Source: Roee Rosen, *Martyr Paintings* (Ramat Gan Museum, Israel, 1994)

Portrait of the Artist as a Blind Martyr

Roberto Maria Dainotto

It must be visible and invisible
Invisible or visible or both:
A seeing and unseeing of the eye

Wallace Stevens

The Abominable Mirror

About the end of the year 1990, sitting on the same bench in the *Bois de Boulogne* where Jacques Lacan had the intuition of the *objet petit a*, the Israeli artist Roee Rosen saw, in one moment, the entire world withdraw from his sight. The winter flowers, the barren trees, the palaces in the distance—daylight itself abandoned him in an utter darkness, blind like "Thamyris and blind Maeonides, And Tiresias and Phineus prophets old."[1] Immediately hospitalized at the nearby *Hôpital du Sacre Cœur*, and diagnosed with an advanced case of prolactinoma, he was eager to know everything about his infirmity: prolactinoma—he was soon filled in—"is a tumor of the pituitary that oversecretes prolactin and impedes vision due to the pressure of the enlarged gland on the optic chiasme. In the first stage of the illness the patient suffers tunnel-vision. This excess secretion of prolactin—the hormone needed in pregnancy to allow maturation of the mammary glands—causes the patient to have enlarged breasts, to the point of a full breast, even in a man." On that same day, at the same time, and not very far from that bench of the *Bois de Boulogne*, the Afghani princess Eva Ghazi, later to become Rosen's life companion, would fall from her horse while, trying to mimic the deeds of St. Joan of Arc, fancied to go to battle against the unbeknownst enemy.

It was after these two apparently unrelated events that Rosen was stricken by his first illumination, which would be followed by many others according to the principle that *l'appétit vient en mangeant*. He was in the hospital's bathroom, brushing his upper teeth in a last effort to be presentable to the medical team, when, concentrated in a super-human effort to pierce the dark veil of blindness, his eyes raised to the facing mirror, he was confronted by the uncanny sight.

Who was this figure, almost blind, budding breasts, that stood staring back at him? What was this odious sight, this motherly parody of himself reflected in the abominable mirror? Whose eyes were those, almost blind, that could not fix the contours of the diaphanous face on the reflecting surface? In the moment of this private הסתר פנים,[2] in this liminal retreat of his entire body from the scene of history, he resolved to see the

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III, 35-6. Milton had gone completely blind by February 1652, his sight having begun to fail as early as 1644. The causes of his disease being unknown in his days (probably prolactinoma, or else some form of chronic glaucoma) the poet determined to interpret his blindness, in the Homeric fashion, as a 'gift in weakness' that the heavens had bestowed on him—the gift of prophecy. Through identification with Thamyris (a blind prophet alluded to in *Iliad*, II, 594-600), Maeonides (Homer himself), Tiresias (the blind prophet—a man with female breasts—of *Oedipus and Antigone*) and Phineus (another mythical blind prophet of Greek antiquity), Milton constructs an identity for himself that is that of the artist as *vates*—one who is a prophet and seer though blind. The figure of the blind prophet is a powerful one to which Milton returns again and again. See, for instance, the sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent," or the *Second Defense* (4, 590), where Milton declares with an echo of Corinthians 12: 9-10: "I shall be at once the weakest and the strongest, at the same time blind and most keen in vision. By this infirmity may I be perfected, by this completed... nor do these shadows around us [blind prophets] seem to have been created so much by the dullness of our eyes as by the shades of angels' wings."
2. הסתר פנים, the "disappearing of the Face," is the Hebrew metaphor denoting the temporary retreat of God from the scene of human history, thereby leaving humankind on its own. The concept is intimately intertwined with that of the martyrdom of the Jews, and has historically served the purpose of pre-emptying the thorny Gnostic question: Why did God permit the suffering of His people? From the perspective of the הסתר פנים, God did not technically 'permit' these martyrdoms—nor was martyrdom, as the Gnostic theology of Richard Rubenstein would have it (see his *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* [New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966]), a sign of the "Death of God." More simply, whenever His people were suffering, God was, so to speak, temporarily absent. For a paradigmatic reading of the Shoah as the fruit of an הסתר פנים, see Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973).

significance of a universe threatening to make him—an artist!—blind. The sight of his incipient blindness was the trauma from which everything else unfolded—the groaning and weeping, howling and shrieking, and the indefinite disappearance of the self in a world of darkness. The wavering image on the mirror was representation and recapitulation of his human condition in a universe from which we are all doomed to disappear; it was the absurd made Holy, the icon of the literally unspeakable, the circumcised image of self cut out from life into an oval frame. He remembered some lines he had read from Jorge Luis Borges' gnostic *auto da fè,*: "The world we live in is a mistake, a clumsy parody. Mirrors and motherhood, because they multiply and confirm the parody, are abominations. Withdrawal is the cardinal virtue. Two ways ... may lead us there: abstinence or the orgy, excess of the flesh or its denial."[3]

Borges' words offered Rosen both the consciousness of and the remedy to his condition of androgynous blindness. The reflection, the *Doppelgänger* he had seen on the mirror was the Epiphany of the false demiurge who had created a world infested with prolactinoma and other unspeakable torments for humankind to bear. The mirror multiplies images like cancer multiplies cells. It is all part of a perverse scheme of the universe that only multiplies pain endlessly and meaninglessly—an inversion of the promises of theodicy into the reality of suffering.[4] The atheistic zeal of the surgeons, masked by the pretensions of the medical science, could—and would, just to reassure the reader of these pages—have removed the cancer from the body of Rosen, thus restoring him to sight. But a most solemn—let alone artistic—response to the evil order of the universe was deemed necessary by the artist, for whom 'withdrawal' became the only way of life. The problem was now to reconcile abstinence and orgy, excess of the flesh and its denial.

Whether for her condition of *femme fatale* or because of her tendency to carelessness, it was Eva Ghazi—mistaking Rosen's room for her own, and entering with the speed of her wheelchair—who contributed, more or less unknowingly, to the solution of the riddle. Informed of the partial blindness of the strange-looking bearded 'woman' ("What a deep voice you have!", she exclaimed in wonder), she thought kind on her part to read to her hospitalized companion from the book she had with her—an English translation of Martin Luther's *In primum librum Moses enarrationes*. The book would have hardly interested Rosen, fearfully waiting for surgery, if Eva Ghazi would not have started reading aloud some passages concerning the martyrdom of St. Lucy:

> When St. Lucy was being carried off to prison and torture, she said that she felt as if she were being led to a dance...
>
> Thus the holy virgin martyrs Agatha, Lucy, and many others... regarded death as a game... Even in the midst of death they were joyful and fearless...

That was it! That was what Rosen needed to solve the riddle! What, if not a martyr, could turn the evil jokes and sufferings dispensed by the cruellest demiurge into *jouissance*, into a dance-like pleasure, a game! What, if not a martyr, could at the same time make of the body the denied flesh *and* the center of her symbolic universe! And what, if not a martyr, could deny the suffering body—the body burned, violated, quartered, cracked, cut, profaned—to reaffirm it in an orgiastic moment of supreme pleasure! The solution to the riddle was *to occupy* the place of reflections, where death is inverted into game, torture into dance, the martyred body into the ecstatic one. The answer was to turn the demiurge's mirror—against itself—into a strategy of survival. He would withdraw into his own image, his merry double. The other body, the cancerous one, would have to be sacrificed in this gesture of withdrawal. Joyful and fearless he took the path of martyrdom that led him into the operating room, assured that the more he would have enjoyed the instruments of the surgeon, the

3. See Jorge Luis Borges' "El tintorero enmascarado, Hakim de Merv," *Crítica*, Jan. 20, 1934. The observation, attributed here to the 'masked painter' Hakim, that mirrors and motherhood are abominable, is used again by Borges in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," *Sur*, May 1940, when the writer is consulting a fictive *Anglo-American Cyclopedia*: "The text of the encyclopedia read: '...the visible universe is an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and motherhood are abominable because they multiply it and extend it.'" In spite of several operations, Borges gradually lost the use of his right eye, with the vision in the left severely impaired. He became yet another blind artist in an already lengthy genealogy. To this period belong the poem "Mirrors" ("I have been horrified before all mirrors / not just before the impenetrable glass / the end and the beginning of that space / inhabited by nothing but reflections...) and the much celebrated "Borges and I," *a diverissement* on the multiplication, inversion, and reflection of the self. A question imposes itself, so to speak, to 'reflection': do mirrors supplement blindness?

4. For the Gnostics, it might be worth reminding us, the world we live in was not created by the true, good God, but by His evil, inverted double—the demiurge. Our world would then be the inverted image of the happy paradise that the true God would have created—but did not. The symbol of the mirror thus play a very important role in Gnostic tradition. See for instance Jacques Lacarriere, "The Impossible Mirror," *The Gnostics*, trans. Nina Rootes (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1989).

more he would have defied the evil demiurge by flipping the promised pain into opposite pleasure. He withdrew and danced.

The first version—or rather a perversion—of *Martyr Lucy* is Rosen's first painting on blindness and martyrdom. It presents the martyr as if in front of an oval mirror that s/he is fixedly contemplating. In an uncanny way, she carries the unmistakable countenance of her author, and his own eyes. She stands hieratic, with saintly dignity, in the posture of a *Cinquecento* waiter, offering with one hand the content of a tray to her viewer. What has the martyr/painter to offer? Nothing more, or less, than *another* pair of eyes.[5] It is the supplementary vision which, through martyrdom and art only, can unveil for us a universe of fearless joy behind the pains and ordeals of a cruel world that, as Dietzgen once put it, "exists *gratis*."[6] But the offer can be seized only as a reflected image sudden to vanish as in a game of mirrors. The vision offered by Lucy/ Rosen is a witness (from the Latin *martus*, whence 'martyr', a witness of God), because martyrdom, like painting, is not only the scenery, face to face, of victim and executioner, maybe gazed by an invisible demiurgic Other, but also the witness of a sanctity offered to the public, an estrangement, a withdrawal from a world of evil, torture, and pain. It is, indeed, *invitation au voyage*, an escape into a world of refracting images, figurae, representations. The martyr/painter, already diaphanous, is already withdrawing.[7]

Fearful simmetries intersect in the eyes of *Martyr Lucy*. For the viewer of this painting Lucy is looking at the mirror in which she sees herself reflected. But instead of a mirror, the only thing the scrupulous viewer, cautiously looking around the museum space, will find in front of Lucy is... him/herself. The viewer has become the true condition of blind Lucy's sight. This is a reflection only *through* the other, through the looking-glass of a spectator who occupies the space of what should be a mirror. Are you, dear viewer, a mirror? Or are you just *looking* at an oval one, and perceiving the image of yourself reflected as that of the blind martyr? Who are you, *hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon double!*

5. In some versions of the legend, Lucy (from Latin *lux*, light) is insistently courted by a man obsessed with the beauty of her "bright eyes." Firm in her desire to die a virgin, Lucy does not consent to the marriage, but she cannot stand, as the good and loving Christian that she is, the suffering and tribulations of her suitor. She then decides, in order to placate his torments, to tear the eyes off of her head, and send them in a dish to him. If the eyes in such legends function as symbolic substitute for sex, one should read Freud's "The Uncanny" (1919), where the coincidence of eyes with sexual anxiety is made clear. The essay is a reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Sand-man," a gothic tale in which Nathanael, the main character, is haunted throughout his life by the story of the Sand-man: "he's a wicked man, who comes to little children when they won't go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes, so that they jump out of their heads all bloody." This insane fear for the Sand-man, will eventually prevent Nathanael from marrying the beloved Clara (whose main attribute, throughout the story, are "her bright eyes"—her name itself, from Latin *clarus* has clear associations with light and vision) and 'consummate' his passion. As Freud sufficiently proves, this fear of losing his eyes to the Sand-man, and this inability to 'possess' Clara's "bright eyes," are symptoms of Nathanael's castration complex. The same complex was at work in Rosen's mind throughout his hospitalization: the threat of blindness, we might recall here, had been accompanied by a growth of breasts taking the place of his more manly attributes. However, in Rosen's *Martyr Lucy*, the doubling of the pair of eyes, like the doubling of the image through the mirror, and the doubling of Rosen into Lucy, entails a supplementary theme treated by Freud in the same essay—that of survival beyond death and castration: "The theme of the 'double' has been thoroughly treated by Otto Rank. He has gone into the connections which the 'double' has with reflections in mirrors... [and] with the fear of death... the 'double' was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego... This invention of doubling as preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of a genital symbol." Like the doubling of the eyes, we might add, in Lucy.
6. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Benjamin's description of Klee's painting '*Angelus Novus*' presents some striking similarities with Rosen's painting of *Martyr Lucy*. In both cases, the accent is put on the figure of a redeeming presence that could finally give sense ("make whole what has been smashed," in one of Benjamin's typical references to the תיקון) of the catastrophes of the past, of the piles of wreckage of human history, and at the same time prevent future tragedies. But in both cases, the redeeming presence—the angel, the martyr, or even the artist—does not seem to have enough time to realize the Messianic moment. "A storm is blowing from Paradise"—Benjamin warns—and is sweeping away the very figure of the redeemer. One has time to wonder, with Rosen's Gnostic zest, why it is that 'Paradise' does not leave enough time for the redemptive moment to be realized. Is it another cruel joke of the evil demiurge, that lets us glimpse images of salvation, without ever letting them be realized for us? At any rate, the problem seems to be, with Rosen as with Benjamin, that the time of Redemption—in a way analogous to that of the suspended time of artistic creation—is always heteronomous to the time of history, thus never to be realized.
7. As some sort of linguistic curiosity, I would like to point out that the Italian for 'to withdraw,' *ritrarre*, is the same as *ritrarre* with the meaning of 'to draw' or 'to paint.' The homophone might entail a deeper truth, since every drawing is a with-drawing from reality into reflections and representations.

Death by Water

Eva Ghazi, famous clairvoyante, had a bad fracture. Nevertheless, from an aseptic room of the *Sacre Cœur*, she could read Roee Rosen's fate in a wicked pack of cards: "Here is the Blind Martyr, and this card, which is blank, is something he carries on his back, which I am forbidden to see. I see the Hanged Monkey. Fear Death by Water."[8] There is one concept, in painting, that perverts all others. I am not speaking of immorality—whose limited empire is that of ethics—nor of color, texture, or perspective—which remain in the realm of technique. I am speaking of the mirror that, like Narcissus' water-pond, lures with re-flections and re-presentations of reality but threatens with death. The mirror is, of course, the ancient analogue of painting. In the tenth book of the *Republic* Socrates undertakes to explain the true (and perverse) nature of all art. The maker of an actual bed or table, he argues, proceeds in accordance with the Ideas of these things, and realizes them by combining pure Ideas (forms) with matter (wood, metal springs, feathers...). But the artist—*cette petite canaille!*—has another way to make these and all other things:

> "An easy way enough, or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished. The quickest way is to take a mirror and turn it round in all directions; before long, you will create... all the objects, in the mirror."
> "Yes, but they would only be reflections," [Glaucon] said, "not real things."
> "Quite right," I replied, "and very much to the point. For a painter is a craftsman of just this kind."[9]

The allusion is not a casual one, because from the analogy of the reflector, either the mirror or water, art results as a debased, inverted (and perverted) production of simulacra that have the despicable consistency of illusions. Art is, so to speak, the executioner of reality, to which it substitutes false images; and the painter is, alas!, "a craftsman of just this kind." If we were to take Plato's analogy literally—art is the executioner of reality[10]—then we should conclude that the representation of Rosen's face in the mirror/painting threatens an execution—or at least a defacement—of Rosen himself. We might have reason to worry: Rosen's face is indeed disappearing. It is not only that, as the translator's Preface to the King James Bible puts it, "the *letter* killeth"; also the figurative sign, the icon, has this latent murderous instinct in itself, as the Reformation desperately maintained. Representations *always* kill: after all if Narcissus dies in the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it so happens under the spell of the image of himself that he sees reflected in the water of a pond. Fear Death by Water. Beware the mirror of representation.

The hostility that Plato shows for mirrors in the *Republic*, can only be balanced by Plato himself, who, in a less quoted passage from *Phaedo* (99 d-e), declares: "I must be careful not to suffer the misfortune that happens to people who look at the sun... For some of them ruin their eyes unless they look at its image (εἰκών) reflected in water or something of this sort." There are certain things, like the sun (an obvious image for the Transcendent) that cannot be seen if not through images and reflections. This is, after all, our Lucy's offering: she has seen the destructive, blinding cruelty of the Transcendent, and she offers this vision for us in a reflection. The role that Rosen prescribes to her is the same that myth once prescribed to Perseus, who killed Medusa without meeting her petrifying sight, but looking at her *through* the reflection on his shield. Mirrors kill, but with some qualification: they kill a petrifying reality, yet they save *us* from it.

8. Eva Ghazi's echoing of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* might have not been casual at this point in Rosen's story. The latter's willingness to occupy the place and role of martyr Lucy was in fact, in the eyes of Ghazi, an uncanny repetition of Eliot's ritualistic deaths by Hanging, Fire, and Water. What happens to the artist, Eliot had after all declared in 1919, "is a continual surrender of himself... a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." The body of the artist suffers the ritual of the *sparagmos*. This is part of the relevance of martyrdom in Rosen's life and art, as it too dramatizes another restricted economy of the sublime, in which blindness, martyrdom, and death are the *via negativa* of survival after a world of sadness and pain.
9. Plato, *The Republic* (X, 596). Not even the most devoted and anti-Platonist artist can escape the spell of Plato's mirror. The Renaissance painter Leon-Battista Alberti asked for instance: "What should painting be called except the holding of a mirror...?" (quoted in K. E. Gilbert and H. Khun, *A History of Esthetics* [New York, 1939]). Also Leonardo da Vinci, who had an authentic fascination for mirrors, went as far as declaring that "The mind of a painter should be like a mirror." (*Leonardo da Vinci's Notebooks*, ed. Edward McCurdy [London, 1906). On mirrors in art, see G. F. Hartlaub, *Zauber des Spiegels. Geschichte und Bedeutung des Spiegels in der Kunst* (München: Piper, 1941).
10. The notion of representations that 'kill' the real has engendered a literature of its own: think for instance of Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, or, more *à propos* in the context of Rosen's oval portraits of martyrs, Edgar Allan Poe's '*The Oval Portrait*.' This death by representation is contiguous to the death by water not only on a mythical, but also, at least in English, on a linguistic level: drowning is at least as dangerous as drawing.

Images of reflection, doubling, and re-presentation, are virtually everywhere in Rosen's book of *Lucy* (1991-92): from the frame within the frame of the cover page, to the numberless epiphanies of mirrors, waters, and TV screens. The story itself is meant to double and re-present (albeit distorted in factual accuracy) the autobiographical[11] narration of Rosen's love-story with Eva Ghazi. Their own identities are of course mirrored by the book's characters, Lucy and Annie. And Annie herself is, in turn, the mirror image of Lucy/Rosen, as section 10, "Her Name," implies:

> her name was Annie, which means in Hebrew, when pronounced with a French accent: "I." And even an American poet once said: "I am Her."

Hebrew doubles the semantics of English, doubled by Hebrew. The game of mirrors perpetrated by the martyr Rosen is a *mise en abyme*: two mirrors, placed one in front of the other, multiply their images endlessly.

Socrates, in his condemnation of arts, accuses painting of being a 'mirror,' a re-presentation of reality that kills the latter to substitute it with images and illusions. The notion of martyrdom, Rosen seems to suggest, is not far from this Socratic concept of re-presentation. What would have happened of Lucy had she not submitted herself to martyrdom and death? Probably nothing. We would not have associated 'Lucy' with any particular meaning, or sign—the eyes, inner sight—in our symbolic universe. Lucy, quite literally, would have been or meant nothing. This is, of course, Lacan's idea of 'symbolic death': it is only the martyr's *death* of the body that allows a *survival* in the symbolic.[12] The martyr, in other words, dies in her body to return, re-present herself to us alive as a pure signifier, as a symbol, an icon of sainthood. What is a martyr if not a pure representation which follows the death of her body in reality? This cycle—death of reality obliterated by its re-presentation as pure signifier—is what we call, in art as in religion, "canonization."

Meditating on the canonization of these martyrs today, after the flood of the neo-conceptual and postmodern art of the '80s, I see the emergence of a historical truth. Not simply because Rosen's work may become part of a future history of painting, or because these martyrs may become the model of art to come. The problem. here, is historical *in an absolute sense*: these martyrs introduce impiety in the artistic scene. They are not the *mise en scène* of an atheist postmodern discourse, proclaiming once again, for the sake of boredom, the death of God and Grand Narratives; and they are not a conceptual dramatization of a theist, benign First Principle—the logos that, although external to the art-object, guides it from distance by giving 'meaning' to it. For the Gnostic Rosen, the existence of a transcendent Being is a dogmatic truth that reveals itself in our everyday existence: what is dead is the desire for God; what remains is a God *de trop*. A new epiphany of the transcendent Being must be produced in the scene of painting, that can only show the meaningless tragedy of humankind, tortured by the martyr-machine of the false god. Yet, Rosen's paintings are not simply the representation of this origin of suffering. They are also a statement of the human hatred against this origin. And it is allegory, in Rosen as in Walter Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, that more properly expresses hatred against the demiurge and Its world. Allegory begins with the slaughtering, the martyrdom, the annihilation of the organic body:

> the characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter the homeland of allegory. It is not only for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of a revenge against the [organic] world.[13]

This is, like the theological dogma that presupposes it, an *ars negativa*: the organic—the body—is denied and transcended by the indestructible body of the martyr.

Lucy's body, in the painting of *Martyr Lucy*, is framed, at the four corners, by scenes of the Saint's martyrdom. We see: Lucy rejecting her suitor; Lucy humiliated in a brothel; Lucy burnt alive; Lucy killed by the sword. The scenes are sketched in a cartoonish fashion, reinforced by the childish smiling faces on the two sides, reminiscent of the faces of Max & Moritz in the book of *Lucy*. Rosen's innuendo to cartoons is of course no mere

11. The idea of autobiography as a *miroir d'encre*, a "mirror of ink" is of course as old as Montesquieu. See, for instance, Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre: rhetorique de l'autoportrait* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).
12. See Jacques Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1986). The mechanism of symbolic death bears powerfully on the Christian notion of the 'virgin martyr'—something we may call 'symbolic virginity.' Virgin martyrs occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of martyrology, and Lucy is among them. The seeming paradox is that she gained her 'virginity,' in the eyes of the Church, only after being raped by the evil emperor, and sent to a brothel. Only insofar as virginity is threatened and taken away from the martyr, will the latter gain the attribute of 'virgin'! In martyrdom as in painting, a loss at the level of reality is compensated by its symbolic substitution.
13. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963).

chance. Cartoons, like martyrdom, are two sides of the same fantasy. Scene after scene, the cartoon hero is stabbed, blown off, minced, a steamroller flattens his body like a ribbon. Yet, in the next scene, he appears with his normal body. As an allegory, his body is indestructible, beyond the natural laws of physics, of life and death.[14] The role of painting—understood as a form of martyrdom and witness—must then be that of inventing an allegorical body. One, for that matter, that can witness the torments of everyday martyrdom without ever being annihilated by it. A body, moreover, that can turn the pain of martyrdom, deflected onto the allegorical image, into a pleasurable spectacle, a show, a theater of cruelty, an exhibition offered for the sheer pleasure of the public and the artist alike.

The Indomitable Phallus

Hanging in Roee Rosen's 1991 *Fake Martyr* is a little monkey.[15] The critic Anne Kastorp describes the scene: "The noose around the neck is tight, the tongue dwindles out, the legs dangle in the air and the penis is in the protruding state that reputedly graces those hanged. Yet it is the monkey's own left hand that fists the fatal rope; he is lifting his own weight, raising the suspicion that he isn't really dead."[16] Is this a 'true' martyr, or the fake, aping image of one? Kastorp seems to have little doubt that "[t]he deceit is misguided and silly": the monkey's death seems here a quite unchristian form of suicide, rather than a true submission to martyrdom. After all, is the monkey *really* dead? Can it be that he hanged himself only to seek that supreme sexual pleasure that, as the scientist suggests, "graces those hanged"? What are we to make of that phallus "in a protruding state"?

In *De Nuptis et Concupiscentia* St. Augustine devotes some memorable pages to the question of sexuality, focusing with particular (and unparalleled) attention on what I would like to call "the paradox of the phallus." His reasoning deviates from doctrinal orthodoxy: far from being the sin that caused the Fall, sexuality is, on the contrary, the punishment for the sin. God punished Adam for having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge by implanting in him a sexual desire which cannot be compared in intensity to any of the others (hunger, thirst, and so on). This is a desire, in fact, that exceeds any organic function, and that, precisely for this reason, cannot be mastered. If Adam and Eve would have stayed in Eden, they would have performed the sexual act in the same way as they accomplished all other instrumental acts: eating to nourish the body, drinking to water the blood, and copulating for reproducing humankind. The damnation of the sexual drive is then, exactly, its absolutely excessive, non-functional nature, that, ousting it from the organic, cannot be possibly tamed by the body that to organic laws obeys. Where did Augustine see this indomitable nature of the sexual drive? Nowhere else than in the erected phallus! Indian fakirs, he observed, can stop the beating of the hearth, monks the hunger of the stomach, hermits the thirst of the throat; martyrs can even suspend the suffering of the body. In principle, then, all parts of the body are submitted to human will—all except one: the erection of the phallus escapes man's free will. Someone with a strong will can fast and starve in the middle of a sumptuous banquet, but if a naked virgin passes by, the erection of his phallus is in no way dependent on the strength of his will. Rosen's erected phallus, in the Gnostic universe of the *Fake Martyr*, is exactly this excess of pleasure and desire that escapes the laws of death and the organic. It is the promise of gratification beyond life. It is the joy that comes after death and martyrdom,[17] in the Dionysian excess of allegory. But a pleasure, alas!, to which,

14. This is also the same fantasy at work in de Sade's *Juliette*. In the novel, the victim's body seems to be, once again, indestructible. Juliette can be endlessly tortured and can survive it; she can endure any torment and scar inflicted on her body, and remain beautiful; she can undergo endless hours of rape, and be fresh and sexy as a flower. It is as though, beyond her natural body, she possessed another body, made of another substance which is excepted from natural laws.
15. The etymology of the English 'monkey' is rather unclear, but Ernest Weekley, in *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Dover, 1967) advances the hypothesis of an association with the Low German *monnik*, a monk. Why would an ape be associated with a monk may remain a mystery, but it is interesting to notice the relevant role monks play in the linguistic imagery of modern languages. Consider for instance the French for 'sparrow,' *moineau*, which literally means a 'little monk,' probably by analogy with the brown-capped head of the sparrow. Or even the ever popular Italian *cappuccino*, again with a reference to the light-brown habit of the monks of the Capuchin order. In the case of the binomy monk/monkey, however, the analogy must be on a level other than pure color impressionism: my only suggestion is that the monks' attempted imitation of Christ and the Christian Saints, gained them the association with the animal that, in popular opinion, imitates humans. In this line of reasoning, the monkey can also be associated with the Christian martyr in general, who, in the midst of suffering, and through it, tried to imitate the suffering of the Crucified Christ. In this sense, every martyr is a monkey, and every martyr is a 'fake,' a copy, a reflection of the 'original' Crucified.
16. Anne Kastorp, *The Fake Martyr: Essay and Lexical Reference to Roee Rosen's Martyr Paintings*, unpublished essay, 1993.

quite literally, one comes too late.

Why did the monkey kill *himself*? For martyrdom to be reproducible, the subject must take the responsibility on him/herself, and become his/her own tyrant and executioner.[18] We are reminded of Baudelaire's "Héautontimoroumenos" (literally, "the one that inflicts pain on himself):

> I am the sinister mirror
> In which the sorceress looks at herself!
>
> I am the wound and the blade!
> I am the slap and the cheek!
> I am the limbs and the wheel,
> The victim and the executioner![19]

What we are confronting is the endless duplication of the self ("I am the sinister mirror...") that re-flects and duplicates images of identity ("The victim and the executioner"). The 'sinister mirror' of painting allegorizes the subject—it makes an object of it. As an object, the self is capable only of passively suffering the pains imposed by the subject. The monkey, an aping image of Rosen, suffers the pain imposed by Rosen himself on his 'objective' image. Sadism turns into masochism.[20] The willingness of the martyr to assume the role of object/victim is precisely what sustains the reality of his condition. The pleasure he derives is dependent on the pleasure he delivers to the executioner—be it human or demiurgic Other.[21] But there is another name for this perverted pleasure, especially fit for an exhibition such as this—it is *exhibitionism.*

Epiphanies of Blindness

Why did Rosen choose the Christian theme of martyrdom in order to exhibit himself as victim and executioner in a tragic order of the universe? And why did he make of blindness the central metaphor for such an exhibition? A reading of the New Tetstament and Rosen's 1989 book *The Blind Merchant* can provide some answers.[22] Revelations 1:7 alleges the Christian prophecy of the Second Coming. The imagery is that of the eternal battle between the clouds that hide, obfuscate the view, blind the eye, and the Light of Christ that

17. Pleasure in displeasure is the exact definition of Lacan's *Jouissance*. This means, in aesthetic terms, that the pleasure of the martyr (or the erection of the monkey) is a matter of sublimity, in a strictly Kantian way: "The sublime may be described in this way: it is an object the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation beyond our reach... The feeling of the Sublime is therefore, at once, a feeling of displeasure... and a simultaneous awakened pleasure." (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. G. Meredith [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964] 106 et passim). The *jouissance* of the martyr, or the erection of the monkey, promise a pleasure that is at the same time desired and feared, longed for and inimitable.
18. Since her childhood, St. Teresa of Avila confesses in her Life, she had dreamt of dying as a martyr "by the hand of the Moors," but she found very soon "the impossibility to go look for martyrdom in those or in other countries." Since 1634, with Pope Urbanus VIII, the Catholic Church had started to discourage attempts to martyrdom, and had showed unparalleled prudence in assigning the status of martyrs not only to the victims of the Moors, but even to the Jesuits missionaries falling under the swords of Japanese samurai in their—albeit admirable—attempts at conversion. From this perspective, the necessity of self-martyrdom should become apparent.
19. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861). In the absence of an executioner in the monkey's death, Rosen seems to follow the metaphysical trace that unveils the way we all die. The fact that we distinguish, in Christian martyrologies, the victim (Christian) from the executioner (Roman), is but a matter of appearances. For Gnosticism, murder and death are contained in the same ontological principle. In the absence of the Roman executioner, is then unveiled the secret of all deaths: we all die murdered by the Transcendent Being—the false demiurge that stands, in relation to the True God, as the monkey stands in relation to the painter.
20. The masochistic tendency in martyrdom is discussed in Gustave Bonnet, "Du saignement des règles au saignement provoqué. Etude psychanalytique du syndrome de Lasthénie de Ferjol," *Adolescence* 1: 2 (Fall 1983).
21. However, Jacques Lacan (in "Désire, vie et morte," *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* [Paris: Seuil, 1978]) warns that "masochism is not inverted sadism, the phenomenon of aggressivity isn't to be explained simply on the level of imaginary identification." It is not, in other words, that the masochist 'identifies' with (the pleasure of) the executioner, but rather transforms himself into an object, a sign in the symbolic order occupied by the desire of the other. Significantly, Lacan identifies the first expression of masochism in the moment of the mirror stage, when the child sees himself for the first time as a sign in the symbolic universe reflected by the mirror. Mirrors, masochism, martyrdom, and painting, seem to be intimately interconnected: they are all moments of aggression against the subject to 'objectify' it at the level of the symbolic.

pierces the veil of blindness: "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced Him." Whose eyes are those that "pierced Him"? What does it mean that these piercing eyes will see "also"? Did they not see before? Were they blind? But how can blind eyes pierce? Or are these eyes, here, the synecdoche for something else, or someone else, like the Jew, that pierced and crucified the true Messiah—or the Messiah of a truth that the Jew could not see? Blindness, in the New Testament, is always in the eye of the other—the heathen, the idolater,[23] the unbeliever. Blindness is, in the end, the metonym of the Synagogue.[24] The Pharisee, man of letters, is blind because he can only see the appearance of things, not their essence. It is in Matthew 23 that the icon of the Pharisee as hypocrite (someone who judges without seeing) establishes itself in full visibility: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides... You blind fools!" A few lines before (Matthew 13:14ff) Christ had recalled Isaiah's prophecy, "you will indeed look, but never perceive." The Jew will not see the Truth, nor will "see" (Thomas's Christian paradigm of Truth) Jesus healing the blind (Mark 8:22; John 9:6). John, like Plato before him, revels in images of Light (Christ) opposed to blindness (the Jew). Inability to see the Light (λευκός) of Christ means inability to know Truth (λόγος).[25] Inability to see (ἰδεῖν) means inability to penetrate the veil of appearance (εἰκών) to reach the kernel of essence (εἶδος). Vision and blindness, sight and darkness, are also the themes of Rosen's *The Blind Merchant*. The book is, from its very outset, a parodic rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. On the one hand Rosen quotes verbatim Shakespeare's text; on the other, he invades Shakespeare's text with what he calls a "parasite text"—his own—and with a series of drawings. If, in Shakespeare, Shylock the Jew is only metaphorically blind—he does not see, blinded by an obsession with material wealth, the holy nature of a person's life, flesh, and body—he becomes, in Rosen's text, literally blind, and every time the text refers to him, Rosen illustrates the scene with what he calls "blind drawings," sketches that he drew with closed eyes. He puts in front of Shakespeare's representation of the Jew as usurer, two other stereotypical representation—that of the Jew as the Biblical blind, and that of the Jew (and his text) as 'parasite,' as something contaminating. These representations are like mirrors standing one in front of the others. They multiply the others' images endlessly, and it is impossible to say which of them is the 'original' image, and which a reflection. One loses sight of the original, and, in this case, of an original Jewish identity in Shakespeare's play or in the Biblical parables of the Blind.

In the painting of *Martyr Lucy*, as in *The Blind Merchant*, it is important for Rosen to transfigure his Jewish identity in the distorting mirror of a Christian painterly—but also ideological—tradition. He becomes blind and martyr at the same time, the symptom itself of a castration at the level of identity. Yet, it is only by (ironically) accepting this transfiguration, this—so to speak—conversion, that Rosen might re-assert for himself an (allegorical) identity that corrodes, undoes, in an exquisitely parasitical way, the identity assigned to him within the authoritative tradition of Christian painting. As Jacques Derrida puts it, "even if drawing is, as they say, mimetic, that is, reproductive, figurative, representative, even if the model is presently facing the artist, the line... escapes the field of vision. Not only because it is not yet visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity."[26] Every drawing, in this sense, is a 'blind' drawing, and every draftsman is a Shylock. Drawing, like representing, is a system of usury, from the Latin *usura*, which also means "wear, tear, loss, wearing out." The draftsman, like Shylock, tears out flesh and corporeal consistency, identity and Self-presence, from his 'real' object, and gives in return a trace of lines, a fable of allegories. The lines are a compensation, a usury, for the loss at the level of reality[27]—it is the flesh of identity that Shakespeare's Gentile Antonio has taken away from Shylock; it is the visible flesh that the demiurge took away from Roee Rosen's sight, in that day of December 1990, on that bench of the *Bois de Boulogne*.

In this exhibition, Rosen has withdrawn into the allegory of the blind painter. He has *become* Lucy. It is only the blind who can show us the way, find an identity beyond life—the gloomy universe of the demiurge—and besides culture—the oppressive yoke of tradition. The blind martyr inverts, de-flects pain and

22. The coupling of these two texts here is based on a structural similarity. Like the Bible, in fact, *The Blind Merchant* can be read as a prophetic text, foreshadowing in an uncanny way the blindness that Rosen would have experienced only one year later.

23. The *American Heritage English Dictionary* defines 'idolatry' as "Blind admiration or devotion."

24. See, on the metaphor of the 'blindfolded Synagogue,' Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) 27 and 111.

25. The relation between Light and Christianity had to be obvious to Arthur Rimbaud, who, in *Saison en Enfer*, renounced his God with the verses: "Yes, my eyes are closed to your light. I am not Christian."

26. Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990).

subjection—zigzags through it towards the homeland of allegory. Her mirrors turn the light elsewhere, illuminate another possible world of fearless joy and mirthful fables of identity. She is the symptom of an impious rebellion against the authorities of the universe and of tradition. She is for us, quite literally, Lucifer, the bearer of light.

27. In Runciman's *The Origin of Painting* (1771), we are offered a myth of origins of drawing and painting that marks, like Dante's *Vita Nuova* does it for literature, the ambiguous contiguity of drawing and loss. The inventor of "iconographic tradition," Runciman tells us, was the young Corinthian woman Butade, who had fallen in love, unreciprocated, with a beautiful young man. She could not have him. Blind cupid had made her fall in love with an object that she could dream of only as a loss. One night she saw the shadow of the young man projected on the wall of her room. She immediately fetched a pen, and drew the outline of the shadow, of that absence in her love-life. She lived with that icon of her lost love until her death, and so she originated, with this symbolic logic of usury and compensation, the art of drawing and painting.