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REVIEW

REVIEW: PHILOSOFHY OF THE ENCOUNTER BY TATIANA ISTOMINA

written by Guest Contributor September 5, 2019



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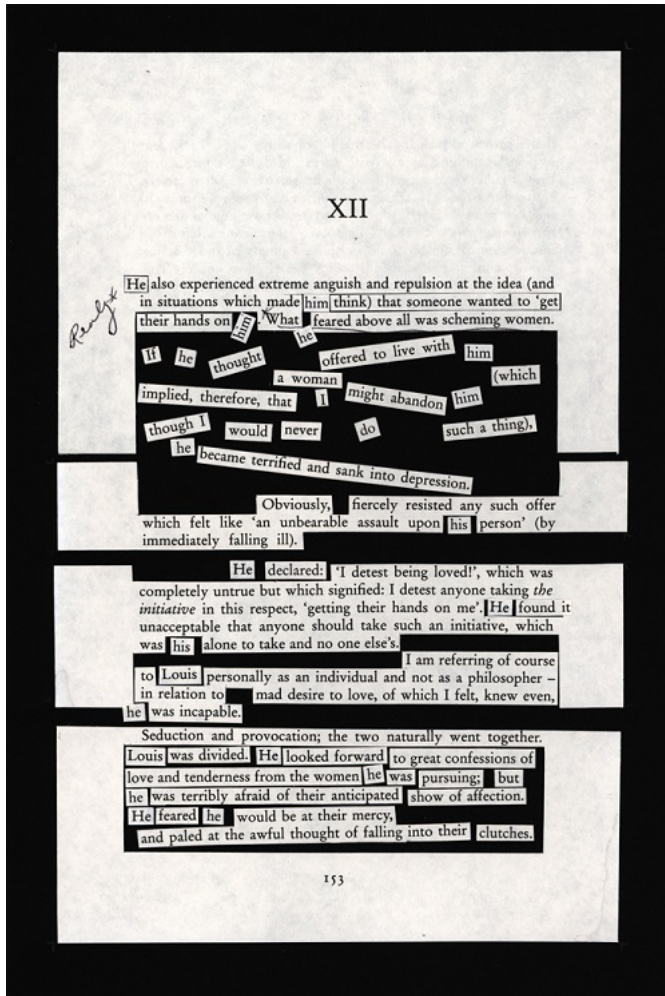
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Philosophy of the Encounter by Tatiana Istomina
Pinsapo Press, May 2019

Tatiana Istomina's new project, *Philosophy of the Encounter* from Pinsapo Press, obliterates any generic classification, and, from its onset, by its formal presentation, demands the reader implicitly begin to limn for herself notions not simply of genre, but of authorship, editing, and readership altogether. Disregard the adage: a number of judgments of considerable rhetorical complexity and implication need be navigated in and through this book's very cover.

Thematically, the work addresses the murder of H el ene Rytman at the hands of her husband, noted Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, for which no real investigation nor trial was held. Declared by a judge to be “in a state of total mental collapse” and “incapable of understanding the legal procedure,” Althusser spent three years in a psychiatric hospital, where he would begin writing his memoir *The Future Lasts Forever*, providing a partial account—his—of the event.

Structurally, this is where things get thorny—for Althusser, for Istomina, and for us. Althusser’s work is itself generically messy, a narrative biography of sorts, but also a willful blurring of the author’s mental state—and in turn, any semblance of ‘facts’—leading to Rytman’s death. She is, in Althusser’s retelling, figuratively silenced, spoken for instead of actively speaking, and to a large degree dismissed and erased. Istomina’s project is to make that silencing visible. Here, though, you must understand me: I do invoke ‘erasure’ and ‘visibility’ in the literary-theory sense in which you read them; I also mean those words very literally, for Istomina’s project is to re-assemble—through cutting, through pasting, through redaction, through textual displacement—the story itself so that we may read it anew. Using black paper and second-hand-copies of Althusser’s original publication, Istomina creates an artist’s book that is quite unlike any I have read before, at once performance and scholarship.

Istomina’s intervention is to re-tell this story from Rytman’s perspective. By re-arranging the actual text of *The Future Lasts Forever* by Louis Althusser, Istomina—listing herself as the editor—presents *Philosophy of the Encounter* by H el ene Rytman. It becomes, now, Rytman’s story. She is given position and prominence as speaker and agent, a voice re-constituted.

The consequences of Istomina’s radical re-writing shift and pulse throughout the work, and the effects are both local and global. From the first line we are presented with a quandary of sorts: we see almost an entire paragraph redacted, and so our introduction necessarily implies an absence. The work begins, “Here is the scene of the murder just as I experienced it,” and words that would ostensibly ground us in manners of setting and telling—“here” and “I”—are perhaps the least stable of the sentence. Is “[h]ere” the narrative of *The Future Lasts Forever*, the encounter that is *Philosophy of the Encounter*, or some interaction of the two? Is “I” now H el ene, elbowing out Althusser from his own framing?

Istomina’s textual displacements may be, at varying times, radical and restrained. In Istomina’s chapter four, retelling the meeting of Rytman and Althusser, she uses redacted text—or is it now a blank page?—in a way that feels almost like a stanzaic break:

“ Having met quite by chance,
we realised we were

*sharing the same sense
of loneliness, and the same desperate longing.*

In another moment, in describing Althusser and Rytman making love, Istomina keeps much of a block of text (seemingly) intact, only to penetrate it with a radically textually displaced sentence that reads: “Now he went at it with a will, displaying all his violence and passion,” drawing, in its jarring displacement, attention to the word *violence*. At moments such as these, for me, Istomina’s project productively calls to mind Lorraine Hansberry’s *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, an autobiography synthesized by Hansberry’s ex, Robert Nemiroff, from her unpublished writings, and Virginia Woolf’s *A Writer’s Diary*, an overview of Woolf’s views on artmaking composed from a selection of her letters chosen by her husband. Those two works (in)famously represent moments in which the spouse speaks for the deceased author in an editorial fashion. Istomina shows us that editorial and curatorial choices are not without consequence. They are not innocuous. They are part of a world of violence. With Hansberry, with Woolf, and with Rytman, the deceased does not speak, but is rather silenced by her domestic partner through elision and omission all under the guise of transparency.

The formal structure of the book is not a gimmick, is not one-note: it is consistently creative and surprising. It is not enough for me to paraphrase how it was assembled, made, organized, and expect that you have appropriately glossed the idea, and can be done with it. It is a complex set of gestures in which Istomina asks us to interrogate our subject-position. The pronominal slipperiness and ambiguity of address, coupled with the elision and redaction that intentionally fracture narrative, forces us, as readers, to become aware of when we are reading Althusser’s story, and when we are reading Rytman’s. The effect is productively destabilizing, and implies we consider what our default reading biases may be.

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Too many New-York-based reviewers resolve toward subway anecdotes, but, as a Manhattanite, I am obliged: at one point, to read a long, difficult sentence, I had to rotate the book in my hands over and over, and faster and faster, to follow the syntax at an appropriate speed. Frustrated, I finally got it—only to zoom back to reality and to be made aware, then, of my looking like an absolute madperson on the 2 train.

This, really, is a book about reading. It is a book that reminds us that reading is a physical act. It is incredibly easy not to think so, but we must be aware, always, that to speak is to be embodied, and to hear, too, is to be embodied, and those bodies have relationships to one another—ideological but also material.

And that, I would argue, is the hidden beauty of the project. Istomina doesn't merely reconstitute Hélène; she does so in a way that makes a show of the labor in doing so; of the violence of her erasure in the first place; in the difficult, on-going negotiation of presence and absence in historical narratives. The cumulative effect is one that is not sealed-off, or made past-tense, but something made manifest and immediate. On the final page, the cumulative effect of Istomina's work hits with force. She alters the relevant pronouns and makes minimal editorial corrections and keeps Althusser's final paragraph in its entirety. She alters the signatory initials, however, and the entire meaning refracts:

“ One final word: I hope those who think they know more or have more to say will not be afraid to do so. They can only help me live.
H.R.

This project is not afraid to say more.



William Camponovo's poetry has appeared in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Best New Poets*, and online at *Poetry Northwest*. With *Lost + Found* and the CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, he has edited and published materials by poets Gregory Corso and Jack Forbes. William has studied poetics at Johns Hopkins, the University of Washington, Antioch – Los Angeles, and CUNY. He is currently completing a dissertation on the work of Adrienne Rich.

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