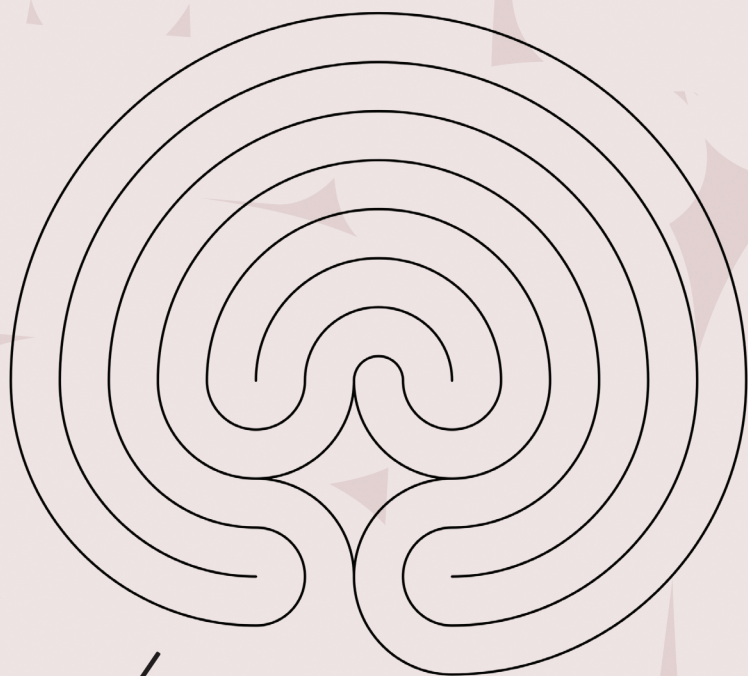


M. Munro



Labyrinths

New and Selected Writings

LABYRINTHS

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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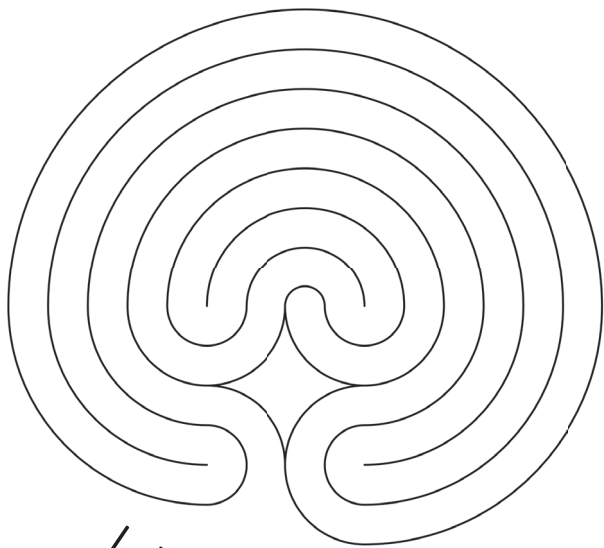
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M. Munro



Labyrinths

New and Selected Writings



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with endless thanks*

LABYRINTHS

Why are penetrating questions so much harder to formulate
than penetrating answers?

— Louis Bury

I

What Is Not to Be Explained

With unfailing kindness, your life always presents what you
need to learn.

— Charlotte Joko Beck

§. The Story with Story

Since a theoretical argument in literary studies is most often the lengthened shadow of an example, it is important to have good examples, be prepared to argue for their usefulness, and work out what exactly they exemplify.¹

For example, truth. But is truth an example? What happens — and what is dispensed with — when a text, for example, a so-called literary fiction — but is this still an example? — stages truth?²

We seek here to launch a reformulation, indeed, a first formulation, if not a first principle, of the issue of exemplarity itself insofar as its structures exceed all hitherto formulated paradigms of analysis, explanation, and assumption.³

It would seem that we must do away with explanation. Perhaps, though, the injunction is too strong. We must do away with explanation in the sense that nothing which could be explained could possibly count as that into which we are trying to gain insight.⁴

-
- 1 Haun Saussy, *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi Inside Out* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 5. Rachel Sagner Buurma, “Epigraph,” in *Book Parts*, ed. Dennis Duncan and Adam Smyth (Oxford University Press, 2019), 168: “The epigraph’s very existence raises questions of tradition, authority, and intentionality; we might even say that it creates” — this one, for example — “a structurally literary situation.”
 - 2 Jacques Derrida, “Le facteur de la vérité,” in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 414. Trans. modified. See Jacques Derrida, “The Purveyor of Truth,” trans. Willis Domingo et al., *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 32.
 - 3 Irene E. Harvey, *Labyrinths of Exemplarity: At the Limits of Deconstruction* (State University of New York Press, 2002), x.
 - 4 Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 275.

Isn't this really explanation enough? — But isn't it too much?⁵

The story at first seems to make the answer clear.⁶

SO WHAT'S THE STORY with story? What makes story so fascinating, and how — by virtue of what — does story so exceed statement? Or, as “the great scholar known as the Vilna Gaon once asked the Preacher of Dubno, ‘Help me to understand. What makes a parable so influential? If I recite Torah, there’s a small audience, but let me tell a parable

and the synagogue is full. Why is that?’

The *dubner maged* replied, ‘I’ll explain it to you by means of a parable.

‘Once upon a time Truth went about the streets as naked as the day he was born. As a result, no one would let him into their homes. Whenever people caught sight of him, they turned away or fled. One day when Truth was sadly wandering about, he came upon Parable. Now, Parable was dressed in splendid clothes of beautiful colors. And Parable, seeing Truth said, “Tell me, neighbor, what makes you look so sad?” Truth replied bitterly, “Ah, brother, things are bad. Very bad. I’m old, very old, and no one wants to acknowledge me. No one wants anything to do with me.”

‘Hearing that, Parable said, “People don’t run away from you because you’re old. I too am old. Very old. But the older I get, the better people like me. I’ll tell you a secret: Everyone likes things to be disguised and prettied up a bit. Let me lend you some splendid clothes like mine, and you’ll see that the very people who pushed you aside will invite you into their homes and be glad of your company.”

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 222.

6 Michael Wood, *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 138–39.

‘Truth took Parable’s advice and put on the borrowed clothes. And from that time on, Truth and Parable have gone hand in hand together and everyone loves them. They make a happy pair.’⁷

In truth, the parable makes for a curious “explanation.” Despite appearances, it signally fails to settle the single question its presentation purports to answer: “What makes a parable so influential?” Instead, once Truth dons Parable’s “splendid clothes,” an unforeseen question comes into view, one which, once glimpsed, no resplendence can obscure: If Parable “clothes” Truth, if Parable is at one and the same time s/he who clothes Truth and the clothing itself, how do you picture Parable? Amid a flourish of “beautiful colors,” what figure does Parable cut?

Let me recount here — let me borrow — what else? — a story. “The most diverse legends circulate about the inexplicable. The most ingenious — which was found by the present guardians of the Temple while rifling through the ancient traditions — claims that, being inexplicable, it remains so in all the explanations which have been given and that will continue to be given through the centuries. Indeed, precisely these explanations constitute the best guarantee of its inexplicability.”⁸ “But at the point where explanations, by showing their emptiness, leave it be,” so our fable concludes, “the inexplicable itself is in jeopardy. Only the explanations were, in truth, inexplicable, and the legend was invented to explain them. What was not to be explained is perfectly contained” — ravishly — “in what no longer explains anything.”⁹

7 “Naked Truth and Resplendent Parable,” in *Yiddish Folktales*, ed. Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, trans. Leonard Wolf (Schocken Books, 1988), 7.

8 Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (SUNY Press, 1995), 137.

9 *Ibid.*, 138.

§. “Not the Flag Flying”: Negations, or, Note on Hegel’s “Absolute Knowledge”

No agreement exists as to the possibility of defining negation, as to its logical status, function, and meaning, as to its field of applicability.¹⁰

“THE MYSTERY OF NEGATION: This is not how things are, and yet we can say *how* things are *not*.”¹¹ To Wittgenstein’s “mystery” of negation it is perhaps apposite to juxtapose an observation of Goethe’s: “We’re only really thinking when we can’t think out fully what we are thinking about.”¹² Goethe’s use of negation, in other words, illuminates negation’s mystery: Might it not be the case that we cannot, in fact, say how things are not when, in its midst, *how* things are not is precisely what’s *not* there to say? Or, more simply, what we can (perhaps) say: What might “the mystery of negation” give us to think, “fully”?

Kōan number twenty-nine of the *Wu-men Kuan*, “Not Wind Not Flag,” unfolds under the sign — a sign — not uncomplicated — of negation.

The Sixth Patriarch came because the dharma-talk flag was up at the monastery gate, beating there in the wind. He found two monks arguing. One said: ‘It’s the flag flying.’ And the other said: ‘It’s the wind flying.’ They argued back and forth, but couldn’t find an inner principle to agree on.

‘It’s not the wind flying,’ observed the Sixth Patriarch, ‘and it’s not the flag flying. It’s mind flying.’

¹⁰ F. H. Heinemann, quoted in Laurence R. Horn, *A Natural History of Negation* (CLSI Publications, 2001), 1. See Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash — The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018).

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Irad Kimhi, *Thinking and Being* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 9.

¹² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in James Geary, *Geary’s Guide to the World’s Great Aphorists* (Bloomsbury, 2007), 277.

The two monks grew silent, and a little fearful.¹³

Whatever else might be said about this kōan, one thing is certain: everything transpires under the dharma-flag. The flag not only sets the scene, summoning Huineng, the sixth patriarch, but as David Hinton observes, an unsettling implication unfurls with it: the flag's use in or for the monastery, and so no less in or for the kōan, is "to indicate that a dharma-talk is imminent. Hence, an image for enlightened talk and ideas, which are not to be trusted."¹⁴ Perhaps then it would be prudent not to take the kōan at face value, nor the Sixth Patriarch at his word. In other words, perhaps "mind flying" should be understood not for what it appears to be — an attempt to settle the conflict between the monks — but for what it does: definitively unsettle it. If the problem appears to be that the monks "couldn't find an inner principle to agree on," in other words, perhaps this suggests that the real problem arises there where they were, in fact, in accord: in seeking one. If an "inner" "principle" can be said to be "found" at all — and can be said to be "one" — *this is not how things are*: The Sixth Patriarch, standing beneath the dharma-flag's steady flutter, can perhaps therefore be understood not to have said *this is not how things are* when *how* things are not is elusively, if precisely, what *is* there — is *there*, unfolding, unremarked — to say. Between the fabric and the wind, overshadowing them, curiously, a mysterious standard can thus be thought to recast the flap between the monks.

13 *No-Gate Gateway: The Original Wu-men Kuan*, trans. David Hinton (Shambhala Publications, 2018), 70.

14 *Ibid.*, 119.

§. “The Mountain Path”: On a Lesson of Fred Moten’s

Blackness is the nonexcluded middle with a right to (refuse) philosophy.¹⁵

ACROSS FRED MOTEN’S BOOKS — from his first monograph, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, up to and including the final volume of the trilogy *consent not to be a single being*, *The Universal Machine* — there’s a seemingly marginal detail, an examination of the recurrence of which might prove telling. No more than a few times in the course of each book, and each time in passing, Moten uses Edmund Husserl’s curious and striking phrase, “transcendental clue” (*Transzendentaler Leitfaden*).¹⁶ Now, it may be true that the transcendental, following Kant, is not the transcendent: it is not what exceeds any (all) possible experience, but rather describes the boundary that shapes experience as its condition of possibility.¹⁷ It may also be true, following Carlo Ginzburg, that a clue is a

15 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 108.

16 See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 96, 97, 163. See also the three volumes of *consent not to be a single being*, as well as Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (Routledge Classics, 2012), and, for the German, Jacob Rump, “Kant, Husserl, and the Case for Non-Conceptual Content,” in *Husserl and Classical German Philosophy*, eds. Faustino Fabbianelli and Sebastian Luft (Springer, 2014), 293.

17 “If what is given with respect to the formation of any field is the strength of the forces involved in its production, then what is given is precisely the *producing* of that field, so that, once again, what is *given* determines the transcendental as the transcendental of what is given. What is *given* but never available is, in every case, what cannot be apperceptively reproduced because it exceeds this as its source. In this sense what is *given* is formless production.” Iain Hamilton Grant, “Movements of the World: The Sources of Transcendental Philosophy,” in *Analecta Hermeneutica* 3 (2011): 16. All emphases are the author’s. “The transcendental,” in other words, “*is the in itself formless form of all forms*” (17).

detail that, while “apparently insignificant,” suggests “a complex reality that could not be experienced directly.”¹⁸ It nonetheless remains to be asked: How does “transcendental” modify “clue”? How does Moten modify Husserl? And according to what perspective, attendant on what perception, might these two questions be seen to be linked?

Ginzburg, after the definition of “clue” cited above, goes on in the next sentence to note that “the data,” curiously, “is always arranged by the observer in such a way as to produce a narrative.”¹⁹ The narrative that follows is a Sufi teaching tale collected by Idries Shah. It recounts a journey made by way of a series of apposite crossings: truth with falsity, ease with difficulty, blindness with insight. But beneath these, or in addition to them, alongside them, perhaps another crossing may be discerned, if one altogether less certain. By what criterion — what demarcation — subsequent to what passage or pursuant to what possible experience can you tell a story apart from a clue — and the clue given (the lie) in or by the story from philosophy? “An intelligent man, a scholar with a trained mind, came one day to a village. He wanted to compare, as an exercise and a

study, the different points of view which might be represented there.

He went to the caravanserai and asked for the most truthful inhabitant and also the greatest liar of the village. The people who were there agreed unanimously that the man called Kazzab was their greatest liar; and that Rastgu was the truthful one. In turn he visited them, asking each a simple question: ‘What is the best way to the next village?’

Rastgu the Truthful said: ‘The mountain path.’

Kazzab the Liar also said: ‘The mountain path.’

Not unnaturally, this puzzled the traveller a great deal.

18 Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 103.

19 Ibid.

So he asked a few others, ordinary citizens.
Some said: 'The river;' others: 'Across the fields.'
And others again said: 'The mountain path.'

He took the mountain path, but in addition to the matter of the goal of his journey, the problem of the truthful and the liars of the village troubled him.

When he got to the next village, and related his story at the rest-house, he ended: 'I evidently made the basic logical mistake of asking the wrong people for the names of the Truthful and the Liar. I arrived here quite easily, by the mountain path.'

A wise man who was present spoke. 'Logicians, it must be admitted, tend to be blind, and have to ask others to help them. But the matter here is otherwise. The facts are thus: The river is the easiest route, so the liar suggested the mountain. But the truthful man

"was not only truthful. He noticed that you had a donkey, which made the journey easy enough. The liar happened to be unobservant of the fact that you had no boat: otherwise he would have suggested the river."²⁰

20 Idries Shah, "The Mountain Path," in *Tales of the Dervishes: Teaching Stories of the Sufi Masters over the Past Thousand Years* (Penguin Books, 1993), 134. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994), 154: "We always have as much truth as we deserve in accordance with the sense of what we say." 159: "A solution always has the truth it deserves according to the problem to which it is a response, and the problem always has the solution it deserves in proportion to *its own* truth or falsity—in other words, in proportion to its sense."

§. Not Even Wrong: Ethics, Andrea Long Chu, and Eternal Irony in the Logical Space of Reasons

I absolutely do court disagreement in that sense. But what I like even better are arguments that bring about a shift in terms along an axis that wasn't previously evident. So it's not just that other people are wrong; it's that their wrongness exists within a system of evaluation which itself is irrelevant.²¹

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's view is that woman is the "eternal irony in the life of the community" and she brings it down by making it a "laughing-stock." We might say that from the perspective of the male master, the collapse of the community is tragic. But from an equally important perspective, the perspective of woman — the slave — the collapse is comic.²²

At an academic event, I was once asked what I had meant by the term *ethics* as I'd used it in a publication. I hesitated and then I said, "I think I mean commitment to a bit." The audience laughed, but I meant it; they laughed *because* I meant it. In stand-up comedy, a bit is a comedic sequence or conceit, often involving a brief suspension of reality. To commit to a bit is to play it straight — that is, to take it seriously. A bit may be fantastical, but the seriousness required to commit to it is always real. This is the humorlessness that vegetates at the core of all humor. That's what makes the bit funny: the fact that, for the comic, it isn't.²³

21 Andrea Long Chu, "Andrea Long Chu Is Ready for Criticism," interview by Thora Siemsen, *The Nation*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/andrea-long-chu-females-interview/>.

22 Philip J. Kain, "Hegel, Antigone, and Women," *Owl of Minerva* 33 (2002). See version at <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/phi/51/>. The quotation is found on page 14 of the file.

23 Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (Verso, 2019), 18–19.

ANDREA LONG CHU'S *FEMALES* is — already — many things to many people, including, as Bryony White notes, “an exercise in logic, not what they were expecting.”²⁴ In context, those two phrases are merely contiguous and otherwise disconnected (“confusing, a difficult read, an exercise in logic, not what they were expecting, controversial, offensive”), but I wonder whether it's not perhaps possible to read them together, one directly modifying the other. That is, might not one of the difficulties here reside in the question of whether there's a certain “logic,” however unexpected, to what remains logically unexpected? In other words, what is the relationship between logic and expectation — and expectations of relevance, not least? In what sense, if any, might the unexpected comprise “a” logic of its own, and (more importantly) in what might its exercise consist?

Perhaps a clue — and the first lineaments of an answer — may be glimpsed in this commitment to a bit.

A young man in his mid-twenties knocks on the door of the noted scholar Rabbi Shwartz. ‘My name is Sean Goldstein,’ he says. ‘I’ve come to you because I wish to study Talmud.’

‘Do you know Aramaic?’ the rabbi asks.

‘No,’ replies the young man.

‘Hebrew?’ asks the Rabbi.

‘No,’ replies the young man again.

‘Have you studied Torah?’ asks the Rabbi, growing a bit irritated.

‘No, Rabbi. But don’t worry. I graduated Berkeley summa cum laude in philosophy, and just finished my doctoral dissertation at Harvard on Socratic logic. So now, I would just like to round out my education with a little study of the Talmud.’

24 Bryony White, “‘Everyone Is Female and Everyone Hates It’: Andrea Long Chu’s Theory of Desire,” review of *Females*, by Andrea Long Chu, *Frieze*, November 7, 2019, <https://frieze.com/article/everyone-female-and-everyone-hates-it-andrea-long-chus-theory-desire>.

'I seriously doubt,' the rabbi says, 'that you are ready to study Talmud. It is the deepest book of our people. If you wish, however, I am willing to examine you in logic, and if you pass that test I will teach you Talmud.'

The young man agrees.

Rabbi Shwartz holds up two fingers. 'Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?'

The young man stares at the rabbi. 'Is that the test in logic?'

The rabbi nods.

'The one with the dirty face washes his face,' he answers wearily.

'Wrong. The one with the clean face washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face.'

'Very clever,' Goldstein says. 'Give me another test.'

The rabbi again holds up two fingers. 'Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?'

'We have already established that. The one with the clean face washes his face.'

'Wrong. Each one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face. When the one with the dirty face sees the one with the clean face wash his face, he also washes his face. So each one washes his face.'

'I didn't think of that,' says Goldstein. 'It's shocking to me that I could make an error in logic. Test me again.'

The rabbi holds up two fingers. 'Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?'

‘Each one washes his face.’

‘Wrong. Neither one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. But when the one with the clean face sees the one with the dirty face doesn’t wash his face, he also doesn’t wash his face. So neither one washes his face.’

Goldstein is desperate. ‘I am qualified to study Talmud. Please give me one more test.’

He groans, though, when the rabbi lifts two fingers. ‘Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?’

‘Neither one washes his face.’

‘Wrong. Do you now see, Sean, why Socratic logic is an insufficient basis for studying Talmud? Tell me, how is it possible for two men to come down the same chimney, and for one to come out with a clean face and the other with a dirty face? Don’t you see? The whole question

“is *narishkeit*, foolishness,” the rabbi concludes, “and if you spend your whole life trying to answer foolish questions, all your answers will be foolish, too.”²⁵

25 Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews* (William Morrow and Company, 1998), 47–48, <https://aleph.org/resources/the-rabbi-is-in-two-men-come-down-the-same-chimney>. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (Columbia University Press, 1994), 37: “Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure.”

II

The Shape of Thought to Come

There is about good writing a visual actuality. It exactly reproduces what we should metaphorically call the contour of our thought. The metaphor is for once exact: thought has a contour or shape. The paragraph is the perception of this contour or shape.

— Herbert Read

What style is achieved in the blank space, the synapse, between end punctuation and initial letter? What governs the move to start a new paragraph? What happens in the pause after the hard return?

— Elisa Gabbert

§. The Sense of the Sense of Thought

How much time will it take to repair my watch? I asked the watchmaker. He replied: You will never know.¹

Paradox is the passion of thought.²

“THOUGHT IS A SENSE, just like sight, taste, hearing, feeling or touch. Through thinking, we touch a reality accessible only to thought, just as colors are usually accessible only to sight and sounds to hearing.”³ A curious assertion, this is also, among other things, a goad to thought. In short, and if thought is indeed “a” sense, how is it one “just like” the others? On what “reality” does thought and thought alone, “through thinking,” “touch”?

“Almost nothing of what will be told here happened in the distant summer of 1926, when Karl Jung, the psychoanalyst, gave his mistress a gift: a wristwatch

without a minute hand. He asked her to wear it even in her sleep, because this watch, so he said, measures the time of love.

A few days later, Jung’s mistress bumped into Jung’s wife, who stood examining the window display of a paint-supply shop on a Zurich boulevard. The two women, who had already met once at a party, shook hands politely. Jung’s mistress couldn’t help noticing that on her wrist, Mrs. Jung wore

1 Daniel Oz, “The Watchmaker,” in *Further Up the Path: Flash Fables*, trans. Jessica Cohen (BOA Editions, 2019), 64.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus: Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 7, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

3 Markus Gabriel, quoted in Robert Pogue Harrison, “The Body of Thought: On Markus Gabriel’s ‘The Meaning of Thought,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 23, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-body-of-thought-on-markus-gabriels-the-meaning-of-thought/>.

a watch that had no hour hand. This encounter certainly had consequences in reality, though reality, as is well known, is paler

“than its own shadow. In any case, in Jung’s dreams the two women also asked each other for the time.”⁴

4 Alex Epstein, *Blue Has No South*, trans. Becka Mara McKay (Clockroot Books, 2010), 1.

§. Changing My Mind: An Autobiography

Desire makes all things bloom, possession withers them all; it's better to dream one's life than to live it, although to live it is still to dream.⁵

ZHUANG ZHOU DREAMS HE is a butterfly: it's well known that on awakening he wonders whether he might be a butterfly dreaming s/he is Zhuang Zhou. What's less well known is where the story goes from there. "Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities!"⁶ Surely. And yet the next and final sentence reads: "Such is what we call the transformation of one thing into another."⁷ Is the distinction the transformation? But is it — are they — "one," do they count as one, let alone a "thing"? Or is such not rather a blossoming?

5 Marcel Proust, quoted in Colton Valentine, "The Madeleine's Metapragmatics: On Michael Lucey's 'What Proust Heard: Novels and the Ethnography of Talk,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 14, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-madeleines-metapragmatics-on-michael-luceys-what-proust-heard-novels-and-the-ethnography-of-talk/>.

6 Brook Ziporyn, ed. and trans., *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (Hackett Publishing, 2009), 21.

7 Ibid.

§. Changing My Mind: Autotheory

We seem rather to be before a musical theme, which had first been transposed, the theme as a whole, into a certain number of tones and on which, still the whole theme, different variations had been played, some very simple, others very skillful. As to the original theme, it is everywhere and nowhere.⁸

Desire makes all things bloom, possession withers them all; it's better to dream one's life than to live it, although to live it is still to dream.⁹

ZHUANG ZHOU DREAMS HE is a butterfly: but does he? Does *he*? In the alleged dream, the butterfly “followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing of Zhuang Zhou.”¹⁰ Does transposition amount to transformation? But for whom? I'm sensing a theme, but at a loss to account for its variation. Because before all else: for whom is this wanting?

Coda: What Is Philosophy?

The same dream came to me often in my past life, sometimes in one form and sometimes in another, but always saying the same thing: “Socrates,” it said, “make music (μουσικήν ποίει) and work at it (καὶ ἐργάζου).”¹¹

8 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Dover Publications, 1998), 171–72.

9 Proust, quoted in Valentine, “The Madeleine's Metapragmatics.”

10 Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 21.

11 Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 1, trans. Harold North Fowler (Harvard University Press, 1966), 60e, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DPhaedo%3Asection%3D60e>.

HOW DO YOU TRANSLATE *DÉSŒUVREMENT*? Whether as idleness, inoperativity, or worklessness, or as something else again entirely, something unheard of (even in Blanchot, Nancy, Agamben), the question is: What is given to be understood by *désœuvrement* in the very unworking of its concept? Might something be carried over by it, preserved in it, stowed away, fugitive, unsounded?

“Two Alaskan Kodiak bears joined a small circus,” so begins an apposite tale, “where the two appeared in a nightly parade

pulling a covered wagon. The two were taught to somersault, to spin, to stand on their heads, and to dance on their hind legs, paw in paw, stepping in unison. Under a spotlight the dancing bears, a male and a female, soon became favorites of the crowd. The circus went south on a west coast tour through Canada to California and on down into Mexico, through Panama into South America, down the Andes the length of Chile to those southernmost isles of Tierra Del Fuego. There a jaguar jumped the juggler, and afterwards, mortally mauled the animal trainer, and the shocked showpeople disbanded in dismay and horror. In the confusion the bears went their own way. Without a master, they wandered off by themselves into the wilderness on those densely wooded, wildly windy, subantarctic islands. Utterly away from people, on an out-of-the-way uninhabited island, and in a climate they found ideal, the bears mated, thrived, multiplied, and after a number of generations populated the entire island. Indeed, after some years, descendants of the two moved out onto half a dozen adjacent islands; and seventy years later, when scientists finally found and enthusiastically studied the bears, it was discovered that all of them, to a bear, were performing splendid circus tricks.

On nights when the sky is bright and the moon in full, they gather to dance. They gather the cubs and the juveniles in a circle around them. They gather together out of the wind at the center of a sparkling, circular crater left by a meteorite which had fallen in a bed of chalk. Its glassy walls are chalk

white, its flat floor is covered with white gravel, and it is well drained, and dry. No vegetation grows within. When the moon rises above it, the light reflecting off the walls fills the crater with a pool of moonlight, so that it is twice as bright on the crater floor as anywhere else in that vicinity. Scientists speculate that originally the full moon had reminded the two bears of the circus spotlight, and for that reason they danced. Yet, it might be asked,

“what music do the descendants dance to?

“Paw in paw, stepping in unison ... what music can they possibly hear inside their heads as they dance under the full moon and the Aurora Australis, as they dance in brilliant silence?”¹²

¹² Spencer Holst, “Brilliant Silence,” in *Flash Fiction: Very Short Stories*, eds. James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka (W.W. Norton, 1992), 17–18.

§. In Praise of Shadows, or, What the Example of the Moon Told Me

What does self-insight look like?¹³

What else is there?¹⁴

“A THEORETICAL ARGUMENT IN LITERARY STUDIES is most often the lengthened shadow of an example.”¹⁵ An insightful observation, this line is also (perhaps only “in literary studies” — or perhaps: as only can be) an incitement. What might it mean for an example to have a “shadow”? Or rather just how, at what angle, according to what source, what illumination, can it be said to have one? Because perhaps above all: What might it mean to “lengthen” it?

Consider Ashely Adams’s microfiction, “HERE ARE THE THINGS THE MOON TOLD ME DURING THE LUNAR ECLIPSE OF JANUARY 21, 2019.” It is reproduced here — as an example? to what lengths? — in its entirety.

13 Kate Rossmanith, “Ditching the ‘New Yorker’ Voice,” *Public Books*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.publicbooks.org/ditching-the-new-yorker-voice/>. “It has become an instrument of illumination.”

14 Haun Saussy, *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 135. Some context: “One curious thing about the ontological problem; W.V.O. Quine once said snappily, ‘is its simplicity.’ It holds in three short words: ‘What is there?’ I would add that only one more word is needed to state the comparative problem: ‘What else is there?’” I would add only that I like the proximity here between the formulations of “the ontological problem” and “the comparative problem” and what it appears to suggest: they are somehow akin.

15 Haun Saussy, *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi Inside Out* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 5: “Since a theoretical argument in literary studies is most often the lengthened shadow of an example, it is important to have good examples, be prepared to argue for their usefulness, and work out what exactly they exemplify.” Saussy, *The Making of Barbarians*, 7: “What makes those the right examples for comparison? Why not other examples, of which there is no shortage?”

She appreciates you all standing in the cold to see her. She doesn't mind if you couldn't make it. She doesn't really understand what being cold means, so she'll take your word for it. She's heard a few of you are afraid of staring into the night sky and the forced contemplation of eternity and vastness that comes with it. She thinks, perhaps, you should put yourself in her place, constantly staring at the sweep of earth, that it will help you come to peace with your own smallness. She says to be careful sharing telescopes and binoculars; you'll get pink eye or MRSA. She is, admittedly, unversed in diseases, but knows humanity has a fondness for dripping all over everything. She knows that her light fills you with melancholy and thoughts of those who have passed away. She says to eat that extra slice of pizza. She would be happy to be your big gay wife. She likes all your poems because it's the thought that counts. She wants to know if we still have mammoths or did we get rid of them? She thought mammoths were pretty cool. She wonders why you haven't turned your scars into the shape of rabbits and toads like she's done with her bruises. She assures you the moon landing is not fake. She wants you to know she tries her best to catch all the stones that might kill you. She has never been fond of meteors and their errant catastrophes, a compensation for their eons of lonesome orbits. She would like you to stop saying every lunar eclipse is the end of the world; this is not the end of anything, but a lucky moment where she and the sun and the earth and you fit

"into each other's shadow."¹⁶

16 Ashely Adams, "HERE ARE THE THINGS THE MOON TOLD ME DURING THE LUNAR ECLIPSE OF JANUARY 21, 2019," *Cotton Xenomorph*, <https://www.cottonxenomorph.com/journal/2019/4/6/here-are-the-things-the-moon-told-me-during-the-lunar-eclipse-of-january-21-2019>.

§. Imagining: A Life...

It's better to dream one's life than to live it, although to live it is still to dream.¹⁷

Philosophy is sculpture in the medium of questions.¹⁸

"MY ULTIMATE DAYDREAM: imagining a life in which I no longer daydreamed at all."¹⁹ This statement seems simple enough on its face. And yet, "how do we draw the line between attention and distraction? What distinguishes aimless drift from alert receptivity?"²⁰

"For some time we have been passing by here repeatedly, and your work

is always covered with fabric. What are you sculpting?

— A memorial.

— In memory of what?

— Your anticipation.²¹

17 Proust, quoted in Valentine, "The Madeleine's Metapragmatics."

18 John MacFarlane, quoted in Joshua Habgood-Coote et al., "Commentary on 'Can a Good Philosophical Contribution Be Made Just By Asking a Question?'" *Metaphilosophy* 54, no. 1 (2023): 59n12.

19 Leslie Jamison, "Dreamers in Broad Daylight: Ten Conversations," *Astra* 2, <https://astra-mag.com/articles/dreamers-in-broad-daylight-ten-conversations/>.

20 Nicholas Dames, "Music, Fiction, and the Value of Attention," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/music-fiction-value-attention>.

21 Oz, "The Sculptress," *Further Up the Path*, 160.

§. "Ovid is Finishing a Letter": What We Talk About When We Talk About Intelligence

But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.²²

IS THERE A SENSATION proper to thought? But what could it mean for thought to have a sensation, let alone one proper to it?

"Ovid is finishing a letter. The wind from the plain slips through the cracks in the walls and the pen trembles in his hand as he writes out the last words

and his thoughts turn toward home. He seals it and addresses it to the emperor of Rome — once an intimate, now almost a fiction of his memory — and hands it to the courier waiting by the door. Ovid stands in the street, watching the gray plume of the courier's dust rise up, dissolve.

The courier rides swiftly across the plain, his face set, his strength such that it seems he must soon reach his destination, but in fact everything is against him — the broken roads, the sun like a hammer, the night sky rent by thunderstorms that saturate the dust and send floods foaming through the washes and arroyos. He fords trunk-entangled rivers, wakes shivering in dripping, wind-tormented woods, comes to rain-swept cross-roads where loitering renegades oil knives beneath black gallows.

The letter suffers on the road, soaked in rain, stained with silt, slashed by the thief he left face-down in milky ditch-water. By the time he finds the squat tower of unmortared stones where the next courier waits, his face is gaunt, his quiver empty, the soiled letter coming apart.

22 Franz Kafka, "An Imperial Message," in *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Schocken Books, 1971), 5.

The new courier's road winds up through a dry, dreary country of starry nights and empty desert space. Miles from anything, he notices that the letter's seal has rotted and fallen off. His conscience flares, flickers, dies; opening it, he finds the letter water-stained and mildewed, some lines blurred irretrievably, but still he can discern a story of exile and despair, of a message transformed in its passage through many hands on its way to a reader who is most likely a mirage.

He has the letter by heart, or nearly, when he finds the next courier by a dry well in an oasis. (In dreams he sees it written in letters of light on pages of wavering flame.) Only when his successor can recite the letter verbatim does he give him the rotting, sporadically legible scrap of paper and send him off.

Weeks pass before the new courier rides into a town and once the key for the Inn of the Couriers has been found and the inn opened (the townsmen had come to think of it as a crypt, or the temple of some dead religion) he finds pen and paper among the dusty rooms and transcribes what he remembers though he fears the falsity of memory and that the words have been shifted, transposed, rearranged. The original has disintegrated by the time he finds the next courier who takes the new letter and heads toward the mountains and away.

It isn't long before the letter has passed out of Latin and into the native tongues of the couriers or of the peoples they ride past—the men who worship fire, the ones who wear peaked caps and live in excavated mountains, the ones who dwell in houses built by riverbanks on stilts. Some regard this as an outrage, though others claim that the letter was never in Latin at all, that Ovid had in fact adopted the barbarous tongue of the Getae or the harsh *lingua franca* of the mercantile Greeks. Some couriers, carrying the letter only in their memories, find they have no tongue in common with their successors, and for a moment the letter passes out of language altogether and into gestures—they pretend to weep, to wrestle with brigands, to fend off the short, sharp arrows

of the Scythians — or even objects — arrows laid in parallel in the dust, a broken plume, stones piled up in the semblance of a city.

Countless letters are in circulation now, and some trace their ancestry to the original, but all, by now, are corrupt, little more than florilegia of ghost stories, quotations out of context, fragments of geography. Through the incessant operation of chance some few have come to resemble their original, but there's no way to find them.

The false and worthless letters are as numerous as the grains of sand in a desert but not even one has come within a hundred miles of Rome, or even a thousand, or even to a city where they fear the eagle-standard, where Rome is more than a rumor. In fact, it's generally agreed that Rome has long since fallen, that the city on the Tiber is no more than a ruin where goats browse on thistle among toppled colonnades. Some insist that Rome never existed at all, that there was only ever the idea of an empire, of a city as desirable as it is remote, ruled over by an emperor sitting in his summer palace, chin in hand, gazing out into the evening as the settling dimness swallows the city, the roads, the arbors, and at his elbow sits a letter unnoticed. If ever he were to open it (but his mind is elsewhere, and he almost certainly won't) he would

“read of a poet who was once almost an intimate, finishing a letter with shaking hand as, without hope, his thoughts turn toward home.”²³

23 Zachary Mason, *Metamorphica* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 273–76.

Matter, space, time, and mind are all just artifacts of our
coarse-grained perspective onto the universe.

— Heinrich Päs

Did the problem as well as the solution lay in thinking itself, in
the way we think, in the way we've come to recognize thinking?

— James Longenbach

One begins to surmise that questions are the very engine of thought, that to think is to ask.

— Lola Seaton

If I ask you a question at the right moment, in the right terms, with the right intonation, so that you suddenly see a way out where the situation was blocked, my question will have proved its relevance by its effects, by the way that your experience is transformed. In other words, your transformation is an answer, but it is by no means an answer “to my question”: it answers for the relevance of the question as a lure that has initiated the process of which your experience is the truth.

— Isabelle Stengers

How much variety, and hence how much uncertainty can we retain, without dissolving the very movement of thought, whose emergence we only begin to comprehend?

— Cecile Malaspina

III

The Key

What constitutes radical thought?

— Saidiya Hartman

Thought — that is, politics.

— Giorgio Agamben

§. Threshold

Und man sieht die Schönheit eines Zusammenhangs.¹

“([A]LL THOUGHT IS BLACK THOUGHT[.]’)² A provocative statement, a parenthetical interjection, true, but one made more than in passing, what it provokes first and foremost — fittingly, precisely — is thought. In short, and perhaps above all: If “all” thought is in fact “Black thought,” how does “Black” — simply within the phrase itself — qualify “thought,” and how might this single, singular qualification in turn be said to define thought in its entirety?

A very beautiful little tale can perhaps begin to provide, if not an answer, then at least the context for one.

Once, a student approached Rabbi Shalom of Belz and asked, ‘What is required in order to live a decent life? How do I know what charity is? What lovingkindness is? How can I tell if I’ve ever been in the presence of God’s mercy?’ And so on. The Rabbi stood and was silent and let the student talk until

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- 1 Robert Walser, quoted in Susan Bernofsky, “Translation and the Art of Revision,” in *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means*, ed. Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky (Columbia University Press, 2013), 227.
 - 2 Jared Sexton, as quoted in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 5. See Jared Sexton, “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,” *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 1 (2012), <https://csalateral.org/issue/1/ante-anti-blackness-afterthoughts-sexton/>, where Sexton opens by quoting from Lewis Gordon’s “Theory in Black” — including a line about a “form” of seeing, highlighted here, as with much else, in what will prove to have been foreshadowing — and derives from it what he calls “a two-sided idea” that serves for him as a “guide”: “1) all thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought and, consequently, 2) all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies.”

the student was all talked out. And even then the Rabbi kept standing in silence, which was — abracadabra — the answer.³

“What is found here is elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere else.”⁴ Perhaps this line from the *Mahābhārata* can be read as a gloss and a key. Everything here turns, in brief, on the word “elsewhere.” The first clause can thus be read two ways: what is found here is elsewhere, is found to be elsewhere, but also what is found here is common, hardly a find (“what is found here is [found] elsewhere” as well). And the second clause? What is found here is the first’s implacable corollary and completion – an altogether discreet articulation from which, all thought out, the complex “all” of thought sets out. Where else?

3 Joshua Cohen, “The Pleasures and Punishments of Reading Franz Kafka,” *The Paris Review*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/09/02/the-pleasures-and-punishments-of-reading-franz-kafka/>.

4 *Mahābhārata*, 1.56.33, quoted in Dan Rudmann, *The Disguise of Language: Translation through the Mahābhārata* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2018), 204, *inter alia*, where the Sanskrit is reproduced: *yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kva cit*. <https://hcommons.org/deposits/objects/hc:32246/datastreams/CONTENT/content>. Elsewhere, Sexton elaborates, already: if all thought is black thought, this is so “less through pedagogical instruction than through an exemplary transmission: emulation of a process of learning through the posing of a question, rather than imitation of a form of being; which is also to say a procedure for reading, for study, for *black* study or, in the spirit of the multiple, for *black studies* ... wherever they may lead. And, contrary to the popular misconception, they do lead *everywhere*. And they do *lead* everywhere, even and especially in their dehiscence.” Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011), <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issues5/articles/jaredsexton.php>.

§. Theory of the Partisan⁵

We do not know what thinking is. But we know when we are not thinking.⁶

“WE CHOOSE THE RIVALS we hope to deserve.” That’s how Becca Rothfeld nearly concludes her review of James Wood’s recent essay collection. It’s the penultimate sentence. The final? The final’s a showstopper. “Wood chose Melville, and I choose Wood.” It’s impressive. And inspiring. And leads me to wonder, among other things (*what kind of choice is this?*, for one), what might it mean to “deserve” a rival? I ask because of who I have come to realize my rival is: Martin Heidegger. Literally a Nazi, if you

- 5 “Although subtitled an ‘incidental remark on the concept of the political,’ Carl Schmitt’s *Theory of the Partisan* is anything but a casual contribution to the concept in question. The study not only raises the theory of the partisan ‘to be the key to recognizing political reality,’ it construes the partisan as a new, and possibly last, figure of the political.” Rodolphe Gasché, “The Partisan and the Philosopher,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 3 (2004): 10.
- 6 Martin Heidegger, quoted in Grant Farred, *Martin Heidegger Saved My Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), epigraph to the volume. Michael Bell, review of *The Aesthetics of Argument*, by Martin Warner, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal*, December 2, 2016, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-aesthetics-of-argument/>: “The nature of thought is notoriously elusive.” Might this not suggest that elusiveness is perhaps the essential quality of thought par excellence, even to the point of notoriety? See James C. Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* and *Seeing Like a State*. “In a sense, it could be said that all this has no importance, that thought has never had anything but laughable gravity. But that is all it requires: for us not to take it seriously.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 376. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009), and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1999).
- 7 Becca Rothfeld, “The Joy of Text: James Wood’s Inspired Reading,” *Bookforum*, Feb/March 2020, <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2605/james-wood-s-inspired-reading-23862>.

know anything else about him, you know he seeks to enliven us to (to “reawaken”) what he calls “the question of the meaning of being.” Being? I haven’t even gotten that far. For me, it’s more like a question of the meaning of the question.⁸ Or more simply, a (the?) question of the question. And so maybe (yes, but only to a degree — one to be determined): *What is called thinking?* “There are two terms that can be used to sum up the traditional image of thought of philosophy, which has infected thinking in general (or was it the other way around? Probably both at the same time). These terms are ‘generality’ and ‘critique’”:

the idea that ideas are general, and that their most potent use is to pin something down as ‘merely a case of (fill in the blank),’ the better to dismiss it. The (blank) of which the phenomenon in question is a case is a generally known category. The specific case is judged by the general category to which it belongs, wielded as a norm. The value attributed to the category (and there always is one) is visited upon the case, which

8 Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17–18, my emphasis: “We were speaking a moment ago of the question. Now precisely this entity which we are, this ‘we’ which, at the beginning of the existential analytic, must have no name other than *Da-sein*, is chosen for the position of exemplary entity only from *the experience of the question*, the possibility of the *Fragen*, as it is inscribed in the network of the *Gefragte* (Being), the *Erfragte* (the meaning of Being), of the *Befragte der Seinsfrage*, that is the entity which we are and which thus becomes the exemplary or privileged entity for a *reading* — Heidegger’s word — of the meaning of Being. The point of departure in the existential analytic is legitimated first of all and only from the possibility, experience, structure, and regulated modifications of the *Fragen*. [...] How, without confirming it a priori and circularly, can we *question* this inscription in the structure of the *Fragen* from which *Dasein* will have received, along with its privilege (*Vorrang*), its first, minimal, and most secure determination? Even supposing that this structure is described properly by Heidegger (which is not certain, but I leave that to one side for the moment), any worry as to the legitimacy or axiomatic necessity of such a point of departure in a reflection on the being-able-to-question would leave intact neither the principle, nor the order, nor finally the interest of the existential analytic: in three words, of *Sein und Zeit*.”

is either disqualified or celebrated on that basis. The logical form this takes is the syllogism. Example: Deleuze is a post-structuralist. Poststructuralism is babble. Therefore, Deleuze is babble. The effect is triage: forget Deleuze. The problem is that each of the terms in the syllogism is a general idea. Each is assumed to be one thing, and what that thing is is assumed to be already known. Nothing new can be arrived at by daisy-chaining already-knowns (other than an exclusion or an endorsement, depending on the bent). This procedure neglects the fact that everything is alive, in the sense that it continues to move through the world in a way that continually generates new variations on itself, ever reincluding itself in the world anew. Everything is in process. There is no 'Deleuze.' There are deleuzes, proliferating as fast as readings happen. 'Deleuze' continues, always under construction, variably in process. The effect of the general idea, coupled with critique, is to deaden. It simply misses process and the ungovernability of its going on regardless. In so doing, it smooths the way for the incorporation, critical or celebratory, of anything and everything. Protestations to the contrary, critique, as allied with the general idea, is a profoundly institutionalizing gesture.⁹

"There is," however, it's worth emphasizing, "a different image of thought," our source continues, one "based not on the general idea and critique, but rather on singularity and affirmation. Its procedure is not syllogistic triage but mutual inclusion. On the most basic level,

singularity refers to the fact that everything exhibits characteristics that do not fit its already-known category. A little detail, an almost imperceptible tic, an errant disposition. These anomalies inhere in the thing, which would be

9 Brian Massumi, "Undigesting Deleuze," *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 8, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/undigesting-deleuze/>.

other than it is without them: each thing, a species of one. Since a thing's singularizing traits inhere in it, while evading its nominal category, they are not called to order by any general procedure based on that category. They persist, and insist on themselves. They resist, with a residual energy of potential variation. Their way of insisting upon themselves might become amplified, suddenly taking on new energy. Even with minimal energy, they may imperceptibly begin to take the lead, to draw the thing after themselves, instead of being dragged along by it. Think of the way a tic or previously unacted-upon dispositions can turn into a habit, and how a habit can turn around and dominate everyday life. Or the way something that presents itself as a simple whim, a trifling captivation, might cascade into major changes in a life's direction. These most mundane of little anomalies are in fact the stock and trade of metaphysics, if metaphysics is to honor process. For what is the concept of a thing without the aspects of it that may potentially lead it, and especially lead it elsewhere, perhaps over a threshold at which it becomes other than it was? The concept has to be pliable enough to wrap itself around the singularizing traits redolent with potential and becoming. It has to be more flexibly abstract than any general idea, by nature sclerotic, can ever hope to be.

What this is all about are basically tendencies. A thing is a bundle of tendencies holding potential, and drawing that potential out in becoming. What procedures are adequate to grasping tendencies, as movements of potential, beyond categorization? How do we understand things in this way? To begin to answer that question, it must be taken into account that tendencies do not mutually exclude each other. This is almost a cliché. What falling-in-love is without glimmers of what might well prove to have been seeds of hate? Answer: a general idea of romance that answers in detail to no actual experience. Or again, what is love without a generous helping of friendship, the very category it purports to cleave away from? Tendencies *always* include each other, even their oppo-

sites, in potential. They are in a state of mutual processual inclusion. Their nature or proportions — the quality or quotient of friendship to be found in a love, for example — cannot be evaluated with reference to any generally applicable category, and therefore cannot be puzzled out in advance. A tendency proves to have been how it comes to express itself. In other words, what something 'is' can only be got at by accompanying its process of becoming. This invites experimentation: tweaking the thing into expressing its potential further. Paradoxically, metaphysical understanding that aspires to be flexibly abstract enough to grasp a thing in its singularity necessarily proceeds pragmatically. This implies participation (if only virtually, in thought experience or thought experiment). But since the limits of any given thing's potential variations are never played out in advance, the parameters of the participation are not pre-given. Any *a priori* assumptions can only short-circuit the process. The thinking of the thing must be open to the unplayed-out in advance: it must be speculative. The image of thought at issue here is an odd bird: a speculative pragmatism. Speculative pragmatism must actively affirm — accompany — the potential of what it thinks. The philosopher cannot take a seat of judgment outside or above. She must take the plunge. She must mutually include her own thought/activity in the process at issue. [...]

Take the plunge: an ethics of engagement. One that contains, among its tics and dispositions, political tendencies that are anything but spontaneist in the way the word is thrown around to mean anything goes and nothing really matters. For speculative pragmatism, anything potentially goes. But precisely because of that, every little thing matters — more than we can ever know in advance. Everything matters; but everything also matters on, following the singular trail of potential's unfolding. To prove equal to the import, to follow the trail of the mattering-on, to honor the potential of the process, it is necessary to participate with great pragmatic and speculative care — and just as much artfulness. There is by the nature of this activity a political element to it. The art

of mutual inclusion, with care: that could stand as the very definition of the political.¹⁰

On any careful reading it's clear. What is called thinking? Only "thinking" is called "thinking." A question then, in a speculative, pragmatic key: What might thinking be like, beyond any generality, or even critique? What must thinking be like not to know, demonstrably, what it is?¹¹

Susan Bernofsky has shared a weeks long struggle to revise her translation of the concluding phrase of Robert Walser's short story, "New Year's Page," *und man sieht die Schönheit eines Zusammenhangs*.¹² First she gives it as, "and we see the beauty of

10 Massumi, "Undigesting Deleuze." "It is worth recalling, on this score, that intensification — the introduction of ever greater tension into a material or medium or movement through stretching and straining — shares an etymological root, the Latin *tendere*, with the whole notion of tenderness, emblemized by the outstretched hand. So, the very procedure that complicates thinking, that makes things difficult and uncomfortable, that ruins the initial plan, that throws things off balance, we might even say that which blackens things, is also that which enables the potential for genuine care, precisely because it requires the risk of genuine questioning." Jared Sexton, "On Black Negativity, Or The Affirmation of Nothing," interview by Daniel Barber, *Society and Space*, September, 18, 2017, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing>.

11 Having cited Foucault's "The Thought of the Outside," Deleuze and Guattari continue on the next page, 377: "Exteriority of thought — the force that is always external to itself, or the final force, the nth power — is not at all *another image* in opposition to the image inspired by the State apparatus. It is, rather, a force that destroys both the image *and* its copies, the model *and* its reproductions, every possibility of subordinating thought to the model of the True, the Just, or the Right." ("In truth," Deleuze will claim, "one thing haunts Foucault — thought." Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand [University of Minnesota Press, 1988], 116.)

12 Bernofsky, "Translation and the Art of Revision," 227–29. Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 42: "Strictly speaking, does not thought — or the act of thinking — always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?" Everything turns on the word "operating," but then also on "capacity," and "always." And "like." Not to mention "foreign." In short: How does — how might — "foreign" designate a language? To what degree and with what certainty can one identify a "foreign" language with one

a context,” and then, with various misgivings, “and we see the beauty of contextuality,” “the beauty of contiguity,” “the beauty of having a context,” “the beauty given us by context,” “the beauty of things in context,” “the beauty of things in their contexts,” when she then switches gears with “and we see what is beautiful about contiguity,” “and we see what is so beautiful about contiguity,” “and we experience the loveliness/beauty of contiguity,” and then tries “and we experience the beauty of continuation,” and then “the beauty of connection,” “the beauty of connectedness,” which gives way to “the beauty of linking things together,” “contextual beauty,” “the beauty of putting things in context,” “the beauty of things linked together,” “the beauty of things conjoined,” and then on returning to it weeks later, on a new approach, “The story keeps on going, and the beauty of a context appears to us,” and “the beauty of a context reveals itself,” before it dawns on her: *and the beauty of a context is revealed*.

And the beauty of this context? Might thinking be revision? But how? In what sense, and to what extent, can one equate thinking with revision? And by what means?

By means of a question perhaps?¹³

“unknown,” and what repercussions might this have for thought? Can one say, with Deleuze, after Proust, thought “invents a new language within language, a foreign language, as it were”? Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), lv. Perhaps the most that can be said with any certainty is that the matter’s elusive.

- 13 The Grimm brothers’ final tale, added to the end of the second edition of their famed collection, in 1819, is titled, “The Golden Key”: “Once in the wintertime when the snow was very deep, a poor boy had to go out and fetch wood on a sled. After he had gathered it together and loaded it, he did not want to go straight home, because he was so frozen, but instead to make a fire and warm himself a little first. So he scraped the snow away, and while he was thus clearing the ground he found a small golden key. Now he believed that where there was a key, there must also be a lock, so he dug in the ground and found a little iron chest. ‘If only the key fits!’ he thought. ‘Certainly there are valuable things in the chest.’ He looked, but there was no keyhole. Finally he found one, but so small that it could scarcely be seen. He tried the key, and fortunately it fitted. Then he turned it once, and now we must wait until he has finished unlocking it and has opened the lid. Then we shall find out what kind of wonderful things

This one, for instance. Take the statement, “the art of mutual inclusion, with care: that could stand as the very definition of the political.” The question: *Does it?*

It “could,” if left at that.

But this is an important question to ask because another question, in its incipience, immediately threatens a cascade: If opposites always include each other, mutually, if “little details,” “almost imperceptible tics” or “errant dispositions,” singularly insist and persist, resisting, in each thing, is this definition of “the political” any different?

Might one discern in the account that gives rise to it the stirrings of a (very) different definition of “the” political? To what “anomalies” might a dissenting definition begin to speak, and how will it have, imperceptibly, and then all at once, diverged?

Or rather, in minor revision of the foregoing and more to the point, how might a dissenting definition be said to begin to “speak” to — or more fittingly, of — what can only be called “anomalous”? (“Since a thing’s singularizing traits inhere in it, while evading its nominal category, they are not” — will not be — “called to order”...)

In a word, might thinking be *partisan* — and of necessity?

In a word and then *in a question*, in all the rigor of its unknowability, where invention impels discovery (Bernofsky’s introduction of the passive voice is brilliant here, illustrative): In thinking *are sides not taken*? In thinking *will you not have taken sides*, and by definition — the side of potential?

there were in the little chest.” Folklore scholar D.L. Ashliman has called this tale “enigmatic.” Perhaps it’s no such thing. The key? Key, perhaps, is *the shift the question effects*, not unlike the shift — and perhaps not unrelated — from past tense into the present. Is this not *now* key? Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “The Golden Key,” in D.L. Ashliman, *Folktexts: A Library of Folktales, Folklore, Fairy Tales, and Mythology*, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm200.html>. In other words, you never know where you might find a key, and what it might open and open onto. The story keeps on going, in yet other words, and the beauty of a context is revealed.

Bernofsky observes that “revision” comes from the Latin *revisere*, to look again, and above all concerns “potential.”¹⁴ What might the potential of thought look like?

How to even begin to get it in view, let alone (on another look) go about answering?

Is this not the province — the provenance — of questions?¹⁵

And so therefore, ultimately, if tendentiously, a question of the question?¹⁶

A question that suggests, as in a revelation, a *thought without image*, something unruly glimpsed unrivaled.

14 Bernofsky, “Translation and the Art of Revision,” 224 for *revisere*, 229 for *potential*. Bernofsky, on the latter page, also allows that revising — like posing questions — is a process “difficult to grasp, describe, and teach.”

15 “What exactly is a question?” Lani Watson, “What Is a Question,” *The Philosopher*, <https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/186-what-is-a-question>: “Perhaps surprisingly philosophers throughout history have not spent a lot of time trying to answer this question. In fact, few have explicitly asked it. Take Socrates. According to the account that we are afforded in Plato’s dialogues, Socrates was a man dedicated to a life of questioning. Perhaps one of the best known and oft-quoted sentiments in Western philosophy is Socrates’ eloquent assertion, during the trial in which he was condemned to death by the Athenian court, that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living.’ It seems Socrates was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to defend a life of philosophical inquiry, conducted through a method of questioning (often referred to as the Socratic Method). Yet nowhere in the dialogues does Socrates examine or seek to uncover the nature of questions themselves. And he is not alone.”

16 Watson, “What is a Question”: “A question does not need to have a determinate answer, does not need to be in the interrogative, does not need to have a question mark, and does not need,” even, “to be expressed in words.”

§. Threshold, or, Paradise: Note on/at the “End of the World”

And the beauty of a context is revealed.¹⁷

“THE WORLD IS EVERYTHING that is the case.”¹⁸ In that case, serious question: How is “the world” to be understood? In other words, how does what the world is like—what is “the case”—permit something like what a “world” is like to be intelligible?

Borges recounts an apposite tale, one that depicts what he calls “a miracle of courtesy”: “The Buddha must cross the desert at midday. The gods, from their thirty-three circles, each throws

17 Bernofsky, “Translation and the Art of Revision,” 229. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer, with Mei-chün Lee Sawyer (Basic Books, 1994), 187: “The unorthodox is as inexhaustible as Heaven”: “The emergence of philosophy has not been a single, definitive historical event. Rather than a discipline notable for its purpose or method, or for questions and objectives universal across space and time, philosophy is a sort of atmospheric condition, arising suddenly—everywhere and at all times. It can hold sway over human knowledge for a certain period, but also abruptly vanish, often for reasons unknown, just as mild spring weather or a storm can dissipate at a moment’s notice. In this sense the notion of a progressive or even nonlinear history of thought is, like the existence of an archive, a canon, or a patrimony of philosophical works or texts, illusory. There is only a meteorology of thought.” Emanuele Coccia, “Like an Atmosphere: Philosophy as a Climate of Knowledge,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 1, 2016, <http://brooklynrail.org/2016/09/criticspage/like-an-atmosphere-philosophy-as-a-climate-of-knowledge>.

18 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 25. Cecile Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 2: “A curious reversibility of information and noise thus becomes apparent: too much information, and also the repetition of the same information *ad nauseam*, becomes noise, whereas information that is radically new falls on deaf ears when context and criteria of pertinence are lacking to adequately distinguish information from noise.” Hence the question, at 12: “How much variety, and hence how much uncertainty can we retain, without dissolving the very movement of thought, whose emergence we only begin to comprehend?”

down a parasol to him. The Buddha, not wishing to offend any of the gods,

multiplies himself into thirty-three Buddhas, so that each of the gods sees, from above, a Buddha protected by the parasol which he threw him.¹⁹

“What we call ‘case,’” Giorgio Agamben writes, “is the fiction according to which the probable and the possible ‘fall’ into reality, while the opposite is true; when considered in a certain way, it is the real that suspends its reality and can thus fall into itself as merely probable.”²⁰ It might therefore be said to be the case — when considered in a certain way — that what is the case is a unique case of being one way or another always, however improbably, held in suspense. A reality that is not one, merely, that, when it comes down to it, courteously does not fail to rise to the occasion.

19 Jorge Luis Borges, “Buddhism,” *Southern Cross Review* 48 (2006), <https://southerncrossreview.org/48/borges-buddhism.htm>. “*Theorein*, from which we receive the word *theory*, did not only mean ‘to view’ but also to view, as the root *THEO* suggests, what G-d or the gods would see.” Lewis Gordon, “Theory in Black,” *Qui Parle* 18, no. 2 (2010): 196. “There is a form of illicit seeing, then,” Gordon continues, on the next page, as though on the narrative’s impossible — certainly unorthodox — perspective, “at the very beginnings of seeing black, which makes a designation of seeing in black, theorizing, that is, in black, more than oxymoronic.”

20 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is Real?*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford University Press, 2018), 33. Christensen, *The Condition of Secrecy*, 78–79: “About this conversation: maybe we could try altering the terms of what we call paradise. If paradise is not only missing, but also in an absolute sense non-existent — because it’s not even we who will enter paradise, but only the dust that all of us, without exception, will some day become — then maybe, just by *thinking differently*, we could give paradise a new address.”

IV

In the Folds

... enfolding and unfolding, implication and explication, implying and explaining, involving and evolving Two systems of universal folding: Spinoza's unfolded from the bare "simplicity" of an Infinity into which all things are ultimately folded up, as into a universal map that folds back into a single point; while Leibniz starts from the infinite points in that map, each of which enfolds within its infinitely "complex" identity all its relations with all other such points, the unfolding of all these infinite relations being the evolution of a Leibnizian Universe.

— Martin Joughin

Descriptions of the world are, in the ultimate analysis, *all* from inside.

— Carlo Rovelli

External perception is an internal dream.

— Hyppolite Taine

§. Freedom Essay: Freedom in/as Autofiction¹

I'D HAVE LIKED TO BEGIN — picture it — by setting two short narratives side by side and making a comparison: I'd have juxtaposed Kafka's "Before the Law" with Arendt's "Heidegger the Fox," her fable about the (self-described) "best of all foxes," the fox who made a trap his home.² Two writers raised on German literature, two writers of Jewish ancestry, near contemporaries, writing on two men from the country, even if writing decades apart. Imagine. The way Arendt closes her piece would help me set up my question and so motivate the comparison. She writes, "Nobody knows the nature of traps better than one who sits in a trap his whole life long."³ Recalling how Kafka's tale ends, with the gatekeeper closing the door of the Law as the protagonist expires, roaring in his ear that all along it was meant for him alone, I'd have to have analyzed how "the Law" can be considered a trap, and whether the man from the country, even if only at the moment of his demise, whether or not he hears, "knows" it. But that's all only in order to set up the question. I'd ask, *Who better knows the nature of traps?* That's how I'd have done it, anyway. But haven't, clearly, because I think the point is better made by evoking the comparison and then intentionally walking away from it.

1 "Many contemporary critics fail to understand that the term *autofiction* suggests slipperiness, an estrangement of the I-narrator, who may or may not have the same name as the author, so that the space of the work can become a space of freedom." Kate Zambreno, *To Write As If Already Dead* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 84. The organizing question here (the "space of the work," perhaps) is: What might it mean to understand freedom in or as — after Schelling, if not so much in terms of the *Freiheits-schrift* — autofiction?

2 Franz Kafka, "Before the Law," in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa Muir et al. (Schocken Books, 1971), 3–4, and Hannah Arendt, "Heidegger the Fox," in *The Portable Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (Penguin Books, 2000), 543–45.

3 *Ibid.*, 544.

§. Entanglements: The Examples of bell hooks and Lauren Berlant

What might be revealed in any exploration of the meaning of love in our lives?⁴

Where love and desire are concerned, there are no adequate examples.⁵

GIORGIO AGAMBEN HAS OUTLINED the constitutive structure of the example and so, thereby, its attendant — doubtless exemplary — difficulties. “The paradox here,” Agamben writes, “is that a single utterance in no way distinguished from others of its kind is isolated from them precisely insofar as it belongs to them. If the syntagm ‘I love you’ is uttered as an example

of a performative speech act, then this syntagm both cannot be understood as in a normal context and yet still must be treated as a real utterance in order for it to be taken as an example. What the example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it exhibits and delimits it.⁶

Exemplary analysis, doubtless. And yet that’s hardly the final word, but rather only the beginning. What does it mean for something (or someone) to be exemplary? And what’s love got to do with it? In other words, if it is indeed true that there are, in fact, “no adequate examples” where love and desire are concerned, it appears to be an open question as to how love can be understood to make the example *qua* example, in its concept,

4 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (HarperCollins, 2001), xix.

5 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (punctum books, 2012), 2.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998), 22.

intelligible. Or is that precisely its claim on (or to) exemplarity? If so, what would an adequate idea of this inadequacy look like? And what might it show?

"Here in the afterlife," begins David Eagleman's short story "Quantum," "everything exists in all possible states at once,

even states that are mutually exclusive. This comes as a shock after your Earthly life, where making one choice causes the other choices to disappear. When you become a lover to one, you cannot become a lover to others; when you choose one door, others are lost to you.

In the afterlife you can enjoy all possibilities at once, living multiple lives in parallel. You find yourself simultaneously eating and not eating. You are bowling and not bowling at the same time. You are horseback riding and nowhere near a horse.

A velvety blue angel gently descends to see how you are coming along with this afterlife.

'This is all too confusing for a poor human brain,' you confess to the angel.

The angel rubs his chin. 'Maybe we can ease you into this with something simpler, like a day job,' he offers.

You are immediately dropped into a work life of simultaneous contradictions. You are concurrently practicing several careers at once, all the careers you had considered when you were younger. You simultaneously count down your rocket ship launch and defend a criminal client in front of a jury. In the same moments, you scrub your hands for a gallbladder surgery and navigate an eighteen-wheeler down a New Mexico interstate. Gone are the constraints of location and time.

'This,' you tell the angel, 'is too much work.'

'Perhaps we could warm you up with a simpler situation,' he considers. 'How would you like to be in a closed room, one-on-one with your lover?'

And then

“you are here. You are simultaneously engaged in her conversation and thinking about something else; she both gives herself to you and does not give herself to you; you find her objectionable and you deeply love her; she worships you and wonders what she might have missed with someone else.

“‘Thank you,’ you tell the angel. ‘This I’m used to.’”⁷

7 David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives* (Pantheon Books, 2009), 82–83.

§. Q.E.D.

The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.⁸

SOMEWHERE IT IS SAID the pivotal moment, in philosophy, divides “As I will show” from “As I have shown.” Wittgenstein compared this moment to “the decisive move in the conjuring trick,”⁹ and Alexander George has pursued the comparison. “What is a decisive move in a conjuring trick? First, and obviously,

it is something that takes place in the context of an interaction between the conjurer and his participant. Secondly, it is ‘decisive’ in the sense that it is required for the trick: without it, the desired effect could not be achieved. Thirdly, it is a move in a ‘conjuring trick,’ and so it must be invisible; the participant must not be aware that this move has been made. Unless the move is hidden from the observer, she will not be seduced by the effect; indeed, if the move is uncovered, the trick will be ruined. Fourthly, what renders the move invisible is subterfuge on the part of the performer, be it legerdemain, misdirection, the construction of false memories, or some other stratagem. Techniques of subterfuge capitalize on some feature of the participant’s psychology — for instance, the principles that govern what is in the spotlight of her attention and what is forced into the shadows. A participant

8 Bertrand Russell, quoted in Kevin Klement, “Russell’s Logical Atomism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/logical-atomism/>.

9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Macmillan, 1958), §308.

in a conjuring illusion is usually an unwitting partner in her own deception.

I referred above to ‘the desired effect’ — but what is that? What is the magician aiming to accomplish? [...] Magicians will often say that their goal is not to surprise the observer, or to fool or to stump her. A magic trick is not a bare shock, a merely unexpected event. Nor is it a con, which is a performance that, when successful, actually leaves the gull unaware that anything strange has happened. Nor is it intended as a puzzle that presents a challenge [...] The point of a ‘magic trick’

“is not to trick someone. In magic’s more ambitious moments, it is rather to induce a state in which one believes that something has occurred and also that no ordinary explanation for this occurrence will do.”¹⁰ What kind of accomplishment is this? And what is its remit? Moment or move, conversion or attestation, if this is indeed the “point” of philosophy, in what sense is it “decisive”?

Ana María Shua has written a very brief story as though in answer (called “Being Pulled Out”) presented here in its entirety:

A magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat. I am the rabbit. I am the magician. I am also the hat. With his rough pulling, the magician hurts my ears. The rabbit doesn’t want to come out of the hat at the right time. And my satin-lined interior isn’t exactly hygienic. If only I were nothing but the act of being pulled out.¹¹

10 Alexander George, “Philosophers and Other Conjurers,” *The Raven: A Magazine of Philosophy* (Fall 2021), <https://ravenmagazine.org/magazine/philosophers-and-other-conjurers/>.

11 Ana María Shua, “Being Pulled Out,” in *Microfictions*, trans. Steven J. Stewart (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 68.

§. No Illusions: The Reality of Reason and the Form (Εἶδος) of Rationality

Riddles are a truer representation of the nature of reality than simple declarative statements.¹²

OF PLATO'S NOTORIOUS RECOURSE to myth, Giorgio Agamben has observed that it always occurs at a certain point: on a point "logos by itself cannot clarify."¹³ What point is this? And why? How is one to characterize it, and so how — into what, exactly — might this intervention be staged?

A very brief tale may perhaps aid us, reproduced here in its entirety:

This tale is rather old: Two painters wanted to see which of them could paint the painting that best imitated reality... One of the painters painted the front of a house, and the illusion was so perfect, so exact, that at first his competitor believed he had lost, but then understood that he simply had to enter the painted house and hang the painting that he had painted on a wall inside.¹⁴

It could be said that Plato turns to myth the precise moment the second painter realizes what he must do — but only in order to further a first turn, to philosophy from poetry, having invented in the process their (age-old) enmity.¹⁵

12 Adam Roberts, *The Riddles of The Hobbit* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20.

13 Giorgio Agamben, quoted in Adam Kotsko, *What Is Theology? Christian Thought and Contemporary Life* (Fordham University Press, 2021), 103.

14 Alex Epstein, "Portrait of the Artist as an Artist," in *Blue Has No South*, trans. Becka Mara McKay (Clockroot Books, 2010), 22.

15 Alexander Nehamas, "An Essay on Beauty and Judgment," *Threepenny Review* 80 (Winter 2000), https://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/nehamas_woo.html: Plato "wrote of 'the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy' precisely to mask the fact that philosophy did not even exist until he composed *The Republic*, where he first announces the quarrel."

So tell me, “simply,” which painter is *logos* and which *mythos*?¹⁶

16 “Plato, in what turns out to be a decisive move, turns the standard picture against itself: he describes the project of methodical rationality, heretofore conceived as hyperwakefulness, as itself a kind of dream. I have already alluded to this point by referring above to the *Apology*: Socrates works to awaken his fellow Athenians (30e–31a). This is a task, however, he was given through dreams (33c).” David Roochnik, “The Deathbed Dream of Reason: Socrates’ Dream in the *Phaedo*,” *Arethusa* 34, no. 1 (2001): 246. 249: “And here perhaps is the clue. One can be philosophical, perhaps one must be philosophical, precisely by challenging the nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy, when properly understood as including radical self-questioning, turns itself inside out and ceases to be a project of rational analysis alone. Instead, like Socrates in the *Phaedo*, it ‘experiments’ with μῦθος.”

§. Dreaming of Spinoza

Whatever is, is in God.¹⁷

This stubborn little word “in.”¹⁸

“IMMANENCE” COMES FROM THE LATIN *immanere*, to remain in. What remains unclear in this characterization, however, may well not be incidental to it. What is this “in,” in a word? Or rather what, in its recalcitrance, “is” this in?

Is it apposite to seek an answer in fiction? What remains in, and in what sense, Augusto Monterroso’s “The World” when reproduced here in its entirety?

God has not yet created the world; he is only imagining it, as if he were half asleep. That is why the world is perfect, but confused.¹⁹

17 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (Penguin Books, 1996), 10, IP15. The proposition reads, in full: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.” As Nicholas of Cusa has it, “God is the universal complication.” Might God be complication itself? Deleuze puts it this way: “Things remain inherent in God who complicates them, and God remains implicated in things which explicate him.” Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (Zone Books, 1992), 175.

18 Claire Carlisle and Yitzhak Melamed, “God-Intoxicated Man: The Philosopher Who Questioned the Existence of the World,” *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*, May 15, 2020, 9.

19 Augusto Monterroso, “The World,” in *Complete Works and Other Stories*, trans. Edith Grossman (University of Texas Press, 1995), 95.

§. One Art

I wish I knew where ideas came from — I would move there.²⁰

“TRY TO BE ONE of the people on whom nothing is lost.” Henry James’ advice may be well known, but it is perhaps for that reason not well understood. Someone on whom “nothing” is lost? So as not to lose out on it, might there be more than one way to hear “nothing” here — and so loss?

“By now,” so begins a timely tale, “everyone understood the importance of articulating your wishes

with the utmost specificity. This was why the woman with the magic lamp had not spoken aloud — or even written anything down — in three months and nine days, ever since the genie emerged in his perfume of rosemary and lit matches. One miniscule error of phrasing, she knew, and she would end up doomed, suffocating beneath an Everest of gold coins, or bound for life to a man whose love for her rendered him insipid, or ruling as queen over some muddy wasteland. No, it was better if she took her time, hiding herself away in the quiet little grammar laboratory of her mind. One day, when her wishes were unassailable, she would break her silence, but until then she would measure her words carefully, adding and removing parentheticals and fastidiously retailoring her syntax until every piece of every wish fit faultlessly together. What did it matter if she drained her savings along the way, or lost her friends, or weakened her health? After all, if she wished well enough, she could regain them in an instant.

20 Lauren Oyler, “Writing to Delight: On Vulnerability, Ephemerality, and How the Novel’s Artifice Is the Best Thing About It,” interview by Mary South, *BOMB Magazine*, February 10, 2021, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/lauren-oyler-interviewed/>.

The genie was sympathetic to her predicament. Over his many centuries of transforming wishes into curses, their inexactitudes and ambiguities had become all too conspicuous to him. Sometimes he imagined what it would be like to take a curry and brush to the things, grooming each and every wish until what people desired and what they asked for were actually identical. He had his role to play, though, and he was obligated to play it. The sequence of events hardly ever varied: someone would free him from his lamp and invoke the ritual words: first an ‘I’ and then a ‘wish.’ Each time, with the pronunciation of that second syllable, a great roar of hope and affection

“would rise up inside him. Maybe, he would say to himself,” as does the young woman to herself, amid the same roar; by now relocated there, all the previous times at a great distance, and so like any consideration else, as if nothing. “Maybe this will be the one.”²¹

21 Kevin Brockmeier, “Wishes,” in *The Ghost Variations: One Hundred Stories* (Pantheon Books, 2021), 21–22.

To say this is to say that we seize, in the act of perception, something which outruns perception itself, although the material universe is not essentially different or distinct from the representation which we have of it. In one sense, my perception is indeed truly within me, since it contracts into a single moment of my duration that which, taken in itself, spreads over an incalculable number of moments. But, if you abolish my consciousness, the material universe subsists exactly as it was; only, since you have removed that particular rhythm of duration which was the condition of my action upon things, these things draw back into themselves, mark as many moments in their own existence as science distinguishes in it; and sensible qualities, without vanishing, are spread and diluted in an incomparably more divided duration. Matter thus resolves itself into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and traveling in every direction like shivers through an immense body.

— Henri Bergson

Other Inquisitions

Is an answer all we can ask for?

— Jennifer Krasinski

§. “Before all else there is beauty”: Review of S. Oglesby, *Theses on Aesthetics as First Philosophy*. Fabulate Books, 2014. 96pp.

THE TELEOLOGY OF THE UNIVERSE is directed to the production of Beauty.¹ That’s the text’s opening line, its first thesis. It’s also a quotation — a quotation and provocation from the late work of Alfred North Whitehead, one that sets the stage for everything to follow. And yet, Oglesby is measured. She immediately acknowledges that Steven Shaviro — another guiding light of the study — “doubtless speaks for many” when he calls Whitehead’s claim “outrageously hyperbolic.”² That does not stop her, however, from going on, still in the very first section, to cite and answer Michael Austin’s question, from the inaugural issue of *Speculations*, “Why does anything happen at all?”³ “In a word,” our author avers, “kalogenesis”: from the Greek *kalos* (beauty) and *genesis* (creation).⁴

Let’s back up a moment. Some context might help (especially considering the fact that Oglesby doesn’t bother). The work’s title comes from one of the stars of Speculative Realism, and the founding figure of its most prominent sub-field, Object-Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman. That aesthetics is first philosophy may be the most striking of Harman’s many startling

1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (The Free Press, 1967), 264.

2 Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (MIT Press, 2009), 69.

3 Michael Austin, “To Exist Is to Change: A Friendly Disagreement with Graham Harman on Why Things Happen,” *Speculations I* (2010): 66–83.

4 The coinage is Frederick Ferré’s, quoted in Brian Henning, “Re-Centering Process Thought: Recovering Beauty in A.N. Whitehead’s Late Work,” in *Beyond Metaphysics? Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead’s Late Thought*, ed. Roland Faber, Brian G. Henning, and Clinton Combs (Rodopi, 2010), 211n2, http://connect.gonzaga.edu/asset/file/263/2010Henning-Recentering_Process_Thought_Beyond_Metaphysics.pdf.

claims, and it gets at the heart of what he's up to.⁵ Since Harman's well-known and widely summarized, I'll be brief. Examples work best. And one of Harman's favorites is fire and cotton.⁶ Fire burns cotton. Full stop. That's the only way fire encounters cotton. Cotton's softness, its color, and scent — its price, and where it's harvested: all this (and more) is lost on fire. Fire burns cotton but it does not exhaust it. It never gets to its depths. And, more to the point, it can't. Nothing gets to anything else's depths, ever. Each object always exceeds what it is to other objects, and to the extent that an object encounters another object it does so by "aluding" to it, that is, by a kind of translation: fire reduces cotton to its flammability. Flame translates cotton into its tongue.

And that's also how to begin to get a handle on Harman's fascinating claim: Aesthetics is first philosophy. First philosophy is (more commonly known as) metaphysics. Metaphysics, according to Wilfrid Sellars' famous definition, is how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term. How things hang together — the ways in which objects translate one another, in other

5 The claim is made in many places. Inter alia, Graham Harman, "Vicarious Causation," *Collapse II* (2007): 221. See also, Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human," *Naked Punch* 9 (2007): 28–30. For Harman "aesthetics is first philosophy" means here, in so many words, causality. But one could ask, after Robert Jackson's example, *Why?* Why is causality, in Timothy Morton's words, "wholly an *aesthetic* phenomenon"? Perhaps one should keep in mind here Borges's definition of "the aesthetic phenomenon," "this imminence of a revelation which does not occur." In other words, perhaps "causality" describes what *does* occur in the imminence of revelations *which do not*. See Robert Jackson, "The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks: Michael Fried, Object Oriented Ontology, and Aesthetic Absorption," *Speculations II* (2011): 154, 167. Timothy Morton, "Introduction: Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear," in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Open Humanities Press, 2013), 19, emphasis author's. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. James E. Irby (New Directions, 1964), 188.

6 The example is used in many places. Inter alia, Graham Harman, "A Larger Sense of Beauty," *DIALOGICA FANTASTICA*, February 1, 2011, <http://dialogicafantastica.wordpress.com/2011/02/01/a-larger-sense-of-beauty/>.

words — can be said to characterize aesthetics, in the broadest possible sense of *that* term. So aesthetics is first philosophy.

That's what Oglesby doesn't tell you. What she also doesn't tell you — not explicitly — is how beauty fits into the picture.

In her account of beauty Oglesby follows Shaviri in closely following Kant. The terms here are largely those of the "Analytic of the Beautiful."⁷ Disinterestedness? Check. Non-cognitive? Indeed: "Beauty," in Shaviri's paraphrase, "cannot be subsumed under any concept. An aesthetic judgment is therefore singular and ungrounded."⁸ Here Oglesby cites Alexander Nehamas by way of clarification. "Kant was right that the judgment of taste is not governed by concepts. That was not because the concept of the beautiful or the nature of the judgment is peculiar, but because, I want to suggest to you,

the judgment of taste is simply not a conclusion we draw from interacting with, describing, or interpreting works of art.

I want to turn our common picture around. The judgment of beauty is not the result of a mysterious inference on the basis of features of a work of art which we already know. It is a guess, a suspicion, a dim awareness that there is more in the work that it would be valuable to learn. [...] But a guess is just that: unlike a conclusion, it obeys no principles; it is not governed by concepts. It goes beyond all the evidence, which cannot therefore justify it, and points to the future.⁹

It's in attempting to extend the scope of that insight that the argument's at its most tenuous. It "goes beyond all the evidence":

7 Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Beautiful," *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 43–97.

8 Steven Shaviri, "Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption," *e-flux journal* 46 (2013), http://workero1.e-flux.com/pdf/article_8969650.pdf.

9 Alexander Nehamas, "An Essay on Beauty and Judgment," *The Threepenny Review* 80 (2000), http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/nehamas_woo.html.

Beauty for Oglesby is the paradigm of aesthetics as first philosophy insofar as the status of aesthetic judgment as it applies to art, specifically, is generalized to stand for the (apparently) “singular and ungrounded” way in which things or objects or whatever — actual entities, to adapt Whitehead’s parlance — hang together.

That’s Oglesby’s gamble, anyway. The bulk of the work attempts to read the Whitehead-inflected treatment of Kant in the crucial first chapter of Shaviro’s *Without Criteria* — a draft of which can be found online¹⁰ — with Ruth Lorand’s *Aesthetic Order*, where beauty is theorized as a type of “lawless order.”¹¹

So there you have it: a vision of a kind of order — on the order of the universe — without criteria and without law. As to its success or failure, I refer the interested reader to the text itself. The details don’t much matter here. As Whitehead says, that’s not where the action is.¹² What I’d like to do instead, in the space I have left, is briefly touch on a line of inquiry that concerns the project’s strong Kantian inheritance, and whose modification may affect its plausibility.

Specifically, I’d like to raise the issue of disinterestedness — as Nietzsche did, and with his very words: Kant, “instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem

from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the ‘spectator,’ and unconsciously introduced the ‘spectator’ into the concept ‘beautiful.’ It would not have been so bad if this ‘spectator’

10 Steven Shaviro, “Without Criteria” (draft), *Steven Shaviro*, <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/WithoutCriteria.pdf>.

11 Ruth Lorand, *Aesthetic Order: A Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art* (Routledge, 2000), 1.

12 What he actually says is, “It has been remarked that a system of philosophy is never refuted; it is only abandoned. The reason is that logical contradictions, except as temporary slips of the mind — plentiful, though temporary — are the most gratuitous of errors; and usually they are trivial. Thus, after criticism, systems do not exhibit mere illogicalities.” Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (The Free Press, 1978), 6. Close enough.

had at least been sufficiently familiar to the philosophers of beauty — namely, as a great personal fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful! But I fear the reverse has always been the case; and so they have offered us, from the beginning, definitions in which, as in Kant's famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. 'That is beautiful,' said Kant, 'which gives us pleasure without interest.' Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine 'spectator' and artist — Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate he rejected and repudiated the one point about the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *le désintéressement*. Who is right, Kant or Stendhal?¹³

Neither, because more than the fate of aesthetics hangs in the balance. As Gilles Deleuze has pointedly noted,¹⁴ since Kant, aesthetics has named a "wrenching" division. As Daniel W. Smith has aptly (and concisely) put it, "Aesthetics since Kant

has been haunted by a seemingly intractable dualism. On the one hand, aesthetics designates the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience; on the other hand, it designates the theory of art as a reflection on real experience. The first is the objective element of sensation, which is conditioned by the a priori forms of space and time (the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' of the Critique of Pure Reason); the second is the subjective element of sensation, which is expressed in the feeling of pleasure and pain (the 'Critique of Aesthetic

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (Random House, 1967), 103–4.

14 See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994), 68, and Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (Columbia University Press, 1990), 260.

Judgment' in the Critique of Judgment). Deleuze argues that these two aspects of the theory of sensation (aesthetics) can be reunited only at the price of a radical recasting of the transcendental project as formulated by Kant, pushing it in the direction of what Schelling once called a 'superior empiricism'; it is only when the conditions of experience in general become the genetic conditions of real experience that they can be reunited with the structures of works of art.¹⁵

Oglesby is close to Deleuze here, and so is her wager: aesthetics in the — truly — broadest possible sense of the term.

Aesthetics as first philosophy is a beautiful thing.

¹⁵ Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality," in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 89. But see also, Steven Shaviro, "The 'Wrenching Duality' of Aesthetics: Kant, Deleuze, and the Theory of the Sensible," *Steven Shaviro*, <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/SPEP.pdf>.

§. The Untranslatable: Triptych on a Sentence by Rey Chow

I. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*

Strictly speaking, does not thought — or the act of thinking — always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?¹⁶

PHILOSOPHIE DÜRFTE MAN EIGENTLICH nur dichten. Wittgenstein's imperative translates, "very roughly," "Philosophy ought really to be written only as poetry."¹⁷ Yet how is one to approach that directive? How is one to *read* it — as poetry, or philosophy? If poetry, following Robert Frost, is, precisely, "what gets lost in translation," how is one to place what's proposed here? And where does that leave philosophy?

"Poetry may well be 'what gets lost in translation,'" Craig Dworkin has conceded, "though the phrase should be understood not in the sense of elegiac ruination or privation, but of absorption and reverie — in the way one might be lost in thought."¹⁸

16 Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 42.

17 Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted and translated in Marjorie Perloff, "'Literature' in the Expanded Field," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 184. Thomas Basbøll has noted that Wittgenstein's dictum "means, somewhat less elegantly than the German, that 'one ought really to do philosophy as poetry.' The German word 'dichten' is the verb form of 'Dichtung,' which means 'poetry.' To my knowledge there is no such thing as poeting in English." Thomas Basbøll, "Epiphany," *The Pangrammaticon*, June 18, 2005, <http://pangrammaticon.blogspot.com/2005/06/epiphany.html>. "In any case," Basbøll concludes, "modifying Peter Winch's translation a bit, we can render this more naturally as, 'One ought really only to compose philosophy (as one composes poetry).'"

18 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (MIT Press, 2013), 124. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 72:

Only in poetry lost in thought, as in another language, may philosophy be found.

II. *The Untranslatable*

Strictly speaking, does not thought — or the act of thinking — always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?¹⁹

“TO SPEAK OF UNTRANSLATABLES,” as does Barbara Cassin, general editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, “in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating.”²⁰ Insofar as the untranslatable is that which one cannot translate, it is by definition what one cannot help but translate. And yet, in translating the untranslatable — interminably — what will one have communicated?

However intractable “the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns,” whatever the recalcitrance, what will have eluded each of the untranslatable’s multiple and variegated translations is, in ceaselessly inspiring them, the incorrigible foreignness of thought (*un mirage interne des mots mêmes*, as Mallarmé has it).²¹ On this point one should amend Novalis with the words of the German travel writer Wal-

“With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy.”

19 Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, 42. Michael Bell, review of *The Aesthetics of Argument*, by Martin Warner, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal*, December 2, 2016, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-aesthetics-of-argument/>: “The nature of thought is notoriously elusive.”

20 Barbara Cassin, “Introduction,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2014), xvii.

21 Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Richard Serrano, “Fans, Silk, and Ptyx: Mallarmé and Classical Chinese Poetry,” *Comparative Literature* 50, no. 3 (1998): 228.

demar Bonsels: Philosophy really is homesickness — homesickness for a foreign country.²²

III. Exile

Strictly speaking, does not thought — or the act of thinking — always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?²³

NEAR THE END OF HIS 1975 NOVEL *Juan sin Tierra*, Juan Goytisolo writes, *Si en lo futuro escribes, será en otra lengua*, “If you write in the future, it will be in another language.”²⁴ That sentence, “like all those of its grammatical form,” Daniel Heller-Roazen observes, “is ambiguous”: if it’s not taken to be “a statement describing a state of affairs (albeit of a particular variety in this case, being ones that have yet to take place),” it will be understood to be “a command, an imperative couched in the indicative mood. In the first sense,” therefore, “the words have a straightforward constative value; in the second,” however, “they have the form of an injunction that could be paraphrased as ‘if you write in the future, you must do so in another language,’ or, more forcefully and fully, ‘if you write again, it cannot be as you have written and write now; if you write again, it must be otherwise, in another language.’”²⁵ How is one to understand that sentence and the language in which it is written? By what departure will one have heard it for what it says?

“A philosopher begins by hearing his native language as a foreign tongue”²⁶ — and that for perhaps no one “more forcefully

22 Waldemar Bonsels, quoted and translated in John Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4, 29, *inter alia*.

23 Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, 42.

24 Juan Goytisolo, quoted in Daniel Heller-Roazen, “Speaking in Tongues,” *Paragraph* 25 (2002): 108.

25 *Ibid.*, 108–9.

26 Michael Kinnucan, “Philosophy in Translation, Philosophy as Translation” *Asymptote* (July 2014), <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/barbara-cassin-dictionary-of-untranslatables-a-philosophical-lexicon/>.

and fully” than for he who was until then a poet: “He wrote of ‘the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy’ precisely to mask the fact that philosophy did not even exist until he composed *The Republic*, where he first announces the quarrel, and that it was he who was on the side of the new and against the traditional.”²⁷

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 98: “To be a foreigner, but in one’s own tongue, not only when speaking a language other than one’s own. To be bilingual, multilingual, but in one and the same language, without even a dialect or patois.”

- 27 Alexander Nehamas, “An Essay on Beauty and Judgment,” *Threepenny Review* 80 (Winter 2000), https://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/nehamas_woo.html. John Sallis, *On Translation* (University of Indiana Press, 2002), 60: “Here for the first time the structure, the basic constitution, of translation is determined; here the Platonic text declares what may be called the protoclassical determination of translation. But in this determination everything depends on how the single word *διάνοια* [thought, in a word] is understood.”

§. The Idea of Prose

“ANY INQUIRY INTO PROSE inevitably meets the perplexing example of an illustrious predecessor,

M. Jourdain, the famous bourgeois gentilhomme from Molière’s play of the same name. Moved to write an amorous epistle to an unattainable lady, the bourgeois hires a master of philosophy to instruct him in this arcane skill. The master first asks him whether the letter is to be written in verse. Bourgeois that he is, Jourdain rejects that out of hand. ‘You want only prose?’ asks the master. ‘No, I want neither prose nor verse,’ answers the bourgeois, who merely wants a seductive note to be casually dropped at the feet of the lady. But the master is less concerned with the pragmatics or effects of the note than with taxonomic distinctions. ‘It must be one or the other,’ he insists. Expression admits of no other possible forms. Asked why, the master provides the following rule: ‘Tout ce qui n’est point prose est vers; et tout ce qui n’est point vers est prose’ (Everything that is not prose is verse, and everything that is not verse is prose). M. Jourdain then wonders what it is that he is speaking. ‘Prose’ is the reply. ‘And when I say: “Nicole, bring me my slippers, and give me my nightcap”, is that prose?’ At the master’s affirmative answer, Jourdain marvels at a competence he did not know he had: ‘For over forty years I have been speaking prose without suspecting it in the least.’ He returns, however, to his primary concern, the composition of the note. He suggests its content, a simple cliché, and asks the master to change it around, to couch it in a more gallant manner. The master essays various permutations on the original suggestion but winds up admitting that Jourdain’s initial version was the best, which leads Jourdain to say: ‘And yet I did not study, and I’ve done this on the first try’ (Act 2, scene 4).

Even by the master's lights (dim as they are), M. Jourdain intuitively arrives at correct expression for his purposes. So what has he learned by learning that he was speaking in prose? No insight was gained here, only a label to be applied to an activity that had not called attention to itself and showed no need of doing so. Yet once the label is available, it becomes a weapon in the arsenal of knowledge that M. Jourdain can now wield to affirm his superiority over those from whom he seeks to differentiate himself. Thus, when his wife reprimands him for his foolishness, he retorts by beginning to quiz her (Act 3, scene 3): 'Do you know what you are talking at this moment?' Madame Jourdain clearly has no idea what her husband is talking about. To his now more refined linguistic sensibility, she appears to be obtusely concerned with matters of content, of evaluation, of pragmatics. 'What is that called?' M. Jourdain insists. 'That is called whatever one wants to call it,' she replies. Clearly, she fails to understand the value of a label, subscribing to a theory that sees naming as arbitrary. She knows there is no knowledge to be gained here, just some verbal posturing. 'C'est de la prose, ignorante' (It is prose, stupid), says the gentleman in triumph, who then goes on to restate for her the opposition proffered by the master that divides the expression of the world into two universes. But whereas the master had offered two mutually exclusive possibilities, M. Jourdain, whose intuitive powers have been ratified by the correctness of his own version of the love letters, now unwittingly deconstructs this opposition by showing that verse and prose are not in a relation of opposition and territorial dominion. He delivers the rule to his wife as follows: 'Tout ce qui est prose n'est point vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers n'est point prose' (Everything that is prose is not verse; and everything that is not verse is not prose).²⁸

28 Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix–x.

“We may laugh at the bourgeois’s inability to parrot his master’s lesson,” concludes this compelling account of our “illustrious,” inescapable precursor, “but we may well wonder whether, just as he has been speaking prose unwittingly, he may unwittingly state a truth about it.”²⁹ Indeed, what might that truth be, and how might that statement, in its peculiar inconsistency, be said to be of a piece with it?

If verse can be identified with poetry, prose cannot be so easily identified with philosophy. “Poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it,”³⁰ Giorgio Agamben writes, so that “every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy.”³¹

Perhaps prose could be said to consist in what’s ventured by the proposition: *everything that is philosophy is not poetry, and everything that is not poetry is not philosophy.*

²⁹ Ibid., x.

³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvii.

³¹ Ibid., xvii.

§. Vertigo, *Beatitudo*: Spinoza and Philosophy

One could say that every philosopher has two philosophies: his [sic] own and that of Spinoza.³²

Spinozism or no philosophy at all.³³

I.

“WE HAVE NOT YET BEGUN to understand Spinoza,” Gilles Deleuze once claimed, “and I myself no more than others,”³⁴ noting elsewhere that “the greatest philosophers are hardly more than apostles who distance themselves from or draw near to this mystery.”³⁵

Here one question eclipses all others, or serves to focus them: What would it be to have an adequate idea of Spinoza?

II.

Philosophy is the very vertigo of immanence. That formula complements one of Deleuze’s, “Immanence is the very vertigo of philosophy.”³⁶ Immanence is not philosophy, nor philosophy immanence. But there is in the passage from one to the other a modification of sense that is not without significance. It is perhaps for that reason that the two formulas are best read together. At the point of vertigo.

32 Henri Bergson, quoted in Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 130n3.

33 G.W.F. Hegel, quoted in Pierre Macherey, “Hegel Reads Spinoza,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 223.

34 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Continuum, 2006), 12.

35 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 60.

36 Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 180.

But why vertigo? What about philosophy, much less immanence, may be said to be vertiginous? Daniel Heller-Roazen has isolated the two components all enigmas share: “opacity and the hidden principle of their interpretation. That summary may appear willfully paradoxical,” Heller-Roazen comments, “yet enigmas verify its truth”: Were an enigma “immediately intelligible, it would be none at all,” yet were an enigma “solely solvable by means of knowledge extrinsic to its construction, it, too, could hardly be called an ‘enigma.’”³⁷

Immanence is the very vertigo of philosophy because immanence is the very paradigm of the enigma.

Deleuze’s formula is found in a work Deleuze titled *Spinoza and the Problem of Expression*. “By taking the ‘problem of expression’ as his central concern, Deleuze announces the ingenuity of his approach. Nowhere in the myriad definitions that the *Ethics* comprises is ‘expression’ defined. Yet the verb form of the concept appears on the very first page in the definition of ‘God’: ‘By God I mean an absolutely infinite being; that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.’”³⁸

More remarkable yet, “as soon as it is introduced into Deleuze’s argument, the concept ‘expression’ is

immediately bifurcated into two senses. The virtue of this concept for Deleuze is that it provides a single name for two heterogeneous processes, *explication* and *implication*. Deleuze argues that in Spinozism the modes, as affections of substance, effectively explicate substance. But it is equally true that each modal modification implicates substance in turn. The usual connotations of these two words are fully in force in Deleuze’s reading; substance is effectively elaborated through, that is, explicated by, the modes. But the modes

37 Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues: The Art of Rogues and Riddlers* (Zone Books, 2013), 77.

38 Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 210. Author’s emphasis.

implicate substance, in that they impinge on its putative autonomy, never leaving it unchanged. [...] Deleuze's point is that in Spinoza substance is in an incessant state of unfolding (*explication*) via the modes, and folding back in on itself (*implication*) as a result of these modal affections.³⁹

To explicate is to implicate, for every implication follows from an explication, and every explication turns on how what it explicates is implicated in it.

Philosophy stands to immanence as explication stands to implication.

Philosophy: the vertigo of immanence *in its expression*.

III.

"Philosophy is something that moves, that passes, and that takes place," Pierre Macherey has written, "in a place where the connection between thoughts gestates, which, in the works themselves, escapes the specific historical conditions of their authors' undertakings, and the understanding of this process diminishes the interest we might extend to their systematic intentions, because this process grasps them dynamically in the anonymous movement of a sort of collective project."⁴⁰

"Spinoza" is the name given that anonymity by those who undergo its movement *sub specie aeternitatis*.

³⁹ Ibid., 211. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁰ Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3–4.

§. "To Believe in this World": Immanence and Militancy

One can just as easily become a convinced Spinozist (or a firm opponent) with a materialist and atheistic interpretation of the *Ethics* as with a mystical-religious one.⁴¹

A problem of *economy* and *strategy*.⁴²

"SPINOZA BEGAN WITH GOD!"⁴³ Louis Althusser exclaims. "A supreme strategy" — "the extreme essence of every philosophical strategy,"⁴⁴ Althusser even goes on to say — "he began by taking over the chief stronghold of his adversary, or rather he established himself there as if he were his own adversary, therefore not suspected of being the sworn adversary, and redispersed the theoretical fortress in such a way as to turn it completely around, as one turns around cannons against the fortress's own occupant."⁴⁵

"A supreme strategy," "the extreme essence," even, "of every philosophical strategy," Althusser's brilliant observation draws a decisive question sharply, if quietly, into focus: What is the sense and value of "strategy" in philosophy, and how is the indiscernibility of the "materialist" and "atheistic" and "mystical-religious" interpretations of the *Ethics* of a piece with it? In other words, what does that indiscernibility delimit? What line of demarcation does it trace?

41 Jean-Luc Marion, quoted in Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*, 1. The title is a line from Deleuze. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 172.

42 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 282.

43 Louis Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza," in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, trans. Ted Stolze (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 10.

44 *Ibid.*, 11.

45 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

The Fire and the Tale: On Ineffability and Philosophy

Riddles are a truer representation of the nature of reality than simple declarative statements.⁴⁶

“What cannot be told of, we want to know, knowing also,” as Arthur Danto put it, “that we cannot say: the ineffable is that about which all that is to be said is that nothing more is sayable.”⁴⁷ “Still,” Danto goes on to say, “one persists in wanting to know, there must be some explanation.”⁴⁸ “What cannot be told of, we want to know, knowing also that we cannot say” — and “still, one persists.” How might one understand that persistence? How does it figure wanting into knowledge, and how might this be said to find in “the ineffable” its articulation?

In *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts recounts an apposite *mondō*.

Fa-yen asked the monk Hsüan-tzu why he had never asked him any questions about Zen. The monk explained that he had already attained his understanding from another master. Pressed by Fa-yen for an explanation, the monk said that when he had asked his teacher, “What is the Buddha?” he had received the answer, “Ping-ting T’ung-tzu comes for fire!”

“A good answer!” said Fa-yen. “But I’m sure you don’t understand it.”

“Ping-ting,” explained the monk, “is the god of fire. For him to be seeking for fire is like myself, seeking the Buddha. I’m the Buddha already, and no asking is needed.”

“Just as I thought!” laughed Fa-yen. “You didn’t get it!”

The monk was so offended that he left the monastery, but later repented of himself and returned, humbly requesting instruction.

“You ask me,” said Fa-yen.

⁴⁶ Roberts, *The Riddles of The Hobbit*, 20.

⁴⁷ Arthur Danto, quoted in Silvia Jonas, *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

⁴⁸ Danto, quoted in *ibid.*, 3.

“What is the Buddha?” inquired the monk.

“Ping-ting T’ung-tzu comes for fire!”⁴⁹

When it comes to the ineffable perhaps the least that can be said with any certainty must respect the need for asking after it: “Is it credible that we can be satisfied with a tale that is no longer” — the monk’s placid explanation — “in relation with the fire?”⁵⁰ Strictly speaking, and however paradoxical, it goes without saying: the identification of the monk with the fire god (and so with the Buddha) obtains *only in inquiry* — in a “seeking” where “asking,” in fact, “is needed.” Only on asking after the Buddha, in other words, can the monk be said to have “come for fire.” And only on asking again, and so having “repented of himself,” may he therefore yet come for the first to be consumed by it.

“The hither side of all solutions”: The Place in Place of Conclusion

Rationality is not a *problem*. There is behind it no unknown quantity which has to be determined by deduction, or, beginning with it, demonstrated inductively. [...] The world and reason are not problematical. We may say, if we wish, that they are mysterious, but their mystery defines them: there can be no question of dispelling it by some “solution,” it is on the hither side of all solutions.⁵¹

49 Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (Vintage Books, 1989), 128. Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 99: “I take this to be the impact of the saying thought to have awakened Zen master Fa-yen: the posture of ‘not knowing’ most closely approaches the truth.” Note, this places Fa-yen’s reply, “But I’m sure you don’t understand it” — and therefore the entire exchange — in a very different light.

50 Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford University Press, 2017), 2.

51 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge, 2003), xxiii.

If we wish to say, after Spinoza, that philosophy is mysterious, that's because what began with God didn't end there: what the *Ethics* co-opts in the last instance and above all, definingly, is mystery, infiltrating it and redispensing it in the name of philosophy itself. The "turn" Spinoza effects follows "as if he were his own adversary": "Immanence" is no solution⁵² — the hither side of all solutions, it betrays its impassive designation for the ruthless criticism of everything existing.

52 "For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away." Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Schocken Books, 1978), 313.

§. The Riddle of History Solved

Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.⁵³

The existence of an answer does, it is true, define the riddle, but not in the manner we might have thought.⁵⁴

“MANKIND ALWAYS SETS ITSELF only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.”⁵⁵ In 1842 in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, and therefore nearly two decades before the better known passage of the 1859 preface, Marx wrote: “The fate which a question of the time has in common with every question justified by its content, and therefore rational, is that the question and not the answer constitutes the main difficulty. True criticism, therefore, analyzes the questions and not the answers. Just as the solution of an algebraic equation is given once the problem has been put in its simplest and sharpest form, so every question is answered as soon as it has become a real question.”⁵⁶ “The existence of a ‘real’ answer follows from the posing of any ‘real’ question,” a scholarly commentary concurs. “But we can now see that the true nature of riddling lies just here,” it continues, “in the pre-

53 Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (W.W. Norton, 1978), 84.

54 Editor’s “Afterword,” in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (Oxford University Press, 1996), 318.

55 Karl Marx, “Marx on the History of His Opinions,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 5.

56 Karl Marx, quoted in Alberto Toscano, “The Politics of Abstraction: Communism and Philosophy,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (Verso, 2010), 204.

carious opacity of the solution.”⁵⁷ If communism “is the riddle of history solved,” what formulation of that “riddle” “knows itself to be this solution”? After what fashion, into what “precarious opacity,” does the riddle of history resolve itself?

A clue may be found in the contrast between two stories — between two instances of self-reference in those stories, specifically, and what the self-recognition in each instance implies for how the story plays out. “In the *Arabian Nights*,” first, “we hear of Emir Hārūn al-Rashīd,

who became very bored. Nothing could revive his spirits. His storyteller asked: ‘Do you want to hear the story of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the mother of all stories, the story that relieves all boredom forever?’ ‘Do you know the story?’ asked the emir. The storyteller confessed that he did not, but promised to obtain it for the emir. The emir gave him one year and one day to accomplish the task, on pain of death. The storyteller dispatched his four disciples to the four corners of the world to find the story. They returned within a year, to be questioned by the emir. Each of the first three confessed to having failed to obtain the desired story, but told instead of other stories and adventures he had encountered. The fourth disciple announced that he had found the story.

‘There was once an emir who became very bored,’ began the disciple. ‘His storyteller promised to obtain for him the story that relieves all boredom and dispatched four disciples for the task. Three returned empty handed.’

‘You are telling me my own story,’ cried the emir angrily. ‘But wait, how did you know about the others? You were not present when they came back. So perhaps it is a story after all!’ The emir became confused. He could not make sense of the situation.

“The storyteller suggested he be patient,” so ends this account of the fable, “and hear the rest. The emir refused. He ordered danc-

57 Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, “Afterword,” 318.

ers and musicians to be brought in, to divert his mind and make him forget the story.”⁵⁸ In contrast, another fable, “narrated by A.K. Ramanujan, tells of a man

who was prompted by his wife to go and listen in the evenings to the recounting of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. But each night he fell asleep as soon as the recitation began. When this happened for three consecutive nights, his wife scolded him thoroughly and commanded him to stay awake. On the fourth night, the man forced himself to listen. The storyteller described how the king of monkeys, Hanuman, sailed through the air over the ocean as a messenger from Rāma to the captive Sītā. As a sign that Rāma had sent him, Hanuman was carrying Rāma’s ring; unfortunately, the ring suddenly fell into the ocean. The storyteller turned to the audience and asked: ‘What will Hanuman do now? How can he retrieve the ring? How can he be of help to Rāma without it?’ The man was deeply moved by what he heard. He jumped up, ran to the ocean, plunged in,

“found the ring, and brought it back to Hanuman. He then returned to his seat,” our tale concludes, “and” — dripping wet — “continued to listen.”⁵⁹

58 Ilan Amit, “Squaring the Circle,” in *Untying the Knot*, 292.

59 Amit, “Squaring the Circle,” 292–93.

§. The Thing Itself

One cannot learn philosophy, because *it has not yet been given*.⁶⁰

“‘PHILOSOPHY’ IS SAID IN MANY WAYS.”⁶¹ Perhaps foremost among them philosophy may be said to be a question of the transformation of aporia into euporia. But how might aporia admit of transformation? To what part of it falls, if any, its formulation as a question?

Forms

Can one speak — and if so, in what sense — of *an experience of the aporia*? An experience of *the aporia as such*?⁶²

How does one both present the analytic solution of a mystery and at the same time conserve the sense of the mysterious on which analysis thrives?⁶³

“In the year 529 A.D.,” Giorgio Agamben recounts, “the emperor Justinian, acting on the urging of the fanatical spokesmen of the anti-Hellenic faction, decreed

the closure of the Athens school of philosophy. It thus turned out that Damascius, the incumbent scholarch, was the last

60 Immanuel Kant, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and Kevin Attell (Zone Books, 2009), 82. Emphasis Kant’s.

61 Justin E.H. Smith, *The Philosopher: A History in Six Types* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 237.

62 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 1993), 15. Emphasis author’s.

63 John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 2.

diadoch of pagan philosophy. Through friends at court he sought to reverse the decision. Their promises of help came to nothing more than the offer of a stipend as librarian in one of the provinces against the confiscation of the property and income of the school. The likelihood of persecution drove the scholarch and six of his closest helpers to load books and belongings on a cart and seek refuge at the court of the Persian king, Khosrow Anūshirvan. Thus it came about that the purest Hellenic traditions that the Greeks—or rather “Romans,” as they were then calling themselves—were no longer worthy of preserving, came into the keeping of the barbarians.

The diadoch was no longer young; the moment was long gone in which he had thought to concern himself with marvelous stories and the apparition of souls. After the first few months of court life at Ctesiphon, the task of satisfying the philosophical curiosity of the sovereign with commentaries and critical editions was left to his students Priscianus and Simplicius. Cloistered in a house in the north of the city with a Greek scribe and Syrian housekeeper, Damascius determined to devote the last years of his life to writing a work to be entitled: *Aporias and Solutions Concerning First Principles*.⁶⁴

“Tradition has it that Damascius labored on his work for three hundred days and as many nights, that is, for the exact duration of his exile at Ctesiphon.”⁶⁵

And so it was that as he was writing one night the image suddenly sprang to mind that would guide him—so he thought—through to the conclusion of his work. It was not, however, an image, but something like the perfectly empty space in which only image, breath, or word might eventually

64 Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (State University of New York Press, 1995), 31.

65 *Ibid.*, 32.

take place. Or, rather, it was not even a space, but the site of a place, as it were, a surface, an area absolutely smooth and flat, on which no point could be distinguished from another. He thought of the white stone yard of the farm where he had been born, at the gates of Damascus, where the peasants threshed the wheat in the evenings to separate grain and chaff. Wasn't what he was searching for exactly like the threshing floor, itself unthinkable and unspeakable, where the winnowing fans of thought and language separated the grain and chaff of everything?⁶⁶

What comes to Damascius is by any account a curious "image." It recalls to him the threshing floor of "white stone" on "the farm where he had been born, at the gates of Damascus," yet it is, for him, "unthinkable and unspeakable," a place "where the winnowing fans of thought and language separated the grain and chaff of everything." An "image," then, that "was not, however, an image," "something," instead, "like" a "perfectly empty space" (one "in which" "image, breath, or word might eventually take place"), "or, rather, it was not even a space, but the site of a place, as it were." How is one to understand that "image"? And how might it serve as a "guide"?

The aporia attains its transformation with a vision of what may well be called philosophy's "first principle." "What is reached here, that is, is something still sensible (from this comes the term *idea*, which indicates a vision, an *ιδεῖν*). But not some sensible thing *presupposed* by language and knowledge, but rather, *exposed* in them."⁶⁷ "The thing itself" is thus revealed to be from the first, in so many words, a kind of exile. And perhaps only in exile is it made out: There where "the winnowing fans of thought and language" may in time separate the wheat from the chaff and yet from which, at last, only with difficulty can it be told apart: its story.

66 Ibid., 33.

67 Ibid., 122–23. Emphasis author's.

The Mystery to a Solution

Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?⁶⁸

A solution that conserves (because it endlessly refigures) the sense of the mysterious.⁶⁹

A story, that is, that, in its telling, is at one with a “demand” that defines that “purest” of Hellenic traditions: the “unavoidable” demand, “the (endless and endlessly circular) demand to inherit philosophy *philosophically*.”⁷⁰ “Of course, the issue of how to inherit philosophy philosophically is no more decided in advance or at the outset than any other issue in philosophy”⁷¹ so that philosophy, as a tradition, may be said to be constituted by the question of “what (inheriting) philosophy (philosophically) is.”⁷² How then is philosophy to be inherited? After what fashion, and according to what necessity, must the answer continue to be informed by the question?

“Close to an old, half-abandoned inn,” begins Malba Tahan’s version of a well-known tale, “we” — the narrator Hanak Tade Maia and his travel companion Beremiz Samir, known for his skill with numbers as the Man Who Counted — “saw three men arguing heatedly

beside a herd of camels. Amid the shouts and insults, the men gestured wildly in fierce debate, and we could hear their angry cries:

‘It cannot be!’

68 Derrida, *Aporias*, 15.

69 Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution*, 2.

70 Simon Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology* (Routledge, 2007), 1. Emphasis author’s.

71 Ibid.

72 Simon Glendinning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 120.

'That is robbery!'

'I do not agree!'

The intelligent Beremiz asked them why they were quarreling.

'We are brothers,' the oldest explained, 'and we received these thirty-five camels as our inheritance. According to the express wishes of our father, half of them belong to me, one-third to my brother Hamed, and one-ninth to Harim, the youngest. Nevertheless, we do not know how to make the division, and whatever one of us suggests, the other two dispute. Of the solutions tried so far, none have been acceptable. If half of thirty-five is seventeen and one half, if neither one-third nor one-ninth of this amount is a precise number, then how can we make the division?'

'Very simple,' said the Man Who Counted. 'I promise to make the division fairly, but let me add to the inheritance of thirty-five camels this splendid beast that brought us here at such an opportune moment.'

At this point I intervened.

'But I cannot permit such madness. How are we going to continue on our journey if we are left without a camel?'

'Do not worry, my Baghdad friend,' Beremiz said in a whisper. 'I know exactly what I am doing. Give me your camel, and you will see what results.'

And such was the tone of confidence in his voice that, without the slightest hesitation, I gave over my beautiful Jamal, which was then added to the number that had to be divided between the three brothers.

'My friends,' he said, 'I am going to make a fair and accurate division of the camels, which, as you can see, now number thirty-six.'

Turning to the eldest of the brothers, he spoke thus: 'You would have received half of thirty-five — that is, seventeen and one half. Now you will receive half of thirty-six — that is, eighteen. You have nothing to complain about, because you gain by this division.'

Turning to the second heir, he continued, ‘And you, Hamed, you would have received one-third of thirty-five—that is, eleven and some. Now you will receive one-third of thirty-six—that is, twelve. You cannot protest, as you too gain by this division.’

Finally, he spoke to the youngest: ‘And you, young Harim Namir, according to your father’s last wishes, you were to receive one-ninth of thirty-five, or three camels and part of another. Nevertheless, I give you one ninth of thirty-six, or four. You have benefitted substantially and should be grateful to me for it.’

And he concluded with the greatest confidence, ‘By this advantageous division, which has benefitted everyone, eighteen camels belong to the oldest, twelve to the next, and four to the youngest, which comes out to—eighteen plus twelve plus four—thirty-four camels. Of the thirty-six camels, therefore, there are two extra. One, as you know, belongs to my friend from Baghdad. The other rightly belongs to me for having resolved the complicated problem of the inheritance to everyone’s satisfaction.’

‘Stranger, you are a most intelligent man,’ exclaimed the oldest of the three brothers, ‘and we accept your solution with the confidence that it was achieved with justice and equity.’

The clever Beremiz, the Man Who Counted, took possession of one of the finest animals in the herd and, handing me the reigns to my own animal, said, ‘Now, dear friend, you can continue the journey on your camel, comfortable and content. I have one of my own to carry me.’

And we traveled on toward Baghdad.⁷³

“Clever,” indeed. How is one to understand the intervention of the Man Who Counted in the “fierce debate” between the three brothers over the division of their inheritance? To what part of

73 Malba Tahan, “Beasts of Burden,” in *The Man Who Counted: A Collection of Mathematical Adventures*, trans. Leslie Clark and Alastair Reid (W.W. Norton, 2015), 11–13.

it falls that addition — the narrator's camel — that turns out to be no addition at all?

Gabriel Marcel opposes the problematic to the mysterious. Whereas a problem, for Marcel, "is something met with which bars my passage," and is thus "before me in its entirety," a mystery is something whose "essence" precludes its ever being at once, "in its entirety," "before me": it's rather "something in which I find myself caught up."⁷⁴ So perhaps problem need not be opposed to mystery after all — perhaps that's what the ingenious Beremiz can be understood to demonstrate. If the problematic is resolved in the mysterious that's because it's into its solution, as into a mystery, that those whom a problem has gathered all with advantage depart.

⁷⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Beacon Press, 1951), 100.

§. “Without this nothing thinks”: The Enigma of the Active Intellect

THERE IS PERHAPS NOTHING more enigmatic in the history of philosophy than that which in the tradition is known as the active intellect (*nous poiētikos*, *al-ʿaql al-faʿāl*). The few dense, cryptic sentences in which Aristotle gives it its inaugural formulation, which comprise the whole of the fifth chapter of book three of the *De Anima*, are on one scholar’s estimation the “most intensely studied sentences in the history of philosophy.”⁷⁵ The “obscurity and extreme brevity” of “this half-page chapter,” notes another, “are notorious.”⁷⁶ In light of that chapter’s posterity, what is it that so many have sought so intently to think by way of it? The chapter in question (430a10–25) reads in full:⁷⁷

Since in all of nature something is the matter for each genus (and this is all those things in potentiality), while something else is their cause and is productive (*poiētikon*), by producing them all as a craft does in relation to the matter it has fashioned, necessarily these same differentiations are present in the soul. And one sort of mind exists by coming to be all things and one sort of mind exists by producing all things, as a kind of positive state, like light. For in a certain way, light makes colors existing in potentiality colors in actuality.

And this mind is separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality. For what produces is always

75 Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

76 Willy Theiler, quoted in Christopher Shields, “The Active Mind of *De Anima* iii 5,” supplement to “Aristotle’s Psychology,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/aristotle-psychology/active-mind.html>.

77 For the translation, and subsequent quotations, see Shields, “The Active Mind.”

superior to what is affected, as too the first principle is to the matter.

Actual knowledge is the same as the thing known, though in an individual potential knowledge is prior in time, though it is not prior in time generally.

But it is not the case that sometimes it thinks and sometimes it does not. And having been separated, this alone is just as it is, and this alone is deathless and everlasting, though we do not remember, because this is unaffected, whereas passive mind is perishable. And without this, nothing thinks.

However redoubtable may be the exegesis that this passage has not ceased to require, the scholarly consensus as to its general characterization can be simply put. Christopher Shields has done so expertly:

Aristotle introduces a division into mind (*nous*) which he maintains is present generally in nature, between the active and the passive (DA 430a10–14).

The active mind is compared to a craft, while the passive mind is likened to matter (DA 430a12–13).

The active mind is compared to light, which in a certain way makes colours that exist in potentiality exist in actuality (DA 430a16–17).

Having been separated, the active mind alone is deathless and everlasting (DA 430a23–24).

Passive mind, by contrast, is perishable (DA 430a24–25).

Because the active mind is unaffected, we are not in a position to remember — something or other at some time or other. Unfortunately Aristotle does not specify what exactly we cannot remember or when (DA 430a23–24).

Without this (*this* = either the passive mind or the active mind), nothing thinks — or one thinks nothing (DA 430a25).

“To the degree that there is agreement about these general claims,” Shields comments, “there is commensurate disagree-

ment about how each is to be understood and developed.” The chapter’s striking last line is here exemplary.

The ambiguity of the last claim provides a useful illustration of the sorts of difficulties we encounter when we approach *De Anima* iii 5 for careful study: in the phrase (‘without this nothing thinks,’ or ‘without this x thinks nothing’; *aneu toutou outhen noeî*; 430a25), one cannot even be sure about the intended referent of the demonstrative ‘this’ (*touto*) or about whether ‘nothing’ (*outhen*) is the subject or object of ‘thinks’ (*noeî*). Thus, depending upon how it is construed, Aristotle’s Greek can be understood in at least four different ways: (i) without the active mind, nothing thinks; (ii) without the active mind, the passive mind thinks nothing; (iii) without the passive mind, nothing thinks; and (iv) without the passive mind, the active mind thinks nothing. These possibilities are not idle: we find different commentators understanding Aristotle’s text in these markedly different ways. Each interpretation seems justifiable in its own terms, and so none is indisputably to be preferred over its competitors, at least not on narrowly linguistic grounds. Interpretive questions thus begin without firm textual data. What holds for this single phrase iterates through the entire chapter.

“Consequently, although some progress is to be made by minute philological analysis of *De Anima* iii 5,” Shields concludes, “the text as it stands leaves unanswered many of the questions with which we began.”

As it stands there is yet one point on which the text admits no dispute: what is at issue in that text’s every interpretation remains “the act of thinking within thought itself.”⁷⁸ “To think does not mean merely to be affected by this or that thing, by this or that content of enacted thought,” Giorgio Agamben has written, “but rather at once to be affected by one’s own receptiveness and experience in each and every thing that is thought a pure

⁷⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 114.

power of thinking.”⁷⁹ “The experience of thought that is here in question,” in other words, Agamben continues, “is always experience of a common power.”⁸⁰ It is none other, and no less, than the commonality of that power that makes of the active intellect an enigma. Daniel Heller-Roazen has isolated the two components all enigmas share: “opacity and the hidden principle of their interpretation. That summary may appear willfully paradoxical,” Heller-Roazen comments, “yet enigmas verify its truth”: Were an enigma “immediately intelligible, it would be none at all,” yet were an enigma “solely solvable by means of knowledge extrinsic to its construction, it, too, could hardly be called an ‘enigma.’”⁸¹

The sense in which the active intellect constitutes an enigma is now clear. “The enigma can be solved only when the one who hears it knows that it turns, allusively, yet systematically, back upon itself.”⁸² The intellect attains its activity only when it “turns,” with the decisive lucidity of the one whom it traverses, “allusively, yet systematically, back upon itself”: the intellect distinguishes itself in its immemorial craft by the activity the problem of its activity provokes, in the varied acts of intellect the experience of that activity’s intimate obscurity does not fail to inspire. There is for philosophy in its history a resplendence the difficult color of clarity.

79 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 9.

80 Ibid.

81 Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 77.

82 Ibid., 76.

§. The Return to Philology

A WELL-KNOWN STORY RELATES that when an editor (as tradition has it, Andronicus of Rhodes) came, some centuries after Aristotle's death, to produce the first complete edition of the Philosopher's works, the volume of fourteen books following those comprising the volume on nature, the *Physics*, bore a designation that in time became a word unknown to the Philosopher himself: "metaphysics," from *ta meta ta phusika*, literally, "the after the physicals," or, more idiomatically, "the ones after the physical ones," "the ones," the books, "after the ones about physics."⁸³ "Whether or not the story is true," one scholar has commented, in an authoritative volume on the history of metaphysics, "the name is peculiarly apt": "For 'meta' can also be translated either as 'above' or as 'beyond,' and metaphysics is often reckoned to lie at a level of generality above and beyond physics. Come to that, it is often reckoned to be a subject that should be studied 'after' physics."⁸⁴ However *meta* may be translated, whatever interval it may insinuate, whether "after," "above," or "beyond," how is *place* to be understood in the word, no less than in the title, *Metaphysics*? What bearing will that initial designation be said to have had on the "subject" that it names, and how will one have come to situate — *to read* — the intervention of the editor in having supplied it? How, in short, is one to understand the "aptness" of that title in all its "peculiarity"?

In a 1798 fragment Friedrich Schlegel defined philology in passing as the "counterpart" (*Seitenstück*) of philosophy.⁸⁵ Phi-

83 Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, "Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/metaphysics/>.

84 A. W. Moore, "Preface," *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), xvii.

85 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted and translated in Werner Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, trans. Catharine Diehl and Jason Groves (Fordham University Press, 2015), 25, 125.

losophy, from the same root, may perhaps be said to be in turn the “metaphysics” of philology.

It will be recounted that Aristotle had no one word for metaphysics. In truth, he had more than one. “Aristotle himself described what he was undertaking in that volume as ‘first philosophy,’ or as the search for the first causes and the principles of things, or again as the science of being *qua* being.”⁸⁶ “These descriptions,” the scholar goes on to comment, “variously indicate both the fundamental character of his undertaking and its abstractness.”⁸⁷ That the Philosopher’s undertaking in the *Metaphysics* may be characterized as both “fundamental” and “abstract” makes the following all the more striking: “In its approach, the volume was a miscellany. It comprised historical and methodological reflections, a survey of problems and aporiai to be addressed, and a philosophical lexicon, as well as direct treatment of its main topics, which included substance, essence, form, matter, individuality, universality, actuality, potentiality, change, unity, identity, difference, number, and the prime eternal unmoved mover (God).”⁸⁸ What is to be made of the fact that, despite its “fundamental character” and “abstractness,” metaphysics—what Aristotle called “first philosophy,” “the search for the first causes and the principles of things,” “the science of being *qua* being”—has never been anything other than variegated? However “direct” it may be said to be, not least in the “treatment” of “its main topics,” Aristotle’s curious volume, in its “approach,” was “a miscellany.” How is one to understand that “approach”? How is one to approach it?

“There could be no philology were tradition not broken,” Daniel Heller-Roazen has observed, “no field of textual interpretation, criticism, and study were the transmission of texts not already obscure, altered, and interrupted: the immediacy and transparency of understanding would forbid the constitution of

86 Moore, “Preface,” xvii.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

a discipline of the study of the language of the past.”⁸⁹ At root, philosophy and philology are bound by a shared condition of possibility, one which neither, as a “field,” can leave behind, yet one with which neither, in its “transmission,” can be identified: “already obscure,” “altered” from the outset, and there, as by an incipient perplexity, by an uncertain interval “interrupted,” “immediacy and transparency of understanding” “would forbid the constitution” of the one no less than the other. That “interpretation, criticism, and study” are necessary, however, is bound to “forbid,” in addition, that that be all. Philosophy and philology are each coextensive with the “interruption” they constitute and with which, at the limit, they nonetheless do not coincide: “immediacy and transparency of understanding” “would forbid” each, no less than its “constitution,” its possession of a “past” — a past that, as such, had gone unthought and until then unremarked. A single consequence follows, a singular complication. There could be no metaphysics were there nothing “broken,” no “tradition” of metaphysics were not its medium, its very element, on each approach, wanting. Wanting, strangely, the question of metaphysics is therefore not, in truth, one. Metaphysics is a question of first philosophy. Then philology.

89 Daniel Heller-Roazen, “Tradition’s Destruction: On the Library of Alexandria,” *October* 100 (2002): 151.

§. A Defense of Obscurity: The Unreadable

Whether or not clarity is enough, it is certainly not enough to throw around the term 'clarity,' since that term obviously means very different things to different people, and stands in urgent need of clarification.⁹⁰

What is there more mysterious than clarity?⁹¹

"If READING IS NOT to be simply synonymous with deciphering, commentary or even interpretation," Geoffrey Bennington has written, "then it must inevitably encounter the question of the unreadable"⁹²: "If I can simply read what I read, then what I am doing is not in fact reading but something else (processing, decoding, unscrambling): reading as such occurs only as and in the experience of the unreadable."⁹³ Not "processing, decoding, unscrambling," neither is it "deciphering, commentary or even interpretation" — reading is an activity irreducible to any other that may, at first glance, be thought to be synonymous with it. Whatever else it is, reading is not something one "simply" does. Nor, it appears, is it something one can do "simply." If "reading as such occurs only as and in the experience of the unreadable," and if the unreadable can be identified with the illegible, reading for all that remains no less difficult to place. "The very act of recognizing moments of illegibility," Craig Dworkin has written, "cancels their status as such; reading the illegible nullifies its own account in the precise moment of its construction and obliterates the very object it would claim to have identified,

90 Hans-Johann Glock, "'Clarity' is not enough!" in *Wittgenstein and the Future of Philosophy: Proceedings of the 24th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. R. Haller and K. Puhl (Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 2002): 83.

91 Paul Valéry, quoted in Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 225.

92 Geoffrey Bennington, "Editorial," *Oxford Literary Review* 33 (2011): v.

93 Ibid.

creating a new space of erasure which cannot itself be read. In that moment of singularity the unreadable disappears within its own legibility, and that legibility simultaneously effaces the text it would seem to read.”⁹⁴ No longer “simply synonymous with deciphering, commentary or even interpretation,” yet incapable of articulation without their resources, situated “only as and in the experience of the unreadable,” yet given over to that experience only insofar as the unreadable itself will have escaped one, where — in what sense — may reading “as such” be said to “occur”?

Writing of novelty in metaphysics, A.W. Moore claims it is not simply that a “radically” new way of making sense of things will, of necessity, have been unforeseeable. “The introduction of a radically new way of making sense of things is unforeseeable in the more profound sense that, until that way of making sense of things has been introduced, there is no way even of making sense of its introduction.”⁹⁵ As Jean-François Lyotard has observed, “We read” — only; necessarily; radically; at all — “because we do not know how to read.”⁹⁶

94 Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Northwestern University Press, 2003), 155.

95 Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, 418.

96 Jean-François Lyotard, quoted in Bennington, “Editorial,” v.

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