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## The Veil of Esteem: On Seeing Oneself Being Seen (Part Three: A Loan)

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# The Veil of Esteem: On Seeing Oneself Being Seen (Part Three: A Loan)

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Melba Hoffer<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This essay is the third and final of a three-part series titled “The Veil of Esteem: On Seeing Oneself Being Seen.” Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s “reflection through vignette” method, I inquire into the notions and interconnections between memory and esteem. Esteem is the truth of oneself through the eyes of the other, and any truth of esteem must be told from the perspective of that other, through the spectating other. Thus, I find that any story of esteem is veiled. This final part, A Loan, posits that our unified recollection is a fiction culled from fragmented truths. This isn’t all bad. It’s the only way we can shape the heterogeneous multiplicity of happy accidents, shaping it in a poetic way. We need to look back from the future to cultivate things that may turn out to be desirable that are happening now. In other words, we can’t leave accident to chance. Otherwise, we’re left with a nothingness that’s but a lack of vision. The story is narrated not as a representation of a person or of people, but the discourse through which I have been lent her voice. I am the translator through which she is now speaking. The translator is the producer of the discourse that suffocates her and allows her to breathe in gasped breaths, the producer of the discourse that both takes away her voice and gives her voice. The first part of this series, “Fragment/Never Thinking of Tomorrow,” appears in *International Review of Qualitative Research*, Volume 5, Issue 1; the second part, “Riddle and Accident,” appears in *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, Volume 12, Issue 2.

## Keywords

ethics, esteem

## Translation

To see oneself is to see through the eyes of the other, but this other is not another who stands outside of one’s own mind. This other is the other through which one is oneself, through which one is made oneself. I am but a fiction, as is she. This is not to say that we are not. We are indeed, but the we presented here are a fiction insofar as all truth must be told as a fiction, for all told truth has the structure of narration. Narration must be narrated from a point of view. One might have chosen to narrate the truth of oneself through the first person, but the first-person narrator cannot tell the story of esteem.

Esteem is the truth of oneself through the eyes of the other, and any truth of esteem must be told from the perspective of that other, through the spectating other. Thus, any story of esteem is veiled. The truth of one-self is always hidden to oneself when esteem is concerned, for there is no such thing as self-esteem. Esteem must come from the other who is in one’s own mind. What’s mistaken for self-esteem is but a translation of the discourse of desire. And it’s for this reason that I must write of her. And who, exactly, am I? I am not one person, nor am I an amalgamation of

people who have loved her. I’m not a representation of a person or of people, but the discourse through which she is a woman longing for air. I have been lent her voice. I am the translator through which she is now speaking. The translator is the producer of the discourse that suffocates her and allows her to breathe in gasped breaths, the producer of the discourse that both takes away her voice and gives her voice.

She herself is not who she is, though she is indeed another who is. She must exist, but it must be that she remains veiled to both of us who are presented in this discourse. She must remain veiled, and she is indeed veiled by this discourse which is not, in actuality, my own.

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## Tobacco Is Its Own Best Filter

Strangely, I found myself insisting that she smoke in my apartment. Now, she's about to board a train to see her mother. I had packed her a lunch that I had accidentally left in the refrigerator. I bum a cigarette from her while she smokes one. I've always hated ultralights, but it doesn't make sense. While there are many ways to stop resisting death, lung cancer is somehow comforting. Lung cancer isn't risky but certain. Lung cancer isn't a mere suspicion. Furthermore, it's common.

I tell her that I'll see her on Sunday. Her breath tastes only mildly of tobacco, much more of burning paper, but sadly mine must be the same. I've always hated ultralights, and she is beautiful.

## Tandem Bike

There's a tandem bike that my grandparents used to have, one gear, backpedal to break. It was yellow, and it made noises not unlike their washing machine. The kickstand came out too far and would contact one of the pedals every time it came around. The rhythm was reassuring, the sound sometimes annoying.

I remember where the bike used to stay in their garage. It was always tangled between the wall's exposed two-by-fours and tennis ball hoppers. The hoppers themselves always seemed to be flush with the bumper of whatever car the garage was meant to protect and that car would've been either an all-blue crushed-velvet interior Buick or a white Volvo, tan interior. The tedious maneuvering needed to free the bike was always eventually rewarding, especially when we—one of five cousins and I—had managed not to scratch the precious car or upset the collection of precariously hung rakes and garden tools. It was also a relief to breathe air that wasn't that of the garage.

I only have a handful of vivid memories involving that yellow bike. The content of one those memories is the reason why I have three scars on my right knee. My cousin Tito drove us onto an unpaved road. I had momentarily fallen off, though not completely. Gravel is rough, and I have no nostalgia for it. Furthermore, I have no nostalgia for the time I accepted an ill conceived dare to be pulled on a brakeless scooter roped to the back of it. That was the reason for a scar on my right elbow which is now apparently gone. Yet another memory is of an event that caused no scars, but the dare was no less ill-conceived. I was to ride solo, seated in the back, hunched over the second set of handlebars while reaching forward to steer down the steps of a nearby Pentecostal church. Pentecostals must like to climb. I'm not sure how I survived. Still, tandem bikes are meant for two.

A good, noninjury-related memory I have of the bike seemed to be a screen memory, but a picture my mom sent me years later proves it to be actual. I remember riding

behind my father and watching the world go by from the side. His cologne smelled somewhat better than the garage, and in this memory, I had somehow managed to stay unacquainted with the ground. I was very happy.

In the memorialized moment, however, I look pensive, almost sad. The shutter speed must've been really fast because you can see the spokes without motion blur. In the instant made perpetual, the bike seems strangely, impossibly balanced. The background is of the hospital where my father worked. It was across the street from the house. There's a Beetle parked in a place that doesn't look like a parking spot. Maybe it was an emergency. I have no memories of how my father's outfit matched the bike. He mustn't have anticipated how time yellows old pictures. I'm not sure how young I was, but I couldn't reach the pedals, something I also don't remember.

She's five years my junior, and I wonder if she'd been born then. She's happiest on her bike, happiest in motion, happiest in the open, perhaps then at peace. It'd be nice to ride a tandem bike with her. If I become an obstruction to the view, she can drive and I can look to the side, though I'd have the urge to show her my scars first.

## Smoking in the Open

[S]moking is nonetheless an expressly human attitude, and I do not think there is any comparable animal attitude. Smoking, on the contrary, is the most exterior thing to our understanding. Insofar as we are absorbed in smoking we escape ourselves, we slip into a semiabsence, and if it is true that a concern for elegance is always connected to waste, smoking is elegance, is silence itself.

—Georges Bataille, 2001, *The Unfinished System of Non-knowledge*, p. 6

Not only has it become otherwise illegal but also we have to smoke in the open. The animal is in the open but doesn't know that it is. When we're aware, there's only concealment and disconcealment. But if we're in fact slipping into semiabsence when smoking, then we're indeed the closest we can be to the pure openness of exposure. We aren't, in other words, just twenty-five feet from the entrance of an interior. Smoking, then, is the model of strictly human consumption par excellence. When we smoke we consume from habit, not from need. Breathing becomes inoperative and deliberate. And not only are we the furthest from being a creature of need when we smoke, but we partake in a consumption that's at the same time a nonconsumption. First, it's a nonconsumption insofar as the cigarette is consumed by proxy from the fact that we've set it on fire. Second, we don't fully absorb the smoke but must exhale it. Last, those of us who chain-smoke do so from the standpoint of continuity. True, there can be no concept of continuity in the open, but then again, a semiabsence is also a semipresence.

## Secondhand Smoke

She tries to remain detached from popular culture. She jokes about being elitist but does so from an insecurity about really thinking people think she is. It's a mere insecurity. She isn't elitist. She's only generous, at times to a fault.

Consider enjoyment from the standpoint of usufruct, the right to enjoyment. When usufruct concerns a rival good, all those with the right to enjoy who enjoy the good foreclose the possibility of enjoyment for others. I think part of her not wanting to be common is related to the adherence to the principle not to squander resources and to the adherence to the principle to consume responsibly. It's as though if she partakes in the common, she forecloses the possibility of others enjoying it. Yes, she enjoys the rarity of a rare enjoyment, but it's also wanting to partake in something that doesn't steal enjoyment from the neighbor. It's the same as a considerate person not wanting to fill the air we all need to breathe with secondhand smoke. I miss her generosity.

## Looking Up

If nothing in us veils the celestial glories, we are worthy of infinite love. Compared with the person I love, the universe seems poor and empty. This universe isn't "risky" since it's not "perishable."

—Georges Bataille, 1994, *On Nietzsche*, "Diary: February-April 1944," p. 69

I don't often look up at night, but I didn't want the smoke to go across the way to the people who were only having beers. The stars are pretty, though, but I know I'll still not remember that they're there. I'm sitting in the courtyard of my building. I've lived here for about a year, but it hadn't occurred to me to use the seating outside. She makes me think differently, and I like it. She's also right. It's a good community space.

The people of whom I'm being considerate are sitting where we once sat. I can't sit there anymore, nor can I sleep on my side of the bed, the side she once usurped from me. I can't sit where we used to sit, one because it's too lonely, and two because there are things that fall from the trees. They're not exactly acorns. I'm scared for the beer couple, but maybe they'll be lucky.

When we were sitting where we had once sat, I had explained that I can be fascinated by almost anything whatever, almost like a child. As a complaint, she reminded me that I wasn't. Hers was a response to a complaint of mine, a complaint only thinly veiled. Regrettably, I had expressed this complaint as an assertion that I can be fascinated by almost anything. I had complained because I hadn't yet understood why she seemed to deliberately limit her interests. Now, I think I understand, and what I

understand to be an understanding is something that also makes me miss her.

She can't be interested in the things that most interest me because she doesn't wish to steal my enjoyment. I doubt that she knows this about herself. She perhaps dismisses this as her being at times difficult. It isn't this. Again, she's only generous, at times to a fault.

She asked me if my fascination with almost anything whatever was the reason why I was so fascinated with her. I corrected her. I'm fascinated by almost anything, but with her, I'm in love. I don't know that it made things any better. I remember the subject changing, but to what, I don't recall. By this time, we were upstairs. Also, I don't remember if I had gotten to explain my idea of how people are like constellations. Freud liked that term a lot, and though I use it somewhat differently, I like it a lot, too, constellation.

Literally, the term means stars with each other. It's a plural being-with that's the precondition for the being of a singular being, and that being is arbitrarily defined by a formation of perceptions. This is like a bear; that's something like a ladle; that's an even bigger like a ladle. But what the ancients didn't know, and maybe Freud would've been unaware of this also, is that the stars aren't exactly with each other. They're all different distances, so taken together, the origins of the light we perceive are records of different moments in time. It's only the perception that's synchronic. In this way, a constellation is most like a painted portrait, different from the modern photograph, somewhat like a daguerreotype. Our unified idea is a fiction culled from fragmented truths.

I've known her for but a short time, but I see things in her that I've seen in other people, things to which I'm attracted. But it isn't the case that I've put her together from these fragments. I'm only the perceiver. It's an accident of the universe that's made her the constellation of everything I'm able to recognize and value, that and then some. But consistent with my definition, is there an arbitrariness to my perception? Yes, there's arbitrariness insofar as what I'm able to perceive is—can only be—founded on what I've perceived before, perceived not in her, but elsewhere. This is like a bear. And doubtless, there are things that I don't perceive, things that, given the opportunity, I won't. Further still, there are always stars that you need to ignore to make the outline, but this isn't to say that one doesn't see them. I don't hold her to an impossible ideal. Her perfection includes imperfection, and I wouldn't wish to annihilate the stars in between. Perhaps even some I would've disliked. Still, she can be whatever she is—or become that. I'll always look up to her, but sadly, her light is now from the past.

## Perishable Constellations

The idea of eternal recurrence derived its luster from the fact that it was no longer possible, in all circumstances,

to expect a recurrence of conditions across any interval of time shorter than that provided by eternity. The recurrence of quotidian constellations became gradually less frequent and there could arise, in consequence, the obscure presentiment that henceforth one must rest content with cosmic constellations. Habit, in short, made ready to surrender some of its prerogatives.

—Walter Benjamin, 2006b, “Central Park,” p. 166

Not unlike opera, jazz is a heterogeneous multiplicity, a constellation, so to speak. It’s a bit different insofar as it’s improvised. True, it isn’t as though there isn’t improvisation in the classical tradition. I’m thinking of basso continuo, for instance. She told me she likes Bach, and he used this device, as one did during the period. This isn’t to mention all the written works that were titled with *Impromptu*. However, jazz developed a bit differently. By then, we had recorded sound. Each instant of the music could be captured in the instant. What was *impromptu* could be repeated, even studied. I told her that I find it difficult to go to live jazz events for the reason that if I end up liking the music, I know that I’ll never be able to listen to it again. It’s really stupid. I’m missing out.

Benjamin is referencing Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence. He misunderstands it slightly, however. He comes at the idea through the lens of a displacing nostalgia, a nostalgia that’s pained to return home to what can be repeated, but it must settle for what isn’t perishable. This is why habit is made to surrender some of its prerogatives. Both completeness and continuity are important motifs in his work. The collection is important for Benjamin, and one can think of the eternal recurrence as something assimilable to this tendency to collect. But eternal recurrence isn’t nostalgia. Eternal recurrence doesn’t make habit surrender the habitual but puts repetition outside of the habitual tense. How so?

The habitual perfects itself and starts over to perfect itself in the same way, only in a different iteration. Furthermore, eternal recurrence is a doctrine of willing, not one of compulsion. There’s something compulsive about nostalgia, and if eternal recurrence can be said to make something surrender some of its prerogatives, one might say that it makes nostalgia surrender its compulsion while allowing it to retain its trajectory of return. In eternal recurrence, there’s return, but it isn’t the return of what Hegel called a spurious infinity, the infinity of a ceaseless just one more, just once more. It’s infinite return in the sense of boundlessness. It’s a return freed of the compulsion that otherwise binds one within the habitual tense. Thus, the doctrine of eternal recurrence isn’t one of perpetual birthing, of a blind propagative drive, but one of never giving up on one’s desire. Eternal recurrence is the doctrine of willing to will, this when one is freed to will not to will, when willing not to

will exists as an impotentiality preserved in one’s potentiality. Without this impotentiality, one can’t say willing to will is a potentiality to begin with. Furthermore, one can’t be freed in this way if one is under the thumb of nonvolitional compulsion. Eternal recurrence takes a necessary risk insofar as it’s the doctrine of becoming who one is once and for all. In other words, Phoenix is a nice place to have visited.

## Dogs

If “to hear” is to understand the sense, to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.

\* \* \*

To be listening will always, then, be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self. Approach to the self: neither to a proper self (I), nor to the self of another, but to the form or structure of self as such.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, 2007, *Listening*, pp. 6, 9

If to listen is to listen for the structure of self as such, then to listen is to listen for the subject. But how might we conceive of the subject? The subject isn’t the special being, but that which the signifier represents for another signifier. The subject is what we find between signifiers. Thus, Nancy writes that this self is neither the self belonging to an I, nor a self belonging to another. It’s in this way that the subject comes into desire. Desire isn’t the space of an “I” and a “you,” but the space that comes to be occupied by the subject. And though Nancy isn’t writing about desire, we can apply his reasoning to desire and say that the subject is apprehended as a subject of desire through the activity of listening. It’s through listening that what was formerly an “I” and “you” become no longer two, for it isn’t the case that in desire, a signifier interposes itself between two subjects. Rather, there are two signifiers, and the subject comes to be between them. There is a single subject, but a subject that nonetheless remains split. Thus, it isn’t the case that the two simply become monadic but that the two become what can only be described as no longer two. But this is perhaps hopelessly abstract. A metaphor:

There was a time when I waited for her calls. To listen for the phone isn’t the same as to be listening to someone speak or to be listening to a piece of music. The difference is that in waiting for a phone call, one awaits a signal in the midst of silence. Listening can be a type of waiting. It’s this type of patient listening that’s at play in desire. I wait by the phone when she isn’t calling me. We are two. Were I to hear her voice addressing me, to hear her voice utter my name, in listening, the self I would find wouldn’t be myself, but the structure of self. When I’d answer her, the same would occur for her. What we’d share is that in each other’s voice,

we'd find the structure of self, we'd find the subject. So I await the signal of the phone only for the reason that it precedes hearing her voice. And why am I attached to her voice? The voice isn't what communicates a message. That's a task charged to language. The voice is the noncommunicative sound that comes from the throat. The voice, then, is an empty signifier. I miss hearing her voice's gentle cadences, miss listening to the medium that once carried my name. For me, her voice is unforgettable. When my phone rings now, I find myself happy only as a momentary reflex.

I once compared the excitement I felt to see her again to how my dog must've felt when I returned home. Now, I feel not like my dog, but Pavlov's, his dog, but only in reverse. When hope is lost, how does one stop awaiting her call? The sound I associate with what was once an exquisite waiting persists. The silence refuses to leave me in peace, and I find it more disruptive than any manner of noise.

## Potentiality

To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential.

—Giorgio Agamben, 1999, *Potentialities*, p. 182

To be capable of one's own impotentiality is a necessary condition to exist in the mode of potentiality. In other words, impotentiality must be preserved in the potential. While it would seem that potentiality is the exhaustion of impotentiality, potentiality can't be anything that forecloses the potential to not-be. Were potentiality to exhaust impotentiality, then potentiality would become perfected, completed, and thus no longer potential as such, but a potential that's either no longer or a potential that's temporarily suspended until impotentiality can return. Just as the analyst mustn't place limits on the analysis with regard either to becoming who she is or not becoming this, we can't place limits on what we bring forth from the nothingness that's always already there, the nothingness that's a necessity of that which isn't of the will, but that's contingent with regard to the will. Nothingness is the necessary background of the will from which the drawn line of potentiality emerges. Nothingness is the silence from which the song of language emerges. If potential gives birth to that which births itself, if potential gives birth to poiesis, then nothingness is potential's dark womb. Nothingness is the matrix of potentiality, and to remain one with and within it is to endure anxiety's abyss.

## Chance and Nothingness

[I]t is a matter of detecting, within the extremely impure, complex composition that is an opera, the

moment when the immanent purity of this very impurity emerges. Thus, the question clearly has to do with the fact that the assemblage of the Idea's artistic materials, the way the Idea is materially constituted, actually occurs within a heterogeneous multiplicity. A multiplicity might be said to be heterogeneous when it is composed of chance and nothingness.

—Alain Badiou, 2010, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, p. 136

She often goes to the opera. If memory serves, she takes the train at least four times a year. What does she like about the opera? She likes partaking in a rare pleasure. There's a lot of effort put into the assemblage of artistic materials that constitute an opera. She wants to appreciate this effort. But why does Badiou call it impure?

It's impure in a similar way that cinema could be thought of as impure. Because there are so many artistic materials to assemble, it's difficult to say what was part of the artistic vision, what was part of the idea, and what we might attribute to happy—or unhappy—accident. An opera is a heterogeneous multiplicity insofar as it's difficult to discern the will of the artistic idea when there have been so many hands involved: set designers, costume designers, lighting technicians, vocal performers, composers, conductors, musicians, etc. As Badiou puts it, the problem of the opera, then, becomes “changing chance into the infinite and nothingness into purity” (p. 139). But why frame heterogeneous multiplicity in terms of chance and nothingness? The accident of chance is easy enough to understand, but why nothingness? Here, we'll part ways a bit from Badiou.

Nothingness and chance aren't really all that different when it comes to the contingent, or what we might call accident. Chance is the coming to presence of the contingent, the coming to presence of the accidental. Nothingness is itself the backdrop of the contingent or accidental that's always already there. Nothingness is the necessarily accidental. Furthermore, if we're to transform chance into the infinite, what must we do? The infinite is best thought of not in terms of an always one more, but in terms of that which is not finite, that which is without bounds, that which is unbound. Thus, chance must become the unbound. If we're to transform nothingness into the pure, then what? We must make something come to presence from the backdrop of what is always already there. And now, we'll completely part ways with Badiou. I think the problem of opera is to bring forth transformed chance from transformed nothingness. In other words, the problem of opera is to bring forth the unbound from the pure. But what does this mean?

Because the assemblage is a heterogeneous multiplicity, the performance itself is subject to boundless potentiality, subject to this, that is, until it's performed. This is what's brought forth from the nothingness transformed. And why must this nothingness be transformed? Artistic creation is creation ex nihilo, a bringing forth of something from

nothingness, an instance of poiesis. From this instance, we have the purity of the artistic idea. So now we're ready to put the components of our formula together.

We must bring forth unbound potential from the pure. Taking a cue from Nietzsche, in this way, the opera, like other artistic creations says, "Thus I willed it," to accident. We project our willing of the artistic idea backward from having projected it into the future from our original artistic vision. Perhaps this is a bit different from my nostalgia, something—taking a cue from her—I'm finding to be more and more disagreeable. Still, it shares the quality of living in the present as though it were the past. This isn't all bad. It's the only way we can shape the heterogeneous multiplicity of happy accidents, shaping it in a poetic way. We need to look back from the future to cultivate things that may turn out to be desirable that are happening now. In other words, we can't leave accident to chance. Otherwise, we're left with a nothingness that's but a lack of vision.

## Death Drives

Pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all perish! In both cases you are probably still in some way a promoter and benefactor of humanity and therefore entitled to your eulogists—but also to your detractors.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, 1974, *The Gay Science*, Book I, ̢1

I'm a ridiculously bad driver. I'm always causing almost accidents and getting lost. That she answered my jokingly posed question of, "Are they honking at me, or with me?" was an indication of her passenger's side frustration. I've often wondered what the angrily honked car horn is meant to mean, exactly. I'm confused because it's often followed by two mutually contravening glosses. It's followed by either, "F\*\*\* you, a\*\*hole," or "F\*\*\*ing die, you f\*\*\*ing f\*\*\*." All this is yelled from the car that speeds past mine, Doppler effect in all its gloriously fading glissando sonority. I find it interesting that the first—subtracting the part about my being an a\*\*hole—is something that I could find quite pleasant. Regarding the second, I'm going to die anyway, with any luck not in a car crash. So Eros and Thanatos, but when you break it down, all drives are actually death drives. Let's not make so much of the fact that the second is that I "f\*\*\*ingdie," although I'm sure someone could petite mort it, also pleasant. But what does it mean to wish someone death, seeing, as I said, that I'm going to die anyway? And what would it mean to wish someone birth? Many things, for not everyone who will have died has been born.

## At Home With Franz

She said that she did something bad. She was trying to open my kitchen window to smoke, and by accident, let in a

whole bunch of ladybugs. I told her that it was okay, and that the ladybugs must have a nest outside my window. I added that those ladybugs, however, actually weren't. They were Japanese beetles. She said that she knew. I told her that they wouldn't bother us much except for the fact that they bite. This too she knew.

If I don't vacuum them daily, there are noticeably large amounts of dead Japanese beetles lining the floor around the perimeters of all my rooms. They expend all their energy trying to get back to where they once were. They're constantly bumping into the walls trying to find the way they came in. Apparently, many of them don't. I haven't vacuumed in two days, and there are a little over twenty of them just by one wall.

The first time she came up, she had remarked that the hallways to my apartment were Kafkaesque. It's an old building that used to be a hospital. When I pointed out the caduceus visible from my bedroom window, she wasn't surprised. She had grown up around a hospital environment. I guess the inside of my apartment is Kafkaesque also.

## Hiding Places

And behind a door, he himself the door, is decked out in it like a weighty mask and, as sorcerer, will cast a spell on all who enter unawares . . . When he makes faces, he is told that all the clock need do is strike, and he will stay like that forever. In my hiding place, I realized what was true about all this. Whoever discovered me could hold me petrified, confine me for life within the heavy door. Should the person looking for me uncover my lair, I would therefore give a loud shout to loose the demon that had transformed me—indeed, without waiting for the moment of discovery, would anticipate its arrival with a cry of self-liberation.

—Walter Benjamin, 2006a, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, pp. 99-100

I used to have a lot of dreams about childhood as a kid. I still do, but I used to, too. If dreams are any indication of what preoccupies us during the day, it must've been the same for Benjamin. Benjamin had a ceaseless fascination with childhood. Here, in the passage above, the partitioning veil of the door becomes part of the hidden child. Behind the veil is an openness, the openness of being exposed, an exposure that can endure as but an openness partitioned given certain circumstances. And it's either the passage of time or discovery that can freeze the child in this perpetual state, namely, freeze his face in this way, freeze his face with a surface so that it can never be on the other side of the veil. In other words, the truth that one can discover in the place of hiding is that the habitual threatens to petrify one behind the veil so that the veil is no longer a partition, but part of one's being. Discovery can do the same thing, to

fuse one with the veil behind which one is discovered, and as a precaution, the child runs out from the hiding place and lets loose a cry, a cry that's but a voice without meaning, a cry that's only a natural index pointing to one being there.

But what is this cry of self-liberation? It's emancipatory, but is it the self that liberates? No, rather the self is liberated, for this self is the structure of self, the subject, the self that comes between two signifiers. It's the cause of the Other, the pressure of the Other that presses against the self of an "I" to produce the subject. And this subject can only let forth a cry, a sound without meaning. Here, the subject isn't a speaking position, but a place from which the Other recognizes the subject as having the capacity to speak, as having the potential. This isn't the subject of natural birth, isn't the subject willfully bringing itself forth from necessary nothingness. It's the subject who's birth is but the attempted escape of contingency, who's anxious birth is the result of the perceiving—reasonably or not—an impending threat of accidental discovery. This is the subject born from the coercive look given to the special being.

I find it interesting that Benjamin is here returning to this passage in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. A nearly identical passage exists in *One-Way Street*, written almost a decade before. The only difference, subtle but major, is that Benjamin doesn't use the first person in the passage in *One-Way Street*. Perhaps one can only reflect upon childhood from the perspective of an adult when one is no longer frozen to the veil of childhood, when the enunciating subject and the subject of the utterance become cleaved through poiesis. I wonder if in the interim someone had reminded him that he was no longer a child, reminded him without recourse to the invasive discovery of looking behind the door. Sometimes reminders are necessary, necessary for one who might be fascinated by almost anything whatever, perhaps necessary also for those of us who hide.

## Mess and Tidy

Untidy child.—Each stone he finds, each flower he picks, and each butterfly he catches is already the start of a collection, and every single thing he owns makes up one great collection. In him this passion shows its true face, the stern Indian expression that lingers on, but with a dimmed and manic glow, in antiquarians, researchers, bibliomaniacs.

—Walter Benjamin, 2004, *One-Way Street*, p. 465

"Sotidy." This is what she repeated to me. I still hallucinate its echoes as I realign pieces of furniture, vacuum Japanese beetles, disinfect the can of disinfectant with the other can of disinfectant that, while kept for this end, I keep hidden. I'm aware that this is a strange behavior, an unnecessary one that comforts me. It comforts me, but I suspect that it would disquiet others should it be discovered by accident.

Anticipating this—reasonably or not—one can take this confession as my cry of self-liberation.

But in other ways, I'm untidy, just older. Like Benjamin, I like antiques, do research, have a bunch of books. Not only does the glow fade into mania, but one also learns to hide one's untidiness, and perhaps I've become fused to this partition because the clock has long since struck. Not for nothing is this passage from the vignette preceding the one of the hidden child in *One-Way Street*. In *Berlin Childhood*, the nearly identical vignette is preceded by one titled "The Mummerehlen." In it, Benjamin writes, "Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words, which really were clouds. The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically" (p. 97). I used to disguise myself in words. I still do, but I used to, too. Like Benjamin, it's a habit I learned early.

## Chain Smoking

The essay on the Bildungsroman is actually a fragment from one of Bakhtin's several lost books . . . Bakhtin retained only certain preparatory materials and a prospectus of the book; due to the paper shortage, he had torn them up page by page during the war to make wrappers for his endless chain of cigarettes. He began smoking pages from the conclusion of the manuscript, so what we have is a small portion of its opening section, primarily about Goethe.

—Michael Holquist, 1986

"Introduction" to Bakhtin's *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. xiii

Does habit trump poiesis? Or is it simply that only the bringing forth matters? Like Bakhtin, I can only chain-smoke, and at that, chain-smoke properly speaking. Many self-proclaimed chain-smokers light each new cigarette. I light new ones from the almost extinguished bits of tobacco. When she hand rolled her cigarettes, they often went out. It didn't seem to bother her at all.

## Lost Umbrella

One is with the woman one loves, speaks with her. Then, weeks or months later, separated from her, one thinks again of what was talked of then. And now the motif seems banal, tawdry, shallow, and one realizes that it was she alone, bending low over it with love, who shaded and sheltered it before us, so that the thought was alive in all its folds and crevices like a relief. Alone, as now, we see it lie flat, bereft of comfort and shadow, in the light of our knowledge.

—Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 466



Notice that Benjamin doesn't say that one is loved by the woman, only that she has love, that she's with it. In some conversations, I also felt that she provided me shade and shelter, but was it for things or from things? That had bothered me. The question has disappeared, though. I realize only now that it doesn't matter. She's generous, and either way, the shade and shelter was provided from the place of love.

## The Poem

[P]oetry is the song of language qua capacity to make the pure notion of the "thereis" present in the very effacement of its empirical objectivity.

—Alain Badiou, 2005, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*,  
"What Is a Poem?" p. 22

To say that the poem she gave me was the most beautiful gift I've ever received still seems to underestimate it somehow. I will say definitively, though, that the poem wasn't shared with me. It was a gift, and the fact that it was given overwhelms me with something, I know not what. The poem, as we've been saying, brings forth into existence something not there before. Not only was the poem itself brought into existence, but it also brings forth something in me. This is generally how we think of poesis, but Badiou adds something to this definition. He affirms that the poem is a bringing forth, but it's a bringing forth that can bring forth in spite of the effacement of its empirical objectivity. In other words, the poem can bring to presence a naming while effacing that which is named, while effacing the referent. In this way, what the poem is capable of bringing forth is the unnamable.

And what is this unnamable thing that poetry brings forth? It's language itself. Language functions truthfully without recourse to the referent. Neither the signified, signifier, nor sign of which the former two are parts are the actual thing we assume to exist independently from the orders of the imaginary and symbolic. Although its occupation is one of indeterminacy, we might think of the referent as occupying the real. Language can do without the real. In fact, it must do without the real, for the real can only remain inassimilable. The real is where lack is lacking, so it's without language's necessary condition, without the condition of negation.

While it's true that this is true of all poetry, I find her poem to be this song. It makes perpetual something that may become effaced, forgotten by remaining with me as the unforgettable. It makes perpetual something I find to be inassimilable, something that I cannot name. This something that I cannot name, she named with her poem. These words that I write seem at least partially in vain. These words that I write are in some sense but an attempt to do what she's already done. In another sense, these words are also an attempt to come to terms with anxiety and nostalgia through poetry's complement, through philosophy.

## Philosophy and Returning a Borrowed Book

The Stimmung of anxiety appears here [in Heidegger's *What Is Metaphysics?* (1995)] as comprehensible only in reference to a lautlose Stimme, a voice without sound that "attunes us to the terror of the abyss." Anxiety is nothing more than the vocation attuned to that Voice.

\* \* \*

Philosophy, which is born precisely as an attempt to liberate poetry from its "inspiration," finally manages to grasp the Muse and transform it, as "spirit," into its own subject; but this spirit is, precisely, the negative, and the "most beautiful voice" that belongs to the Muse of the philosophers, according to Plato, is a voice without sound.

\* \* \*

Philosophy is this voyage, the human word's nostos (return) from itself to itself. Which abandoning its own habitual dwelling place in the voice, opens itself to the terror of nothingness, and at the same time, to the marvel of being; and after becoming meaningful discourse, it returns in the end as absolute wisdom, to the Voice. Only in the Absolute can the word, which experienced "homesickness" and the "pain of return" (nost-algia), which experienced the negative always already reigning in its habitual dwelling place, now truly reach its own beginning in the Voice.

—Giorgio Agamben, 1991, *Language and Death*,  
pp. 60, 78, 93

I'll attempt to synthesize these three important moments in Agamben's *Language and Death*. They're moments in the argument about philosophy and the Voice, something that here should be understood as the voice without sound: The Voice without sound is the negation proper to language, and when one is called by the voice without sound, called by meaning without speech, one experiences being. It's for this reason that the Muse of philosophy is this voice without sound. However, an attunement to this voice is also to have anxiety. To be engaged in philosophy, however, relieves this anxiety insofar the word passes through this anxiety, and experiencing nostalgia, returns after its departure from the voice back to its origin. But why is this significant?

I think that there's an important point to be made about what's communicated through silence. Philosophy's muse is a silent muse, and the silence that's behind philosophizing is indeed both anxiety provoking and the cause for nostalgia. However, when words are deployed in meaningful discourse, they can return to this silent voice that had initially called out to us. When they return, the words will have

passed through both anxiety and nostalgia. In this way, philosophy makes us sophisticated, gives us wisdom. Literally, it loves wisdom. In other words, these words, the words that I'm writing, are a sublimation of a nascent love. They're a satisfaction of the drives through an inhibition of their aims. By satisfying the drives, one avoids becoming caught up in desire. I find myself put in this position.

My Muse has been silent. I made a promise not to force song from her, and I don't know what else to do but direct my love into what I'm writing. It's been many weeks, and I can only interpret her silence as an indication to love her without hope. She shouldn't refuse the words in this book. Unlike her poem, they aren't a gift. From the beginning, the words have always been hers. They're only returning home.

### One-Way Street

The only way of knowing a person is to love that person without hope.

—Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 467

She was sitting on the steps to my apartment smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. She asked me if I was pissed. I told her that I was only worried about the car ride back home. In the car, I tried to convince her not to break it off. In her driveway, I tried to put the front wheel back on her bike. She ended up having to do it herself. Her last words to me were, "I'll think about it." These are words that come after, the words that come back. The words had been a loan.

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