

Akim, Zappy and the Green Eye by Pierre Joris

Contributed by Pierre Joris

Pierre Joris Akim, Zappy and the Green Eye Â

Is there life before reading? I am not certain — & grow less certain as time passes, as I grow old & memory, like nostalgia, isn't what it used to be. So if you ask me what it was like to be a child, I will have a hard time answering — and not just because I do not remember it as being the best time of my life. Not that I wouldn't be interested in finding out for myself. But how to be a historian of one's own past, if *istorin* — the Greek word for history — means for the one historian I trust (because I love to read him) to find out for oneself. How can I go there from now? Maybe I can write myself there, i.e. activate dreaming and reading and come back forward.

And thus the earliest — supposedly paradisiacal, even if or maybe exactly because, forgotten — state of childhood I cannot help but associate with non-reading, so that "prelapsarian"Â always rhymes with preliterate in my mind. Where was I? Rue Glesener, in the southern quartier de la gare of Luxembourg. When was I? Not yet, not yet. I lack photos of that time, cannot see myself, and the google map doesn't get me closer than 200 meters for an inch. The street was maybe 300 meters long, that much I can make out; it started from the Avenue de la Liberté and ended in the rue Adolphe Fischer.

We lived — but this I was shown later, it is not my memory, just something I was told — we lived for awhile in the last house on the North side of the street, the one giving onto the large open space used by Karp-Kneip constructions as depot for its construction materials and as parking lot for its caterpillar tractors, steam rollers, and asphalt laying and paving machines. I must have looked down on that machinery from an upstairs window, or tried to get glimpses through slits in the wooden barrier surrounding the site. But I do not remember the specific occasion of doing that, or, better, all I remember is the fondness of children and grown men to peek with mouths agape through any available opening into construction sites where big machinery moves about.

The only thing I do remember from that house — because in the next house we lived in I already remembered it and its location in a room I furthermore remember every detail of, especially the daybed in the corner upon which I taught myself to read —, the only thing I do remember from that first house is a large Mahogany radio set with built-in record-player on top and box to keep the old shellacked 78s and later the first "long-playing" 33-rpm records at the bottom. A Nordmende, I think, but who knows, it could just as well have been a Phillips, Telefunken, Grundig or Saba. Sleek, elegant, probably taller than I was the year my father bought it. It stayed that size, I kept growing. I like to think that for some time we saw eye to eye — for what has remained with me always was the magic green eye that, cat-like, would widen or narrow its pupil in relation to how good the signal was. I would press my blue eye to its green & with one hand play with the tuning button to make the eye twitch.

But I would have my hand gently slapped for playing with the tuning button because father didn't like me to un-tune the one station he listened to — long-wave Radio Luxembourg. Not much stays with me beyond the fascination of the green eye, except for two auditory memories. The first of these is the opening soundtrack and half-screamed title of the 12:50 p.m. radio-drama: *À ça va bouillir, Zappy Max!* Although French was always an available language, I don't remember anything of the story lines, except for Zappy Max's breathless voice, and the fact that the weird nasty bad guy was called "le tonneau" — the barrel. What made the show for me were the incredible variety of noises, screams, sound-effects, that pushed whatever story line there was ahead at breakneck speed.

What has stayed with me more essentially was something else: a sequence of sound I couldn't make sense of but proved was the most seductive, the most wondrous and mysterious language-sounds I had ever heard. And that inscribed itself immediately and forever in my brain. It would come over the radio in the program my father listened to after Zappy Max, the one o'clock news. Later on I translated the music the vocables made into semantic meaning: it turned out to be a name, much in the news at that time: Krim Bel Kacem. I can still hear it in the singing French inflections of the news announcer "returning, repeated, over and over: Krim Bel Kacem Krim Bel Kacem Krim Bel Kacem.

With no semantic referent to attach to the sound sequence, I was utterly seduced by its sheer musicality, from the repetition of which I drew an immense pleasure I recall to this day: first, the initial hard, nearly explosive consonantal rub of "r" after "k" followed by the elongated high vowel sound of the "i" and down into the calm "m" — a peaceful "om" after the crime-evoking sounds of the first three letters. Then the high bell-sound of "bel" a clear peel, short but echoing loudly and in its very clarity hiding or making me forget the reference to the obvious (but misplaced) French semantic meaning. This was followed by the alliteration of the "k" sound, though this time with the variation of the "a" vowel replacing the "are" of *krim*, a descent in pitch from the "e" of "bel," but a widening of the scope of sound, a deepening into that initial and initiating sound of human language, the long "a" that can carry pain, pleasure, surprise, exhilaration and so on. After the "c" planes down and alleviates the harshness of the two initial "k"s, the sequence finishes on a second alliteration, that of the final "m," easily drawn out to bring it even closer to the calmness of the seed syllable "om."

Maybe my father did tell me that it was a name, no matter, I don't remember if he did, and if he did do so, I must have forgotten instantly, or else willfully worked on forgetting, as I do remember that "Krim Bel Kacem" was my favorite word sequence for that marvelous childhood play consisting in repeating a sequence of words without pause or interruption until any semantic meaning is rubbed out and all that's left is the pure jouissance of a sound that now arises from the very chora of language.

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Now you may say that the foregoing answers my initial question: clearly, there is life before reading, and it is the life of sound....But how do I know? Much of the time listening to Radio Luxembourg in that room with the green eye gleaming were spent on the daybed at the other end of the room with ... a book in my hand. The first such book was a tome

grabbed from my parents' shelves maybe because it also had drawings. I could read the title: The Idiot. I am sure I could not read the name of the author: Fyodor Dostoyevsky. But I wanted to read & I read or looked at the first page of print & taught myself the letters, with whose help I don't remember. A year later I was put immediately into second grade, given that I could read — & just as immediately proceeded to exchange the Dostoyevsky for the first fifteen issues of "Akim," the Tarzan wanna-be character created in 1950 by the script-writer Roberto Renzi, with artwork by Augusto Pedrazza in the handy Piccolo strip-series. They were the perfect size to read in school under the desk, or on the daybed out of the parents' sight and under the protection of the cool, unphased green eye of the Nordmende, while "Krim Bel Kacem Krim Bel Kacem Krim Bel Kacem" would eventually echo through the other words, "Akim, Akim, Akim" and I would make up new names for new heroes I dreamed I would later write about or draw strips for or put on the radio and I could already here the announcer in Zappy's voice breathlessly screaming: "À va bouillir, Kim Akrim Bel Kacem."