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## **St Ghetto of the Loans: Or, the Persistence of the Avant-Garde**

Epigraph:

Throughout my life, I've had no other goal than to be an extremist, at that battlefield which alarm clocks suggest even as they lure us into the traps of life.  
—Gabriel Pomerand, Introduction, *Saint Ghetto of the Loans: Grimoire*. Michael Kasper & Bhamati Viswanathan

Can one be Chaplinesque after Auschwitz? Can foam ride an abyss? How long can such an effervescence persist – and once apparently extinguished, how might it uncannily revive? To consider these questions is to consider the strange persistence of the avant-garde in its plural guises – flaring to life at particular sets of historical, political and geographic coordinates; casting a vision-altering light along with its gaseous, insalubrious propositions; winking out of view on the next gust; only to wink back to life with unlikely aptness at some improbably new set of coordinates. Such is the case with Lettrist Gabriel Pomerand's *Saint Ghetto of the Loans: Grimoire*, which has winked back to life here on Planet Flood-n-Fire some seventy-five years after its first publication in Paris in 1950 as *Saint ghetto des prêtres: grimoire*. The “ghetto” in question is St-Germain-des-Prés, rife with artists, celebrities, emigrees, sex-workers, thieves. Pomerand's *Saint Ghetto* captures this riotous community riding the wake of annihilative violence via punning verbo-visual rebuses jostling with the French verses they supposedly translate. The resulting sequence is as vividly veering as the fortunes of its subjects. Pomerand's tone is at once gleefully ribald, sending up Left Bank personalities and peccadillos, and ambivalently apocalyptic, casting his eyes to an impending heaven, as thick with stars as drowners in the Seine.

Like all avant-gardes, Pomerand's Lettrism is animated by contradictions: serious and farcical, fond and vicious, legible and literally encrypted. Fittingly, the newly released bilingual edition of *Saint Ghetto* manages to be both compact and abundant, unleashing the rambunctious precision of Lettrism itself into our asphyxiate era. A previous, fleeting visitation of *Saint Ghetto* to the Anglophone faithful may be found in Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* (1989), which construes the 20th c. phenomenon of teens-in-revolt as

moving from the Dadaists through the Lettrists to the Situationists to punk. The current “amplified edition” from World Poetry Books is the latest entry in an occult/angelic relay from the original French edition of 400 copies to Marcus’s reprint of a single spread to a complete 2006 edition by Ugly Duckling Presse (title #1 in their Lost Literature Series). The present edition is the work of the same translators augmented by a fuller apparatus and an inviting design that I suspect owes much to the vision of Matvei Yankelevich, now editor at World Poetry Books, a founder of Ugly Duckling. Such cunning and dedication typifies the resourcefulness-amid-precarity of avant-garde print culture, and further indicates its persistence. *Pace* Ginsberg, all these books are published in Heaven.

The current volume features Pomerand’s hand-drawn rebuses or “metagraphics,” accompanied by Pomerand’s “original” French verses they claim to translate, as well as English translations by Michael Kasper and Bhamati Viswanathan – alongside contemporaneous prefaces, timelines, pen-portraits, glossaries and translators’ notes. From this apparatus may be derived the following: Born in 1925, Pomerand survived the early death of his father, a schoolboy stint in the Resistance and the deportation of his mother to Auschwitz (this latter claim according to the sound poet and concretist Jacques Donguy) to wash up, starving yet sustained by a salubrious diet of Lautréamont and Rimbaud, in Paris in 1945. There, at a soup kitchen for Jewish orphans, he met Isadore Isou née Goldstein; the two would join in and help to catalyze the frenzy of familiarly modernist activities then erupting in the Left Bank: nightclubbing, gossiping, sound-poetry-ing, painting, writing, filmmaking, dramatizing, expounding, philosophizing and launching movements. Isou and Pomerand’s specific contribution would be Lettrism, an omni-medial re-configuration of culture which required first and foremost the re-invention of language along its sonic and visual axes. *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* would be Lettrism’s most achieved embodiment – aside from the Situationists International, its successor movement. Per *Lipstick Traces*, Debord and his teen comrades were at first enthralled by the (slightly older) Lettrists’ hands-on renovations of urban space, media, and the sign. The split that would eventually lead to the founding of the Situationists would fall along the usual avant-garde lines – competing claims viz. youth, revolt, and Chaplin.

*Saint Ghetto*, however, captures Lettrism at its most effervescent. “Were the new egyptians,” Pomerand expounds in his 1950 introduction, with the typical assurance of modernists and twenty-five-year-olds.

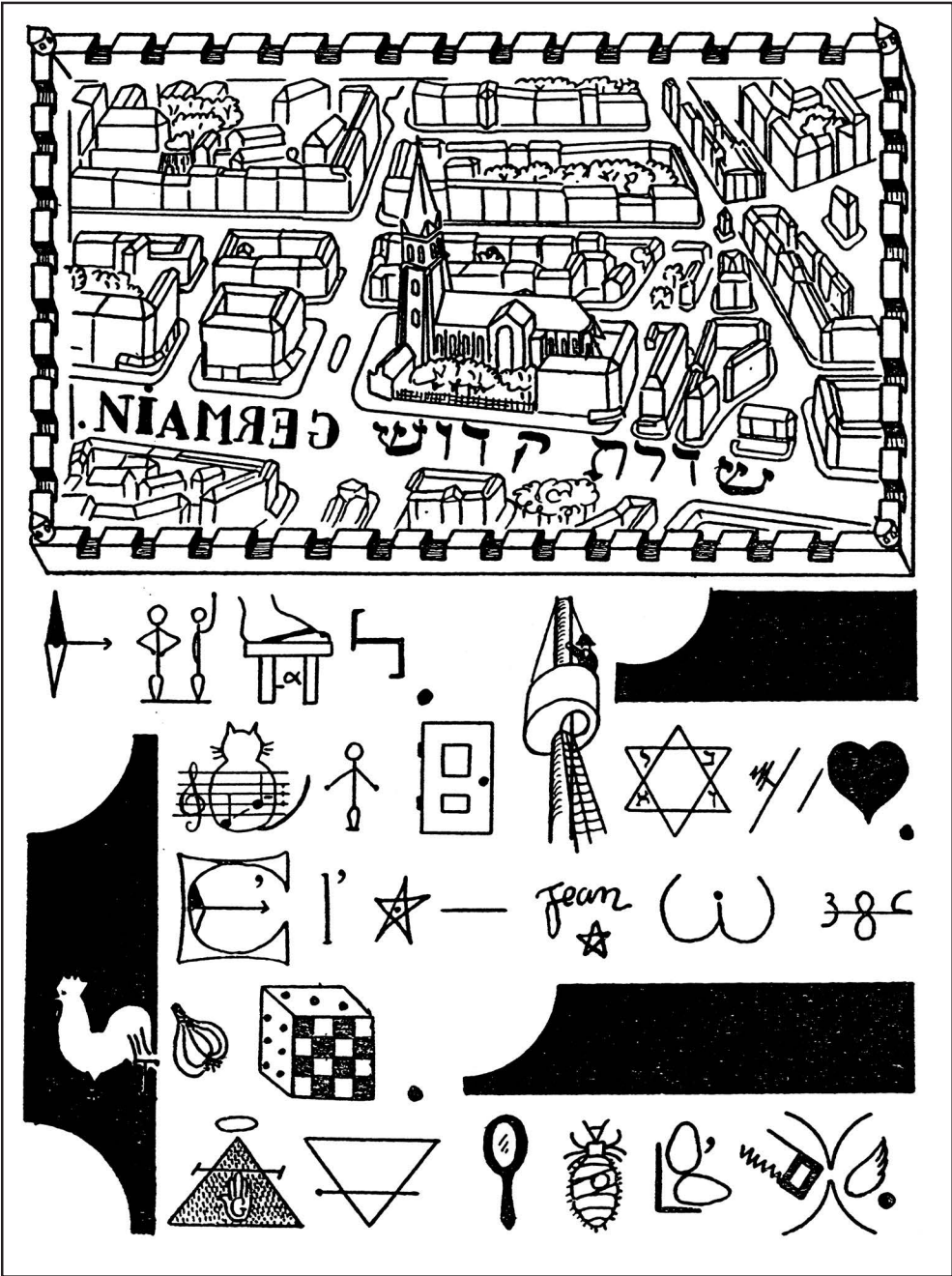


Image credit: Gabriel Pomerand © World Poetry Books, 2023

“Everywhere, people are building pyramids.” What interests Pomerand (and Isou) about the ancient Egyptians would seem to be their hieroglyphic method of inscription: “I’d like to build, instead of temples, a temple-writing.” To create what he would call “metagraphics,” Pomerand gives an account of himself as “leafing through old magic manuals and luxurious incunables” in search of “a system of intrinsic figuration” that would move literature “closer to what matters, to the stockpile of vital forces within its signs.” For all the slapstick broadness that the work which follows partly entails, Pomerand’s introduction pre-emptively claims for himself a priestly dedication, focus, elegance, and even obscurity.

But pyramids, of course, are both houses of the dead and an attempt by the powerful to write their own life stories in advance of their deaths, a simultaneously prophetic and retrospective writing, a clashing of temporalities which proposes a third, uncanny interim. It is this insectoidal interim, constantly perishing and reviving, that *Saint Ghetto* occupies and which seems, to me, to be the signature of the avant-garde across its many periods and guises, as best embodied by its habitual emission, the manifesto. Indeed, in its opening lines, the 1942 Lettrist Manifesto itself opens by making claims on a vivid, endangered interval of energy and extinguishment which will survive its signatories through the luciferine logic of contradiction “The flourishing of bursts of energy dies beyond us. / All delirium is expansive.”

As with avant-gardes, the pyramids and temples of the ancients are both engineering masterpieces and icons of exploitation, futility and loss, subject to re-contextualizations that could not have been predicted by the powerful who built them or their temple priests. A recent example from our own time would be the Temple of Dendur, imperiled by the building of the Aswan Dam in 1967, saved by UNESCO fiat, disassembled, subjected to a bidding war, then re-assembled at the Met in New York inside a special pavilion meant to mimic the climate of Egypt (but which climate – when?). The wing housing this temple was later named for the Sackler family, donor-class drug magnates whose name was then taken down when the strafings of the opiate epidemic could no longer be ignored in the metropolis. Pharaohs all the way down.

Such catastrophes and reversals would not have been unimaginable to Pomerand and his comrades; murder, flight, precarity, endangerment were the defining experience of their young lives. Re-read at a distance of seven decades, the glittering brio of Pomerand’s introduction rides a riptide of pain: “From nothingness, I’ve dug out each of the signs that make up this work, like

one obliged to invent wisdom." Far from pharaonic, Lettrists, their confreres and rivals were starting from zero – or wished to do so. The verb "wish" is achingly apparent in this introduction: "I wish my mind could steer clear of its certifiable miseries," Pomerand says, before swerving Rimbaudianly to "I wish to dress splendidly." Unexpectedly the language of the temple reappears in a minor mode, not, this time, to dress Pomerand as a priest in opulent robes, but to show himself as one interred: "Buried in the temple it builds for itself, my mind marches around in impervious armor, a great *de-braining device*."

The intensity and self-violence of the "de-braining device" gives rise to many resonances – at once the hammer-blow to the cow's skull at the slaughterhouse, the bone-saw of the pathologist autopsying the dead, the excerebration that preceded mummification. More Rimbaudianly, perhaps, to be de-brained is to be liberated from rationalism in order to access a more eternal instinct, or, more pensively, to render the mind impervious to the brain's traumatic memory-regime. At any rate, the de-braining device delivers an all-purpose dérèglement: "I want to work the miracle that is precisely the act whereby one comes to *no longer believe one's own eyes*."

Like the slit eye that inaugurates the new cinematic vision of *Un Chien Andalou*, Saint Ghetto requires readers to use their eyes to move beyond familiar modes of sight. Pomerand's work outbounds any one method of reading, even as each spread hosts a flood-tide of visual imagery, in both the verses and the teeming metagraphics. The translator's note confides that the confection of Pomerand's metagraphic style had as much to do with the invention of the ballpoint pen as with arcane research, and that seems confirmed by the ludic freedom of his style. The right side of each spread features a compressed rectangle busy with visual information – part rebus, part chutes-and-ladders gameboard, part engineering diagram, part winking, hand-drawn cabaret advertisement. Easily recognized symbols such as hearts, angel wings, and talismanically-inscribed Stars of David ride alongside cartoon-ish renderings of body parts, animals, buildings, common objects. Mathematic and alchemical formulae circulate alongside bits of French, English, Arabic, Greek and Hebrew, some signs halved to accommodate others. Still other symbols seem specially invented by Pomerand and used over and over, chief among these being a schoolboy's doodle of linked halfloops which seems to represent at once breasts and buttocks.

While the variety is zany, the arrangement is purposeful; all the graphics take part in a kind of delirious jittery transit from top to bottom, left

to right or vice versa, depending on the spread and guided by channels and arrows in the work itself. This circuitry or flow feels electrified, incandescent, haywire, and, inevitably, jazzy. The page entails a dynamic, ever-ramifying psychic map of the “Ghetto,” at once self-excavating and self-erectating.

Along these lines, Kasper and Viswanathan have, unusually, chosen to emphasize the visual in their English translations; that is, their English verses correspond to Pomerand’s French with almost diagrammatic visual precision, with each proper name, line- and page-break in the block of English text lining up with the French below it. In this way, the English visually dissolves into Pomerand’s French, and then into the whirl-a-gig energy of the metagraphics; in this madcap circuit, each sign is converted, inverted and returned with a turn of the page to be converted and inverted again.

The solubility of the English is answered by a puckish dynamism in Pomerand’s use of Hebrew in his rebuses. Across the sequence, Pomerand, who referred to himself as the “cantor of Lettrism,” activates Hebrew for its sonic effects, adding or subtracting Hebrew letters to homophonically approximate French words, or denaturing and reassembling Hebrew words to achieve a Marinetti-like onomatopoesis, or, in another mood entirely, inscribing it to talismanic effect.

But the most arresting icon of *Saint Ghetto* is not a visual symbol at all but the word “Ghetto” itself, which Pomerand’s title figuratively salt-pastes over the name of the baroque church which gives the quarter its name. However tongue-in-cheek, Pomerand’s insistent use of the term “ghetto” both evokes and inverts its most recent and lethal usage – from a designation of carceration, concentration and liquidation to one of elevation, protection, celebration. Like a quantum switch, this inversion inaugurates and makes possible the work itself. As *Saint Ghetto* opens,

*St germain des prés is a ghetto.  
All there wear yellow stars on their hearts.  
It’s Cocteau’s star, which is a cocktail of stars.  
St germain des prés holds a mirror to heaven.*

St germain des prés est un ghetto.  
Chacun y porte une étoile jaune sur le coeur.  
C’est l’étoile de Cocteau qui est un cocktail d’étoiles.  
Saint germain des prés est un miroir pour le ciel.

The puns and homophones that swarm these lines entail a reorientation of values and space. The orderly progression of this vertical stack of statements is undone by the sonic similarities and puns, which start to cross the wires of the separate lines – such as the word for yellow, “jaune,” in which Cocteau’s first name (Jean) hides in the poem’s second line, or the mirrored phrases in the third line of the French which replace “Cocteau” with the Yankee word “cocktail.” As the puns fizz around the lines, meaning is unexpectedly reassigned and emptied out like a cocktail glass, and what is high and what is low begins to drunkenly switch places. The result is a proliferation of stars, a proliferation of Jews, an association of Jews with stars and art and a ghetto as a glamorous mirror of heaven – not (yet) an afterlife, but an arlife, a nightlife.

Cocteau himself has a triple role to play in this sequence. He is the exemplary art-star fluorescing with gossip, drawings, decor, costumery, novels, and movies, literally and figuratively funding the activities of his fellow artists; his name provides a wealth of visual and sonic puns that circulate in the sequence; and the flexibility of his hand-drawn line seems to flow directly into Pomerand’s. Across the gutter (but looking at the stars), the bold yet compact molecule of this quatrain is released into the visual energy of the first hand-drawn rebus in the book. In a map at the top of the page, the familiar diagonal of the Boulevard St Germain has been dubbed over with a French- Hebrew mashup, “Germain” appearing in mirror-writing, the Hebrew word-order altered to accommodate the French. Contact, it would seem, produces change, motion and energy. Across the booklength sequence, doors swing open, odd bedfellows touch, the Gallic rooster (coq) inserts itself everywhere, both sonically and visually; cocks are as numerous as stars in this omnilingual cocktail de Cocteau.

But lest things get too celestial, the verses also grow increasingly bawdy, with celebrities like Vian, Camus, Sartre riding a wave-form of elevation and profanation, along with anonymous Yankees, rich emigrees, virgins, crooks, and passersby. The usual crude stereotypes of gender and race are mobilized, yet, unexpectedly, in this circuit of reversals, the less-powerful parties assume the more dignified positions – the redskins wear war medals,” while “a Black is a White who does not rape.” In this close quartier, the specter of rape is constant, and yet averted; the would-be satyrs of Paris cannot achieve their lustful ends “for were a generation whose men, having stood erect too often in the recent war, have lately drooped.”

In keeping with the logics of inversion and deflation, the tone of the poem inverts from its opening pages to its last, and the poem's last third sees the mood of a starry, tipsy haven entirely capsize. "Everyone's corruptible, but not my neighborhood," this final motion fondly begins, "My neighborhood, a ring on the finger of Paris. / My starry neighborhood, why didn't they build the Arc de Triomphe / on your spine?" This uncertain tone, between praise and sneer, ignites pages later: "This neighborhood ought to be torn up like Marseilles' streets of ill repute during the German occupation."

*We must hang these poets who rule here like monarchs [...]*

*We must plug all the holes in the neighborhood.*

*Holes of the spirit, holes of the cellars and the rats, saxophone holes, hooker holes, and the fake holes of virgins, and holes in the immense sky, itself a terrifying bullet hole, through which all that hemorrhages from this neighborhood ran in a single night.*

In keeping with this vision of liquidation, in which fond litany becomes a kill list and yellow stars are replaced with bullet holes as the neighborhood's habitués are annihilated, the visual logic of the rebuses also flips from a conventional scrawl of black figures on a white background to white figures on black. The effect is one of lightning – or gunfire – convulsing the night. The poem's final page finds Pomerand entirely desolated:

*You see, there's no one left, no one, but me, down on my luck, all alone like a dog howling at death in the solitude of an empty desert.*

The accompanying rebus shows the poet's signature, and of course, his signature insignia, a cartoon phallus, in a cemetery-like field of crosses and Stars of David. It is the sequence's most legible page.

What does it mean to erect a St Ghetto of the Loans, a Jewish-coded, art-starred heaven on earth, to fondly fill it with one's heroes, comrades, lovers, and rivals, to celebrate and lambast its cheerfully venial energies – and then to stage its liquidation? What does it mean for a French Jew who has narrowly escaped murder both to build and eradicate his own dreamscape in this way – attentively, painstakingly, in verse and in drawing, transferred to linotype and zinc plate and published in an edition of 400? One could call upon any number of frameworks to explain this gesture: psychological frameworks, like traumatic repetition, grief, fear (the safest place, perhaps, is not a ghetto but a grave) – or literary-historical frameworks, such as



modernist maximalism (what's more maximalist than apocalypse?) – or rhetorical frameworks, such as irony – but how big would this irony have to be to sustain the anti-sublime thunderbolts of ecstatic abnegation which produce and are produced by these pages? For this book did in fact clap shut for most of a century, and now its self-lighting, extremophilic eye once again snaps open at this most fetid of moments – the bottommost vent of our overheated, combusting, plastic-heaving planet. Such ironies go beyond what can be accounted for in a schoolbook rhetorical device. Such ironies stretch as large as the book of the cosmos itself, with its cascading, agonistic and palimpsested creations-- that of Genesis, or the Big Bang, or just any star nursery, or just any gold neutrino speeding for its smashup beneath a mountain in Switzerland, or just any old hole – *holes of the cellars and the rats, saxophone holes, hooker holes*-- in spasm, in collapse, strafing the universe with its exilic, permanent photons, its clutch of avant-gardes.

NOTE:

For my take on Pomerand's use of Hebrew, I consulted poet and translator Adriana X. Jacobs and have relied upon her insights.