

Federico Federici

E I S

*with an essay by
Peter Schwenger*

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Cover: *First attempt of rhyming silence*, Federico Federici 2018.

In 2010, after visiting the Snæfellsjökull National Park, I started working on a multi-language visual poem, *EIS*, based on the birth, the growth and the death of the glacier shrinking and shifting.

EIS, an essay

«In writing of the night, I really could not, I felt I could not, use words in their ordinary connections. Used that way they do not express how things are in the night, in the different stages – conscious, then semi-conscious, then unconscious.»

Interview with James Joyce about Anna Livia Plurabelle, «Harper's Magazine» (1931), Max Eastman.

This is James Joyce, trying to explain to his friend Max Eastman why he wrote *Finnegans Wake* the way he did. Federico Federici's *EIS* is of course a much more slender work, but there are clear affinities to Joyce's. Like the ironically titled *Wake*, it leaves the waking world behind; and what it does with words tries to capture «how they are in the night», specifically in our dreams. It begins with a note in the classic form used in psychoanalytic cases, written in what might be thought of as its classic (i.e. Freudian) language, German: «In der Nacht vom 5. Februar auf den 6. Februar 1974 träumte er» («In the night between the 5th and 6th of February 1974 he dreamed»). Following this is a page that is solidly black on both sides; another such page closes the work. Framed by these visual equivalents of darkest night is a dreamwork whose interior vision, metaphysically and existentially, rivals the darkness that surrounds it. It is a vision that is embodied in words, and obsessed by them.

That words appear in our dreams is undeniable; just *how* they appear continues to baffle researchers. Something is communicated by, say, a written page in a dream; but if you try to see the actual words, they elude you, for the associations that make dream images so volatile are even more expansive in words. Federici, in his prefatory note, speaks of a "screen" of words; and in what follows we find dense blocks of typing that represent such a screen. In particular, several landscapes are constructed entirely out of words, whose placement corresponds to that of the natural objects and displaces them – as words have always tended to do. This is a technique that was used by Concrete Poetry, and more recently by the asemic artist Xu Bing. It emphasizes the ways that a screen of words stands between us and the world. Upon this screen we project our habitual patterns of perception and meaning, patterns which have been established precisely through words. Now, in the unstable world of dream, the screen begins to crack, like a sheet of ice that is

no longer transparent, as language is commonly supposed to be, but covered with a fine web of filiations. One thinks of the branching genealogies that linguists construct to trace the journeys made by linguistic particles from one language to another. Federici makes use of many languages in this work: German, Swedish, English, Latin, Italian, Sanskrit, French, Czech, Russian. These are sometimes translated in footnotes; but translation is less important than transition: that "shifting and sliding" from one language to another, words revealing their arbitrary and unpredictable powers. *EIS* itself is not only the German word for "ice" but a word that also appears, with different meanings, in Latin, Greek, Portuguese and Danish.

Federici's preface presents *EIS* as an experiment – not in the usual sense of "experimental literature" (an unsatisfactory term in my opinion) but as an actual "experiment with sounds [...] recorded with a set of contact microphones." Reflecting Federici's profession as a physicist, this experimental aspect accounts for the occasional presence of numbers – as in the "Failed" attempt to calculate (*pesare il buio*) the black hole of a squared page filled with zeros. The sounds being investigated forsake their verbal significations to take shape as music, with words and phrases repeating like motifs. We find explicit musical directions: *diminuendo*, *crescendo*, *con brio*. Indeed, the spaced words with their occasional blocks of dense typing might be read like the player piano rolls of Conlon Nancarrow.

Federici's poetry, while its words waver in and out of various languages, conveys a meditation on universal themes, arrived at through intense particulars. His style evokes that of T.S. Eliot, another multilingual poet, and at several points the allusions are quite evident. That poetry plays such a large part in this "fissured text", as Federici calls it, is appropriate. For in poetry the branching cracks that are the sign of language's insufficiency can be read otherwise: as a net with which to attempt the capture of elusive apprehensions.

Still, those apprehensions must inevitably elude us. As in dream, we yield to the experience of this text on terms that are not our own. When we emerge on the waking side of darkness, of the double-sided black page that concludes *EIS*, we carry with us the bodily sense of a complex and poignant emotion; but we have no words for it. We must content ourselves – as I have here – with describing the surface aspects of the work, knowing that this surface is cracking and shattering even as we observe it.

Peter Schwenger

«There are things
we live among 'and to see them
is to know ourselves'»

Of being numerous (1968), George Oppen.

To most readers, textual experience is supposed to be a straight path through conventional signs, preferably within the frame of a native language. Nevertheless, no language is, in itself, truer or closer to "reality" than any other. Simultaneously writing in different languages, including those apparently obfuscated, results in an undepictable state of the text, hard to be conceived out of the conventional logic.

An inspiring interpretation of this phenomenon may be put forth referring to De Broglie's duality.

Once the wave-like behaviour is observed, the particle-like one disappears: once *är tyst* (Swedish) → *is silent* (English), the *silent artist* disappears and someone else stands in his place in that silence. The classical idea that only what is expressed in a familiar language can be experienced, and vice versa, is hence uprooted or at least challenged.

Only for the sake of simplicity, English has been chosen as a language of reference, whenever possible.

The surface of the glacier, the most accessible part of it, forms a conglomeration of more or less conscious events and drives a relentless flux of languages. The overall text is far more significant than the strings of words or the expanses of signs it consists of, as much as the dynamics of dreaming preserves the traits of an individual experience, whilst within fixed structures. Any distinction between the languages, as well as any sense of objectivity of their constituents, is worked around.

Either behaviour (wave-like or particle-like) is, in the end, nothing intrinsic.

EIS works as a phenomenon which occurs because fundamental forces come into play. It is set out for the reader to experiment with the text, not to fulfil his expectations or to confront the obsessions of him who writes it.

The plot, in itself irrelevant, does not subsume a univocal experience. The characters are unstable and undergo constant metamorphoses,

getting transmuted or annihilated. That involves the languages (*German* → *English* → *Swedish* → *German* → (...)) and the subjects (*I* → *you* → *w* → *I* → (...)) likewise.

Pronouns and nouns may be equated with elemental quanta of action, or with exchange carriers within the textual field. The things we live among are knots of a one and only undistinguishable field and to see them is to know that we too belong to it.



recording a glacier
(4 contact microphones driven by TASCAM DR-60D)

Works on paper unless otherwise specified.
Dimension: 147×210 mm (*); 210×290 mm (**)
Typewriter: Olivetti Studio 46.

- p.7 * *Investigation of empirical tendencies* | typewriter, ink pen, 2020.
- p.8-9 * *A representation of this text* | typewriter, ink pen, 2020.
- p.19 ** *In Herzens Mitte* | typewriter, ink pen, 2018. *Jahrbuch der Lyrik*, Christoph Buchwald, Mirko Bonné editors, Schöffling & Co. Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2019.
- p.20 ** *Ensamheten* | typewriter, ink pen, 2018. «Asemic Front», Sloan De Villo editor, March 9, 2018.
- p.24 * *Vorm Wort* | typewriter, ink pen, sand paper, Vinavil, 2019. «A-Minor», January issue, Nicolette Wong, Eryk Wenzia, editors, 2020.
- p.25 * *Ordgranser* | typewriter, sand paper, Vinavil, 2019. «Stadtsprachen Magazin», Joey Bahlsen, Birger Hoyer, Martin Jankowski editors, n.13, 2020.
- p.27 * *Énumération de mots* | typewriter, ink pen, 2020.
- p.28 ** *Woods etc.*, homage to Alice Oswald | typewriter, 2017. *Concreta-Mostrapoesia*, Giuseppe Garrera, Sebastiano Triulzi curators, Hungarian Academy, Rome, 2018.
- p.31 ** *Landscape with lacking data* | typewriter, charcoal, 2018. «Asemic Front», Sloan De Villo editor, March 9, 2018.
- p.32 * *Poem of Nature* | typewriter, ink pen, Vinavil, 2019.
- p.35 * *Song of the red bird* | typewriter, pencil, 2019.
- p.35 * *Song of the blue bird* | typewriter, pencil, 2019. «Metonym Journal», William Jessup University, n.10, 2020.
- p.37 *Midsummer dusk map* | typewriter, ink pen, rubber stamps, approx. 70×135 mm, 2018. «Luuwa», Francesco Aprile editor, n.3, 2018.
- p.39 ** *Tentativo di pesare la luce* | typewriter, charcoal, 2018. «Asemic Front», Sloan De Villo editor, March 9, 2018.
- p.40 * *Schneestreifen* | typewriter, ink, chalk powder, grass, Vinavil, 2019.
- p.41 * *Ding an sich* | typewriter, ink pen, charcoal, 2019. «Unknown Quantities», Ma Culture, Criticism and Curation, and MA Graphic Communication

Design at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts of London, n.7, 2020.

p.42 «dál realita/ ničila sebe samu», from *Pokoj* (Room), Petr Halmay.

p.43 ** *Lapses and latencies* | typewriter, 2017.

p.45 * *Winter '45* | typewriter, ink pen, Vinavil on cardboard, 2019. «The Shanghai Literary Review», Alexandre Gobin editor, n.6, 2020.

p.46 *Hier suchst du das Wort im Wort*, part. | typewriter, toner, ink pen, scotch tape, Vinavil, approx. 110×115 mm, 2018. «Luuwa», Francesco Aprile editor, n.3, 2018.

p.47 ** *Ich bin dein Vater*, part. | typewriter, charcoal, 2018.

p.49 ** *Kein Genaues Wort Datum* | typewriter, ink pen, charcoal, 2018. «Asemics Magazine», Cecil Touchon editor, August 1, 2018.

p.50 * *Synapse und Symbol* | typewriter, ink pen, charcoal, 2019. «The Shanghai Literary Review», Alexandre Gobin editor, n.6, 2020.

p.57 * *Word carrier particles* | typewriter, ink pen, sanguine, 2020.

Due to contrast and gamma correction, performed for typographical reasons, minor details (type of paper, charcoal, sanguine, hard pencil strokes) may have gone lost. High quality pictures are available for consultation here:

www.behance.net/federico_federici

Preliminary excerpts have appeared in print and online journals and magazines such as «Nokturno.fi» edited by Virpi Vairinen, n.4, 2019; «Ditch» edited by John C. Goodman and James Mc Laughlin, May 12, 2013.