

Autonomy of the Word



R.M. Berry

LUCCHESI AND THE WHALE

Frank Lentricchia

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"I am a lone rat in a hole, therefore I write.

"Or is it: I write, therefore I am a lone rat in a hole?"

This parody of Cartesian solipsism appears midway through Frank Lentricchia's novel, *Lucchesi and the Whale*, as protagonist Thomas Lucchesi waxes delirious over Herman Melville's—and vicariously his own—pursuit of absolute writing. Lucchesi is Lentricchia's dour fantastic, an obscure novelist for whom nothing that comes naturally comes naturally, hybrid of Orphic self-defeat and self-creation. He would prefer to live bodiless. His ineffectuality is his secret pride. He is, by his own unhinged account, the happiest of men, a writer whose utterly barren personal life constitutes the superabundant occasion for his art, an exquisite fullness spawned of conspicuous lack, and so of all mortals the most miserable. "The maximum happiness is to be in love with your own unhappiness," he soliloquizes, and his aesthetic repudiation of love and fortune—at least, until very late in Lentricchia's manic text—suggests a dizzying devotion that, if not heroic, is mad, mad, mad.

This is a provocative novel—if "novel" is the word—about writing on the edge. Lucchesi would be the martyr of literature. Wifeless, childless, friendless, broke, his published corpus during his first 43 years is five pages. By age 65, he has produced a novel "published by an obscure art press, at his expense, in an edition of 87." He hopes, by immersion in Melville's colossal anti-narrative, to pay homage to an immensity he knows his own writing

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can never approximate, but this trade-off—flesh made word—remains unstable. He dubs himself the Scrooge-Christ of art, an aesthete who hoards his talent while crucifying himself upon it, a "mad Ahab of reading." He waves his copy of Melville's fat book in the air, shouts at his students, "I have no idea what this is. Do you? Answer me! I AM AFRAID! I AM AFRAID OF THIS COCKSUCKER!!" When a coalition of Gay-rights groups has him removed from his post, he tells the campus newspaper, "I confess I have not much enjoyed life outside the page." Although insisting he's satisfied with his unredeemed state—"No doubt about it: quite happy"—a phantasmagoric Luciano Pavarotti appears to him and announces that he's diseased: "My dear Thomas, you write a writing, and this is why the total animality of your style is withheld just enough to rob us of your best. I sing. Write! Let your brain become as dumb and cold as a trout in a remote alpine stream, in mid-winter. Because this is what your brain most desires."

What does bliss look like?

Lentricchia's novel is comprised of Lucchesi's 30-page, brilliantly outlandish meditation on Melville's *Moby HYPHEN Dick*, or M-D—the behemoth tome never to be confused with a whale of similar but UNHYPHENED name—sandwiched between recollections, tirades, hallucinations, anecdotes, letters, nightmares, and often hilarious, unfailingly extravagant, literary detrita, the sum of which flamboyantly refuses to become a story. In a sober sense, this refusal is Lucchesi's credo: never be the maker of plots, which is to say, a father, which is to say, mortal. He would be, instead, an imaginary avatar of the originary Creator, the Father of fathers, first to abandon his marred work. If only Lucchesi can postpone the terminal sentence, propagate an analogical

sequence in which each element will become all, perhaps his writing can compensate for primordial inadequacy. His first published work, a bawdy tale about a wheelbarrow, recounts an inverted Oedipal conflict in which Mom and Dad, to recover their sexual intimacy, must murder their intruding son. The pedicidal instigator is Maternal Nurture herself, who, in a frenzy of nostalgia for love's loss, loads her baby into a wheelbarrow, and with hubby gripping the other handle, rolls off to bury him in fertile fields, "all fragrant of black earth." Then the happy homicides make love beside the gravesite, "in the manner of the wheelbarrow."

This tour de force, with accompanying bawdy illustration, appears in a little-read literary review where, as testimony to Tommy's prodigious gifts, one would expect it to give rise to parental celebration, if

only it weren't for Wittgenstein. Tommy has gone off to grad school and read him—specifically, remark §40 in *Philosophical Investigations*, the distinction between a name's meaning and its bearer. Ever the proponent of aesthetic abstraction, Tommy avails himself of philosophy's oldest corruption, invoking Wittgenstein's high-mindedness for petty justification, and names his murderous characters for his folks. After all, they're just the bearers of their names. He's their meaning's maker. Broken-hearted over their murderous depiction, Mom and Pop Lucchesi—the couple in Lentricchia's fiction, not the couple in Lucchesi's—complain to their author: "[T]he family in your story doesn't remind us at all of us," and Tommy responds with a lecture on aesthetics: "The artist...requires freedom from



Detail from cover

all of his sources, literary and familial." Lucchesi is infolding vertiginously. Imagination imagining imagining. His solitary predicament becomes analog of a neighbor's, one Mr. Salvatore, inspiration for the wheelbarrow fiction and scandalously pathetic cuckold. Each is "gripped by the buffoonery of an emotion which exceeds his situation. Which exceeds all situations." In this farcical darkness, no one knows where she/you/I/he/it stands.

What seems of deepest interest in *Lucchesi and the Whale* is this treatment of advanced art as a mortal repression, refusal of world and

flesh, the human's overcoming of itself.

Lucchesi would be the *übermensch* of experimental fiction, writer of words purified of worldly accidents, and this ambition entangles him in manifold ambivalences. He wants what he doesn't want, despises his own heart's desire. If his self-transcendence is just another mystified idealism, then it seems

ripe for satirical deflation, a send-up awaiting its pratfall, but if Lucchesi's mortal hunger is ours, a refusal of alienations now grown imperceptibly familiar, then Lentricchia's fiction seems as much enigma as parable. These are matters of serious comedy, involving the fate of transformative art in the new millennium, and I confess to some dissatisfaction with Lentricchia's way of leaving his conclusion up in the air. Specifically, over the Irish Sea in an Alitalia jet, as 65-year-old Lucchesi gets the ride of his life from Ruth, a late-40s, sexy flight attendant.

Lucchesi's failings are so obtrusive, his virtues so fragile and obscure, that this culminating return to, if not commonsense then common feeling, seems an earthy let down. Are we to accept the judgment of BF Norman—globetrotting Wittgensteinian and pansexual

septuagenarian—that Lucchesi’s aesthetic longings are just sublimated horniness? If so, then everything we know at the end is what we already knew from the start. Or is it, as Norman suggests later, that Lucchesi’s experimental novel—portions of which are Lentricchia’s experimental novel—represents the very self-beshitment Lucchesi has attributed to Wittgenstein? “Alone. Ruth and Thomas. He is exhausted. He never knew that he wanted a woman like her....” The novel trails off in a polyphony of reassurance:

“The turbulence!” she declares.

“We might die. We might be doomed,” he complains.

“We’re aloft.”

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