

Planks and Bricks

The essay (and hence also the journalistic column) is a medium that abhors doubt. Like a public speech, it wants to advance an argument, it wants to conclude. The essay must come, a priori and by definition, to a point. Why am I asked to contribute a regular column? And why did I decide to comply? A newspaper has been left on my kitchen table. Visitors who knew me before I moved here tend to leave their newspapers behind, fearing that I will let myself otherwise sink into ignorance. While munching the bread and the Comté cheese, my eye lights on a book review in that left-behind newspaper. The book is by Pierre Michon and has just been published in a Dutch translation. Although the review portrays Michon as too heroic, I become intrigued. I try to find out more via the World Wide Web. The deviously commercial, ad-spewing search engine brings me to an article that Michon wrote together with the Mexican author Alberto

Ruy Sanchez, an article that must have appeared in *Libération* some time back. Michon and Sanchez tell how, quite independently of each other, they have been carrying the same photo with them for the last twenty years. The photo, snipped from a magazine, shows a dilapidated, small, wooden building. An old man with a hole in his trousers and a jacket with one pocket ripped almost off is opening the door. The interior of the small house is invisible—no more than a black hole. The man is William Faulkner. I am anything but a collector of photos or other pictures, but for some inexplicable reason I too have carried that same photo around with me for years. How is it possible that three men, in totally different parts of the world, should attach the same importance to exactly the same image? I get, despite myself, a proof that communication might possibly exist. For years, I had trusted both the photo and my instinctive interpretation of it (I knew what the photo was and meant), without question, and now, hit by the communication of minds with Sanchez and Michon, suddenly I am looking up for the first time who had taken the photo. It turns out to be a certain Martin J. Dain. In 1963, Random House published a small book containing some hundred Faulkner photos by Dain, under the title *Faulkner's Country. Yoknapatowpha by Martin J. Dain*. Seeing all those photos taken by the same photographer diminishes rather than reinforces the impact of the one I have kept; I see photos of Faulkner

at home in Oxford, Mississippi, in and around the stately Rowan Oak, and even though I already knew many of those and other Faulkner images (on boats, in Hollywood, at the Nobel Prize award ceremony) it is as if I now realize for the first time that Faulkner is not entering *thé* house, not the 'real' house, but merely one of the outhouses of Rowan Oak, where he messed around with dogs and chickens and horses. Michon and Sanchez, although they are both quite familiar with Faulkner's work, seem similarly unburdened by this knowledge. They describe the photo (as they do the whole of Faulkner's oeuvre) as 'Un petit homme du Sud qui revient toujours dans la maison noire de la douleur' (A little man of the South, who keeps on returning to the dark house of pain). They explain that 'la maison de la douleur' is the place where communication is possible only with the dead. I could not have put it better myself, and I would add that communication is possible only about the dead. The three-way communication of minds was possible because the photographer Dain allows us to project Faulkner—our own image of Faulkner—onto this photo of an oldish man, who happens to be William Faulkner and who happens to be opening the barn door. The photo alone cannot effect this communication; for this it requires us to project our knowledge of Faulkner's whole oeuvre onto that single image. It was evidently the presence of Faulkner, in his shabby clothes, that sparked off the communication, that caused all three of us to

see in that knocked-together wooden shack the 'real' house and, in the dark rectangle of the doorway, the blackness of pain.

In literature, great efforts have been made to construct that house of pain; in music, too, I can think of countless examples over the centuries; the same is true in painting. But in architecture...? That is something I still want to do: to build the sad house, the house of pain, the house of affliction, the house of suffering, the house of regret, the house of doubt, the desperate house, the dead house, the dying house, the house of the dead. And I want to accept the task to design that house, to construct that house—not just *a* house with sad qualities, but *the* Sad House (in the same way as Lou Reed does not simply compose 'a sad song', but actually calls it *Sad Song*). For building that house of pain, I am convinced that wooden planks are the ideal and proper material. Planks are gnawed by beetles and worms, they are consumed by fire, they twist and warp, they float away in the flood, they rot, they fade, the paint blisters and peels; they shrink, swell, crack, curl, splinter and split; the ticking of the beetles that gnaw the timbers and subvert their stability remind us of the finiteness of existence. No engineer can calculate exactly how the material will behave, for the material is wholly unpredictable, too variable for standardization. Rigid with fright, we peer through the black gaps that form between the planks. The planks have all the qualities of the corpse they coffin.

The planks of the barn whose door Faulkner is opening in the photo are the same planks as those from which Cash knocked together a coffin for Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, and the same planks as those on which I have seen the Indians of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas carry their dead for burial to the hill on the outskirts of the city. The top of the hill is marked by large, wooden crosses, an image of Golgotha. Once the dead have been interred, the plank is laid on top of the filled-in pit. Subtropical rainstorms soon wash the plank away, down to the foot of the hill, where it joins others in an untidy heap of driftwood. They are the very opposite of a gravestone.

But, even as I write, even as I weave and elaborate the motif of the wooden plank, I cannot help thinking of Sarajevo. I cannot forget the strength of brick; for brick is the perfect bearer of scars. Of course, there are plenty of other building materials and I myself have tried quite a few of them: glass, steel, concrete, zinc, roofing tiles, PET bottles, paper... But now I realize that wooden planks and bricks are the best materials for the architecture I espouse. I know of course that neither of them has the advantage of novelty, but I am also aware that they possess none of the gratuitous opportunism that is inherent in so many promising new materials, those materials that bear the promise of another, better time: there is no other, no better time.

Planks or bricks? It is a dilemma, an almost impossible choice between a monument to transience and

transience itself; between the gravestone and the driftwood plank. Should I opt for the direct and continuous confrontation of the plank, which shrinks and cracks and chafes and fades, whose knots fall out and which splits open around the nail holes? Or must I go for the prosaicness and slowness and internalization of brick, for the inward-looking, inner slowness of brick, which waits and waits for the sudden impact of the bullet, or which willingly bears the slow encrustation of lichens or the creeping deposits of city air pollution.

Yet could it be that this choice was made long ago? Planks for the private, personal house, for those specific lives, for the ever-ongoing confrontation between the individual mind and mortality, the death-wish. The cracking of the wooden planks is an unremitting reminder. Planks nurture fear and uncertainty. Planks pose the question and sow doubt. Brick, on the other hand, seems to be reserved for public buildings, for the abstract, instruction-giving authority, with neither face nor spirit, for the ever-changing streams of users. The brick wall stands patiently in its public space waiting till it gets shot at, so that it can become the bearer of bullet scars; or waiting until it is pushed over by a bulldozer and crushed to make the base course of a road for cars.

Wim Cuyvers *Text On Text* was published (in Dutch and English) on the occasion of the inauguration on January 16, 2005 of the building Hogewal 1-9 in The Hague, which was renovated by Wim Cuyvers for the foundation Stroom The Hague, visual arts-architecture, and in conjunction with the exhibition 'Wim Cuyvers – from Belgium to Nowhere' at Stroom The Hague, from 16-1-2005 to 12-3-2005

Voorkamer was curator of the exhibition 'Beeld in Park 2003' where Wim Cuyvers installed his first 'public house', a second 'public house' was build in the gallery of Voorkamer in the city of Lier.

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Editing: Lily van Ginneken, Wim Cuyvers
Translations: Robyn de Jong-Dalziel and Lut Laridaen
(articles published in Archis) Robyn de Jong-Dalziel,
Victor Joseph, Wendy van Os and Arthur Payman
Final Editing: Sally Heavens, First Edition, Cambridge
Book Design: Filiep Tacq
Typesetting: Wilfrieda Paessens
Printer: Grafikon Oostkamp
Edition: 200

© Wim Cuyvers and Stroom The Hague
ISBN: 90-73799-42-2

Publisher:
Stroom The Hague, visual arts-architecture
Hogewal 1-9, 2514 HA The Hague
The Netherlands
tel (+) 31-(0)70-3658985
fax (+) 31-(0)70-3617962
www.stroom.nl
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Co-production:
Voorkamer vzw
Bril 14, 2500 Lier
Belgium
tel.: (+)32.(0)499 38 25 31
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