

## THE MORTILOQUIST: A BARBARIC INTERPRETATION OF THE LIFE AND PROBLEMS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Author: Reza Negarestani  
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### Review by *Niraj Kumar\**

The Mortiloquist is the second work in the Blackening Trilogy by young Iranian philosopher and theory-fiction writer, Reza Negarestani. Negarestani is in exile and has recently shifted to the USA. He originally hails from Shiraz in Iran and was based in Seremban, Malaysia. His first work, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*(2008)<sup>1</sup> caused quite a stir in the academic world for the dense and elliptic arguments on petro-politics. This work was rated as one of the best books of 2009 by Artforum International.

The Mortiloquist is highly awaited by the western academic world. Reza undertakes the challenge to interpret a barbaric interpretation of the life and problems of Western philosophy.

*The Mortiloquist* is a cross-breed of play and philosophy, another evolving step in his theory-fiction genre. It is a textual mongrel and the Greek world, the fountain head of Western world, is represented from the perspective of the barbarians. The play starts with a hypothetical siege of Athens by the barbarians. There is an argument among three philosophers major Greek philosophers- Aristotle, Speusippus and Andronosos. The three philosophers rather than fleeing from the Academy, were busy arguing the philosophical concepts. The philosophers were captured by the barbarians and unimaginable cruelty inflicted upon them. Three philosophers are forced into freshly gutted out carcasses of three oxen. These are then sewn up to trap the philosophers in a way that only their heads protrude.

Upon the stage, three oxen corpses lie in the foreground and from each carcass a the head of a philosopher protrudes. Each act begins with depictions of barbarous savageries taking place in the stage background. Conversations between the three philosophers who are trapped in dead animals are appear as theatrical dialogues.

In *The Mortiloquist*, in the Act II, there are three scenes. Each scene begins with a generation of a new entity from the putrefying animal carcasses. The oxen carcasses change to canine and fox corpses and other chimerical forms. Ideas and philosophical debates among the three master-philosophers shift according to the “germinal power of putrefaction and the possibility of the infinite deformity of forms in decay”. The history of western philosophy is interpreted barbarically.

In fact, Reza Negarestani traces the custom of unimaginable torture to the Greek tradition and examines how this might be at the root of western “reason”. The western historians generate a novel dichotomy where barabarians are coated with every negative vice and the Greek civilized world as the perfect repository of virtue. In an earlier essay Reza picked up the two passages from leading Greek writers and poets for his erudite exposition in the essay, '*The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo*'<sup>2</sup>. The passages come as utter surprise to a modern reader for the level of imagination on part of the Greek thinkers to inflict cruelty against “outsiders”.

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\*Niraj Kumar is the Editor of Journal of Indian Research.

*The living and the dead at his command,  
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,  
Till, chok'd with stench, in loath'd embraces tied,  
The ling'ring wretches pin'd away and died.*

Virgil<sup>3</sup>

*The punishment imposed by Mezentius on the soldiers of Aneas should be inflicted, by coupling him to one of his own corpses and parading him through the streets until his carcass and its companion were amalgamated by putrefaction.*

Erinensis,<sup>4</sup>

Reza refers to Jacques Brunschwig's 1963 essay, "*Aristotle et les pirates tyrrheniens*"<sup>5</sup> to discover the impact of Etruscans' exploitation of dead bodies on western philosophy. Reza explains in details the Etruscan's punishment. The Etruscans were the marauding pirates and settlers who had occupied strongholds in the Aegean in the eastern Mediterranean. Michel Foucault could not trace the genealogy of reason or punishment in his famous work, *Discipline and Punish*<sup>6</sup>, and remained stranded at the edge of European modernity.

Reza describes how during the Greek's golden period, outlandish form of punishment were meted to the barbarians. Even the Etruscan King Mezentius, was not spared.

Similar practices were revived during the reign of the Roman Emperor Marcus Macrinus. Even as late as the sixteenth century, the horror of this torture was expressed, by an emblem called *Nupta Contagioso* in which a woman was shown being tied to a man plagued by syphilis, at the King's order. *Nupta Contagioso* or *Nupta Cadavera* literally suggests a marriage with the diseased or the dead: a forcible conjugation with a corpse, and a consummation of marriage with the dead as a bride.

There was a furor across the western world in May,2011 when a Moroccan Islamic Scholar and member of the religious establishment, Abdelbari Zemzami issued a fatwa allowing sexual intercourse with a corpse. The western world was aghast at the way necrophilic sex was declared Halal in Morocco. Later, the clergy had to withdraw the fatwa under intense media criticism. But, the Western world views the 'cruelty' of the "outsider" and indulge in selective amnesia of their own 'cruel' formulations.

Negarestani describes about Etruscan's punishment:

*"a living man or woman was tied to a rotting corpse, face to face, mouth to mouth, limb to limb, with an obsessive exactitude in which each part of the body corresponded with its matching putrefying counterpart. Shackled to their rotting double, the man or woman was left to decay. To avoid the starvation of the victim and to ensure the rotting bonds between the living and the dead were fully established, the Etruscan robbers continued to feed the victim appropriately. Only once the superficial difference between the corpse and the living body started to rot away through the agency of worms, which bridged the two bodies, establishing a differential continuity between them, did the Etruscans stop feeding the living." <sup>7</sup>*

Reza tries to figure out how the putrefying punishment made an impact over Aristotle's thinking and later on western reason. Reza also show how Aristotle draws a comparison between the soul tethered to the body and the living chained to a dead corpse (nekrous):

*" Aristotle says, that we are punished much as those were who once upon a time, when they had fallen into the hands of Etruscan robbers, were slain with elaborate cruelty; their bodies, the living [corpora viva] with the dead, were bound so exactly as possible one against another: so our souls, tied together with our bodies as the living fixed upon the dead." <sup>8</sup>*

In Etruscan punishment, both the living and the dead turned black through putrefaction. This was the point of unshackling the bodies. Reza states that the blackening of the skin indicated the superficial indifferenciation of decay (the merging of bodies into a black slime). For the Etruscans, it signaled an ontological exposition of the decaying process which had already started from within. This stage was known as the blackening of decay or chemical necrosis, *nigredo*. Such kind of putrefaction is the inspiration behind Reza Negarestani's ***Blackening Trilogy!***

Reza thence describes the necrophilic roots of western reason. The western reason was merely the mirror image of the barbaric reason. He refers Aristotle to reflect over Etruscan reason :

*" It is not the supposedly living body which is tethered to a corpse to rot, because it is exactly the soul qua living which is bound to a corpse – namely, the body. For Aristotle, the soul, as the essence of a being, needs a body to perform its special activities, and it is the responsibility of the soul to be the act of the intellect upon the body. Therefore this necrocratic confinement is both the price and a means of having a body as instrument, and then using this instrument to govern and eventually unite beings. The soul, in this sense, has two activities, inward and outward. The outward activity of the soul is the actualization of the body according to the active intellect (nous) which is immortal; in other words the extensive activity of the soul is the animation of the body according to the ratio (reason) derived from the nous, the intensive and inward activity of the soul. The inward activity of the soul is its unitive activity according to the intellect as the higher genus of being qua being." <sup>9</sup>*

Reza further concludes in his essay:

*" Reason grounds the universe not only on a necrophilic intimacy but also in conformity with an undead machine imbued with the chemistry of putrefaction and nigredo." <sup>10</sup>*

What perplexes Reza that all the guiding light of western philosophy tell us only about the living and not the corpse while both are the mirror image. He describes about the missing side from the mirror motif in Greek philosophy :

*" not only does the living see itself as dead, but the dead also looks into the eyes of the living, and its entire body shivers with worms and dread. It is indeed ghastly for the living to see itself as dead; but it is true horror for the dead to be forced to look at the supposedly living, and to see itself as the living dead, the dead animated by the spurious living." <sup>11</sup>*

Reza calls this as *" molesting of dead with the animism of the living."* Reza discovers a particular kind of torture that barbarians employed to inflict upon the living. It was for a dead to act like living. The barbarians *"slaughtered their own cattle, disembowelled them and then forced the Romans inside the carcasses in such a way that only the talking heads of the soldiers protruded. In doing so, they exhibited the farce of vitalism by ventriloquising the dead with the living."* <sup>12</sup>

Such Greek cruelty with corpse is not lesser than the barbaric practice of packing the philosophers in the dead carcass of oxen. This is the barbaric innovation which Reza terms as *"Mortiloquism"* in this second book in the Blackening trilogy, *"Mortiloquist"*. It is a neologic term derived from two words mortality and loquism. This has serious philosophical implications for the planetary philosophy.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR WORLD PHILOSOPHY

For more than five decades , social sciences and philosophy revolved around the linguistic turn. The Postmodernist discourse took it to extreme by positing that Reality is linguistically constructed. Reza Negarestani has emerged as the synthesizing philosopher for the new "material turn in western philosophy". Inspired from Deleuze and Guattari's work on geophilosophy that how thoughts are grounded in the earth, the paradigm inherited from Nietzsche through Heidegger ; the new breed of philosophers are lifting their speculations much beyond the earthly foundation of philosophy. From the spices to culinary, carcass to worms, rats to porous earth; the philosophers are bringing back material things as the foundation of enquiry. What distinguishes Reza from others is that he is developing an asymptote of thinking, an open movement of thinking. He claims in his recent essay, "*Globe of Revolution: Afterthought on Geophilosophical Realism*"<sup>13</sup> that , once the geophilosophical synthesis as the drive of earthly thought is freed of grounded relation to the earth, thinkers can construct "*the asymptotic thought of the open*". That way, Reza is insisting against the closure of Being, closure of thought, closure of bodies.... One can see throughout his work, *Cyclonopedia*(2008) obsession with porodynamics, worms, twists, holes, perforation, topology of the cut... everything is an open-ended movement. Political implication of his revolutionary thinking during the present age of bio-political surveillance is immense.

Negarestani is cutting open the cadaver of western philosophy. The western philosophy is trapped within the dyadic thinking. The Mirror is the western motif par excellence. One sees itself as the other, the perfect matching 'double". But, it is the only one side of the mirror that has been thought about by the chain of western philosophers. Like Etruscans torture of captive by chaining dead bodies face to face with the living, facing part by part; western thinking has its "other". Reza takes out the image of decomposition, the blackening of bodies which homogenizes the living and the dead bodies in the Etruscan punishment. He elevates *decomposition* to a transcendental level. Decomposition contains the seeds of 'synthetic materialism". Decomposition also takes one away from the linguistic universe into real spaces, materiality of things.

Negarestani pits openness and survival as the two determinant of creativity. Every being exist between the two necroses of openness and survival. It is the primacy of "openness" in his works which when combined with emerging synthetic materialism has wherewithal to bring revolutionary changes in the global system which is under closure after the 9/11 incident.

Negarestani has devoted the last chapter in the *Mortiloquist* on Mezentius, the Etruscan King who was tortured by the civilized Geeks later on . He has earlier deliberated upon Mezentiusial Metaphysics in his essay, *The Corpse-Bride*. Following Bacon's view on Mezentius that the "*living perish in the embrace of the dead*", Reza explores how soul as living is in embrace of two synergistic necroses and explores a hyperbole, "*soul is a bicephalous necrosis*". He pits "decay" as the third necrosis. He succinctly puts up his idea of triumvirate necrosis corresponding with the triad of body, soul and intellect in the gradation of reason. He exclaims, 'For Reason, there is always crowd of deaths". Reason explains, '***All roads lead to the bosom of the dead!***'

Reza Negarestani is pointing to the underside of the western reason. Western reason gained primacy through practices as barbaric as those can be and that has inflicted the worst cruelties against non-western societies , nature and ecology.

The forthcoming book, *Mortiloquist*, will become a phenomenal text that would lead to decomposition of western reason. Like new Zarathustra, Reza Negarestani appears on the planetary scene with fresh thoughts to illuminate the man with the movement of the Open.

*"Thee I conceived as holy, O Ahuramazda, when thy Good Thought appeared to me. [...] A difficult thing it seemed to me, to spread thy faith among men, to do that which Thou didst say was best."*

[Yasna 43.4]

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### **Notes:**

1. Negarestani, Reza(2008). *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. ISBN: 9780980544008, Victoria: re.Press
2. Negarestani, Reza(2008). *The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo*, in MacKay, Robin ed.(2008) *Collapse IV*, Falmouth: Urbanomic  
<http://www.thing.net/~rdm/ucsd/Zombies/The%20Corpse%20Bride.pdf>
3. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VIII 483-88
4. Erinensis, ' *On the Exploitation of Dead Bodies* ', The Lancet, 1828-9: 777.
5. Brunswig J. (1963). " *Aristote et les pirates tyrrheniens* ", Revue Philosophique de France et de l'étranger ,**153**: 171- 190.

6. Foucault, Michel(1975). *Discipline and Punish :The Birth of the Prison*. Paris: Gallimard
7. Negarestani,n.1,p.131
8. Quoted by Cicero from Aristotle in *Hortensius*. Also see *Saint Augustine Against Julian :Writings of Saint Augustine* (1957). Volume **6**, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America.
9. Negarestani, n.1, p.134.
10. *Ibid*, p.135.
11. *Ibid*.
12. *Ibid*,p.136.
13. Negarestani, Reza(2011). *Globe of Revolution. An Afterthought on Geophilosophical Realism ,* Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture , **17**: 25- 54.