

The *Totentanz* Of Art: Anthony Catania's Lightless Light

'To kill death is to become him'
- Piers Anthony, *On A Pale Horse*

True to its apocalyptic title, Anthony Catania's *Last Light* revises its most inspiring sources by filtering them through its antithetical aesthetic radiating what Harry Levin calls "the blackness of whiteness". Clearly not an exhibition of polarities, *Last Light* unleashes this darkling paleness to intensify in Bloomian terms its "anxiety of influence". Consider, for instance, the 'Mourning Light' and 'Shades of Stars' pastel drawings whose subversive reworking of Böcklin's *Die Toteninsel* (1880) and Van Gogh's *La Nuit Etoilée* (1889) bleaches them to an astral dance of death. For Catania recasts Böcklin's ferryman, skiff and isle from spectral stars whose pallid light, eerily evocative of *Die Toteninsel's* looming white shroud, subverts any Böcklinian intimations of *La Nuit Etoilée's* nocturnal chromatism in its Van Goghian stellar dynamics. Imbued with this Stygian gloom's hueless hue, Böcklin and Van Gogh mutually dissolve into Catania's intermeshing of their scattered souls. Significantly, not only does Van Gogh's crescent moon mutate into a sickle-shaped Böcklinian barge of the dead, but it modulates its waxing yellowness to Böcklin's isle's achromatic metamorphosis into cypress clumps flaring in Van Goghian *angst*. Appropriating Van Gogh's starry vision, Catania pales it to a waning darker than Böcklin's.

Haunting, in fact, Catania's arboreal Isle of the Dead is a Dantesque ferryman whose equally pale Ovidian ordeal transmutes him into a Charon-Herne likewise plagued by ambient Van Goghian stellar stains. Nothing remains, however, of the Wild Hunt's Herne in Catania's Charonian equivalent but an antlered skeleton whose starry anguish reflects the Isle's and the barge's – for it similarly scatters into writhing Van Goghian sunflower petals. Incarnating neither the *wilde Jagd's* hunter nor Böcklin's boatman, Catania's Charon-Herne stalks and ferries nothing beyond its insubstantial substance. Being essentially no Böcklinian oarsman, the Charon-Herne significantly plies a death-driven barge. As Kafka's Hunter Gracchus intuits: "My ship has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death". Being the Isle's *genius loci*, the Charon-Herne looms as Death oarlessly steering itself to a Never-Netherworld, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. The unearthly effect is of a pale Cimmerian realm whose absent presence glitters in starry evanescence. Unlike Guardi's *La Laguna Grigia* (ca. 1780-1785), with its glittering surface suggestive of resurgence, Catania's Charonian canal shimmers with the putrescence of stellar revenants. "[B]egot", in Donne's words, "[o]f absence, darkness, death", Catania's is a white light that is not there. What this twin set of drawings uncannily casts is a mournful ghostly light – a spectral elegy to Catania's hollowing out of Böcklin's and Van Gogh's diametrically opposed luminosity. But

Catania's pale palette is equally self-elegiac, for what gleams on its lightless light is his own aesthetic epitaph.

Hence the starless realm of the "Dying Death" set where Catania's Charon-Herne, like Homer's Orion dissolving into a phantom deer, aptly mutates into a pallid parallel to Turner's chromatic horseman of death. But Catania's Reaper transcends Turner's saddle-slumped skeletal *Death on a Pale Horse* (ca. 1825-1830) by paling further into its own cadaverous void. True, in fact, to Paul de Man's disturbing intuition that "by making the dead speak [...] the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death", Catania propels his Equine Death to a consummation of its Heideggerian *moribundus* fate, thereby succumbing his deathly light to its subversive scythe. Symbolic of Catania's art at its evanescent might, the Revelation *Equus* of the 'Dying Death' drawings, unlike Turner's, canters into the quintessence of nothingness. The aesthetic rest is a vacuity of Stygian Paleness. Radiating Rudolf Otto's *mysterium horrendum*, Catania's 'Dying Death' set collapses into the *totentanz* of its event horizon, for its starless numinous annihilates, if I may rephrase Marvell's famous words, all that's made to a black thought in a pale shade.

Saviour Catania