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forty-seven candles on a cake of bloodied thorns

forty-seven stitches in his neck and shoulder arguing the case for resurrection in a world of date-stamped abattoirs and troughs where two ears, each intact and mirror-matched, are held to be a universal boon

forty-seven variations on the days in school he wore his kilt to tyrannise the Sassenachs, a sgian dubh in his shrill blue eyes and saplings in the pleats

forty-seven unrehearsed excuses for being who he is

forty-seven years of being awkward

forty-seven serious mistakes he never recognised, with people whom he claims he never knew in places he insists he'd never seen, the travel stubs marked 'Cancelled' and the memories annulled

forty-seven letters, stamped and sealed, and never posted to the friends he never lost and the girls he never hurried and the family abandoned and the angels he embraced

forty-seven lies he should have told

forty-seven fantasies and forty-six desires

forty-seven fingers on the thirteen hands of Mr Kung the pianist at parties for the deaf and blind where no one knew the score yet hummed, each to herself, the tune

forty-seven tutued navvies singing a cappella in a barn above whose door the words: "We swap, trade, traffic, barter, and exchange" and in the window images of surgical adroitness

forty-seven echoes in his skull

forty-seven accidents involving toys and creams

forty-seven widowed Brides of Christ in needle-sharp stilettos and suspenders selling tickets at the convent door for mysteries to be revealed to he who draws the lucky number (there is no lucky number)

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forty-seven roads leading neither back nor onwards through the cities he imagined
in the continents invented for the women with big buttocks whom he sodomised
with such elan as sanctified his claims to be a poet

forty-seven sigils of the Beast

forty-seven ages in the strata of the rocks he might have climbed

forty-seven heavens where the starving choirs strung on scaffolds choke and spit,
their kicking feet an outline for a dark eleventh Sephira whose name is not revealed
and gender veiled

forty-seven signatures petitioning the beatification, immediate and
unforewearable, of Alfred Jarry and Don van Vliet, names drawn capriciously from a
velvet hat he wore when hats were being hung on final pegs

forty-seven lessons to be learned in times of want

forty-seven women at the wake

forty-seven shadows on his lungs, a Rorschach Test for coroners concerned to find
the truth among the lines and scores and shreds and lacerations in the pages that
he left

forty-seven inconclusive notes, the magistrates debating whether chance should
pick an explanation suitable for summing up the fragments and the crumbs and
burning wax, the detritus of meanings he'd escaped

forty-seven brass screws in a cake of burnished yew

happy birthday, you fucking fraud

Poem

My poems were my peacock's tail,
I recognize in retrospect:
The flourish of the horny male
Cast in a poet's dialect.

And tail or tale fanned with the page
From spine of book or peacock's spine
As badge of my byronic age
I offered for a lover's sign.

The god that quits the fleshly wand
Too soon and leaves us mortal men
And quits the aged bird grown fond
Of love beyond the loved peahen

Is he, I understand, who toys
With poets too in love with words
And leaves us narcissistic boys
As beautiful and bleak as birds.

7th dream (extract)

Any biography of Armand Trévignon would be incomplete without an account of this extraordinary interview, perhaps as shocking in its time as that ten years later of the Sex Pistols by Bill Grundy. I should like to thank the BBC at this point for allowing me access to their film archives, and for the great kindness and patience shown me during the laborious task of transcription. The interview, broadcast live, was little short of a disaster. Trévignon, chain-smoking his Gîtanes and sipping the claret he had (as the producer, Tony Leiman, remembers) insisted on as a condition of his participation in the programme, did not have whatever it is that constitutes a television ‘presence’, and dumbfounded Humphrey Burton when he insisted that he would far rather have appeared on ‘Come Dancing’. Irritatingly lapsing into French at all too frequent intervals, he seemed to have little interest in talking about his book, deflecting questions in wholly unpredictable and improbable directions. On the issue of his residence as a Parisian in, of all places, Portsmouth, he appeared to be offering a visiting card, pulled from his top pocket, to his interviewer in confirmation of his present address. It turned out to be, when read out aloud to the camera by its bewildered recipient, a Community Chest card from a Monopoly game. Trévignon took umbrage at Mr Burton’s suggestion that this might perhaps be some kind of practical joke.

Asked his opinion, later in the interview, about the recent événements in his native city, he did not, as was expected, distance himself, the artist aloof, from the popular uprising in Paris, but rather insisted that the students and workers had not gone far enough.

“What we have been witnessing in these past two months, Mr Burton”, he announced in his still heavily accented English, “is a spontaneous éblouissement, an awakening and flowering, of the human spirit in joyous revolt against bourgeois authoritarianism in the factories, in the universities and schools, in the tired and tyrannical bureaucracies, in the street. Yes, I say spontaneous; and I repeat it: a spontaneous outcry! It is not some Communist plot, you see. No, it is not thinkable, vraiment inconcevable, that a few left-wing agents provocateurs could, as your newspapers would wish you to believe, have mobilised so many thousands of people from every sections of society such as we have seen happening in these recent weeks. Non, je ne peux pas y croire. Have you read the writing on the wall? I mean very literally, there, on the walls of Paris, an aerosol democracy: ‘Pouvoir à l’imagination’, it says; Power to the Imagination! Free the mind, restore the integrity — the wholeness — of the individual, and you free the people. And now you see the people of France have arraché ... how do you say it? ... have grabbed

back the political decision-making process into their own hands, back into a freely constituted community in which all men and women participate as equals, as comrades. *La fraternité* — do you know what that means, Mr Burton? *Il faut y ajouter la sororité, puis qu'il n'y a malheureusement pas de qualificatif moins sexiste dans la langue.*

“And we have seen, have we not, how the despotically paternalistic authorities have responded. ‘You brothers and sisters’, they say, ‘do you forget that all brothers and sisters have a father? We shall give you discipline, as all children must submit to discipline. We cannot let our family crumble into infantile anarchy and chaos’. And so the CRS chastise with their batons and with tear gas the children on the street. Why so? ‘You have elected us’, they then say. ‘You have willingly relinquished, as a woman at the altar to her husband, your political will to us at the ballot box. Can you not then understand that we act on your behalf, do what we do for your own good, *pour la patrie?*’

“Isn’t that an interesting word? ‘*Patrie*’. Feminine in gender, and yet literally meaning ‘fatherland’. How deceptive language is! The nation — she — is the country of her fathers!”

Humphrey Burton at this point, visibly uneasy at the sensitive direction the discourse seemed to be taking, attempted to regain the initiative in the conversation by asking Armand Trévignon to talk further about the intricacies of language, with reference specifically to his literary work. Trévignon, however, his passions engaged, was, while apparently acquiescing, not to be deflected from his course.

“*Oui, d’accord, le langage. Mais précisément, je parlais là de l’endogénie du langage. Où en étions-nous, donc? Ah, oui. The metropolis — la métropole — is, on the other hand, in terms both of grammatical gender and of morphology, the city of one’s mother. Donc moi, je suis matriote; from the womb of my mother I am born. You see what an archæology of the lexicon reveals? The language has a secret life that is all its own, despite us. Has its Pandora’s box of words and their modes of combination that are impervious to our whims to change them and exist independently of the uses we may make of them. And so it is not we who speak but language, the language which was already there when we were born, which speaks through us. And therefore language can often express meanings which we did not ourselves intend to express, but which, in our thus articulating them, appear post hoc to be what, all along, we meant. We accommodate our thoughts to what we say, voyez-vous, et non pas l’inverse.*

“Thus, for example, if I speak to you of les droits de l’homme ou bien de la fraternité, the words and phrases which pass through me exclude automatically half of humanity, mais encore pire, commit me to thinking that ... à penser cette exclusion. Or encore, if inadvertent of what I say, my lips and tongue and teeth and palate collaborating unreflectingly with the speech of the moment, I speak of ‘mob rule on the streets of Paris’, or of ‘the efforts of the authorities to restore order’, it is once more the form of language which surprises me with what, in consequence only of what I say, I truly think.

“D’où vient ce langage? Ah, we must not blame language. We must not blame the water when it is the drinking bowl that is dirty. It is the structure of the society in which we live, the network of capillaries through which the language is syphoned, that gives rise to this discourse. And then we listen to the discourse, and by its magic it reconfirms the social tissue that gave it shape. It is for this reason that my surrealist brothers and sisters turned, for example, to l’écriture automatique or to le cadavre exquis as means of disengaging the generation of text from the social and intellectual contexts of its production. But there, you see, I have also had little family squabbles with my siblings in the movement. For they would say that it is thereby l’inconscient which thus, unhindered by the ego, expresses itself in text. Quite so, I do not disagree. And indeed for many years I too produced writings in this manner. In such a manner, and in my commitment to such beliefs, was my first published book of writings produced. But you see what is happening here? Ownership of the means of literary production is, under a socialist poetics, transferred first to the people, and poetry, yes, becomes democratic. Yet then that which the language in consequence speaks is filtered and channelled through a social consciousness that embodies but a new authoritarianism, the authoritarianism of—entendons les majuscules—The People. Of course, I really mean The State. And so, with the surrealists, ownership of the means of production is transferred now to the Unconscious, to those dark and mysterious reaches of the mind that harmonize with the pulsations of the Universe.

“And this, I too believed, as I have said. Until, that is, I travelled in 1945 to the home of the indians in what is now called by its white settlers the United States of America. I shall not bore you with the details. But I have come to recognize in the course of the years that followed that, just as no one owns the land which was there before us and will be there after us, so no one owns the language. The unconscious and the language are, after all, two very different kinds of entity, and the one cannot appropriate the other as though it were rightfully its own. Proudhon was thus correct: property is theft, including appropriation of the language.

“For many years I worried over this, though still continued, since it was still within me to do so, to write and to publish the poetry that from somewhere issued forth

through me. I did not fully understand what it was that, deep down inside, I must have known. And it was arrogance, I am sure, that prohibited me from understanding it. For I continued to think of myself as a poet, as someone—a somewhere, perhaps—who had a special access to language. For while I readily disclaimed exclusive ownership of the text I produced,¹ I was unable to renounce my position as the special channel through which the text emerged into its public and published form. I have since learnt some humility. I wish now to say: Let us permit language to surprize us with its own life.

“Thus I tap language elsewhere, elsehow. Je me tais; je ne pense à rien. I take the dictionary and I shake the words, letting them fall wherever they choose that they shall fall, into a dozen little boxes—the number is without significance. I take the grammar book and scoop up the boxes into its pages. I carefully and respectfully close the grammar book, gently shake the book a long moment and leave it, restful, on the shelf to settle. Puis, je l’ouvre. I take a spoon, a large wooden spoon—a wooden spoon is always best, being of the same organic matter—and dip it in and eat, as a communicant may take the wine and wafer. Silencieux, je me fais conduit d’un discours nouveau. I think nothing, but let another discourse, a discourse that emerges from another spiritual embryo, speak through me. What does it say now? You must listen to it. It is like the cries of a baby. Ecoutez bien ce qu’il dit. It says through me: Build the barricades, open the prisons, disband the army, stone la CRS, get guns, get bombs, storm l’Elysée, burn le Quai d’Orfèvres, sack le Quai d’Orsay, fuck the government, hang the ministers and guillotine les députés, eat de Gaulle, shoot the pigs. Thence, little by little, will come our poetry today”. So speaking, he produced a wooden spoon from the inside pocket of his red velveteen jacket and offered it to Humphrey Burton, inviting him to try likewise.

The press were of course delighted, could not believe their good fortune. The red-top tabloids, Armand Trévignon’s writings of little interest to their readership, focussed on the man. “DEPORT HIM!” ran the headline of one editorial, suggesting that Comrade Trévignon was obviously a Soviet agent and agitator employed by his KGB masters to foment revolution and anarchy in Britain and to stir up public opposition to the Vietnam War (they had discovered that he had participated in a protest march on the American embassy earlier that year), and was therefore a serious threat to national security as well as an insult to the deeply felt beliefs of the Free World. On the discovery that, in 1967, Armand Trévignon, together with a small number of other French poets (who, of course, would not be mentioned in the article), had been invited by the Lycée Voltaire in London to give a reading of his poetry on the occasion of the centenary of Baudelaire’s death, another report by a popular columnist in an otherwise more middle-brow newspaper announced that “Under cover of being a ‘poet’, this avowed revolutionary has for years been secretly infiltrating schools and youth organizations, contaminating the minds of our children with his seditious libertarian propaganda”. Quoting in English, in that same article, from ‘Les Paradis Artificiels’, a particularly obscure poem in La pinasse

suisse, Trévignon's first book of verse, the columnist then pointedly asked: "Is there any wonder, then, that British teenagers, fed on so-called 'poetry' of this kind in our classrooms, are turning to the mindless stupefaction of drugs and free-for-all sex?"

"Ranting Red Rocks Burton: Humphrey Gets The Hump" proclaimed another headline, while the article beneath, creatively misquoting Trévignon's own words, called for his immediate arrest and a public referendum on the restitution of the death penalty. The quality newspapers, most of them too sensible to pay serious heed to the byzantine ruminations of a self-proclaimed ballroom dancer, were more restrained in their coverage of the broadcast, and left their condemnation to the arts pages where they conducted a systematic and painstaking demolition of Trévignon the writer. In only one was there a detailed report on the television broadcast, with the suggestion made that, even if he were not personally involved with the so-called Commando Émile Henry urban terrorist group whose bombing campaign was now shaking northern France, at least Trévignon's outspoken public statement of his beliefs could be construed as irresponsibly legitimizing 'direct action' of this most heinous kind.

He was not to be forgiven for that.