



A-religion*

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This article attends to the film's re-reading of Melville in terms of a presentation of an a-religious religion. The film's display of beauty and its engagement with both the sufficiency and vulnerability of this beauty is seen to partake of a philosophical and cinematic questioning of an aesthetic of auto-sacralization and the chances of an atheist art.

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Should we wish to praise Claire Denis's latest film, *Beau Travail* (good work, handsomely done), it would not be advisable to direct its title back at it, as a compliment. For this title should be understood as an exclamation uttered in front of a disaster: 'Good work, handsomely done', as one might say 'Congratulations!' in order to lash out with irony at a stupid act or a clumsy gesture. So that no doubt should remain as to the correct tone of the title, one need only look up the expression in the short story from which the film was adapted, Melville's 'Billy Budd, Sailor'. 'Handsomely done' is an expression uttered by Claggart (Budd's sworn enemy) when Billy knocks over his bowl of soup. Melville prolongs it by 'And handsome is as handsome did it, too' (Melville, 1985: 350), going on to comment on this allusion to Billy's particular, angelic type of

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beauty, by noting that it was the deep-seated reason for Claggart's hatred of him. 'Handsomely done!' not only takes 'handsome' against the grain: beauty in itself is mocked. This is the effect of the 'perverse nature' of Billy's tormentor.

This 'handsomely done' or 'beau travail' echoes in the book as in the film the expression 'pretty good find' or 'belle trouvaille' (Melville, 1985: 330), also directed at Billy (Gilles Sentain in the film), this time by the commander whose desire for the beautiful young man is alluded to both by Melville and by Claire Denis. If he is a 'pretty good find', it is because he is a foundling. This is one of the characteristics that make him into a Christic figure – into this victim offered up to the 'mystery of iniquity', as Melville puts it, following St Paul. Melville's tale is a tale of a Christic passion whose iniquity leads to no salvation, other than the salvation of sailor's poetry, which at the end of the story makes the writing self-referential (Melville was a poet as well). A ship called the *Athée* (the *Atheist*) leaves no room for doubt: the tragedy of Billy is that of Christ in a world without God – and perhaps, by that token, the tragedy of an art whose very art abandons it to the hatred of the world. But it is in the very power of that hatred, in the 'depravity according to nature' which attacks beauty, innocence and goodness, that this art finds its springboard: it is 'the point of the present story', as Melville puts it. Claire Denis is less explicit. As she hides the precise meaning of 'beau travail' – at least during the film, since the film itself invites a re-reading of Melville – so she uses the markers of a Christic allegory differently, paradoxically, in a more insidious and more showy manner. She does not cite the scriptures, does not name 'the Atheist', but she does show the cross (as does Melville) and the Madonna (to which Melville alludes). Mainly, she makes Gilles overtly into a saviour (he saves a soldier during an explosion) whose sin in the eyes of his enemy is not a cup which is knocked over but a flask which is proffered to a torture victim; he utters 'Lost' as he lies dying (perhaps – but perhaps he will also be resurrected at the end of the film?).

A lost saviour then; and the one who lost him, like a Satan leading him astray in the desert, is equally lost, banished from the Legion and committing suicide, but only in order to live again in the film's final scene, this time without any ambiguity, in the intense life of a precise and feverish dance, executed in a disco with the lights dimmed, to a song whose title (no secret title to decipher here) is 'Rhythm of the Night'.

A paradox, which belongs to Claire Denis and owes little to Melville, or that Melville exploits little, is that he who loses a saviour

belongs to an impeccable order – quite the thing to say! – symbolized here by the Legion: the order of the army, or a monastic order (the equivalence is raised in Melville), ritual order (the entire film is scanned on the figures of ritual, its songs, its marches, its observances); the order finally of an accomplished, powerful and harmonious beauty, incarnated in this instance in the bodies of the men. This order, this religion, is posited in the face of religion – the Christian one, but also the Muslim one (present in the fact that it is Ramadan with the prayers at the mosque, in a marked complicity and solidarity with the ‘saviour’). In the face of, and also against, just like the two men who closely confront one another: another religion, or rather, and more strangely, an a-religion – an a-religion that defines itself in closely similar terms to the Christian one (‘I am the guardian of your flock, commander’, the cross of the legionnaires’ cemetery). This a-religion is made up of a body of observances closed upon itself, referring only to itself, and in this it is similar to the corps of underemployed legionnaires on the fringes of the desert, on the fringes of the South, on the fringes of misery, on the fringes of possible conflicts, suspended between idleness and guard duty, preoccupied with its appearance: body, clothing, virile gestures of combat simulated in an empty building. It is this order that the ‘saviour’ troubles (‘a guy who had nothing to do with us’), says his enemy, who also acts as the narrator.

But this order of a-religion: what is it after all, to what does it refer after all, other than the film itself, its image, the process of its filming? At least it is at this point that I risk an interpretation of this film which calls so ostentatiously for the interpretation of the secret that it reveals. The secret it reveals is also the secret of the important transformations made to Melville’s story: transformations that go far beyond the rationales of an ‘adaptation’, that divert the topic fundamentally whilst remaining secret, beginning by this title which does not say where it comes from and where it leads.

This interpretation, amongst other possible ones, would start precisely with the title. ‘Beau travail’ substituted for the name of a character means that it is not the story of that character that is at stake. It is the film itself that is: here is good work. Consequently, it is a work on beauty: body, light, appearance, harmony, majesty, stark rhythm of editing, which holds the narrative at bay, in favour of an ostentation of the image through which the camera signals or signs itself. Image signifies itself from the opening images of the film (the insignia of the Legion in extreme close-up on a wall). Image signifies itself in its prestige, in its power, to the extent that it proposes a cult

of itself to the point of turning the film into a kind of an icon of the image and of cinema: an icon in the strong sense of the term – in other words an image which in itself gives birth to the image it represents. Everything in the film indicates something of a non-representational, non-figurative affirmation of the image: the power, the intensity, the fire even of a self-presentation. (One can add to this the pattern according to which the sexes are divided upon this stage entirely peopled by unusually virile men, traversed by homosexual allusion, and where the few women are situated on the side of rest, of relaxation or of compassion for the lost saviour.)

Melville's tale can be read as the parable of an art which would be the substitute for redemption in a world without redemption: the torment of the 'handsome sailor' subjected to a terrible but necessary law of the world opens up on its own history and its own poetry. Denis's film can be understood as a sustained, nervous inquiry into what could be called Melville's religion (and which holds true for any kind of religion or mystique of art). Can beauty save itself? Should it not, rather, save itself from itself? What is an absolute order of self-presentation, a form which finds completion in its representation of itself?

I have heard it said that there is in this film an 'unbearable literalness'. In fact, it is the literalness of hieratic and hierarchical ordering in the proper sense of both terms: sacred power, the sacrality of power and the power of the sacred making up a full, autonomous and exclusive order, representing for itself the immanence of its own transcendence, appropriating it in its self-image. It is none other than fascism as fascination of auto-sacrality and of auto-figuration. (This does not mean that Claire Denis reduces the Legion to that category; the internal complexity of the film shows it sufficiently.) But the use of the term 'fascism' can lead astray if I do not take the time here for the digressions it necessitates. I will only say that the 'unbearable literalness' of the film is that of an image, an art, a beauty which is worried for itself, which is worried precisely by what one might mistake for self-satisfaction. 'Beau travail, handsomely done'; can a work of beauty be a fine mess? But without beauty can we even begin to pose the question? Or, also, if art finds itself in charge of something which is none other than the escheating of the theologico-political order, what does 'art' then mean? To the fascinating and perverse sufficiency of an 'a-religion', what affirmation can we oppose; what atheist art which would neither be closed on itself, nor submitted to injunctions of meaning? The astonishing strength of this philosophical film – the strength of its work – is to produce no less

than such questions: and its *beauty* is that of such *work* (or indeed the opposite).

References

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