FROM DOG TO ANT
The Evolution of Lee Breuer’s Animations

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Outside a dog, a book is a man’s best friend.
Inside a dog it’s too dark to read.
—Groucho Marx

La Divina Caricatura, subtitled A Fiction by Lee Breuer, is narrated by and based on the life of a dog, mainly. You might know the dog if you have followed Lee Breuer and Mabou Mines’ works for the past thirty years. Her name is Rose, a mutt whose tales wag on about her love life and the fate of her friends, lovers, and incarnations. Rose is not Breuer’s only animal attraction. He has been walking and talking with animals for his entire career and features an imaginary menagerie in the very titles of his plays: The Red Horse Animation, The B. Beaver, The Shaggy Dog Animation, The Warrior Ant, Epidog, and Ecco Porco. Far more than a zoo story, Breuer’s batty vision is at once biotoonic (biology + cartoons) and mythopreposterous. It is conceived within a concoction that mingles Hinduesque cosmology and snatches of sociobiological hypothesizing with nods to Dante, Disney, and Nietzsche. But, Breuer, whose language can be explosive and his comedy abrasive, is not just a wild duck.

In La Divina Caricatura, it becomes clear that while he may have been making mayhem with Mabou Mines, he has also been engendering a substantial mytho-theatrical cycle of plays and a singular approach to acting and performance that brings together world theatre traditions and American pop culture. Moreover, his comedie animale descends from a lineup of notable thinkers, most of whom he merrily misreads. “To misunderstand is to transmute,” he claims, and “to transmute is to make from another one’s transmogrified self.” (There is, I suspect, an entire theory of acting in that mutter.) Unlike Breuer’s previous publications, which are mostly in script form, La Divina Caricatura recombines and annotates his cockeyed plots and looney scenes as a narrative. This allows for a more interiorized perspective on his characters and their
relationships. The book concludes with a twenty page Summa Dramatica, in which one of Breuer's characters summarizes his approach to performance and matters of the spirit. Overall, then, Là Divina Caricatura offers an opportunity to track Breuer's mythmaking, inquire into his sources, and speculate about his deeper doings.

More than two decades ago, Bonnie Marranca identified Breuer's creativity in terms of a "personal mythology," which revolves around love, creativity, and artistic success in the fractured pop and cultural scenes in America. (see the PAJ title Animations: A Trilogy for Mabou Mines, 1979) Her insightful introduction to the volume compares Breuer to Spalding Gray and Richard Foreman, among others, in the context of an "auto-mythopoetic" strain in American avant-garde theatre. She also alludes to the mythmaking practice of "bricolage," cited by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and marks Breuer as "the Groucho Marx of the American avant-garde." But what began with nascent autobiographical content and a sophisticated joker's take on theatre has, cumulatively, evolved into an extensive and complex system of thought and practice. By now, Breuer's oeuvre loops together several interconnected narratives, recurring characters, signature images and motifs, all suffused with an elaborating dramatic (yet comic) and serious (though comical) metaphysical depth drawn from his lifelong researches and personal and professional journeys.

Là Divina Caricatura derives from The Shaggy Dog Animation, A Prelude to Death in Venice, Epidog, and Ecco Porco. To novelize them, Breuer edits out stage directions and photographs. He rewrites lines, varies the layout and typography, and interpolates new material. Unlike plays, the novelistic (re)formulation frees him to indulge in literary, authorial spiels, and insider asides. On the page, Breuer's punsterism is incessant: "I dreamed I was Computer Literate and sent you an Email in my mind...I was Pregnant John I'm Happy to Announce we have a Love Litter," Rose types. That Breuer opted to metamorphose his theatre texts into a novel speaks to his sense of intertextuality and performance, narrativity, and processes of cultural transmission and reception.

Là Divina Caricatura has two long Canticas and sixty pages of endnotes and appendices. Cantica I, John and Rose, begins with Rose's "Dear John" letter about her emotional dependency and sexual involvement from Venice Beach to Avenue B. (This is The Shaggy Dog Animation.) John's infidelities are tallied along with his breakthrough into the Downtown Manhattan Art World. Rose's lament comes from her heart and New Jersey, where she is a patient at the Institute for the Science of Soul (ISS) in Cheesequake, N.J. She is being treated for Animation Addiction and Animation Abuse. The Animation theme accounts for the book's new material.

Rose's story continues three years later, in A Prelude to Death in Venice, as she imagines/ writes/ lives in a movie script in which John cracks up while he is being scripted into a film version of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice (as in Venice Beach, California). In performance, John handles two street corner telephones and engages in rapid bursts of conversation. A Bunraku puppet, crafted as a replica of John, was attached to the live actor's chest, and its
ventriloquized voice and actions doubled the doubling of voices from off-stage actors. For La Divina Caricatura, Breuer replaces playscript formulae with cinematic shot and camera angle directions as a frame for the utterances. For audiences, the *mise-en-scène* with an actor/puppet, multiple voices, and narration-within-narration is captivating. In a book, the layering of narrative perspectives—by representing spoken voices, written notes, movie script lingo, telephone talk, and quotations from Mann’s *Venice*—amplifies Breuer’s thematic discourse on the invasive mediation and animation of consciousness.

As John talks on the phone on Manhattan’s First Avenue, Rose is creamed by a garbage truck and winds up among roving Lost Souls in Bardo. Thirteen years later, the saga continues in Cantica II: *Ecco Porco*. Rose is befriended by John’s former lover, Suelee, who is working on a Master’s thesis on Gender Ontology at Brown (this is *An Epidog*). Suelee’s subject is Diogenes and the Cynics. She is arguing that the Cynics, or the dogs, were Feminists. Amidst discussions of Love, Feminism, Speciation, Animal Rights, and Spirituality, Suelee and Rose have an extraordinarily erotic and intellectual affair. The novel closes with a rapturous prose poem on female love, the heavens, and death. Rose dies again, but she is reborn as a Warrior Ant.

“*A fiction with documents*” might be another subtitle for *La Divina Caricatura*. The paperbound 6” x 41/2” formatted book includes a pastiche of letters, questionnaires, transcriptions of therapy sessions, and mock-medical forms. It contains screeds, recipes, and appendicies on topics ranging from meditation and sex to dieting and “Petamony” claims. One “official” letter concerns Worker’s Compensation: “The law must provide a definition of Reality. For if a Character is proven to be Unreal, all Bets, including Worker’s Compensation, are off.” Here and elsewhere Breuer’s satire smells of Jonathan Swift, whose *Tale of a Tub* is a riotous compendium of Prefaces, Introductions and Digressions. Breuer is also Swiftian in his unhinging of holy leanings, unfettered depictions of human bodily functions, and penchant for animal leavings, loving and logic.

*La Divina Caricatura* is written in paragraphs consisting of from six to forty phrases (sans periods). Uttered in Rose’s first person dogese and an omniscient mindvoice dotted with old radio tunes, there is a letter writing form of address for most passages that has the quality of Beckettian rants. With typographic fonts aplenty—bolds, italics, and flights of cursive—the text bounces with Breuer’s propulsive rhythmicity, vernacular grit, ear highjinks, and proclivity for skewering intellectual sources at the drop of a dime. Burroughsian, Jimmy Dean Joycean, Lacanian—Breuer’s brew dashes doo wop hip hop lyricism up against pomo banter and classical gags. Consider the following. John is in a crisis, it’s past mid-Saturday night and he is standing between two pay phones on 6th St. and Avenue B:

Who am I talking to? (We’re at #29) We’re back on the Hotline Back to the Damoclean Angle Back to a high Angle Oh just some Bitch whose got my Number Can you hear the
Music That’s my Number It’s on the Track “Jack You make my Lips Smack Lemon Ice” . . .

Breuer’s linguistic lip service is hilarious for the hip. It is mixed allusively with slices of the sacred and scientific, then shaken and stirred, profusely: “Soul is Orgasm . . . One’s Orgasm is one’s spiritual address—one’s dot org.” For decades, Breuer’s performance texts have been an anathenenema (excuse me) to the theatre’s more righteous rear-garde seat packers. La Divina Caricatura piles it on, including pop porn in the form of several crude and tender interspecies sex scenes.

Watching and listening to Breuer’s actors in performance makes you realize how visceral and volatile language can be. Reading his prose leads you in other directions. For example, there is the matter of his sources. In addition to ‘toons, rock and roll and intercultural theatre, Breuer, a California kid, has often spoken about being influenced by Kafka’s writings. But while Kafka’s perturbed cockroach (“Metamorphosis”), mild mannered ape (“A Report to an Academy”) and curious canine (“Investigations of a Dog”) bear some resemblance to Breuer’s beasts, it is another German writer who seems more kin to his more dogged concerns. “ Desire projected itself visually” for Gustave Aschenbach, writes Thomas Mann, of the protagonist of his famous novella, Death in Venice. Following Mann’s writer, Rose moans, “O to be a Creative individual A Filmmaker To project the light of one’s Desire onto the objects of this world.” Similar phrasings seem apt for describing Breuer’s vigorously sexualized mises-en-scène and, as Marranca remarks, his autobiographical project. She says Breuer is not narcissistic in relation to his life, but “self-projected.”

More directly, Aschenbach’s creative and identity cum sexual crisis in Mann’s story appears, in Breuer’s Prelude and La Divina Caricatura, to underscore John’s artistic dysfunction and hopeless aesthetic idealism. Mann, who disdained popular culture, found dogs comforting. His longer than any shaggy dog story I’ve ever heard, A Man and His Dog, is an eloquent love letter to a short-haired German pointer named Bashan. Part character study, part report on Bashan’s recovery period in a clinic, if it is not one of Breuer’s soul sources for Rose, I will be doggoned.

A Man and His Dog, from 1918, is a sentimental narrative about a bourgeois gentleman and his daily walks with his dog. Written in copiously detailed, conversational prose, the novella became a best seller and is generally regarded as a piece of escapism Mann wrote in order to avoid addressing Germany’s predicament immediately after World War I. Since 1954, the English translation has appeared in a collection titled, Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories. Recognizing Mann and A Man and His Dog as one of Breuer’s sources does not grandly alter our understanding of Breuer and his dog. But, insofar as Breuer monkeys with Mann explicitly in two of his major works, it is worth speculating about what relationship he might have to that of the 1929 Nobel Prize-winner.

Compared to Breuer’s lovesick Rose or, for that matter, Kafka’s Kantian Snoopy, Bashan is Lassie in LaLaLand. Pages are devoted to observing the dog’s histrionics and musing on his feelings and
thoughts. Mann’s narrator is enamored. Bashan is “good and good-looking” and “lofty and dignified” with “splendid coloration.” His actions are often cast in theatrical terms. Bashan’s kennel has “curtains of sackcloth” and he scampers into his master’s room like a comic actor. On walks, the dog’s “theatre of action” is a “parklike valley” with dirt paths. There, Bashan chases birds and gallops freely. Up to a point: “But if I sit down at a bench he is at my side at once and takes up a position at my feet. For it is the law of his being that he only runs about when I am in motion too; that when I settle down he follows suit.”

It is here that Breuer’s senses perk up and he focuses on the inherent “master/slave relationship” between dog and man. Rose can’t help herself. She is in love. More pertinently, she has memories of a path:

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I \text{ remember the first time I laid eyes on you You were in the park With your Box On your Bench across the Path I saw a space at your feet Between your feet was a space my size I crept into it . . . That was my place I knew my place I knew how Big I was I was the dimension of the Shadowy Space from one shoe to another Down there at your feet . . . I sucked myself I pissed on my paw John I was in Love with you Love Laid Down the Law}
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The notion of a “law of being” for Mann and “law of love” for Breuer is one cipher for connecting these two writers and their psycho/sexual/aesthetic/artistic and social/class obsessions. In Mann’s case, the inflexibility of the Law (religious, sociocultural, ontological, aesthetic) as it pertains to everything from artistic form to sexual identity is at the core of his shorter work. Mann’s method is to create fictions with manifest symbolic polarities (age/youth or ethereal/earthly) and have characters engage in extended dialogues or overtly ironic monologues about them. Death in Venice, whose main character is dying of love/lust, is overstuffed with meditations on dyadic subjects ranging from spirit/body and art/life to the eternal Apollonian/Dionysian contrast. Not surprisingly, Mann relies on illusion/reality and, inevitably, theatre and performance metaphors to advance his diatribes. One story in the collection, Mario the Magician, is an elaborate description of a grotesque illusionist in a seaside resort who reduces audience members to a trance with arithmetic tricks and poetic speeches.

Death in Venice is, of course, Mann’s most pronounced dramatization of the antinomies that concerned him. Similarly, his Tonio Kröger (same collection), revolves around a youth’s desire for fame as an artist. Like Breuer’s ambitious, conflicted, doubt ridden characters (the Red Horse, B. Beaver, and Rose’s John) Tonio wants to be an artist. He has devoted his life to art, he laments, but, alas, he has no life, no love. In Felix Krull, the role of actors and the theatre is also briefly depicted. Krull, a wealthy businessman, writes his scandalous confessions, in the middle of which he recalls a painful day as a child when he first visited the theatre. At a matinee performance, a dashing cad charms ladies and entertains the audience with his wit and exquisite costumes. The actor is a friend of Krull’s
father and when they meet him in his dressing room, he turns out to be a stumpy, vulgar, pimply, despicable human being. Another illusion lost.

Thematically, Breuer apes Mann in broad strokes. In Mann’s tales, as in Breuer’s, polemics abound on creativity, art, dreams, delusions, sensuality, love, fame, health, and recovery. Illusions, theatrical and otherwise, are stripped bare with irony and emotion. In her essay Marranca writes that the narrator of Red Horse “is struggling to discover his identity and style as an artist” and that “if on the metaphorical level B. BEAVER acts as a fable about the artist, on the mythical level it demolishes myths about the male ‘animal’ in society.” In Venice, Ashenbach is tortured by his struggles with style and identity. More curiously, at one point, T onio Krö ger exclaims, “Is an artist male, anyhow?” Nearly all of Mann’s male characters, like Breuer’s, share Kröger’s plight at the theatrical performance: “he was looking within, into himself, the theatre of pain and longing.”

Here is how I imagine The Red Horse Animation came to be staged after Breuer read Mann. In Tonio Kröger, Hans rejects Toni’s plea to read Schiller’s Don Carlos, instead saying, “I’ll stick to my horse books. There are wonderful cuts in them . . . .” Hans excitedly continues, explaining how you cannot see the horse’s motion because everything is moving “so fast.” The books are Edward Muybridge’s famous stop-motion photographs. But, T onio interrupts Hans to talk about his experience of reading Don Carlos, “it is beyond anything you could possibly dream of. There are places in it that are so lovely they make you jump . . . as though it were an explosion.” The scene T onio is describing occurs when the King publicly sobs as he realizes that he has been betrayed by the Marquis. The “explosion” is a tender, emotional, and, perhaps, homo-erotic moment that halts the narrative. Apart from Rose’s weeping over John’s affairs, I can think of many instances in Breuer’s work with Mabou Mines where the story and succession of media and bodily images stop and a richly felt moment transpires, usually with a rock and roll soundtrack and crisp lighting effects. In short, this is Breuer’s method as a writer and director: to have a scene gallop along rapidly and then instantaneously freeze everything in order to convey the vivid emotional center of the situation or to reveal a character’s feelings. Even though it is many years ago, I can still see Bill Raymond, his puppet, and the other actors in The Shaggy Dog Animation, standing still in front of a bright enlarged radio band spanning the performance space. Is this conscious borrowing or postmodern pastisching on Breuer’s part? I don’t know.

In a 2002 interview in the New York Times, Breuer offered this self observation:

What is my motivation for attempting to push the envelope at times? Why do I risk social disapproval? Why do I clearly attempt to defeat myself? Would I rather take the suffering than the success? Is that the key to the so-called Art Martyr?

Mann raised similar questions. Ashenbach and Tonio Kröger are two examples of Art Martyrs. The latter asks, “what more pitiable sight is there than a
life led astray by art?” Strangely, in *The Magic Mountain*, which takes place in a sanitarium and is a deliberation on art and popular culture, Mann’s method prefigures aspects of postmodern prose. In the quote above, Breuer is talking both about himself and his character, Porco. The adoption of animals as characters is Breuer’s most complicated twist on Mann. By inhabiting animals, Breuer’s ideas on sex, gender, love, identity, class, family, creativity, and the self-destructive tendencies of human beings are held in arrested development, and comic relief—suspended animation. His animals—B. Beaver, Rose, Porco—can love, suffer, complain, even die, but the level of self-knowing that they ultimately demonstrate, or the amount of responsibility they have, is not accountable in fully human terms. After all, what can you expect from a pig? Or, an artist? As Kröger asserts, the “artist must be unhuman, extra-human; he must stand in a queer aloof relationship to our humanity.”

For Breuer, the human/animal relationships are metaphorical, tricksterish, mythic; and sex happens. When Rose and Suelee fall in love and have sex, at the climax of which Rose dies, one has to pause at the paradoxes. Rose remains subordinate to human desire and manipulations (Suelee seduces her by reading from Plato’s *Symposium*), but she is also triumphant as she finally chooses LOVE and is not its victim. She is “Top Dog.” Then a Dead Dog. Then reborn as an Ant.

And the moral of the story? I doubt there is a moral. Like Aesop, Swift, and other fabulists, Breuer’s animal figures and voices can skewer human foibles and rake our morality over the coals. But, unlike those of such predecessors, his philosophical underpinnings are more metaphysically hybridized. In performance, his raw stew is cooked with an interculturally theatricalized fare that mixes puppetry, masks, storytelling, and shadows and light. Western and Asian performance theory are in his recipe box and, of course, the latter are inseparable from religious and mythical thought. Thus, Breuer’s plots and theory thicken considerably when, in *La Divina Caricatura*, he serves up sides of science and salts it with myth/belief solutions. Rose, we learn, meets the wise cow, Sri Moo, ends up in Bardo, with Porco, and is reborn as a Warrior Ant. In other words, E.O. Wilson and evolutionary biology are bardo-ized and with prop(ositon)s from Indian religio-mytho-performance theory.

Holy Cow! Has what started as a staging of a Loony Toon Horse and Puppy show metamorphosed into a Dantean and DNA-ian parody? Is this not the ultimate Shaggy Dog story, which is not about a dog at all, but all about god? Eschewing Dantesque grandeur and sanctity, *La Divina Caricatura* profanes everything sacred. (Rose is in hell, Porco is in Purgatory, and the Warrior Ant is in Paradise.) Breuer’s emphasis is also theatricalized, scientific, and trans-theoretical. In an earlier book, *Sister Susie Cinema*, he included an aphoristic essay, “The Theatre and Its Trouble.” The essay pleads for poetry in theatre, for more non-Western performance, for considering that “[Performance] is the method of natural selection adopted by culture. Culture is society’s DNA.” In the last part of *La Divina Caricatura*, however, the stakes are higher. As Sri Moo Paramahamsa, a cow who teaches at the Institute where Rose recovers,
puts it, “What is God’s Action?” She moos, “What is the Divine Through Line?”

Sri Moo lectures to Doctors of Divinity in Scotland. Her rumination, titled *Summa Dramatica*, ranges freely into the fields of theory, genetics, spirituality, physics, addiction, and cartoons. Being a divine bovine and an “Adjunct Ungulate in AntiEleatics,” she subverts genus and species with genius. “As an academic, a mammal, and a cow,” she utters, “I know I have a soul.” Sri’s beast to man treatise cites the *Quantum Dramaturgy*, *The Qu’Ant UM—Holy Books of Ants*, and thinkers from Aristotle to Tweetybird. Breuer/Moo’s pataphysical discourse argues for performance as an eternal matter of soul seeking, accelerated by recombinatory genetics that quest for becoming light and pure animation. Animation, Moo enucleates, refers to a recirculating, soul, spirit, immortal life force, a neuronal “meme.” Descendant from a Jungian anima, cousin of the Warner Brothers, Breuer’s animation is as real as the soul of Galy Gay.

Briefly, Sri Moo applies physics to the soul, eventually concluding that the soul is receptive to light, but behaves like a quanta-particle until it attaches to a role, at which point it becomes animated. “Plays,” Moo explains, are the cultural entities where roles, in the form of knowable characters (heroes, fools) appear, with historical and social variations. Roles, scenes, dramatic genres, and acting are discussed. Sri Moo states: “Roles, when Animated, are Souls. Souls are Resurrected as they play Roles. As one’s Immortal Soul is Performative, these Performances are Immortal—the Divine Sarah comes to mind . . . .” Sri Moo then demonstrates how souls, like those of Rose and Porco, become addicted and are unable to function because the pool of dominant roles are limited and market driven. Souls need vital ideas and imagery, i.e., culture, to evolve. But our choices are becoming idiotic. Souls seek pure animation, but, instead, become addicted to Art Martyrs like John, or the mindless products of Broadway and Hollywood. Moo’s Institute is dedicated to the rehabilitation of souls so they can return with clearer understanding of themselves and thereby reinvigorate “the Biocultural Game.”

Moo’s logic loosens the longer she muses. God is aware of the situation and “selects for stupidity.” HIS idea is de-evolution. For Breuer/Moo (and E.O. Wilson), the solution lies beneath our feet. That is, the perfect creature, the most socially yet individuated organism of all time is the Ant. Ants, in Breuer’s reincarnation dogma, are at the apex of the cycle of the soul’s life. An ant has no “I,” thus only acts for the community. Group action and consciousness is what is needed for the regeneration of life. Breuer’s cycle of plays, *The Maha BarbaraAnt*, takes on this problem and dramatizes the ascent (or re-ascent) of ants, thereby, refocusing reincarnation with sociobiology. Of course, Sri Moo’s realizes that each individual is, paradoxically, a composite and a cultural entity in itself. Thus, individuals, following the logic of natural selection, are conflicted between becoming more individuated or adapting to their culture to preserve it, thereby losing their identity.

As a performance theory, this is suggestive for thinking about Breuer’s work.
On stage, his characters are deeply conflicted between being animals and responding to human/social behaviors. Yet, they cannot help but react to the total ecology of the mise-en-scène: music, lighting, gesture, sound, motion. Like real cartoon characters (Goofy or Wily E. Coyote), Breuer’s are pliable, indestructible, but adaptable to every environment, which is why he employs Bunraku and hand puppets, shadows, projections, masks, and stage gimmicks galore. Breuer seems to be crookedly following Kleist, Artaud, and Grotowski in his probing of a spiritual center for theatre, along with traditional aesthetic practices from various cultures and pertinent scientific concepts. Thinking from Breuer’s perspective (yikes!) leads me to imagine entirely different approaches to The Birds, The Seagull, The Bedbug, Rhinoceros, Animal Crackers, Cats, BatBoy, The Hairy Ape, and, two other plays, which might be subliminal templates for his oeuvre, In the Jungle of Cities and Mann is Mann.

Admittedly, as the Summa Dramatica is rendered by a cow to theologians in an “Afterword” of a novelization based on existing plays, it amounts to less than a formal presentation of theory. That said, like all theories of performance in artistic works (say, Hamlet talking to the players), there is doubtless method in it. As for the rest of La Divina Caricatura, there is much more to consider. But, you are on your own. My copy is already too dog-eared to be of further use.

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