

Essay Review

Philosophy and/or Performance: A Discussion of Richard Shusterman's *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*

THE ADVENTURES OF THE MAN IN GOLD: PATHS BETWEEN ART AND LIFE / LES AVENTURES DE L'HOMME EN OR: PASSAGES ENTRE L'ART ET LA VIE, by Richard Shusterman. Photographs by Yann Toma. Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2016. 127 pp. \$35.42.

The first thought that comes to mind when reading Richard Shusterman's *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is how refreshingly unorthodox its author is. Shusterman is a respected aesthete, responsible for books such as *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (2002), *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (2001), and *Pragmatist Aesthetic: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (2000)—all disciplined, carefully argued contributions to the philosophy of art and/or the body. The new book steps off path. It presents a different kind of philosophical intervention, one that encourages reconsidering philosophical methodology and its less-explored possibilities. You will be reading a work that, for all its unconventionality and close kinship to art, still invites being approached as philosophy.

The book—not its themes but the physical object in your hands—is not easily describable. It combines words and images. The words—the book is bilingual with pages split between French and English—mixes autobiography, descriptions of events relating to the “Man in Gold,” and academic commentary. The images are photographs by Yann Toma featuring Shusterman posing as the Man in Gold at various stages. The production of most of the photographs required the implementation of a unique technique: long exposures in the dark lit by Toma's manipulation of a lamp in response to Shusterman's/the golden man's immobile body. As the lamp moves during the exposure, the emerging picture, though static, manages to capture movement; it is as if you were watching a dance while looking at a still photograph. Images and storyline do not always coincide: some images correlate with events described; others do not. Nor is the relationship between Shusterman and the golden man straightforwardly accountable (Shusterman is not precisely role-playing or acting, but more on that later).

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Such a book capsizes reading conventions. Respond to it solely as philosophy, and you will miss its point in one way. Relate to it merely as performance, you distort it in another. Both modes should intertwine and, ideally, not as parallel possibilities of reading but as somehow morphing into a single engagement. Disambiguating what such a reading may mean calls, at the outset, for a teasing out of the possibilities and limitations entailed in both responses: the capacity of the book to be assessed as a contribution to philosophy and its ability to stand as a worthwhile performance.

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First, philosophy. In what sense may this book instantiate a form of philosophizing? Readers familiar with the trajectory of Shusterman's previous work will not be wholly unprepared for the drift of the present. In view of Shusterman's work on Western philosophy's marginalization of the body, in light of the development of his "somaesthetics," in consideration of his decision to train as a Feldenkrais instructor, it is only natural for him to explore uncharted ways of giving voice to an embodied attempt to think. Yet if *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* partly constitutes a prolonged invitation to the philosopher's body to step in and become a real dimension of philosophizing, philosophers sympathetic to this objective will wish to be clear about the inquiry as such. What is Shusterman's question? Which concepts are subjected to examination? How do the appearances of the Man in Gold dissipate some uneasy vagueness? Shusterman does not clarify such issues, suggesting that his goal—at least in this book—is not to demonstrate and rationalize some thought-out mode of embodied thinking. And yet, it is hard to dispel a sense that embodied thinking is part of what this book attempts to put on the table.

It is easy to trash this attempt. If a question is not asked, if a knowledge-claim is not advanced and justified, how can embodied adventures become a form of thinking? And even if they do constitute thinking, in what sense are they justified thinking? (Philosophy, after all, possesses a normative dimension: you do not merely articulate a thought; you must also defend it.) While I am too conventional to deny the validity of this line of criticism, I also allow myself to make room for the contrary intuition. If philosophizing means pushing against one's vocabulary, resisting and testing the categories governing one's thoughts, it necessitates cultivating a humbling distrust toward one's own methods. Important questions may be begged when limiting oneself to discursive reasoning. Justifications may amount to something other than arguments. Could the distinction between contexts of justification and contexts of discovery (along with the denial of discovery's epistemological import) itself be a dogma that requires rethinking—say, by noting forms of knowing that appear inseparable from particular routes of discovery? Are there forms of error that may involve holding on to true beliefs but

reaching them via superficial justifications, a route that renders these beliefs simultaneously “correct” but somehow not fully known? If such questions exert any pressure on your confidence regarding what philosophy ought to be, you will not wish to prejudge Shusterman’s experimentation with a different philosophical idiom.

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Philosophy sometimes defines itself by invoking the Socratic insistence that the unexamined life is not worth living, presenting itself as an attempt to abide by this maxim. It is at this point that methodological questions such as the ones above surface. What does it mean to “examine a life”? Scrutinizing core beliefs, no doubt; but how about trying out ways of being other via which engrained blind spots and simplifications are revealed? While no arguments or conceptual claims emerge through the embodied thinking presented in the book, its experiment is unmistakably a form of self-examination. By permitting himself to be in another way, Shusterman displays a process of self-discovery. He is not, though, actually role-playing in the sense of giving voice to some suppressed potential. Rather, he begets an entity that stands in a tense relationship to who he is. He then enables this creation to remain undocked from his identity as philosopher. To shun the (predictable) attempt to rewind the threads that have been embroiled into some harmonized identity means that self-knowledge might extend to the act of expressing and encountering shreds that cannot be subsumed as part of what one’s “life” has always meant.

In what sense, though, is the Man in Gold a fragment or an aspect of Shusterman? We read that he emerged for/from Shusterman at a particular moment, equipped with particular sensitivities and objectives (he loves knowledge and beauty, we learn, and he also fears rejection and being misunderstood). Readers familiar with mask theory will be reminded of the birth of Kostya’s “Critic” in Konstantin Stanislavski’s *Building a Character*—the worn coat Kostya puts on, gradually drawing out unfamiliar body movements and a strange speech, culminating in the emergence of a genuine entity, only partly controllable by the actor. Shusterman’s golden man is, likewise, not fully governable, and his actions and appearances (or the duration of these) are not precisely willed.

Considered as self-examination, the process is not reducible to counterfactual role-playing—how would I feel/what would I do had I been X?—but involves an existential hiatus, a leap into some outlandish way of responding to the world enabled by the role. Outcroppings from this odyssey cannot be captured by a new set of claims. Discovery entails, rather, a new way of moving, of taking in, of being a subject of time. Here the discontinuity between the golden man and Shusterman becomes significant. Yes, he shares Shusterman’s love of knowledge and beauty. At the same time, this entity is also as distant as it can be from the philosopher who has begotten it, from

the academic who has permitted his body to become this entity's vehicle: the Man in Gold lacks identity (name, nationality, occupation, history); he lacks context (friends, relatives, parents, children—some vague remarks about his mother are made); most importantly, perhaps—he does not speak. True, many of his needs and interests can be intuited by those who meet him. Yet such communication is never verbal.

We are presented with a walking oxymoron: a nontalking philosopher. His experience of time, too, is discrete, coming alive for several hours or days—then vanishing for months. There is no attempt to connect the dots into an organizing narrative. Nor are we being offered an insight into whether knowledge has been accessed during his adventures or into whether such knowledge even gathers up. What we are shown, rather, is a philosopher selecting the most unphilosophical incarnation he can find in order to re-encounter the world.

Two moves are mobilized by this incarnation: the first is the idea of knowledge as action, which sometimes surfaces within religious epistemology or within aesthetics. John Milton or Hans Urs von Balthasar or E. L. Mascall have suggested that knowing is sometimes a doing—not a doing that gives birth to knowing but a doing that is itself a way of knowing.¹ Writing about poetry and knowledge, Angela Leighton too has proposed to think of knowledge in some cases not as a noun but as a verb.² Sometimes the purchase on reality promised by knowledge is acquired through doing. Sometimes it somehow inheres in it. To love wisdom may call for more than discursive thematizing, defining, arguing, or counterarguing. It may call for agency in its immediate embodied sense.

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The second interconnected move relates to metamorphosis (knowing through doing—the first move—does not require working yourself out of who you are). Several books surveyed in a relatively recent *New Yorker* piece by Joshua Rothman have documented earnest attempts to approximate the state of this or that animal. Fueling these imaginative endeavors is not always a desire to know—one obviously learns too, yet that is not the main motivation—but the hope to stretch contact points with reality, deautomate the donning of one's humanity, become reacquainted with one's world.

Being a Beast: Adventures across the Species Divide by Charles Foster (2016), for example, presents a sincere attempt to first become a badger (spending weeks underground and eating worms) and, later, a fox. Foster describes an episode of looking (as a fox) upon a row of houses at evening, counting seventy in which the television was on. Sixty-four houses featured the same program. Reflecting on Foster's surveillance, Joshua Rothman notes:

To Foster's way of thinking, the people in those houses, watching "Eastenders" over their blandly globalized dinners of pizza, pad thai,

and aloo gobi, were living nowhere in particular. The foxes are “the real East Enders,” because they “know that there’s a mouse nest under the porch at 17A and bumblebees by the cedar decking at number 29B,” and are exploring and hunting on these particular streets. An urban fox will “carry on being foxy, whereas the thoroughly urbanized humans are in danger of not being optimally human. . . . We have acutely sensitive hands, but we handle the world with thick gloves and then, bored, blame it for lacking shape.”³

It is not so much the need to know that lurks beneath observations such as these. It is more of a hope to heighten one’s presencing. Projects such as these—apart from Foster’s, Rothman discusses Thomas Thwaite’s attempt to become a goat (described in his *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human* [2016])—share with Shusterman’s golden man the wish to reinvent fundamental, tactile responses to one’s self and surroundings. Experimenting with alternative ways of being by relating to one’s humanity not as a necessity but as a contingency reattunes the role player to what inhabiting one’s skin can mean. And this extends to more than experiencing things from the standpoint of the nonhuman role. The return to a humanity you have tried to unlearn adds new dimensions of being. Different patches of grass will never seem uniform if, like Thwaite, you have tried to graze for several days. Raindrops sound differently if, like Foster, you have heard it from within a badger’s lair after munching worms. Accessing remote embodiments recalibrates one’s way of being here.

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While this second current of the book—metamorphosis—spreads out into more than knowledge, its status as a form of experiential inquiry is hard to deny. The Man in Gold is a corridor to learning because he is agency devoid of a personal name or history or context or language—an agency that, while experiencing itself as seeking knowledge, specifically avoids formulating in words conclusions from the search. Toddlers learn in such ways, as do nonhuman animals, so implicit or explicit propositional knowing thatness is not a must for learning. The Man in Gold presents himself as a vehicle for this kind of learning. To utilize this vehicle is to concede that, yes, you cannot shake off your humanity, your language, or your adult perception; but that does not mean that you cannot substantially nudge yourself in that direction. And the learning is that of an adult (one suspects that the name selected for the golden man—the word “Man” emphasizing both humanity and adulthood—is intended to disassociate our imaginings of him from the animalistic or the infantile).

Enthusiasts will say that any week spent in committed experiments—such as those mentioned above—teaches more than a week of poring over books. A more guarded response will concede that some valuable lessons may be learnt via self-othering. Yet no one claims that prolonged

imaginative re-embodiments should displace other kinds of learning. If you love wisdom, why not go for both? The real dispute concerns whether the direction should be accepted at all. Philosophy's love-hate relationship with the epistemic role of experience re-enters: are such powerful experiences a form of learning? On the one hand, philosophers have repeatedly connected coming to understand with undergoing involved states (Plato's epistemic parables all string together learning and undergoing, and his dialogues typically highlight a process of painful discovery). On the other hand, we have the opposite ideal—the philosopher's need to decontextualize, to speak in dissociation from any specified location, gender, time, and nationality. The philosopher even sometimes hopes to transcend language or species: Descartes is not interested in human truth but in what cannot be doubted by any rational entity; part of Hume's surprise (and frustration) stems from his realization that he cannot disentangle his account of causation from human perception.

We are aware that the God's eye view has been repeatedly discredited. Yet tie down a contemporary philosopher on a rack and stretch, and most will confess that they are aiming for the same kind of perspective, even if legions of other academics would consider the attempt naïve. The point is that this hope to touch transhuman truths is at loggerheads with the concession that experiences are epistemically important. To make room for experiences undercuts the attempt to withdraw from the contingent ways by which human beings happen to learn this or that. Precisely on account of their vivacity and potency, experiences can distort. False beliefs may be embedded in visceral experiences. The acceptance of some truths may demand the dismissal of powerful experiences which discredit them.

Plato was able to veer between these poles by adopting both. While experiences play a role in one's ascent out of the cave and while one is reduced to humbling *aporia* when interrogated, the hold on one's philosophical identity is not lost under such experiences. Experiencing goes hand in hand with the ability to step back, reflect, argue, define. Had Plato read Shusterman, he would have told him that a philosophically rewarding form of embodied inquiry must be a delicate tango between reaching into and out of the body. He would have raised his own objections against role-playing. But had he set these aside, Plato would have claimed that, even if it is useful to engage in such leaps out of one's skin, any attempt to toy with one's embodied agency must retain the aloofness of philosophy, its hope to grasp things without being governed by formative vocabularies. "Contrary to your intentions," we can imagine him berating Shusterman, "by fragmenting yourself between you as philosopher and the voiceless golden man who conducts his embodied search, you have, in effect, forfeited the hope of bringing together experiencing and thinking."

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Choosing to relate to this book as a performance rather than as philosophy modifies much of what was said above. To engage with the *Adventures of the Man in Gold* as performance entails relating to its author's professional identity as merely another layer of the performance's meaning. We will be following a narrative whose author happens to be a philosopher. We will be looking at images provided by an artist, Yann Toma, which convey Toma's response to his model's professional persona rather than claims advanced as part of that profession. To approach the book in such a way turns "philosophy" and "philosophizing" into materials for a work, not more.

Disentangle the various layers of the performance. First, we have a description of the performance: what the golden man did; how others reacted. We then have Toma's own performance—echoes of his movements as he was photographing Shusterman. We, moreover, have the text, itself a performance in which the philosopher's voice frames (sometimes creatively) happenings and images. Finally, we have further offshoots of other potentially available performances—footnotes that direct readers to websites featuring a filmed footage of the *Man in Gold* or an exhibition whereby some of the images from the book have been displayed. It is a performance that will keep you busy: you will be looking at images, imagining the choreography responsible for producing them, reading a text, imagining past performances (or searching for them online), and you will be doing all these as part of absorbing a single performance—the book. You will also be wondering about the potency of the camera; how its agency draws out unplanned choices from the performer. For it is not just the mask of the Man in Gold but its synergy with Toma's camera that jointly midwives from Shusterman the agency that then gets captured. You will want to know how such agency changes when the camera is absent. You will wish to understand the camera's force as experienced by a philosopher.

Engaging with *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* as performance, as a planned experiential space driven by justified choices, we will hope to know more regarding the specific gain of using a philosopher as "material" for the performance. What would be lost had Toma employed a nonphilosopher as his subject? We would also try to understand better the Man in Gold's need for the company of others and the potentially intrusive manner in which he tries to fulfill this need (the golden man appears in public settings in which he is not expected, wearing a skin-tight golden suit. The occasional brushes with law enforcement agencies mentioned in the book disclose the disturbing overlap between such appearances and a public nuisance).

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For me, the more rewarding answer to these questions brings together the two responses to the book—as philosophy, as performance—that I have up to now kept apart. Shusterman's philosophical intervention, stressing as it

does many features that safe academic philosophy vilifies or ignores, calls for an iota of aggression. The book's very choice to speak in images, to practice embodied inquiry, to collaborate as such (and with a nonphilosopher to boot!), even the choice of gold (its association of glitter as opposed to content)—they all combine to ruffle the feathers of a community cocksure of its norms. Shusterman's ongoing attempt to undo philosophy's sidelining of the body while insisting on offsetting this as an insider, as a philosopher, necessitates a degree of impoliteness. He is a risk-taking philosopher, choosing not to be a recluse but rather to invite himself into a company that is perplexed as to how to respond to him. Entering their world, he perceives an asteroid ever splintering into societies, specialized journals, and conferences. Such academic fragmentation enables professional confidence and a sense of direction. Its cost, though, is an ever-growing mismatch between philosophy and its academicization. The avatar he sends into their midst makes sure to be as conspicuous as possible with his golden suit. But coming into contact, he does not speak. If you wish to know what he is about, you will have to extend an interpretative gesture.

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Notes

1. E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images: A Study in Theological Discourse* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1957), 83; John Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8:21; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 15–20.
2. Angela Leighton, "Poetry's Knowing—So What Do We Know?," in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
3. Joshua Rothman, "The Metamorphosis: What Is It Like to Be an Animal?," *New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, 70–74, at 73.