

College of Arts and Sciences
CUREJ - College Undergraduate Research
Electronic Journal

University of Pennsylvania

Year 2007

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Orpheus in Guy Davenport's "The Dawn
in Erewhon"

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Revised version, posted 10 December 2007.

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Introduction: The Assemblage Style

Although *Tatlin!* is Guy Davenport's first collection of fiction, it is the work of a fully mature artist. This level of development is not surprising when we consider that "The Aeroplanes at Brescia", the first of the collected stories to be published, appeared in *The Hudson Review* in 1970, when Davenport was forty years old. Earlier, during his undergraduate days at Duke, Davenport had flirted with fiction writing and produced several short stories, which literary critic and Davenport's personal friend Wyatt Mason labeled as distinctly "Southern" in tone and concern. After graduation, Davenport continued to write through his career as student and teacher, but produced basically everything except fiction: translations, poems, and essays. Each of these genres would subsequently be reflected in the fiction.

Throughout his lifelong academic career, Davenport was a champion of the High Modernism of Pound, but his fiction is arguably Postmodern. Davenport's fiction resembles the all-encompassing range of his essays rather than wholly embracing the aesthetic subject matter. Taking Pound's definition of masters as "men who have combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well or better than the inventors," Davenport may be a master of Postmodernism but he is not a master of Modernism; Modernist tropes and devices are just one among many of the historical aesthetics Davenport selects to form his fiction.¹ Indeed, Davenport does not call his fiction "stories". Instead, he stresses their collage-like nature by terming them "assemblages", a term derived from art history.

¹ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 39.

Calling a fictional story an *assemblage* not only draws attention to the artificiality of the text, but also provides a paradigm for the reader's reception. In the original context, *assemblage* refers to sculptures comprised of found objects. Joseph Cornell's "boxes" are probably the greatest example.² Davenport's assemblages, of course, are comprised primarily of his own invention, but Davenport readily employs *objets trouvés* from history. Furthermore, Davenport's methods of composition often involve arranging already composed sentences from his journals or "workbooks." By combining these discreet elements into a single unified work of art, like the visual assemblage, he creates an aesthetic of disjunctive parataxis.

In his handful of interviews and autobiographical writings, Davenport does not confine the term assemblage to refer to specific stories, but the appellation *assemblage* should only be applied to certain pieces of Davenport's fiction, which share a very pronounced feature. All of Davenport's assemblages have discrete blocks of text, which are sometimes set off by titles, as in "Wo es war, soll ich werden":

RUE DE FLEURUS

Human nature is not interesting. The human mind is interesting and the universe.

PAPYRUS

Yeshua was the shepherd who abandoned the nine and ninety sheep to find the one sheep which was lost. There was delight in his heart when he found it, for nine and ninety is a number of the left hand, and if one is added to it, it passes to the right.³

Like a visual-art assemblage, this style draws attention to the composite nature of the text and uses the visual appearance of the page to group the elements. All of Davenport's stories may be

² Davenport writes about Cornell (and his ill-fated collaboration with Stan Brakhage) in the comical essay "Pergolesi's Dog". While the essay is actually about mistaken convictions, Davenport uses an anecdote about Cornell as a starting point. At the beginning of the essay, he describes Cornell and his boxes: "Cornell [is] the eccentric artist who assembled choice objects in shallow box frames to achieve a hauntingly wonderful, partly surrealistic, partly homemade American kind of art. He lived all his adult life more or less a recluse, on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, New York, sifting through his boxes of clippings and oddments to find the magic combination of things—a celluloid parrot from Woolworth's, a star map, a clay pipe, a Greek postage stamp—to arrange in a shadow box." From *Every Force Evolves a Form*, (San Francisco: North Point, 1987), 144.

³ Guy Davenport. *The Death of Picasso* (Washington: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 323.

assemblages in terms of content, but some of them have a highly developed and consistent style, which we will call the *assemblage style*.

Many of Davenport's most accomplished stories, including "Wo es war, sol lich werden" and "The Ringdove Sign", feature this assemblage style, but it is present in a more crudely developed state in *Tatlin!* The eponymous assemblage features the style in that it is comprised of text blocks set off by bold titles, but it relates the story of the Russian Constructivist in a straightforward chronological narrative. The concluding novella, "The Dawn in Erewhon," more clearly predicts Davenport's later assemblages. As in the excerpt above from "Wo es war, sol lich werden", the sections of "The Dawn" are disjunctive, their relationship is not immediately clear. By studying this assemblage, we can see the early foundations of the assemblage style and develop a model for reading.

Early in the text Davenport provides a historical precedent as a guide for his reader. The first two sections of "The Dawn" respectively introduce the two main storylines, Davenport's character Adriaan van Hovendaal and a retelling of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, which basically continue independently until the conclusion. Immediately after these first two sections, Davenport places a translation of the "Shield of Achilles" episode of *The Iliad* (book XVIII, lines 478-617). Disjunctive in its relationship to the preceding chapter, the episode subsequently ties into the main plot when Section Four begins with Adriaan reading Homer. This section does much more to help the reader understand the style than to understand Adriaan's life of the mind. Roughly thirty years after "The Dawn", Davenport acknowledged the Homeric precursor of this tangential style:

Cinema has taught us how to read a flow of images. My method of serial collage is not all that different from Homer's inserting family histories, myths, and long lists of ships into descriptions of battles. My departures from linear narrative are all forays into analogies and metaphors. Our fund of comparisons and similes becomes shopworn over the years. There are ways of sharpening and brightening. "Invent, invent!" said William Carlos Williams. "Make it

new!” (Thoreau, Ezra Pound). The craft of writing has a long history of innovations. These inevitably collide with the traditions we’re comfortably used to.⁴

Just as in the epic poem, the Achilles shield episode in “The Dawn” is “a departure from linear narrative”. By placing this section so prominently in the story, Davenport helps situate the reader and also establishes the primacy of style in the assemblage.

Thesis: Orpheus, the Symbolic Guide

Like many Modernist texts, “The Dawn” teaches us how to read it. The assemblage style requires special attention from the reader to make sense of the many disjunctive elements; a connection between two paratactic sentences brings not only a certain frisson but also foregrounds the mental thought processes that go into reading and making sense of two objects. The act of reading “The Dawn” tests and develops the creativity of the reader, and these acts are reflected upon in the story. Just as Davenport used the “Shield of Achilles” episode to evoke the precedent of Homer, the symbol of Orpheus guides the reader to understanding the story and its historical context. The symbol of Orpheus is reflexive; it is meta-textual in that it refers to the act of reading the text itself. By studying the symbol, the reader can see how a rather fanciful story of a Dutch philosopher and a society of Erewhonians is relevant to contemporary life and very urgent.

Davenport’s use of the myth of Orpheus is complex and multifaceted. On the most principal level, the myth of Orpheus provides a way to think about major themes of subjectivity, the power of art, and the relationship of art and the past. Using Ovid’s retelling of the myth as a standard, the story of Orpheus involves these themes in several different ways: Orpheus as poet/philosopher, the animation of the forest and animals, and most famously the gaze that forces

⁴ Guy Davenport, *Circumspectus*, (Champaign: Finial, 2004), 2-3.

Eurydice to remain in the underworld. The gaze upon Eurydice shows not only how subjectivity changes something but also kills it. This violence and the power of the gaze is balanced by the earlier element of the story, the animation of the forest by the power of art. This balance of subjectivity, in which the mind changes objects but also allows those objects to have subjectivity and voice unto themselves is a characteristic of what Davenport calls “the archaic spirit of man”. Davenport illustrates an example of this attribution of subjectivity to an object in a literary tradition that revolves around the figure of Orpheus. Beginning with Ovid and continuing into the present with works such as “The Dawn,” authors have created landscapes that can also be interpreted as sexualized male and female couples. By explicating passages of literature for the reader, Davenport shows instances of the expanded sensibility at work and the ability to access it through art. By placing selections of this art in his story, Davenport exercises these faculties in the reader.

In contrast to the sexualized landscapes of the Orphic literary tradition, the main visual symbol of “The Dawn” serves to remind us of the unique state of mind in the 20th century and the absence of the archaic spirit in our contemporary society. Davenport attempts to locate the social factors that have contributed to failure in imagination and advocates individualism in response to the conformity of society. Above all else, Davenport locates the influence of technology on our psychology. The coldly rational scientific exploration of the moon contrasts sharply with the moon that is full of life in mythology. The Erewhonian storyline, continued from the original novels by Samuel Butler, confirms not only this Luddite criticism of technology but also exemplifies adopting the non-rational in order to stay balanced in one’s thinking. The other major story line, which focuses around Adriaan van Hovendaal, also exemplifies this concept of balance by presenting Adriaan as an alter-ego to Ludwig

Wittgenstein, but one who balances the intellectual pursuit with the physical. These characters stand as exemplary sensibilities in a society that is out of balance. The rapid rise of technology has led to society in the 20th century becoming detached from its own human history and this inherent human spirit.

Davenport's stylistic attempt to evoke the archaic spirit is informed by Pound's ideogrammic method. The figure of Orpheus ties this link together and can be seen as a direct acknowledgment to Pound by Davenport. Davenport has written brilliantly on Pound's inspiration by the mythological figure Persephone. She is, of course, the goddess of the underworld, whom Orpheus must charm to retrieve Eurydice. The allusion to Pound evokes a stylistic precedent. Pound's description of his own style could just as well be describing "The Dawn." "The ideogramic [sic] method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register."⁵ The ideogrammic assemblage style attempts to jumpstart the reader's imagination by putting objects into a new context. Furthermore, Davenport explicating Pound informs our reading. Appropriately, he writes in "Persephone's Ezra:"

The placing of events in time is a romantic act; the *tremendum* is in the distance. There are no dates in the myths; from when to when did Heracles stride the earth? In a century obsessed with time, with archeological dating, with the psychological recovery of time (Proust, Freud), Pound has written as if time were unreal, has, in fact, treated it as if it were space. . . . In Pound's spatial sense of time the past is here now; its invisibility is our blindness, not its absence.⁶

In order to reconnect the reader with the past and reclaim the archaic spirit, Davenport follows Pound's lead to opening the reader's eyes to the life of the world that may lie hidden beneath the surface.

⁵ Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, (New York: New Directions, 1970), 51.

⁶ Guy Davenport quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 20.

By assembling his text as a field of cultural allusions and excerpts from historically real sources, Davenport creates a text that is, in some ways, a natural work like history itself. As Robert L. Caserio observes in his essay “Guy Davenport: Understanding What to Save?” Davenport becomes an Orphic Noah, preserving lost elements vital to our culture.⁷ Caserio refers to the entire collection *Tatlin!*, but among those first texts “The Dawn” most reflectively analyzes the importance of culture to society.

I: Adriaan as the Orphic Wittgenstein

If the narrative of the story itself is not enough to establish the identity of Adriaan as Orpheus, Davenport acknowledged his intention in an early interview:

Symbolically, I meant him to be an Orpheus, descending into a new underworld (another reason for [choosing] the Netherlands), trying to find something like the natural archaic spirit of man, which I gather is what all philosophers and religious thinkers are trying to find. Now Orpheus is a tragic figure: he found his Eurydice but he looked at her as he was not supposed to and he lost her forever. This myth is a very modern story.⁸

In “The Dawn”, Davenport offers not only a retelling of *Erewhon*, but the myth of Orpheus. Adriaan becomes a manifestation of Orpheus, whose search for the archaic *psyche* is both physically and intellectually philosophical.

Davenport illustrates the physical and intellectual nature of Adriaan’s quest—as well the stakes in such a quest—by creating Adriaan as an alter-ego to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Earlier in the same interview, Davenport explains that he modeled Adriaan as a sexually-liberated Wittgenstein. Many other clues to Adriaan’s alter-ego surface in the story. The name *van Hovendaal*, Dutch for the gardener, alludes to Wittgenstein’s temporary employment

⁷ Robert Caserio, “Guy Davenport: Understanding What to Save?” *Vort* 3:3 (1976), 61.

⁸ Barry Alpert, “Guy Davenport—An Interview” *Vort* 3:3, 10.

as a gardener's assistant at a monastery after the publication of his *Tractatus*. Also, in the opening section of "The Dawn" Davenport paratactically compares the morning rituals of the two:

At the gymnasium he had finished his presses and curls, walked springfooted to the showers, tossed his shorts and jockstrap into his locker, and lifted his face to the cold torrent that sprayed him until he was gooseflesh and shivers, his scrotum tight.

Wittgenstein's mornings were spent in gardens, forests, Cambridge fields. His hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, he walked around trees, his eyes puzzled by their beauty. (*Tat* 132)

Without any explanation except description, Davenport contrasts the characters of these two thinkers by juxtaposing images of them. Wittgenstein finds himself unable to understand the environment he wanders in, the very forest which Orpheus (Adriaan) can animate. Orpheus turns the trees into *kouroi*, young men and women. Immediately following Wittgenstein's purely intellectual regard for the trees, in which the eyes are at odds with the mind, we flash back to Adriaan's gym, where the tree is replaced by an actual kouros:

The attendant Hans, a tall, steep-chested boy with a wad of hair at his jugular notch, had brought him a fresh towel. A redstone *kouros* from Sounion, this strapping young Amsterdammer, translated into the slenderer grace of the modern gramivore. He wore only a thin-bretelled blue undershirt that rucked under his pectoral mass but stretched creaseless across his myronic flanks. Adriaan regarded his stout cock with philosophic admiration, male envy tempered by apolegamy. (*Ibid.*)

Wittgenstein's puzzlement is replaced by Adriaan's "philosophic admiration". Male envy is a natural instinct, but here it is balanced by *apolegamy*, which derives from the Greek word meaning "to decline". This ancient integration of the intellectual and the physical is the telos of the Orphic quest. *Tatlin!* locates this need for a return to physical and intellectual integration as a primary concern for the modern mind.

The sexual freedom experienced by the characters directly contradicts social prohibitions.

In an interview Davenport has placed Adriaan's sexuality in the context of philosophy:

So I imagine a modern Dutchman who does express himself with his body as well as with his mind and seems to me (or at least I want to suggest this) that he lands in an Erewhon. That is, there's no such human behavior ever going to be generally permissible. What Fourier asked for.

So we make him a student of both Fourier and of Sam Butler. He's a kind of latter-day disciple of Epicurus. (*Int* 10)

Although—or, perhaps, because—no culture would allow such behavior, it is important to imagine the natural behavior of sexuality without the social constraints. “The Dawn” is also the first story in which Davenport published sexually explicit scenes. The reception of this book proves the case it makes: society actively represses sexuality. Davenport said he feared accusations that his book would be considered pretentious but was shocked by charges of pornography. Nevertheless, he continued to publish fiction uninfluenced by the reception. Sexual scenes meticulously detailed in exuberantly arcane vocabulary became a trademark feature of his fiction. Although “The Dawn” had Davenport’s first instances of sexuality, it would not be until “On Some Lines of Vergil” in *Eclogues* that he introduced the sexual theme that would draw the most critical attention and the most backlash, the sexuality of children. On this subject and the subject of his critics, Andre Furlani quotes a letter from Davenport: “I have no defense of my fictions. [...] I’m aware that I’m imagining a morality transcending practically all present cultures. Hence my interest in Fourier’s ‘calculus of passion.’” Furlani concludes, “Davenport’s stories locate a source of the radical innocence of children in their embryonic sexuality”.⁹ For Davenport, sexuality is a naturally innocent activity stigmatized only by society.

The Utopian philosophers of the story emphasize a balance between intelligence and instinct. Davenport locates one of the strongest links between the two main philosophers in the story by juxtaposing two quotations, the first by Fourier: “Butler is an intellectual cousin of Fourier. *Bij voorbeeld*:¹⁰ reason uncorrected by instinct is as bad as instinct uncorrected by reason. // Unreason is a part of reason” (*Tat* 227). The repetition of sexuality in the story represents the

⁹ Andre Furlani. “Guy Davenport’s Pastorals of Childhood Sexuality” in *Curioser: On the Queerness of Children*, edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 226. Further quotations are cited in text by the author’s last name.

¹⁰ *Dutch*: For example.

expression of this instinct and becomes its primary symbol. Like the sexually precocious children of Davenport's later fiction, Adriaan and the other characters in "The Dawn" act upon natural urges without the unnecessary self-consciousness imposed by social strictures. They follow the morality outlined by nature and their own libidos. Erik Anderson Reece, a former student of Davenport, describes the philosophy of Fourier, in which attraction equals destiny:

Fourier held the "moral philosophers" responsible for instilling in humankind a system of laws and beliefs that ran directly counter to what he observed to be nature's system. In *Apples and Pears*, Adriaan transcribes into his sketchbook one of the earlier pronouncements Fourier made, his open "Letter to the High Judge," written to Napoleon in 1803: "They [the moral philosophers] should have seen that God's design for society is implicit, as it is with the stars and the animals, in the natural attraction immutably built into our being." But instead, Fourier contended, "the only art the moralists know is that of perverting human nature and repressing the soul's impulses, or passionate attractions."¹¹

By presenting Adriaan as Wittgenstein "opened up" Davenport makes social claims rather than those related to the historical Wittgenstein. Biographical facts are never presented in the story, but the unhappy context of the philosopher's biography contrasts with the Arcadian happiness experienced by the characters in the story. Sexuality is an interesting locus, where the urges of the individual are clearly met with customs of society. Davenport does not recommend simply balancing intelligence with sexuality, but rather realizing that they cannot be clearly separated.

Sexuality is an intrinsic element of the philosophical sensibility symbolized by the figure Orpheus. Andre Furlani, in his study "Guy Davenport's Pastorals of Childhood Sexuality", determines that the relationship between intelligence and instinct in Davenport's fiction is curiosity:

Sexual desire complements other forms of curiosity, and thus Davenport's fiction realizes the erotic implications of [Randolph] Bourne's belief that the virtues of childhood are not in "the moral realm" where adults strive to confine them: "Discarding the 'good' child, then, we will find the virtues of childhood in that restless, pushing, growing curiosity that is characteristic of every healthy little boy or girl." For Bourne, virtue issues from an ardent curiosity for the data of the material world, leading to the acquisition of powers of judgment indispensable to the expansion of one's moral sympathies. Davenport does not hesitate to identify such ardor with eros. (Furlani 233)

¹¹ Erik Anderson Reece, *A Balance of Quinces: The Paintings and Drawings of Guy Davenport*, (New York: New Directions, 1996), 45. The addition of "the moral philosophers" is Reece's.

The association of eros with intelligence explains not only the far-reaching sexual practices of the text but also the broad range of intellectual issues. Davenport argues (and illustrates) the pleasures associated with both sexuality and learning. Davenport makes as much a case for enjoying the mind as he does the body.

Davenport alludes to Ovid's implication that Orpheus was the source of philosophy, the profession of both Adriaan and Wittgenstein. In addition to being a student of both Butler and Fourier, Adriaan is writing his second book on Orpheus:

He had begun the *De Sensualitas*, weaving his ideas around the spindle of a myth that had two faces. One was that of Orpheus, the other that of Persephone. Orpheus had become Pythagoras, and Pythagoras had begun philosophy, losing it once to the mathematicians and again to the philosophers who could only speak through the mask of the magus. (*Tat* 192)

In *The Metamorphoses*, Pythagoras shares many characteristics with Orpheus. Chapter 27 begins with a short narrative describing Pythagoras proving a geometrical theorem. Chapter 22, which centers on Davenport's retelling of the Orpheus myth in a highly homosexual context, begins with a quotation of Pythagoras. The origin of philosophy in Orpheus connects these seemingly disparate ideas with the rest of the narrative. After philosophy has changed from the original art of Orpheus to that of the mathematician, it has lost its original consilience.

In the concluding passages of "The Dawn," Davenport makes a tangible but tangential connection between Orpheus and Wittgenstein. In *Objects on a Table*, Davenport's book of lectures still-life painting, he gives an example of a literary still life, an assortment of books on a table in one of Poe's short stories. Davenport presents a similar still life of books at the end of "The Dawn". The collection of books summarizes the themes of the assemblage by association:

The twelve blue volumes of Fourier would go, Kirk's crotchety *Heraclitus*, Zuntz's *Persephone*, Wittgenstein's newly published *Über Gewissheit*, in which he had underlined the closing passage, which tries again to know and to know that one knows. *I cannot with any seriousness think that I am dreaming while I sit here at my table and write. If a dreamer says I am dreaming, he is as wrong as if he had said in his dream, It is raining, even though it is raining. Even if the rain suggested to his sleeping mind that he dream of rain* (*Tat* 261, author's italics)

Wittgenstein is implicitly identified as Orpheus by association with Persephone. Persephone, in turn, is paired with the ancient philosopher Heraclitus. We will explore these relationships more fully in the next section.

II: Pound/Persephone

Davenport indicates that Orpheus and Persephone, paired together, represent complimentary relationships to the past. In the myth, Orpheus must persuade Persephone, Queen of the underworld, to allow him to return Eurydice to the realm of the living. These two figures operate mythically to define the individual's relationship to the past, but also work metatextually to describe Davenport's relationship to Pound and, therefore, an artist's relationship to a tradition. Pound's concerns with the presence of the past resonate throughout the entire story. By invoking Orpheus as a compliment to Pound's Persephone, Davenport himself performs the work of Orpheus bringing back the vital parts of Pound's contribution. Pound's Persephone has vigilance over the entire past, while Davenport's Orpheus labors to bring the important past back to the light of day.

Davenport has been an engaging critic regarding this aspect of Pound's career. In the essay "Persephone's Ezra" from *The Geography of the Imagination*, Davenport traces the influence of Persephone on Pound. To Davenport, the mythological figure has grand implications:

As if Persephone were his guide toward the light he sought, as if she, the power of renewal, had chosen him and not he her [...] his eye went to the master poets whose manner is limpid, sharp, clear and simple: Homer, Ovid, Dante, and Chaucer. So carefully did he study each that one can plausibly trace Pound's style wholly to Homer, or wholly to Dante, as it would seem; what we would be looking at is the unbroken tradition of the Homeric phrase in western literature[.]¹²

¹² Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination* (Boston: Nonpareil, 199), 143. Further quotations from this book will be cited in text as *Geo*.

He meticulously connects details of Pound's poetry with a rich living tradition. According to Davenport, the poet can connect to the past by concentrating on one aspect—the symbol of Persephone or the poetic phrase.

Ovid, from whom the Orphic literary tradition springs, is associated with the literary device of evoking an individual through another object, most often an item of nature. In “The Dawn”, Davenport uses the same Ovidian technique many times, as when he refers to Wittgenstein in the forest of *kouroi*. He most deliberately employs the technique by borrowing Pound's own symbol for Persephone. “Persephone's Ezra” explicates this symbol in the first section, entitled “The Flowered Tree as Koré:”

Persephone enters Pound's poetry early and remains, and she is always there in an Ovidian sense, embodied in a girl or flower or tree, so that his most famous *haiku* is like a face Odysseus sees in Hades, reminding him of the springtime above in an image combining tree and girl: *petals on a wet, black bough*. (*Geo* 147)

So too does Persephone appear in “The Dawn”. When Davenport uses the same symbol as Pound to embed Persephone in the poems, he begins a trail of associations which ultimately leads to the reference of Pound himself. In the same way that Homer or Dante is transitively present in Pound's poetry, Pound appears in “The Dawn” through Davenport's use of his symbol.

Davenport establishes Persephone as a symbol for time in an earlier story in *Tatlin!*. If “The Dawn” is Orpheus' story, “1830” belongs to Persephone. It is a fantastic story in which Edgar Allan Poe visits St. Petersburg, an underworld presided over by this queen of the dead. John Wilson in his thesis on the story “1830” connects Persephone's sense of time with another character recurring throughout the collection, Herakleitos. The ancient philosopher argued that all time and experience was essentially the same but different in form. He used fire to symbolize this concept, and Davenport alludes to the connection between the two figures with the comet Ceres, the stellar fire evokes Herakleitos and Ceres is of course Persephone's mother. Wilson

argues: “The connection implies that Persephone and the Herakleitian fire are related “myths” expressing, in different ways, the same reality the same “permanent state of mind.”¹³ Wilson describes and locates the archaic spirit, a term he may not have known, because it was first published in this same issue of *Vort*. Persephone represents the archaic spirit, while Orpheus is the link between the living world and the dead by means of art.

This mythological symbolism contains an aesthetic theory about the atavism of innovation. An explication of Constantin Brancusi’s *Torso d’un jeune homme* in the assemblage illustrates this point. Adriaan describes the sculpture as a good starting point for the investigation of Orpheus. Davenport describes the statue: “It was as old as the sculptor’s art, this log of wood upright on its cylinder thighs, compacting into barest elemental grace the body of a boy.” The terms of description distinctly combine the ancient and the modern. The analysis of the statue contains both Orpheus and Persephone:

Persephone stood at all the angles of time. Orpheus was the spirit moving counter to the direction of time, the one complement that Herakleitos could not find.

Laurel, laurel and his silver eyes among the leaves. *Brancusi heeft gelijk*.¹⁴ he was a tree. And the Koré a flower. (*Tat* 193)

The modernist (timeless) aspect of Brancusi’s statue captures the nature of both Orpheus and Persephone. By going back in time to retrieve the pure elemental forms, the statue is Orphic; by representing all time, chthonic. Thus we can locate creativity as a connection with the archaic spirit.

¹³ John Wilson, “1830” *Vort* 3:3 (1976), 54-5.

¹⁴*Dutch*: Brancusi was right.

III: Ovid & Tradition

In a particular section of “The Dawn”, Davenport draws on Orpheus’s central role in a literary tradition beginning with Ovid and continuing to the present. This tradition is characterized by the Ovidian practice of concealing sexualized figures in a pastoral landscape. Davenport introduces the reader to the tradition, provides a close reading of an exemplary text, and joins by presenting his own landscape. While making this textual analysis, he also reflects on the mind as landscape and on the influence of environment on the artist. The sexualized landscape in the Ovidian tradition provides such a meaningful source here, because it very clearly shows the power of imagination in reader reception, but, moreover, due to the fact that it links this aesthetic activity with man and his environment. This case of modernist didacticism also corresponds with Fourier’s Utopian goal of seeing the harmony of human and nature. The archaic spirit does not necessarily involve art, but the practices in the Ovidian tradition are examples of the sensibility at work.

Chapter 28 is dedicated entirely to exploring this tradition and it takes place entirely in Adriaan’s imagination, perhaps in preparation for a writing project. This framing device is important, because it shows Davenport’s emphasis on not only the reception of art but on the phenomenon of imagining history; all of *Tatlin!* can be seen as an exploration of an epistemology of history. At the beginning of his critical survey in Chapter 28, Davenport begins with pointing out the influence of the environment (in this case, the political environment) on the work of the poet:

Adriaan first read the *De Universitate Mundi* in a *zielsverrukking* of joy. The Latin was midway between the gold of Ovid and the hefty iron of Hubert Poot. It was not renaissance but the empire still alive that in the twelfth century a scholarly monk at Chartes could write

[(. . .) He gives the original Latin and then his translation:]

*The world at the source of time was dust,
A wind of matter sifting through itself,*

*Till God from the deep of his being thrust
 Into the storm of its ancient chaos
 Mind. (Tat 212-3)*

Davenport hopes to show his readers a *zielsverrukking* of joy, a joy delighting the soul, in these selections of literature. Not necessarily the contemporary environment at Chartres, but a still-living past allows the monk (Bernardus Silvestris) to produce this excerpt. The ambiguous sentence suggests both that (the human) mind makes sense of an otherwise formless chaos and that an internal logic was given independently to the environment. Davenport separates this first sentence as an introduction before the introduction of the Orphic theme.

Davenport interrupts the poem with a paratactic comment that simply suggests the names of other authors in the tradition. This quotation begins where the previous one leaves off, with the poem interrupted only by Adriaan's concise list of authors in the tradition:

Ovid, Milton, Bernard, Supervielle:

*Mountains, sinews of the earth, bind the world,
 Atlas is roofbeam of the sky and stars.
 [...] He continues quoting, portraying more mountains]
 King Rhodope to whom her mountaineers
 Play lovesongs on their zithers of her grace,
 Gargano sharp above Italian fields,
 And above the Sicilian, Pelore. (Tat 213)*

Davenport's list of writers mirrors the quoted list of mountains. Although most of these authors wrote after the composition of this selection, the colon suggests that this passage could have originated from any one of them and evokes all. Again, we see Davenport's insistence on the ancient roots of innovation. Employing a collage technique of these various Ovidian authors, Davenport discourses on this Orphic tradition. While reverberating the themes of his assemblage, it points the reader to external sources and encourages him or her to have a look.

Chapter 28 provides a brief survey of the works in this tradition. The major excerpt from Bernardus Silvestris serves as an exemplary passage to guide the reader, but using the skills learned in reading this passage can lead the reader to further insights into the works of these

other writers. Silvestris's catalog of mountains could easily appear in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, but Milton's *A Maske* (also known as *Comus*) could equally be considered. Jules Supervielle joins the tradition with his tale titled simply *Orphee* but also through his novels which express a longing for the landscapes of his youth (the Pampas of South America) and for a return to fraternity among men. Davenport shows the tradition continuing into the 20th century with the works of Jean Cocteau and Pavel Tchelitchev. Davenport also adds himself to this tradition by closing the chapter with his own landscape of interlocked, sleeping figures. Orpheus serves as an inspiration and important symbol for each of these writers. In "The Dawn," the figure of Orpheus—like everything else—does not only represent a mythological symbol but has a significant history.

Davenport employs Orpheus both as a symbol for understanding the past and as an indicator for a living history that the reader can investigate. His exegesis establishes Bernardus's otherwise recondite passage in the Orphic tradition:

And did he consciously conceal Orpheus and Persephone in the finale of this progression of mountains?

It was upon Rhodope in Thrakia that women maddened by his indifference tore Orpheus' head from his body, the dark ate the bright. And in a Sicilian meadow the lord of death and rock raped Persephone among flowers, the dark ate the bright. (*Tat* 214)

After guiding the reader past the intentional fallacy, Davenport supplies the background knowledge necessary to make sense of what is otherwise just a list of mountains. With this literary example Davenport shows how the imaginative mind can animate the environment. The function depends upon seeing the (human) history in a place. The reader, given a curriculum of authors and a road map, is encouraged to practice the learned skills. Through these arts the imagination engages the environment.

IV: The Lunar Landscape

The moon is the principal visual image of “The Dawn”. Thomas Harriot’s map of the moon hangs next to the Picasso drawings in Adriaan’s studio. John Russell’s portrait, “painted from nature”, graces the actual cover of *Tatlin!*. The story ends with Neil Armstrong placing his left foot upon its dust. The moon occupies a space considered as much by scientific ambition as by aesthetic attention.

The Ovidian tradition, explored in Chapter 28, informs the treatment of the moon’s landscape. Davenport does not subliminally embed a human figure, but rather shows how human history has left its mark across the moon’s face. He creates the same effect as Chapter 28 by cutting from images of Dutch youth on the beach to scenes of light playing on the moon:

Dat gaat te ver, they heard Erika say.

The dull iron mountains beyond which stretch the lava fields of the Palus Somnii and the mercurial black hills and dismal quarries of the Mare tranquillitatis take the dawn of the moon’s sixth day on their garnet peaks, then as a feathery limelight on the spines of their gullies, and hold in their piedmont rubble a coral of lightning.

A hand on a sandy thigh, drone of the sea, unending kiss. *Ook aan de langste zomerdag komt een einde.*

Across the white bones of the rim of Atlas, silent from the storms of fiery rock at the moon’s birth to the holocaust of time, steel light as if flashed from tungsten strikes next the mountain, dolomite and terrible, in the crater’s desolate midst, and next, above black valleys of shadow, the sooty promontories of Hercules, and spreads on to the dead stone rings of Aristotle and Eudoxus. (*Tat* 139)

Like the Ovidian examples of figures sleeping as hills, the cinematic cutting of images suggests a transposition of the human figure upon the lunar landscape. Both by employing the names of ancient Greeks and dramatizing the passage of light, Davenport draws attention to the passage of time. This passage comes at the end of a long series of scenes using the same technique. The amount of detail in describing the mountain ranges immediately invokes comparisons with the mountain range description from Bernardus and therefore calls for a similar technique of observation.

The repeated references to the moon indicate the internal tensions of understanding it. The moon is presented both as a part of man's natural environment and a remote hostile terrain, an object of artistic attention and a scientific specimen, a living spirit and a dead ghost. Foremost, these tensions indicate the power of human subjectivity. Davenport employs hyperbole to draw attention to the consequences of certain, in this case scientific, subjectivity:

The Roman astronomer Secchi, having built up by micrometric triangulation a drawing of the crater Copernicus based on telescopic observation for seven lunations, photographed his drawing and presented it to the French Academy in 1856. Shadows shift hourly on the mountains of the moon. Secchi made his observations when the moon was ten days old. (*Tat* 211)

This final sentence, which seems bizarre on the initial perusal, suggests that the moon is a human creation. The metaphor of humans giving birth to the moon is actually informative; whereas the moon was once an internal part of the human psyche—something we unhesitatingly accepted—science has differentiated the moon and given it a life of its own. Davenport contrasts this scientific sensibility with the poetic one inherent to archaic man. The peculiar wording of that final sentence draws attention to the concept of time. On the back cover of *Twelve Stories*, there is an excellent Davenport quote, “The first thing to go when you walk into the wilderness is time. You eat when you are hungry, rest when you are tired. You fill a moment to its brim.” Those who attribute a living spirit to the moon are also those least likely to define it in time. When we examine it only with an analytical sensibility—and not connected with the body and spirit—it disappears like Eurydice.

V: The Subjectivity of Art

Thought and knowledge are inextricably tied to vision in “The Dawn”. Davenport liked to point out that the Greek verb *graphein* means both to draw and to write. One might also add that the Greek verb *eidō* (with its perfect form *oida*) can mean both to see and to know. The

unaugmented form, *idô*, provides the root for our English word *idea*. The Orpheus myth provides a dialectic through which to discuss vision. When Davenport relates the myth offhand in the interview quoted above, he oversimplifies the myth: “he found his Eurydice but he looked at her as he was not supposed to and he lost her forever” (*Int 10*). As with many of the stories in *The Metamorphoses*, such as Diana and Actaeon, it is not the fact that the subject does what is forbidden that changes him, but the vision itself. Eurydice ceases to exist not for the sake of a moral punishment against Orpheus, who broke the rules, but because the gaze of Orpheus removes her subjectivity. In this way *The Metamorphoses* becomes a meditation on subjectivity. “The Dawn” explores the power and consequences of subjectivity through the dialectics of the Orpheus myth and Wittgenstein’s philosophy. The essential characteristic of the archaic spirit of man is the ability to see the subjective in the objective, to give agency to the inanimate and allow the inherent logic of the object to speak to the subject, like Orpheus animating the forest.

Davenport extends this theory of vision to the reception of art, which is also symbolized by the myth of Orpheus. To experience a work of art in a way that meaningfully engages with the past, the subject must allow that art object to communicate subjectively. Just as Orpheus descends to the underworld to retrieve a dead spirit, the art viewer can convene with the past. The myth, when Orpheus looks at Eurydice and then loses her, implies that this experience requires a suspension of the self. When Orpheus looks at Eurydice, he turns her into an object and denies her subjectivity; therefore, he loses her. In order for her to exist, he must remain facing away, refusing any pretence to know her and therefore allowing her to exist subjectively. Just as Orpheus with Eurydice, the experience of artistic works must remain chthonic.

The portrayals of Picasso and Bosch in “The Dawn” provide examples of the subjectivity of art objects themselves. Verbally depicting the artwork, Davenport suggests the subjectivity of

the Bosch painting by portraying its internal life. In a more critical fashion, Davenport describes the communicative technique of Picasso's paintings. Bosch's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* reoccurs several times throughout the work. In Chapter 25, Davenport juxtaposes the troubling visions of "Sint Anton" with Bruno and Adriaan, alternatively looking at a Bosch painting, browsing a sex shop, and watching a sex show:

Inside Adriaan and Bruno looked at the *praeservativer* by Bosch, clitoral vibrators, porcelain phalluses from Japan decorated with Fuji and cherry blossoms, lifesize rubber dolls, apparatus with bulbs and straps.

A movie on a skrim depicted Scandinavians copulating in a beechwood.

Sint Anton turned his weary eyes to see what show was on the kame. Hot ripples warped the liquid glare.

From under his homespun cowl, leaning on his tau cross, scratching the pig behind the ears from time to time, he watched with perfect disbelief a gourd wheeled with shekels to make a chariot drawn by mice. A lyre bird, half erased by the liquid glitter of a mirage, marched beside a turnip.

--*Ondeugend!* Bruno said. *Met milde hand.*¹⁵ (*Tat* 201)

The scene contrasts the sight of the sex shop with the troubling vision in the painting. The final line is ambiguous, so that we do not know whether Bruno refers to the hand as Bosch's painting technique or perhaps something more erotic. When Bruno sees the life in the painting, he is surprised and delighted, a level of excitement often reserved in contemporary society for lascivious arts.

Much later in the story, Davenport returns to Bosch as a theoretical model. He suggests what seems to be a romantic concept of the meeting of the mind and the environment:

Worlds, infinite worlds.

My capacity for seeing gives me access to a world which is then all the world I know. My capacity is unique, my world unique.

That is the subject of Bosch.

When a man talks like Giordano Bruno of infinite worlds it is this world alone that he describes: monads mirroring monads. Deaf, dumb, and blind I dream in a telegraphy of synapses weather, tone, color, pain, numen, rain, nostalgia. But my joy in a wildflower, my dread of death, my outrage, my just hand with my brother is from the life within the monad. To live is to choose.

That is what Bosch saw and what he imagined Sint Anton saw. Everyman his hog and eiderdown, raging tooth and pitcher of gall. The bubble in which Bosch puts us is our *individuum*, never without the knife of dominion slicing in, the fish of company obtruding, the thistle of time sprouting through the floor. (*Tat* 249)

¹⁵ *Dutch*: Naughty! With a mild hand.

Davenport locates a paradox in the painting. We are trapped in our environment, but the possibilities within us create an unlimited potential. Our experience in this world gives rise to a world of imagination.

On the other hand, the subject matter of the Picasso paintings in the story suggests the changes the subject brings to the object. In Chapter 19, Davenport describes Adriaan in his study. By describing his study, Davenport describes the man:

Adriaan sat in his orange and brown Rietveld chair. On the cork bulletin board before him were thumbtacked four of the ink drawings Picasso did in 1954 of women and artists.

In one Cupid holds an old man's mask to his face. A woman, nude except for wristwatch and beads, watches him with amused, indulgent eyes, longlashed Roman eyes.

In another, a blonde wearing only a garland in her hair pretends to be frightened of the same Cupid. His mask is grotesque but smiling.

Cupid peeps from behind the mask in the next drawing, and the woman giggles.

In the fourth drawing an old man has replaced Cupid. His back is bent, his genitals withered, his face Tithonian. The girl is more beautiful than in the other drawings. There is no girlish silliness in her face. She is intelligent and calm.

Persephone est, et Plutus senex, aurum hic, flos illa. (Tat 183)

Cupid, or Pluto, wears a variety of masks, each changing the subject he looks at. The ability of the subject to react to the viewer still suggests agency in the object itself. When analyzing the style of Picasso, Davenport again implies that art objects may have subjectivity by implying that they possess language. He describes the differences in visual languages in terms of national tongues: "Picasso paints in Latin, in Italian and Spanish. Braque has always painted in Greek. He can do *men, de, and gar* with an ace of clubs, a clay pipe, a marble table. With the same objects Picasso says an ironic *même*, shrugging his Catalan shoulders" (*Tat* 194). Although the paintings portray the same objects, they possess different languages which communicate different things. Unless the viewer allows the paintings subjectivity they appear merely a playing card, a pipe, and a tape; they do not speak the words of Picasso or Braque.

Conclusion: The Power of the Imagination

In one place in *Tatlin!*, Davenport dramatizes the control of the imagination over reality in a curious way. On the page that lists “Library of Congress Cataloging in Publications Data”, we read:

“The Aeroplanes at Brescia” follows Kafka’s and Max Brod’s account of an event. “Tatlin!” is indebted to Callia Gray’s pioneer work, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922*. Parts of “The Dawn in Erewhon” are excerpts translated from Adriaan van Hovendaal’s *Het Erewhonisch Schetsboek* and *Higgs Reizen in Erewhonland*.

On such a (seemingly) official page, it is remarkable to find fiction. The first two titles are works written by actual people, but the second two are books written by a fictional philosopher. The *Het Erewhonisch Schetsboek* does indeed (at least partially) exist but the portions subsequently written by Guy Davenport and published had probably not been drafted as stories as early as the printing of *Tatlin!*. The original readers of *Tatlin!* would not have known of these forthcoming books. The name on the bibliographic information record becomes one of the many esoteric names encountered by the reader of *Tatlin!*.

The obscure references in the writing are deliberate. Davenport delights in their obscurity and encourages the reader to do the same. The intentional obscurity becomes simultaneously didactic and playful. So when we encounter the name *van Hovendaal* in a list of otherwise historically real people, it is natural to at least suspect ignorance and think that he is some obscure philosopher, otherwise overlooked outside of Davenport’s lucubration. The possibility is strong enough that an informed interviewer, poet, lecturer and editor of *Vort* magazine Barry Alpert, asked Davenport about the real Adriaan:

BA? [sic] How long have you been familiar with the work of Adriaan van Hovendaal?
 GD? [sic] There is no such person.
 BA: Then what’s the function of the note where you indicate that you translate from two his works?
 GD: All right. That story, if it is a story, is about Samuel Butler’s Erewhon. In a sense I’m updating Butler’s Erewhon. (*Int* 10)

Like many artists when asked to explain their work, the publicity-shy and generally reclusive Davenport does not answer the question. He offers an explanation of the piece, but his superficial explanation seems out of sheer exasperation of critical incompetence; the information in his answer should be obvious to all but the most careless perusal.

The function of the note, like the paratactic sentences that compose the work, is up for interpretation. He could just be sharing a joke with the reader interested enough to read such a page. But the note may be more significant than a sly nudge to the reader. It suggests that Adriaan is Davenport's alter-ego. The note confirms the reality of the author of these books. As Davenport has indeed written these books, he by transition becomes Adriaan van Hovendaal. Adriaan is his *daimon*. But, regardless of intention, the note raises a more profound question that follows both the writing and lectures of Guy Davenport: what truly is the difference between the historical figures Davenport treats in his fiction and the characters he creates? Is there a difference between people such as Franz Kafka, Edgar Allen Poe, Ludwig Wittgenstein and others such as Adriaan van Hovendaal? Davenport reminds us that history and fiction both occur in the human imagination.

Davenport explores the implications and possibilities of the imagination. The condition of the imagination, in which there is a simultaneous reality of fiction and fiction of reality, offers fascinating possibilities of freedom and compels morality. The emphasis in the work is on the process, not the condition of the imagination:

“Mr. Davenport, are you making this all up, or is it true?” So, after class, a student, to whom Mr. Davenport, “Who’s to say?”

Who indeed? Whether or not truth is created, insight is creative. Something seen that was never seen before has been fetched *ex nihilo* as inexplicably the Elohim fetched the heavens and the earth.¹⁶

¹⁶ Hugh Kenner, “Ex Nihilo” *Vort* 3:3 (1976), 30.

The work—as fiction writer, teacher, and literary critic—is comprised of dazzling examples of this creative insight at work. All of this work encourages us to partake in the pleasure of such a mental act of creation.