Navid Kermani

Das Buch der von Neil Young Getöteten

(‘**The Book of the Listeners Slain by Neil Young**’)

Translation sample by

Tony Crawford
E-mail: tony@crawford.berlin

[[Orig. pp. 7–16:]]

As if God had wanted to drive home to her the realization that she was no longer in Paradise, as if He had wanted to rob her of the memory of it, or, worse still, to make her sense of security shrivel into a mere memory, my daughter got colic every evening about eight or half past eight. The word sounds harmless, but those who have held in their hands a newborn babe writhing with pain, its features twisted in a thousand folds; who have subjected themselves, even for just ten minutes, to that thin squeal, would have to be cynical to find this world tolerable. I hadn’t known before exactly what colic is, or that there is a name for it, the term ‘three-month colic’, when it occurs in newborns. Three months of torture were in store for my daughter. No one had warned us, and no one, no matter who we alerted, seemed to take her torment seriously. The assurances of our midwife, our daughter’s grandparents, and our friends that many infants get colic and it is no cause for alarm struck me as euphemistic and

unfeeling. Carrying my screaming daughter through the flat, I accused humanity of closing its eyes to the real conditions of existence, and God of a crime against humanity. What, if not a newborn baby who, unlike adults or even older children, cannot soften the pain by routing the sensation through the qualifying faculties of consciousness; what, if not his daughter's colic, should give a father cause for alarm, not because he is seriously worried about her health, but because he sees all the wretchedness of this world manifested in her struggling body?

The shock was all the greater because the first few weeks with my daughter, apart from isolated moments of panic, had passed in complete tranquillity, and even the birth had gone much more smoothly for my daughter (although not for my courageous wife) than I had imagined it would. She had only cried (my daughter, not my wife) for a few seconds. Then she looked at us calmly, through her huge eyes, a little bit expectantly, a little bit sceptically: 'So that's what you look like,' she seemed to be thinking. Since that moment, I have known the taste of bliss. On that early morning, I carried my daughter for what must have been nearly an hour, spellbound by the solemnity of her gaze, swaying through the sparsely lit delivery room, and sang to her, so softly that only she could hear it, the song 'Turaluralu' by the German group Trio; but that's not part of this story, because the book I'm writing is about Neil Young, and he didn't enter my daughter's life until she needed him (I used to think Neil Young was always a necessity, but now I believe a person can get by without him for the first few days).

The colic began, if my memory does not deceive me, about ten days after she was born. I had been out with my best friend, and brought him home with me for a glass of wine, when we found my shaken wife and my whimpering daughter on the sofa. That evening I had a good laugh about her maternal ineptitude and my paternal aura, since my daughter quieted down in my arms, but the next day and the day after that, and the third evening too, my hands could work no more miracles, and I had to admit the probability that, on that first evening, I had simply happened to arrive home at the right time, about half eleven, when my daughter had just got over the distress that was to become her daily routine.

The evenings that followed were devastating. As I trotted up and down in our split-level flat, trying all kinds of holds and positions in vain, I was only kept alive by the duty to see my daughter through, and by the prospect that her pain would abate in three hours, more or less exactly, and that in three months the colic would be past. But my inability to communicate these consoling thoughts to my daughter tormented me. Carrying her and cuddling her was not without its effect, apparently; she often stopped screaming and only whimpered, or was still for minutes at a time, but her strained features made it plain that she was still in discomfort. Damn this world! Every evening I remembered a quotation from Georg Büchner about mankind being the gods' poor musicians, and our bodies the instruments: 'Do we wring these awful yowlings from them only to have them rise higher and higher and fade away into a voluptuous sigh in the ears of heaven?' I had quoted it in my thesis

on Islamic mysticism because it expresses a motif common in Sufi writings. But this, the yowling that a bitter fate wrung from my daughter, was no motif – it was as real as a truck or a toothache.

I was standing in the middle of my study with my daughter during the fourth evening of colic when the thought came to me to listen to music: perhaps it would distract her, I reasoned, not taking much hope from the idea. But there was nothing else for me to do, and it certainly wouldn't hurt. Following a sudden impulse, I immediately picked Neil Young's 'Last Trip to Tulsa', the last track on his first solo album: a nearly endless repetition of the same unvarying chords, punctuated by pauses of several seconds, to a superb lyric that I have never understood to this day. The track is not only fragile, associative, fortuitous; it is intentionally so – as is so much of Neil Young's later music and lyrics – conserving the outer form of a conventional song structure while demolishing it from within. Wearing the cloak of a folk ballad, with the acoustic guitar as the only instrument, 'The Last Trip to Tulsa' is really the sometimes meditative, sometimes gruff recitation of a poem that purposely submits to the constraints of rhyme and to the assonances and dissonances of the language, and by that very submission drifts in a different direction with each succeeding verse, discovering a surprise with every line. There is something about it of nursery rhymes, and also something of speaking in tongues; when I hear these verses, I imagine Neil Young sitting on the bed in his hotel room, his western boots stretched out across the starched sheet, a good buzz in his skull, listening to the syllables and the rhythmic sounds emerging from the

unvarying chords of his guitar, the sequences of assonant vowels, like the /e/ in 'servicemen were yellow' and the /ə/ in 'but I was afraid to ask'; of initial or final consonants like the /g/ in 'gasoline was green' and the /t/ in 'my last trip to Tulsa'. Following the logic of the text, Young writes the lyrics in the booklet in lower case and in running text, without line breaks.

I was by no means so presumptuous as to suppose I could initiate my daughter to the literary aesthetics and the onomatopoetic nuances of Canadian avant-garde poetry at the age of one week. What moved me to put on 'The Last Trip to Tulsa', and not one of the many harmonious Neil Young songs that even women and children can appreciate, although admittedly those tracks are sometimes shallow, and occasionally – I confess, to forestall any suspicions that I might not be an objective judge – embarrassing (and other music besides Neil Young was out of the question, although I might have considered 'Turaluralu' if I had had the CD, despite the fact that I had already tried singing it, to no avail), what moved me then was the voice, the woefully high voice that frequently slips into a whine, a voice which is actually unacceptable for a singer, and especially for a rock singer, which many people find too thin, almost fluting, the voice of a Kafkan hunger artist, which can only be neuralgic to unreceptive listeners and which for so many years now has brought me the most malicious remarks from my mates and my brothers, whereas I, like every other Neil Young fan no doubt, love it more than everything else about him. This track shows off Neil Young's voice in its purest state, both by its minimalistic instrumentation and

because most of the time he sings very softly, not always on the threshold of a whisper, but over the borderline between singing and self-directed monologue. It is indeed an unusual communicative situation, inasmuch as a song is almost always directed to a multitude of addressees, yet in this recording Neil Young seems to be singing for himself, or at most for another person sitting next to him on the bed (me, for instance), leaning shoulder to shoulder with him against the wall. His voice here reveals rare shadings, deep, silky and rough. The piece begins with Neil Young flailing more or less haphazardly at his guitar two or three times, after which, as if in contrition, he almost inaudibly caresses it. Because that intro was completely drowned out by my daughter's screams, I gave the volume knob a good twist to the right. And then, out of the blue, the voice was there, cautious, almost shy and yet tempting; as I said, at the lower boundary of vocalization, but of course extremely loud out of the speakers, much too loud for a baby.

> well i used to drive a cab you know, i heard a siren
> scream, pulled over to the corner and fell into a dream.
> there where two men eating pennies and three young
> girls who cried, 'the west coast is falling. i see rocks in
> the sky.' the preacher took his bible and he laid it on
> the stool. he said, 'with the congregation running, why
> should i play the fool?'

After freezing for a second, I wanted to rush to the amplifier and turn the volume back down, but in the time between the realization that I had to turn the music down and the impulse to go to the bookcase and do it, during that tenth-of-a-second of timelessness

between the two units of thought, my daughter went quiet. I noticed it immediately, and not because she fell silent – the music was too loud and I was too fascinated by it – but because her body relaxed. I felt it in my hands, where she was lying on her side, her chest in my left, her hips in my right; I felt it in my two little fingers which were touching her belly; in the nerves in the pads of my fingertips.

> well i used to be a woman you know, i took you for a ride. i let you fly my airplane, it looked good for your pride. 'cause you're the kind of man you know, who likes what he says. i wonder what it's like to be so far over my head. well the lady made the wedding and she brought along the ring. she got down on her knees and said, 'let's get on with this thing.'

Throughout the nearly ten minutes of the track she was quiet, even through the middle of the storm that twice breaks loose unannounced halfway through the trip and exposes us to the raging of the wind-whipped sea, the hard, jarring sound of strings pounded with full force and the wailing of a tenor already much too high – even during this hard-rock intermezzo on the acoustic guitar, this portrait of the punk as a young man, my daughter was not ruffled for a second. Cool as an old salt on the ocean of Neil Young's music, she braved the tumultuous tempest until we found smoother waters again. Neil Young has his metallic side, his stubborn rejection of harmonies, by which he has earned my loyalty, enduring through all his patches of harmlessness, as no one else has except 1st FC Cologne (who are, after all, the Real Madrid of the West). Many of his deepest tracks and his best albums arise from a tension between his lust for

destruction and his incredible knack for good melodies that only he can bring off, because his voice, neither hard nor handsome, but simply flutelike, yields to neither of the two opposing forces. There have been tours where tape loops of machine noises filled the gaps between his numbers, and the roadies had to wear hard hats with ear muffs – for medical, not for visual reasons. The EP *Eldorado* for example, which Neil Young published at the end of one such tour in 1989, in a ridiculously small pressing, and which was only sold in Japan and Australia, so that, besides the Japanese and the Australians, only hard-core fans know about it, is one of the three or four Neil Young records that stand out as total works of art. The noise is like the inside of a factory – but a factory with the first breeze of spring blowing through it. This tension finds its clearest expression in *Eldorado*, but something similar powers Young's best LPs, *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* from 1969, *Zuma* and *Live Rust* from the seventies, and his late gems *Ragged Glory, Weld* and *Sleeps With Angels* – all of which are albums that he recorded with the rowdies from Crazy Horse by the way, the garage band that plays almost as badly as Neil Young sings ('three guys and as many chords', as a journalist once described them). [[…]]

[[Orig. pp. 81–91:]]

No one, least of all Neil Young himself, ever claimed his guitar playing was technically good. His right hand is adroit, but his left

hand moves slowly due to a disability. He doesn't know scales, and many of the notes he would play are, as he says himself, 'notes that I know aren't there.' And there is only one band, Crazy Horse, that hears the notes that aren't there. That's why he must prefer them to any other, better band. Only with them do all the fingers come together to make a hand, the ears equal a sense of hearing. Only with them can he sit down by the well, free from the need to make allowances and agreements, and give ear to the sound welling up. 'You can call it a solo,' he's quoted somewhere as saying, 'but it's really ... the whole band that's playing. Billy Talbot is a massive bass player who only plays two or three notes. People are still trying to figure out whether it's because he only *knows* two or three notes or whether those are the only notes he wants to play. But when he hits a note, that note speaks for itself. It's a big motherfuckin' note. Even a soft one is big. Frank uses the biggest strings of any guitar player I've ever seen. Frank is probably even more of a crude player than I am, because his lead isn't as developed as mine. But his strings are *so* big! He hits a note, and it's a big note. Without Crazy Horse playing so big, I sound just normal. But they supply the big so I can float around and sound *huge*. The big is them.'

'The big' was first caught on vinyl in *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*. Since then, Neil Young and Crazy Horse have let the improvisations draw them in deeper and deeper, surrendered more and more completely to the feeling of the song, especially in concert. With ever greater patience they have held their ears to the well. I have a bootleg of a 1970 concert, a CD of disgraceful quality in which

the mixing is completely chaotic, the noise is louder than in a train compartment, the guitars sound like triangles and now and then go missing for seconds at a time. These recordings of 'Down by the River' and 'Cowgirl in the Sand', in which the musicians not only make mistakes but also audibly admit them, strain the aesthetic sensitivities of even lenient novices; but to the hard core, they are magnificent. Both songs run twice as long as the already generous studio recordings, so that a piece like *Down by the River*, based on a composition that barely fills three minutes, extends to twenty. It is a wild, ecstatic din based on the same monotonous strokes, yet as if Neil Young and Crazy Horse finally dared to cast off, and with never a glance shoreward. But in the studio recording, the liberation from the structures that a composed piece imposes are still fresh. The rawness, hesitancy, and tangible newness of this recording in particular, made two whole weeks after Crazy Horse first got together, is still exhilarating today. Neil Young seems to have a similar view. Although he has since played 'Down by the River' at countless concerts – I myself was privileged to hear a fantastic interpretation a few years ago – he has not released it in the electric version on any of his later live albums (it only flares up briefly in an acoustic version on an early live album with his other band, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young). There is something in the very first recording that has never been achieved again since, and never can be: Neil Young and Crazy Horse never would become really good musicians, but in 1969, they were still really bad. Their musical abilities were so limited, and at the same time their will to find an expression for their

feeling was so great, that the music seemed to be constantly hurtling into walls, and positively exploded – yet not with a huge thunderstorm like Jimi Hendrix's, but as if in a laboratory, under a bell jar, quietly, intensely and unspectacularly, so that inattentive listeners, and neighbours who only know Neil Young from the stairwells and corridors, don't even notice it. With Crazy Horse, Young often sounds like a garage band; they don't rehearse much, they just start playing, and usually the first take is the one that ends up on the album. 'We *knew* we weren't any good,' Neil Young once admitted. 'We *knew* none of us can really *play*. We'd get it in the first take every time, and it was never right — but we could never do it better. We're makin' mistakes, but what happens is we get so into the music it sounds great.' In 1990 he said that, after the release of *Ragged Glory*.

Octavio Paz tells the story of a beggar in Tibet who walked up to the city wall and mumbled something, whereupon the goddess of love miraculously appeared to him. The priests and monks couldn't believe it, but they found that, every Sunday after the beggar recited his litany, the goddess of love really did descend on him, speak a few words, and then disappear. The imperial court heard about this beggar and invited him to come and recite the litany before the emperor. The beggar came, but the monks saw that he recited the litany all wrong. They knew its original source and corrected the beggar. The next Sunday, the beggar tried to mumble the correct version, and the goddess of love has never revealed herself again since.

Neil Young has an outstanding perception of the value of the spontaneous, the unpolished; he once said his goal was something analogous to *cinéma vérité*, a kind of *audio vérité*; he later had to create that musical atmosphere deliberately, but in 1969 it was simply there. That is what is special about this recording of 'Down by the River'. It really is a garage band that just got together a few days ago and is amazed to discover how much you can do with two guitars, a bass and drums when there's no one there to bother you. He reported the beginnings of his musical career to his biographer and father as follows: 'There was a kid in my class who had an electric guitar. There was another kid who didn't have a guitar, but he *wanted* to. The first one had a good guitar and also an amp. So I got a guitar and would plug into his amp. Then my other friend, Ken Koblun, got a guitar, a bass. And we started playing, you know … we just started.' 'Down by the River' and 'Cowgirl in the Sand' came into the world eight years later.

To be honest, I secretly consider 'Cowgirl in the Sand' even more felicitous than its twin because the individual instruments are more consistently intermeshed and the high tension is sustained every second. That is more distinctly audible on the bootleg I have: the guitars on 'Cowgirl in the Sand' never yield the centre. Nonetheless, 'Down by the River', so uncontainable, has always been a tiny bit closer to my heart. It has that easy beat and – well, the melody, the text, the refrain, which I just dismissed as incidental, are really phenomenal, of course. Exactly how the composition hits home, how desperate, precise and terrible the two verses are, is

demonstrated by the bootleg I mentioned, on which Neil Young plays 'Down by the River' solo on the acoustic guitar – the song holds up easily; you almost forget there ever was an electric version.

> Be on my side, I'll be on your side
> There is no reason for you to hide
> It's so hard for me staying here all alone
> When you could be taking me for a ride
> (Chorus:)
> She could drag me over the rainbow
> Send me away
> Down by the river
> I shot my baby
> Down by the river
> Dead

Maybe someone knows the situation when everything crashes down over your head and you cling to some girl, not even a pretty or attractive one, but your baby isn't interested in you, and only laughs; maybe someone can imagine what absurd, self-centred fantasies you spin and how you imagine everything would be all right, and the best thing, for your baby too, would be if you just ran away together from the hopelessness that you sometimes back yourself into and the shame that you feel towards yourself about it, towards no one else, not even your baby, who you could tell about it, but who couldn't care less, because no one has any idea how colossal the disaster is, no one knows the details of the rottenness and the pettiness that you would see in yourself if you only had the courage, and that courage itself would be the only thing that could save you from the fallacy that it's your baby who is recklessly refusing the happiness there

would be in running away together, leaving it all behind you and starting a new life, a life that isn't really there, or can only exist for other people, like your baby, who locks you out and gives her love to some other guy, the wrong guy. That is desperation, but it's a dingy little cold desperation that could drive some people to turn their aggression outward and shoot their baby down by the river.

The second of the two verses in particular has always, in my mind, scored the movement of running away that used to run through my life before my daughter barred the way.

> You'll take my hand, I'll take your hand
> Together we may get away
> This much madness is too much sorrow
> It's impossible to make it today
> (Chorus)

The dream of escape that 'Down by the River' tells of, and musically represents, is not that sentimental urge that I liked in 'Out on the Weekend'; not a momentary getaway from a boring routine that, looked at rationally, is actually bearable. This beat is deliberate and dispassionate. The melancholia that the speaker needs to flee from here is so pervasive that nothing is left of his motivation, except that he couldn't be worse off somewhere else. Late in the bridge there is a significant passage, when the two guitars, after going their separate lonely ways, unexpectedly meet again. For a couple of seconds, they play the same chords. Then, as if they were ashamed of their unison – as a married couple who incessantly argue feel awkward when they notice they have drawn close together for the

space of a few words or a glance – they stop, in a silence whose eloquence is heightened by the fact that the bass and the drums play on as if nothing had happened, a sound cycle in the background that we only notice after all other noises or voices have suddenly fallen silent. Whatever was left alive dies here. The rhythm guitar takes up its trot again, whereupon the lead guitar hastens to drag out a few irrelevant notes, until the song's initial riff sounds the signal that releases them both and the second verse follows, beginning with the proposal of escape and ending in the refrain with the murder – if ever a second of music slew me, it would have to be the 'dead' at the end of the refrain, sung by Neil Young in his highest register, as the soft wail of someone hit, although the speaker of the text is the one who fired the gun. No, let me be more exact: it's not the death cry itself that hits me: the moment it is sung, the refrain ends, and the old beat comes in again undisturbed, the highway beat. It's that. The singer woefully dwells on his deed, or his word, for a few more seconds, repeating to himself, 'Shot her dead,' but by then he, and we, are already back on the road. That a single object never fills our consciousness completely, and even in our first grief, our most fervent love, we simultaneously perceive the advertisement on the side of a bus, the wax stains on a table; that time does not stop and we can love or kill or whatever we do without stopping the course of events; that we can mourn a dead person one evening, yet the next morning, or the morning after that at the latest, we still get up, eat breakfast, have a shit, read the headline on the newspaper, listen to the voicemail; that the worst troubles or pangs of conscience are not

bad enough to bother us permanently, and even the direst – killing the person we love – can't stop us from going on living, edging closer to death; that even the other person's death doesn't release us from our own transience: that is what the moment says in which Neil Young cries, 'Dead,' and the old beat resumes, unperturbed. A gruesomely beautiful moment: the idea of writing this book originated exactly then. Many years ago I came across a manuscript which purported to be about mystics who had listened to recitations of the Quran and died of it. *The Book of the Listeners Slain by the Quran*, it was called. Before I had even examined the manuscript, its title fascinated me. I had the feeling I knew exactly what it meant. At that time I listened often to 'Down by the River', and every time it gave my heart a convulsion until I thought, for a tenth of a second, I would suffocate. When I first heard of the *Book of the Listeners Slain by the Quran*, I found it not at all curious or implausible that people could be killed by a chant. What the manuscript discusses must be, I imagined, the escalation or the extreme of that same experience that Neil Young gave me. In the meantime I have read the *Book of the Listeners Slain by the Quran*, written my own book about it, and discovered that my assumption was correct, and relates to a fundamental aesthetic experience that people have tried in every age to grasp rationally. It took a long time, and it took me a roundabout route via Islamic mysticism, Baudelaire, Rudolf Otto and Theodor Adorno, before I finally made the attempt to describe the simultaneity of delight and terror, negating both of them, at the point where it first entered my consciousness – in other words, before I

discovered *The Book of the Listeners Slain by Neil Young*. More than a few of its protagonists were done in down by the river. Now I see the striving of the past third of my lifetime, the years of studying books and emotions, the exploration of the Quran, poetry, food, love, and most of all, sex – now I see that it was all directed towards nothing else but grasping the instant right after Neil Young cries, 'Dead'. Anyone who thinks I'm exaggerating hasn't listened carefully to the song, or else knows nothing at all about sex. [[…]]

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a quotation from Georg Büchner: Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, in *Danton's Death, Leonce and Lena, Woyzeck*, trans. Victor Price, OUP 1988.

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