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ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER AND THE POETICS OF INCORPORATION

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In Else Lasker-Schüler's poetry and prose, we find the desire or wish to be devoured by the love object while consuming the object in turn. In this analysis the merger or turn of phrase is tied to the subject's own constitutive incorporation of a dead loved one. Now living objects must be loved to death or undeath. It was her mother's death that guided Lasker-Schüler to live and love on as haunted subject to repeat and rehearse the love object's loss or departure via fantasies of incorporation.

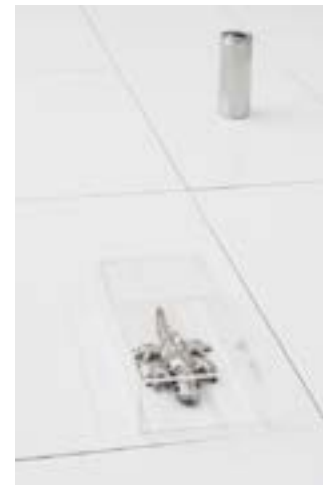
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On trouve le désir ou l'espoir d'être dévoré par l'objet aimé en même temps qu'on consomme l'objet à son tour dans la prose et la poésie d'Else Lasker-Schüler. Dans cette analyse, cette fusion ou cette tournure de phrase prend sa source dans le fait que le sujet cause l'incorporation constitutive d'un être aimé décédé. À partir de là, on doit aimer les objets encore vivants jusqu'à la mort ou à la « contre-mort » de ceux-ci. La mort de sa mère dirige Lasker-Schüler vers la façon de vivre et d'aimer d'un individu hanté : répéter la perte de l'objet aimé ou son départ à travers le fantasme d'incorporation.

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Mourning requires that the dead live on “in us”; interiorizing or incorporating the dead is the difficult yet inescapable task of the one who is left behind.¹ Psychoanalysis reminds us too of the pathological aspects of incorporation. The German-Jewish poet, playwright, and writer of prose, Else Lasker-Schüler, continuously confronted death; she survived the deaths of her mother, brother, and only child, among others. Her mother died in 1890, when the author was twenty-one years old, eight years after the death of her favorite brother. She described her mother’s death as having broken her world apart (Durchschlag-Litt and Litman Demeestère 18). Throughout her texts, there is the continual return to the subject of the mother’s death. The author’s identity as perpetual mourner, as one who carries the dead within her texts, who writes repeatedly of and to the dead, also cosigns texts, which are otherwise addressed to sexualized or romantic love objects. These texts reveal the ways in which desire becomes bound up with the experience of mourning. In her *oeuvre* there is, furthermore, almost no attachment, which might not be preemptively mourned; the encounter with the loved other often appears alongside the possibility of departure or absence.

“Das Lied des Spielprinzen” (“The Song of the Playmate Prince”) is an important poem with which to begin marking the crucial links between the questions of mourning and desire in Lasker-Schüler’s work. The poem was published in the 1917 collection *Gottfried Benn*, named after the German poet to whom Lasker-Schüler had, in fact, been romantically attached. The two authors addressed each other in publications in several Expressionist journals, and years later, Benn identified Lasker-Schüler as one of the greatest poets of twentieth-century Germany (Newton 2). The poem was published after the end of the affair, prompting many biographers to identify Lasker-Schüler’s suffering over the break with her Song that gave it voice (Falkenberg 76).

Wie kann ich dich mehr noch lieben?/Ich sehe den Tieren und Blumen/Bei der Liebe zu./Küssen sich zwei Sterne,/Oder bilden Wolken ein Bild-/Wir spielten es schon zarter./Und deine harte Stirne,/Ich kann mich so recht an sie lehnen,/Sitz drauf wie auf einem Giebel./ Und in deines Kinnes Grube/Bau ich mir ein Raub-

nest--/Bis-du mich aufgefressen hast./Find dann einmal morgens/Nur noch meine Kniee,/Zwei gelbe Skarabäen für eines Kaisers Ring. (*Gesammelte Werke* 1: 209)

How can I love you even more?/I watch the flowers and animals/At their love./If two stars kiss,/Or if clouds form a picture--/We’ve already played it more gently still./And your hard brow,/I can lean myself against it./Sit on it like a gable./And in the hollow of your chin/I build a robber’s hideaway--/Until—you’ve eaten me all up./Find then one fine morning/Only my knees left over,/Two yellow scarabs for an emperor’s ring. (Newton 169)

The poem begins with the question of how the speaker might approach the love object. There is an urge or call to love more, to find a more complete approach to desire. The poem closes by envisioning a process of incorporation whereby the subject would be devoured and thereby preserved and hidden away within the object’s implicit withdrawal (Rickels 6). The poem thus opens a site in which the limits of incorporation are exceeded or overcome.

Paralleling the speaker of the poem’s call to find or locate a “hideaway” in the other’s face, it is in the body of the text that wishes for incorporation can be expressed or stored. Abraham and Torok underscore the difference between the healthy mourner’s capacity to introject and what goes into the “illness” of incorporation:

Such is the fantasy of *incorporation*. Introducing all or part of a love object or a thing into one’s own body, possessing, expelling or alternately acquiring, keeping, losing it—here are varieties of fantasy indicating, in the typical forms of possession or feigned dispossession, a basic intrapsychic situation: the situation created by the reality of a loss sustained by the psyche. If accepted and worked through, the loss would require major readjustment. But the fantasy of incorporation merely simulates profound psychic transformation through magic; it does so by implementing literally something that has only figurative meaning. So in order not to have to “swallow” the loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing. (126)

Abraham and Torok emphasize the mourner's desire to swallow the object. In "Das Lied des Spielprinzen," the I of the poem wishes that the addressee would suspend her within this opening of mourning.

It is often the case that the mourner fantasizes entering into the body of the lost other, a reversal that facilitates the fantasy that the loved other remain. Lasker-Schüler's poem ensures that the speaker, or I of the poem, and the addressed other will merge, or rather that the I be subsumed at the other's address, since separation can be averted only through the speaker's wish for consumption. Crucially, unlike the desire to devour the other, in "Das Lied des Spielprinzen," there is the desire for the annihilation of the self, the desire to be devoured by the other or you addressed in the poem. The act of incorporation turns onto—into—the self: "And your hard brow,/I can lean myself against it,/Sit on it like a gable./ And in the hollow of your chin/I build a robber's hide-away--/Until—you've eaten me all up./Find then one fine morning/Only my knees left over,/Two yellow scarabs for an emperor's ring" (Newton 169). The speaker offers herself as object to be incorporated by the other. It is here that the effects of mourning may be most palpably felt. Freud, in his seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia," discusses the problematic, if not elusive, question of the way in which, in mourning and melancholia alike, the ego allows the shadow of the object to "fall" upon it (249). Lasker-Schüler writes as one who carries the dead within her; she explicitly wrote of her belief in ghosts and her identity as one who was haunted (Newton 8-9). Even, or especially, in a poem dedicated to desire, the author is identifying with the dead, and, as in her treatment of her lost objects, wishes herself to be carried in the body of the sexualized love object.

The suicidal impulse of the one who cannot complete mourning can be reformulated as the desire for absorption in the other's body, which entails the self's annihilation. Punctuation interrupts this moment of self-destruction; a hyphen cuts into the two lines, which move toward the devouring of the speaker. Language itself mimics the speaker's disappearance; the moments of silence in the text remind of the inevitable loss of voice, which would take place upon immersion in the other. Freud remarks, on the question of love and suicide, that

both demonstrate the state of the ego overwhelmed by the object: "In the two opposed situations of being most intensely in love and of suicide the ego is overwhelmed by the object, though in totally different ways" (252).

The question persists whether the disappointing end of Lasker-Schüler's relationship with Benn is directly at stake in the poem "Das Lied des Spielprinzen." Since it is suggested that it was Benn who ended their brief affair, she, as "ex-", casts her ghostly shadow upon him (Falkenberg 94). Perhaps there is an effort, materializing in the space of the text, to deny the loss incurred at the end of the amorous relationship. Lasker-Schüler marked herself as an author who continuously blended the spaces of fiction and biography, signing letters, for example, with the names of her created characters. She mythologized herself, in one instance stating that, though she was raised in Elberfeld, she, in fact, was born in Thebes (Durchslag-Litt and Litman-Demeestère 14). In "Das Lied des Spielprinzen," the symbol of the scarab and its regal setting reflect her interest in mythology. It remains undecided to what degree biographical experience, in this case the reality of the relationship between the two writers, can be aligned with the poem. The poem's title refers to a prince, recalling Lasker-Schüler's repeated references to herself as the Prince of Thebes, thereby destabilizing any clear or singular identity. And yet, Lasker-Schüler invites entry into her biography by placing the collection under Benn's name.

The comingling of fiction and biography echoes the way in which self and other combine. In many of her texts, Lasker-Schüler includes the wish for a return to the mother's body. In the poem "Chaos," ("Chaos") from the 1902 collection *Styx*, the following words parallel the movement of the I in "Das Lied des Spielprinzen":

Ich wollte, ein Schmerzen rege sich/Und stürze mich
grausam nieder/Und riß mich jäh an mich!/Und es lege
eine Schöpferlust/Mich wieder in meine Heimat/Unter
der Mutterbrust./Meine Mutterheimat ist seeleer./Es
blühen dort keine Rosen/Im warmen Odem mehr.--
/...Möcht einen Herzallerliebsten haben,/Und mich in
seinem Fleisch vergraben. (Durchslag-Litt and Litman-
Demeestère 54-57)

I need a pain to pierce/To strike me cruelly down/To

rip me into my self!/O, for the power, the will/To bear
me back to my homeland/Beneath the maternal breast./
My motherland is soulless,/ Roses no longer bloom/In
her warm breath./....Would I had my heart's beloved,/
To bury myself in his flesh. (Durchslag-Litt and Lit-
man-Demeestère 54-57)

In this poem, as in other texts, the concept of home is equated with the figure of the mother (Snook 224-25). The desire for a return to the “mother’s breast” figured as a return home attaches to the desire for burial. This figuration of return becomes possible only through the advent of the experience of pain; the desire for the mother’s body transmits the self’s shattering or wounding. Burial takes place in the heart of the “most loved” other, someone, in part, offered as substitution for the maternal object. The image of the mother’s death is contained in the lines in which breath ceases, a breath pictured here as related to life-giving forces; the roses can no longer bloom in the mother’s presence. It is, then, after an interruption through a hyphen and ellipses that the I moves toward the space of incorporation; the poem reveals the other to be male at its close: “his flesh.”

These lines from “Chaos” are sustained by the integral connection between mourning and sexual impulses or instincts. There is the often-noted upsurge in sexual desire on the occasion of a loved person’s death. This desire works both sides of what develops into ambivalence: on one side, Melanie Klein emphasizes the triumph of fulfillment of early death wishes; on the other side, Abraham and Torok refer to a “final, climactic outpouring of love” for the deceased (103). In “Chaos,” a poem that traces the effects of pain and death, a connection is clearly established between the mourning over the mother’s absence and the desire for incorporation. The poem returns to the mother’s death with the focus on the cessation of breath. The poem’s call to rip or puncture the subject echoes the author’s description of the breach her mother’s death introduced. The desire for a return to the mother’s body can only spell desire for entombment or burial, as the mother’s body is an interred corpse.

The entombment of the mother’s body additionally requires the ingestion of the favorite brother Paul’s body;

Paul died eight years before the mother, who transferred the unmourned loss of her child into his surviving sibling (Rickels 31). Throughout Lasker-Schüler’s work, there is a parallel idealization of both mother and brother. In a 1932 prose text, *Die Eichhörnchen* (*The Squirrels*), the brother is named a young king, a presence echoed in the poem already bearing in its title the turn towards the princely, “The Song of the Playmate Prince” (*Gesammelte Werke* 2: 604). Significantly, the mother/brother loss is repeated through Lasker-Schüler’s later loss of her own son, Paul, whom she named after her missing brother, Paul. Upon her son’s death, the author inevitably replicates her own mother’s loss of her brother. Thus her internal mother supports her in her grief. Lasker-Schüler’s son’s death furthers identification with the deceased mother.

The injunction in Lasker-Schüler’s work to remember and inscribe the dead internally and forever finds a corollary in the wish for others to remember. The last stanza of “Das Lied des Spielprinzen,” issues a guarantee that the speaker of the poem will be re-membered by the other: “Find dann einmal morgens/Nur noch meine Kniee,/Zwei gelbe Skarabäen für eines Kaisers Ring” (*Gesammelte Werke* 1: 209). “Find then one fine morning/Only my knees left over,/Two yellow scarabs for an emperor’s ring” (Newton 169). Though only pieces of the self remain, the image of the knees, underscoring brutality and annihilation, is aligned with the divine and the magical. The scarab, a symbol of divinity in ancient Egypt, is also used as talisman. Though reduced to the level of adornment—the knees described as two yellow scarabs appropriate for an emperor’s ring—the remains of the speaker, nonetheless, become prized possessions that, moreover, possess divine power. There is thus the magical, which remains. Incorporation, as Derrida underscores in his discussion of the question of crypt-keeping, is on the side of the fantastical and magical (Derrida xvii). Not only will the other be made to remember through the forced inclusion of the speaker into the other’s body, that which remains will install a type of power over the other. Lasker-Schüler’s repeated depiction of the poet as possessing divine power is reintroduced here via the image of the scarab. For her, it is the poet who can experience divinity (*Gesammelte*

Werke 2: 329).

The author's linking of the maternal with the often mystified or magical realm of the literary solidifies the connection throughout much of her *oeuvre* between ghosts and the space of the text. The author's mother is repeatedly identified as the one who inducted her into the world of literature, marking the maternal legacy as one doubly tied to language (Cohn 19). There is thus, hidden within Lasker-Schüler's understanding of literary invention as divine, another origin lying in the ghostly; language's magical elements are again tied to the dead. It is the mother who, in order to preserve a link to the entrance into the poetic, must be incorporated. Language itself, for Lasker-Schüler, the possibility of its inception, is perhaps always envisioned within the context of loss. Furthermore, there is the notion of language as lost; a belief is presented throughout her *oeuvre* in a mythic, early language which, presumed lost, must be sought (Hedgepeth 48).

Although the I of "Das Lied des Spielprinzen" desires a brutal consummation, desires her body to be consumed by the other, simultaneously, the pain that would be inflicted by the speaker on the loved object is present. Aggression in the poem is addressed to both self and other, mimicking the fluctuations of sadism and masochism. The third and fourth stanzas of the poem mark the violence that would be inflicted on the loved object's body through the speaker's desire to become a part of that body: "Und deine harte Stirne,/Ich kann mich so recht an sie lehnen,/Sitz drauf wie auf einem Giebel./Und in deines Kinnes Grube/Bau ich mir ein Raubnest--/Bis—du mich aufgefressen hast" (*Gesammelte Werke 2*: 209). "And your hard brow,/I can lean myself against it,/Sit on it like a gable./And in the hollow of your chin/I build a robber's hideaway--Until—you've eaten me all up" (Newton 169). The speaker transforms the "hard brow" into a space that can be usurped for the emplacement of her own body in the other's body, which must support the speaker. The sexual components within these images are also apparent. That the speaker wishes to sit on the other's body shows, moreover, that sexual desire here is tinged with violence. The act of installing oneself inside the cut-open chin of the addressed you both objectifies the other's body and inscribes in it this moment of vio-

lence.

The question with which the poem begins—how might the speaker and the addressee experience more love—would find an answer in ambivalence if it were not for the link to early childhood given in the poem's title as allusion to play. That the song is sung by a "playmate prince," or by the prince of play, recalls earlier modes of attachment. Incorporation's proximity to oral instincts invites, in good part, this return to early states of relating.

Written five years before "Das Lied des Spielprinzen," the language of Lasker-Schüler's 1912 novella *Mein Herz, Ein Liebesroman mit Bildern und wirklich lebenden Menschen* (*My Heart, a Novel of Love, with Pictures and Real, Living People*) insists upon the possibility of incorporation. *Mein Herz* is comprised primarily of letters addressed to Lasker-Schüler's ex-husband, Herwarth Walden, whom she had just recently divorced. Throughout the novella, we find narrations of eating and drinking that illuminate the importance of consumption (*Gesammelte Werke 2*: 369). The image of devouring is essential and recalls the manic response to mourning described by Freud. Freud explains that a response of mania entails the desire to devour objects (Freud 255). In one letter addressed to her ex-husband, Lasker-Schüler writes that she should be seen as comparable to a pineapple by a painter who wishes to paint her portrait and closes the description with a turn towards cannibalism:

Ihr wollt es nicht glauben, aber der Maler mit der ungeheuren Handschrift wird mir glauben, daß ich von der Ananas stamme. O, dieser berausende, wilde Fruchtkopf mit dem Häuptlingsblattschmuck! Ich habe noch nie davon gegessen, nicht einmal genascht, aus Pietät, und dabei könnt ich meine pflanzliche Abkunft aufessen, wie ein Menschenfresser. (*Gesammelte Werke 2*: 362)

You won't believe it, but the painter with the terrifying handwriting will believe me, that I am descended from the pineapple. O, this intoxicating, wild head of fruit, the chieftan's ornamental bonnet! I have never eaten one, not once nibbled at it, because of my piety, and yet I could devour my vegetable ancestry, like a cannibal. (*Heart 20*)

She uses the word “*Abkunft*” (descent, lineage, or parentage) to discuss the pineapple. It is the plant or vegetative form of her parentage that could be eaten, a possibility then tied to the act of a cannibal, a “*Menschenfresser*.” There is thus a link drawn between inheritance or the familial and the question of incorporation. This inclusion of the familial may inevitably refer to loss, the deaths of family members recalled. Implicit, as well, in this moment is the speaker as object of consumption, her comparison to fruit signaling her own fantasy of being devoured or incorporated by the other. There is the wish that the other will follow the call to cannibalism by recognition of the speaker as object available for consumption. Additionally, when the speaker associates herself with exotic fruit described as intoxicating, she uses identification, in part, as lure.²

Though not explicit in this passage, it is crucial to note that in many sections of the novella, the loss of the relationship with Herwarth Walden, the addressee, is directly tied to the speaker’s experience of suffering. It was, in fact, commented that the novella was too heavily based on the author’s biography (Falkenberg 76). The fantasy of incorporating the lost loved object attends identification with acts of cannibalism. The novella incorporates the other; the majority of the epistles are addressed to the author’s ex-husband. In effect, through language, the text becomes a space that can devour or swallow up other objects, which are then contained or stored within.

Just three short sections after cannibalism is first introduced in the novella, the theme returns in another of the novella’s entries. In this example, the act of devouring is turned inwards. The speaker describes a type of self-encounter, one sustained in terms of manic jubilation:

Ich bin nun ganz auf meine Seele angewiesen, und habe mit Zagen meine Küste betreten. So viel Wildnis! Ich werde selbst von mir aufgefressen werden. Ich feiere blutige Götzenfeste, trage böse Tiermasken und tanze mit Menschenknochen, mit Euren Schenkeln. Ich muß Geduld haben. Ich habe Geduld mit mir. (*Gesammelte Werke 2*: 365)

I am now entirely dependent on my soul, and have tread upon my shores with fear. So much wilderness! I

shall be devoured by myself. I celebrate bloody pagan rites, wear the masks of evil animals, and dance with human bones, with your thighs. I must have patience. I have patience with myself. (*Heart 20*)

Evocations of Dionysian festivals or feasts follow, aligning the speaker with playful disposition of human body parts. A primitive world is traced here in which a belief in spirits and ghosts is at home. As in the poem, named after a prince who plays, here too, play becomes synonymous with acts of a brutal nature. The addressees—the letter is addressed both to her ex-husband and her friend Kurt (most likely her ex-husband’s travel companion at the time)—become objects of aggression. Their bodies are now simply fragments, pieces or remainders that become objects of play for the speaker.

The I of the text is alone, or rather, left alone, as though all others have departed. There follows the gesture toward making oneself into the other, whereupon a dissociative inclination appears. The self can be made other in the psyche that stores or retains the dead as other. The self can turn on itself in order to devour a self relation otherwise addressed as a suicidal urge. There is ecstasy in this moment of celebration that allows the speaker to enjoy the animalistic. The figure of manic intoxication arises. Perhaps the turn to the self is described as joyous because it marks the moment of having let go the objects that have been successfully mourned. These objects are not only the ones from which the speaker has detached herself, but also objects upon which the speaker can unleash aggression. There is also a turn towards the self as the one upon whom one can depend. There is the possibility of having patience with oneself. The subject becomes able to treat herself as other. The self can be judged and viewed, and, furthermore, acted upon without the presence of others. There is the fantasy, then, of incorporating oneself into oneself; perhaps celebration here stems from this possibility of ultimate return. At the close of the letter, the speaker states that she is herself, her only “immortal love.” The self alone can usurp the role that might be or was once played by others (*Heart 21*).

Lasker-Schüler insists on the possibility of turning towards the self as other. Beginning with her mother,

Lasker-Schüler's imaginings preserve a space for the unincorporated other; the self could become the "other" in an already familiar process. The writing subject who is inhabited by the dead may thus always be writing with the effects of ghosts or lost objects, the voice of the I becoming multiple. This question of multiplicity applies indeed to Else Lasker-Schüler, who took on the personalities of her invented characters, signing letters in their names and dressing herself in the costumes that she had assigned them. Identity is seen as plural with the haunted self too appearing as a plurality of identities. She claimed she had conversations with ghosts. In Lasker-Schüler's texts addressing or interrogating desire, the traces of losses cannot be erased. Instead, the urge or wish to ingest the other without thought of letting go, and the reciprocal desire for the loved other to do the same, is repeatedly presented. Desire is projected through the lens of loss and often includes the wish for a return to the symbiotic relation between mother and infant that can be reconstructed through processes of incorporation.

Notes

¹ See Jacques Derrida *The Work of Mourning*.

² The question of intoxication enters into a discussion of mourning. As Avital Ronell suggests, the user of the drug or elixir often turns toward intoxicants either to convene with or dismiss phantoms. The hallucinatory properties of drugs facilitate the emergence of the fantasized object. See: Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* 5.

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