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**Arte e spiritualità.
Omaggio
a Antoni Tàpies**



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Arte e spiritualità. Omaggio a Antoni Tàpies

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Straw

An essay on Tàpies

Daniel R. Esparza

In his 1970 essay, *Res no és mesquí*, Antoni Tàpies wrote:

To reflect upon straw, upon manure, may be important nowadays. It is to meditate upon the first things, on the most natural things, on the origin of force and of life... That is why it must also be remembered that, in the world, there are still many straw pallets, and that the artist takes more interest in them than in the beds of gods or their messengers or the wealthy who adore them. Because the artist feels, and this is nothing new, that this origin, this life source, this fertilizer that makes the earth fecund, the 'salt of the earth', truly resides in those who struggle from below, who sleep, even if just symbolically, in the straw of miserable huts, or on the pallets of so many prisons, or amid the stink of the manure in stables for 'heretics', or in the fields where those who are considered trash leave behind their sweat (Tàpies 1970, 133).

I want to take Tàpies' remark seriously and reflect upon straw. This is then an essay on grazing and rumination, in two different senses. On the one hand, it asks whether it is possible for non-ruminant animals like us to ruminate – and to do it properly. That is, it questions whether we can do what Tàpies recommends we ought to do with straw. In that sense, this is a reflection on the incomplete. As the physical act of ruminating implies the partial digestion of the eaten hay, reflecting on rumination (ruminating rumination, if you will) is always necessarily half-done. There are some thoughts we cannot fully stomach and some others we are urged to purge. The many insufficiencies of our memory (Augustine's "stomach of the soul") make it inevitably so. On the other, this short commentary makes a somewhat scandalous claim: straw is (a) religious, theological, and political matter.

Lyotard regards Augustine's *Confessions* a(n) (in)digestive movement. "Sin", he writes, "must be vomited out in spasms" (Lyotard [1998] 2000, 92). Like Augustine, Spinoza also gave eating a distinctive place in his philosophy, as he understood that consumption is inevitable. His *Treatise on the Reformation of the Understanding* in 1661 begins with a warning: "This Treatise on the Reformation of the Understanding, which we give you here unfinished, kind reader, was written by its author many years ago. He always entertained the intention of bringing it to a conclusion; but, hindered by other occupations, and finally snatched from him by death, he was unable to bring his work to the desired completion." (Spinoza [1661] 1992, 1) This warning is a *memento mori*: death eventually consumes us all. True, all texts remind us of death's unavoidability. But essays particularly so. Every essay carries Spinoza's forewarning within it, as they all are necessarily unfinished.



Antoni Tàpies, *Palla i fusta* [straw and wood], assemblage on canvas, 1969. Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies.

Writing an essay on the incomplete is thus both redundant and contradictory. Redundant, because an essay (unlike a treatise) is just a sustained attempt at grasping something, a consciously incomplete and recurring revisiting of a subject. Insofar as it is redundant, it is an act of rumination. The essay forcefully repeats, retries, rethinks, remembers, and resents. Like Spinoza's conatus, it is possessed by an infinite but impossible inclination to keep on being, to insist upon life. And yet, at some point, the essay will be finished (by the author) and consumed (by the reader) – hence its contradictory nature.

An essay on incompleteness is so an essay on repetition and rumination but also an open question regarding the eventual end of all digestive processes. As Tàpies' mentions of manure suggest, the essay is also an eschatological matter, both theologically (as it might deal with god, the gods, or "the beds of the gods") and politically (as it ineludibly deals with us and our fellow men, the "salt of the earth", the polis). In that vein, ruminating on the incomplete means anticipating the moment in which we will no longer be *inter homines*, and pondering on the (im)possibility of dodging this absence –our absence. To put it bluntly, ruminating requires wondering whether raising the dead (and from the dead) is possible. Indeed, Tàpies' plea for rumination demands pondering on death alongside rebirth and forgiveness or, even better, on forgiveness as rebirth. To forgive is to insist on living. If Tàpies sees in straw "the origin of force and of life", then we should at least entertain the idea of straw as the harbinger of rebirth, the forerunner of the eschatological completion, the matter forgiveness is made of. This is not an intemperate statement. Hay-covered troughs and mangers (Tàpies' "beds of the gods") were often the setting for some of the most important mythical and religious events of the ancient world. From Zeus to Christ, gods were habitually born in barns and stables, accompanied and raised by ruminants.

Forgiveness, Mary-Jane Rubenstein explains, is a disruption of the violence and counter-violence of the everyday (Rubenstein 2008, 82). As the birth of a child-god in a hay-covered manger meant splitting the continuum of history in two, forgiveness unremittingly modifies the violent monotony (and the monotonal violence) of the everyday by introducing a series of *ifs* in both history and memory. That is, forgiveness troubles Augustine's *venter animi*. It upsets it, forcing it to ruminate the common violence that is to be forgiven. As Tàpies finds the "fertilizer that makes the earth fecund [...] in the straw of miserable huts", forgiveness finds sway in fragile gestures and materials – a newborn child, a reborn someone. By rejecting violence as a primary motivator of human behavior, these rebirths become acts of resistance against the systems that perpetuate harm, releasing wrongdoers and victims from the cycle of retribution. Furthermore, like Tàpies' work refusing to hide the straw and wood it is made of, forgiveness does not require the offender or the victim to change who they are. It allows them to exist side by side while remaining fundamentally different. *Palla* is *palla* and *fusta* is *fusta*; straw remains straw as wood remains wood.

In other words, forgiveness brings things to an end and perpetuates nothing. Far from bringing anything together, forgiveness discerns, separates, breaks up, and disengages. It is the op-

posite not of resentment, but of reconciliation. Reconciliation aims at the preservation of the everyday (the already existing status quo), whereas forgiveness has to recognize and uphold its fleeting and incomplete *raison d'être*. If forgiveness is to remain forgiveness and not something else (clemency, pity, indifference, benevolence, magnificence) then it needs to put an end to all kinds of rumination. The only ruminating activity that forgiveness allows for is the repeated disposition to forgive. This is borderline impossible, and so the forgiving act is always incomplete, delayed, postponed. One rehearses (*répété, essaie, essaye*) forgiveness. As Vladimir Jankélévitch rightly puts it, "it is very possible that a forgiveness free from any ulterior motive has never been granted here below, that in fact an infinitesimal amount of rancor subsists in the remission of every offense, such as the calculating self-interest that cannot be weighed" (Jankélévitch 2005, 1). That insignificant, barely indiscernible amount of resentment reveals the insistent presence of the incomplete.

Resentment obviously ruminates. And still, rumination can also be bile-free. To speak of the incomplete is to (always eschatologically) speak of an entirety of sorts in, again, two directions. First, incompleteness refers to the idea of an absent totality. The essay moves through a trace of a completeness evoked negatively, through defect and lack – a totality that is always yet to come, here but not yet. This negativity is the announcement of a future fullness as much as its expectation. Incompleteness anticipates an end that occurs only when and if the author surrenders (whatever that submission means) and lets the Sisyphian rock roll. One must imagine the author happy.

An author can forgive his own writing drive, give in, and give up (à la *Bartleby*) and never complete anything. Others, like Balzac's *Frenhofer*, never give up. Those are the ones who never complete anything, consumed as they are by their own activity. As Walter Benjamin puts it, "hell is the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started." (Benjamin [1972-1978] 1969, 179). Fighting one's way out of hell is to seek completion. An essay could be finished, like Spinoza's treatise, with the author's death. But there are other ways to bring an essay to its conclusion. One can set fire to the haystack and be done with it. Frustrated authors eventually have to deem the writing done despite their own (again, Sisyphian) drive. In that sense, incompleteness is always a crisis, *sensu stricto*. There comes a moment in which the (alive and ruminating) essay is abandoned to its fate, for better or worse. And still, the always incomplete essay will live on in the stomach of the author's mind, demanding rumination: amendments, rewritings, rereadings.

Incompleteness points to an always delayed, postponed solution but also to the afterlife of the essay. Only the gods can usher conclusive moments into history. All we mortals can do is ruminate life, trying to raise the dead – a properly religious and political task. Indeed, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (Marx [1852] 1978, 569) asserts that revolutions involve an "awakening of the dead." The phrase turns revolutionary action into political-necromantic activity. Instead of political theology, Marx opts for political wizardry: in times of revolutionary crisis, Marx writes, people "anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past in

their service.” (Marx, [1852] 1978, 595). While obviously metaphorical, the phrase has clear necromantic overtones. Traditionally, necromancy involves awakening a dead spirit for at least four different purposes: 1) to predict future events; 2) to bring someone back to the realm of the living; 3) to gain access to hidden, remote knowledge; or 4) to use the dead as a weapon. The awakening of the dead that revolutions require, Marx explains, is not intended to make the ghosts of old struggles walk again, but rather to “bring back the spirit of the revolution” (Marx, [1852] 1978, 595). Any of the possible uses of the necromantic arts listed above could be at play: 1) the spirit of revolution can (pre)tell us what the outcome of this particular historical moment will be; 2) dead revolutionaries of the past can be “reborn” in the living; 3) by reencountering the spirit of past revolutions, we will finally know what to do in the present; and 4) we can wave the flags of those who died in past revolutionary struggles to glorify present struggles. Rebirth, memory, the disruption of the everyday, and the search for completion are all at play in this summoning.

But folklore and fairy tales have taught us that invoking the dead most often ends in disaster. uninvited demons frequently respond to these calls and sabotage the necromancer’s work. The *Brumaire*, like Spinoza’s incomplete treatise, also includes a warning, noting that succubi have a special relationship with the dead: “the tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (*Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden*) (Marx, [1852] 1978, 595). It is obviously a recurrent nightmare: the Alp strikes generation after generation. Tradition thus becomes a bad dream, collectively ruminated time and again. Marx’s use of the word *Alp* when referring to demons, nightmares and tradition simultaneously is anything but innocent. He could have used the word *Schreckgespenst*, which translates as “nightmare” and belongs in the same taxonomy as the other *Genspenster* that swarm and haunt his work. But even if the spectre that we get in *Schreckgespenst* matches that of the *Manifesto*, *Alp* is a better choice. While *Alp* is generally translated as “nightmare” (assuming that *Alp* and *Alptraum* are the same thing) the word denotes both a nightmare and a specific type of demon: a succubus. Both *Alpträume* and succubi are incapable of possessing anyone. They can only sit (*cubare*, lie) on (*su*) the sleepers’ chests, giving them nightmares. Marx’s *Alp* insinuates that a heavy nightmarish slumber keeps “those who struggle from below, who sleep [...] in the straw of miserable huts” from raising. How can we scare these unclean spirits away and wake up? Tàpies recommends focusing not on the sleeper but on the surface on which the sleepers sleep: one should reflect upon straw, shifting from necromancy to religion. Straw reveals itself as a fundamentally religious, political, and theological matter.

Michel Serres (2022) chose to call his last book, published posthumously, *Religion*. The word should be used, if at all, with fear and trembling. Contemporary writers (at least those belonging to the broad Marxian tradition) have noted how religion often functions as a restrained, euphemistic synonym for “ideology” or “politics.” The term implies an epistemological, social, and ethical nexus that bridges individuals’ worldviews and their normative frameworks, providing sufficient and necessary guidelines for socio-political (inter)action. There is certainly some

(rather self-evident) truth in this. Nothing new under the sun. And yet, Serres' choice is neither a political nor an anti-religious provocation. Religion is after all, and despite the efforts of far too many religious studies scholars, a word commonly used with relative ease. But are we, will we, ever really be at ease with religion? Despite its everyday presence, both religion (the word) and the religious (the phenomenon) remain problematic. As Mark C. Taylor restlessly repeats, religion is certainly more interesting where it is least obvious (Taylor 1999,1), and given the tiresome hypertrophy of politics, one would do well to try to find it elsewhere (as if on the fringes of politics, in the "fields where those who are considered trash leave behind their sweat") by studying politically useless (and religiously relevant) matter(s): Tàpies' straw and wood, *palla i fusta*. Can these materials be confidently considered of the order of the religious, or at least not entirely absorbed by the omnipresence of politics? Can their presence set a limit to the political and lead us into something we can (finally or again) consider religious, something that does not weigh us down but helps us scare our nightmares away? These materials, Tàpies' assemblage of *palla i fusta* shows, are anything but insignificant. Indeed, they are borderline uncanny: familiar and strange, uncomfortable and pleasant, insignificant and awe-inspiring.

Serres was kind enough to give his *Religion* a subtitle: "Rereading what is bound together." Rereading is another word for ruminating. Linguists tend to agree that one of the sources from which the term "religion" proceeds is "re-legere" –to read again (Serres 2022, xii). Religion is thus the act of ruminating tradition. The religious read the same book(s) over and over again and ponder the same things generation after generation, retelling and rereading the same stories for years on end. Tradition reveals itself not as a nightmare but as a shared bed when what is ruminated is not life (the necromancer's task) but what Tàpies deems "the origin of force and of life" –straw. If seen not from the point of view of the "sleeper" but from the place in which the sleeper chooses to sleep (the straw of miserable huts which also makes the beds of the gods, the material that appears time and again in Tàpies' oeuvre), religion reveals itself as a struggle against incompleteness, a binding together of the divine and the miserable, of what has been received and the ones who receive it. This act of rereading carries threads of forgiveness. Ruminating redeems. "Every time we reread a text", Derrida once wrote, "it looks like a penance. We ask for forgiveness by reading" (Derrida 2001, 53).

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Abstract

Following Antoni Tàpies' 1970 essay *Res no és mesquí*, this paper explores the concept of rumination as both a physical and philosophical act. It examines the possibility of metaphorical rumination, questioning our ability to fully engage with the contemplative process Tàpies advocates in his reflection on straw. The essay posits that rumination, like the incomplete digestion of ruminants, symbolizes the partial nature of thought and memory. Some thoughts resist complete assimilation, while others demand rejection. This inherent incompleteness is framed within the context of Augustine's concept of memory as the "stomach of the soul." Finally, the paper makes the (hopefully provocative) assertion that straw holds religious, theological, and political significance, also based on Tàpies' essay. This claim invites further examination of the symbolic and metaphorical potential of seemingly mundane materials (namely, straw) within broader philosophical discourses.

keywords | Tàpies; rumination; memory; incompleteness; straw.