

“What Thou Lovest Well:” Elder’s Paradisiacal Images of the Female Body in *The Book of All the Dead*

Parol (Bevivino editore, Bologna). No. 19 (2009).

Angela Joesse

“What Thou Lovest Well:” Elder’s Paradisiacal Images of the Female Body in *The Book of All the Dead*

Angela Joosse

It is difficult to write about Bruce Elder’s *The Book of All the Dead*. The task is daunting, and I hesitate, but out of love for the work, I begin to articulate some of the phenomena held present therein.

The Book of All the Dead undoes thinking, calling upon us to reflect upon what is thinking. It undoes perception, calling upon us to reflect upon the process by which perception is possible. It undoes the cinematic image, soliciting us to experience what is the cinematic image. It unravels history, engaging us in a quest for what is time. In all of this, images of the female body appear as a guide for the maker and viewers of the work. These images put the viewer in contact with the phenomenon of darkness, on which all that is “seen” depends.

The Book of All the Dead is a massive work. It took nearly twenty years to complete, and spans over forty hours in screening time. Physically, it consists of thousands of feet of film and this collection of film reels and cans weighs hundreds of pounds. This is to say that experiencing *The Book of All the Dead* is a demanding task. It is not easily viewed at home, but requires a cinema space. It also requires multiple days of dedicated focused attention. I viewed *The Book of All the Dead* over a period of three months when it was screened at Cinematheque Ontario in the spring of 2008, but ideally it should be experienced over a period of three days. So, this work places high demands on time and attention, and yet, as I have come to understand, this film cycle *must* be long

and overwhelming. Within this excess we can experience a change in consciousness and access a gift of profound reflection. It is through this excess that we are emptied out, and become receptive to reflection upon what is most primal in us, the rhythms that call us into being.

Watching *The Book of All the Dead* is an overpowering experience. After all, this is the book of *all* the dead. It is in a sense a humanist compendium, a constellation of wisdom and insight from mathematics to philosophy to artworks to cultural expression. One's perceptions are filled with many layers of polyphonic music, voices reciting poetry, rapid camera movement scanning the monuments of the world, inter-titles and superimpositions of quotes from great works in philosophy, mathematical formulations, computer generated graphics, and constantly shifting textual anagrams just to name some of what is woven together in these films. In watching these films I am gripped by the question, "how can I think of everything all at once?" and I slowly I realize that I can not. Each constellation of meaning is formed only to be dissolved and reformed. I must let go of the impulse to order my thoughts and perceptions. This polymorphous composition pushes through me; it washes through me; its excess fills me and empties me. Throughout the film cycle, we often glimpse images of ocean waves swelling, curling and surging over onto a rocky shore. I begin to feel consonance with these waves; I am filled with a powerful surge of proprioceptive energy, which is simultaneously an emptying since I must let go of my compulsion to fix meaning. In its place, I begin to accept a meditative state where the rhythms and constellations of sounds and images move through me. My writing also follows a wave-like movement, leaving room to consider the dependence of what *is* upon what *is not*. I gather my perceptions to extend reflection upon them, only

then to follow a reclining movement back to then begin again¹. Indeed, Elder has said of his film cycle that “It circles back upon itself again and again, even though it steadfastly approaches its destination” (2005, 457).

In experiencing *The Book of All the Dead* I become receptive; I then begin to realize that I am witnessing a prayer². This vast and overwhelming compendium is also a searching and a petition for the beauty of truth shining within the hellish accumulation of guilt and violence in the world and the narrowing of experience to the logic of technē³. I too take up a posture of contemplative reception. This prayerfulness is a state of being most alert and present, and in this way it is an active state; but it is also plea, a letting go in order to be filled, and in this way it is a docile and receptive state. We could say that prayer is a state of highly active passivity. It clears away all selfishness—that is to say self-projection and egotistical desire—opening one’s capacity for reflection and attunement to what *is*.

Through the disposition of prayer, one also comes to recognize that the contemplation of goodness must come through a genuine grappling with the presentness of the flesh. Have we not learned that unless our thinking remains connected with the contingency of the present, our visions of what is good simply become free-floating projections into the future? What we can know of the good must come through the

¹ My approach to writing this paper has been informed by Samuel Mallin’s “body hermeneutic” method. For exemplary results of the process of this method, see Mallin’s *Art Line Thought*.

² A number of months after reflecting on this phenomenon of prayer in the film cycle, I read this description of prayer by Elder, “The activity in which we contemplate the meaning of the world is prayer. In prayer, we empty our minds of abstract thoughts and give ourselves over wholly to perception, to seeing a thing for what it is” (2005, 465).

³ See Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” in which he shows how the logic of “Enframing” which dominates our current conception of technology (and our epoch in general), transforms everything into a standing reserve, a reserve of energy and resource just there for instrumental use.

contingencies of this world, and not remain relegated strictly to fantasies of the imagination. That is, if paradise is to be anything more than a dream, escapist fantasy, or deferral of pleasure it must enter the here and now⁴. It is our bodies, the flesh, which gives us access to the reality of the present. Ideas have the capacity to float free from the body and float free from the present, but the flesh remains inextricably tied to the present. Another way into this realm of thought is to say that if we have not become so full of despair, if we still have some courage left to try to ask questions about what is goodness and what is human happiness, then we must approach these questions with the humble acceptance that our most genuine thinking and knowledge comes through a mutual unfolding of the flesh of the body with the flesh of the world⁵.

And yet, this is not an easy task. Even if we have the courage to attempt such contemplation, our thinking may have become so technologized, our perceptions so instrumentalized that we are no longer capable of such disclosure. In light of this I become even more sympathetic to the necessary length and excess of *The Book of All the Dead*. The duration and polyphony of this film cycle are required to undo the sediments of instrumental thinking and perception thereby opening up a generative gap through which to reflect upon the very processes of thinking and perception. While experiencing *The Book of All the Dead*, my thinking must come into alignment with my perceptual sensing. I am challenged to release judgment, as Elder's constantly moving camera also does, and discover what emerges when we begin to consider how it is that we gain contact with what *is*. What opens up is not only what appears to us, but also the process by which things come into appearance. This is where genuine thinking and genuine

⁴ See also Elder's reflection on the *paradise terrestre*, in "Driftworks, Pulseworks, Lightworks," p. 455.

⁵ See Merleau-Ponty's writing on the chiasm, particularly in "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible*. See also, "Chiasm, Line and Art (A Justification)" in *Art Line Thought* by Samuel B. Mallin.

perception might begin and where an opening to the paradisiacal might obtain. In accepting that I can not think of everything all at once, I begin to realize that my thinking is integrated with the movement of my attention, and my attention is a harkening to what is given in experience. The content of the following text which intermittently overlays the images in *Illuminated Texts* (1982) resonates with my experience of the film cycle:

The Mind
constructs patterns
in the passage of time

Let me pause to gather this description back and begin again. In viewing this film cycle I am overwhelmed, but this overwhelming experience is also a purging—I cannot hold onto any one image or idea or quote or mathematical formulation or sound. I am completely filled, to the point of needing to be open to what *is*. Thus I am filled/overwhelmed, to be emptied of my preconceptions or my impulse to order my perceptions, only to be filled again with the fullness of contemplation upon how it is that I perceive the world. I experience a slackening in my thinking and I begin to notice the movement and activity of my attention. I can not think everything all at once because my attention, my perceptions, and my thinking are embedded in time. Ideas, formulations, and images too are enmeshed in this dynamic flux of time. Profound constellations of ideas and images do appear, and my attention and thinking are active participants in this, but I begin to experience the provisional nature of ideas⁶. A gap opens up between my sensing of this cinematic world and my capacity for articulation as well as the movement of my attention. This is a most profound gap.

⁶ For Nietzsche's insights into the provisional nature of values and truths, see for example, *The Will to Power*, p. 497.

Images of the female body are exemplary in forming and filling this gap in perception. Images of female nudes permeate *The Book of all the Dead*. Different nudes appear in throughout the films, and some disappear for a time only to surface again in a later film. The women from whom these images are drawn are of varying ages and complexions and colours. Often the camera pans slowly over the surface of the woman's body. The film flows along the surface of her flesh caressing the light from her skin and also losing contact in the deep shadows where the light merges with darkness and falls away. Here the camera does not engage in the arching arabesque movements that animate the footage of the social and historical world. These images also stand in contrast to the static camera of the vignettes performed by actors. This is a slow and gentle camera which neither floods its imaged object with a dynamic force of movement, nor appears to impose a strict geometric frame on its imaged object. The deep shadows that surround the nude often merge with the darkness that surrounds us in the cinema, diffusing the bounds of the cinematic frame. Not always, but often, an image of the female body briefly fills the entire screen without any interrupting layers of text or other images. These are intimate moments. The camera appears to be called to responsive movements in openness to her gentle gestures and the curves of her flesh. Furthermore, the depth of field of these images is often shallow, bringing even more attention to the sculptural depth of her figure and the dispersal of the image into darkness.

Like all sound and image elements in *The Book of All the Dead*, images of the nude are introduced, and then rapidly displaced by other image sequences. And yet we continually return to these images at unexpected intervals. Each time any element in the film is repeated, its context and associations are reworked and renewed; it thus becomes

both more familiar and more strange through this repetition. One striking experience I have had in taking notes while viewing some of films in the cycle, particularly *The Dream of the Last Historian* (1985, Lamentations) and *Et Resurrectus Est* (1994, Exultations), is that I find myself in an inarticulate state when the images of the nude first appear. These images quiet me and grant me a certain speechlessness. She appears too close for thought, for speech, for categories. It is only after we have returned to the image of the nude many times that I begin to be aware of what I have experienced. My speechlessness and quietude are only revealed to me *after* the repetition of her image has pushed through the film enough times for me to bring my perceptions of her into conscious thought. That is, I am not reflectively aware of my speechlessness until after I have begun to articulate my experience. My initial quietude and sensing of the gentle intimacy of the image, only becomes reflectively available to me after I have begun to write. In this I also become aware of these images *as* images, as representations. As my capacity for reflection increases as we continue to return to the images of the nude, I also gain more clarity on my initial lack of reflection. And yet, because these images continue to appear spontaneously—that is, the polymorphic layering and cutting of the films make the prediction of sequences impossible—I am granted renewed glimpses of her initial visibility, of the way in which I was initially drawn into her image. The quiet intimacy resonates. I am filled with wonder at the way she is there, in and of her own. She does not speak, and she does not appear to be concerned with the camera, though the camera is concerned with her. She is not glamorized. I sway gently with her movements and the movements of the camera over her body. The fullness of her flesh pushes out and permeates the images, I see this especially in the fullness of her breasts. She is naked.

Why am I looking in on her in this vulnerable state? Unveiled in this way she does not project an identity or a character type, and I become increasingly aware of how much of her I am not able to access. She is unclothed, and yet I do not have access to her interiority. She is exposed and yet I become increasingly aware of what I can not see. She is in and of her own, she moves in and of her own. I have access only to this image of her surface. This is an intimate view, and yet she is over there and I am over here. In fact that is not even the case; she has been eclipsed and now only this representation flickers in her place. So much has withdrawn from this image that the darkness that surrounds her now appears to be closer to my initial experience of intimacy in this image than does the glow of light that once was her skin.

I become aware of my own outsideness in relation to these intimate views. And yet my own interiority is permeated by the excess of image and sound intertwined in this film cycle. Through repetition and excess, the gap between my attention and the film is continually annihilated and then opened again.

Here, the potency of Ezra Pound's words from Canto 81, resonate, a quote which also scrolls up the screen in *Azure Serene* (1992, Exultations).

First came the seen, then thus the palpable
Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,
What thou lovest well is thy true heritage
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
(541)

Indeed, first came the seen. In experiencing the way in which images, and particularly images of the female nude emerge from the polyphony of *The Book of All the Dead*, I am gifted reflection on this act of seeing, on the emergence of seeing. The seen becomes palpable, becomes articulate, becomes a positing of what *is*. And yet, no sooner

does this appear than through the labile constellations and repetitions of these images do I begin to attune to what I am missing. I begin to perceive these images *as* images from which the true intimacy of the flesh has withdrawn. I become more aware of how my own sensing flesh has been drawn out toward her in care. And yet she is not there. Her image is the “seen” element of what is now absent. Is this reduction not a hellish violation? This image, this representation, radically reduces and undercuts the gentle intimacy and beauty of her being in the flesh which I can empathize with so readily through my own sensing flesh. Indeed this is a hellish violation of her being, and we would resign ourselves to hellish turmoil if we accept this emptied form as the end point of our knowing.

But there is more. These images of the female body call us onward, like Beatrice’s guidance to Dante and his devotion to her in courtly love. For example, Dante expresses his recovery from a moment of cowardice in the following way after Virgil reminds him of Beatrice’s radiant guidance,

As little flowers, bent and closed
with chill of night, when the sun
lights them, stand all open on their stems

such, in my failing strength, did I become.
And so much courage poured into my heart
that I began, as one made resolute:

‘O how compassionate was she to help me,
how courteous were you, so ready to obey
the truthful words she spoke to you!
(*Inferno* II, 127—135)

In the film, we recognize the woman’s body as *nude* because what normally remains hidden has come into the light. The nakedness of her appearance is dependent upon a

withdrawal of darkness⁷. Further, her appearance as image depends upon a withdrawal of being. In my own flesh I am called to respond to her as other, in the fullness of her alterity, particularly in light of the way I am touched by her openness and vulnerability held present in her state of nakedness. But I can not genuinely respond to her in this way because she is not there. I feel her absence with striking intensity. The presence of image is forcefully marked by an absence of flesh. And yet, in context of the overwhelming polyphony of the entire film cycle, I have become aware that every act of my perception is likewise reductive in nature. Each constellation of meaning I grasp is merely one among a multitude of possible constellations. Each act of perception and thinking is a reduction of the full possibility of being. This full possibility of being can be characterized by the profound potency of darkness. Whatever comes into light is a reduction of that darkness by which beings come into appearance. And yet our experience of that darkness is dependant upon our reflection upon the “seen” world. The images of the female nude in *The Book of All the Dead*, urge us not to fix our thinking to these reductions only, but also to contemplate the darkness on which this appearance depends and which is so much vaster than what appears. Likewise, these images within the full film cycle call us to an awareness of the vastness of being upon which all beings depend. It is through attentiveness to this process that we can accept these reductions as provisional and engaged in the dynamic flux of time, rather than a hellish reduction of sedimented forms which have been emptied of the fullness of flesh. In this way Elder’s images of the female body are extravagantly paradisiacal, for they work through our own flesh to reconnect us with the full creative power of being, the potency of darkness.

⁷ For Elder’s writing on images of nudity see “The Foreignness of the Intimate or the Violence and Charity of Perception,” p. 469—470.

The feminine quality of these images, their gentleness, splintering beauty, patient recurrence, guidance toward receptivity to what *is*, and wisdom of the potency of darkness, is integral to Elder's vision of the paradisiacal throughout *The Book of All the Dead*. These images bring to presence an awareness that what *is* must be a reduction of what *can be*, and yet rather than leaving us to despair such a reduction they reconnect us with the fullness of potentiality. Thus the cycle of images of the female body in *The Book of All the Dead* offers a petition to feminine wisdom⁸ and a plea for letting go of the masculine possessive impulse to fix ideas and entities in place. Indeed, the soundtrack to the film *Et Resurrectus Est* is layered throughout with the filmmaker's voice speaking the words of William Everson's poem "Annul in Me My Manhood." This poem articulates a supplication for a release of the masculine "bold possessive instinct," and a plea for the openness and receptivity made known through feminine characteristics.

[. . .]
 How may a man assume that hiddenness of heart
 Being male, all masculine and male,
 Blunt with male hunger?

Make me then
 Girl-hearted, virgin-souled, woman-docile, maiden-meeek;
 Cancel in me the rude compulsive tide
 That like an angry river surges through,
 Flouts off Thy soft lip-touches, froth-blinds
 The soul-gaze from its very great delight,
 Outbawls that rare celestial melody.
 [. . .] (122)

Here, the masculine "rude compulsive tide" is understood as a hindrance, for it impedes the quiescence required for openness to the divine. The impulse of this blunt maleness is to declare the reduction, the emptied form, to be all there is, thus cutting one off from the

⁸ Luce Irigaray's *The Way of Love*, works to reconnect philosophy with the wisdom of love, which is also a connection with the feminine. "The book outlines another philosophy, in a way a philosophy in the feminine, where the values of intersubjectivity, of dialogue in difference, of attention to the present life, in its concrete and sensible aspects, will be recognized and raised to the level of wisdom" (vii).

wisdom of love. This masculine impulse would resign us to the halls of hell with its desire to fix the image as equal to the flesh-filled entity, and even erase any awareness of the potentiality of darkness. Thus the petition of *The Book of All the Dead* can also be understood as a prayerful meditation on a way to nurture such feminine qualities through a constant letting go of all constellations of ideas. As a viewer I share in this experience by taking up a position of active receptivity in relation to the overwhelming polyphony of the film cycle, but this letting go is not all there is. Through a continual return to images of the female nude body, I am gifted the opportunity to reflect upon the way in which “The Mind constructs patterns in the passage of time.” As nudity is made present through the absence of garments, so the image is made present through the absence of darkness. These images, in context of the rest of *The Book of All the Dead*, open the viewer to receptive meditative reflection upon the fullness of potentiality which reclines in order to allow moments of appearance to shine forth in time. The paradisiacal enters the here and now through this feminine wisdom of love which reconnects us with the generative nature of darkness.

The cinema is an art of time.

Attention is an art of time.

“Love is an art of time.”⁹

⁹ I am quoting one of Elder’s titles here. “Consolations,” part two of *The Book of All the Dead*, carries the subtitle “Love is an Art of Time.”

Bibliography

- Dante Alighieri. *Inferno*. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- . *Purgatorio*. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- . *Paradiso*. Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday, 2007.
- Elder, Bruce. “Driftworks, Pulseworks, Lightworks,” in *Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, ed. James Miller. Waterloo: Wilfrid University Press, 2005.
- . “The Foreignness of the Intimate or the Violence and Charity of Perception.” In *Subtitles: on the Foreignness of Film*. Ed. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour. Toronto: Random House, 1994.
- Everson, William. *The Veritable Years 1949—1966*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1978.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Irigaray, Luce. *The Way of Love*. Trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček. London and New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Mallin, Samuel B. *Art Line Thought*. Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996.
- . *Body on My Mind: Body Hermeneutic Method*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. Trans. W. Kaufmann and R. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1960.
- Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Thirteenth printing. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1993.