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# Eclipse: The Variations

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# *Tod Marshall*

## ECLIPSE

### *The Variations*

#### *Aria*

Refuse cruelty.

Hear the branches' illiterate quivering.

Behold the moon's eloquent shine.

An angel  
whispers in her ear,  
acute angles of folded wings.

Memorize the steady chant of bells.

Watch her swell.

#### I.

Like Hildegard of Bingen:

“A little later, I had a marvelous and mystical vision; all my inner organs were swollen and upset and the sensations of my body were no longer felt. For my consciousness had been transformed, as if I no longer knew myself, as if raindrops were falling from the hand of God upon my soul.”

#### II.

An eloquent music envelops her,  
makes her belly swell and shine. Perhaps  
it is

### III.

Bach, the rocking of branches in a gentle wind, air rhythmically flexing in gusts as if the universe were just a pair of healthy lungs. As if the branches, around dusk, tire of the various exercises of contrition and release sacrificial leaves, begging insects for a few moments of peace. As if autumn were just another story festering in the mind of God. Like heaven, electricity, and the invention of music that does not end. The ground is sprinkled with such abandoned wealth. A night sky littered with stars that once flashed like knives, switchblades aimed at carving out the moon's intrusion into rational order, the swollen tongue of a gentle wind—that same one again—those sharp guardians of history's fugue, the return of a hopeful melody that refuses the "lewd cycle," as Spengler called it, of conception, blossom, the final fireworks of fruition, and the lengthy death-shiver sardonically called, tongue tucked against the cheek, civilization.

### IV.

The first sermon is not a story.  
"Saints embrace a sort of mortification,  
a partial articulation of the soul's  
inherent anarchy: to bend back  
desire's steady insistence, to sit  
atop a deep well, wants and needs  
literally swelling toward the rim,  
scaly claws skittering against  
the intricate stonework; perched  
there, wielding smooth wooden staves,  
shoving at illiterate lust, refusing  
compulsions into a long fall  
after which they regroup,  
learn to worship the moon,  
and begin to crawl again."

## V.

History: “The swelling movement at the end of a musical phrase was characteristic of the period after the Baroque.”

Commentary: Wagner’s lip curling with disgust as he dubs such sounds “the clatter of princely dishes.”

## VI.

Dualism is a cruelty,  
the literal refusal  
of god and world.  
Eloquence as union,  
whispers folding  
through the angles  
of the ear: memorize  
the shining angel  
in her swelling body  
that *is* her swelling  
body. The steady,  
quivering bells  
chant the same.

## VII.

His fingers momentarily linger over the keys of a harpsichord, black and white pattern seething with symmetry, great German knuckles swollen into Trinitarian regions of fantastic genius. A few weeks before he had composed the Goldberg variations meant to soothe a patron steadily to sleep. Linger, and then begin to play. Beautifully, and yet, halfway through those fingers refuse familiarity, realize that repetition is the cruel core of loss, that there is little wonder in this slow, cyclical eclipse of the world, and so, he eloquently improvises, plays for hours until his young, second wife, swollen

with child, calls him downstairs, casually asks “what was it you were working on, what brought such sweat to your brow?”

## VIII.

Hildegard wrote:

“when in accordance with the secret order and will of God, at an appropriate time rightly determined by divine providence, the child in its mother’s swollen womb has received the spirit, it shows by the movement of its body that it is alive.”

## IX.

Cruelty shaped to a story  
invites the act to happen  
again. Swollen words  
whispered into the acute  
folds of an eloquent sentence.  
Hear the moon’s steady hum.  
Find refusal in the illiterate,  
the body’s quivering, the  
angelic chanting of bells.

## X.

The next sermon is not a song.  
“Electricity clicking through wires  
becomes visible, for a second, when that  
God’s-wrath-crashed bolt of swollen light  
strikes the local transformer,  
and power lines change into a tempestuous net  
of sparks that showers nearby houses  
and announces the child’s arrival.”

## XI.

History: “Music remains alive to intuition, and Bach’s art finds international response among those who are sensible to metaphysical realities whatever their intellectual predispositions may be.”

Commentary: The sky a gauzy blue stained with grey smoke: a *cantata* performed by ragged skeletons in a courtyard. Enthusiastic applause, the metaphysics of barbed wire.

## XII.

Cruelty refuses eloquence  
to fold beyond acute angles.  
Wings chanting air  
swell the memory of wind,  
a steady whispering  
that branches throughout  
an illiterate angel’s body.

## XIII.

She rubs her stomach and says  
the child will be here soon.

## XIV.

Sing: The belly is an altar,  
the belly is a fruit.  
The baby likes to kick  
with his tiny foot.

## XV.

Chant: to stroke the globe of skin, to press palms  
against the arched abdomen, to see the swollen navel  
steadily become a tiny stem atop the heavenly bloat  
that collapses, compacts, and squeezes through  
the acute angles of that illiterate cave of dreams,  
and wakens in a world so bright the lungs flutter  
then loose an eloquent scream.

## XVI.

And Hildegard wrote:

“I saw a very bright fire which was incomprehensible, swollen, wholly living,  
and appearing as if it were totally alive. The flame of the fire was an airy  
color, and it was blazing violently in a gentle wind. And I saw this flame  
lighten in color and give forth a bolt of lightning, the bright fire, blazing  
violently in a gentle wind.”

## XVII.

The uncollected sermon.  
“Behold the stained glass:  
a Virgin’s blue robe,  
her swollen stomach hidden  
within eloquent folds of cloth.  
Light’s steady shine  
through angelic white wings.  
Memorize the green, blue,  
and red panes. Whisper  
and they shatter.”

## XVIII.

*Kapellmeister*, twenty children, two wives, and official appointments all over the land:

What notes eloquently capture the loss of a child?

Only eleven of yours ever ran, caressed the keyboard, or plucked at the strings of an earthly instrument.

Johann Christoph and Maria Sophia, twins dead right after birth.

Leopold Augustus, dead before the end of a year.

Christian Gottlieb, dead at three.

Johann August Abraham, dead within a day.

Christiane Dorothea, dead at the age of one.

Christiane Benedicta, dead after three days.

Ernestus Andreas, dead on All Saints Day, his first.

A thematic recursion? They said you composed a six-part fugue in your head.

Or, after the first, does it feel like an Old Testament curse, like wrestling angels, a plague of sores upon swollen skin, like tucking the sacrificial dagger in the folds of your robe and turning to the steep path, knowing no voice will refuse the blade's awful arc, that the only whisper will be your arm's cut across the sky?

## XIX.

History: "The count commissioned him to write soothing music to relieve the tedium of sleepless nights."

Commentary: *music is pure narration, a story that can't be told.*

## XX.

On the Trinity, Hildegard wrote:

"The Lord is brightness and this brightness swells and flashes forth and in this flashing forth is fire and these three are one."

## XXI.

The final sermon.  
“‘Lyvwire,’  
the license plate  
reads. Live  
as in electricity, god-  
son of generator  
and necessity, held  
up on those lines,  
liquefied stars  
rushing through swollen  
cables. Or live  
like the concert  
in the park, *2nd*  
*Brandenburg*  
and *The Goldberg Variations*:  
Bach’s eloquent returns.  
The audience applauding  
and grabbing jackets  
and purses, folding up blankets  
as they hurry to cars,  
trying to avoid  
the swollen traffic,  
even though the black-  
tied musicians  
haven’t finished their bows.”

## XXII.

Unlike Hildegard, who wrote music,  
lived cloistered, and meditated for days  
on the exact shade of angelic light,  
she swells and gives birth.

### XXIII.

Behold the angelic whispering  
of wings, sparrows refusing  
the cat's eloquent threat.  
They land in the branches,  
clean feathers, and gather  
debris into a nest, steadily  
swelling clump of lint  
and string, angular shine  
of a bent paper clip, a tatter  
of egg carton that looks  
like a bell, an illiterate moon.

### XXIV.

After the healing, she takes up painting,  
portraiture of the cruel ones. Their victims:  
children catching a last glimpse of sky,  
gauzy blue stained with grey smoke.  
A man holds open the metal door.  
Slight brush stroke, a bit more work  
on the mustache, a crinkled nervous tic  
at the corner of his mouth. Blending  
oils, she finds the right shade for steel  
helmets, a color that somehow captures  
the moment of crushed hope, the quivering  
that is almost-extinguished life. A steady hand  
that bares clarity, bristles in the details and  
reminds the viewer to refuse repetition's force.

### XXV.

Spengler said humanity is a "beast of prey." To say otherwise is to be "a beast of prey without teeth." The leaves drop and will drop again, gentle wind

rippling through branches swollen by colorful fall. Lungs, liver, splendid guts, double-helix telling the tale of civilization, the tale of life without wings, a cruel narrative with no use for *is*.

## XXVI.

History: “The Germans’ steady approach refused any quarter for the civilians who tried to flee the area. It was, one Belgian said, as if ‘the wings, the boots, the gunfire, and shells had synthesized into a cruel symphony of destruction.’”

Commentary: Nietzsche’s madman says, “Is there not perpetual nightfall and more night? Must we not light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing of the noise of the grave diggers who are burying God?”

## XXVII.

Steadily refuse the cruel bells.  
Fold quivering hands.  
Clench, then shape them  
into fists. Memorize  
the angles of the angel’s wings,  
a woodcut on the altar,  
how he whispers into the virgin’s  
ear. Illiterate boots will chant.  
They can do nothing to stop  
the eloquent swelling of bodies,  
the moon beholden,  
offering its shine.

## XXVIII.

And wings summon the angels  
who offer this simple sermon,

present tense throughout,  
that narrates, sings, and stutters:  
“There are nights that drive the stars  
from the sky, send the moon  
behind clouds of smoke, nights  
when cruelty refuses  
every eloquent and illiterate cry  
of pain, and keeps pressing the blade.”  
They speak and stop and the light  
they leave pardons no darkness,  
embraces all that shines.

### XXIX.

A sequence that comes to an end.  
Impregnation, gestation, and birth.  
No ceaseless speech whispers behind our backs,  
nothing cares to keep our stories alive.  
Listen. You’ll hear the electric clatter  
of collapsing stars. To refuse that sound  
as anything other than soothing—a mother’s song  
over the crib of a sleeping child—is to accept  
the acute eloquence of the moon, the folding  
away of cruelty, the love of illiterate wings.

### XXX.

A finished self-portrait—memorize  
her eyes, the moment of conception,  
rain falling from the hand of God. In her posture,  
the fierce determination of birth.

She hangs it near a window, allows paint  
to dry. The child sleeps, just barely  
shaded from the sun; recorded violins  
drift up from downstairs.

Probably Brahms, appropriate  
for autumn, the fade to dusk, a century  
where any story might be true. At night,  
when the child cries, she nurses him on the couch,

listening to the steady music of mouth  
and swollen nipple, illiterate  
and insistent—supple lips, strong jaw—  
shaping an eloquence that eclipses the self.

*Aria Refrain*

Refused cruelty quivers

Illiterate wingfold of angels  
whispers in your ear

Behold the moon's memorable shine  
through acute angles  
of stars and sky

Hear steady bells

An eloquent chant  
that swells