On Murat Nemet-Nejat’s *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*

The central heresy of *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* is that “the body is immortal, the soul mortal.” Nemet-Nejat writes that it is the body that is “endlessly involved in transformations, into dust, into humus, into water, into food chains … into star dust.” It is the body that continually seeks another body to inhabit after death and thus yearns to be immortal. This is similar to the drama of the Bardo state in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. But the soul, “the mind’s eye” is “less durable than an electron.” For Nemet-Nejat, both the soul as well as the words on the page, whose insufficiency every poet knows, are the “parasites in process in the unending flow of things … but nowhere, nowhere the same.” It is seeing with the mind’s eye, “one’s struggle against the materiality of things — of language” that causes one to become “inevitably snared by it,” “the yellow of the carpet / lurks in the yellow of my eye. // and waits.”

Nature is “condemned to a prison / of colors.” This is a problem of consciousness. Nemet-Nejat writes, speaking of the Eda of Turkish Poetry, “*Consciousness dies, the eye dis-solves into motion, silhouetted by the dark matter of words*” [my emphasis]. This human eye transforms into the mechanical eye, (the “I”
merges with the “eye” in an “open-ended weave of language,”) a camera that photographs the words as they pass before it, that emerge in light, and vanish in darkness. *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* is a record of their traces on the page. Nemet-Nejat quotes the filmmakers, Godard, Brakhage, and Bresson. Each of these filmmakers broke, in their own way, with narrative films of the Hollywood sort, or, more precisely, each has created a new kind of narrative, using various techniques. For example, Brakhage used methods like painting on celluloid, scratching on film, multiple exposures, and fast cutting. Speaking of Godard, Nemet-Nejat refers to a process of eliminating or fighting against the authority of the frame. In this way, the invisible makes itself known. This is not an intellectual process but one of perception and change of consciousness. This kind of “seeing” involves a de-centering of the self. The fragmentary nature of the poems acts as a series of gestures toward the invisible. The fragment is “devoid of any lyric persona (no lyric I)” but replaced with the “mechanical eye” of the lens. The human eye is a subjective device, that involves the processing of light by the human brain. A mechanical eye, like a camera, is an objective or absolute measuring device, that is, the sensor that receives the light is “dumb.” Robert Bresson is important to Nemet-Nejat because the subjectivity of his “models” approaches the objective: “The models mechanized externally” and yet, Bresson writes that they are “internally free.” Again, Bresson writes, “The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, what they do not suspect is in them.”

Nemet-Nejat has an interest in these filmmakers and their various techniques which they translated to the camera, since he translates them to the poem. Each page is like a frame, or a snapshot, the record of a moment in language. Nemet-Nejat writes, “I feel, old man, seemingly in the calligraphy of sudden thoughts” [my emphasis]. Nemet-Nejat has spoken of the words as constellations or musical notations, or as calligraphy. I imagine words in this book as birds in flight, their movement captured by the lens, which is the “mechanical eye” looking. Words on the page are bent and lengthened, almost like calligraphic
signs, as if a photograph was taken of them as they raced across the mind. They are like traces of a movement of thought in language. Language is not stable but fluid, as is the camera panning across the page. And then again, in some cases, the camera (the poet’s I/eye) is fixed on a non-moving sequence of words. In *The Peripheral Space of Photography*, Nemet-Nejat speaks of his affinity for photographs that are “imperfect,” that have an element of surprise, and reveal qualities of the “man behind the camera” that he might not even be aware of. He also examines the tension between the “seer” and the “seen” and the way the subject’s “pose” can subvert the photographer’s attempts at a conventional image, or tease the “seen” into active thought. Of course, this essay shares a similar objective with “The Question of Accent.” In both cases, Nemet-Nejat is keenly aware of the ways in which power and authority work in photography, through focus, framing, “clarity,” and, in American English, through flatness, neutrality, global dominance. A poet should rebel against this, and *The Spiritual Life of Replicants* shows, convincingly, a reader the reason why.

Blurs, scratches, and so on can produce in a photo a kind of “spiritual light” that “is not transparent but “impure,” as against the attempts to create “ART” — to regulate the pose to simulate a painting. In attempting to capture “the god of the forest,” Brakhage writes, “It had to do with the history of painting rather than any wood creature.” Finally, this “impurity,” these words in motion that leave traces of flight on the page, akin to the scratches and blurs of photography, are like the memory of a still in a projected film. The cinematic “eye,” the soul, is not durable, as the body is, or spiritually pure as in Christian doctrine. In fact, this inversion of Christine doctrine is at the heart of Nemet-Nejat’s Sufism, and thus this “eye/soul” is not stable, but in motion, panning, establishing long shots, questioning the nature of the frame, all of which, produces traces, scratches, blurs, that don’t so much establish fixed meanings but rather tease the mind into active thought. I feel it is from this heresy in Nemet-Nejat’s Sufism that the poems receive their energy and forward propulsion in creating “a spiritual filmic language,” enacting a
drama between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual, being and non-being, the “I” and the “eye,” human and machine, until there is “A motion of light without the camera obscura, two entities pressing against each other.” It is an ecstatic moment when the ego and the material dissolve, and two entities press close to each other. There is an echo here of a great Turkish poem, Güntan’s “Romeo and Romeo.” The above was my experience of reading The Spiritual Life of Replicants during a time when I was watching many films and making films.

Works Cited