

# VISCERAL POETICS

ELENI STECOPOULOS

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*for my teachers*



*in memory of Karl D. Uitti (1933-2003)*  
*John N. Woodhull Professor of Modern Languages*  
*at Princeton University,*  
*mentor and friend*



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# THE HEALING FORCE OF LANGUAGE

ALPHONSO LINGIS

We see that our words quicken, shock, energize, stun, excite, support, offend, and wound those with whom we speak. Our words also focus, fortify, hearten, embolden, agitate, weary, stupefy, and distress our carnal substance. Friedrich Nietzsche said that value-terms are not first comparative; the meaning of the positive, affirmative terms is inward. In a surge of excess energies we exclaim “How strong I am!” “How healthy I am!” “How happy I am!” “How beautiful I am!” These words do not simply report on an inner surge of force; they consecrate it and intensify it. Saying “how happy I am!” we feel still happier. The powerful words strengthen, healthy words invigorate, joyous words enhance, beautiful words glorify; the feeble words weaken, morbid words sicken, sullen words depress, ugly words disfigure.

And words heal. Words are an essential component of medical practice. Words formulate the diagnosis and prescribe the pharmacology and surgery of the cure; they continually assess and guide the treatment. Psychoanalysis formulated treatment for which language itself is the pharmacology and the surgery. The talking cure. Psychoanalysis sought to make its language as prosaic as that of physical medicine, but also wove in the language of myths.

Claude Lévi-Strauss recognized the psychoanalytic cure to be similar to the shamanist cure and also delineated the differences. The shaman interprets the symptoms not in the language of the psychoanalytic prose but in that of myth. Lévi-Strauss showed how the words, songs, and also gestures of the shaman bring the body of the sufferer into the mythic discourse where meanings are extended. The mythic conflict and resolution is reenacted in the body of the patient—the physical body that is also a psychic and a social body.

Eleni Stecopoulos was studying poetry, languages, philology, writing poetry. She is stricken with an idiopathic condition, some autoimmune disorder, finds herself mired in pain. “By 2001 I could no longer recall or imagine what a pain-free body felt like.” She crossed the continent seeking help from doctors and healers. She learns different languages that are elaborated about her condition. Morbid words did not afflict her body and spread sickness over it; instead she believes that the exclusion of the body from language is what perpetuated her illness. “Pain is not the origin; it is the condition of unknowing the source, so that there can only be method.” She will write out of her suffering, with her suffering.

She sought out medical specialists, and in time sought out everything that might promise help: chiropractic; homeopathy; traditional Chinese medicine; chelation; autohemoral ozone treatments; bee venom injections; Ayurveda; electrotherapeutics like biofrequency therapy; and hybrids of Chinese medicine, kinesiology, and biofeedback such as Neuro-Emotional Technique and Thought Field Therapy. Different languages describe the body differently, formulate the diagnosis in different terminologies, with different paradigms, formulate the treatment differently. Chinese medicine shows her a different map of her body, a map of meridians, gradients, and networks. The languages themselves might be healing. “With my body as the test-case, I was forced to entertain that language—words, vocables, writing, philological aura—might be efficacious as medical technology...and this had little to do with discourse, comprehension, or even my belief in the power of this language.”

Eleni Stecopoulos speaks of her text not as autobiography but as autoethnography. It is the report of a participant observer of a life but also of a culture. And of cosmologies. “All hermeneutical quests—to translate incomprehensible language, to interpret an illness, to locate a foreign culture or language strangely more recognizable as oneself—are cosmological quests. And vice versa.” Stecopoulos follows ethnographers in their study of native American languages. Learning these languages—and learning these cosmologies—is also writing in these languages.

But so many languages about the suffering body must lead to direct study of the language of the suffering body. This book then is not about all those

languages, but about the language that not the autonomous I but the suffering of the body utters. Thus this book is centered on Antonin Artaud, who suffered much and wrote much and who worked to stage a theatre of cruelty that would issue out of torment.

Empathy drew Eleni to Artaud. She watches him at work drawing a portrait; as he draws he presses the pencil hard against corresponding parts of his own body. The participant observer is in empathetic symbiosis with the subject he seeks to represent. Empathy, she understands, “does not mean comprehension; it means visceral sensibility of a perceived connection. And that is more often incomprehension.” “Rather than writing impenetrable blocks of prose, I want to write something with stretches of opacity (where the reader cannot easily go).”

Artaud’s writing moves from incandescent poetry to glossolalia and nonsense. His words issue from his neurological disorder and his suffering and are twisted, scattered, and clouded by the spasms of his pain; his words also rise and spread release and open new forces in life. Eleni tracks the movement in Artaud’s language from therapy to poetry and watches for the forces in his language that are also healing. She discovers still another map of the body, Artaud’s map of a fragmented body, a body without organs. And reading Paul Metcalf she finds not a muscular whole but an oceanic body, “teeming with fluids, fusions, explosions.”

Artaud’s writings are heretical, Cathar, and blasphemous; they are also writings that illuminate and deliver to new kinds of strength. A sister to Artaud is Mère Jeanne des Anges, the seventeenth-century abbess of a convent in Loudun who had been treated by medical specialists and also subjected to long exorcisms to drive out diabolical possession. The autobiography written by Jeanne and the writings of Père Jean-Joseph Surin, the principal exorcist, were studied by Jesuit, philosopher, and psychoanalyst Michel de Certeau.

The healing energies in language do not lie only in their illuminating, informative capabilities, but also in their melodic and rhythmic, incantatory and ritual components. These components also are at work in poetry. Poetry focuses our sensibility upon minute marvels and immense enigmas.

Poetry speaks of the most familiar things intimating what is unknown and unsayable in them. Philosophers from Socrates to Heidegger saw that poetry allies with philosophy to quicken the mind to the most important things. Eleni Stecopoulos is singularly aware of a healing power in poetry that touches the most obscure depths of our carnal existence. She seeks to uncover “how the body in its opaque poetry can be homeopathically treated by poetry—as aesthetic, not anaesthetic, therapy.”

Eleni Stecopoulos’ researches open an important field for investigation and practice: the healing force of language, of poetry.

# PREFACE

...poetry is anarchic insofar as it calls into question all relationships between objects and all relationships between forms and their meanings. It is also anarchic insofar as its appearance is the consequence of a disorder that brings us closer to chaos.

—Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*<sup>1</sup>

*To treat an illness without source  
a language without target  
“sociopathic not idiopathic”  
not theory but innard sight*

Fifteen years ago I submitted my body to translation, and to cope with the side effects, I began to write about the encounter. I was a student at the time, trying to interpret the strange, invented language of a famously mad poet, and at the same time, I was a patient experiencing mysterious chronic pain. My writing and my work to heal myself became symbiotic: the writing could not end unless I got well; I could not get well unless I exorcised the pathology of the disciplining systems Antonin Artaud critiqued and those that constrained me. The multiple ways Artaud’s language has been read by critics quickly became analogous for me with the multiple ways my illness was read by physicians, healers, and myself. And people warned me. They told me it was dangerous to “confuse” the two projects, as if body and text did not run together. My reading was sympathetic. Symptomatic. The syndrome spread through my body, so I could no longer distinguish what was and was not aesthetic. Everything is aesthetic.