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Title: Pintxos 2: small delicacies & chance encounters

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Abstract: Jacques Derrida wrote in *Glas* that “The glue of chance creates sense” and he was almost correct. It is, in fact, the toothpick of reading and writing – taken in their most expansive senses – that connects one chance event to another, that binds together, however briefly, the volatility of events. Chance and art: the pleasures of sensuous sensibilities, the distinctions of the conceptual, and the free-flowing sociability of a city as the day rounds almost imperceptibly toward the night. Watch out for the drunken philosophers, poets, and painters; listen for the talking parrots and puppets; beware of the marauding pirates and the red hand-prints on the walls of caves. *Pintxos* is best read in a manner similar to nibbling upon its namesake, tasted bit-by-bit as if one is wandering from one bar to the next along the evening streets of San Sebastian. This is the second part of a two-part installment.

Keywords: Pintxos; art; chance; philosophy; experimental writing

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Pintxos 2: small delicacies & chance encounters

Gray Kochhar-Lindgren¹

Abstract

Jacques Derrida wrote in *Glas* that “The glue of chance creates sense” and he was almost correct. It is, in fact, the toothpick of reading and writing – taken in their most expansive senses – that connects one chance event to another, that binds together, however briefly, the volatility of events. Chance and art: the pleasures of sensuous sensibilities, the distinctions of the conceptual, and the free-flowing sociability of a city as the day rounds almost imperceptibly toward the night. Watch out for the drunken philosophers, poets, and painters; listen for the talking parrots and puppets; beware of the marauding pirates and the red hand-prints on the walls of caves. *Pintxos* is best read in a manner similar to nibbling upon its namesake, tasted bit-by-bit as if one is wandering from one bar to the next along the evening streets of San Sebastian. This is the second part of a two-part installment.

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...the glue of chance makes sense...
Jacques Derrida
Glas

Hong Kong as a Cézanne still-life

Angles, scraped hillsides, rises and falls, a visual kinetic turbulence that is absolutely still, composed. Blues, whites, grays, purples becoming one another. Mont St. Victoire, from many perspectives, simultaneously. *L'Estaque*, with its blocks of sea-blues and sky-blues.

A still-life, movement itself.

Ētui

An *étui* is a small ornamental case for holding needles, cosmetics, hypodermics, and other ar-

ticles. As Walter Benjamin observed with those Argos-eyes of his that moved simultaneously in a thousand different directions across scales from the microscopic to the cosmic: “the interior is not just the universe but also the *étui* of the private individual. To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior these are accentuated. Coverlets and antimacassars, cases and containers are devised in abundance...”.² *Aletheia*: hiding and revealing, covering and uncovering, (un)veiling. Antimacassars and draperies. (Both parties of this analogy would have despised the comparison.)

Benjamin goes on about these remarkably revelatory tiny jewel-boxes: “The destructive character is the enemy of the *étui*-man. The *étui*-man looks for comfort and the case (*Gehäuse*) is its quintessence. The inside of the

¹ University of Hong Kong.

² *Gesammelte Schriften (GS)* 5.1: 53.

³ *GS* 7.1: 353-54.

case is the velvet-lined trace that he has imprinted in the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction”.³ Traces are left, as memories and clues of a past presence still present as a softly indented quasi-readability. If we are extremely lucky, talented and our *étui* has been, against the odds, preserved, there will be others who will come – for a short time – in order to read the slivers we have left behind upon our departure. There are those, and they are many, who wish to destroy all the traces, even the traces of destruction. For example, they exhume a body that has been shot and then burn it into ash, scattering that ash to the winds. They want no legibility at all, no memory or anticipation, but the small bejeweled case gives an odd sense of comfort. *Gehäuse*. Encased, but as a form of being-inhoused, of dwelling as a form of the longing for comfort. The *étui* is a home, an infinite cabinet of curiosity, a swirl of universes.

Reading such signs, as Benjamin intimately knew, is the task of a detective. The first section of “The Sign of the Four,” the second Sherlock Holmes’ story, is entitled “The Science of Deduction” and it begins like this: “Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantel-piece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined arm-chair with a long sigh of satisfaction” (1). There is the “neat morocco case” and the “velvet-lined arm-chair,” both receiving imprints, and the “long sigh of satisfaction.” It’s almost like writing, isn’t it?

Watson wants to know more, to know how Holmes’s science of deduction, necessarily connected with but not identical to, the perspicacity of his observational skills, ruminates to

his friend: “I have heard you say that it is difficult for a man to have any object in daily use without leaving the impress of his individuality upon it in such a way that a trained observer might read it. Now, I have here a watch which has recently come into my possession. Would you have the kindness to let me have an opinion upon the character or habits of the late owner?” It is now a watch-case in question, but again a case upon the surfaces of which someone (indeed a host of others) has left the “impress of his individuality” – an imprinting, a series of indentations and pin-pricks – that is readable by the astute observer to come. Holmes to Watson to the Reader (always hypothetical). A circulation catches a cogwheel and gets underway.

Lethargically, Holmes responds to Watson that he “cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.” Brain-work, perhaps what is called philosophy, is the only antidote for the banal commonplace that is existence, at least for this addictive deducer named Holmes, who is also a writer of specialist tracts on types of ash, the impressions of foot-prints, and the influence of various trades on the hand.

Holmes-Watson, which are a necessary dyad, are a function of writing that combines the observational, deductive logic, and story-telling that, contextualizing the scenario, moves the deductions along. Conan Doyle is yet another positionality in this circuitry of *polylogos* that is reading, writing, watching, thinking, and, always, a sharing. We invest shares of value each time we make in imprint,

an impress with the insertion of a needle, the light tap of a key, or the stroke of a pen. We are always tracing, leaving scat and scenting our way through the world. We carry the *étui* on our back, snail-like, but eventually it no longer fits and we cast it aside for another, larger habitation. It's a gamble, this investment strategy of reading and moving along, but it keeps us on our toes.

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Baulücke I

The gap between buildings, empty space whispering for our attention, unobtrusively, as potential for what-might-come. Spacing emptiness: waiting as the whisper of an invitation. "Surfaces can function as linearities and lines can cooperate in surfaces, and holes can exist at all scales. Everything between the dimensions is materialized... There is no randomness: there is only variation. The truly amazing feature of this system is that it is in fact structured by holes" (Spuybroek 10). This is the "structure of vagueness," which as it becomes more precisely determined also produces a complementary vagueness that awaits.

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Quinsy

An illness of the tonsils, from which Montaigne died on September 13, 1592. Was his last silent sentence "I am dying of quinsy"? Will our last sentence be declarative, imperative, or interrogative? We won't know. A final inhalation, a rattle.

Sheep livers and the language of the birds

Speaking of the Essayist, Montaigne remarked sardonically in "On Prognostication," that "As for those who understand the language of birds and learn more from the liver of a beast than from their own thought, they should be heard, I think, rather than heeded." It's an interesting question, this relationship between observing, reading as interpretation of signs, the concept of evidence in different cultural and historical scenarios, and "one's own thought."

Evidence is not self-evident, although it is usually presented as if it is. Evidence is always a construction – individual, collective, and institutional – in need of interpretation. It is always, that is, an interpretation in need of another series of interpretations that comes to a halt when a decision is rendered. Time to move on. This is philosophy's "hermeneutic circle," a circle that is not vicious but, rather, one that is necessary and inescapable. Thinking about evidence always remains within this circle – although perhaps this circle wobbles, twists, or spirals into dimensionality and fractals. If we were to try to escape this circle, which we will always wish for, we would be forced into an infinite regress toward first principles and a discourse of origins. We do not have time for this detour. This interpretive task, unending, is not, needless to say, a form of skepticism that says "we can know nothing," but, rather, a condition for knowing what we consider the "true" or the "real."

Thinking "our own thought" or "thinking through evidence" raises the question of the evi-

dence for learning by either what we traditionally call the “teacher” or what we traditionally call the “student,” both of which are inadequate to the situation of learning. Nonetheless, these approximations will have to do. The marshalling of evidence of any sort is the art of reading the world and of giving reasons – *reddere rationem*, or to “give an account of oneself”(cf the *Gospel of Luke* 16.2) – in a particularly designated domain of action: divination, experiments, exams, sports, and lovers’ quarrels. If there is evidence offered that *demonstrates* – another interesting word – that learning has occurred, we must already understand what we mean by evidence. What, however, is the evidence for evidence? Where does this process begin or end? And how might we articulate different types of evidence at work in the entangled transmission called *learning* in a philosophical or artistic sense?

Where else would we begin but with sheep’s livers? It is haruspicy, hepatoscopy, astrology, and *harpedonaptēs* (Serres on the Egyptian Gnomons). Or, perhaps, with poetry?

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;
wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world
my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom

Is this evidence? Does a Twombly or a Kiefer offer “evidence”? If so, of what sort and about what? All evidence involves a gap – actually many gaps – between the “evidence” and the “object of evidence” to which the evidence points toward in order to bind the object ever more tightly toward the “truth” of what is being affirmed, negated, proven, demonstrated. (And we are close to the monstrous here.) This gap can never be closed for then there is evidence of nothing at all, but only a concrete and faceless block of the real that stands as self-

sufficiently self-evident. This, though, never happens. All attempts to articulate matters-of-fact and states-of-affairs are always within the movement of a more encompassing event.

Learning is an event and every event engages and (re)distributes a temporalized spatiality, a spatialized temporality, all of which is incessantly, and without interruption, in motion, the movement of worlding itself. Learning is learning to ride these crosscurrents with insight, flexibility, appositeness, tenacity, and – although only very occasionally – with a graceful and powerful beauty.

As Heidegger has reminded us in *What Calls for Thinking?* there is never any teaching except when teaching becomes a “letting-learn.” Teaching can construct contexts, platforms, scenarios and situations in which learning may occur – it almost certainly will in one form or another – but teaching does not directly *cause* learning. In other words, teaching and learning is not a linear function that is duplicable over time and in different spaces. It is not a controlled or controllable experiment.

One series of images for the evidentiary situation that we are seeking to clarify is that of *interlacing*, as in an arabesque, a Möbius strip or a Klein Bottle, a Celtic knot, the tying of a pair of shoes, or the game of Cat’s Cradle: string figures, games, artworks, and mathematical puzzles. Twists in thought. Evidence is here entangled in an infinite pattern – the hermeneutic circle warped – rather than being a linear and causal function, a finite scenario of successful learning, or, God forbid, a decimalized score that looks precise but which is actually both hilarious and nonsensical. The circle is broken and this enables manifestation of the complexity of shape-shifting forms of evidence. There is pattern, but this pattern – fractals, archipelagos, unfinished rugs – always leaves loose ends, other threads to pull upon, and evidentiary strands to extend...

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The Crito

Philosophy is ventriloquism with a twist. It echoes, vibrates, resonates. Speaks-forth via the vehicles of echo-machines.

At the end of the *Phaedo* Plato tells us, through the dead letter of his writing, that Socrates' last words were *ô Kríttn, éph, tói Askłpiôi opheílomen alektruóna; allà apódote kai m amelste*. Crito asks a follow-up question, but there is only silence. And, yet, here we are: saying the same things over and over again. The silence, somehow, is built into a vast machine of writing and reading. Let's plug it in and see how it runs?

Each and every one of us, in absolute solitude and in absolute togetherness, comes to this inescapable edge, have always been, at each instant of appearing at this precipitous edge of disappearance. This is a radically different edge than all other edges. An "edge," after all, divides one region from another; we have absolutely no idea about the regionality of death, for this remains not a region – although it has of course often been imagined as just that with its own underworld or overworld geography – but a blankness. Absolute opacity. "Edge"ar-

rives at the tail end of a long and circuitous history that takes us back to the Proto-Indo-European root *ak-*,⁴ to "be sharp, rise (out) to a point, pierce." We are pierced, punctuated, and punctured by our own dying and the dying of all that-is. Coming-and-going. Full-stop.

Each day we edge toward and away from the inescapability of erasure, but none of our sacrifices and none of our ruses work. Nothing we do can give us an edge over this edge. We do, though, owe roosters and money to others, including Asklepios, the son of Apollo and some beautiful princess or another. He was, along with Achilles and a number of other notables, raised by Chiron, the most sublimated of the centaurs who exchanged his immortality for mortality and was then rewarded by Zeus by being set into the heavens as a constellation. There is a great deal more to be said, but we would soon have to begin practicing chiromancy and the infinite art of reading hands. Crito and Socrates – or their masks and mimes – await our return.

We are, always, in mourning ahead of time (What can such nonsense possibly mean: *ahead of time*)? And, yet, Socrates comes to the edge where he has always stood with a magnanimous equanimity, an incessant reflective curiosity, and even a kind of liberatory joy. He remembers something, right at the end as his body is growing cold from the hemlock, and projects a request to a friend to keep a promise forward into the future. It is a debt, payable by a cock, that he owes Asklepios, the god of healing.

At the moment of death, presumably unhealability itself, Socrates reminds his friend to make an offering to the god of healing on his behalf. He owes him something and wants to fulfil the debt, through the intermediary of a friend, just before he goes.

Then Socrates took hold of his own feet and legs, saying that when the poison

⁴ https://www.etymonline.com/word/*ak-?ref=etymonline_crossreference.

reaches his heart, then he will be gone. He was beginning to get cold around the abdomen. Then he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said – this was the last thing he uttered – “Crito, I owe the sacrifice of a rooster to Asklepios; will you pay that debt and not neglect to do so?” “I will make it so,” said Crito, “and, tell me, is there anything else?” When Crito asked this question, no answer came back anymore from Socrates.⁵

This is the last moment of *dia-logos* in the *Phaedo*, but it had begun earlier in the *Crito*. The last day is divisible; the *logos* is always at least two.

As is so often the case, Socrates opens the drama with what looks to be the simplest of questions: “Why have you come at this hour, Crito? Or isn’t it still early?” (43a). It’s just before dawn and Socrates’ death is imminent, but there is still time, just a bit of time but perhaps enough time, to talk, to think once more together, to remember the gods. It is the time night is giving way to the day, when the sun’s fingers are first casting an initially pale luminescence from over the distant horizon. What time is it? What is your reason for coming this early? Socrates is awake and time is on the move. A timing, a rhythm, of languaging, reasoning, questioning, and the morning light of the last day.

Socrates recounts his dream of a woman in white and its connections to Achilles in Homer’s *Illiad*; they speak of money, friends, and value; and then discuss whether Socrates should escape from prison and go into exile, still alive even if not able to live out his days in Athens. Crito is urging his friend to extend the time of his days on the earth and Socrates is encouraging him to think about all the implications of such a decision. Everything must be done by the coming night for the ship of

Apollo is on its way from Delos and its arrival in Piraeus is the signal for execution of the condemned.

Crito is in a rushed and anxious panic, overcome with fear and grief. Socrates, bringing his friend Crito along with him, slowly turns through the labyrinth of the argument, the pros and cons of an escape, and what gives value to existence, concluding that “it’s not living that should be our priority, but living well” (48a). For his part, Crito keeps saying the same things over and over again – this is bad repetition – and Socrates, as usual, returns to the beginning to measure the adequacy of the starting point. “I think it is most important to act with your consent and not against your will. See, then, that the starting point of the inquiry is laid down to your satisfaction and try to answer the questions in the way you think best” (49e). We are in the midst of an argument at the very edge of things about the finalities of things, rotations within rotations, but becoming differentiated as we move along with Plato-Socrates-Crito through the labyrinth of reasoning. What happens if, instead of following a string back out, that we, instead, enter into the mouth of the Minotaur?

And then, suddenly, the Laws of Athens appear as if in person, as if to speak on their own behalf. The voice of Plato is split as Socrates divides himself into new roles. Everyone is masked and multiple and we are in the theatre of Dionysos. The Laws are ventriloquized:

If the laws and the community of the city came to us when we were about to run away from here, or whatever it should be called, and standing over us were to ask, ‘Tell me, Socrates, what are you intending to do? By attempting this deed, aren’t you planning to do nothing other than destroy us, the laws, and the civic community, as much as you can? Or does it

⁵ *Phaedo*, trans. Gregory Nagy (<https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/the-last-words-of-socrates-at-the-place-where-he-died/>).

seem possible to you that any city where the verdicts reached have no force but are made powerless and corrupted by private citizens could continue to exist and not be in ruins”? (50b)

In this question, contemporaneous for the contemporary political moment, Socrates has become the virtual addressee of the discussion with the Laws, which, in this dramatically staged scenario, occupy the usual place of “Socrates” as the guiding questioner and clarifier, while Socrates – speaking on behalf of the Laws in the voice of the Laws – has slipped into the symbolic position of Crito (and all of the others who respond to Socrates’s inquiries). “Socrates” is speaker and listener as he takes on the theatrical mask, the *persona*, of the Laws. Is this a tragedy, comedy, or satyr play? All three, intertwined? How do we tell the difference? And Plato, of course, is off-stage acting out all the characters in the opening act of the drama of western metaphysics. He had wanted to be a playwright and that, perhaps, is what he became as he staged the opening acts of philosophy.

Speaking of repetition, Deleuze reminds us that philosophy and theatre – *contra* the manifest and self-contradicted trajectory of Plato – are inseparable. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the masters of maskings and street-corner buskings, “want to put metaphysics in motion, in action... they no longer reflect on the theatre in the Hegelian manner. Neither do they set up a philosophical theatre. They invent an incredible equivalent of theatre within philosophy, thereby founding simultaneously this theatre of the future and a new philosophy” (1994 DR 8). Theatre inhabits philosophy; philosophy inhabits theatre: each is a mask of the other and all masks multiply. *Mise-en-abyme; mise-en-scène*.

But the Laws have been patiently awaiting our return. They have reminded Socrates that he has always been free to leave the city at

any time that he chooses, but that “whoever remains with us, having observed how we decide lawsuits and take care of other civic matters, we claim that this man by his action has now made an agreement with us to do what we command him to do... although we allow him either of two possibilities: either to persuade us or to comply...” (52a). All of this is spoken in the conditional tense of “what-if,” creating the fictive space of virtuality in which language occurs. The Laws continue, noting that they are open to persuasion if they are deemed inadequate or unjust but if such persuasion hasn’t occurred, then the compliance of all those who have “signed” an implied civic contract through their behavior is expected. Athens, Socrates’s mother and father, has birthed and nurtured him, given him a place and a series of interlocutors to natter on about gadflies, money, love, and being-beyond-being throughout his life. Why flee now, once Athens has judged him to be guilty of impiety against the gods of the city and of corrupting the young? Democracy has its dangers.

We, however, might well resist this conclusion. After all, the charges were trumped up out of the merest shreds of truth which lent their support to the revengeful autocratic use of democracy against someone that Athens, in its official political guise, had grown frustrated with. We could easily make an argument, following Plato’s metaphysical trajectory, that the empirical Laws are not congruent with the supersensible idea of justice and that the latter, always dividing the former, would allow Socrates to be free to escape. Socrates, in truth, might well agree with this conclusion, but he is not willing to abandon his city, the city of his mother, father, lovers, and friends. Has the court misjudged the scenario in condemning him to death? Yes, but that is no reason to try to extricate himself from its judgment, for they are simply continuing to act out of an ignorance that believes it knows that what it does is best. Socrates understands the delusional

nature of this judgement, but he sets himself along a counter-track. The time for argument is coming to a close, but the time of offerings and a continuing question are just opening up.

Having put themselves on trial, the Laws rest their case and Socrates, Plato's greatest character, picks up the thread in his artificially natural voice. "Rest assured, my dear friend Crito, that this is what I seem to hear, just as the Korybantes seem to hear the pipes and, this sound, from these words, resonates within me and makes me unable to hear anything else" (54d). This is strange. The Korybantes, offspring of the Thalia, the Muse of comedy and poetry, and Apollo – a figure who flows like a subterranean river throughout these dialogues – are the caretakers of both Zeus and Dionysos (but let's not get into the complexities of lineage and temporalities). They are a band of dancing ecstasies – male, armored, and associated with rites of initiations as boys moved into manhood – most likely originating from distant Phrygia on the Anatolian plateau.

Socrates, who has earlier been instructed in a dream to learn music – the arts of all the muses – now turns toward another form of ecstatic listening: the pipes of the Korybantes, which resonate in his inner ear, drowning out all other sounds. The Laws are deafening and Socrates, moved to this point of ecstatic being-overcome through the patience of the contours of a dialogical argument, consents with equanimity to their decree. Of course he will not flee. Athens, his home, is the place of his birth and the place of his death. The gods and the Laws have converged and he has heard nothing from his *daimonion*, that quiet but imperative sign of resistance that reminds him what *not* to do.

The offering to Asclepius and the trust of friendship, based not on merit but on a generosity of thought that is another direction for philosophy's task. None of Socrates' friends, including Crito who has by the end left the scene out of grief, "deserves" his friendship, but

he offers it, like the questioning conversation that is philosophy itself, free of charge.

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The city as a crime scene

Walter Benjamin has famously asked: "But isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn't the task of the photographer – descendant of augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?" (GS 2.1:385). Photography as a descendant of augurs and haruspices? Only Benjamin could have thought and said this. Photography, of a certain sort, *reads* the city and its future in its image-lives. A technoshamanism at work. How might we transport it to the next stop of the *metaphorai* of the city?

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Black patent leather shoes

Easter Sunday in the Atlanta suburbs, circa 1960. The American South. Burroughs had just published *Naked Lunch*, Civil Rights and

Vietnam were slowly beginning to generate heat, and Kennedy would soon announce the Peace Corps and the moon-shot. Everyone in the neighborhood was laboring with a mighty effort to become-more-American, to become-more-middle class, to become-more-Christian. It was a small world – a good world in many ways – but was already cross-cut and opening to the winds of change that were swirling from over all the horizons and wafting up, with a slightly acrid stench, from the underworld drift of tectonic plates.

We did not know much; we did not talk much. The maids, bedecked in starched white uniforms, came from across town on the bus once a week, lined up at the corner in the afternoon to go back. I did not know much. The last Big War was still turbulently impressed on our parents and grandparents, but we did not understand that, just felt the tragedies, the invisible wrenching, the lack of understanding. More-American; More-Christian; More-Middle-Class.

Flannery O’Conner was living at the Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville, on the banks of the Oconee River, and publishing *The Violent Bear It Away*. We all remember, of course, the Oconee from the first page of *Finnegans Wake*: “Sir Tristram, violer d’amores, fr’over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war: nor had topsawyer’s rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselfe to Laurens County’s gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time” (Joyce 1).⁶ Do not be tempted by an attempt at an exegesis of this passage or you will be lost forever in the riverine circularities of the Purgatory of reading. Get Thee Behind Me! All we need to know, right now, is that the Oconee runs through both Dublin and Milledgeville.

Those Sunday black patent leather shoes of my mother and sister are images of my own erratic efforts at understanding. Everything is reflected in those dark and polished surfaces, reflecting only a shimmer of light but not the determinations of specific objects. They are signs, bearers of histories, encasers (*Gehäuse*) of adult feet and of small feet skipping toward the unknown. We dressed up and sang hymns. I got bored, became petulant, and fell in love with the girl in the next pew. He is Risen. Then we played together in the sandbox, the shoes stored away in the closet for the next Sunday.

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On genre confusion

I do not know what it means to write fiction, philosophy, novels or essays. One aspect of this conundrum is a bad faith desire on my part, constructed on a fear of predators, not to be seen, not to be held accountable. Simply to hide via multiple forms of camouflage:

Camouflage is the use of any combination of *materials, coloration, or illumination for concealment*, either by making animals or objects hard to see, or by disguising them as something else. Examples include the leopard’s spotted coat, the battledress of a modern soldier, and the leaf-mimic katydid’s wings. A third approach, *motion dazzle*, confuses the observer with a conspic-

⁶ See references to *Finnegans Wake* at <https://genius.com/4170830/James-joyce-finnegans-wake-chap-11/> for more information.

uous pattern, *making the object visible but momentarily harder to locate*. The majority of camouflage methods aim for *crypsis*, often through a general resemblance to the background, high contrast **disruptive coloration**, eliminating shadow, and **counter-shading**. In the open ocean, where there is no background, the principal methods of camouflage are *transparency, silvering, and countershading*, while the ability to *produce light* is among other things used for **counter-illumination** on the undersides of **cephalopods** such as **squid**. Some animals, such as **chameleons** and **octopuses**, are capable of **actively changing their skin pattern and colors**, whether for camouflage or for signaling. It is possible that some *plants* use camouflage to evade being eaten by **herbivores**.⁷

What is all of this but the brilliance of subterfuge, the deep desire to stay alive in a hostile environment that, indifferently, is hoping to eat each of us? This desire of the other to eat us is a desire that will, without any doubt at all, be fulfilled. Evolution, that great goddess of mutability, teaches “us” – though there is no “us” being taught – to hide, to flicker, to transmutate so that we will have just one more instance of “life.” Each instant, precious. Each instant, dissipating as it appears. The other will be sated on the feast that is each of us, just as the other is being-eaten as it devours us. Spinoza’s *conatus* is set in the context of a death-drive that overpowers desire to remain-in-being.

If I keep moving fast enough – moving from essay to aphorism to vignette to the novel as a practice-ground – I will create a *motion-dazzle* that will hide me in the woods, unspottable. I can become-chameleon and be a professor or a poet, a taverna-owner or a diplomat of cosmopolitanism. Who knows what? Catch me if you can. Here now, gone now. Feint, weave.

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camouflage> (my italics).

⁸ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/heed>.

This discourse is often set against that of “authenticity,” where we are who we are, we are transparent, we are pinnable-downable, we are for-real. Good faith is a good thing; common sense is a good sense; the common good is a good good. Most of us are suspicious of such talk, tied as it is to suspicious characters in the history of philosophy or to a metaphysics of essences, but – for any ethics to occur – there comes a point where each of us needs to say “Here I am; I am in hiding but will share my code of camouflage with those who are hunting me.” The worlding of the world as the noir of movement: visibility-hiding; *aletheia* as Earth and World. Writing, simultaneously, demonstrates and obscures.

All of this, of course, is simply obfuscation. In my own genre confusion, I am simply hiding the fact that I have little to no talent either in fiction, essay, philosophy, or critique, much less in poetry as a proper domain of its own. I love language, the move and fit of words, the mist that arises in a field in the morning or the moment when evening brings a slight shift of the winds. The fit-shiftingness-fit of words. But I have no sense of character, plot, cadence or the patience required of the novel or the poem. Perhaps I should simply be satisfied with one form of writing rather than try to move between genres to create new genres. That is a sensible suggestion, worth heeding. Heeding, turning in the that direction, emerges from an infinite complex that includes “Old English *hedan* ‘observe; to take care, attend, care for, protect, take charge of,’ from West Germanic **hodjan* (source also of Old Saxon *hodian*, Old Frisian *hoda*, Middle Dutch and Dutch *hoeden*, Old High German *huotan*, German *hüten* ‘to guard, watch’), from PIE **kadh-* ‘to shelter’.”⁸

The pathways would wind through the dark and interminable forests of language – near the bend of a green-white rushing mountain river

and through the winter woods we think we know – initially skirting the cities with their artificial lighting, although I will, by hook or crook, always return to the boulevards, mazes, and alleyways of the city. That, I suppose, is the accident of my destiny. At least for now. Or, perhaps, it's only another ruse, a way of moving through the dappled light. A step ahead, or behind, of perception.

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The comet of the inner eye

Mouches volantes, flying flies, they are sometimes called, but in fact they are microscopic comets darting through the universe of the interior of the eyeball. The comets block the incoming light and thus cast shadows and the eye sees, quite miraculously, a part of the inside of itself. The video of the floating speck, backed by networked blood-vessels and the blindspot of the optic nerve, is an expression of our fascination about how the body operates and how it comes unstitched, a minuscule part at a time. The molecules are preparing to be freed from this gross form of the mesosphere and released to the larger and the smaller. The stretched whiling that is the person that is each of us will, however slowly, snap. The long history of the eye, of visibility, and of instrumentation has been internalized, magnified, compressed.

Muses

My sisters, my brothers, my friends, my masters. There are not many, only the Nine: an infinity.

The knell of chance

"And since the question here concerns a glottic gesture," Derrida writes, "the tongue's work on (it)self, saliva is the element that also glues the unities to one another. Association is a sort of gluing contiguity, never a process of reasoning or symbolic appeal; the glue of chance makes sense, and progress is rhythmized by *little jerks*, gripping and suction, patchwork tacking – in every sense and direction – and gliding penetration" (*Glas*, 142, second column).

A surface is struck; there is a blow, however minute. A resounding vibrates, solemnly and in diminishing waves, felt. Everything glides, imperturbably, along...

Reference

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Obliteration

As it appears, literature erases itself. Autonomy and autoimmunity simultaneously at work. Fictivity: the unreal, the paradox of sense, the *noema*, the non-existent objects of St. Meinong's logic. A tale, like all tales, told by an idiot. We are all born and die idiots, speaking in our own idioms. All literature worth its salt is idiomatic, immediately recognizable by its differentiated style. Writing, as art, idiomatizes. Literature obliterates the world for the sake of the imagination, of possibility, of virtuality that creates, sometimes fleetingly and sometimes for millennia, a new earth. None

of these words approaches anything like adequacy, but we do not know how to speak about what matters most that through these expressivities. Oblivion awaits all. In the meantime, some of us write.

Virality

An invisible and potent contagion that is, perhaps, floating innocently if not innocuously through the air. The *perhaps* drives behavior, feelings, plans: *what-if?* This perhaps opens the world and turns the corners of the streets. It allays chance – I will plan for the possibility, the probability – but it simultaneously keeps determinations constrained, keeping chance on the move: whatever I do cannot converge absolutely with the real, for the real always blooms with the perhaps.

Perhaps I'll go for a walk; perhaps I will write; perhaps I will die from the COVID-19, my lungs inflamed, without the succor of the sweetness of air. Perhaps not. This “not” as a negation of the perhaps negates only the specific determinations of the perhaps, but not the structure of the perhaps itself, which twists and turns unpredictably, opening up unforeseen avenues of action. The perhaps is a structure of objectivity. Perhaps, which is constrained and operationalized by the historical a priori that gives us our particular set of chances, keeps the mark of the question perpetually mobile. Perpetually to be addressed.

Is the virus living or non-living? That assumes that we know the difference between the two terms, even though we have only recently, as modernists, constructed this dividing line.

The Virus is the figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife by claiming that is it is a difference that makes no difference not because all is alive, vital, and potent, nor because all is inert, replicative, unmoving,

dormant and enduring. Because the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus, it can use and ignore this division for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself. The Virus copies, duplicates and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances. It confuses and levels the different between Life and Nonlife while carefully taking advantage of the minutest aspect of their differentiation. (Povinelli 2016 19)

The virus is living and not-living; not-living and living (and this is all connected to the related false dichotomy of the machinic and non-machinic). It doesn't “traverse” or “bridge” that distinction, since the distinction is not stabilized in-place ahead of time, but, rather, the virus dissipates this structure from its origin (which is historical and not ontological).

This round of the corona-virus has shown us how powerful the “sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself” can be, as well as the way in which it “experiments with, tests its circumstances.” This is precisely how “we humans” also respond, stretched out along the way of living our dying and dying our living.

Conatus; transmutations; constant variations...

Reference

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Geontologies: a requiem to late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Starry Night in a coffee cup

How could I resist? There it was on the menu in the Lex on Belcher's Street: Van Gogh's *Starry Night* floating on the top layer of marvelous white cream in a creamy porcelain cup

layered below with the darkness of an espresso as thick as the thickest impasto. HKD\$88. The waitress said they printed the image on the screen of the cream. Brilliant! Or, they could print a picture that I sent them. Van Gogh must be killing himself again as his images become the very image of the simulacrum. Cream as a canvas as a screen; a printer as a projector interfacing with the aromatic liquidity of the coffee; a successful capitalist lure; a stimulant that, sipped, enters the depths of my body, incorporating art as a flavored scrim of color, to be, eventually, transmogrified and excreted, sent on its way but in a form that is unrecognizable to the aesthetic eye.

“Painted in June 1889, it describes the view from the east-facing window of his asylum room at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence⁹, just before sunrise, with the addition of an ideal village.” That is helpful, but not sufficient. There cannot, of course, ever be the “sufficient” when it comes to art: every commentary is necessary but radically *in* sufficient.

Lavender blooms wildly purple outside the creamy beige walls of the monastery.

“The nocturne series was limited by the difficulties posed by painting such scenes from nature, i.e., at night. The first painting in the series was *Café Terrace at Night*¹⁰, painted in Arles in early September 1888, followed by *Starry Night Over the Rhône*¹¹ later that same month.” I have never stepped outside of the *Terrasse du café le soir*.

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Kochhar-Lindgren, Gray. “Painting.” In *Night Café: the amorous notes of a barista*. Aalborg: Eye Corner Press, 2010.
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⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint-R%C3%A9my-de-Provence>.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caf%C3%A9_Terrace_at_Night.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starry_Night_Over_the_Rhone.

Nightboat

A resonant image: timbrous. The night evokes itself, always full of eddies, pulls, currents. A boat stays afloat, but only for so long and only if it knows how to minimally construct itself and navigate the currents. A plank, raft, canoe, steamer, cruiser, a floating world. Queequeg and Ishmael knew the nightboat; Ahab was blinded by the boat of white (although white manifests differently in different games of writing, such as Serres’ on the white blankness of the omnivalence of hominescence). “Perhaps writing a book is a way of locating and capturing something that will never stop moving. Perhaps reading a book is a related gesture.” The night is scintillant, quivers with invisibility, visibility, orbs of radiant midnight blues.

Reference

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Dietrologia

“In Italian, there is a useful word, *dietrologia* – literally, ‘behindology,’ the art of deciphering the hidden meanings of things, including the most transparent of them. Forget transparence – there is *always* a plot” (1). In other words, there is always a stain on the mirror, a blank and black spot, a remainder outside the field of intelligible or sensible vision, which is itself a false dichotomy. We are always falling behind in our quest to see what is behind the scenes of appearances. This is solved, in a way, when – as Deleuze reminds us – we remember that there are no more appearances, but only apparitions. In another way, we cannot not look for the behind, the out-of-sight, the around-the-corner. *The Wizard of Oz*.

Reference

Bradatan, Costica. "Always narrating: the making and unmaking of Umberto Eco." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 9 March, 2020: 1- 17.

Books in the cedar tree

Looking out the kitchen window in the early evening I saw a shelf of colorful books inside the cedar on the other side of the glass. The shelf fit perfectly inside the trunk of the tree. It was quite beautiful, a striking image. The shelf was in the tree; the window was in front of me, transparent and reflective; the bookshelf was off at an angle, invisible except in the reflection in the window, the shelf inside the tree. The angles had to be exact; the light had to be exact. The singularity of multiple vision.

The smooth porcelain whiteness of the inside curve of the coffee cup was covered, unevenly, with the foam of the leftover single-shot latte. A moonscape; the sea as it washes back out over the sand, leaving traces, pockmarks, foam, and tributaries.

The pileated woodpecker is back, moving from place to place out in the woods attacking the trees like a huge mechanical jackhammer. The holes sculpted over time are beautifully shaped doors into food and home. Walking down the road this morning, I saw one banging away at a cedar. It looked like it had just been to the barber, with its red Mohawk crest, a fashion statement indeed. Very elegant. It has zygodactyl feet, two toes pointed forward and two backwards, so that it can climb vertically and hang out with great panache on a tree trunk. They say the woodpeckers have been around for 50 million years or more. Not bad. They are the pterodactyls in miniature.

A sun-bleached book – José Saramago's *The Double* – sits in the back seat of my car, every day absorbing more destructive light from the sun and every night wishing it were some-

where else, absorbing the freshwater of a lake or being read by lamplight. I'm sure the back window focuses the light and turns the pages even yellower than they would be if the book were sitting in the sun on the porch. But there is something profoundly appealing to me about that book in the back seat, exhibiting its mortality, its wear.

That's what reading and writing do. They wear down, wear away, become crinkled with age, use, and the weather. Not to reveal a secret essence – there is no such thing – but to reveal the public secret of reading and writing: it must go on; it can't go on. We must take up the task again and again and each time we take it up a step closer to death, our own edges curling and becoming sunstruck, the letters fading into illegibility as the paper dries and the spine cracks.

The moon is a creamy thumbprint in the blue afternoon sky, visible at first through a V of tall firs on the hill and then, when I'm out on the sand-flats, high in the sky. The moon had moved quickly – whether of its own accord or moved by an invisible greater power I couldn't say – for I had only been walking for about ten minutes. The eelgrass smelled of sewage and a green pipe jutted into the beach from the houses. The sky was huge and blue, the mountains of the Olympic Peninsula blue ridges, the water a fluctuation of blues. The shingled and faded beach houses, modest but confident along the shoreline, stand under the infinite expanse of blue. The bald eagle floats down from a tall tree on the hill. The water is cold on my feet as it curls in from the Sound. I want to disappear into summer; I want to become summer. My sandals are full of wet sand.

The books are all in the cedar tree, visible and untouchable, waiting to be read and never to be read. The window, the angle, the light, the shimmering reflection that is the world.

The terror of Monday

It is absolutely predictable. Sometime between 2 and 5pm on Sunday afternoon, perhaps with the slightest premonition of the evening (but I'm not sure), a small terror drifts down upon me: *Monday*. I am walking through Sheung Wan, sitting on a café terrace down at Cyberport, or reading *Le roman policier* – or perhaps just sitting in the flat doing nothing – and it quietly strikes. A barely audible whisper of terror – something like a soft *hiss* – and the slightest brush of an angel's wing. There is an intake of breath, not much but enough to notice, and the weightless weight of a foreboding. Not much, just a little. It has a wing, a hand, and a voice. What does it say? “You must go back to work.” My time, which I have been pretending is my own, will once again belong to another and I will step back into the role of employee, servant, slave. Since they pay me for my time, my time is their time. I am uprooted by the trowel of temporality, just ever so slightly, and the serenity of my time that is my own is disrupted by the repossession of my time by another. (Cf. Hegel, then Marx.) It says: “You cannot get everything done; you cannot, no matter how hard you work at it, finish.” It addresses me, as it addresses you, as “you.” It is an impersonal personalized utterance. A universal that is singularized. Things will not be wrapped up on Monday for Monday, or on Friday for the previous week, or on the weekends for the pleasures of the weekends. There will be loose-ends; things will remain undone, partial, out-of-joint. And at some indeterminable point *Monday* will not be the first instance of a new work-week, but the last instance of what we call “a life.” My disappearance will quickly disappear, but I will, at last, no longer know Monday's terror. My time has never been my time: always and only a gift.

The gift

The gift of time, inseparable from the gift of dying and becoming-corpsed, makes us cry out, laugh, speak, snap, take pictures, write, and attempt – always insufficiently – to learn how to live before it is too late. We will, undoubtedly, fail.

Impossible sorrow

To do nothing except let the sorrow of each thing, passing, ride through me. An impossibility. The need to make marks.

Vaghezza

“Surely, it cannot be a coincidence” writes Lars Spuybroek, “that one of the modern texts in the history of aesthetics to employ the term ‘grace,’ Firenzuola’s 1541 *On the Beauty of Women*, compares it to the Italian term *vaghezza*, which means ‘vagueness,’ ‘charm,’ as well as ‘movement from place to place’” (2020 24). Vagueness can be charming as it moves along at its own pace and of its own accord. There is, for instance, the *wandering spirits* of Petrarch’s *Sonnets*:

QUANDO Amor i begli occhi a terra
inchina
E i vaghi spirti in un sospiro accoglie
Con le sue mani, e poi in voce gli scioglie
Chiara, soave, angelica, divina;
Sento far del mio cor dolce rapina... (II)

Spuybroek, as we have seen, has long been interested in the “structure of vagueness,” a phrase that pricks our logical hackles, but also triggers our fascination with the inevitable necessity of the obscure, the muzzy, the vague, the errant and the wandering. This, after all, accompanies everything we do. Vagaries have structure, but it is a structure of a strange sort, mobile and self-generating. We are all born on, and under, a wandering planet.

Analyzing the “agential action” of the “wool-

water machines” of Frei Otto and his team at the Institute for Lightweight Structures, Spuybroek writes that what emerges from the process is a “complex or *soft rigidity*... we should therefore resist the idea that the first stage is a rigid order and the end result is just a romantic labyrinth or a park. Actually the arabesque order of the end result is as rigid as the first stage of the grid, but much more intelligent because it optimizes between individual necessities and collective economy. Yet it is not an easily readable and clear form of order, but a *vague order*; it is hardly possible to distinguish between surface area, linear elements, and holes” (2005).

The action of the wool-water machines is of an agential intelligence based on a constrained freedom set into motion by “three algorithms.” This is the intelligence of materiality itself that forms itself as it goes and “though the order is vague, it should nonetheless be considered very precise, because nothing is left out. There is no randomness: there is only variation” (2005). A precise vagueness; a vague precision. We have stepped outside the fabled Cartesian grid of precise points mapped to a set of coordinates nor are we in the fabled box of ordinary thinking. We are quite close, instead, to the Stoic-Deleuzean “paradox of the logic of sense,” but not quite in a situation of equivalence. Neighborhoods; affinities.

I will not attempt to list the things that wander, for lists themselves certainly wander, but suffice it to say that there is nothing that does not wander. Worlding: errancy, disinclinations, vortices. Turbulence. The vague can, on occasion, be clarified, but the clarified also then produces the next penumbra of obscurity. Chance events: clouds. Causal and casual ramifications.

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Art, intimacy, poverty

Not much can be said, just a tiny morsel of an utterance that, perhaps, we are mishearing in its quiet reserve:

Art is the intimacy of poverty
 Art is the poverty of intimacy
 Intimacy is the art of poverty
 Intimacy is the poverty of art
 Poverty is the intimacy of art
 Poverty is the art of intimacy

Art is a generosity that arises out of a deep sense of poverty. Emptiness as the requisite for the line of making. Every artist feels incapable of the task of art. This is not because of a personality defect or because of a miserable self-image. Nor is it, in any simple quantifiable manner, because the abundance of the world, even the simplest thing of the world, infinitely exceeds our capacity for engaging it in a medium of expression. The task of art makes demands that are impossible to fulfill. Cézanne in the thunder and the downpour, buying paints.

We are poverty-stricken, stricken by the pure meagerness of what we have to give as the task of art is given to us to undertake. With the deepest passion we can bring to bear on the task, we begin to craft something – a poem, a painting, a score – and we are bound to fail. How do we live with this failure? How is this failure the very success of art, even as it undermines all the usual notions of success?

We remain intimate with emptiness, with the almost-emptiness of words, color, sound. We remain as close as we can bear to the silent and invisible fire that is always consuming us.

Art consumes us; it consumes itself; and, there, art remains. There, shimmering, are the remains of art. We learn, as we are able, the enigmatic, difficult gifts of poverty that demands a response of a making that fails to achieve itself. This is its glory.

Poverty is simple open-handedness. Waiting, then turning the hands over and beginning, without knowing what we are doing, to make art. Poverty is a waiting with expectant lack of expectations. Then: act. But even act as a form of waiting on the edge of the crease between subject-object-world, on the edge of knowability, on the edge of appearance-vanishing.

In “The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France,” Blaise Cendrars wrote:

My poor life
This shawl
Frayed on strongboxes full of gold
I roll along with
Dream
And smoke
And the only flame in the universe
Is a poor thought...

Nowhere

“The only flame of the universe/Is a poor thought.” What a thought, what a flame. We are stricken with poverty, with incapacity and impossibility, and this is enough. Ashes to ashes, but in the dash of the between, the poverty of poetry, the poverty of thought. The gift that lifts a voice. A slow flame: all is fire.

Reference

Cendrars, Blaise. “The prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France.” In *Nowhere: People, Place, Time*, translated by Ron Padgett. <https://nowheremag.com/2011/04/the-prose-of-the-trans-siberian-and-of-little-jeanne-of-france-blaise-cendrar/>.

Gray space

Speaking about Marcel Duchamp’s innovations and looking ahead into the then next century, David Bowie insisted that “What the piece of art is about is the gray space in the middle. That gray space in the middle is what the 21st century is going to be about.” This would be “exhilarating” and “terrifying,” “absolute fragmentation.” Here we are.

Reference

BBC Archive. “David Bowie: Internet is the new rock n roll.” *Newsnight | Classic Celebrity Interview*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLf6KZmJyrA>

On becoming writing

“It,” thankfully, will outlast “me.” When I first set out to become-a-writer, I did not know, not quite, what that might entail. I still don’t, not quite, and I am still working at becoming-writer. Feeling my way in the dark – through my fingers, my feet, my nose, my eyes, my ears, and my tongue – along the log-strewn edge of a northern beach, through the thick loam of the forest of firs, across a trackless desert where my feet and my heart become unbearably heavy, always in a certain darkness with an occasional flash of something or the trembling vibration of a thread. Experimenting, failing to experiment. Stuttering, stammering. Trying-out.

I was, first of all, a reader who felt an obligation to contribute to that enigmatic pleasure that kneaded distances and opened possible worlds. I tried poetry but have little sense of a visual imagination and a tin-ear for music. (Ask my wife, whom I met at a poetry reading, so at least all was not lost.) I tried novels, but I have no sense at all of plot or character, which I have heard are important for the craft of the

novelist. I tried, even earlier, fictionalizing an encounter with Descartes and something about that has stuck. Odd, what sticks.

A sentence here, a sentence there; a word there and a word here. *Here* and *there* never stay-put, they are never set-into-place. Perhaps a paragraph, maybe even a page. That's about all I can hope for and the obliteration of all obliteration is certain. This will be, in large part, an act of ventriloquism in which I parrot the codes that the world has given me, at least the ones that I have been able to pick up in small shreds, some with what seems like blurred letters that have run together across all the surfaces of the Earth.

My hope is that a tiny line of the codes bequeathed by ventriloquism might be inflected with an accent, partially the long vowels from Tennessee and Georgia, partially inflected by bits-and-pieces of French and German, a few poorly pronounced syllables of Cantonese, and the infinite worlds of the lost languages that pinpoint my location by their immense absence that is nonetheless in the closest proximity to

what I am able to say and how I can say it. *Style*, with its rhythms, is the essential task. The *about* recedes before the singing and stuttering of style.

Language is not an enclosure and it is not essentially a machine for representing the world outside of itself in an harmonious accordance. Nothing is contained "in" language. Language is a flowing forth in all directions that sweeps us along, a torrential force that almost always goes unnoticed and is absolutely modest in its willingness to stay off-stage, obscured and quiet. It is (in)human, operating at every scale and at every con-junction and every dis-junction, every criss-crossing of every expressivity. (These occur at the same instant as the instant appears and dissipates instantly.)

With the time I have left – today, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow – I will scribble across the page in as many ways as I can. I will accentuate with an accent, a style. This – along with my attempts at generosity – are what I ask to be judged for.

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