

- Je Rame: poetry for power

“I row
I row
I am rowing against your days

You enter the house of suffering

I row
I row
On a black blindfold your actions are recorded
On the great eye of a one-eyed horse your future is rolling

I AM ROWING”¹.
- Henri Michaux

“I would like to imagine a reading by Michaux
hammering *Je Rame* into the skull of his enemy”².
- DiamandaGalàs

With Henri Michaux the malediction genre acquires literary form and comes to the fullness of its artistic dimension. His poem “Je Rame” is one of the most intense interpretations included in “Defixiones. Will and Testament”³, whereas his writings and thoughts on the use of the poetic word as an act of power, are often picked up and quoted by Diamanda Galàs when tracing back to her artistic genealogy and describing her creative process. Starting with these very writings we shall dwell on a description of the perceptive operation performed by Michaux, highlighting the way in which certain aspects of the creative process become manifest in the verses of “Je Rame”, to be then transposed into Diamanda Galàs’ interpretation.

Just as we did in the anthropological context of lamentations and *defixiones*, where we pointed to the presence of social and psychological contexts marked by violent antagonisms, so we

¹ “Je rame
Je rame
Je rame contre tes jours
Dans la maison de la souffrance tu entres
Je rame
Je rame
Sur un bandeau noir tes actions s'inscrivent
Sur le grand œil blanc d'un cheval borgne roule ton avenir
JE RAME”. Henri Michaux, “Je Rame”, *Poésie pour Pouvoir*, 1949.

²DiamandaGalàs, “In the Mouth of the Crocodile”, 21/3/2013, <http://diamandaGalàs.com/writings/the-mouth-of-the-crocodile/>, fecha de consulta: 01/07/2013.

³DiamandaGalàs, “Orders from the Dead”, *Defixiones. Will And Testament*, Mute Records, CD, 2003, libreto, pista n. 3 disco 2.

also noticed in Michaux a constant feeling of oppression from a hostile outside world. It permeates the entire biography of the poet, from his childhood until the Nazi occupation of France, or the painful circumstances of his wife's death⁴.

“In the heat I am rather easygoing, vaguely irresolute in terms of caresses, of contours. Mentally, as you say, I blend into the scenery. When it's cold, it's an entirely different matter. I get a move on. Mentally, I pierce, I pay no heed to surfaces. And I hate (not people) the cold or, should I rather say, I attack. Provided I keep this hate (or aggressiveness) going, I do not catch the cold [...] . My health is in hostility. What is hard is to keep it there. I must gather myself often, in order to get my voltage back. My accusations, there are better ones”⁵.

Upon reading these considerations on hate and aggressiveness, we immediately realize that the author is far from perceiving hostile conditions as merely cause for anxiety and complaint. Conversely, the friction that results is for Michaux both salvific and fortifying and constitutes precious fuel for a chain reaction.

“‘I will do such things - what they are yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth’, says King Lear. Immensity of the surge of rage, out of all proportion to the push-button event. Such an excessively vast, unbearable force with no glad for it and thus no outlet either, condemned to be platonic (but it will drive you mad if you don't do anything) - you have to *aim it*.

The huge tumultuous lake, then, that seemed to overflow its banks, is yet sufficient to launch a torpedo”⁶.

In addition to noticing a tendency to capitalize on conflict, in Michaux we observe an awareness of the preeminently interior, psychological, dimension that the events thus unleashed eventually achieve. There is in fact a phase shift between the detonating event and the disproportionate fury that results in the subject. This tremendous buildup of energy, according to the poet, could lead to madness if it were not to be driven against a target.

“Without a target there is no aim. Without a goal there is insufficient wish to achieve. But let us not dwell on the objective. [...] Once the individual who was darkening the whole horizon of your angry being has become quite pale and restricted to himself, he really is no longer up to the super-hate you were reveling in. [...] You will make him worse, thus making him better for your purposes. [...] Curses and particularly chain curses - And reading them is almost always quite bracing - tend toward something other than destruction; they tend to create a motor. Not to wound or eliminate the

⁴Michaux's wife died as a consequence of terrible burns suffered during a fire that burned down their home.

⁵ “Dans la chaleur, je suis plutôt débonnaire, vaguement velléitaire en caresses, en modelé. Mentalement, comme on dit, j'épouse les contours.

Dans le froid, tout différent. Je fonce. Mentalement, je perce, je ne tiens pas compte des surfaces. Et je hais (pas les gens) le froid ou, dois-je dire plutôt, j'attaque. A condition que je maintienne cette haine (ou attaque) je ne prends pas froid [...] Mon salut est dans l'hostilité. Le difficile est de la garder. Il me faut me recueillir souvent, pour retrouver le voltage. Mes accus, il y en a de meilleurs”. Henri Michaux, “En pensant au phénomène de la peinture”, *Passages. 1937-1963*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, pp. 69-70.

⁶ “Je ne sais ce que je ferai, dit le roi Lear, mais ce sera l'épouvante de la terre”.

Immensité de l'emportement sans proportion avec l'événement presse-bouton. Cette trop vaste insupportable force, qui, n'ayant pas de glande, n'a pas non plus d'exutoire, vouée à être platonique (mais à vous rendre fou, si vous faites rien), il faut la pointer. L'énorme lac tumultueux, alors, qui paraissait devoir déborder tout contenant, il suffit au lancer de la torpille”. Henri Michaux, “Note sur les malédictions”, *Passages. 1937-1963*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 103.

enemy, but opposing the enemy, to create in oneself the Dragon of Fire. [...] As for the magic of curse, it is, above all, hammering, hammering, hammering”⁷.

Hence the “hammering” curse (and the nails of the *defixiones* cannot but be associated with the hammering) is the last resort. It guarantees that the violence of the environmental antagonism does not turn the subject that harbors it into its primary victim. It is however important to underscore, that the practice described by Michaux is not expected to harm a rival literally, thus wasting its fury in a direct conflict. Michaux’s main concern is clearly not the objective destruction of a real antagonist, but rather, after having been pushed “to the limits of his own universe”, to recover full centrality and total possession of his inner space. The poet interiorizes the external object, and once full possession has been gained, reshapes it by “worsening” it in order to match the “super-hate” it intends to fuel. Hence the intentional enhancement of this “driving force” instead of its discharge, results in the generation of something transcendent that Michaux calls the “Dragon of Fire”.

“I allowed my enemy to grow inside me. [...] But what was I supposed to do? He follows me everywhere, so he knows what will make him rich while my fear to become impoverished to his profit makes me add doubtful or bad elements that do me no good and leave me suspended at the very limits of my universe, even more exposed to the treacherous blows of my enemy, who knows me as no adversary has known his enemy”⁸.

These usurping enemies are therefore very valuable, since they can unleash the process of psychological “empowerment” that ends up transcending the conflict from which it originates.

“As one must be able to lose the dangerous comforts of happiness, one must be able to lose some of one’s friends; but enemies must be kept. Precious!

The airplane makes speed out of excess pressure. The problem is not to calm this pressure down, but to place it. To transform what is wrong, the enemy, the irritating situation, hostile surroundings, *into energy*.

⁷ “Sans objectif, pas de visée. Sans but, pas de désir suffisant d’atteindre. Mais, ne restons pas sur l’objectif. [...] devenu bien pâle et restreint à lui-même, [...] n’est vraiment plus à la hauteur de la *sur-haine* où vous vous plaisez à vous tenir. [...] Vous le ferez pire, l’améliorant de la sorte pour votre dessein.

Sans avoir à craindre de nuire, vous pointez maintenant carrément, sur l’être composite devenu digne d’une offensive totale. [...] Las malédictions et spécialement les malédictions en chaîne (leur lecture est du reste presque toujours tonique) tendent plus qu’à une destruction, tendent à créer un moteur. Non blesser ou supprimer l’adversaire, mais par l’opposition à l’adversaire, créer en soi le Dragon de feu. [...] Pour la magie de malédiction, elle est, avant tout, martèlement, martèlement, martèlement”. Henri Michaux, “Note sur les malédictions”, *Passages. 1937-1963*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, pp. 103-106.

⁸ “J’ai laissé grandir en moi mon ennemi. [...] Mais que faire? Il sait à présent, me suivant partout, où trouver ce qui l’enrichira tandis que ma peur de m’appauvrir à son profit me fait m’adjoindre des éléments douteux ou mauvais qui ne me font aucun bien et me laissent en suspens aux limites de mon univers, plus exposé encore aux traîtres coups de mon ennemi qui me connaît comme jamais adversaire ne connut le sien”. Henri Michaux, “La vie double”, *Épreuves, exorcismes. 1940-1944*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973. Trad. castellana en: Henri Michaux, *Escritos sobre Pintura*, ed. Chantal Maillard, Murcia, Colección de Arquitectura, 2000, p. 29.

Far from wasting the eruption of anger on the often quite ordinary individual who seems to be its cause, it is important, on the contrary, to cut one's connections to him as much as possible, to float inside the anger, take pleasure in it, to grow, intensify in it"⁹.

Therefore there is an intentional disconnect from the external object, and what remains is psychological material that emerges deformed in the conscience of Michaux - the disfigured faces that we know from his artworks are its tangible manifestation. We can thus imagine him in the act of concentrating on one of these creatures, deliberately exasperated in their monstrosity, so as to create the target of a "curse-poem".

"But a few years ago, living in a country that has for a thousand of years been the land of magic, where paintings and sculptures give commandments, where words spoken or carved in stone exert some control over the living, the dead and the gods, one day when I had been extremely frustrated, I had the inspiration of directing my anger (instead of letting it raise me and shake me up in a disorderly way) and placing it on some character (who actually happened to be largely responsible for it) and this repeatedly, insistently, incessantly. I then felt my anger as matter, as a resistant fluid, as a weapon, while I was thrust into action reinventing, almost without realizing it, the verbal instrument of anger - that is, the curse. But I constantly had to keep putting my anger back on the target, which was not exactly easy, to my surprise. The man I thought I hated so much tended to become blurry. Insufficiently hateful, he did not measure up to my total rage, which wanted a more exciting target, an ideal target. I therefore modified him, but not too much, and his situation too. It was him and it was not him. It was better than he was"¹⁰.

"Je Rame", just like other poems by Michaux, springs from this inner endeavor and we find in it intentional references to the practice of ancient curses. Well beyond its narrative or descriptive value, his text appears as an "act" that assumes the form of a long and detailed list, endowed with the paratactic, repetitive, circular structure that is common to so many *defixiones*. He directly addresses a generic "you", cautioning against the malediction that weighs on him. He starts in the past tense "I have cursed your forehead your belly your life [...]", and then shifts to the present when describing all the consequences that are bound to strike the victim "The air you breathe suffocates

⁹ "Comme on doit savoir perdre le confort dangereux du bonheur, on doit savoir perdre de ses amis, mais il faut garder ses ennemis. Précieux!

L'avion fait de la vitesse avec une excessive pression. Il ne s'agit pas de la calmer, cette pression, il s'agit de la placer. Utilisation *énergétique* de l'ennemi, de la situation irritante, du milieu hostile, du mal. Loin de gaspiller l'éruption de la colère sur l'individu souvent médiocre qui en paraît la cause, il convient au contraire de couper le plus possible ses attaches avec lui, pour voguer en elle, jour d'elle, se grandir, s'intensifier en elle". Henri Michaux, "Pouvoirs", *Passages. 1937-1963*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 135.

¹⁰ "Mais, il y a quelques années, séjournant dans un pays qui depuis des millénaires est celui de la magie, celui où peintures et sculptures donnent des commandements, où les paroles prononcées ou gravées dans la pierre contraignent les vivants, les morts et les dieux, j'eus, un jour que j'avais été extrêmement contrarié, j'eus l'inspiration de diriger ma fureur (au lieu de laisser me soulever et m'agiter désordonnement) et de la placer sur un personnage (qui y était du reste pour beaucoup) et cela d'une façon répétée, insistante, incessante. Ma colère, je la sentis alors comme une matière, comme un fluide résistant, comme une arme, cependant que je me mettais en action et réinventais presque sans m'en rendre compte l'instrument verbal même de la colère ; c'est-à-dire les malédictions. J'avais toutefois constamment à la remettre sur l'objectif, ce qui n'allait pas du tout seul et me surprenait beaucoup. L'homme que je croyais tant détester avait tendance à devenir flou. Insuffisamment détestable, il n'était pas à la hauteur de ma rage totale, qui voulait une cible plus excitante, une cible idéale. Je le modifiai donc mais pas trop, je modifiai aussi sa situation. C'était lui et ce n'était plus lui. C'était mieux que lui". Henri Michaux, "Pouvoirs", *Passages. 1937-1963*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, pp. 135-136.

you / the air you breathe is the air of a cellar [...]” synthesizing the magical-poetical act in the inexorable, repeated, action of rowing against his life “I am rowing / I am rowing / I am rowing against your life [...] I row / I row / I am rowing against your days”.

In the style of the poems that stem from this inner practice, and in particular in “Je Rame”, we can find the same rhythmic, repetitive and paratactic, textual structure, the same detailed list of suffering to impose on others, as appear in many *defixiones*. We can almost hear the forceful hammering of the *defigens*, and we see it again in the violence with which Diamanda Galàs’ fingers strike the piano keyboard, or in the dry nasal sounds that her voice produces as it hits the walls inside her skull.

However, there’s something fundamentally different compared to the ancient curses with which we started our analysis: the original intention of the *defixio* was very practical and concrete, the identity of the victim was carefully indicated and tangible consequences were expected. The psychological effects that the process of practicing the curse produced on the perpetrators were irrelevant - after all, in many instances, the *defigens* was a professional magician who was recruited for the task, and therefore alien to the conflictual relationship that existed between the person who had commissioned the *defixio* and its target.

The “analogical support” we discussed above - the *kolossos*, i.e. a small figure depicting the victims, or the material elements (hair, nails, personal objects) that were used to identify them thus directing magical action against them - in Michaux becomes an object that is deliberately distanced from its initial external referent. It is thus that the antagonism of the artist is consumed within an intra-psychical ambit - what appears externally, be it painting or poetry, is a remnants of a process whose final goal is the ultimate transformation of the artist himself.

“The world moves away from you

I am rowing

I am rowing

I am rowing against your life

I am rowing

I split into countless rowers

To row more strongly against you”¹¹

As we saw above, when addressing Diamanda Galàs’ interpretation of the poem “Todesfuge” by Celan, we are once again faced with a systematic altering of the artist’s subjectivity, which in this case does not manifest itself in an antiphonal, dialogical fashion (interiorizing the antagonist’s “you” and making him speak in the first person), but rather in a multiplicative one, with the declared aim of confronting an external “you”. In other words, the antagonist is first represented, and then, as a representations, attacked. This process calls for an intrapsychic incorporation of a

¹¹ “Le monde s'éloigne de toi

Je rame

Je rame contre ta vie

Je rame

Je me multiplie en rameurs innombrables

Pour ramer plus fortement contre toi”. Henri Michaux, “Je Rame”, *Poésie pour Pouvoir*, 1949.

mental object that takes on the shape of an “obsession” of sorts nurtured by the artist, who then opposes it through a linguistic operation.

[D.G.] “This music is concerned with tendencies towards excessive behavior. An obsession, extremes omnipresent and encroaching upon the other, within microseconds, coalescing one moment and dissolving the next, towards an ultimate dissolution, which is the soul’s own Implosion.

You do not go to a hospital to inspire the recreation of your own Death onstage. You know it by heart. This need, this voracity for the extremes of consciousness I return to.

An actor may simulate the desired emotive state through a skilled manipulation of external object materials, or he may use the raw materials of his own soul in a process which is the immediate, the DIRECT experience of the emotion itself. This second concern is felt by performers who, not just professional, are *Obsessional* performers”¹².

The antagonistic matrix which, as we have seen, is common to both *defixio* and lamentation, is then translated into a form of representation which is articulated by counterpoint, antiphony, parody¹³, and by the different subjects embodied in the performer herself who, through incorporation, presents them to us in a dialogical relationship.

As in Michaux, in Diamanda Galàs too, “art as malediction” constitutes a “counterattack” strategy. It is part of a dialectic between introversion and extroversion, which presupposes the prior invasion of an antagonist. In open conflict with the latter, the artist performs a mental and formal representation of him, followed by a counteroffensive action aimed at regaining centrality over the inner space. Actually, when speaking of the dynamics that accompany her artistic practice, she states: “[...]The words cut and bleed, each syllable served upon a razor blade. ‘Bleed you bastard. I have your hands on the table and now I cut each finger with great precision to save my life. *BleEd* you have tried to bury me alive but I will cut off your fingers so I may free myself from the curse of your tribe, of *you*, who has tried to steal my every stepag.’ Now I drag your body to a dank and filthy place. *Sucio*. I make sure you will *never* be discovered and I return to my home and clean clean clean. Katharizo Katharizo. I must make it clean to make my way upon this slate. Hammer hammer hammer [...]”¹⁴.

In the third track of “Defixiones. Will and Testament”, second CD (Songs of Exile), Diamanda Galàs’ expressive devices are added on to Michaux’s literary ones. An echo-effect prolongs the duration of sounds, intertwining and multiplying them together with wing beats and buzzing noises. From whisper to scream, from feverish articulation of syllables to their slow enunciation, the interpretation of the text presents different climaxes, followed by as many descending parables, decelerations and caesuras. The words “Je rame”¹⁵ are repeated by the singer

¹² Diamanda Galàs, *The Shit of God*, New York - Londra, High Risk Books/Serpent’s Tail, 1996, pagg. 1-2.

¹³ Per parodia si fa qui riferimento al concetto di “parodia seria” sviluppato in: Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni*, Roma, Nottetempo, 2005.

¹⁴ Diamanda Galàs, “In the Mouth of the Crocodile”, 21/3/2013, <http://diamandaGalàs.com/writings/the-mouth-of-the-crocodile/>, data di consultazione: 01/07/2013.

¹⁵ Che potremmo intendere quasi come il “ritornello” del brano.

with growing emphasis, to coalesce in inarticulate sounds and flow in a single highly nasal vowel. This percussive, hammering, clash of the voice against the “mask”¹⁶, echoed by the *basso ostinato* of the accompaniment, is immediately reminiscent of the blows of the hammer of the *defigens* on the metal sheet of the *defixio*, and constitutes the fundamental moment in which the performance seems to brush against the metaphorical limits of language to approach a dimension in which text, voice and music become “action”. But if, by pushing the allusive confines of language, one approaches action, if no longer exclusively linguistic, of what nature would this action be? Perhaps magic, as suggested by the ritual matrix of the curse?

Directly quoting Diamanda Galàs herself, we might frame the process in question within a dynamic of concentration and extroversion of energy: [D.G.]“I wanted to produce an immediate extroversion of sound, to deliver a pointed, focused message - like a *gun*.

I used to talk with my singing teacher in San Diego about guns as *necessity* and *metaphor*; we both believe in the idea of “extroversion of energy”. For example the way I sing embodies the concept that diffraction of the personality provides essential liberation from the self, thus extroverting the insanity. And when you extrovert the insanity, you can live most of the time as a real person, yet be able to change your self and commit actions that your real self would not be capable of”¹⁷.

In both, Michaux and Galàs, the inner horizon of the artistic endeavor is such that the text and the performance become acts of self-transformation and psychological empowerment¹⁸. In Michaux we are invited to take part in it through a textual experience, an individual relationship between us and the written page. In Galàs the live performance will embrace the audience in a specific time-space relationship, in addition to openly declaring the purpose with which the poetic or religious texts of others are reinterpreted as lamentations and maledictions against her declared antagonists.

Yet, in neither of these artists can we totally rule out the complementary presence of a “magical” intent. Actually they both admit the possibility of its efficacy beyond the author’s subjective inner dimension. In Michaux we see the concept of curse, as a literary and psychological act, coexist with his readiness to accept the idea that psychic energy can cross the boundaries of the subject to the extent of “acquiring magical power” and thus reaching the external object.

“But without a certain extreme - extreme concentration - there is no direct, massive, permanent, magical action of that thought on the thinker. Intensity, intensity, intensity in unity, is absolutely

¹⁶ Ossia contro le cavità mascellari e frontali.

¹⁷ Diamanda Galàs intervistata da Andrea Juno, in: *Angry Women*, New York, Juno Books, 1991, pag. 8.

¹⁸ Il termine “empowerment” è qui inteso in senso letterale e generico, ovvero di rafforzamento. Diversa è la sfumatura che la stessa parola può assumere quando riferita a contesti quali minoranze etniche, o razziali, o sessuali - in tal caso per “empowerment” si intenderebbe un processo che accumula strumenti e conoscenze per un’emancipazione concreta di natura politica e sociale.

indispensable. There is a certain threshold beyond which, but *not before*, a thought-feeling counts, counts differently, counts genuinely and *takes on power*. It may even spread out in all directions”¹⁹.

Diamanda Galàs, in turn, goes straight to the point warning of the magical intent of her *defixiones* [D.G.] “[...] my hexes are personal and meant to happen, even if it takes years”.

¹⁹ “Mais, sans une certaine extrême, extrême concentration, il n’y a pas action directe, massive, permanente, magique de cette pensée sur celui qui l’a pensée. Intensité, intensité, intensité dans l’unité, voilà qui est indispensable. Il y a un certain seuil, à partir duquel, mais *pas avant*, une pensée-sentiment compte, compte autrement, compte vraiment et prend un pouvoir. Elle pourra même rayonner...”. Henri Michaux, “Pouvoirs”, *Passages. 1937-1963*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 137.