

The Nigredo

An Essay on the Poetics of Compost

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As Poetry Recycles Neurons

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As readers we are not passive consumers of finished products. Each time we read we consummate with words in a ritual act of *hieros gamos*.¹ The reader is motivated to reassemble texts into new and different word-worlds. The writer is responsible for the inception of a world that has more connections and meaning seeded within it than they can be possibly aware of. Poetry is especially rich with latent meaning and infinite possibility. Upon reading, poetry breaks down into nutrient rich soil, in turn fusing both the poem and the reader. This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry explores this process by drawing on the works of a diverse array of American poets. In the book, quotation and tropic language are the composting mediums that turn the soil. The author, Jed Rasula, posits that language is biodegradable; it decomposes just like organic matter. Over time the poem starts to disintegrate and composite identities emerge from the ashes of the old. Word and language are animate; they live and die by the same rules that all life forms do. Populations of word organisms form semiotic biospheres; their overlapping meanings are sympatric cohabitations of ecological niches; their deaths alchemical transmutations. Like This Compost, this paper is both philosophical discourse and anthology of mutilation. Its focus is on the Nigredo stage of alchemy, or putrefaction, that occurs in the first stages of decomposition. It is in this stage that soma² becomes fertile black earth, the word-matrix that births new life condensed into meaning.

The Nigredo

Melanosis is the blackening of basal matter. Putrefaction.* To rarefy “lead” means the necessary and inevitable decay and disintegration of the materials in the retort and reduction to a state of elementary matter. At the end of each life, the form of all things must dissolve and return to the undifferentiated state from which they arose. Vitriol.³ Visit the interior of the earth and by rectification you will find the hidden stone. Descend into darkness. Light awaits resuscitation.

Eliot paints a picture of decay with the first lines of *The Waste Land*. “April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain.”⁴ Here, April is the *nigredo*⁵ - cruel, daunting, inevitable. Yet new life breeds in the suffering and decay of barren earth. Purple flowers bloom in a dead land. Royalty springs forth from ruin. Memory latent seeds combine with nature’s lustful desire to be inseminated by germ and rain.

Ruin inevitable,

yet

bloom the land fallen dead.

Memories of the lustful

germ and rain.

* In his book, *Creative Mythology The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell writes about the Nigredo stage of alchemy as the stage in which the world came into being out of the primal energies or waters of chaos. He defines the putrefaction of the Nigredo as a “blackening” or “melanosis” of matter.

Life is a passing from the realm of death mirrored *ad infinitum*.⁶ “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?” Life lives on death. It breathes the dead, eats the dead, calls the dead home.

Nigredo is the poetics of death and decay. The protagonist of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is caught deep in reverie on the shore of a beach, reflecting on the mystery of substance, as a boat waits for a drowned mans body to rise “A corpse rising saltwhite from the undertow, bobbing landward. . . . Bag of corpse gas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy tidbit, flash through the slits of his unbuttoned trouser-fly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. Dead breath I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a ruinous offal from all dead. Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun.”⁷ Ubiquitous mortality – none escape, all profit. Tiny mollusks and clamshells are ground down into sand for their begotten children. Body becomes abode. Disintegration is volatilization of the fixed, a rotating of the crops or turning of the soil.

All words become memory become meaning. They are skeletal remains animated by the reader who is both oracle and necromancer.⁸ “To read poetry is to suffer a continual lapse of meaning into being, message to event. A digestive sensation – even excremental.”⁹ Like the phoenix, new generations are created in the ashes of the old. Through the thread of memory – stored as Logos – words walk as corporeal ghosts.

Seed of word-body decomposing / nutrient rich packet of information / Embryo /Yolk / new bodies for new soil / / new growth shoots green / stems flowering buds and leaves / feed the living shepard tone / aural mobius / language

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A current under the sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a necropolis<sup>10</sup>, a place where the living pay homage to the dead. In this passage word sees its own life flash in the night. A bioluminescent flare of latent memory surfaces in the passing. The implicit is made explicit for an instant and then it disappears, back to where it came. The whirlpool is the void that swallows time. The *aqua permanens*<sup>11</sup> that is a current of life-energy returning to its source. The vessel remains. Flesh is picked from word. The reader becomes haruspice<sup>12</sup>, who divines arcane knowledge from viscera, organs and bones. Offal.

Robert Bly offers a poem that rejoices in the sweet perfume of death, "After death the soul returns to drinking milk / And honey in its sparse home. Broken lintels / Rejoin the sunrise gates, and bees sing / In the sour meat."<sup>13</sup> from *Eating the Honey of Words*. Time runs backwards after death. The soul returns to its mother. Milk and honey of the promised land. Bees are nature's adepts who pollinate amongst the dead. Broken lintels - seed bodies - greet the sun. Dana Levin writes about the resurrection of the light in *Sun Sutra*.<sup>14</sup> In the darkness of descent, the stars – astral bodies of light – teach us the arcane knowledge of the night.

-as if dusk were a page  
turning in a book  
and after the bright tale of day with its heroic light

*the quiet story of the stars—*

*teaching you their habit  
of jewelizing the interior—*

so that night  
might not mean loss?

*the art of matter  
is limit and splendor.*

Dusk is a liminal state, a thin veil, where word is traced upon object and text onto image. The turning of the page signifies the transmigration of a soul. The hero must make a descent, a katabasis<sup>15</sup> into the substrate underworld, where the dead pile. Poetry is word star formed constellation. Night and soil are the same here. Both are sewn with bodies, long dead but continuing as ghosts of memory. Terra and celestia. Descension of spirit, ascension of soul. The early metallurgists saw meteoric ore as star seed and telluric ore as embryo mined from the womb of the earth or *petra genetrix*, Gaia.\* Where both substrates meet lies word and language. Necropoetry is chthonic<sup>16</sup> – pertaining to subterranean earth, where the divine sleeps nested in its manifolds. Night, dark soil, depths, ocean, unconscious. Death does not mean loss of meaning. Rasula writes, “Every time the poem is read, it disintegrates. At the same time, its disappearance is not a loss of meaning, but a recovery of its obscurity, its underside.”<sup>17</sup> The art of matter is the beauty of impermanence. *Splendor solis*.<sup>18</sup> All things are magnificent, luminous, and fleeting. One incarnation waiting to be recycled into another. Genesis follows the turning of the page, the turning of the soil. Levin imagines the tomb as a cradle, as birthing house where the dead nourish new bodies.<sup>19</sup>

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\* In his book, *The Forge and the Crucible*, historian and mythologist Mircea Eliade analyzes the roots of metallurgy. Before Humans learned how to mine telluric ore from the womb of the earth, the only source for iron was meteoric ore. This had a profound impact on humans, who generated myths about the celestial origin of a substance that came from the heavens into the willing hands of the homo faber.

You have installed a voice that can soothe you: agents  
*of the eaten flesh, every body*

*a cocoon of change—*

Puparium. The garden  
a birthing house, sarcophagidae—

How the skull-grounds  
are ringed by flame, how they spread out under

a diamond tent, how the adepts  
pupate  
among bones—

All ghost spirits living / word flesh Life thought / Star scry.<sup>20</sup> The soothsayer – reader and teller of signs - finds knowing is in the passing. Secrets lay in the transient nature of all forms. Death is a cocoon, it completely embraces word. Inside each chrysalis, the flesh of word is liquefied and new forms start to congeal. Liquefaction is metamorphosis. The living compile libraries/tombs of the dead into a compost library – a necropolis – an inexhaustible fountain of knowledge. Borges writes in *The Library of Babel* that “The library is unlimited but periodic”.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the sepulcher marks both grave and cradle. Burial grounds are marked by the flame of creation. Fire is temple of diversity, composite identities emerge in its wake. The pupate, too, is a consumer of word flesh – a digestive organ of venerable nature. The art of decay is the Great Work that Rasula writes about in *This Compost*, “The work obeys a process. The worker is dissolved at the crown of creation. A tropic summit; a crypt. “In the mind, the bone pile grows.” And on this “sarcophagus of we know not whom, / each figure, impending, become a sign,’ each sign a seed (sema) each seed a some (some body), is forced through hermetic (sealed) passages by the heat of the process. The fire smokes until the whole mass is illegible chiaroscuro. Black

sun. Nigredo.”<sup>22</sup> From this unreadable mass of undifferentiated meaning, the reader must recombine the discontinuous into interminable comprehension. The reader is the alchemist, who must separate and rarefy the excrement in the retort into the most luminous gold.

## Saprotroph

|              |     |         |               |
|--------------|-----|---------|---------------|
| time         | and | trope   |               |
| body-breaker |     | vulture |               |
|              |     | eat the | carrion       |
|              |     |         | Eucharist     |
|              |     | every   | body          |
|              |     |         | dissassembled |
|              |     | soma    | decomposed    |

## Compost

Time and trope are the compost mediums of the Nigredo. The heat and energy generated by metaphoric language begins to break bodies down into a living matrix – a margin the living and the dead populate the same space. They cohabit and collaborate with each other. It becomes almost impossible to differentiate the living from the dead, past and future are interlaced, memories recycle experience, become experience. Experience and memory are wed by imagination, with tropic heat. Energy. “A narcosis of tropical conductivity blending the living with the dead” Borges writes that “A book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory”.<sup>23</sup> Susan Howe speaks on perception and the chiaroscuro-like space of the margin, ““Who can tell what empirical



perceptions really are? Veridical and delusive definitions shade into one another. All words run along the margins of their secrets.”<sup>24</sup> Pp.48 Perceptions are formed out of a relationship between reader, writer and written – a triadic relationship of semiosis. “The relational space is the thing that’s alive with something from somewhere else.”<sup>25</sup> Pp. 58 The bed hangings of Howe’s *The Midnight* can be likened to the river Styx, which thinly separates the heavens and subterranean earth, the ascended and the descended. Charles Simic alludes to the river in his poem *Charon’s Cosmology*, “With only his dim lantern / To tell him where he is / And every time a mountain / Of fresh corpses to load up”<sup>26</sup> The reader is like Charon<sup>27</sup>, who navigates the threshold of the living and the dead, using only his dim lantern, the light of awareness, to separate shadow and contour. In this place, it becomes difficult to tell the living from the dead, which side of the river is which. “Take them to the other side / Where there are plenty more / I’d say by now he must be confused / As to which side is which”

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> *Hieros gamos* or Hierogamy refers to a sexual ritual that plays out a marriage between a god and a goddess, especially when enacted in a symbolic ritual where human participants represent the deities. It is the harmonization of opposites

<sup>2</sup> Here, soma means body.

<sup>3</sup> Vitriol is the alchemical name for sulphuric acid. Metallurgical uses for vitriolic substances were recorded in the Hellenistic alchemical works Zozimos of Panopolis, in the treatise *Phisica et Mystica*. V.I.T.R.I.O.L. is an acronym which stands for Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem. This translates to "Visit the interior of the Earth and by rectification (purification) you will find the hidden stone." This image is purportedly found on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes (Tabula Smaragdina Hermetis) and is a revered alchemical text of the Rosicrucian order.

<sup>4</sup> The Waste Land is a 434-line modernist poem by T. S. Eliot published in 1922. It has been called "one of the most important poems of the 20th century."

<sup>5</sup> Nigredo, or blackness, in alchemy means putrefaction or decomposition. The alchemists believed that as a first step in the pathway to the philosopher's stone all alchemical ingredients had to be cleansed and cooked extensively to a uniform black matter.

In analytical psychology, the term became a metaphor 'for the dark night of the soul, when an individual confronts the shadow within.'

<sup>6</sup> "Life is a passing from the realm of death mirrored *ad infinitum*" is a quote from my paper Solve et Coagula, which talks generative process of dissolving and coagulation.

<sup>7</sup> Ulysses chronicles the passage of Leopold Bloom through Dublin during an ordinary day, 16 June 1904. Ulysses is the Latinized name of Odysseus, the hero of Homer's poem *Odyssey*, and the novel establishes a series of parallels between its characters and events and those of the poem

<sup>8</sup> Necromancy is a claimed form of magic involving communication with the deceased – either by summoning their spirit as an apparition or raising them bodily – for the purpose of divination, imparting the means to foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Necropolis – "The fantastic anomaly of culture is that the living are exiles or outsiders, the most isolate of all minorities. The small community of the living extends to the past only by trafficking with the dead, whose mounds are "mulch for covetous burrowing thought." The found of the dead constitutes the outer limits of the local; and the space of habitation is like a cistern, its hollowness resoundingly provocative." This compost pp. 65. *Necropoetics*.

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<sup>10</sup> The necropolis is the hallowed ground of the graveyard, a city built to house the dead, where the living ancestors can pay tribute to the fallen.

<sup>11</sup> Jung talks about the aqua permanens, a word synonymous for the philosopher's stone, "It begins with the four separate elements, the state of chaos, and ascends by degrees to the three manifestations of Mercurius in the inorganic, organic, and spiritual worlds; and, after attaining the form of Sol and Luna (i.e., the precious metal gold and silver, but also the radiance of the gods who can overcome the strife of the elements by love), it culminates in the one and indivisible (incorruptible, ethereal, eternal) nature of the *anima*, the *quinta essentia*, *aqua permanens*, tincture, or *lapis philosophorum*. This progression from the number 4 to 3 to 2 to 1 is the 'axiom of Maria'..."

<sup>12</sup> Haruspicy is the inspection of the entrails of sacrificed animals, especially the livers of sacrificed sheep and poultry. Haruspicy is one of the three branches of the "Etruscan discipline" (*disciplina Etrusca*) preserved in written texts that were known to the Romans, along with ritual practice and divination from lightning.

<sup>13</sup> From the poem "Time Runs Backward After Death" by American poet Robert Bly.

<sup>14</sup> Sun Sutra is a poem by Dana Levin, from her book *Sky Burial*.

<sup>15</sup> Katabasis, or catabasis, (is a descent of some type, such as moving downhill, or the sinking of the winds or sun, a military retreat, or a trip to the underworld or a trip from the interior of a country down to the coast. There exist multiple related meanings in poetry, rhetoric, and modern psychology.

<sup>16</sup> Chthonic (pertaining to the Earth; earthy; subterranean) designates, or pertains to, deities or spirits of the underworld, especially in relation to Greek religion. The Greek word *khthon* is one of several for "earth"; it typically refers to the interior of the soil, rather than the living surface of the land or the land as territory.

<sup>17</sup> This Compost pp. 71. *Muse's Archetext*.

<sup>18</sup> *Splendor Solis* ("The Splendour of the Sun") is a well-known colorful, illuminate alchemical manuscript. The earliest version, written in Central German, is dated 1532–1535.

<sup>19</sup> Refuge Field, from *Sky Burial*, by Dana Levin.

<sup>20</sup> "All ghost spirits living / word flesh Life thought / Star scry" is a quote from my paper *Solve et Coagula*.

<sup>21</sup> A quote from the short story *The Library of Babel* by Jorge Luis Borges.

<sup>22</sup> This Compost pp. 93. *Nigredo*.

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<sup>23</sup> From *The Library of Babel*, by Jorge Luis Borges.

<sup>24</sup> Howe the Midnight pp. 48. *Dark Daylight of Words*.

<sup>25</sup> Howe the Midnight pp. 58. *Pandora*

<sup>26</sup> From the poem “Charon’s Cosmology” by American poet Charles Simic

<sup>27</sup> In Greek mythology, Charon or Kharon is the ferryman of Hades who carries souls of the newly deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron that divided the world of the living from the world of the dead. A coin to pay Charon for passage, usually an obolus or danake, was sometimes placed in or on the mouth of a dead person. Some authors say that those who could not pay the fee, or those whose bodies were left unburied, had to wander the shores for one hundred years. In the catabasis mytheme, heroes — such as Heracles, Orpheus, Aeneas, Dante, Dionysus and Psyche — journey to the underworld and return, still alive, conveyed by the boat of Charon.

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