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Eye Am a Camera: Murat Nemet-Nejat's Later Writings

Reading Murat Nemet-Nejat's most recent book of poems, *Io's Song* (2019), I've found myself being pulled back in time to another book of his—not poetry but criticism, and it now tells me something about all of his later poetry, particularly its significance to an avant garde that can morph and migrate while sometimes unaware of any artistic or intellectual paradigm shifts in the greater society at large. *The Peripheral Space of Photography* was released in 2003; it seems to have been the start of a new, sustained meditation in Nemet-Nejat's life. Actually, the manuscript for the book was completed a decade earlier. In any case, I think it's become the matrix of his poems since then—that is, since the early nineties when his larger project, of which *Io's Song* is the latest public record, *The Structure of Escape*, was gotten underway.

Not yet completed, this project planned to consist of seven volumes, it's substantial enough at this point to warrant wider consideration—beyond any one poem or book of his that's been published in the last, say, twenty years. The entirety of his later life as an artist and thinker does present itself in *The Structure of Escape*—so, now, I want to offer a way into it through his informed, intuitively insightful grasp of photography, as well as cinema, in *The Peripheral Space of Photography*, because doing so allows me to fill in a picture (pardon the pun) of his *oeuvre* or at least of his later work.

What has most preoccupied Nemet-Nejat in these past decades is resolved in *The Structure of Escape* (*Io's Song* the latest installment). This has been a long journey, with the poems comprising his magnum opus starting to come into view thirty years ago. With them, as his treatise on the photograph delineates, certain generative questions began to come forward.

Does one “escape” beyond a “periphery” to where some truth may reside? Let's imagine the photograph is not a lie; then is “escape” the truth of our condition? Is that when we're most, or at

all, authentic, let's say—when in flight, as contrasted with being grounded, at rest, composed?

Another set of related questions might go like this: Is escape into, or from, the truth of the photograph made by possible by its periphery? Normally, *to escape* might imply *crossing beyond a periphery*. So would the truth of the photograph, as is perhaps implied in the title of Nemet-Nejat's study, have to do with some relationship between what is *actually* to be seen in the photo, let's say, and/or what might lie beyond the border of it—that which, in its unknown state, could perhaps have made possible the context of the picture taken? Is the photo *per se*, in other words that which is visible, the *structure* of the photo's truth, a truth that, even so, might take us outside the visual frame?

I find the *The Structure of Escape* to be of a piece—ideologically, ideationally, and aesthetically—with *The Peripheral Space of Photography*. Moreover, I read how portions of the earlier book have been brought forward, transmogrified, as “poetry” held between the covers of, let's call it, an imagined, multi-volumed, grand structure. Just as a finished building comes into view before it's fully constructed, so too has *The Structure of Escape*. Three books are in print—*The Spiritual Life of Replicants* (2011), *Animals of Dawn* (2016), and *Io's Song* (2019)—along with smatterings of what will become other volumes, they having appeared to date in journals.

These portions of the greater design specifically hearken back to earlier thinking about the still photo, and about cinema too. It would be nearly another decade since *The Peripheral Space of Photography* was published, in 2003, before *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* (2011) was released, the book of poems making plain its affinity with the photography study.

I find no use of the term *periphery* or any of its forms (e.g., *peripheral*) in the three books of poems already published, which are portions of *The Structure of Escape*. However, the poetry in them gravitates toward questions of the liminal, threshold, as well as transformation, or a return to the apprehending of an unfolding process—that is to say, the perception of time. This complex is orchestrated in many ways in these books. Consider, for instance, a compacted poem such as “*See d*”—which makes me realize that the charm of this pun, for that matter of any pun, is the very morphing of what's in play:

Seen is an escape
from *see d*
eye is a procreation
to be *see d* is to stir seed and be fucked

to be the subject
to the eye—is to be desired
I am *see d* by you
[etc.]
(*Io's Song*)

One's vision is wrapped up in a welter of impressions that occur, the poet seems to sense, in a duration of time. (Does *time* imply no periphery?)

The peripheral finds a home in *The Structure of Escape*. In offering a view of the constructed scene from outside the frame, we might sense the photographer's—as well as the poet's—mind. Does the photographer simply work semiconsciously, intuitively? “What is most relevant in a photograph,” Nemet-Nejat maintains in *The Peripheral Space of Photography*, “is not what the photographer focuses on, but what he or she ignores.” The photograph as work of art, in other words the intentional photograph, let's assume, ultimately “is so conscious and proud of its formal design, [yet] so unconscious of its mortality, that it leaves me disappointed.”

Does “escape” necessitate the dissolution of periphery? Design, one might think, the composed photograph, should foreclose on *escape*. It must. The genesis for *The Structure of Escape*, taking the poems principally in these three groupings as some larger gestalt, is art's heroic failure within the limits of history, which, for Nemet-Nejat, is inflected by the tenuousness of memory. He spent his formative childhood in Istanbul. He never forgets, while, of course, as is human, he continuously, consciously as well as unconsciously, recalls. The poems are compelled and suffused by memory of both his recent and distant past. This process of living as well as making poetry, of remembering, this way of life, is something he's aware of, and it's something, furthermore, he relies upon in his writing. *Escape* becomes the perfect way to view his quite human circumstance.

Does Odysseus really mean to return from Troy, to the end point in his journey? The periphery is how I should think of Husserl's phenomenology, as well as about these poems that strike me as akin to both the world's appearing and how, especially the photograph, and cinema, render the real for us in their appearances. Now well beyond Modernism, the phenomenal as concept for navigating experience seems, such as that conceptualization, inescapable.

Nemet-Nejat plays with the question of mirroring in a poem, from *The Structure of Escape*, which he titles “in the arms of the eternal—Odysseus”:

departure
in the concave mirror
arrival return

in the mirror
departure
in the mirror
arrival
[etc.]

In thinking of Nemet-Nejat's later work, my appreciation of it, along with Husserl's legacy, and the thinking and legacy of Don Ihde, a still-living philosopher, come to mind. Ihde's book, *Bodies in Technology* (2002), which is contemporaneous with Nemet-Nejat's *Peripheral Space*, seems to operate under an archetype shared with Husserl.

So much of *The Structure of Escape*'s concerns are held by memory, not always obviously to the reader right off, and yet *escape*, itself implying transition, the epistemology of it unfolds through the implicit metaphor of the still photo. We may wonder if this is "mere" metaphor in his grand poem. In a poem Nemet-Nejat titles "Mortal Proof" he writes: "A machine, image, if complex enough, will inevitably ask the question, am I mortal, or what *will* happen after I cease to exist" (*The Spiritual Life of Replicants*). Ihde finds an "irony" in how we live with our technologies today. We have made instruments, he says, which "can more clearly, more precisely, and more profoundly deliver data/images"—such that, to a degree they set us apart from the rest of our history, they intervene and subvert what we might wish to call *reality*: "the better the data/image," Ihde quips, "the more constructed it has been." Hence the more constructed we are.

In "Rocks 'n Breaks of the Heart" Nemet-Nejat exclaims, "oh the difference of knowing that what is merely visible is woven / into what is longed for" (*Io's Song*). The *periphery*, the longing, is not only where he operates; it's the exquisite insignia of his and our knowing. "The soul, the mechanical eye we are born with, [is] stealing the body to tell its dream." This is why he writes the poem he titles "Limbo" (*The Spiritual Life of Replicants*)—which is the place where, in earnest, he actually wishes to be. His struggle is to get there and maintain its ground.

Nemet-Nejat's opus is postmodern in its poetics, derived from the quintessentially Modernist photo. (The emergence of the modern photograph anticipates, counterintuitively, that of

Impressionist painting giving rise to all of Modernist art, which in turn leads directly into postmodernism.) There's a fundamental tension in his later poetry. We're meant to realize that his lyrics' speaker is caught in this tension. We perceive it and so are enabled to see beyond it. The intention involves inherent order. He perceives a world in which there's supposed to be such an order, as if the world made sense; however, it never quite does. Some of the poems are cerebral forays into logical thickets such as this one.

On the other hand, taken whole there's a grand lyricism also possible in this later work. His lyric poem, the other pole in the tension, is necessarily ignorant of any logical conundrum—which is to say that his lyrics contain a purity made possible only because they face what must be addressed, the logical inconsistencies, and yet they reach beyond the precinct of reason. They're completely existential, which is to say they're completely human in their condition that ultimately has to do with fate.

Regardless of what seems to be his indulgence in conundra, at bottom he owes allegiance to sheer beauty whose worship is the hidden portal to possible escape. An escape, like his personal lineage, is a retrieval. In "Eda and Cinema," a note placed at the back of *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*, he explains his poetry as rooted in the Turkish Eda form. "Eda is a poetics of Sufism," he points out, which "is rooted in the structure of the Turkish language," a language in which "thought [is] a linguistic tissue" that for him is unachievable in English since it lacks, in comparison with Turkish, a syntactical flexibility. But of course he's writing in English. Owing much to the Eda form, his lyricism is colored by his own history that goes back to a Jewish Iran, then moves forward in time with migration, or sheer escape, to Istanbul, and then to America.

Beauty, like love with which it's aligned in some of his lyrical utterances, cannot exist in a world that makes sense if what we mean by *sense* is governed by a language such as English. In "The Idea of a Book," an essay he appends to his 2004 anthology, *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry*, he offers an explanation for how his future work, *The Structure of Escape*, still to be fully conceived and written, with its gatherings of seemingly unlike poems (as well artworks—i.e., word art including his ink abstractions that create some larger, partially subliminal, impression), will take shape: "The underlying syntactical principle is not logic, but emphasis: a movement of the speaker's or writer's affections. Thinking, speaking in Turkish is . . . a record of thought emerging. . . . Eda is the play of ideas through the body of Turkish."

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In the later note, at the rear of *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*, he maintains that “[t]he ‘I’ experiencing phenomena and phenomena themselves disappear and unite in an animistic synthesis.” Like the camera, then, this “‘I’ becomes the ‘eye’ merging with it in an open-minded weave of language.”

Nemet-Nejat cannot let go of the allure of explanation—rather, the books are collages comprised of didactic statement, a form of concrete poetry, and lyric—and so his reader is taken from one thing to another, from ardor and song to quest for an answer to, resolution of, one or another apparent contradiction. Sometimes, with charming humor, we get a poem that doesn’t fall neatly into any of these three modes of writing, such as “The Parakeet Record to Teach It How to Talk”:

“Go down... Go down... To slepp...” “No that’s the flip side. Here now...” Twit, wit wit wit. Twit. Twit. Wit. Twit, twit, twit. Wit, wit. “I’m a parrakeet. Good morning. Good morning.” Twit. Wit. Wit. Wit. “I’m a parrakeet. Good morning. Good evening. Good evening.”

Now we are going to say a Ffew Words:

*Good morning Good morning
Good morning Good morning*

Now let’s hear the parrakeet doo it:

*Good morning Good morning
Good morning Good morning*

Now let’s hear your parrakeet do it:

Good morning
Good morning

“Say it you lousy parrakeet.” (Good morning) “Say it or I’ll wring your neck.”
[etc.] (*The Spiritual Life of Replicants*)

But poem does fit with other, included, thought-problem excursions. Some of them are koan-like constructions that attempt a poetic synthesis—and they are that. Yet for me they lack the fineness of either his love plaints or sheerly visual arrangements that transport the reader out of the tug-of-war between mind and heart, let’s say, by simply transcending spoken language. Even so, his “koans” do something to this effect, albeit for me not as magically. They have their singular power, as in “Auguries of Contradictions” (which happens to be on the page facing the aforementioned “Limbo,” in *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*):

how can a thought *that* does not exist not exist, *can not exist*, responding to a question?

If not exist, where's the question *provoking* it then...

The eye must *hear* its contradictions and see through itself—in an act of freedom.

As the parrot in my room talks to me, affectionless
and vast.

Questions and answers are mirrors reflecting each other's emptiness
where the eye travels.

He assails the world's inconsistencies, and fails. The failure is that kind of heroism that's memorable in its refusal to abandon a belief in the world. When, in these books, the pendulum swings to the other extreme, one of Nemet-Nejat's pure lyrics, we know the poem's poignance in the disappointment that's the source of the created world's completely irrational gorgeousness. Here, for instance, is the mellifluous start of "Billet-Doux" that, like the rest of *Animals of Dawn* in which it appears, is a writing-through of *Hamlet*, in this instance, presumably, to evoke Polonius:

"Billet-Doux"

"Ay, springes to catch woodcocks I do know."

Gem incarnate you are my beloved
As you walk, darling, you get more gem-like
That crystal neck, that ruddy cheek of yours
As I love, sweetheart, you get more doe-like

Unending tears after you, have I not always shed
[etc.]

And here's an evocative bit of writing-through from a Turkish poem by Sami Baydar:

Swans

"Spinning within the span of a swan"

Swan milk in the bosom of the lake
withdrawn into the depth of the sky
flowing on earth

its history is upended
like Narcissus.

swan short of hands and legs
sensitive to water
its crimson eyes water's song
the lake doesn't fill, fast, let's cry, let's cry
swan
swan

the souls weeping in purple smoke
and being severed with silver wires maybe
are swans blood
that spill out through willow's reeds
[etc.]

In *The Structure of Escape* some elements in one book return in others, such as the “plop” of a frog in a pond in “IV. The Disappearance of Time,” and later in his poetic deconstruction of *Hamlet* that makes up *Animals of Dawn*. Here's what may be a key line, from this poem:

the real escape occurs twice, being born and dying

The line floats on the page by itself, so, in a sense, constituting its own stanza. From this same book:

Desire is a tautology.

Desire always transcends the body's ability to meet it.

That's why it is called desire.

Therefore, words *are* words.

*(while desire, for the moment, bobs in rest.
In this cave of Aelos we love each other.)*

