

Maledetto by Kenneth Gaburo — an analysis by Rick Burkhardt

Kenneth Gaburo's forty-minute opus Maledetto, for seven "virtuoso speakers," takes the problem of meaning as its material. Every sound is a word (or, less frequently, part of a word) filtered through a context that comes from the world of speech. Of the seven speakers, one (speaker A) delivers a comically protracted lecture, one (speaker B) furiously whispers nonsensical words and phrases ("inspired, wagtail, sweetmeat, tib, prancer, thing, bite, aphrodisian") as if they were vile insults, one (speaker D) alternates between goading and drunken, incoherent ranting, sometimes shouting out disembodied transitional words like "But" and "Furthermore," and the remaining four (speaker group C) form a "choir" that drones congregationally, murmurs, snickers, cheerleads, argues, and parties. It's not always clear what they are all talking about, or if they're talking about anything. But for the bulk of the piece, the main subject of discourse is the screw.

The lecture delivered by speaker A contains more information about the screw than one would have imagined existed. The etymology of the word is examined, the physics of the screw, its history, its many uses, different ways screws are made, names for different types of screws, standards by which screws are designed and traded, speculations about how history would be different without the screw. Much of A's text sounds like something straight out of the Oxford English Dictionary (which in fact it is). He quotes extensively from historical sources, mathematical formulas, trade manuals (including one published by the "screw thread standardization committees of Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States") and other fields of authority.

His approach to the word "screw" is exquisitely rational — exquisitely, because the word "screw" is not exactly a neutral word. Double entendres bound around the text like kangaroos, and his straight-faced rationality begins to seem like an extreme sport, a freak of nature, not just rationality but hyper-rationality in the face of it all. He must maintain a straight face through passages (quoted from medieval mechanics texts) like:

These pressing instruments are easy to work. They can be moved and put up

any place we want, and there is no need in them for a long straight beam of a hard nature, and there is in them no hindrance from stiffness. They are free and press with a strong pressure, and the juices come out altogether, and we have to repeat the pressing again and again until no more juices are left in the pressed substance. [*Gaburo p. 6*]

Most sentences in Maledetto are less colorful than that one. But many are, in Ron Silliman's words, "altered for torque, or increased polysemy / ambiguity." The first words spoken in the piece are: "Screw is a cylinder having a spiral thread and a corresponding spiral groove winding around it in a uniform manner." The absence of an article for the word "screw" detaches it from the syntax of the sentence, opening it to greater interference from its mischievous double meaning. Other sentences are similarly open due to their sprawling reference frames and gaplike pronoun references: "Incidentally, Drachman cannot use Biton as evidence for anything." [*p. 8*] Sometimes Gaburo inserts unmotivated pauses into the speech, heightening further the open, underdefined, gaplike quality of a passage like:

The wedge has been used from very old times for splitting things. [pause] A very special use is seen in the perfume press pictured at Pompeii. [pause] The wedge is the direct descendant of the ax. [pause] Possibly [long pause] it is the other way around. [long pause] The lever is found everywhere in nature. [pause] The roller and the wheel are very old indeed. [pause] The augur translates a circular motion into a linear one along its axis of rotation. It is related to the screw. [*p. 11*]

Another way that texts are "torqued" is by speed instructions, which Gaburo supplies in words-per-minute (wpm). The speakers must speak at speeds ranging at various times from 40 wpm to 300 wpm. A phrase like "Stopper screws, such as are described by Cipriano Piccolpasso for his pottery bottles" at 280 words per minute sounds like a firecracker, and though this does not erase the meaning, one has the sense of meaning being temporarily "overtaken" by sound, and one mentally "fills in" the meaning a second or two later. Of course, one may not fill it in correctly, or one may decide to leave it as "meaning which could be filled in." The meanings of sentences become difficult to follow as the sentences increase in speed, and at a certain point (a sort of "event horizon") their meaning becomes completely open. They are not meaningless — we *don't* understand the meaning, but we understand that they *have* a meaning, and we imagine that we *could* understand the meaning under different

circumstances — they are placeholders for “meaning not filled in.” The same can be said for a sentence (delivered at any speed) like “Therefore the law becomes: the power is to the resistance as the distance between two contiguous threads is to the circumference described by the power.” [p. 4] I don’t doubt that sentence has a meaning, but I know I’ll just have to wait to see if something comes along and fills that meaning in.

Outside of speaker A’s rational world, meanings cavort spasmodically, unattached, ready and eager to fill something in. Speaker group C, intoning monotonously like a congregation, asks itself the questions “Meaning what?” and “To what end?” repeatedly, with different mumbled answers each time. These answers often take the word “screw” into connotative fields other than the sexual and technical ones already established, and their syntax is generally even more torqued than speaker A’s:

Meaning what? / Morality. / To what end? / To force or extract from some unwilling giver. / Meaning what? / Rate of taxation: simply the maximum that can be screwed out of people. / To what end? / To enough. / Meaning what? / Screw harder. / To what end? / To oppression. / Meaning what? / Screwing into the hearts of men by degrees. / To what end? / To screwing them beyond the worth of things. [p. 3]

Or, a bit later:

Meaning what? / Turn [pause] key. / To what end? / To turn the screw. / Meaning what? / On. / To what end? / To stretch her limbs with screws [pause] and pulleys. / Meaning what? / Extortion. / To what end? / To torture. / Meaning what? / [pause] To crush the thumbs of the Jew with vice and screw. / Meaning what? / [pause] Penal. [pause] / To what end? / [pause] To get him to tell you where he buried his treasure. [pause] / Meaning what? / Fuzz. / To what end? / To get a head screw. [pp. 6-7]

Most of group C’s utterances in the first ten minutes or so of the piece take the above form. The “meanings” (and purposes) they offer are always in the form of sentence fragments, which keep them out of speaker A’s rational realm, but occasionally, as in “To get him to tell you where he buried his treasure,” they approach a kind of spook rationality (a dark underside of rationality, in that case). Later, group C takes on other performance tones, and as

one looks at them all one can see that “not quite rational” is their common characteristic:

sex poetry -> giggling conversation -> angry argument -> football crowd -> computer jargon

Yet in every case, the sentences remain torqued so as to complement speaker A’s gaps in some way. A sample “conversation,” for example, reads like this (throughout these lines, group C is supposed to sprinkle the dialogue with laughter, “well-spaced twitters”):

I am not sure that [laugh] in any case, I should [laugh] have screwed myself up to accept it, as I am [laugh] shy among strangers. / Do you [laugh] suppose Christina was prophetic? / “Doctor,” [laugh] replied Sir Austen, “if you had a pure-[laugh] blood Arab Barb, would you cross him [laugh] with a screw?” / I affirm the right [laugh] to singular bargaining with all of the [laugh] collective governing organs. / Did [laugh] you know that before the use of wind [laugh] power there were a few horse-[laugh] driven Archimedean [laugh] screws?
[laugh] [pp. 13-14]

In fact, some of the “conversational” lines (like that last one) are lines that would fit perfectly into speaker A’s lecture — but it’s as if they’ve been clumsily rewritten so as to be conversational: “Do you suppose its origin is [laugh] really obscure?” “[shouted] On the contrary, wasn’t Wilkins prophetic when he said ‘the chief inconvenience of this instrument is that in a short space it will be screwed up into its full length?’” The rational, here, is being flavored with something from a different domain, casting doubt on its already precarious rationality.

Speaker B plays a similar role: his words, delivered in a loud whisper, are spoken simultaneously with speaker A’s, glued to speaker A alliteratively.

Speaker A: from the Mynas Codex edited by Nix that Heron really
Speaker B: *fiddle thread mount cut easy block nibble trim hair rake*
[p. 7]

In these sections (there are five of them over the course of the piece), speaker B sounds like the irrational underbelly of speaker A.

Speaker D goes to a further extreme. Her solos are explosions of words delivered with great intensity, apparently related only by haphazard irregular alliterations: “Eye, electrify, exalt, lap, under, let, far, fly, lump, high, lush, hearty, lear, hance.” She punctuates these solos and other moments in the piece by shouting out words which would normally indicate rational causality (or at least semantic connectivity) but only rarely do they end up connected to anything: “But,” “Again:” “Furthermore:” “And” “Only to” “Nevermind.”

Speakers A and D interact in a variety of ways. A key moment in the piece (and one of the sparsest) is their duet about three quarters of the way through, in which speaker A, listing screw classifications, speaks one name at a time, with speaker D responding to each with a word of her own.

A: round head D: boozed [pause] A: fillister head D: budgy [pause]
A: oval head D: bemused [pause] A: hexagon head D: blind [pause]
A: socket head D: bung-eye queered [p. 21]

It’s as if the rational (and what could be more rational than taxonomy?) is being “translated” into the irrational. And to be honest, there’s not much experiential difference between them. Speaker D’s contributions all begin with “B,” which makes one doubt their value as units of meaning (though “blind” doesn’t seem quite accidental — it seems more like a slowly focusing commentary on the proceedings); but Speaker A’s all include the word “head,” which is arguably more ridiculous.

After this point, speaker A’s rationality seems forever tinged with irrationality. His list of screw thread classifications goes on for way too long and sounds as arbitrary as it is (as all taxonomies are at some level). Then he begins to explain the economy of the manufacture and sale of screws, and just as rationality seems to be returning (to smooth over the previous unrest, as it were), he utters these sentences:

As a measure of how sophisticated the screw business has become, I should like to relate the following personal story: [pause] My brother-in-law has an unusual occupation. [pause] He works for the United States government. [pause] He is an expert on screws. [p. 24]

On the word “screws,” all the other performers scream the sound “oo” fortissimo, as high as possible. They hold their notes during Speaker A’s text, changing notes every time he speaks a word with an “oo” sound, resulting in a shifting chord which slowly (over several minutes) moves down the register, fading slowly to pianissimo. It enters as a kind of abstract wail of protest, a plea for sanity; after thirty five minutes of talk about screws, it jolts one with a sudden clear elemental force into reality. There’s a reality on stage for the first time in the piece — and speaker A’s brother-in-law being an expert on screws is *not* part of it. Speaker A is proceeding to describe, in painstaking detail, his brother-in-law’s job as a “go-between for the screw maker and the screw user.” It isn’t possible, it isn’t *sane*, that speaker A would be personally connected to the screw industry — and *by marriage*. What he describes is nothing if not rational (it’s downright bureaucratic), but for the first time, the audience, faced with the clarity of six people screaming, *doesn’t believe it*. As the description of the brother-in-law’s job becomes more and more convoluted (all the while being “revealed,” becoming more and more audible, behind the screen of the chorus’ decrescendoing “oo” sound), the description starts to seem like a screen itself, a Borges-like paradox of self-similarity referring to nothing but its own obsessive permutations. These culminate in a twist of capitalist logic which is almost a cry of futility:

With industrial acceleration being what it is, is it even possible that a new screw on the market intended to replace a screw or screws which are thereby rendered obsolete may itself become obsolete before it has been used because of an even newer screw variety. [pause] My brother in law is a dedicated man. [p. 26]

and then Speaker A stops speaking, leaving the now-very-quiet “oo” sound behind him. It seems as though now we will finally hear what’s behind all the talking, but instead the “oo” fades, almost imperceptibly, into nothingness.

The sound “oo” does not come out of nowhere. It has been preceded by three large sections of the piece devoted to the sounds “s,” “k,” and “r,” respectively. Together, these four sounds are the sounds of the word “screw,” sounds which move by stages from fully

unvoiced to fully voiced. There is a physical force to that motion, and it does not really ally itself with either the rational or the irrational (though it may be physiologically close to the alliterative nonsense games played by speakers B and D). When the “oo” sound arrives to slam the door for good on Speaker A’s attempts at rationality, it allies the phonemic properties of the word “screw” with whatever force it is that always subverts rationality — which is exactly what the linguistic properties of the word “screw” have been doing all along.

In the strikingly simple coda, meaning floats over texts in which the categories of rational and irrational are practically reversed. Speaker A says:

In Heron’s pneumatics certain implements outside of the five powers (six powers according to modern thought) are described. Especially interesting are his devices which produce circular movements as a result of hot air or steam streams. [pause] For example there is an altar where a fire is lit and the hot air from this hollow altar, streaming through four bent pipes, makes puppets dance. [pause] Authorities contend on the strength of such playthings that the Ancient Greeks could have invented the steam engine if only they did not have slaves which made such an invention superfluous. [pause] Clearly, this is not true, for [pause] among other things, the engine had to wait for the screw as we know it to be refined. [p. 26]

And Speaker D says:

If we: dipped rather deep.
rather dipped deep.
deep rather dipped.
dipped deep rather.
deep dipped rather.
rather deep dipped. [p. 26]

Rationality in Speaker A’s text has been replaced with antiquity, ritual, wonder, speculation, depth, weight, significance. For the first time, he seems to have an important point! Speaker A’s last sentence returns to rationality, but in so doing negates the point he was making and becomes shallow again (almost a shaggy dog story). Speaker D, on the other hand, takes a coherent thought (or half of one) and applies a clear, audible, rational procedure to it, permuting three words until all six possible orderings have been heard. The procedure, clearer than the matrix of words that results, seems to comment on all the prior “rationality,” its glossiness, its

arbitrariness; the words themselves perform a balancing act on the edge of meaning, never to attain any particular meaning, but never to escape its aura — these words, unlike most of Speaker D's (and in a different way, unlike most of Speaker A's) *feel like* they mean something. The piece ends with meaning and rationality thus redefined: as opposites.