

R. BRUCE ELDER'S *THE BOOK OF ALL THE DEAD*

The Book of All the Dead, R. Bruce Elder's 42-hours long first cycle, gathers films he made between 1975 and 1994. (He started working on a new cycle of more modest proportions, *The Book of Praise*, soon thereafter.) In both its quantitative and qualitative scope, it is likely the most ambitious artwork in its medium, in the same league as the towering achievements in other media on which it is modelled: Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Pound's *Cantos*, Wagner's *Ring*, as an epic of Biblical proportions, structure, and inspiration. For "*The Book of All the Dead* is an effort (bound not to succeed) to create a compendium of the most valuable thoughts produced by the greatest minds of our civilization —by the greatest minds of the culture that is about to disappear"¹: namely the West, whose objectifying "conquest of the world as image" (Heidegger) has proceeded abreast of its own inner collapse. Can some kind of spiritual raft be pieced together from the flotsam of this shipwreck, by using art to wrest some meaningful patterns from the undertow as they emerge? This was Elder's wager in resorting to experimental film to not only trace the modern world's descent into the hell of technological nihilism, but point the way to a paradise regained by reuniting mind and body, coaxing the viewer to surrender to poetic rhythms arising out of the counterpoint of the disparate stimuli of a non-narrative multimedia collage that thwarts the rational subject's phantasies of control and continuity. To enact the interpenetration of self and world, he ventured to rely on the ontological features of the photographic image, since it is not made by human hands so much as by the unconcealment of light, hoping to fashion through film "a new model of reality —a post-modern paradigm" "that most closely resembles the pre-modern beliefs of Western Christianity"², where material signs reveal the elusive creative wellspring of all appearance, while the past remains alive in the present as the future comes forth.

The Book of All the Dead, accordingly, is not a version of Dante (or of Pound) but a demonstration of the endurance of a particular pattern of intelligence —[...] concerning a journey to the place of the dead and a visit with ancient bards. [...] [It] manifests the co-existence of works in this higher Order of Things and the co-presence of all such works even in the intelligence of our miserably destitute times.³

Elder's cycle is deeply indebted in this to Northrop Frye's literary criticism.

At the base of Frye's writing is a conception of bio-power which extends in a vast field throughout history. Power is depicted as energy which creates the forms of literary work that appear through the pens of artists and poets. This represents Frye's attempt to get beyond the categories of time and space, good and evil, or any of the categories of law that constitute the power structure of the western mind. It is a profoundly idealistic conception and undoubtedly reflects Frye's religious belief.⁴

—As it does Elder's, since he understands his films as "the work of a simple pious man."⁵ For *The Book of All the Dead* assumes the incarnation of the Light of the world, the divine Word in which all things have their being in time, yet are bound up "*In Light of the Great Giving*" as the single timeless text of Truth that manifests Be-ing itself, like the Bible. This analogy comes out incidentally in the following gloss:

I have wanted to work with many types of construction, to emphasize the films' collage character [...] [as] an occasion for the happening of truth, for truth to emerge into the

opening in routine that the strangeness of a work of art creates. Only such a bricolage construction that disturbs the flow of time can suggest the continual renewal of Be-ing in the incessant coming forth of beings. (Of course, a book, in the Biblical sense, is similar: a motley collection of records of diverse sorts: poems, prayers, history, legal edicts, theological speculations, visionary records, anecdotes, allegories, parables, tales, etc.)⁶

Most of the elements Elder lists as components of the Bible as a collection of books are also to be found, among others, in his own *Book of All the Dead*. This collection of filmic “books” is likewise arranged in an overarching order, the same one that Frye identified as the Great Code of Western literature, detectable in most of its works, i.e. the sequence Eden-Fall-Exile-Redemption. It may seem ironic that a post-modern work dedicated to uprooting the very idea of narrative as central to the mental apparatus of technological mastery turns out to be based on the *grand récit par excellence*, the Bible as founding text of Western civilization and of its claims to domination. Yet what better way to heal and transmute it than to reclaim some overlooked insights of its own tradition? This is why, like Wagner’s *Ring*, “its main theme is love and the irreconcilability of love with domination.”⁷ It therefore resists imposing a neat coherence on the viewer’s experience, instead allowing order to fleetingly emerge out of the flow of things as the gift of a Providence that has nothing to do with the triumphant march of linear Progress the modern West has turned it into, since “the New Advent does not stand before us, but above us.”⁸ This must be kept in mind as “the cycle begins with the emergence of Nature out of nothingness and ends with the New Beginning”⁹, again like the *Ring*, while, as in Pound’s *Cantos*, “the interweaving of themes in *The Book of All the Dead* constitutes a gigantic metaphor for the development and conflicts within an individual whose development in turn stands for the historical process itself.”¹⁰

But this development is not cognitive; it’s not that the discovery of an *aporia* in one system of understanding propels one to a new level of understanding. It’s more a historical/theological progression than a conceptual progression.¹¹

Elder’s hints to this effect have largely gone unheeded, so that in approaching *The Book of All the Dead* afresh, one might do worse than take as a guiding thread on this protracted journey the theology of history drawn from the Bible and Christian liturgy that structures the sequence of the films and provides the key to their meaning within the formal whole of the completed cycle, regardless of how and when they arose within the fits and starts of the project as it evolved.

The experience of the Wholly Other that Elder seeks to foster in every moment is that of the very wonder of Creation out of no thing. He likes to locate it in the female body and mode of being as the object of the longing that propels his cycle from beginning to end, corresponding to Beatrice in Dante’s poetic work as a whole. The feminine here is however not just a guide to the divine but a clue to its nature. At the Genesis of the cycle’s world in *Breath/Light/Birth*, light is let be through the clear shade of the Mother’s body as “matrix of mystery” (since the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* is echoed in this one¹²), allowing a child to come to light as the breath of Spirit floats over the creative chaos of birth, in which inner self and outside world are co-emergent. They still appear to be seamlessly interwoven at first in the tender afterglow of *Sweet Love Remembered* between two women who gradually become aware of each other as distinct beings, with a bittersweet taste of self-knowledge at the mirror-stage. This fall from grace is only aggravated with *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, leading from ancient Christian graves to Elder’s mirror image as a body emaciated by disease and a self haunted by death, which drives the narrative

construction of identity through (largely false) memory. Yet the “little death” of pleasure can still afford unity with Nature, while film footage takes over from stained-glass windows as a “text of light” (Brakhage) about its Source, exemplified in the transparent *Trace* of a painterly nude that follows: a glimpse of the redeeming female figure that will recur throughout the cycle, like the principle of *Permutations and Combinations*, where rapid-fire audio-visual non-sequiturs show a way beyond self-will. It leads to the increasingly random chronometry that becomes part of the collage of poetic and mathematical citations of 1857 (*Fool’s Gold*), where Pound admits he has “tried to write Paradise”, even though “*Le Paradis n’est pas artificiel*”; for natural forces prove uncontrollable in the Flood, recalling the irresistible storm of Progress blowing from Paradise that thwarts the Angel of History’s constant attempts to go back, “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed”, in Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*.¹³ The “wounds of returning” heal awhile in fragile peace with the Creator after the ordeal related in the words of Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, as though Noah could now say: *Look! We Have Come Through!*, since here for Elder “the cinematic transformations which the dance undergoes parallel my struggles to regain my health after a lengthy illness.”

He performs *The Lesson* by Ionesco in *Illuminated Texts*, demonstrating how “arithmetic leads to philology, and philology leads to crime”¹⁴, since the totalizing rationality of Babel issues in the confusion of languages and ultimate loss of meaning with the sense of good and evil, as reflected in the closing image of himself filming at Auschwitz. Elder’s *Lamentations*, like Jeremiah’s, can then stand as a *Monument to the Dead World* left in the wake of this profanation, since language as the “house of Being” has been laid waste like the Temple as the “house of the Holy” (Heidegger). This feminine presence of God —the Kabbalah’s Shekinah, now exiled from the Temple, is thus mostly felt in the mode of absence in *The Dream of the Last Historian*, for *She Is Away*, and *The Sublime Calculation* that would bring us back dancing to a restored Jerusalem turns out to be an illusion, but for the female figure glimpsed among the abstract patterns of “a purely cinematic choreography” (Elder) in *Barbara Is a Vision of Loveliness*.

She may be that same Shekinah as Wisdom, courted in the Wisdom Books of the Bible (Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Song of Songs) that the *Book of All the Dead* abundantly quotes in the three “books” of *Consolations*, where wisdom is identified with the order of the universe that humankind must learn to submit to in order to find solace, and more specifically with the laws of Nature disclosed by empirical knowledge. The observance of Law now takes over from Temple worship, and such humble attention in obedience prepares virgin ground for a new covenant, allied to a faithful reading of human wisdom. For if Boethius’ *Consolations of Philosophy* stand at the beginning of its Christian tradition, because after all the word is Greek for the “wisdom of love”, this reconciliation of Athens and Jerusalem is sealed by Simone Weil’s definition of faith as “the experience that intelligence is enlightened by love”, which Elder tries to convey at the crux of his cycle. For “*Love Is an Art of Time*” in its most expansive, almost prosaic region, allowing *The Fugitive Gods* to leave in their wake *The Lighted Clearing* where *The Body and the World* can come together in pleasure as a vacant mind communes with the Wholly Other and a saving masculine Word is uttered in a maiden’s shape (as in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s *Parsifal*).

This Magnificat gives way to *Exultations* at the Word’s Incarnation in *Flesh Angels*, since human bodies become the locus of the divine, still wandering between different dispensations in *Newton and Me*, before we reach the end of Purgatory atop the earthly Paradise of *Azure Serene (Mountains, Rivers, Sea, and Sky)*. As Dante there takes leave of Virgil as guide to be led by Beatrice up to the Heavenly Rose, so does Elder part ways with his own mentor Stan Brakhage at the latter’s bridal banquet, evoking both the Wedding at Cana and the Last Supper where the Bridegroom (Christ) joined with his Bride (the Church) as One Body beyond time as

history. This calls for *Exultations: In Light of the Great Giving* of a “time when Heaven descends to earth and makes all earth one with Heaven”(Elder), resolving all dualities into a *coincidentia oppositorum*: above and below, outside and inside, masculine and feminine, the beginning and the end, even life and death at this climax of Holy Week. For Maundy Thursday ushers in the *missa jubilaea*, yet also hinges on the Passion of Good Friday and the Harrowing of Hell on the Sabbath, or *Burying the Dead: Into the Light* that will fill all with the Paschal proclamation of *Et Resurrectus Est* in a garden outside the City of Lights —as Heavenly Jerusalem? For it is at Giverny that Monet captured the Edenic vision of a floral epiphany of Light that propelled Elder on his own quest to film Paradise as the redemption of history within Nature, paradoxically achieved when all things are made new and strangely iconic in the digital imagery of the Risen Body, whose embrace of all the dead with all that lives heals the soul it merges with as a feminine erotic Presence.

¹ Bruce Elder to Antonio Bisaccia, October 1994.

² R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity. Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989, pp. 30-31.

³ (“Ash Wednesday”) “Letter by Bruce Elder” (to Dr. Henderson, April 1, 1991), in *Innis Film Society Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 1992.

⁴ David Cook, *Northrop Frye. A Vision of the New World*. Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1985, p. 14.

⁵ “Interview with Bruce Elder” by Jim Shedden, *Millennium Film Journal*, No. 22, Winter-Spring 1989-1990, p. 114.

⁶ Bruce Elder to Antonio Bisaccia, October 1994.

⁷ “Interview with Bruce Elder” by Jim Shedden, p. 101.

⁸ Bruce Elder to Antonio Bisaccia, October 1994.

⁹ “Interview with Bruce Elder” by Jim Shedden, p. 101.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*, p. 101.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 104.

¹² See a germane Heideggerian reading of that tradition by the University of Saskatchewan’s Herbert V. Guenther, *Matrix of Mystery: Scientific and Humanistic Aspects of rDzogs-chen Thought*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” IX, in *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Tr. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1970, p. 249.

¹⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Four Plays*. Tr. Donald M. Allen. New York: Grove Press, 1958, p. 76.