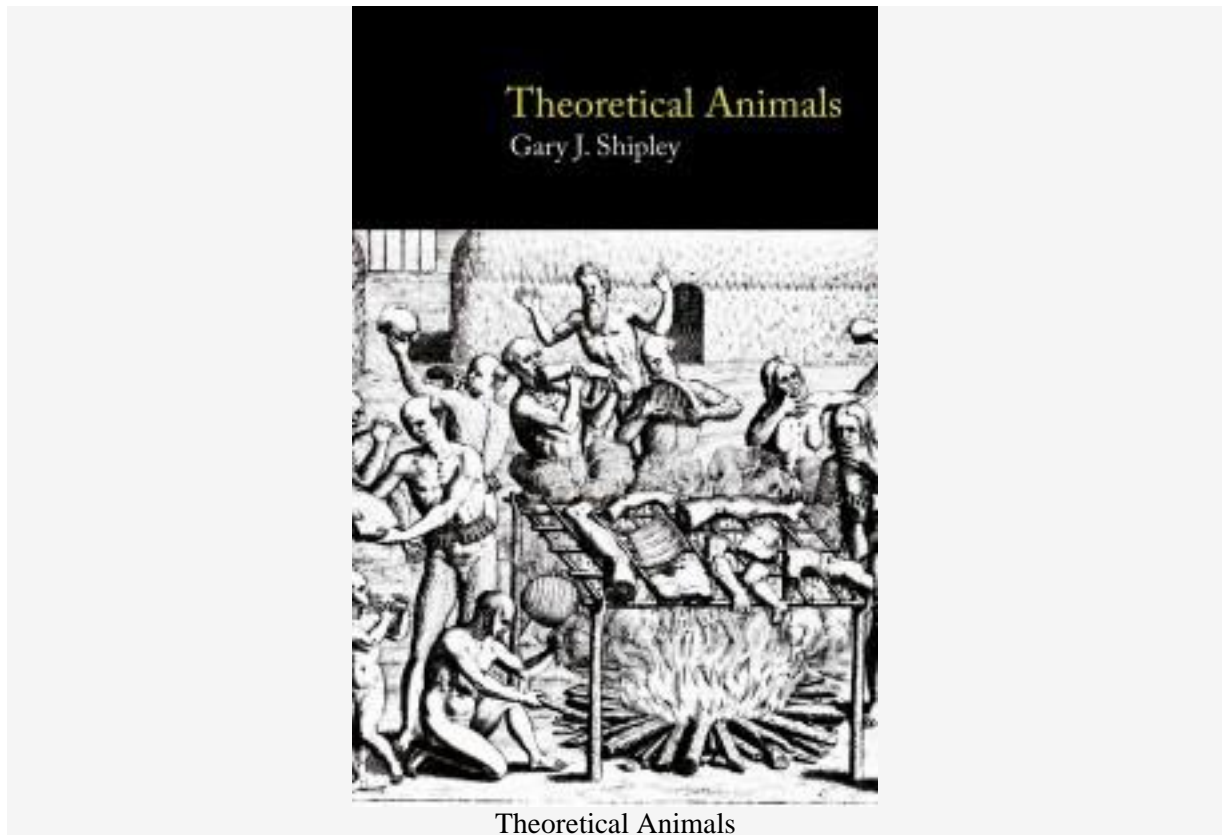


THE MEANING-MAKING MACHINE



Theoretical Animals
Gary J. Shipley
(BlazeVOX Books, 2010)

In 1959 in Paris when William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, following in Tristan Tzara's footsteps, started in earnest to construct the 'cut-ups', they began the nominal process of reducing 'conventional' prose back down into the retinal-rush of the newsreel, the slogan, the hideously disgorged and fractious sentence, began to re-interview the brain itself in the process of writing. Burroughs, after cutting up and then 'folding' the pages of Shakespeare and Rimbaud, wrote: "*Cut up Rimbaud and you will hear the voice. Cut-ups often come through as coded messages with special meaning for the cutter*". These 'cut-ups' performed semantic miracles of course, making T.S Eliot sound, for the first time, truly interesting, while creating supersonic sonnets of Shakespeare and opening perhaps a few inches wider Huxley's *Doors of Perception*. The re-birth of these experiments, while not confirming the death necessarily of any other 'modes' of writing, paved the way at least for an attempt for literature itself to be surpassed.

The writing of Gary J. Shipley in *Theoretical Animals* has some common ground with these endeavours yet seems also to have over-stridden the skeletons of these writers to flesh out his own particular vision. He explains himself in a recent interview:

"I am celebrating enigma as an end in itself, an all-pervasive telos: the tangled spine of metaphysics/morality and aesthetics-enigma as driving force and (hidden) end."

Thankfully, when reviewing this book critics will lack the necessary 'categories' in which to place it, though I could easily announce to the reader that it is full of little 'counter-fictions' and 'anti-poems' and/or 'contrary-styles' and add any other endlessly superfluous literary formulations. A French critic (Thibaudet) once described Lautréamont's *Maldororas* a "*frenetic monologue*" which, true enough, could well allude to that horrible pitch of voice within. Likewise Shipley's voice should be stored upon a disc and played back to the deaf in their dreams, in which of course they can once again 'hear'. It has been said that Lautréamont, in his great degenerative work, reached beyond "*the limits of literature*". But what lies, really, beyond those limits? Semantic disorientation? A break from ALL syntactical 'rules'? Or is it physically just to move ahead of the shadow cast of the last stump of language? But no, for even the imagination of the mystic or the visionary must be stopwatched by eternity. In all probability, it only equals to a deliberate deviation from a supposed total *knowledge* of what literature has done and what it will be expected to continue doing, i.e. narrate, depict metaphor, create fictions, which, in short, will naturally continue to dominate the contemporary domain. The alternative, while being still (it is true) piteously vague, comes closer to what Shipley here has achieved, to partially/impartially hypnotize the reader into becoming ignorant again—as in the "*supreme fiction*" of the poet Wallace Stevens who understood that to witness truly "*the inconceivable idea of the sun*" each of us must become "*an ignorant man again*"; for here is the making of a truly *future* form, one that seeks to assert its transition from narration to *meaning* as if meaning itself was nothing but a pathological lie. Shipley explains himself thus: "*In a way, the characters embody what it is to populate a novel-world that wasn't made for characters. They are forced to bend and mutate. They find a way to exist, to make meaning.*" When discussing Bataille, the French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote: "*Bataille broke with traditional narrative to tell us what has never been told before*" and Shipley himself seems in the process of achieving this, to turn his pen back into "*a pitiless chisel*", like Maldoror's own.

All of the figurative forms that inhabit *Theoretical Animals* bear the weight of the writer's own meaning-encrusted cross, his own "*tangled spine of metaphysics*" and we watch each of them move up and through the bone-gears of both the theoretical and critical apparitions of self: "*never resting in time, unscrolling on ragged lakes, their costumes of wrinkled skin distilled*". The book itself is a supernatural factory: a conveyor-belt of image-carcasses eaten clean to the bone by the ferocious appetite of meaning or non-meaning. The nearest book that we have in style to Shipley's would be *The Atrocity Exhibition* by J.G. Ballard, he who himself described Burroughs's greatest book *Naked Lunch* thus: "*Bizarre and nightmarish scenes flash by, like glimpses of some exotic and decadent City. Only later do we realise that this strange City is the one we all inhabit in our waking lives*". *Theoretical Animals* mirrors such a statement, but also defies even this description of the bizarre, for the world within these pages is also industrial, claustrophobic, nihilistic, ersatz in fact, just as in the installations of the German artist Gregor Schneider; a world of fraught interior tunnels and of corridors that turn back on themselves, as if his incubated spaces were constructed as a stage for some choreographed experiment for the damned in cybernetic heaven, a place at death where no longer does a life *flash* before the eyes, but is rather shouted out by a bored technician on a faulty tannoy-system, as each diabolical action of the unaccountably wronged, or evil, or mutated is followed by no ultimate regret, for all these 'non-characters' are as contemptuous of their own behaviour as that of their creator.

Thus the writer is celebrating enigma as an end in itself, a stupefying black-hole into which all human chance and consciousness are sucked: Heidegger once famously asked the question "*why are there beings at all, and why not nothing?*"; a notion that Shipley happily applies his own anti-systematic approach to, making of both myth and logic mere sterile counterparts to his own multidirectional world of rejection and nothingness.

Theoretical Animals is unwilling (rightly so) to concede any imaginative ground and implies that ALL literature is essentially useless, redundant or, how Rimbaud described it, "*a vaguely hygienic distraction*", each 'figure' that populates this book being but an alias in the criminal act itself

of *imagining*, for Shipley single-mindedly re-judges this 'act' to watch his own blood rush to the heads of each new hypothetical race:

"Negation of action is the most courageous of mutations. One becomes somebody and nobody, existing in another world confusing feeling with knowing."

'Identity', Shipley is telling us, is the last extant human illusion to remain, so that it seems, in the end, no more than our own congenital mannequin wheeled into and out of the world to replace us, an all-consuming *nothingness* that will return once man's original breath-canister is hurled back into deep space, leaving even the mirror itself with nothing left to reflect/repeat, and thus turning it also back onto itself, to peel back its own tinfoil-tissue from the bone of all now non-personality:

"I did not recognize my contamination. But just then a set of insectile eyes disappeared into the glass. For a fraction of a second I was guaranteed through them. Their chance warn, they run, why? I seemed to recognize their borrowed host: he/it was me. Said, 'Hey, before I looked I knew you well'."

Shipley's prose prefers to steel-plate itself into inversion, mental tautness, deadly emanations, and we are all invited to wade through the desolate swamp of his imaginings as, like any truly radical writer, he unveils a world that seems to surpass our own cognizant capacity to believe in it. The writing is devastating enough to fossilize older, more redundant literary forms, his aphoristic litanies and murderous cacophonies glass-case our more conventional modes of writing forever, while breaking down the DNA of the traditional reader-writer relationship, just as Lautréamont believed that fiction writing served only its own tethered-end (*"Even if I had no true event to recount to you, I would invent imaginary tales and decant them into your brain"*). As readers, we are expelled by *Theoretical Animals* just at the moment that we try in vain to embrace it, we are spoken to ironically, but only as a pointer to what has already been displaced, distorted, re-questioned by the author, 'irony' here being only a subsidiary and uncompromisingly complex clause in the contract between idea and comprehension:

"A cannibal is a human that feeds on the flesh of other humans.

Ersatz humans are not humans.

Humans that eat ersatz humans are not cannibals.

Ersatz humans that eat humans are not cannibals.

Therefore, an environment that advocates or facilitates humans feeding on the flesh of ersatz humans and/or ersatz humans feeding on the flesh of humans does not thereby advocate or facilitate cannibalism."

Many readers it is true will consider Shipley's book to be almost unreadable, unthinkable, such is its sometimes bewildering and deliberate multiplicity of illogical registers. But it is a work in its manifold mastery of disguises and its damning implications for logical and contemporary prose that STOPS the world, empties the dust of the objects around us into the hourglass of its every word: *"drag on. A montage of smoking fingers and mouths shield us from / our pulped words and swallowed screams. Nobody can make a dent in this warped shroud."* Matching the anaemic prose of Beckett in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the writer becomes a phenomenologist inspecting our skulls which, like a full-stop, have rolled to the end of his questions. We *watch* in slow motion the lines of his prose, as unyielding as iron-bars, jut up and rip through the concrete of the page. While at his feet, in the mud, lies the abandoned rusted copper-piping of Hell's failed sprinkler-system, yet no one seems interested. The *beyond* in Shipley's world is no longer an eschatological or celestial fiction, but rather a tape-recorder found amid the bric-à-brac that is running down its batteries to the histrionics of God's now panic-stricken voice on REPEAT; while about the slime, the mud, the bloody corpses, a series of intransigent, anonymous and flesh-aborted bodies search frantically for the OFF button. But in history any time an author deposits such a spiritual and atheistical weight of suffering into our imagination, the result is usually what the Romanian philosopher E.M. Cioran described as being *"an accumulation of confusions, an inflation of*

horrors, of frissons that date. One cannot keep renewing Hell, whose very character is monotony.” Through a constant cycle of self-cannibalism the writer’s mind regurgitates this “*accumulation of confusions*” for his is a remorseless mind which, like a bird-of-prey, consumes the perpetually regenerated entrails of each idea. Everything is tortured, yes, but also otherworldly, subtle, playing out the death-principle inside of the closed universe of a gesture, a space, a moment of psychosis, or propaganda. “*Men’s minds need a simple truth, an answer which delivers them from their questions, a gospel, a tomb*”, wrote Cioran, and Shipley applied this apocalyptic oversight of mankind by writing a characterless novel of ‘characters’, a *reductio ad absurdum* in which the verisimilitude of the vignettes (which could pass as chapters) is allowed to occasionally flash-up onto the page, for amid the darkness this is how we find the ‘stories’, like ‘signs’, neon-signs short-circuited by the mud left over of the time *before* man breathed, and thus we see them flicker at the edge of nothingness:

“regarding the reasons as to why certain individuals should have inspired laws concerning their continued existence, (...) They even speak of a day when they will deliver us from our pseudo-existence and make us real.” (from ‘*There is almost universal ignorance*’)

Naturally, the inherent ‘enigma’ in this writing is only that of being a homo sapiens, a living organism tethered to the reins of a universe held by hands or no-hands, depending on your belief. The humanity of this book is that of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa: “*Humanity, being a mere biological idea and signifying nothing more than the animal species we belong to, was no more deserving of worship than any other animal species*” (*The Book of Disquiet*). And so Shipley, like Pessoa, has chosen to worship the biology of unalterable consciousness: “*Our teeth give as heads bow and count on the garrulous tolls airing the week’s burdens for an amphibious and relative god.*” The writing, as in this fragment, happily maintains its grotesque discrepancy between the comparison made between image and idea, between the obligatory ‘reality’ of a would-be pariah of civilization and those most deliberate creations of his own mind, for he can write of mutation in the same effortless way as Wordsworth could write of a flower, images which are both triggered by the *same* lawless conclusions of a mind-in-the-making. But it would not be going too far to suggest that Shipley’s mind stockpiles its own images as if an end-of-the-world refuse heap, or as in the broken-down and *finished* world of the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky, whose poetical vision Ted Hughes depicted as a “*humanity stripped of everything but the biological persistence of cells (...) among the odds and ends of a destroyed culture.*”

The construction of the book is such that it can satisfy a hundred different and varying readings AND responses, as well as give birth, at the same time, to the numerous myths of truth—as believing in a fiction is often inevitable, even when the notion of ‘fiction’ is as ambiguous as in this ‘novel’; no *superliterature* will be needed to be invented in which the relation between author, character and idea is destroyed completely, for even the anonymous narrator will find an inner propulsion to “*shift the truth to fit need*”. Bataille when writing of Nietzsche’s “*mental void*” talked of the writer’s destiny in the following terms: “*IN SPITE OF MYSELF I slowly sketch erosion and ruin*”, for the writer will always come up short before his own moral bulwark, even when his morals are themselves a ‘void’, but a necessary one, such as in this book. Morals of course create their own ‘meaning’, something which Shipley also confronts when describing *Theoretical Animals* as “*...the meaning-making machine*” which has now become “*infected, is itself a disease*”, deliberately restricting himself to an antithetical reality, a protracted mental state to conceive of what he himself has called “*a largely theoretical construct, so that the book’s autophagia becomes a mere eating of pictures of self*”; this is a pivotal statement to the understanding /overcoming of this book, for while infinite complexity can only ever negate and negate us, if we are to escape ‘reason’ we are left only with what Shipley describes as the ‘HUMANEXIT CODE’, a teleological doorway that amounts to no more than a curtain of flesh into which each of the ghost-inhabitants of the book passes into and out of, those who have embodied most it seems the writer’s own sense of alienation in the world, the necessary alienation that in a ‘literary’ sense helps tear down the walls of what limits and constricts us.

A review by Paul Stubbs
October 2011

E. M. Cioran wrote of the “*stupidities inherent in the cult of truth*”, which the writer and critic Susan Sontag depicted as being “*The implications, here and elsewhere, of what the true philosopher says that there is not something ‘true’ but rather something necessary or liberating. For the ‘truth’ is identified with depersonalization*”. And if the re-birth of the imagination is to continue to locate a perpetually new and subsidiary womb for itself, for every new idea, concept, inversion, then what might well be deemed today as too intellectually obdurate a work, too unyielding a *possibility* of the mind, may, of course, by tomorrow, be considered *necessary*. *Theoretical Animals* embodies a lot of what Rimbaud meant by being “*absolutely modern*”: to decode the systems of the storyteller, reverse the ‘traffic’ of historical stimulus and thus allow the masses to be “*replaced by their tomorrows*” today. And whether or not the experiences endured in Shipley’s book are *modern* or are not, it doesn’t really matter, for no one it seems is arriving to suture our wounds, and God’s fin, in deep space, will continue to circle us, regardless.

Paul Stubbs (october 2011)