

Excess—The Factory by Leslie Kaplan



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Having spent all her early years cooped up in the Marshalsea debtor's prison near London Bridge Amy Dorrit, nicknamed 'Little Dorrit', is released into the freedom of European travel. After having spent a quarter of a century behind walls and iron bars her father is confronted with a new reality: he has inherited considerable wealth. The family travel to Venice where the young girl leans upon the balcony of her rooms overlooking the canal from which she can "musingly watch its running, as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison again, and herself, and the old room, and the old inmates, and the old visitors: all lasting realities that had never changed." Dickens describes the manner in which her father breaks down at a public dinner as the "broad stairs of his Roman palace were contracted in his failing sight to the narrow stairs of his London prison". It is as if the stain of all those years behind bars forces itself to the surface and the hideous effects of long-term imprisonment re-appear as a reality which has never been escaped. And as if echoing this sense of the inescapability from confinement Maurice Blanchot wrote about Leslie Kaplan's 1982 book-length poem *L'exces-l'usine*:

Other remarkable books have described the work done by a factory and in a factory. But here from the very first words we understand that, if we enter into working in the factory, we will belong henceforth to the immensity of the universe (“the great factory universe”), there will no longer be any other world, there has never been any other: time is finished, succession is abolished, and “things exist together simultaneously”. There is no more outside – you think you’re getting out? You’re not getting out. (“*Vous n’en sortez jamais*”)

Being divided into ‘Nine Circles’ *Excess – The Factory*, in its English translation done by Julie Carr and Jennifer Pap, inevitably calls to mind the structure of Dante’s *Inferno* but Kaplan’s poem is very different from the schematic world of the Italian poet. In the ‘Fourth Circle’ Kaplan refers to “Palpable air” and it is that very palpability that also reminds us of Dante: this world possesses a vivid sense of being there. However, the “You” (“*On*” in the original French) which sees itself “endlessly” in Circle Five is there throughout all nine sections of the poem: differentiation according to individual sins does not exist in this dystopian nightmare of the factory. In their Afterword the translators talk about the third-person pronoun designating the subjective presence that moves through the poem. They conclude that to translate “on” as “you” has the advantage of sometimes referring to the self, sometimes to a specific other, and sometimes to anybody:

“You,” then, offers the floating subjectivities of this assemblage of persons made disconnected by the factory system.

The opening lines of the poem emphasise the wisdom and effectiveness of this decision and the first passage, “L’usine, la grande usine univers, celle qui respire pour vous. / Il n’y a pas d’autre air que ce qu’elle pompe, rejette” is soon followed by the uncompromising phrase “On est dedans”:

The great factory, the universe, the one that breathes for you.
There’s no other air but what it pumps, expels.
You are inside.

With an increasing awareness of claustrophobia the passage on the first page concludes

No beginning, no end. Things exist together, all at once.

Inside the factory, you are endlessly doing.

You are inside, in the factory, the universe, the one that breathes for you.

The protest movements in France in 1968 had led in turn to the strike at the Brandt factory in Lyon where Kaplan was working at the time and she recorded the liberating effect of having the high walls of routine and expectation taken down, even if for only a short time:

People invite each other to come see their work spaces. Until then, it was not allowed to go into another work area besides your own. For the first time, workers circulate in their factory, which seems extraordinary: the factory belongs to us. Above all, you have the feeling of time.

The sense of removing the prison walls leads to a feeling that “Time becomes a way to meet, and also to imagine.” It is perhaps with this in mind that Leslie Kaplan can present us with those moments of connection and tenderness that, as the translators put it, “seem to us to offer, if not a *way out*, at least an alternative reality hovering in the margins”:

You walk with the girl along the edge of the water. The sky is white. Banks, banks of the Seine. You walk together, you talk to each other, while the sky touches the earth, and the water. Benches, a painted snack bar...

You hold the girl by the arm, you walk...

You walk. You have an apron, the girl has a smock. The trees are

detached, stiff and green. The sky hovers.

Threading a path through the nine circles of the poem we are presented with the isolated traces of human lives and these are

often presented in a fractured state, a face, a dress, a mouth which is lacking a tooth but through which come words. In the world of Kaplan's factory "You wander in places without names, courtyards, corners, warehouses" but you also sense what she wrote about the central truths of Kafka's world:

This sentence of Kafka's has always seemed to me to be the very definition of what writing is: "To write is to jump outside the line of the assassins": the assassins, contrary to what one might believe, are those who stay in line, who follow the usual way of things, who repeat and start over again the bad life as it goes.

In that first circle the poet tells us "Words open the infinite" and it is this gesture perhaps which takes us beyond the world of Dickens's *Little Dorrit* where the stain of the Marshalsea prison dries up the canals of Venice for Amy. In the world of Leslie Kaplan's factory

You advance in a boat, through muddy and narrow streets.

It is in those words "On avance dans une barque" that we see that even if "Vous n'en sortez jamais" there is at least an alternative reality hovering in the margins.