

LUSTRE, GERARD MUSY

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So, if I dream I have you, I have you,
For, all our joys are but fantastical.

L is for the Latin *lustrare*, meaning to illuminate, to make lustrous or illustrious. From which emerged *lustre* or *luster*, now defined variously as: the quality of shining with reflected light; the radiance of beauty or renown; and brightness, sparkle, as in “the lustre of the stars.” *Lustre* evokes glossy surfaces, glitter and sheen.

In eighteenth-century French art, as laid down in the decorous brushstrokes of a Fragonard or a Watteau, “nothing mattered more than the turn of a phrase that put glitter on a platitude of love.” For the twentieth-century artist Gérard Musy, the language of photography offers up its own eloquent syntax, its own potential for glittering turns of phrase. Now the sparkle emanates from leather and latex, chain and whip, and is captured and sealed in the silver of Musy’s photographic prints.

Lustre relates to *lust*: “intensely felt desire; that which yields pleasure.” Usually, *lust* speaks of a maddening, seemingly uncontrollable, need to take sexual possession of another human being. Musy channels his *lust* by guiding the light of his eye through his lens, and thus succeeds in catching the elusive lynx, bird of night desires.

...my eyes are lenses
through which the brain explores
constellations of feeling...

L is also for *list*, in former times closer to *lust*. To *list* was to collect, to possess. A *list* was a border, or what was contained by borders: a field, especially one of combat. Musy’s field is boundless. The photographer prowls it restlessly, always ready to add another link to his chain of pleasures: New York’s Club “A”, the Roxy, the Kamikaze, Ava’s, the Vault; Los Angeles’ Vertigo; London’s Skin Two, Torture Garden, Fantastic Club; Paris’s Palace, les Bains, le Queen, Geneva’s Macumba. . . . And as a reminder that the more genteel tastes of tea and music lovers have their own erotic allure: Paris’ *Mariage Frères* and New York’s Metropolitan Opera.

U is for upside down: unsettling perspectives, vertigo, whirling horizons, fragmented bodies. Musy prefers the spinning forms of a kaleidoscope. We, the bodies of *Lustre*, defy gravity and the vertical. Abandoning the upright, we float, “... carrying our seed in our head; like flowers, flaunting our sex shamelessly; as in Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, upside down; an end to uprightness, the way up is the way down... The shape of the body awakes, the shape of the resurrected body is not vertical but perverse and polymorphous; not a straight line but a circle.

U is also for urbane: “evincing the polish and suavity characteristic of social life in large cities.” Gérard Musy’s so urbane metropolitans, cosmopolitans, accoutured in feathers and animal skin, and draped with ornament. The brightness of stars in the night sky seems to fade the closer we get to big cities, but the luminosity of Musy’s earthly bodies (his cosmopolitans) is magnified; densely-packed human beings throw up superhuman talents and superhuman desires. Does not desire stem from the Latin *desiderare*, itself from *de+sidus*, star or constellation? In Musy’s constellation, every/body is a star, flickering, each one a phantasm: “a constantly shifting succession of things seen, imagined in the imagination.” Musy the phantasmagorist, then, and *Lustre* his kaleidoscope.

S is for sensation—both the pleasurable sensations evidently enjoyed by Musy’s subjects, and those enjoyed by us, his book in our laps. Sensational, too, those preposterous fashion shows, those glittering parties and all their fashionable accoutrements—those chains, whips, pierced nipples, pristine white gloves (what goes uncovered in public gets covered in the pleasure palaces, and vice versa).

S is, inevitably, for Sade, who proposed to counter the stale hedonism of the bourgeoisie, reinvest sex with mystery and terror...

...Natural freedoms are but just:
There’s something generous in mere lust.

...and question the hypocritical notion of love’s benevolence:

For the crown of our life as it closes
Is darkness, the fruit thereof dust;
No thorns go as deep as a rose’s,
And love is more cruel than lust.

Lastly, **S** is for the true spirit of surrealism, “a systematic illumination of the hidden places and a progressive darkening of the rest: a perpetual promenade right in the forbidden zone.”

T is for thrills and theatrics—with everybody given assigned a role in the erotic drama, and everyone a voyeur. The Theater of Cruelty, demanding engagement and chastisement before purification. The virtues of shadow (*The Dark Is Light Enough*: the title of a play by Christopher Fry), clandestine rituals, secret games at the limits of legality.

T is also for Thanatos, death personified, brother of Hypnos—sleep, and son of Nyx—the night. He keeps Eros in his sights, but can never blind him:

I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore
And bade me creep past.
No! Let me taste the whole of it...

R is for the radiance of beauty. Musy, lost in the soft glow of femininity...

I love to watch, while you are lazing,
Your skin. It iridescens
Like silk or satin, smoothly glazing
The light that it caresses.

R is for radiant energy: “traveling in straight lines with the speed of light, passing through certain media without absorption, absorbed by other media as black bodies, reflected by still other media, as polished surfaces.”

E is for ennui, that which lust sweeps aside. “The moment we indulge our affections, the earth is metamorphosed; ...all tragedies, all ennui, vanish...”

And **E** is for Eros, the 433rd asteroid, which comes closer to earth than any other heavenly body. Immortal Eros, Musy’s guide:

“Dear heart,” said Vesperus, “there’s no need to use the bed. Why don’t we take this easy chair as our rock and try to imitate the picture in the album. What do you say?”

Jade Scent pretended to be angry. “People don’t do things like that!”

“You’re right,” said Vesperus, “people don’t do them. Immortals do! Let’s be immortals for a little while.”