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A Game of Equivocations:
Review of Richard Shusterman's
*The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths
between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale /
Les aventures de l'homme en or. Passages
entre l'art et la vie. Conte philosophique.*
Illustrated by Yann Toma. Paris:
Éditions Hermann, 2016¹

Abstract: In Richard Shusterman's *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, the limitations of the *conte philosophique* are transgressed. The published volume incorporates a photo essay, reviving the old tradition of *paragone*; the written narrative, in turn, invokes the traditions of the doppelgänger story, the fairy tale, the quest-romance and—through its introspective passages—a literary confession. But even if, by Shusterman's admission, this tale refers to its author's personal experience, it also breaks the “autobiographical pact” by continuously playing with the pronominal references and thus destabilizing the relationships between the author, the narrator, and the characters. The current review proposes that Shusterman's refusal to draw the line separating “I” from “he”—and reality from fantasy—is informed by his conclusions about T. S. Eliot's (self-protective) and Oscar Wilde's (self-incriminating) creations of their public personae. It also suggests that his storytelling technique relies on the trope of irony in self-redescription as understood by Richard Rorty, although Shusterman's *l'Homme en Or* remains the very opposite of Rorty's *ironist*.

Keywords: Richard Shusterman, doppelgänger, T. S. Eliot, Oscar Wilde, somaesthetics, photo-essay, autobiography, irony

¹ This is a revised and translated version of the review article “Ukryty, jawny, zdystansowany: Richarda Shustermana *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life. A Philosophical Tale*”, originally published in 2020, in Polish, by *Er(r)go. Teoria—Literatura—Kultura* 2.41. 203–215. doi: 10.31261/errgo.7417.

The Adventures of the Man in Gold combines a photographic project by Yann Toma with Richard Shusterman's semi-autobiographical narrative printed in two columns: in English and in its French translation by Thomas Mandémé. The story falls into three parts, and each is set in a different place: the former Cistercian abbey of Royaumont, Île-de-France; Paris and Cartagena; and the region of the wandering dunes of Northern Jutland. The three chapters recounting this journey are accompanied by the preface, acknowledgments and the "biographies" section, which, while elucidating the story's academic context, further add complexity to its narrative situation. *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is unique amidst Shusterman's oeuvre. It is the only work of fiction amongst his academic writings, which otherwise range from a treatise on analytical philosophy to several books on pragmatism and on somaesthetics (the discipline he introduced to philosophy), from philosophical essays to literary studies, and from the examinations of theoretical questions to the accounts of live performances.

The book's elaborate, three-part title points its reader in three directions simultaneously. It promises a picaresque narrative (although it features, instead of a picaro, the alter ego of an academic philosopher); then, it lifts the picaresque onto a metaphorical level, for the adventurous escapades become a journey along the paths of intense self-fashioning; and, finally, it recommends that the story should be read as an account of a philosophical experiment. Yet, in various places, this *conte philosophique* also assumes the tone typical of confessional prose. The confession, however, is all but straightforward. The author, having directly addressed the reader in the preface, continues, in the main text, as the third-person omniscient narrator only to allow one of the characters—a philosopher named "Shusterman"—to be heard when an extensive excerpt from his own essay is quoted (*M* 20–22).² However, when the quotation ends, it is the first-person "I" that—contrary to the reader's expectation of a comfortable return to the third-person narrator—takes over the story. But soon after, the narrative voice flees away from the narrative "I", taking a safe refuge in the distanced "he". It is all part of the ongoing process of destabilizing the narratorial entities. While the grammatical categories keep altering, the philosopher rapidly (or, more appropriately, in a twinkling) transforms into a man wearing a shining suit; accordingly, *Lebenswelt* as we know it becomes part of a fiction, despite the author's declaration (from the preface) that the ensuing events, as well as those that led to the experiment, constitute part of his biography. The "autobiographical pact" as it is understood by Phillipe Lejeune—the agreement that the author has made with his reader—becomes patently violated, and the story begins to invoke parallels with Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, wherein the borders of reality and dream, reverie and imagination, confession and the *conte philosophique* become disquietingly blurred.

² All parenthetical references to *The Man in Gold* are to page numbers in its 2016 edition, its title being abbreviated as *M*.

The tale's theme, however, has clearly-delineated roots, reaching deep into the dark-romantic doppelgänger stories wherein "I" becomes the other, having transformed into the object of one's fascination, apprehension, or both. The tradition encompasses Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and "William Wilson" (a prototype of Wilde's *Dorian Gray*), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as the uncanny modernist story "Axolotl" by Julio Cortázar, which features a character who is fascinated by the orange-golden axolotls and who eventually turns into one of them. But in Shusterman's tale, the doppelgänger theme extends beyond fiction, and into real life, though all attempts at univocally identifying the real-life personae behind the imaginary protagonists end in ironic anti-climaxes.

Hence, rather than interpreting this tale as an autobiography in the form of a doppelgänger narrative, a tale about an academic transforming into the Man in Gold, one could approach it as an allegorical story about the transformation of a philosophy—Richard Shusterman's philosophy turning away from the one-sidedly analytical (or, purely discursive, as represented by his *The Object of Literary Criticism* in 1984) towards the openly pragmatist, and finally, shaping itself as somaesthetics, which is both a philosophy and the art of self-fashioning and self-development. Drawing inspiration from the tradition of Eastern philosophy—including "Asian practices of Hatha Yoga, Zen meditation, and T'ai chi ch'uan" (Shusterman, "Somaesthetics" 302)—somaesthetics aims for the refinement of the sensory sphere, the ways in which we perceive the world. Indeed, in his tale, Shusterman incorporates references to the Daoist philosopher Laozi. Yet, he creates a figure that embodies not only the Daoist ideal of naturalness but also, somewhat paradoxically, the ideal of self-styling—the Man in Gold, a figure of studied simplicity.

The varied philosophical—Daoist, pragmatist, and somaesthetic—context and, additionally, the idea of experimenting with the limit of one's self have been discussed by this book's first reviewers.³ The present commentary will look at *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* predominantly from a literary perspective, focusing on the complex relationships involving the author, the narrator, and the story's characters, and remembering that this story is told not only in words but also with images, that—besides being an evasive autobiography, a doppelgänger story, and a philosophical tale—it is a photo essay. The text is accompanied by a series of photographs taken by Toma, who, in fairy-tale logic, has witnessed the birth of the Man in Gold at the same time as being a practical provider of the golden costume, the former property of his parents, the ballet dancers. In the inscriptions accompanying

³ Stefán Snævarr includes a discussion of somaesthetics (86–89); Catherine F. Both stresses the anti-essentialist understanding of the self and subjectivity; Stefano Marino highlights the connection of life and art as promoted by Shusterman's *conte philosophique* and as countering the Aristotelian division between *poesis* and *praxis*; Ellen Y. Zhang, finally, emphasizes the Daoist mythological and philosophical parallels, viewing the imaginary transformation of the philosopher into "the Man in Gold" as evoking associations with medieval alchemy.

the majority of photographs, the model is identified as “Richard Shusterman” posing for the photo session titled “Somaflux”. The information is factual. Toma is going round the model and, with his lamps, he is drawing the shapes symbolizing the contours of what he sees as the model’s energy field, capturing the model’s “aura” (M 13). It is the technique of rayographs, the method used by Man Ray in his famous 1934 self-portrait, *Space Writing*. The final effect of the process—happening over the lengthened time of the film exposure—takes the form of luminous streaks and swathes. Its description delivered from the model’s point of view is, in fact, included in Shusterman’s “Photography as Performative Process”, wherein the photographer becomes a dancer circling his object (71). The images (not all of them containing light drawings) create a narrative wherein the Man in Gold first appears standing in the grey expanse of a parking lot; then, he leaves the interior of a medieval abbey and runs into the light-saturated garden, only to emerge in Colombian Cartagena and, further, in Paris, walking by the Seine, his golden costume (or is it his skin?) shimmering. Finally, he reappears in Denmark, exploring the stone sculptures on its windy coast. Everything that takes place in the narrative is typical for a fantasy romance, with its hero going in search of a mythical female embodying the beauty originally perceived in the mother figure and, later on, materialized as an enlivened sculpture—the animated and possibly ensouled artifact, similar to *l’Homme en Or*.

Toma’s pictures, continuing the tradition of *paragone* in art, vie with the text for attention. They are evocative. The picture in which the Man in Gold, having escaped from the abbey’s “dark chamber”, is kneeling on the edge of a pond, leaning over the water surface to refresh himself (31), evokes associations with the theme of Caravaggio’s painting: *l’Homme en Or* becomes a Narcissus mesmerized by his reflection. In another photograph, *l’Homme en Or*, similar to the figures featured in the impressionistic garden paintings, appears to draw the viewer’s attention to the landscape rather than to himself (M 33). By contrast, in the photograph opening the chapter titled “A Mysterious Birth”, he assumes the central position (M 16), his figure enclosed within the skein of the light lines shaped like an egg. (The reader is told that he doesn’t know his parents, he can only picture them to himself.) In yet another scene, the photo featuring the riverside walk, his costume reflects the shimmer of the water; and, indeed, the aquatic associations will recur in the text. Additionally, several photos contain the light-drawn words: *l’Homme en Or* is depicted as he lies asleep, with the inscription “SOMA” hovering above him (M 25), or, on a beach, as he stands inside the niche of a light-drawn “A” (M 56–57). But are the letters necessary? Is photography hinting at its insufficiency, its role only complementary, literally highlighting a philosophy? Or, is it the professional philosopher’s (only natural) unwillingness to totally shun discursive thought?

There is something overly allegorical about the figure of *l’Homme en Or* posing next to the word *soma*; but as a literary character, he is far from the dryness of allegory. Mercurial and childlike in his spontaneity, he waves to the cars passing

by (*M* 37); at other times, he lacks resilience and shies away when confronted by the Cartagena machos offering sexual innuendos (*M* 49–50). His double and, simultaneously, his opposite, the story's narrator—whilst being well-disposed, even affectionate, towards the protagonist—shows not a trace of his stubborn simple-ness. Consequently, despite the intentional obscuring of personal references (with “I” slipping into “he”), the narratorial entities, even if destabilized, retain their distinctiveness. They all—Richard Shusterman as the author providing (in the preface) his personal reasons for the creation of the story; the story's neutral narrator; the Man in Gold as the protagonist; and, finally, the protagonist's ficelle, that is, the philosopher posing for the photographer—seem to overlap. But, rather tauntingly, all of them, through subtle shifts in the point of view and grammar, differ from each other, which is why *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, although avowedly based on a true story, remains fictitious.

Such complex relationships have their prototypes in literature. Likewise, the touchstones for the golden man's personality should be sought in literary works, particularly, in T. S. Eliot and Oscar Wilde. Shusterman wrote articles on both authors and, in 1988, *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*. Characteristically, his *l'Homme en Or* negates the same modernist self that Eliot satirized through his cerebral Prufrock—a persona depicted as an assembly of discursive references. But does the Man in Gold resemble Prufrock in dandyism? The indeterminacy of his condition—is the shimmering caused by the glimmer of his skin or the costume?—translates into the indefiniteness of his status as neither that of a straightforward anti-dandy nor that of a simple embodiment of dandyism. He does not exist unless the philosopher is prepared to don the shiny stretch (thus adding, in the transgressive Foucauldian fashion, a postmodernist philosophical inflection to the phenomenon of dandyism).⁴ This transformation of a human being into an artefact (enlivening, in the book's last pages, stone sculptures) has its archetype in the transformation of Wilde's Dorian Gray into a picture, albeit to a different effect. Additionally, Wilde's “The Fisherman and his Soul”—a fable written around the same time as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, offered for publication in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* and, eventually, replaced by the novelette (see, e.g., Price 75; Gillespie 52–55)—features yet another model. The unfeeling, literally heartless, cerebral “Soul” abandons the fisherman—who remains faithful to his love and content to stay in the sensuously rich underwater realm—and, driven by insatiable curiosity, sets off on a journey. Its curiosity represents a kind of interest sustaining the explorations of a cruel connoisseur, the curiosity unmindful of its object's well-being, which Richard Rorty (in his discussion of Nabokov's aesthetes) describes as the opposite of the caring interest, the attitude of a desirous mind (157–65). Never satisfied in its search for knowledge, the master of compelling argumentation, the

⁴ For a discussion of Foucault's understanding of aestheticism as “self-transformation”, see Kevin Lamb. For Shusterman's discussion of Foucault's experimental attitude to self-fashioning, see, for example, his “Somaesthetics and Care of the Self” (530–32).

Soul impersonates discursivity, whereas the fisherman corresponds with the soma. It is their relationship that seems to be echoed in the interaction between Shusterman's characters: the seasoned, world-wise academician, a practical man used to functioning within hierarchical systems, and *l'Homme en Or*, trusting, even credulous, silent and anarchic, "recognizing ... [the discursive language] as the glory of philosophy but also an imprisoning source of its oppressive folly" (M 58).

Besides the decadent echo to the philosopher's self, yet another, perhaps more important, context emerges, including the ways in which Eliot and Wilde communicated their ideas in art and criticism. Shusterman's carefully-controlled interweaving of the public and private discourses can be better understood through the Wildean perspective, with Wilde frequently using his characters and narrators to give voice to his own opinion (the case, for example, with *The Critic as Artist*, *The Decay of Lying*, or "The Portrait of Mr. W. H")., at the same time as claiming that, conversely, his personal correspondence, rather than factual, was fictive, a kind of epistolary literature. (This latter claim, concerning Wilde's love letters to Alfred Douglas, proved of no avail in the libel trials.⁵) It is significant that Shusterman, in his essay on "Wilde and Eliot", highlights a striking difference in the strategies they used when projecting their public images. He emphasizes that the decadent aesthete—dangerously toying with the image of a carefree dandy—eventually, paid the high price set by the bigoted Victorian court, that of imprisonment, infamy, loss of parental rights, and years of neglect by literary critics. The cautious modernist, on the contrary, succeeded, having created the image of serious authority. In contrast to flamboyant and openly rebellious Wilde, Shusterman explains, practical and reserved Eliot constructed his public image in the awareness that a person willing to significantly influence society and its culture must recognize its conventions, "at least conform superficially to its central behavioral norms in order that he survive to practise his art"—the lesson "Eliot learned from Wilde's bitter experience" ("Wilde" 141), and the one that served him in the successful creation of his public image. As a result, for many years, most of the literary-critical concepts which arose in the course of Eliot's silent polemics with his decadent progenitor were, unjustifiably, considered exclusively Eliot's legacy.⁶

Then, might it be that Shusterman—having noted Wilde's strategic mistake and heeding the same lesson—consistently discourages hasty identifications of the author with the narrator and either character? His narratorial tactic invalidates Stefn Snævarr's slightly backhanded compliment depicting Shusterman as "the golden boy of aesthetics ... possibly a golden oldie" (86). Indeed, the viewing of the Man in Gold (the figure teetering, in places, on the brink of naivety) as

⁵ For the fateful misreading of private correspondence as anticipated in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H", see William A. Cohen (220).

⁶ Wilde's presence in Eliot's criticism, besides being examined by Shusterman, has been discussed by P. G. Ellis, R. J. Green, and Lawrence Danson. Their contribution is noted in my "From T. S. Eliot to Oscar Wilde" (141–42), which also considers Eliot's literary polemic with his predecessor.

a symmetrical alter ego to the real-life philosopher might be naïve of the reader. Several examples of Shusterman's technique of alternating pronouns, already mentioned as deliberately undermining the "autobiographical pact", would also be useful in illustrating his complex attitude to the Man in Gold. For example, when describing his relationship with *l'Homme en Or*, Shusterman—his voice not quite identical with the narrator's—uses contradictory terms, suggesting a separation and a total identification at the same time: "I witnessed (and incarnated) the performances of the Man in Gold" (M 7). Indeed, he explains that he was merely "posing as the Man in Gold" (M 12). It is only later on, once Richard Shusterman, appearing as Toma's model and the first-person narrator, has fallen asleep that the Man in Gold begins to exist in his (or is it *its*?) own right, initially, as pent-up energy ("Some inner force. ... It wanted out; it wanted light" [M 30]) and, subsequently, as a power controlling and transforming the model and causing him to transgress the limits of his old self ("I no longer knew what I was doing. More precisely, I was no longer I" [M 30]). This flipping of the self to the other side can be viewed in the light of Shusterman's essay on genius as a *daimon*, an unpredictable force dominating the conscious self ("Genius" 204–07). In fact, *The Adventures* deploys the vocabulary of "transformation and possession" (e.g., M 8). But the result of this change is also an objectively existing character, and a suitably archetypal one, too: as befits a fairy-tale protagonist, he has a special godmother, the proprietress of the Cistercian abbey who "christened" him (M 17). From this point onwards, the pronouns in the story become consistently destabilized: "they" can refer to Toma and the posing philosopher as well as to Toma and the silent *l'Homme en Or*.

This is a game of consistent prevarication, with the tale hinting at a separateness of the two characters, the Man in Gold and the philosopher. Thus, using the third-person point of view, the narrator explains that the academic philosopher "sometimes dreams he is the Man in Gold" (M 35), the fact confirmed by the image depicting the Man in Gold at the philosopher's desk (see M 36). Further, the tale discourages the identification of the philosopher as a character (named Shusterman) with the real-life Richard Shusterman, who has authored the preface. Rather characteristically, the unshakable faith in the existence of *l'Homme en Or* is ascribed to the photographer. In the closing episode, the philosopher recalls having glanced at the night sky and seeing a burning meteor, "a blurry shooting star" (M 120), whereas the photographer, who "saw it too ... [,] correct[s]" the philosopher by stating that "It was simply a luminous cloud by which the Man in Gold ascended into heaven ...". (M 120). In the French version, "It was simply" is translated into "*il s'agissait en fait*" (M 120; italics mine), as the more assertive "it was in fact". With this assurance (*en fait*), Toma returns the philosopher to reality, but one remembers that this is only the reality of a fairy tale.

Effectively, the text disrupts any set of oppositions through which it could be conceptualized. Only the male-female relationship seems inscribed into a rigid framework of polarities (and complementarities) resulting, most probably, from the

fact that the tale's philosophy resonates with Daoist, rather than western, sensibility. Otherwise, divisions are abolished: a semblance of autobiographical factuality is given in the fairy-tale narrative; dream segues into waking life; complex discursive subtleties are mixed with the assertions of the Man in Gold's uncomplicated innocence; the itineraries of academic conferences intersect with the routes of the archetypal quest for love (or, is it for a mythical beginning?); the golden garment performs conflicting functions—as the sensitive and bruised skin and as a protective shield, “a shining coat of armour” (*M* 61, 64); and the philosophical fable displays footnotes typical of a scholarly essay, determinately evading classifications. Finally, the tale's purposeful indeterminacy is heightened by the fact that the French translation, appearing simultaneously, adds another dimension to the English text. While, for example, the English text informs the reader that the Man in Gold quietly entered the philosopher's life—“came into existence”—the French translation makes his entry quite dramatic: “un personnage ... fit irruption” (*M* 7). Whilst, in English, one is told that “it is risky to lose one's sense of autonomy”, in French, this risk is the effect of a (rather pleasurable?) activity of playing (“jouer”) with self-autonomy (*M* 8). Whereas the English text makes note of the passive incarnation of *l'Homme en Or* by the philosopher, in French the philosopher plays an active part in the process—*enacting* the role of the Man in Gold, by being “l'acteur” (*M* 7).

The elegance and poetic quality of the English narrative is appreciated by Snævarr, who, nonetheless, also indicates the repetitious use of the words “love” and “beauty” as sentimentalizing and diminishing their meanings (*M* 91–92). The words “enchanted”, “charm”, and their derivatives belong to the same sentimental list. Yet, the charge of sentimentality can be relativized if one assumes that *The Man in Gold* consciously alludes not only to eighteenth-century *conte philosophique* but also to eighteenth-century sentimentalism. The poses assumed by the Man in Gold throughout the photo-essay, conspicuously in the last picture—him looking pensively into the distance, his chin resting on his right hand, and his other hand on his hip—are evocative of the sentimental, introspective male portraits (calling to mind the studied poses in Watteau's paintings) focusing on the self and feelings in ways that were both intense and ironic.

It is indeed irony that figuratively drives the text: the gentle irony in the philosopher's voice commenting on the sentimental adventures of the Man in Gold and, more importantly, the romantic irony subverting the characters' identities and nullifying the “autobiographical pact”. Also, by discouraging a too-ready identification of the philosopher with the Man in Gold, the narrative appears to resort to Rortian irony, which is functional in defending the vulnerable self. If that is so, then Shusterman's *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* constitutes his new gesture of reconciliation with his former intellectual adversary, Richard Rorty. However, his *conte philosophique* is also an expression of his long-standing resistance against pure discursivity in self-description. The tale, as combined with the photo essay,

introduces a figure that will always remain vulnerably exposed in its corporeality, the very opposite of the Rortian *ironist*: Richard Shusterman's *ingénu*.

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