

The Greatness of the New-Found Night

A Review of A. Staley Groves' *Imaginality: Conversant and Eschaton*

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Imaginality - Conversant and Eschaton by A. (Adam) Staley Groves appeared at the recently founded Atropos Press in their "Think Media: EGS Media Philosophy Series." The aim of the "Think Media" series is to provide a survey of the output of both the MA and PhD programs at the European Graduate school, and *Imaginality* comprises an extended version of Staley Groves's Master Thesis, supervised by philosopher Wolfgang Schirmacher.

The main aim of the enterprise that philosopher-poet Staley Groves is undertaking in this work is – and I can of course only say this with many necessary precautions in place, and with as much truthfulness toward the surface that I am listening into – to think a metaphysics without, and perhaps beyond, metaphysics. I take metaphysics here to denote, in the line of Heidegger and Derrida, the whole history and practice of Western philosophy from Plato to Husserl.

Staley Groves states:

Though metaphysics remain important to existence and by no means would metaphysics be “conventionally” over, this thinking portends of surfaces by conversant that requires us to consider surfaces without metaphysics. (Staley Groves 2009: 22)

In what I consider one of the key scenes in *Imaginality*, Staley Groves writes about this “without metaphysics” as it were with “flattened ladders” (which immediately evokes §6.54 of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*),¹ a “torsion of the impossible,” “the compressing world of the future and the ahead, this to-come already.” (169-70) *Imaginality* constitutes a self-contained world without outside. And these first quotes (later on we shall say *verses*), taken from the opening section entitled “Afterward” and beyond state this aim very clearly. I listen to the poetic conversation that Staley Groves entertains with Judith Balso, who in her study of Fernando Pessoa describes the outlines of the project that Staley Groves, *pace* Pessoa, pursues:

Breaking with metaphysics is at once accepting the absolute exteriority of the world and the universe, and acknowledging that their existence isn’t there for us, isn’t meant for us in any way, and cannot be interrogated from any sensible point of view. (Balso 2006: 42, my translation)

¹ See Wittgenstein 1974: 89.

Perhaps these first lines are already enough to scare the potential reader, or to motivate an easy disavowal of the poetic project that Staley Groves is undertaking. I for myself had to admit to the immediate shock and brain failure the moment I read the first few paragraphs. What I, again, had to realize, is that I was dealing with a philosophy fully *conditioned* by poetry, as becoming clear from the introductory discussion of Wallace Stevens's poem "Tattoo," which provides the preliminary circumscriptions of Staley Groves's vocabulary: "We elect poetry and a few meditations to illuminate possibilities" (Staley Groves 2009: 27).

Staley Groves's vocabulary, as employed in *Imaginality*, does not consist of concepts in the usual sense; rather he aims at a constant deferral of metonymies – *not* metaphors – of traces of traces of traces and so on, if only the 'word' 'trace' would be apt here, which it is clearly not. Instead of through a vocabulary, which in itself always already embodies the *voice* (*vox*) and therefore presents itself *before* a surface, we should review his text topologically, as a surface, if anything a key word in Staley Groves's work, both philosophically and poetically. Below I quote a possible "line," *versus*, on the surface of *Imaginality*, a track activating a possible approach:

I call *portending* of surface and text, that text is before and in the hands of any "reader." ... The goal of reading ... is to obtain that geometry or surface through the image, to provide evidence of surface portending, conversant and Eschaton. It is to *lissen* portending, not by hearing, but by the lissen, a listening. (9-11)

To “deal” with the diacoustical hermeneutics of a *verse* like this, I have to mediate between borders, the surfaces of the standard book review and the text that is before me, the reader. I have to lissen – “a cleft or seam dividing the strata of a rock” (28n16) – portending by a listening, a close lissening of the two surfaces, to locate a conversant, to render an “Eschaton, this actual and virtual surface without metaphysics, without metaphor, the transfer of intellection, simply, conversant and transmission. ... Our thesis: two surfaces present a third surface from the view of the image that moves a single image between. Despite the fact such remains in the idea, the whole Eschaton remains the text (here) that ciphers an impossibility of the Eschaton to-come without being and metaphysics (there)” (13-15). I hold my tenor, it rings a bell, I listen to myself reading Levinas in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*: “Eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and the present. ... It is a relationship with *a surplus always exterior to the totality*” (Levinas 1969: 22). The topology of this relationship comprises the topic of research in the first chapter of *Imaginality*, “The World is an Image of the Earth,” and the next one, “Bestimmung, Conversant, Tenor,” which, admittedly, establishes a somewhat distant connection with the “living philosophy” propounded by Schir-macher.

In chapter three, this impossible surplus to-come, the Eschaton – a “brane” if we would move into the territory of physics and cosmology – is thought of as the “stretching of language to incorporate the unbeing of being” (Staley Groves 2009: 85) This explains the many sequences in *Imaginality* devoted to

the etymological unravelings, complications, and (k)nots (or in Staley Groves's terms: 'stemma' and 'venation') concerning the concepts introduced above: lissen, filioque, tenor, sinus, conversant, transmontana, and portending. They are raised from the dead, their forgotten uses reincarnated into a fabric scanning the works of Giorgio Agamben, Paul Celan, Heidegger, Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Vilém Flusser. The multiple taps on linguistic history placed by Staley Groves enable him to arrive at the Heideggerian idea of the poet as the guardian of truth, hospitable to truth. Nonetheless, "[p]oetry is not eternal truth, it must continue to change, to represent the ability to think, but even this thinking is finite, though an expandable thought which gives a directionality to language on all its corners" (86). The fabric of a text, *in casu* a poem, is twisted and distorted in the process. "We think a poem as toroid, as sinuous: eschaton, vision of the ear, the speech of the ear, passing the ear. Toroid shaped surface, a listening surface" (94). To stay with Jacques Derrida, whose discussion of Paul Celan he unravels: the poem is always already *oto(bio)graphical*.²

As we continue from the first vibrations and membranes scrutinized in the first half of *Imaginality*, we extend toward the surface of a body, the *novel*, brought to our attention through readings of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. "A surface as a body with facts – stupid truths or eschatological debris – information coming from experience, perhaps debris 'shot through' a superstructure" (Staley Groves 2009: 137). Through listening in on Benjamin's analyses of storytelling and Barthes's inspection of Eisenstein's films stills from *Ivan the Terri-*

² See Derrida 2005.

ble, Staley Groves observes that “[t]he idea of the novel [sc. the new, Eschaton], epitome [sc. a thing presenting something else in miniature] of epic body [sc. the world] is no less *kindred* [sc. king, *cynne*, *genus*] spirit to the still” (141). My addition of the textual traces backward and forward left by many a word in this short quote should again direct the readers to the fact that, contrary to what this book review might suggest, any linear or literal reading of *Imaginality* is most unsatisfactory. In it, we are always already confronted with logic of the *verse*, the *vertex*. Staley Groves’s poetic stethoscope on philosophy might be bugged, and the connection time might even be longer than in Avital Ronell’s *Telephone Book*: “Our line on philosophy, always running interference with itself, will be accompanied no doubt by static. ... Hitting the streets, it welcomes linguistic pollutants and reminds you to ask, ‘Have I been understood?’” (Ronell 1989: 3)

The aim of a book review is, at some point on its surface, to *judge*, to pass a sentence, to break the conversation and turn towards the potential costumer, I will have to distort my own fabric and lissen. At the end of his as of yet unpublished collection of poems, *33 poems*, Staley Groves formulates what I would like to consider the statement under condition of which we are to read *Imaginality*, “a flat concept of the significant surface as kaleidoscopic view” (Staley Groves 2009: 214). With the risk of citing too much (or too little), I will recite it in full:

(If poetry as a political project is surface versus apart surfaces then the poetic enterprise is not to narrate grid against grid but to make a torque of the grid to themselves

To perhaps be able to imagine what images them

*What this results in then is not a matter delivery but a project of speaking
apart and at the same time not,
or dividually in*

The way to this can open up an aesthtic reasoning

*That is the overturing of the structure onto violence
into the transmission of imaginary kalidescopically*

*Poetry should agitate the imaginary whose foundation is of the nothing
apart and conversant with such) (Staley Groves 2008: 19)*

This condition is a *political* condition, and boils down to the question, “What is authored and who/what authors?” (Staley Groves 2009: 190) *Imaginality* answers us and tells us, “how we deal with such portending and authorship” (190), and how to “torque the grid of themselves ... through a kaleidocsopical moment of auto-poetry, where the depletion of the senses is also the beginning of flooding the depleted, though twisted, cut up, deranged, the double tauto-spin of the revealed” (190). *Imaginality* in this sense attacks the current conflation of the properly poetical concept of Eschaton to-come and the Christian-messianic turn adopted by Western political narrative after 9-11. It is poetry’s task not to oppose this narrative, but to torque it, and “imagine what imagines them,” “who/what authors” (190). This “poetic eneterprise,” in-ether-prise, caught as the foot leaves

the surface, is a project of “speaking apart and at the same time [k]not,” contrary to philosophy, metaphysics. “The relationship to liberal democracy and economic force have assisted as a world force of philosophical discovery, no less, to recap, such has failed in all theoretical structures to preserve nothing more than the One-feeling” (192), and this structure is to be “overtured” “onto violence into the transmission of “imaginary kalidescopically.” This is an “aesthtic reasoning,” a double surface of the ethical and the aesthetical, much like Wittgenstein envisioned.

“The subject,” Staley Groves writes in the concluding chapter, “if indeed a credible combatant, must overcome both textolatry and idolatry by a *hospitality* of the converse that is a portending of surfaces both originary and apart. ... It is to ask: where does the responsibility [sc. response-ability] lie?” (211) The subject has to respond to the call of imaginability, “the one fact we have mentioned in this work: *facēre*, the do, or ‘fact’” (234). Whether this call for action, if only poetic, is anything more than a recall from the earliest *ekklēsia* remains to be heard. Nevertheless, the few reservations that I have toward such a totalizing “enterprise” do not tempt me to dismiss Staley Groves’s project as a whole and the promises it makes. We place the curvature of our ears against the muteness of words,³ and listen to what Wallace Stevens portends; *Imaginability* could be heard as a sinuous affirmation of “the greatness of the new-found night” (Stevens 1997: 457).

³ See Nancy 2002: 47.

About the Author

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