Return to Nevèrÿon: A "Derridian-esque" Meditation.

By Wendy Galgan

Having finished Samuel R. Delany's Nevèrÿon series, readers (we readers) stand at the Bridge of Lost Desire one final time, ready to journey beyond Kolhari and into other lands and other languages. But before we leave Nevèrÿon, before we slip silently past the old, nameless gods that guard the southern border of the land, we might take some time to reexamine some of the themes that Delany has woven through his stories, woven them in much the same way that yarns of gold and silver are woven through the finest cloth. This reexamination – this revisiting – I believe is one of the reasons Delany placed "The Tale of Gorgik" at the beginning **and** the end of all his tales of Nevèrÿon, for when we revisit Gorgik's story after having read the entire epic, we discover that all of the components of all the tales had their beginnings in that first story. By returning to that tale, Delany gathers up all the yarns he has put through the loom of his storytelling and winds them together into one skein as a way of signaling (or, better yet, signifying) that his tales are finally at an end – for isn't "to spin a yarn" also to tell a tale? Thus, Delany mentions weaving frequently, and in ways that show how the cloth being woven mirrors the text being written: ". . .she lingered at the loom for minutes, watching the pattern, with its greens, its beiges, its blues, extend itself, fixed and stable, line after line. . ." (Return 13). More than just suggesting the parallel between lines of text and lines of threads, however, Delany makes the connection between weaving and storytelling explicit, when Gorgik says, "'Yes, I have such memories. You have, too. We both return to them, now and again, to weave, unweave, and reweave the stories that make our lives comprehensible to us'" (32). Indeed, Delany casts himself – the teller of the Nevèrÿon story – as a weaver producing a tapestry, telling the reader, "But we have one more strand from the past to weave into our tale in order to reveal the smallest pattern in the present" (169).

Now that we readers have read all the tales of Nevèrÿon, now that we have seen Delany's tapestry in its completeness, now that the epic's fabric is laid out before us whole and entire, now that he has shown us that "smallest pattern in the present," let us take a few minutes to trace the way in which those shining threads have been woven throughout the material. These threads are many, and are deftly worked into complicated and shifting patterns, but by looking at where the

tapestry ends, that is, at *Return to Nevèrÿon*, we then will be equipped to trace them backwards, back into the whole of the Nevèrÿon epic.

Before we begin, however, I want to place a question into consideration, a question to which I do not have an answer. Here is a book with two of its three stories written in the mid-1980s, one in 1985 and one in 1987. Thus I would ask you, in a book written during our own plague years (when we were all watching people we loved die before our eyes), in a book written at the height of the AIDS epidemic, what does it mean (or does it mean anything) when the very first word of the very first story is "no?" As I say, I have no answer; I may, in fact, be reading too much into that one word, but I cannot help but hear it as the *cri de coeur* of a man living in the midst of a pestilence that was killing people all around him. The presence of this illness, disguised and transformed as it is within the world of Nevèrÿon, becomes part of Delany's strategy of resistance, his method of engaging with his readers (gay and straight, male and female) in an attempt to open up a necessary and difficult dialogue about AIDS. It is Delany's way of using discourse to place himself in a position of power (by initiating the dialogue) while also acting from within a position of opposition/powerlessness to point toward the shortcomings of those holding the real power in AIDS discourse during the 1980s. As Michel Foucault wrote, "[w]e must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point or an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (101). In the days of the writing of *Return to Nevèrÿon*, it was silence that was killing people, and those writers who, like Delany, attempted to put into words what was happening, attempted to "undermine" and "expose" that silent discourse, found themselves trapped in the space Jean-Françoise Lyotard would call the *différend*. "In the différend, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence. . .that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that which remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase" (13). Whether this particular "no" of Delany's means anything more than what it says or not, whether it is something crying out to be "put into phrases" or just a means of

opening "The Game of Time and Pain," I cannot say. But the plague to which it gestures, the disease which would become known as AIDS, that word becomes, of course, one of the threads woven throughout the Nevèrÿon epic. It is a dark thread, thick and purple, and it lends its color to all the stories written during our plague years.

One more thing before we turn to *Return to Nevèrÿon*. I have used the word "epic" three times now – very deliberately – to describe the Nevèrÿon series in its entirety, for I believe the work is truly an American epic. Written in postmodern times, the series does, of course, adapt some of the traditions of the epic, molding and changing them to fit both the modern-day sensibilities of the reader and the linguistic modalities inherent in what Delany calls "this most despised sub-genre of paraliterary production, sword-and-sorcery" (Silent Interviews 129). Instead of the Homeric hero – the one character who stands at the center of a classical epic and, by virtue of this privileged position, becomes the focus of the point-of-view through which we perceive the unfolding action – we follow a number of different characters throughout Nevèrÿon, becoming privy not only to their outward speech and action but also their interior dialogue. And yet….Delany does provide a focal character of sorts, for doesn't every main character, at one point or another, meet or speak about or hear about Gorgik? There is no great war in the Nevèrÿon tales such as we find in the *Iliad* and yet there is a guerilla war being fought by Gorgik and his followers to end slavery, and while most of the battles of Gorgik's war take place "off stage" in terms of the *Return to Nevèrÿon* narrative, we do "witness" some combat and hear of other instances of fighting between those who would end slavery and those who own slaves. In its very ambition – to trace the history of slavery in America **and** tell the story of the AIDS epidemic as it was being lived in the 1980s – the Nevèrÿon story is epic in scope and intention, and it plays out across a vast land and within the lives of many characters. Finally, I believe Delany gives us a clue that he, himself, views his work as an epic: by beginning and ending the series with "The Tale of Gorgik," he follows within the structure of his narrative the traditional definition of an "odyssey," which is a journey that begins and ends in the same place. Thus, Delany signals, through this allusion to Homer's *Odyssey*, that the tales of Nevèrÿon can, indeed, be read as an epic. For the purposes of this essay I will, of necessity, be focusing on *Return to Nevèrÿon*, which comprises the final chapters of the Nevèrÿon epic, but I believe it is important for the reader of the tales of Nevèrÿon to keep this epic structure in mind when examining the themes of the work. As we trace the myriad colors, the many themes, that Delany has woven

into these tales of Nevèrÿon, we find some recurring frequently. It is these threads – gold and silver, iron and copper – that I would ask us to think about one more time before we leave the land of double-blades and dragons.

First, I would like to put a little pressure upon the name: Bridge of Lost Desire. Perhaps we could look for the Derridian *différance* in those two words, "lost" and "desire." For, is one destined to lose the object of one's desire that one has seen on the bridge, as Clodon wonders as he searches for the woman with perfect hands, feet and eyes (Return 157)? Or, is the bridge the place where one can find the desire that one had lost in the past, as do many of those who search for – and find – a willing partner in a sexual version of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic? Or, (and there's Derrida's favorite copula once again) does one risk losing one's desire by indulging one's lust on the bridge? And what of desire? Can we only desire what is absent? Is that what it means, then, to have a Bridge of Lost Desire – that the absent object, the desired object, can no longer be desired once it is present and available? Or, is it that, through our desire for the absent object, we become, in Kristeva's formulation, abject? That it is the gap that is telling and important? Gorgik speaks of how "the pause holds desire as much as it holds all my uncertainties about it" (Return 32), thus introducing Delany's formulation of desire as existing within the pause – indeed, Delany ends "The Tale of Rumor and Desire" by telling us, "You know what to read in the pause" (Return 213). So perhaps it is not true absence, but a momentary abeyance of language, that signifies desire. As Gorgik explains to Udrog in "The Game of Time and Pain":

> 'Tale tellers talk of lust as a fire that makes the body shiver as though cased in ice. But it's not the fire or the ice that characterizes desire, but the contradiction between them. Perhaps, then, we should go on calling it a pause, a split, a gap – a silence that, on either side, though it seems impassable, is one that, while we are in it and it threatens to shake us apart, it seems we will never escape.' (Return 53)

Perhaps that abeyance occurs within memory, and is signaled as a loss to the one who remembers, for, as "remembered, something is presently tensed in its loss" as a "*past* presence," a "strange intensity of not now and most surely now," an "intention of time," a "place of time" (Scott 55). And the silence Gorgik mentions, that deadly silence of the *différend* against which Delany was fighting as he wrote his Nevèrÿon epic, becomes/remains both a loss and a yearning, something to both push against and to embrace as a part of a desire itself, as part of the abeyance of language.

But an abeyance of language, while it does hold "the pause" within itself, is – in and of itself – not exactly the location of desire, either, for it seems that desire (at least in Nevèrÿon) is very much rooted within the language act itself. The gap, the pause, is that instant of balance between the *remembering* of something and the *naming* of that something, that is, the *re-calling* of desire by naming it, by bringing it back before us through the use of the word, for when we use a word as a name "we reenact, or adopt, or reanimate, or entertain the thought of previous users of the same word or some part at least of that thought" (Barfield 24). In other words, we desire what has been named before, by us or by others, and by enacting and re-enacting that naming we bring desire forward into the pause, the gap, the space prepared for its reception within our acts of both speaking and listening. Delany himself has suggested elsewhere that speaking and listening are what constitute the desiring and the desired subject. "She or he who desires, listens," Delany writes. "She or he who is desired, speaks . . .I might go so far as to say that to speak is to constitute oneself as a desired subject. To listen is to constitute oneself as a desiring subject. . ." (Silent Interviews 137). Perhaps, then, it is the resonance between and among the words and silences, the wholes and parts, of language, that help constitute the desire which we seek. If every word and sentence "causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole of the view of the world which lies behind it to appear" (Gadamer 415-16) – that is, for our purposes, if language's resonance acts to display the desire that lies/hides/waits *behind* the words – then desire's appearance, its display, must, of necessity, take place within the pause, within the gap. Desire balances and is balanced, is held by and held in abeyance by, the gap which is the pause which is, finally, the Derridian *différance*, "the (active *and* passive) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving" (Positions 8). The play of interiority and exteriority, the presence and absence inherent in the language of desire (Derrida, Grammatology), serve to both bridge and widen the gap within which desire resides/waits. Yet, for Delany, that pause/gap/delay is found not only between those words and sentences that display desire, but in the difference between our desires and our experience:

> The discrepancy between what we desire (want, wish for, expect) and what happens contours the space in which language repeatedly and repeatedly occurs. The discrepancy between what we say and what happens contours the space in which language repeatedly and repeatedly occurs. The discrepancy between what we say and what happens is the endlessly repeated locus of desire. And the discrepancy between what we desire and

> what we say revises and revises the space *of* what happens *to* what happens (our experience *of* our experience, if you will). Yet by the same tense tripartition, none of the three will ever be adequate to the other; and their inadequacies are a field for play, slippage, endless revisions and changes on and in all three. (Silent Interviews 158)

Thus, our *speaking our desire* is, perhaps, an incantation, an apostrophe, a summoning if you will; our "speech act is directed toward an object which is not yet present, has not yet appeared, is coming" (Welton 306), and that speech act summons the not-present object to the "field for play" and "slippage" that is inscribed within the locus of what we desire/what we say/what happens, described within Delany's narrative.

There are other threads to follow, however, and our time grows short.

Metaphysics is woven throughout Delany's linguistic tapestry. Indeed, near the end of "The Game of Time and Pain," we find one of the neatest distillations of philosophical questioning I have seen in a fictional work. Gorgik is thinking about how he had defined himself against Lord Krodar, who is now dead:

> When the old definitions are gone, he [Gorgik] thought, how we grasp about for new ones!
>
> What am I, then?
>
> And what is this 'I' that asks?
>
> Yet to articulate them was to be aware of the split between them, between the mystical that asked them and the historical they asked of, between the unknowable hearing them and the determinable prompting them, so that finally he came to this most primitive proposition: only when such a split opened among the variegated responses to a variegated world *was* there any self. (Return 116)

Here, in eleven lines, we find Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger, Pascal, Kant and Augustine. Here, in eleven lines, we find the question of being examined sympathetically and articulately. Yet while metaphysics and its language are very much a part of the tales of Nevèrÿon, it is not just metaphysical language, but also the question of language itself that has become part of the warp and woof of Delany's weavings – and it is within that question of language itself that Delany is able to gesture towards the question being raised by metaphysics; and to answer these questions, Delany returns time and again to tale-telling, history making, and the use of signs.

For Gorgik, it is the ability to be the story teller, to take hold of one's history and the history of those around one, which defines the self. Gorgik describes the moment "'when. . .I

gained my self, the self that seeks the truth, the self that, now and again in seeking it, becomes entangled in falsehood, error, and delusion, as well as outrage and pride – the self that tells the tales'" (Return 57). Notice that it is *within* language – truth, falsehood and the telling of tales – that Gorgik gains his *self*, his *being*. This is Gorgik's recognition that we live within (*are* within, *exist* within) language, that language is "something by which we are sustained and in some senses encompassed" (Olafson 189). Later, as Gorgik moves from *being* a slave to *being* a soldier to *being* "the Liberator," he comes to understand that "the self that tells the tales" takes into him-*self* the ability – the power – to construct history, both for himself and for those around him. Gorgik talks to people, and in the talking draws their stories from them, listening to the tales of slaves about to be freed (Return 74), and the stories told by the men and women who sell themselves on the Bridge of Lost Desire (Return 220), and within this performance of talking/listening he takes into himself the ability to *be*, at least linguistically (that is, in his re-telling of their tales), the people whose stories he absorbs: "To tell a tale, [Gorgik had] often felt, was to take as much as you gave" (Return 116), and in the taking and the telling lies the very act of *being*, of *be*-coming, of *be*-lieving the story you are telling, the history you are constructing.

Yet, as the Handmaid and Vizerine Myrgot suggests in an imaginary conversation she has with Gorgik, it is not enough just to *be*, it is not even enough to collect the stories of other people's *be*-ing. A person's history will not outlive her if she does not make sure that others can tell her tale after she's gone:

> 'As Vizerine to the Empress, as Liberator to the land, you and I have lived those tales – yet even we, in these basic and barbaric times, would be hard put to tell them: we were too busy living them to attend to their narrative form. And neither of us thought to keep a mummer or a tale teller about to narrate them for ourselves and others, to give them a classic mold. We must satisfy ourselves, then, with empty signs, marginal mutterings, attending rather to the celebratory engine of someone else's distant and speculative art.
>
> 'Will someone someday ever essay their rich specificity? No, I will never hear mine related. I doubt you will ever hear yours. However laudable our actions, as tales neither aids enough men now in power.'
>
> (Return 113)

The tales of the Liberator and the tales of the Vizerine will be lost, because they will not be remembered; and they will not be remembered because, in addition to not being useful to those

in power, they will not be written down. For it is in the writing that a tale is truly preserved. It is within writing that knowledge "becomes stratified," that "deposits of knowledge accumulate like tools and the works which result from them. Concretely, it is writing and especially printing which have permitted knowledge to accumulate and leave traces." On "the basis of this sedimentation, the quest for knowledge, like the technical pursuit, is irreversible. For all new thought uses the thought of the past as a tool or instrument and in this way carries history forward" (Ricoeur 83). And because neither Myrgot nor Gorgik have written down the stories of their lives (despite their both being able to write), and because they have not thought to have a tale teller form their lives into narratives as those lives were being lived, there is little possibility that their own histories will be carried forward.

There is, however, a suggestion within what the Vizerine says that perhaps the histories of Gorgik and Myrgot would not be preserved even if they were written down, because they do not aid the "men now in power." And here we find ourselves back within/amid the question of power and language, back in Foucault's suggestion that both power and powerlessness exist within the use of language, back in Lyotard's *différend* as it was in the 1980s, where the men in power used language – and silence – to control debate about the illness killing gay (read: powerless) men. "Language," Delany writes in "Appendix: Closures and Openings," "is first and foremost a *stabilizer* of behavior, thought, and feeling, of human responses and reactions – both for groups and for individuals. . . .Language is a stabilizer among our responses to the world and to our problems in it" (Return 274-75). It follows, then, that those men in power have used/are using/will continue to use, language as a means of keeping public discourse (and public action and reaction) under control.

And with this, the question of power, we come to the overarching theme of the Nevèrÿon stories. That theme is, of course, slavery. Its iron-and-blood- red thread runs end-to-end and side-to-side throughout the entire linguistic tapestry that comprises the tales of Nevèrÿon, and it is ever and always interwoven with the metallic gold threads of power. As I suggested before, we find Hegel's master/slave dialectic embodied in the slave collar worn by Gorgik and Noyeed. When Clodon encounters the undertaker's son in "The Tale of Rumor and Desire," the son bids Clodon to wear an unlocked slave collar and go sell himself on the Bridge of Lost Desire: "'If you wear a slave collar; and if you carry the scars of a marked rebel; and if you stand out on the Bridge of Lost Desire – well, these, taken all together, become a kind of sign. . . .What all those

signs mean, brought together and placed in the positions that we have discussed, as I'm sure you have now understood, is that you. . .are the Master'" (Return 174-75). Delany, however, makes very clear the idea that, while there can be a blurring of the roles of Master and slave when an unlockable collar is worn by a man who chooses to wear it, no such blurring occurs when the man in the collar is, in truth, a slave – and this is because the Master holds a terrible power over his slave. A locked collar, and the slavery it signifies, steal the humanity, the very *being*, of the one who wears it:

> 'Everything that allowed thought to become word, idea to become act, or plan to become practice had been shucked, stunned, petrified. . . .The lesson was that, when you are oppressed, your acts, even if gratuitous, must not only be, but must seem, aimless, random, purposeless. . . .I was to [*sic.*] cowed even to consider the linkage moment makes with moment to create the history that, despite our masters, is never inevitable, only more or less negotiable. . . .[T]he self which gives life meaning had been banished from my body.' (Return 35)

Gorgik, who speaks the above lines during his recitation of a tale of his own life, was able to recover his lost self, "the self that tells the tales," but even as he recovered that self Gorgik realized that he could gain his own physical freedom from slavery and that would still not be enough: "'I knew I would not be content till I had seized. . .freedom and power for myself, even though I knew I had to seize the former for every slave in Nevèrÿon – before I could truly hold the latter'" (Return 55).

Slavery has been written onto the human body, and into the lives of the people, within Nevèrÿon. Slavers can capture anyone – barbarian or Kolhari alike – who is vulnerable and alone outside the city's borders, and those in power, those who control social and political discourse, can make a slave of whomever they choose. Gorgik realizes that he must, through *whatever means necessary*, fight to end the institution of slavery in his world. At the beginning, that means physical battle with slave owners and those who supported them. But as time goes on, Gorgik comes to realize that he must enter into the halls of power himself; he must no longer define himself merely as the opposite of Lord Krodar, the man fighting to prevent slavery's abolition, but must instead learn the signs and signifiers that make up the *language* of power within the High Court of Eagles. Gorgik explains,

> '. . .as I came within the walls of the council room with a voice and a vote and at last the title of equal, my enemy was suddenly my teacher, my critic, my exemplar. He was the mirror I had to look into to learn what I was to do. . . .' (Return 31)

Yet even as he realizes that the mirroring he must perform in relation to Lord Krodar is in some ways no longer the reversal/opposition/resistance it was originally, even as he realizes he must adopt the grammar and syntax of the Court, Gorgik continues to define his very *self* against Krodar. Thus, when Krodar dies, Gorgik finds himself (almost literally) off-balance:

> He'd [Gorgik] defined himself so long by his opposition to this dead lord, it was as if – at the death – he'd been pushing against a mountain to have it collapse into a field over which he'd gone staggering and reeling; as if, running across a plain, he'd gone over a cliff, into the air, flying, flailing, falling; as if he'd woken with an unspeakable power that felled all he looked at so that even as he gazed around to assess the damages, he'd only wrecked more. (Return 116)

Here, then, we find a metaphor for the transfer of political power, and it is power of the most dangerous kind, for in its own way the power of the Court – its intrigues, its punishments and rewards, its full and ebb tides – holds captive those who live within it. This power is Byzantine and tyrannical, for "the hierarchy of prestige branched;. . .the branches interwove; and. . .the interweavings in several places formed perfectly closed, if inexplicable, loops" within the High Court; all the "elegant lords and ladies" were slaves to it, to "power, pure, raw and obsessive" (Return 241, 43). Yet, for Gorgik, gaining power for himself is the only sure means to end slavery, so he works to gain it and, upon gaining it, brings about the end of slavery for the people of Nevèrÿon.

Is this, then, Delany's answer to the silence of the *différend* of the 1980s? Perhaps it is. Perhaps he is suggesting that, rather than slave within the silence (for, as we heard over and over again during our plague years, *Silence=Death*) we should push against it (the silence, and its companion, death). Suggesting that, somehow, the tales of Nevèrÿon speak to our own tales of time and pain, rumor and desire. Suggesting that, like Gorgik, we must develop our own strategy of resistance. Suggesting that we should stand in opposition to the discourse that is both an "instrument" and an "effect" of power and, instead, speak out from the *différend*, claiming for ourselves and for all the powerless the grammar and syntax of our own High Court of Eagles. Suggesting that the pain and death of silence must, once and for all, be "put into phrases" and brought out into the public discourse.

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