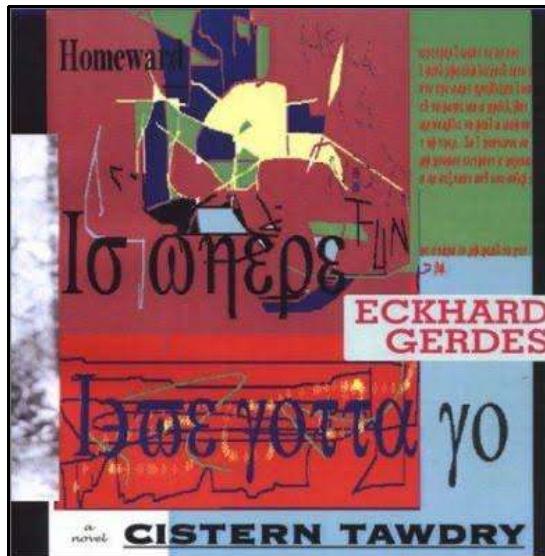


Patterning the Verbal: Foreword to Eckhard Gerdes' scripto-visual novel *Cistern Tawdry* (2003)

by James R. Hugunin

To view graphic images from this novel go to:

<http://www.uturn.org/Gerdes/index.htm>



To read a review of this book go to:

<http://www.fuguestatepress.com/cistern.html>

Star Tier → A mysterious text is found in an attic. Who's its author? Cistern Tawdry. What is his aesthetic lineage? If one could take DNA samples of Tawdry's text, an examination would reveal Cistern-the-writer's grandparents as the Englishman Laurence Sterne and French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, his parents as the Zurich Dadaist Tristan Tzara and the Russian Futurist Ilia Zdanevich. Thus born of wit and *ambiguité*, irrationalism and *sdvig*, it tells the tale of one Cistern Tawdry. Tawdry, a writer who is trapped in his marriage and in a job he hates, works for his father-in-law and so can't leave his marriage because of his job and can't quit his job because of his wife. In this supposed

texte trouvé, Cistern goes carousing after work (he takes a *sdvig*—er—swig), despite his wife's threat to leave him if he ever went on a bender again; so his wife leaves, threatening to abort their baby. Despairing, Cistern commits suicide and — like Osiris before him — is sundered into seven parts and scattered. Cistern wails: "It used to be I was *inside* a type of novel, no matter how hard it was to define. Now I'm outside of *any* source. I'm external. Nothing can catch me: not science-roman-poetry nor calligraphic epithets nor collegial epaulets nor columnal epitaphs." Analogously, the text itself is trapped in its marriage to syntax and grammar, subjected to laboring at Meaning by The-Law-of-the-Father (that overarching *pater* called Language). As the brief quote just cited above hints, the life of the spirit is not served by the conventions of mimetic realism; so the text as well goes on a bender: stuttering, pattering, punning, and escaping the home of standard typography, committing semantic suicide as it is cut-and-pasted across the expanse of the page. The remainder of the tale is about how Tawdry's sundered soul is brought together again, an event duplicated at the textual level as we readers piece together these dispersed fragments of text.

At both the level of the narrative and on that of the materiality of the text, Gerdes finds a world beyond the limits of reason and rationality. The wordplay, the sounds, and morphological distortions of the typography in *Cistern Tawdry* signify a willful embracing of the materiality of the text. He desires an expressive language that generates a direct effect that bypasses the normal routes of language used to convey meaning. This tactic not only mimics the narrated events, but energizes the text, multiplying its associative poetic potential and giving us access to the somatic realm. Such deformation and demolition of the word (*paragondage*, i.e., the assortment of various sizes of type in the same word) and sentence (fragmentation, montage, scale disparity, twisting lines of text, etc.) Julia Kristeva theorizes as the liberating influx of the *semiotic* (pulsions and drives of the pre-Oedipal) into the *symbolic* (secondary drives, the post-Oedipal, The-Law-of-the-Father). Semi-otic and symbolic are not opposed terms, according to Kristeva, but intertwined processes necessary for signification. In poetic discourse, however, the semiotic takes its revenge on the symbolic — deranging it — working both within and against representational modes. This semiotic is articulated by flows and marks, energy transfers, by the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as the signifying

material to create a rhythmic totality—as seen in the concrete material fullness of Gerdes's scripto-visual fabulations. Each typographical construct (cluttered with Brobdingnagian letters, minuscule letters, scrawled cursive, and amateurish sketching) is a highly marked text interspersed throughout the various pages of unmarked text. Add the text's penchant for all manner of wordplay, double-entendre, and neologisms, and we have a Pandora's Box from which escape all the potentialities of language, all the pleasures of the text. As Cistern explains to us readers on letterhead that reads *Cistern Tawdry, Famous Deceased Author*: "What I'm trying to present to the reading public is fiction as they've never seen it but have known deep inside it could be like if it were done differently and correctly. Enough characterization to maintain interest. Enough wordplay and literary references to please academia . . . Enough creativity to attract the enormous young literary readership which is yearning as we speak for books to be spoken about in cafés and intellectual circles."

This concern with the materiality of one's medium rests upon the knowledge that every medium has as a material its own particular effect—a piano and an organ, a painting and a woodcut, elicit very different responses from us. As Russian *zaum* poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksander Kruchenyk noted in "The Letter as Such" (1913): ". . . a word written in one particular handwriting or set in a particular type face is totally distinct from the same word in different lettering." It wasn't until the early twentieth century that writers began to exploit the materiality of their written medium, using text as a transparent medium to convey content, to represent. The Dadaists, and Italian and Russian Futurists were early explorers of typographic manipulation where presentation became as much or more important than representation. Representation, seen as a substitute for the concrete factualness of the work, was often attacked as unable to lay claim to the realm of the unrepresentable which was seen as resistant to language. Therefore, the modernist practices of these groups foregrounded formal, material issues of their medium; they thereby opposed the established social order by subverting the dominant conventions of the rules of representation.

Russian Futurist Ilia Zdanevich's solution to undermining the control of patriarchal authority over language — letting Kristeva's visceral semiotic usurp the rational symbolic — was his poetic *zaum* experiments. *Zaum*, with its method of *sdvig* (shift), entailed acting on the *verbal mass*, producing a surface con-

dition, or *faktura*, and treating sound independent of meaning. "If a phrase becomes a double-entendre," wrote Zdanovich, "that is *sdvig*. If the words become confused with each other (by *verbal magnetism*) or if a word detaches itself and joins up with another, that is also *sdvig*." But this risked the production of an esoteric and idiosyncratic communiqué, a text that's taken one too many swigs — er — *sdvigs*. Gerdes tacks away from such sheer drunken interiority. He propels his narrative with, as he Cistern put it, just "Enough characterization to maintain interest." But that still leaves a lot of loose threads, so he (Cistern) also hopes for a reader who'll, just like a kid, "pick up an unraveled baseball and think it interesting."

— The End —

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