

Róbert Gál

Excerpt from *Agnomia*

They select someone, perform plenty of experiments on him, and only *ex post facto* describe him as the very object of the experiment. They misattribute any hidden meanings of his polysemous utterings to himself, though they treat them as unambiguous. They give him a hard time for years to come. What they, in an instant, stitch together with definitions he is forced to spend years unpicking by honest interpretation. Over time their definitions become so sclerotic that they grow rigid. His interpretations look as if they're made of butter, which they throw back in his face to have a good laugh at *his* babblings. They wind things up to the point where they find in all his babblings points with which to jab back at him from head to toe. In the blink of an eye, his defenses are instinctively engulfed by the need to rid the inner core of things of their inescapable outer shells. And this works, in return, against their inners, which it accordingly starts gnawing away. Two attributes of an observer: disdain and benevolence. Is it not those with the greatest stamina who abandon a sinking ship first? But then which ones are granted the ability to sense the bottom and draw specific lessons from the sensation? Is it possible that having a sense of the bottom is an option even in the event that we've been cast down there by force? If so, to what eventualities does this apply? The objectivity of obsessiveness? Let us do something, anything, and the moment it's done it ceases to be anything. There's here a kind of back-to-front conceptualism, a chance to find order in how one random event follows another. At the end there is always a concept, though in classical conceptualism the concept is at the beginning. So here is an exchange of one thing for another, which is undergoing constant interchange. We merely upscale the criteria, manipulating time in space by the number of pages written and suchlike. Any malfunction is a threshold event. The expected arrives unexpected. Building blocks of the mind, but how can the mind be a building? We would have to make allowance for its possible collapse at any moment. Pyromanticism. It never approaches maturity. And dreams are fended off like one volleyball after another (shots fired through a boat don't count). Possibility is inalienable. The character of man, the anthropomorphology of his very naturalness. The stuttering judgments of philosophers who, as far as the will is concerned, are lacking something. The antecedence of the age of the world's instruments over man. Workshops of ascendancy? Fanatics with a human face (wearing the devout countenance of praying mantises). How one actually thinks and, counterproductive to that, the actual thinking of others. Macrostatics. When one illusion changes into another illusion, its essence remains unchanged. *Stay hungry! Stay foolish!* And one may observe oneself communicating with a dead person who, in the rhotacizing tones of a girl's voice, is explaining to one how things always function piecemeal, whereby each piece contains within it the whole from which it has broken off despite itself, and, seeking a way out, points to this supplementarity with the defective *r* that automatically gets in the way of any, at first sight credible, chance of a future. There is nothing more manipulative than apprehensively fighting back against manipulation. Being the song of Job, insistent images fluttering about inside the heart in a ritual of rebirth. For all words uttered are like ants lining up in formation against you. Even errantry has paths to follow. One could speak of being freed of the compassion that necessarily follows from circumstances. In her case, this means that when they're dancing and she's twirling around them she's the only one who's not dancing. "But does someone have to go and jump off a bridge because of that?" the poet asks. "Yes," replies the dead girl's consciousness, which has been mysteriously silent in life. In her lifetime this consciousness had preferred hypotheses, which it immediately tested by destroying them. For example, it would always test the possibility of touching by touching, and so on. Even acts of coition seemed real, but how could they be real when they weren't? Liquid mercury introduced into a half-open mouth to compensate for bated breath is ill-advised. And yet, this was what she craved, after her consciousness had been chafed to possible nescience. For what other approach is there to a game in which what one's conscious of is attributed to the consciousness, to the latter's

permanent disadvantage? Stories that begin at the end don't need beginnings that would convict them of making a point, that is, of committing a falsehood. A falsehood that loses its falsehood, being turned inside out by the truth, as if that were possible at first sight. But in any subculture there are other rules and privileges accorded to others that permit them to fire off viruses at everyone else, as if all that was at issue were the odd truth. As indeed is the case. Such truths have been hiding beneath the surface of inebriation and have usually been silent, because nobody would let them get a word in. Actually, attendees at these parties would subconsciously exchange them for falsehoods, as if they, whether truths or falsehoods, were immaterial. The point is that the seesawing certainties of these people prevented them from letting truth get a foothold. As if a prerequisite for the stability of a certain order were the prerequisite for stability even in an element that isn't stable. Watching bodiless souls being joined in a bouncy rhythm by soulless bodies. Giving over one's breath as an event that needs to be retold. Inner silence cannot capture it. Being silent outwardly means participating in building the temple. The monomorphism of being at every instant, each instant advancing under the impulse of obligation. Being as an analogue of breathing means denouncing breathing as something unnatural. The identity of the optional. Yes being entitled to Yes; likewise No. A consciousness that outstrips its own progression. First, one might believe and ask questions only afterward, or one might ask first and believe afterward. Flypaper keeps flies alive. In loving, what matters is not *who with*, but *how*. And the unity of opposites of pain. The zenithal moments of life in their conjunction with tight-lipped gobs. When not killing oneself, one's killing others, but those around are immune to it. Divers pasts of a diverse past (cast back from each point in the shade into a landscape of Platonic ideals). The anachronism of a vision that climaxes beneath a cloak of respite. Movement always complying with one and the same motion from the point of view of the goal. But a goal cannot be the arbiter of any point of view. My sorrow is organized by a sorrow that is organized. Little beetles, it says, have carried off the path to my person. Ever straying to the exact goal, as if straying had goals encoded into it. Visions of the instantaneous, not to be supported, not to be undermined. One can get sentimental even over a hangman, if you think about it. The monotony of any settled notion that, in its turn, turns any settled notion inside out. Torment is unending, but the form of its expression expresses something else. Fanatality. Raising doubts about the given, which is dubious only if the given is indubitable. The hands on a clock point to eternity at every moment of intransigence. But what kind of eternity is it when it persists only in an intake of breath and breathing actually harms it? Pain depicted through the variability of the meanings that, *ex post facto*, consign it to the cage of understanding. Having an understanding of somebody else is possible through both detachment and introspection. Both methods produce secondary static from the primary absence of understanding. A Yes won by obduracy is the product of having expected an unexpected No, which may spoil it. Containing oneself within a zone of inviolability, in order, if need be, to furtively pause and wonder. The furtive perception of a moment gulps in expectation of what it might perceive. So, its enjoyment is twofold, once in the anticipation and once in the inversion of it whereby any Yes of the present moment is but a vain rendering visible of something that effectively extends into the domain of what might be seen from the domain of what has been seen, which cannot be seen given that it is a direct component of our seeing. The bilateral uses blind alleys for the purpose of takeoff. We left the venue with a pleasant thrumming in our ears. "Your laughter is so infectious," says D., radiant as an aspen. We toast life with a draught of corrosive. On the way to the toilet, one after the other, we watch those present and their shadows. A group of guys, Sex Pistols copycats, are just finishing their set. Encouraged, we've staggered off to another dive. Here we're watching a girl with huge breasts and an uproarious top that does almost nothing to clothe them. The girl's having a great time, downing one pint after another. D. says that there are no girls like that back home, alluding thereby to the invisible boundary between licentiousness born of a desire and licentiousness born of hysteria. Others would blame it on American girls' innate tendency toward excess: they need to be outrageous in all circumstances. In another bar, D. unexpectedly asks me whether I've ever raised a hand

against L. I no longer remember what my exact reply was, but I do remember that I hesitated. She nestled down in the leather seat and then stretched out like a flower about to burst from its bud. After letting her attention roam briefly but intensely around the sleazy interior, which is filling up with dozens of successful young men in suits, carrying briefcases, she says with seeming apathy: "Let's go." We've ended up on a motorcycle, where I hold her tenderly in my arms as if she were not one for rough play. Somebody had parked the motorcycle at the edge of a small square, which looked empty, but then it turned out that uniformed eavesdroppers can pop up from around every corner, if it comes to that. "We're going now," I say. I might have helped her break free from certain stereotypes, but she didn't need my help. She might have helped me break free from certain stereotypes, but I didn't need her help. Repetition is reminiscing ahead. Ineffectual dreams don't exist, so the unconscious is more effectual than consciousness. And since my pain doesn't follow from the findings of philosophy, the question is: In what respect can clarification of the cause of my pain be aided by the findings of philosophy? In being accountable for anything's enduring, since for what else can one be held accountable? This raises more questions: To what extent can the consciousness's accountability for something enduring be its consistent monitoring of it, and to what extent is the monitoring of what endures even conceivable and admissible? Is every story a manipulation? And so forth. A story is the span of a horizontal network needed for any vertical event to have something to grab hold of and evolve. The sheer intensity of the need for anticipation, which gradually mutates into a prophetic aptitude for precisely foreseeing what's already been called the future. The gradually identified dryness of a parched state and a cross turned upside down, uprooted into the firmament of the superego. Where a fall is a cry of victory, which, like an angel, comes crashing down with the result that, through the impact of what it has dragged down with it, it might blame some act of tearing asunder for that which has been catastrophically doomed *ab ovo* to be torn asunder. The dire straits of love. In the bright light of defiance. Light won through defiance? Fretful energy expended on trying to grab hold of and hold on to the aura of its lampposts. Years spent laboriously tempering one's capacity for feeling until the time comes when this capacity is transformed into the body's capacity for pain. But what kind of capacity is pain, when capacity means being able to act and achieve something? Is not even martyrdom, then, something that is by nature laughable, just as nature finds laughable any act of destruction or nihilism generated in the mind? On the basis of the natural need for words that are meant to be useful, one calls that semi-anonymous, self-promoting girl simply a prostitute. When faced with the incongruity of a rebus, we seek something invisibly our own. Being able to ask questions of that amiably chatty wee creature, even by means of a kiss, defined as mouth-to-mouth panting, as expressly offered in the girl's ad. "I do not require this service," I tell her decisively, but seeing her sincere, saddened eyes, my heart slowly mellows. I may not alter my decision, but I have a natural need to be at least as tender to her as she is to me. I feel the full effect of her embrace. It is maternal and soft, simultaneously affectionate and sensual. And without any pressure on any of the constraints of reality, including time. We prolonged our hour by almost an hour. Then having both come, we lie huddled together and keep quietly repeating something. It's eleven at night and I'm her last client of the day. I invite her for dinner and, much to my surprise, she accepts. I enjoy watching her panties sidewinding naturally over her smooth thighs to arrive safely, after a couple of wriggles and tugs, at the place where they belong. Finally, she tells me her name is Lu, which means "light." And now comes her story. When Lu got snagged in Ben's plans, the trap had been set long before. Lu had absolutely no objection to jumping right in. She appreciated how radical her decision was and therefore gave no thought to its further consequences. The Lost Childhood Club and other ghettos of ingenuity. The need we have for all the indispositions that impact on life is begging to be written about, but differently. "I'm used to phantoms now," says Ben, adding something about madness, which he says will never be within his grasp. The field of anxiety's inventiveness, craters of possibilities for anything tossed into the air like a geyser of playing cards. Ben nags at Lu for spending days on end doing nothing. She retorts that he had, if he hadn't forgotten, promised her work. He says he made no such promise. And she, that he did.

And she burst into tears. He tried to soothe her, though he had an urge to slap her. She let herself be soothed, though she, too, had an urge to slap him. In the end, they made love and then got drunk. Such is the backdrop against which, for weeks and months, with only short breaks (for she would always leave for the east after a few weeks to see her parents), their cohabitation was played out. This setting was created by a chance observer. In calm tones he points out to someone what bothers him about me, but without bothering to add which bits he's only just invented. He says something about the exaggerated movements by which I cause turbulence in space and which he finds discordant. He used the addressee of this remark as a catalytic converter, because the remark was directed at me. Then he grinned, since seeing me as an object tallied with his job description. The worst writers are those who slowly evolve into the little top and bottom cogwheels that drive the mechanism of their own power, which needs constant organization because it's battery-driven. Its keyword is "cunt." If you're a man, you get up from the table slowly with a woman between your legs. "We think what we see; hence, we aren't seeing it," Ben maintains. "While others see what they're seeing because they don't think about what they see." He makes a great thing of Thomas Bernhard, whom he sets in a context of his own devising. However, in attempting to apply this truth to love, all he does is retreat from Bernhard back to the Kafka of one of the propositions in his *Letters to Milena*. In the event that the reader doesn't recognize the proposition, he can work it out for himself. I'm holding it like a dog—the thought crosses my mind in the metro—as I sense the heat of my hands slowly draining into a gently rounded metal bicycle frame. And, automatically following the thought through, I immediately add: a friend. D. and I are sitting in a small New York Bagel Buffet on Sixth Avenue, located just a few yards from Barnes & Noble's gigantic, multi-story bookstore. Together, we munch on slices of pizza, washing them down with hot half-and-half coffee. The flow of ideas that come springing into life is naturally synchronized to the gentle, but at that moment much-needed, soothing sound of the objects and people of life as it passes by. Baba Yaga's hut standing on a chicken leg. Somebody up there throws down a pair of eyeglasses. They are keys. They convey me up into a nest. I wonder, what was D. feeling as we stood crammed together in that corner like frozen flowers that aren't allowed to breathe? As the shrill shouting of melting lead had the two of us frostily shrieking with one and the same heart, which stepped up its output with every passing moment as a cycle of eternal, exhausting ecstasy flowed into its matching body. At first, she'd looked as if she didn't understand. "This is torture," she said. "Does he even know how to play that saxophone. . . ?" My reply to her, but kept to myself: "Positive negation is the negation of negation. There are various forms of such negation. From holding one's breath through the whole spectrum of colors that manifest themselves in monochrome, to the final gush spewing from the colorful spectrum of blood as it spills out from within and is, therefore, consistently authentic." So, no affinity based on nasal hair, then, D. ruminated as she tried to pinpoint just what it was about Hammano that appealed to her. He's got the complexion of a child, she continued to muse, as if unable to grasp how this child could be nearly fifty. He used to take me around with him like a little dog. Wait here, I'll be back in a mo. And he didn't come back till two hours later. As for my capacity for suffering, my endurance is considerable, D. says with an odd smirk. She describes to me the death of one of our friends I hadn't seen for years. One after another his organs had failed, finally he'd gone blind and from then on he never went out. He was a mathematical genius whose greatest mistake was not to have left Slovakia after the November revolution. Today he'd have a post at Oxford, a steady income, and he'd probably have resisted the snares of alcoholism. What horrified me most was the dry tone in which she was telling me all this, as if she wasn't even talking about a human being, but about a mass of inert matter condemned to the decomposition that she was idly contemplating with the eyes of a voyeur. What does she actually see in Hammano, I ponder, summoning up a mental image of that life-sated artist, who once plunged an embryonic Christ on the Cross into a bottle of weird moonshine and called the work, with fitting effrontery, *Original Sin*? But just go try and identify with your own name and what it evokes by way of an icon. "I am not I," says Hammano, because he is Hammano and he's right, even though he's wrong. And that's why. In any tautology

lurks a concentrated empathy for tautologically opening up that which has been opened. She had the jitters before entering the venue. She dithered outside the entrance, and if I hadn't gone out for a smoke, she might have sneaked away altogether. I catch her by the shoulder: "Come on, for goodness' sake!" She says she's going to buy a ticket first, and so she does. We sense an affinity with the space that's slowly closing in. We're standing together, suitably apart from each other. The squall of tones from the first piece of the concert casts us both into apathetic expectation of the inevitability to come. When years emanate from days. These are Mondays, these Sundays, and so on. This is a shadow of light, and this is the sun. Night is also a sun. His need to communicate has never been desperate, but even so, it has agreed to elicit disagreeing reactions from the critics. They would pick on various imperfections in his work, which was never meant to be perfect, because it needed to breathe. "I'm so relaxed," says D. in the bath, "that I could happily drown myself." And the reality of what he's seeing automatically adjusts to being seen. If on occasion liquid honey overflows, it turns into. . . The need to open one's eyes, which must perforce see something, surely. Something that, in order to be seen, even if it's not far from itself, is nonetheless brought closer to itself by means of revelation. Opening one's eyes and thus being able to see something that might strike the need to dream as invisible.

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