

THE SOURCE

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A NOTE ON PROCESS

From January of 2008 to September of 2009, I read only page 26 of nearly ten thousand books at the Denver Public Library, culling from them bits of language, which I then fused together, altering some nouns to read 'the Source' so they become reflective of the parameters of the project. At its core, the book is a prose cento, a continuation of a practice dating from the Homeric song stitchers of antiquity to current trends in hip-hop culture and electronic music; however, it's also a testament to the interconnectedness and mutability of all writing, as well as an exploration of the notion of origins, both textual and spiritual. The choice of page 26, while obviously corresponding to the amount of letters present in the English alphabet, is also important in Kabbalist terms; it represents the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters that form the name of God. Additionally, according to the Talmud, the Torah would have been revealed during the 26th generation of the history of the world; thus, it is Moses who, 26 generations after Adam, receives the Torah transmitted by God. Interestingly, by using a correspondence table, where each letter is given in ascending order a numerical value (A=1, B=2, C=3, etc.), the name of God in English has a total value (G=7, O=15, D=4) of 26. The problems of numerology aside, I undertook this project in order to investigate whether or not constraint-based, conceptual writing might have a spiritual dimension. It is now my belief that rigid and systemic modes of writing can embody an emotionally charged engagement with the world.

They exist in libraries by word, by groups of words, by entire sentences in certain cases. But they are surrounded by so much empty filler and trapped in such an overabundance of printed matter that I myself, truth be told, have not yet succeeded, despite my best efforts, in isolating them and putting them together.

—Marcel Bénabou,

Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books

But they all have one voice in common, they all have, with their differences, a certain music I am attuned to, and that's the secret.

—Hélène Cixous,

Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing

I

On the stage they call it presence. Some actors have it, and some don't. Certainly a good talker is also a good leader, an act of pacification that represents the most important event in the history of the Source—every department of life now showing symptoms of revolutionary change. I can here give only the general conclusions at which I have arrived, with a few facts in illustration, but which, I hope, in most cases will suffice. It will be difficult. So long as this conception is retained, the difficulty is not relieved by calling it an occasion. Homer did this for the Greeks, Virgil for the Augustan age, and Shakespeare for the English. The Source heralds the benefits that accrue from unlocking the gates of reason and ignores the abominations.

The ridiculous and amazing mistake people make is to believe they use words in relation to it. Even the war itself, the grossest fact of our recent history, shrinks in the wake of the Source, which finds its expression without falling into sentimentality, confident that, if a complete meaning does not result, at least the shadow of a mood will.

The Source sits atop an alp as if it were a throne. I record it here. Others memorize a pattern and work with it, whereas the Source understands a pattern and works against it. Like a nutritive substance surrounding a growing embryo, the Source feeds upon its enclosure. My point is its incompleteness.

Various sources force us to assume that the so-called earliest Source leaves no trace but an elaboration. It was simple for it to give unpleasant orders, yet one can no longer simply speculate or reason about the Source, for the very framework within which traditional speculation and reasoning proceeds has been shaken to its foundation.

Clearly one does the Source the greatest service by quoting as much as space allows. So much so that from one day to the next, while outside the weather remains consistent in its uncertainties, we might begin to build within it a storm.

On what account are we not condemned to servitude? The Source was never a system of imperial exploitation, nor was it full of sentiments of unity, brotherhood, and common interests. If it were your choreographer, then it would devise dances to make you appear a virtuoso dodging dead horses lining the road, though still bound by the rules of deportment. Is it really a matter of indifference to the people in the marketplace? Each account confirms every other account. As we all exhibit the kind of behavior predicted by the Source, the next step is to ask whether this behavior has its origins elsewhere. Can we respond to silence in the presence of speech by saying: the Source has no beginning?

Do we not have terms in the English tongue to define and shade pastel painted rows of block-and-plaster houses scattered haphazardly across forlorn landscapes? Do our decision-making mechanisms, as a whole, not resemble a herd of deer or a covey of quail after the hunting season?

There are days when I find myself longing to be near a river or lake, to let the familiar argument of analogy break down. This is not an ethical view of life. I've told at least one person everything I am aware of that I've done or that's been done to me. Thus, one emerges from the blind alleys and pitfalls of the Source, tasting an orange or touching a velvet cloth or listening to Mozart.

Those involved with the Source since Romanticism have looked to the poetics of death and textual dismemberment for the authority to outline once glorious but now perverted sourcelessness. I watch until it's just a little blur in the distance, blending in with everything else. Though we come from different places, we've all tried breaking up with our pasts. However, thanks to the negligence of those who sought in the Source a social message, a soul, a numinous substance, most examples exemplify nothing but a transfer to the prison's psychiatric ward, where no actual treatment occurs.

If it were true that before me now is an unopened volume on the Source and the odor of boiling cabbage coming from the kitchen, then I wouldn't have to claim cultural acceleration is such that we frequently assume the Source is able to destroy our appreciation of the present. At this stage of my studies, I don't feel a wild-hearted enthusiasm that the end of summer might bring an expected fall. For the Source, a weather-beaten sail is willingly bent to shore. But have I thus lost it willfully? Are our flowers merely flowers?

The Source celebrates both prostitution and the life of letters. It is a touch sadomasochistic because it suffers a sense of its own belatedness, hates fussing with nature, and would like the world to be all weeds. Some think it the forerunner of what may be the international style of the coming decade, because it is secretive but hides nothing, requires an all-inclusive symbolism to determine its interpretations, while paying little attention to the complexity of mixed reverie and memory.

And now I will show you how it happened to be in the heart of an art movement of which the outside world at that time knew nothing. They were like well managed horses, and could tell when to stop or turn. They said things we felt were true, things like: "When I came to you out of all that dust and heat and toil, I positively smelt violets." They kept up a constant fire of introducing each other. They thought every instrument would perform its work best if it were made to serve not many purposes but one. It was out of this that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for those values.

Do you want to pick up the thread of the Source? Does nothing else matter to you? So the subject of responsibility, of obligation and commitment, opens into a set of questions having to do with the difference between doing a thing wrongly or badly and not doing the thing at all.

The Source pulls along a man in an orator's mask. Within him, there is a bullet lodged so deep and harmless and near the bone, cutting for it would be a shame. The only real, great change I've ever happened to witness was sitting with its chin on its knees and its arms tight around its shins—a part of the Source without its meaning. It arrived late as usual, why you already had a spoon in your hand. When I have to be, I can be devious.

Here we are at the height of descriptive intimacy. The Source, like a Roman shirt stitched from the scraps of various sources, keeping us warm. Its image is a representation of representations, not of suspect reality.

The words of the Source seem, when I use them, to have a specific reference to what I'm talking about, outside of their sphere of influence, and so I do use them.

I use them to say things like:

"After a limb is lost, pain remains a clichéd metaphor pillaged from cultures in which its function was opaque to the outsider."

What we need is a notation that can do away with this uncertainty. It is a neutral word, yet the sentiment is one of almost moral condemnation, implicit in our ability to signal mood, excitement, calm, romance, and danger without the transformation of experience into language. But I name no names, leaving it to you to name your own, to put in an ironic light radical ideology.

Nevertheless, there is an isolation that still startles in view of the Source, suggesting the limits and burdens of community, the struggle between what it jettisons and what is jettisoned from it. They fell. They got up. They wanted an abstract idea, an outline. But postmodern heterogeneity and reinvention of identity are emphatically not among the features which typify the Source. I think it believes firmly that meaningful action depends on careful thought.

Then there is the writing itself, as though the Source calmly places its cards on an old carpenter's bench, saying anything that comes into its head.

Do you remember the polemic that accompanied the invention of the Source? There are those who still hold today with the idea that it has a structure, which, like the geography of an island, can be discovered by successive approximations. Against this bent of mind you should, very cautiously, be on your guard. I offer my help cleaning up the office, gladly embracing anything that promises to soften or explain away the terror of writing upon the coffin in front of a crowd of strangers, while as a further camouflage the Source shakes its hair over any onlookers.

This brings it into collision with uninterrupted joy, purity, and sweetness, the blunted point of its diagnosis of our arts—the ease with which the birds, initially the strangest of apparitions, became the most familiar of presences, as packed into the day as people on a bus platform. If it can be seen as imperative and prescriptive, this deification of the Source knows but a single law—itself!

One messenger, then another with a tale of worse disaster shouted through the house. After some time, their harmony in lovemaking became perfect.

The orchestra was silent, the air was blue, and there was a buzz of talk. It must have been about midnight. It is the hedonistic message of the lyric poets: just watch me eat while you have a hunk of bread and butter or something.

As though the Source were to say, "Ah, but you're supposed to tell me something true, not something imagined," what is important when the wheels of a moving vehicle on the screen seem to be stopped or to be traveling in reverse is like the lecture I plan to give, how first I beg you read the verdict: each creature like a modification of the other's infancy, long since dead yet still alive.

What few people are out are in an absurd hurry to achieve notoriety.

It is enough, after all, to transcribe the muffled sounds of the town reaching through the window-slit, but most of us, when listening, visualize characters and customs in terms of our own life, and I have accordingly turned bonnets into hats, a morning-dress into a house-coat, and evening tea into supper when it seemed necessary to the continuity of listening.

For all of our determination and intelligence there is a dark, nonsensical element of the Source that eludes our comprehension and thereby leads us to a thin vertical path through the pine trees. We remembered, while reading, that there had once been works which had not tried to prove anything, content to stand on their own merits, not presuming to eat of their patron's bread, saying this would wake me—the noise of some guns, smoke ascending to heaven.

In these circumstances, the Source confines itself to a string of paradoxes and takes refuge behind a barrage of high-sounding words. A better sense of values and the passage of time make it possible today to correct this. Laws were not designed to prevent dishonorable practices, so ostracism is the ultimate remedy for intentional offenses. I am sorry you should have the trouble of carrying your little notebook so far.

The streets are darker and emptier now that the thunder of disapproval has died down.

Why, if you are so clever, do you lie here like a sack and have nothing to show for it?

Although it is common to think of the Source as a philosophy, it is, in fact, the inventor of common philosophic thought.

Where is the necessity of positing the same thing twice, of having it twice? This form of argument made valid an elementary principle of a potentially inflammatory political situation, which is why I believe that I am justified in advancing the following thesis, however precarious it may be: those who so severely circumscribe the possibilities of acting on the Source's emancipatory desires are faced with the rules of thumb accumulated by Babylonian star-gazers, the dogmatic affirmation of life in general as an abstraction, both describing facts and symbolizing them in a network of endless, unreal circulation. One doesn't lie in the motive from which one acts, but in the conformity of the act itself.

How should we respond to the prospect? Shall we lay down this law for the Source: do not do anything improper. Are these objects of knowledge still forms? Should we not exaggerate their degree of resemblance? Don't the same bodies appear differently colored by candlelight than they do in the open day? Can the Source call great historical movements the product of its achievements alone? Aren't the speeches and writings attributed to it notable for the appeal to experience, as much as, or more than, to principle? Life is short and anxious for those who forget the past, neglect the present, and fear the future.

If anyone asks you what the Source is, send them to their own senses, because anything written can seem like straw.