

JUSTIN CLEMENS

RE / VIEWING REPETITION / S

The Collected Works of Victor Bergman

Having just finished my own conference presentation—as it happened, on the theme of ‘The End’—it was about the last thing that I wanted to do. Still, as an old Australian ad for car oil once nearly had it, ends ain’t ends. The conference itself—entitled, in tune with *le dernier cri* of academic fashion, *Repetition/s*, deploying that natty front-loaded slash like a beach-head from the general unique to the multiple particulars—had hit the sands running three days before in Ljubljana with a demented neo-suprematist post-Soviet cosmonautical performance (no, an ‘informance’!) tagged as *Zupančič::Turšič::Živadinov-AKTUATOR: 2016*, and directed by the notorious Slovenian impresario Dragan Živadinov—perhaps most famous world-wide for his part in founding the avant-garde music group Laibach or, at least, its umbrella corporation the Neue Slovenische Kunst (NSK), but allegedly close to being a household name within Slovenian territorial borders, not least for his ongoing world-historical semi-centennial project *Noordung 1995-2045* by which terminal date, if he is still alive, the geriatric Živadinov will for his final act be shot into space in a capsule with the residual symbols of his own ‘anti-mimetic, post-corporal’ performances gathered about him—in which two shaven-headed goons clad in emended versions of so-called Active-Wear acted-out a sequence of extraordinary load-bearing geometrico-gymnogyic partner exercises accompanied by an enigmatic robotic collaborator that was rocking out to a melancholic techno *son-et-lumière*. In any case, I felt that I’d been morally blackmailed or strongarmed into attending the final Saturday night performance of *The Collected Works of Victor Bergman* on the basis of elective affinities in which I ultimately do not believe—the matey syntagm ‘my Australian friends’ hardly being the crispest of aesthetic carrots in the refrigerator’s vegetable section—given there is, as Jacques Lacan puts it, ‘no friendship in the unconscious,’ let alone among the partisans of nationalism—a feeling only queasily exacerbated, as it turns out, when, having been solicited by Aaron Orzech and the rest of The (extended) Family into penning the review that you are currently reading on the basis that ‘nobody ever writes about our work,’ I discovered through the merest, most cursory of online enquiries, that earlier iterations of the piece in ques-

tion had been relatively well-received by a variety of our glorious homeland's theatrical sub-luminariat, who had poured out—or, at least, had committed to print and pixels—their own upsized elucubrations concerning the matter at hand. In *The Age*, Cameron Woodhead had thoughtfully hand-tooled a series of *schwärmerisch* ejaculations to provide a tender *berceau* for his sensitivities: 'breathlessly eccentric,' 'whirlwind intimacy,' 'barrelling absurdity,' and 'crazed experimentation' were only a few of the adjective-noun combinations jetting upstream like spawning Canadian salmon from the avant-garde cursor of his word-processor. The self-proclaimed 'baby boomer' Elizabeth Quinn seemed to have been significantly less impressed, modulating heavily into the third person to convey her 'uncharacteristically lukewarm response while all around her were admiring the Emperor's new clothes.' For his part, Martin Shlansky announced that '*The Collected Works of Victor Bergman* is one of the most unique performances I've seen,' 'an experience, and possibly an exorcism.' Need I go on? All the evidence is there to suggest that I'd been unduly duped by a hoary hard-luck tale of young, plucky local actors struggling manfully—or, since this is allegedly THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, personfully—against the sheer fortress walls of White Australian Philistinism and its Pitiless Indifference to Experimentation, to Talent and, yes, to Thinking. The so-called 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' is indeed an historically-attested Australian cultural disorder, itself denominated in a neo-classicizing way after several of the key events leading up to the destruction of the ancient Roman monarchy under the Tarquins, discussed in several savage lines by Søren Kierkegaard following an indication by Hamann, himself presumably indebted to Livy and Plutarch... but where? Where else but in.... oh, disappointingly, not in *Repetition*, but in *Fear and Trembling*. Still, it seems now that it was too late for me, given that I had already begun to write, given that I and my friend Sigi, another Antipodean attendee, had barely had time to wash down some subtle Slovenian sushi with the Human Fish Beer (actually this is a lie, as they did not stock this particular brand—though it does exist—or, if not a lie, at base a kind of retrospective wish-fulfilment founded on a kind of wistful longing I will continue to entertain for such mildly surrealistic signifiers of odd life-forms), before we were whisked away from the table of Slovenian intellectuals at which we had been only-too-briefly seated, and into the winding cobbled streets of Ljubljana-By-Night, guided by none other than Ben Hjorth, one of the conference organizers and another Australian performance-maker, prompting in me ('prompting,' a term I believe to be of theatrical provenance) a very dim recollection of reading Paul Theroux's *Riding the Iron Rooster* as a teenager, in which the following lines, or, perhaps, something recognisably close to the following lines (given that I have never referred and intend never to refer to 'the original' again as long as I live and breathe) appear: 'I had reached my lowest point yet. All around me were Australian voices in the dark. I was soon to learn that, whenever I hit a low point, Australians would be there.' In any case, I had no idea where we were going, and could do nothing but try to maintain in my state of relative beerlessness some kind of equanimity by staving off the fear that I, with Živadanov's informance still relentlessly dominating all my performance-receptive

neurons, of which there are I must confess relatively few, would have to lie to ‘my Australian friends’ that I had actually liked their *The Collected Works of Victor Bergman*, using a few choice dissimulating phrases, before shooting off to the impending conference afterparty where, with any luck, I would be able to drink enough Mitteleuropean alcohols with Hegelian-trained scholars of ‘Being, pure Being —’ to suppress my irritatingly insistent jetlag and finally get some sleep back at the hotel, before being taken on a scheduled sight-seeing Sunday survey of the famously picturesque environs of Slovenia, ‘the sunny side of the Alps.’ Addled as I was, I couldn’t quite place the name Victor Bergman, which I was nonetheless convinced I recognized, if in an annoyingly attenuated form, and which—indeed, given that my professional life as an academic demands a certain mnemonic reliability, even, to repurpose one of Martin Heidegger’s terms from the 1930’s concerning the ontology of equipment, a serviceability regarding the sense and reference of proper names—I was shamefully (or rather shamelessly) semi-consciously flirting with confusing with the well-known left-wing photographer-writer Victor Burgin, as if, knowing that I knew less than I knew I should know, I could nonetheless pretend that I was a better piece of equipment than I was (or am). As it turns out, another quick googling of today’s technically-externalized-expropriating global memory that is THE INTERNET set me straight: Professor Victor Bergman was a character in the first season of the UK sci-fi series *Space: 1999* which I had watched sporadically as a child, and whose mystifying disappearance from the show—‘in reality’ due, of course, to invidious contractual wrangling between the actor Barry Morse and the producer Fred Freiberger—had inspired a veritable effusion of speculative explanatory counter-narratives from fans. Yet was this even relevant to *The Collected Works of Victor Bergman*? Being inveterately or constitutionally Cartesian, I sort of doubted it. By the time we arrived at the theatre, the place was crawling with punters, many of whom had somehow found somewhere to buy enormous quantities of beer. Gregor Moder, another of the conference organizers, and apparently himself once a working actor before completing his PhD—not on *The Collected Works of G.W.F. Hegel*, but rather a brilliant intervention titled *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity*, which I have since been attempting to *work through*, as they say—reassured me that there was still time before the performance began to acquire the necessary instruments for ensuring drunkenness beyond even the truth of the Hegelian dictum that truth is that ‘Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk...’ (‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §47). In his own conference presentation, on philosophy as performance, Gregor, following Barbara Cassin, the great historian and theorist of sophistry, had quoted the ancient rhetorician Quintilian’s fabulous, famous *Diktat* to the effect that, while philosophy can be faked, performance cannot. In any case, Gregor had spoken in his own name here—or, at least, in the name of The Organisation: “there is time.” So Sigi and I, along with two other young Aussies, Kiri and Eleanor, scuttled around the corner to an excellent establishment at which the proprietor was celebrating his birthday with his chain-smoking, hard-drinking family and friends. The triangular bar was so smoky I could hardly see my hand in front of my face. As a birthday gift, the

owner offered us several sharp shots of a shockingly strong liquor to go with our big brown bag of long-necked beers, which we gratefully if foolishly sculled before stumbling back to the theatre, which, to my surprise, was veritably seething with enthusiastic attendees. As I never usually drink shots, their effects proved disarmingly unpleasant. Alas, I was also lamentably without a bottle opener. One talented and sensitive usher skilfully popped the cap off my beer with a cigarette lighter as we jostled in. The *salle* was oblong, with the bench stairs at one end. The walls and floor had been painted black. Sigi and I squashed ourselves onto one of the benches, front and centre. Near us, I saw Freddie Rokem, a well-known German-Israeli dramaturge and theorist of theatre, who had been a keynote speaker at the conference. His paper, a meditation on Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* and Berthold Brecht's *Mother Courage*, had elaborated upon the thesis that *habits are the petrified residues of our first happinesses and our first horrors*, invoking the *Verfremdungseffekt* of a family drama: a stranger appears at the door just as a mother is about to throw a bronze figurine at the daughter, while the father has opened a window to call for the cops. You get the picture: the enigmatic, elemental drama of domesticity is exposed by a primitive interruption, the stranger at the threshold, the contingency of an encounter, the *Deus ex machina*. The stage props before us were already suggesting the menace of a homely—that is, an *Unheimlich*—encounter. A great square of tape, perhaps 5 or 6 metres across, delimited the stage. At the rear, in the centre, a little table you might find at a nondescript trattoria draped with a red cloth and white lace was topped by a video screen, several photographs which looked to be portraits of various persons, and an array of fat white candles. To the left of the central table, a non-descript white chair, accompanied by a bundle of leafy branches; to the right, a red bucket, a much lower white coffee-table upon which sat another white chair, upon which, in turn, sat an old-school yellow telephone with the circular dial. There was also a six-pack of beer in its green plastic sheath, and a small red bucket. In front of the furniture lay a fringed Persian carpet. I leaned over and stage-whispered at Sigi, still thinking of Živadinov's show as the gold standard: 'I hope it's not too terrible.' Then Aaron came on. He was wearing a loose white singlet and black jeans. And he began to dance. The first time I had ever clapped eyes on the fellow, he was playing the devil in a University of Melbourne student production of an Austrian classic whose name I have completely forgotten. The play itself wasn't that good, but I knew at once he was a real actor because he changed shape and size several times during the performance. I also recall being surprised when I met him afterwards: he didn't look anything like any of his characters. Now, however, Aaron looked exactly like he looked himself. His dancing resembled the way an average Australian might imagine a traditional Eastern European dance to be done, all thigh- and foot-slapping, blank-faced and over-formal, rhythmical yet clumsy. Having started, moreover, he did not stop. Brian Lipson, the other actor in this two-hander—older, sinister, and certain—moved purposefully about, yelling exhortations and uttering insinuating fragments of advice. Aaron kept dancing. The dancing went beyond the point at which the point would have already been made that the point had expressly gone beyond the point of making a

point. The dance went on and on. Nor did this indecent extension of exhaustive and exhausting performance serve either to clarify or decide the logic of the scene. On the one hand—and since I knew Aaron and his ex-partner Emma, another acquaintance of mine, had in fact gone on a long trip together through Eastern Europe, events upon which this performance was clearly in some way based—it seemed to speak of certain real, traumatic events that had actually occurred, and their consequences: linguistic confusion, sexual tension, financial hardship, disturbing encounters, etc. On the other hand, as the performance progressed, the situation simply became more and more diegetically unreal. Was Brian a personal trainer of some kind? A secret service handler? A therapist? A family member? A director? Was this a rehearsal for a future play? The play itself? Or some kind of murderous, non-fictional reality? A scam? A response to a scam? A revenge tragedy? A rewriting of *Doctor Faustus*? A *Hamlet* or even a *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* set in Romania? The plays within plays started to multiply beyond even the famed death-traps of *The Mousetrap*. The incompatible narratives and their generic models circulated around a central character—or, perhaps, to speak the current language of topos theory, a subobject classifier—whom Aaron and Emma had met on their journey. An avuncular man with innocent motives? An ex-KGB operative now working for Mossad? Hard-working, straight-talking fellow? Madman? Killer? Harmless eccentric? A phantasm of the play itself? Or of the relationship between Aaron and Emma? Or of the relationship between Aaron and Brian? Or that between actors and performance? Play and spectators? Performance and reality? Even after Aaron had finally stopped dancing and cracked himself a can of VB onstage, the complexities continued to compound. The conversations between Aaron and Brian shifted between the quotidian and surreal. Who was who? Was the first part just training for the second? Or was the point to push Aaron to the point of real exhaustion, so that there could in fact be no real training for the (never-achieved) finale? Something had to keep on not finishing in order to finish itself off. Both actors wore black armbands which may or may not have contained technical recording and/or transmitting devices.¹ Necessity or virtue? The great abstract relation between modality and morality was evidently one of the play's themes (so to speak), and not just concerning the apparition and application of technical devices. J.L. Borges famously remarks that the most boring European version of the Arab classic *1001 Nights* was a masterpiece of German scholarship: whereas all other translations had excised, censored, and repressed various scenes and stories from the original, the Germans left nothing out. But it was the excisions and insertions that gave the text its preternatural vigour. The personages involved in the production of *The Collected Works of Victor Bergman* had clearly learned their Borgesian lesson well; in fact, they had evidently had to begin with excision and simulation. Knowing Aaron and Emma without being close friends, I knew something decisive and terrible had happened on their trip overseas, but the mystery of it was probably unplumbable without an appallingly supernumerary rudeness on my part. This ritual performance neither cleared nor cleansed the air. Rather, as in Kenneth Slessor's great poem about Sydney, "*Five Bells*," the play conjured and condensed the fog of per-

sonal and political histories into a snarling mnemotechnical beast that scratched and tapped against the pane of the present, without ever resolving into a final, defining, or definitive shape. What emerged from the appalling fantasias, the disjunctions, the confusions, the systematic distortions and the downright fabrications, was a moving image of trauma and repetition, of ends and endlessness/es. In my own talk at *Repetition/s*, I had briefly spoken of ‘death-lag,’ on the model of jet-lag: that paradoxical interval between your death and the realization you are dead. If, as is sometimes said, one’s whole life flashes before one’s eyes at the moment of dying, then one never dies, even though one is already dead. The image of your whole life repeats itself, all the way up to the moment in which... the image of your whole life repeats itself. At some point during the performance, I heard Freddie Rokem exclaiming ‘These Australians are crazy!’ an ejaculation which he almost immediately corrected: ‘Their idea of Europe is crazy.’ I couldn’t agree more. Something horrifically personal was being *worked through* (to repeat this indispensable Freudian concept) in the consciously displaced form of a consciously displaced performance, but that personal experience hooked into all sorts of vaster, darker colonial horrors. Much, much later, when I had returned to Melbourne and was drinking again with an old friend who had once been an actor, he remarked that it couldn’t have been done without co-creator Romanie Harper’s intervention. Romanie, my friend asserted, is ‘a kind of genius.’ ‘I saw that thing before she’d gotten to it,’ he said, ‘and it just wasn’t that good.’ As I’ve been trying to convey, however, I’m pretty much a Buridan’s Ass functionary as an audience member, so I’d rather starve to death than decide on the truth of this. But it’s clear that Romanie had functioned as something like a fixer, or rather as an un-fixer, a *dé-brouillardeuse*, an ingenious agent who kept the actors and their actions unsettled with a divisive power of negation. So the undecidability of sense, reference and value in this piece was potentially due not just to my own psychic weaknesses, but to a ‘conscious’ and objective aspect of the work itself. It was as if the performance—like this re/view of it—ended not with the bang of a single full-stop, nor with the whimperingly traditional triplicity of an ellipsis, but rather with two, between the two: a little, literal, littoral stutter or minimal repetition of points, improperly finished yet not entirely certain whether it should have been continued or whether it had already said too much..

Notes

1. It is worth mentioning here the actual, theatrical-technical function of these devices: replaying recordings of artists Harper and Orzech, and others, discussing and trying to retrospectively piece together this ‘event.’ The performance itself was therefore a staging or framing of literal *repetition*: “It’s French for rehearsal!,” to bastardize another Australian advertising jingle. Such a(n attempted) repetition is not only—or even primarily—that of the ‘original’ event itself, but repetition precisely of attempts to reconstruct and recount it that were themselves already never more than repetitions—inevitably failed, second-rate or second-order, poor images flickering on the cave wall of memory—of that absent,

'lost' original, the efficient cause of those memories. *The Collected Works*, then, would be positioned in that simulacral third-order to which Plato seems to relegate artistic representation, and most urgently theatre, but with the Deleuzian—or, depending on how you look at it, Badiouian; in either case, fundamentally psychoanalytic—twist that this copy of copies, circling interminably around the absent centre of the true original and its ('lost') meaning, would embody the fragile, dynamic truth of this inversion: the simulacrum as the locus of (the traces of) the Platonic 'form' itself: the traces of a necessarily 'lost'—and only in this purely formal—object that does not exist, but paradoxically insists in the imperfect form of its own repetition/s [*Ed.*].