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Fragments from Mu and Nexus of Evil: Late Fragments 1-7

A review of two books by André Spears

By Matthew Maguire

Reading André Spears is a true delight for he takes one caroming on a journey from the high towers of erudition to the catacombs of vaudeville, from the temples of Midrashic allusion to the back alleys of funk. When T.S. Eliot was asked whom he considered his audience, he answered, all the poets who ever lived. I get that sense from Spears; he sparks me to be on hyper-alert for his nod to this poet, or that satirist, this canonical demon, or that topical rock star.

Addressing first his *Fragments From Mu*, I recognize that his ability to set me on heightened alert may create imaginary connections of which he is unaware, but even that is part of his strategy. So, with that singular caveat I plunge into my hunt, and one of the first allusions I find is his use of *Mu*, a homage to a poet who is foundational for Spears, Charles Olson:

“While she stares, out of her painted face,
no matter the deathly mu-sick, the demand
will arouse
some of these men and women”
(from *Maximus, to Gloucester: Letter 2*)

Spears’ work is like Borges meeting Bob Dylan meeting Artaud meeting Charles Olson. His voice combines the labyrinthal metaphysics of Borges with the comical irreverence of Dylan with the obsessive urgency of Artaud with the elegant *letters* of Olson. Throwing in a little of the wet anarchy of Patti Smith and the dry satire of Jonathan Swift, he foments a heady brew completely his own.

Deeper than the surface pyrotechnics of his euphoric gaming is a narrative trope that repeats relentlessly with a dark urgency. I respond when his narrator, his Traveler, arrives at moments of recognition and makes a decision: “I will play Oedipus at Post-Colônees instead!” (p. 15)

This is the major thematic pattern that provides the deep structure of the book: *Revelation leads to Action*, and Spears’ Traveler is like Oedipus desperately seeking a Colonus that recedes as he advances. Events and signs and prophecies evoke revelation, and revelation incites action, yet that action never leads to resolution. As the tragic overtones of existential dilemma accrue, an implicit question accrues urgency: what action might we possibly take in this labyrinth that would be meaningful in its impact and not swiftly evaporate? Spears’ existential dilemma is different than that of Sisyphus, for Sisyphus is granted an

understanding of his pattern. The boulder will always return to the base of the mountain and the trial will begin again. Sisyphus has Nietzsche whispering the balm of eternal recurrence in his ear. Spears' Traveler is granted no pattern. Eternal evaporation is what he faces. His disorientation is profound.

The trope: "This is not a wound" is potent in its allusion to Magritte (p. 14, 15, 16), because of course the writing is about a wound. A psychic wound. The wound of living.

Spears invents language continually, sometimes in a nod to the classic masters of the nonce word, and sometimes in a derisory tone aimed at the corporate/technoids bowdlerizing our language. The following passage elucidates literally what has been raveling metaphorically:

"Self-Divided and powerless
I wait for the correct
constellation of signs to indicate
the Opening of the Past
and the Closing of the Lexicon" (22).

We are disembodied in this world, but we still feel the pain of our phantom limbs. Who or what has stolen our bodies? Spears indicts the villains; high on his list is the corporate eclipse of our reality, such as: Amex's Art of War (16), the Worldcom Republic (19), Raytheon (55), Mastercard (58), United Technologies (58).

Spears' Traveler, as are all dramatic characters, is defined by his choices, and he opts for descent:

"I opt
for the one on the right,
going *down*" (24).

Like Dante at the gates of Hell, his characters note that: "The stairwell seems Abysmal." Of course it's the Abysmal with a capital A; it's the Inferno as redesigned by a channeling of Sartre and Camus. Like those two Franco-comedians, Spears is darkly comic—such as in the image of our Traveler, his back wrenched, body locked at a 90° angle, as the escalator restarts, going *down* (26).

We know where we are. We're goin' down. And we know when we are: "In these Endtimes" (28). We're facing mortality. Hieronymous Bosch meets *The Matrix*. We're gonna die. Here we are lookin' at the old folks' home, and how do we get out of this nightmare? Apocalypse Now. Yes, Spears is dramatizing the struggle of mortality. Should we start screaming or tell jokes, or both, like Hamm and Clov?

Our Traveler is "a stranger in a strange land," but this image from Exodus provides fertile land for his revelations:

“... my tribulation yields at once
to the light of Revelation” (33)

The passage above reminds me of the perspective of Aeschylus: we suffer unto wisdom. Spears knows that Dante concurs: the descent into suffering and despair is essential for revelation. Aeschylus passes the wisdom-through-suffering baton to Dante who throws it to Beckett who loans it to his divine vaudevillians. Spears grabs it for his holy fool:

“On impulse
sticking with a *wi'n'wi'n*
Game Plan, I turn to cross
the room walking backward—
in an effort to follow
the dance step of Michael
the Fallen Archangel
which I do not know
how to do. ” (35)

As Nell says in *Endgame*, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.” Spears mines this dark humor, and often makes me think of Bergson’s *On Laughter*. The discovery of the Neanderthal trying to fit the blue peg into the red hole is a wry image (49). And his spontaneous combustion (50) is a sly authorial self-reference, an inverse mirror image of a primal self.

As I noted in my preface, it is Spears’ special brilliance to construct a literary object that pops with allusions like fireworks at Chinese New Year. He makes continual sly, comical, satirical allusions to our cultural reference points, bridging high and low, pop and classical, transcendent and banal, such as, “The Pink ‘Sweat and Tears’ of Prince Floyd” (58). What is so impressive is the virtuosic range of references: physics, Tarot (the Fool), the Greek (the Argo), the Bible (i.e. Endtimes 58/59), American history (Tati’s Last Stand), world history, sci-fi (i.e. Swarmbot), philosophy, and more. He’s cooked up a joyous, urgent, and funny gumbo of everything we know. It’s a concatenation of whacky mischief and profound lament spiced with an erudition that simultaneously mocks and celebrates itself. For instance, he takes glee in whimsical mischief with language, such as, “Paracalyse,” a Lewis Carroll-like portmanteau of apocalypse and paracletes (something Greek). His is also a conceptual portmanteau: Old Testament vaudevillians: Moses plays the Catskills. It’s tremendously amusing, and I should note the droll way Spears exoticizes common words in sly postmodern ways such as placing an umlaut on “vaüdevillians.” He is like a snake oil salesman signaling his own artificiality, wearing a tux in rural Indiana (on a Hollywood back lot), signaling his own construction. The whole principle of construction is a kind of conceptual portmanteau.

I haven’t returned to the issue of the language itself just to celebrate it freshly but to note that the pattern of the language—the conceptual portmanteau—is the

construction principle of the nightmarish funhouse the Traveler traverses; the dream logic of one environment morphing into another. Yes, it is a rabbit hole, but more arduous than the one Dodgson constructed for Alice. More confounding because the level of surrealism is exponential. Wonderland is based on a few simple factors morphing, i.e. animals can talk in a world that often changes scale, but in the Spears world of Mu—the Joycean nightmare history from which we are trying to awake—everything is combining with everything. “A storm gathering inside the dome.” The Torah mates with corporate hegemony as the Tarot breeds with history, sci-fi diddles Da Vinci as physics porks the Greeks. It is light and whimsical. It is also an image of trauma. History is dancing on the head of a pin while a man’s consciousness is at stake.

As Spears alludes, it is an Escher universe; “Escher’s excellent adventures” (62). And Escher is more frightening than Dodgson because of his implication of infinity in closed systems. The Traveler has the revelation that he is traveling through a perfect storm of time, and that the figure he sees at the other end of the tunnel is himself. (I intuit that all the figures he has seen are himself.) Möbius molds malignancies. Spears is welding another one of the girders of his infrastructure: a revelation provokes an action. The implicit action that follows the revelation, “I can win by losing,” is the victory of death. I can escape from the “Continuum-less Continuum” by dying. Death as a victory over the curse of immortality. Death as release.

“No sooner does this revelation occur... I lie buried...” (63) But alack, he is reborn, resurrected. Alas! “Being pulled from the water by my hair” (63). Pulled by his hair from the amniotic waters of the womb. Pulled from the baptismal font.

The Escher ziggurat room yields another revelation: “the Game is a Game” (65). Mortality is a game. It is a moving moment when the Traveler realizes that the frail hunchback (another self) is “another player whose terror and solitude are as real as my own.” (67) This is the emotional core of the book: the terror and loneliness of being trapped in an endless game that is constructed of tests of solitude.

He encounters “the Fat Man and the Hunchback... [who] mirror my Self-Division” (67). The action that results from this sequence of revelations is profound: the embrace. But then fear reasserts itself. We cannot win by dying. We remain hostage:

“Both torn apart and pieced together
this same woman’s Voice
speaks for my trauma as Hostage
to the game...” (72)

In despair, Spears reaches as does Dante:

“I write in the strange hope
of hearing a different Voice,

always already beyond the Astral plane:
the Voice of love calling, nonetheless." (72).

This moment (and others subtly understated) reveal the deeper yearning beneath the antic linguistic acrobatics of the language. It evokes Dante's connection to Beatrice. So lost and yet awaiting.

Then Spears tips his bowler to Beckett: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" – Beckett, *Endgame* (73). Yes, André is in dialogue with Sam. They share an affection for Aporia—a philosophical puzzle of a seemingly insolvable impasse in an inquiry. They feast on doubt. Yet, Sam never mentions the love of another as a possible path to salvation. Spears is writing a love letter in despair.

As the Traveler nears the end of infinite journey in Mu, he encounters the bicycle, which will be the vehicle, literally and figuratively, of the sequel to *Fragments from Mu*, which Spears titles *Nexus of Evil: Late Fragments 1-7*:

"I see a Bicycle.

The bottoms of its wheels
are lodged in a circular pool
of Ice." (96)

The allusion to the ice of Dante's Ninth Circle is unmistakable, so perhaps (we reason falsely) we have hit the nadir of our descent. He observes:

"Over the Handlebars
a small Flag marked
Holy Davidson
waves in the wind." (96)

The wordplay on Harley Davidson is humorous. The holy son of David is Jesus. Jesus' bike in the 9th circle. Now there's a theological reversal of Good and Evil, and so in our infinite series the omega is the alpha ad infinitum.

Nexus of Evil: Late Fragments 1-7 starts with last section of *Fragments From Mu* (the bicycle frozen in ice):

"My Bicycle is a Soul Machine
Fueled by the Cold Sweat
of Funk Thang's Pow'r." (6)

The bike actually *is* a soul machine (10). We have fun as we channel theology through the lyrics of James Brown, the GODFATHER OF SOUL. My hunch that we have not been released just because our traveler has now mounted a bicycle is confirmed in one of the thematic core questions of this diptych of books:

"What if, by playing *loo'zz'loo'zz*,
I bring both myself

and my opponent
to Perdition, and find
that the Game goes on,
despite all, more Unforgiving
than ever?" (18)

The repetition becomes even more fascinating with the jazz-like patterns of theme and variation. We encounter a fresh thematic thread, the unity of opposites, such as "*wi'n'loo'zz*":

"The Single Fold
wherein pure hatred and
pure pleasure are One!" (26)

The broken bike as vehicle of the soul is an incisive metaphor. Yes, we are wobbling wheels and crooked handlebars. Not only are our bodies imperfect but so are our minds/souls—furthermore there is no mind/body dichotomy; it's all one. We *are* the bike. And as the Traveler crashes and does a "frontside three-sixty" surrounded by the fog "below, behind" (29), we experience a brilliant image of total immersion and encapsulation. We are falling in infinite free space in every plane.

Spears completely embraces the mode of "crash" and "bounce" (32) and "slam" and "DECAY" (33). His sequel to *Mu* is exploring this koan of Daruma Dalchi: *Nana-korobi, ya-oki* ("Fall down seven times, stand up eight"). It dilates this question: how many times must we fall before we are free? Everything that follows is a conscious epiphany of falling and crashing infinitely. Finally he hits "Ground Zero... / Motionless, in a single / moment of Standstill at last" (35). This was the ultimate fall.

Spears is Diogenes on a bike in free fall, seeking love.

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