

THREAD- TWISTERS

On a Barbarian Loom

The plastic conceptualisation of contradiction as an energetic form of necessity involves weaving. Weaving models contradiction structurally, where structure is not the inverse of surface, but one condition for the manufacture of surface. A second condition would be desire, with all of desire's temporal and social implications. As such, weaving is a material and bodily solution to apparent intellectual contradictions. Or is it an intellectual solution to material or bodily contradictions? In any case, cloth rhymes, where rhyme, an experimental technique of memory, is also an embodied social and temporal transmission.

Weaving is both necessary and good; *both* is its keyword. Cloth, weaving's material production, offers a screen for projection at the same time as it shelters. It can serve as a mediation. It is also absorbent and holds a stain or a tincture. Cloth shelters, and it masks and it pleases and it binds. Use and pleasure are indistinguishable. It is mystical insofar as we cannot historically conceive of its beginning. To copy, to carry, to blend and to couple: every protocell originates these processes. All plants and creatures and systems twist. Even our mothers' skin has been stitched. Weaving's technical (spectrum) configures the metrics of proportion alongside the tensile intersection of contraries in space. It has to do with both geometry and mortality. In all of these ways, weaving is very much like language. It is outside origin, yet within history – it both constitutes and transforms the history that sustains it. It shows that the medium of history is dynamic transformation.

And so, like a language, a politics, or any human mode of relationship, if weaving is not practiced and transformed, it can recede from community knowledge. Weaving is adjacent to bodies, and so partly describes those bodies, absorbs their stories. Knowledge can be lost. When we lose a language a story is suppressed.

The grammar of looms is gesturally dependant. Like scaffolding, it furnishes a framework for a precarious proposition, a polytemporal renewal. Which is to say that weaving is a supple schematization of potential relationships and their interactions, using a gamut of received, but sometimes transformed or innovated gestural techniques to posit a syntax of fibres. Where the furnishing called scaffolding is architectural, looms pertain to bodies and labour. Any bodily limb can serve as a component of a provisional loom. Especially the hand is already a loom, as well as being a comb and a shuttle, and all of the figures in an alphabet. The leaning weight of the weaver can supply the necessary tension to warp threads, or to a revolution. Also the ribcage is a loom.

"Contradiction in matter is imaged by the clash of forces coming from different directions"¹ Simone Weil wrote in London in 1943 in her unfinished essay on Marx. Marx's concepts of labour's relation to value and profit were founded on an analysis of cloth. Present history shows that the use of force has in no way been resolved in the totalizing political economy; rather, it has been generalized and extended. The conditions of mass labour are brute expressions of force and subjection. Where Marx's thinking pertained to the abstract potential of cloth and its exchange, once divorced from need, and cloth's ability to accrue value at each stage of its transformation, thus instrumentalizing labour and desire, Weil's technical apprehension of labour itself, in its repetitive aspects and its cognitive conditions, brought attention to the spiritual dimensions of work, where spirit is one attribute of the social complex. It is spirit because or if it transmits to others. Force exerts a suppression or negation upon this communal transmission; force usurps spirit.

Cloth has been appropriated. In capitalist production there is hegemonic repetition rather than storied transmission. In the factory, in the mill, metrical time, which is one arm of force, colonizes spirit. That time's fanatical brutality is punitive rather than socially sustaining.

Who deviously strings her loom defies this colonization. Here the language of weaving transforms to an array of fibrous techniques for the dialectical dissolution of force. For the devious weaver, the threadtwister, the question of value is reopened, submitted to an unfounding. How can threadtwisters rethink value, when cloth – capital's first and core productive appropriation – has become culturally worthless, displaced, dispensable, invisible, mute? At mass industrial scales, in the sweatshops, nobody weaves a whole cloth. Those rags are constrained to transmit somebody else's might, and to subtract cognition from labour. Now, dwelling for a while within the social agreement we call art (an unlimited making), we are free to rethink value in relation to this rag technology *because* cloth is worthless, because it is made by nobodies. Nobodies are the bodies that twist the threads. Cloth can temporarily absorb and diversify the value we agree to practice together, we who are nobody. There will be supple kinds of value that cannot appear in the calculus of financialization.

Therefore nobody's weaving identifies itself as an antidote to force. For the threadtwister, value is what force abandons. Where force is absent, time blooms. We will move towards the materials that rot – plant, insect and animal fibres, for example – to frame that vulnerability as abundance. Time is an unstable component in composition, from the points of view of gesture, and of materiality. The textile situation opens a soft duration where instabilities collaborate in a refreshed and unlimited cognition. This is transformational work, weaving new time for the desiring on a communal warp of subterfuge. Transitive, relational, threadtwisting often involves song, which may be tentatively structured according to the rhyming temporality of embedded repetitions. Loomsong. Ragsong. Also, threadtwisting can substitute for song that has been silenced. Soft value is practiced. Weaving, against force.

In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Philomela, a daughter of the King of Athens, was transformed into a nightingale. The king was a dyer of fleeces. Philomena was a weaver. She went on a voyage to visit her sister and before she arrived she was raped by Tereus, King of Thrace, her sister Procne's husband. She told him she would now inform the world of his crime – so he cut out her tongue, then repeated the rape. "The severed tongue lies palpitating on the dark earth, faintly murmuring" moving to its mistress's feet, says Ovid.² Held captive and speechless in a hut in the forest for a year, Philomela made a purple and white weaving, writing into the woven pattern the story of the rape and imprisonment.* By means of an old woman messenger she sent the textile – which was perhaps a shawl or other garment – to Procne, who read in the woven gift the purple line of her husband's crime and her sister's absence. Disguised as a bacchante amidst her marauding band of women, Procne then came and rescued the mutilated Philomela. In horrific revenge, the two sisters killed and cooked the son of Tereus, to whom they then fed the murdered child, before bringing to him, in fury, the boy's head. The enraged king pursued the sisters, who, flying from him, develop wings – Philomela a nightingale's and Procne a swallow's. For Philomela, night-song-lover, daughter of a wool-dyer, the patterned work of weaving transmits corporally; its song is gestural, not uttered. *Barbarian*, it should be recalled, means outside speech. Procne flies to the roof, and Philomela escapes to the woods.

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For Philomela, night-song-lover, daughter of a wool-dyer, the patterned work of weaving is epistemological. It transmits. *Barbarian*, it should be recalled, means outside speech. Weaving, a figured discourse twisted upon intricately ordered warp, transmits the unspeakable song.

¹ Simone Weil. "Is There a Marxist Doctrine", *Oppression and Liberty*. tr. Arthur Willis & John Petrie (New York: Routledge, 1955.)

² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. G.P. Gould, trans. F.J. Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 319-335.



**Stamina barbarica suspendit callida tela purpureasque
notas filis intextuit albis* * She hangs a Thracian web on her
loom, and skilfully weaving purple signs on a white
background, she thus tells the story of her wrongs *
Cleverly she fastens her thread to a barbarian's loom, and
weaves purple designs on a white background, revealing
the crime * With great skill she pulls thread into a warp on a
barbarian loom, and by weaving patterns of purple on a
white background, she depicts the crime * And now the
grief-distracted Philomela wove in a warp with purple
marks and white, a story of the crime * With skill exact a
Phrygian web she strung, fixed to a loom that in her
chamber hung, where in-wrought letters upon white
displayed, in purple notes, her wretched case betrayed *

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book VI, 576-77)