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Therapy of Flesh

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NETSUKE

Rikki Ducornet

Coffee House Press

<http://www.coffeehousepress.org>

128 pages; paper, \$14.95

Netsuke is the story of a deranged therapist who runs a two-pronged private practice, the legitimate side actually serving as a cover for a kind of Sadeian laboratory, where what's practiced is an "embodied science," that is, a zone where clients, "creatures of darkness," as the therapist describes them, are manipulated into transgressive sexuality, fulfilling his prurient wishes. A collector of netsuke, miniature sculptures invented in seventeenth-century Japan, the therapist pushes his clients around, and everyone else, for that matter, as if they were, like his sculptures, things with which to amuse himself, things to ogle, to fondle, to toy with, things to stuff back into his cabinet of improprieties once he's done using them as, to paraphrase Angela Carter, probes and fringed holes.

Netsuke castigates a life, and perhaps our society as a whole, in which Eros has gone awry.

Exhausted and corrupt, suffering from ennui, he has a firm epistemic distrust, giving way to rank self-indulgence: "As important as ideas are, nothing serves the self better than the flesh." According to the therapist, it's the clients who are to blame for his doubts:

It is possible that, if I have lost patience with ideas and with the vehicle that conveys them from our teeth and tongue and out into the air, it is because so many of my clients don't know how to think. Inevitably, they confuse apples with oranges. Because their parents confused love with hate, they have never learned how to listen to the inner logic of the flesh. Their lifesaving *intuitive* capacities must be uncovered, honed, and spurred.

But like Humbert Humbert, and the narrator of A.M. Homes's *The End of Alice* (1996), he's a liar, one whose "lies are boundless," one who "lies as he breathes, by necessity"—a man who will cross every boundary, professional and otherwise, to force his clients to surrender to this grossly corporeal "inner logic." He's gripped within what Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) called "unreason transformed into delirium of the heart, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite." The therapist is on a rampage:

I was bred to anger, born and bred to rage. I eat away at the ripe flesh of things like a wasp eats away at the body of a fig, leaving it to rot. The longing for, the hatred for all the lands of milk and honey—those recurrent vipers rising up to sting me on the neck.

Blinded by his raging insatiable desire—he's a man who sometimes gets hard "just saying the word

'woman' aloud," who cannot, at one point, even look at a certain woman "without imagining plowing into her"—he forces a number of triangulations, which usually involve himself; his wife, Akiko; and an odd assortment of lovers, including a suicidal woman the doctor calls "The Cutter"; a man named David, who "transforms" into a woman named Jello; and another woman, Lucy: "Neurotic, cummy, self-aggrandizing, a braggart."

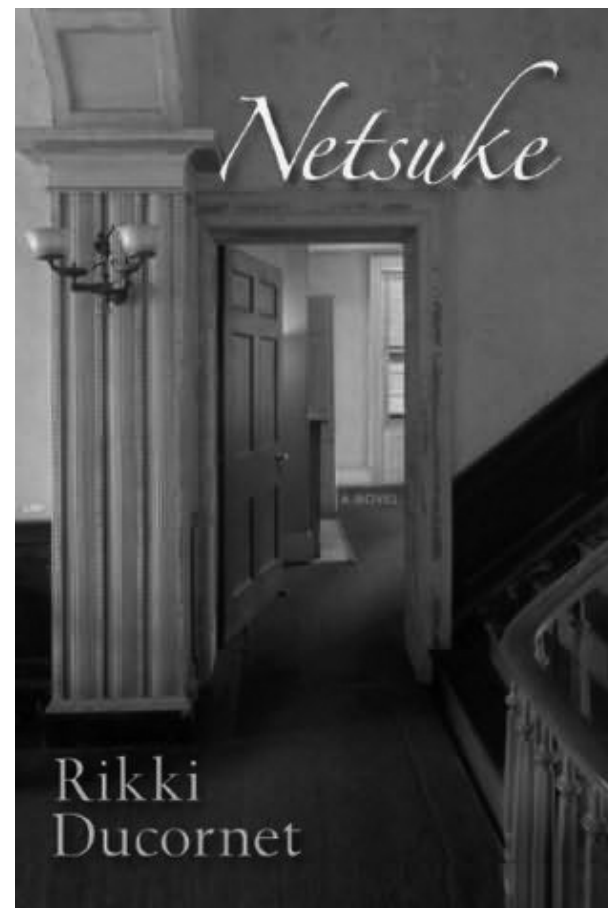
At the outset of the novel, which subtly oscillates between third- and first-person narration, we're privy to the randy anti-hero's priapic observations about a seemingly innocuous activity: jogging, an act which is really marked by its eros, since "one is running toward the future, the next encounter." Here he undergoes a "metamorphosis," changing from a man to a loping wolf, and then into a centaur—the woman he jogs past his nymph—he subsequently becoming "Neptune in a sea of foam," only to finally recognize himself as an "old Prince of Darkness." Later, a "scowling" Kali, or rather a statue of her, appears, "showing her teeth," seemingly condemning the adulterous husband, who likens himself to the Minotaur, who, having difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality, sees chimeras, believes his days are "*made up of what he calls 'real time' and the 'interstices.'* *Real time provides an identity, a footing. The interstices, however, provide him with a life.*" In a skewy interpolation of Chuang Tzu's quote about reality and dreaming ("Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?"), he posits, "*If the world is a dream, then fucking is as close to awakening as I can get. If the world is real, then fucking is as close to dreaming as I can be.*" Though we find him, by the middle of the novel, severely compromised, completely debauched, surrendering to every passing whim, he's also often puzzled with doubt:

As I wait I wonder about the world beyond my immediate interstices. I mean the so-called "real" world, the world of everyday. The world of novelties and embalmers, anesthesiologists and escalators. The world of paper, paste, and cocktail hours. Public attention. Akiko's world.

I wonder what it would be to be unsevered from the instant, undiminished, as she is, intact. To live in Eden, before the smack, the disorder to which one is eternally espoused. (And even this *before* the father muscled his way into...but I will not *go there!*)

As when an adolescent, one entered into a moment of grace, riding a rented horse across the city beaches in the raging sun of summer, brown as a savage man, proud of the body I had suddenly grown into. Salt on my tongue, the wind thick in my hair—I felt the bounty of the world. And I knew that *I was of that bounty.*

Though *Netsuke* is peopled with myriad mythological figures, the one who's evoked most frequently, however, is Proteus. From his place in the classical Greek pantheon to John Milton's "old Proteus" who is called "up unbound / In various shapes...from the Sea, / Drain'd through a Limbec to his native form," from his appearances in alchemical and early philosophical writings to Ovid's forever changing sea-god in *Metamorphoses*, Proteus looms large in antiquity; but it is the Proteus in Shakespeare's *Two Gentleman of Verona*, whom the therapist most resembles, for



like that rascalion, his affections are, at best, fleeting, and fluctuate according to whim. It's easy to imagine the therapist—after discovering, toward the end of *Netsuke*, that his own deceptions are about to be exposed—to borrow Proteus's words and rebuke himself for his faults, saying,

O Heaven, were man
but constant, he were perfect: that one error
fills him with faults; makes him run through
all sins
Inconstancy falls off, ere it begins.

While the therapist never has a chance to completely indulge his desire for everyone to yield to his unappeasable appetite, he does still use every psychological trick he knows to manipulate clients and others to submit to him, leaving "scowling ranks" after his psychological rampage. Violent, insane, he won't allow anything to steer him away from his onslaught:

They fuck like high school kids in a kind of frenzy. She smells of oyster mushrooms and won't stay still. She's showing off, eager to impress him. At some point he goes crazy with it and forces her ass. Things are out of control now; she is crying, fearful. This all goads him on.

Rikki Ducornet's *Netsuke*, where allusions to a panoply of gods and monsters abound, where some characters are, at times, avatars of those divinities, gives lie to the idea that intertextuality etiolates a narrative, chokes it beneath so much classical or whatever drapery, peoples it with cardboard cutouts for characters, relegating it into a facsimile of something far superior—these references serving, instead, as enriching threads woven within hefty narrative weft. Carefully limning the interstices between obsession, rage, desire, truth, and intimacy, as well as attentively traversing the planes of same, *Netsuke* castigates a life, and perhaps our society as a whole, in which Eros has gone awry, while also offering a *cri de coeur* against dubious psychiatric palliatives.

John Madera has published work in *Conjunctions*, *Opium*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *The Believer*, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and many other venues. He is the managing editor of *Big Other* and a columnist for the *Nervous Breakdown*.