

FLIGHT: A SINGLE SCATTERING OF THOUGHTS

On Books, Homing Devices, & The Printer's Plight

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Through a fortunate turn of events, I was lucky enough to visit the 'original' Manchester, for the first time in my life, just two days before visiting the so-called 'Manchester of the East' (also for the first time in my life, and it turned out to be the significantly more beautiful and impressive Manchester), namely Lodz – an instructive experience to say the least, considering the centrality of two themes or topics that I understand to be at the heart of the exhibition *Anabasis: Rituals of Homecoming* (part of Lodz' *Festival of Dialogue of Four Cultures*) that I was invited to participate in – one being the notion of homecoming (or the ceaseless journey in search of those roots we summarily call 'home'), another – and here I may be taking interpretive liberties – that of doubling, mirroring and oscillation ('I' and 'We', real and imagined, up and down, back and forth, and so forth).

To continue: journeying from Manchester, with the help of EasyJet (the only JetSet that I – and *lots* of Polish migrant workers – can genuinely call my own) to Lodz, I briefly (that is, for something close to twenty-four hours) touched down in Berlin, the city that I, though not without a measured degree of soul-searching, have been calling home since February 2008 – and 'home' has definitely come to acquire a wholly different meaning now that the apartment building that houses us there (of the Soviet classicism variety) has become ours. That said, the money that actually pays for this relative extravagance is made far away from this so-called 'home', in the city of Antwerp – for it is this city's museum of contemporary art that pays the bills, and it is to the Belgian state (and Flemish community) which funds this museum that I pay my taxes: indeed, *where* one pays one's taxes is perhaps the most concise (if not terribly charming) definition of what constitutes one's home. I will not go any further into the details of my commuting life, which is in any case very modest in comparison to the distances covered by some of my colleagues (and so many other 'professionals' who are not my colleagues) on a weekly basis – for now, let us just say that I have learned to attune my reading habits to this exhausting (but obviously not entirely unsatisfactory) nomadic lifestyle, the *ethical* problems of which – and I am not just talking about carbon footprints – I am only too acutely aware of. Here is what I so self-consciously [*groan*] underlined in a book I was

reading on the plane on my way in: “some people’s immobility is necessary for other people’s mobility”. The title of the book: “The New Spirit of Capitalism”; its authors: Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello¹ – truly required reading for anyone (‘art’ people first and foremost) naively inclined to romanticize the (both presumed and actually existing) liberating aspects of the reticular, rhizomorphous regime of today’s boundless networked mobility.

Arriving, upon the invitation of participating artist Susanne Kriemann (dedicatee of this piece of writing), in the basement of a printer’s shop in Lodz, where *one* artist’s book was being made, these were the thoughts that publicly flooded my mind:

1. Soliloquy of the Book

“One is Better than Many / Whole is Better than Half / On is Better than Off.” This in recognition of the happy fact that one of the Book’s (handful of) truly great assets is that it does not have an ON/OFF switch. No cables, batteries, intricate pin codes, plugs, sockets or anything else that may be defined as irreversibly complicating “access”: I just have to pick it up and open it. [A Polish poet of some renown has remarked that the book of events is always open in the

¹ Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London & New York: Verso, 2005, p. 362. For Boltanski and Chiapello, this fact is one of the foundational truths of what they call the connexionist paradigm of the contemporary world: “a connexionist world is haunted by a very acute tension between the proximate and the remote, the local and the global. And this tension weighs particularly upon great men, since they embody the truth of this world; to acquire high status in this world, it is advisable to move around incessantly, in order to cultivate new links.” I am writing all of this down as an afterthought of sorts, ten days after my visit to Lodz, sat in a flat in Istanbul’s Galata district, once known as a melting pot of well-heeled traveling merchants of Italian, Jewish, Greek or Armenian descent (the particular street where we are staying being the banking centre of the once ‘global’ Ottoman Empire: the embodiment of an earlier “spirit of capitalism”). They have long since departed (or were forced to depart), and mostly much poorer Turkish families now occupy the living quarters of their crumbling palaces, their poverty a function of what sets them apart from their Galatan predecessors: mobility. To continue: “in a connexionist world, where high status presupposes displacement, great men derive part of their strength from the immobility of the little people, which is the source of their poverty. The least mobile actors are a salient factor in the profits that the mobile derive from their displacements. (...) If it is true that some people’s immobility is the precondition for the profits others derive from their ability to move around, and that mobility procures incomparably greater profits than those who remain *in situ* can aspire to, then we may say that the immobile are exploited in relation to the mobile.” *Ibid.*, p. 363.

middle.] A book is always 'on', it is always working, even when shut close: after-working, it cannot break down. *We* can break down in response to its contents, however, or in response to its lack of (or unwillingness to share its) content. In this (morbid) latter case, one might say that, even though I opened the book's pages, it remains closed to me. Some books, in this regard, we will never be able to pry open: transformed into impenetrable entities instead, they will stand tall and mute like, say, the proto-minimalist monolith in the fabled opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*: a mere thing in itself rather than an object for a subject to know and own.

Once opened, the book speaks to one reader only: their song cannot be shared. Books can be read out aloud of course (poetry in particular – but not just a few poets object to this intrusion into the privacy of the reading experience²), and in certain countries audio books are quite the craze – a thriving industry (and it would be interesting to investigate *why* those exact countries are so partial to the form). But the audio book seems to belong to the world of the car, essentially: it is designed for the insular architecture of the automobile as an I-pod on wheels (the pod for the 'I' or ego); in this sense, the audio book's disembodied voice hands the book back to its true destiny – to be consumed in the solitude of One, for my eyes only.

[That said, I habitually read four or five books at the same time; that is, *approximately* at the same time, alternating and switching from philosophy to poetry to historiography to biography to philosophy.] Reading one book, however, is still very much like hearing one voice, whether of a singer or a choir – and allowing its hypnotic power to enthrall and steal me away from human bondage and the manifold daily pressures of the social contract. Only the lonely are the people of the book.

² The master curmudgeon of twentieth-century poetry, Philip Larkin famously refused to give poetry readings of his own (highly popular and eminently quotable) work, stating in an interview: "I don't give readings, although I have recorded three of my collections, just to show how *I* should read them. Hearing a poem, as opposed to reading it on the page, means you miss so much— the shape, the punctuation, the italics, even knowing how far you are from the end. Reading it on the page means you can go your own pace, taking it in properly; hearing it means you're dragged along at the speaker's own rate, missing things, not taking it in, confusing *there* and *their* and things like that. And the speaker may interpose his own personality between you and the poem, for better or worse. For that matter, so may the audience. I don't like hearing things in public, even music. In fact, I think poetry readings grew up on a false analogy with music: the text is the "score" that doesn't "come to life" until it's "performed."" Quoted in: "An Interview with Paris Review", in: Philip Larkin, *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, London: Faber and Faber, 1983, p. 61.

In a famous nugget of intellectual folk wisdom, central to German Idealism in particular, books have been called long letters to unknown friends. Books certainly *make* friends – and enemies. Friendship lured me into this basement, and perhaps some enmities will follow my way out of it again.

2. The Homing Device

Now *I* wish I knew where home was – I even wish I knew *what* home is. But of course, like so many other people in the musty subterranean room in which this text was first read out, I have refused this ‘home’: I have denied it and abjured it, and buried its siren song under scorn. We identify home with the weight of rootedness (i.e. that which anchors and immobilizes us), and who wants roots these days – other than for touristic reasons? [‘Roots’ tourism has become *really* big business of late, in these quarters of the world especially: Jewish heritage tourism in the former lands of the Pale of Settlement, for instance, or Prussian heritage tourism in Kaliningrad Oblast. In both instances, the dream of recovering a long-lost experience of rootedness has a decidedly traumatic edge: they are impossible homelands, shrouded in dreaming.] I, for one, would rather want to have someone else’s roots – or better still, other people’s *stories* of uprootedness... Roots smack of ground, and this grounding of the grinding poverty of origins, of the soiling of the soil. Other than for being original, no wants origins either: we want destinies only – aerals.³

Indeed, the depreciation of home has long been a function of globalization; the culture industry, to which art has so long longed to belong, sadly, is at the very forefront of this movement – its role in the global economy is to reinvent migrant labor as a romance of radical chic (“nomadology”) and sell its abominations back to us in the guise of that most highly prized of cultural commodities, cosmopolitanism.

³ “We no longer have roots, we have aerals. We no longer have origins, we have terminals” is a sound bite coined by media theorist McKenzie Wark, author of *Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events* (1994) – a work from the early days of the Deleuze-inspired theoretical infatuation with “nomadology” and “diasporic thought.” We know better now, and the work of Wark (et al.) has faded from view accordingly.

Mobility, it is well known, is the most highly prized quality in contemporary man. But my mobility, our mobility, as we already noted, is built upon other people's immobility – I am thinking of the sheer weight of the printing press in this cellar, and the printer's cats and dogs, and the lightness of my paper and my 900 gram laptop – and the immobile are, invariably, the weak: those who slouch at the losing end of the equation. This mobility is obviously not just limited to a matter of physical ability (as in: my legs don't mind nine hours in economy class), it is also a mental requirement or social skill, easily translated as *flexibility* (Brussels Airlines, the company that flew me back from Warsaw to my office in Antwerp after my brief sojourn in Lodz, has developed a signature brand of inflight service named "b.flex economy"): ultimate proof of the untiring readiness to flex the muscles of one's mind. This readiness, of course, has long been the hallmark of the writing (or book-making) trade – the world's second oldest profession, so closely related to the oldest (which it so lovingly describes times and again), where a similar but different kind of flexibility is in order.

Perhaps books are our only homing devices: I live out of my bookcase rather than out of my suitcase. Perhaps "home" is simply where we unpack our library: my library is invariably the first thing I install when settling down or moving into a new abode. [Among volumes of Benjamin exegesis; to anyone who suffers fragments and fragmentary writing badly: I understand and sympathize (deeply), but sadly fragmentation seems to count as our present's only remaining form of totality.] The paper trail of a lifetime of books assembled, collected and (self-) published: the only material facts of life that we will happily allow to bog us down in the tiresome business of finding anchorage, some time, somewhere – for they are the immutable expressions of the mobility of the mind. [And fragments at that.]

Hence also my resistance to glorify the concept of circulation (of concepts, ideas, etc.) to which the book speaks: we resent its overtones of exchangeability and marketability. If the goal of the book is to disseminate and spread the word, I also (very much) like to see it standing there, merely exuding standing, in stasis, on the top shelf of our library, not saying anything at all, not even to myself: we all have such books and we probably cherish them even more than the ones that just keep jabbering. This aligns the book with the work of art, which I appreciate precisely for its silence and unwillingness to cooperate, to communicate, to banally share its 'contents': to stubbornly cling to the fantasy of singularity and

closure, oneness and wholeness – let us now praise the book as an emblem of stability.

3. An Ancient Indecision

Philosophy, it is true, cannot seem to make up its mind about the voice as the carrier of the word (*logos*, in both senses of – mark my self-reflexive words – the word) or the word as the way to the voice: which is worse, which deserves greater caution and distrust? For what is distrusted in both is the physical appearance of *thought* – that thought, alas, should debase itself to don the mantle of matter at all! Such nagging doubts (which one is better?) and anxieties (why can't you just read my thoughts?) are already present in Plato. The frank material shape of the written word, which can develop into the erotics of bibliophilia (this is clearly one aspect of reading that all the *Kindle*-wielding prophets of the so-called “End of the Book” seem to underestimate: man's desire to fondle, handle and hold not just the living, but the dead letter too) on the one hand; the enthralling, hypnotic allure of the reader's song, which calls forth the terrible Homeric parable of Odysseus and the Sirens – hark the enchanting cadence of the printing press, hard at work – on the other. This axiomatic dilemma of speech versus writing continues to inform much current philosophical thought; it certainly is (or was) one of the cornerstones of Derridean deconstruction, which, in clearing this spirit's path towards obtaining philosophical legitimacy, turned out to become an influential ally of the “new spirit of capitalism”.⁴

Bibliophilia, of course, requires a home (one book I hold dearly and clutch to my chest) – just like most eroticism, in the end, belongs to the home. The love of books and the love of love may join forces to conspire against the delusional tyranny of mobility.

To further this investigation of our writers & readers' *ars erotica*: one defining charm of *used* books is their smell, which is of course what most directly connects them back to the archaic art and materiality of printing (ink, paper, glue etc.); another such charm – provided it remains within the bounds of the acceptable – consists of glancing over previous readers' notes and uncertainties,

⁴ Boltanski & Chiapello, op. cit., p. 453.

stuttering thought and misunderstanding: once again, in half-wholesome presence of the fragment.

With the olfactory (and the auditory illusion of hearing other readers' chatter): enter the complicity of *all* the senses, the fingers and the eyes at the fore – there to remind us of the true etymological root of the 'digital' as that which concerns the fingers (or toes!), not zeroes and ones. Consider the reader or the writer's resemblance to the pianist here (the ghost of Rubinstein haunting every dilapidated mansion in Lodz), or, more appropriate still, the *potter*: holding, molding the book as a vessel from which the gift of the wor(l)d is poured forth. But of course philosophy does not approve of fingering either, and it resents the laying on of hands: philosophy is quick to prohibit the manual as such. Which may again lead us back to pondering the long history of the mind's antagonistic relationship with the physical world of objecthoods or thingnesses: the book as (the-word-in-print-turned-) object is simply suspect. [This too Plato found, and Derrida exploited.] But so is the voice as some-thing that emanates from the body, my body, our body politic, as to command authority. It is impossible to acknowledge this body as the source of such authority: it is much more a site of rebellion and resistance instead. In this respect, the voice (voicing of the word) and the book (printing and grasping of the word) converge in 'mine'.

4. The Toolshed

One of the finer moments in a biopic of French philosopher Jacques Derrida [there he is!] takes place when the late founding father of deconstruction leads the camera crew into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the daily practice of philosophy, its holy of holies – his library. Staggering numbers of books line the walls of his study of course, seven thousand at the latest count, but “has he read all of these books” the interviewer asks in disbelieving awe. “Of course not,” Derrida replies, what, are you *mad*? “I have only read a handful – but those, at least, I have read very carefully.”⁵

A similar insight occurred to me just recently, when visiting the book-filled home of an artist in Berlin. Glancing at the thousands of books strewn and scattered around his apartment, we chatted cheerily about some of the frustrations their

⁵ Derrida, 2002, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman.

volume begets – such as, precisely, immobility, rendering the cultural producer most vulnerable. Has he read or even summarily leafed through all these books, I ask, knowing that I myself buy and amass many more books than I can actually read. As if that was the sole point of having them: surely *reading* these books is not always what matters most – and he compared the book to a hammer, a tool for hammering this very point home. One buys a hammer simply to use it every time one needs it, which may not necessarily be very often – maybe once a year or so. But then, at this point in time, you *do* need a hammer, as no other tool will do: some things can really only be hammered with a hammer. [Even those who hammer very often, for professional reasons of the carpentry type for instance, do not hammer all day or day in day out.]

Sometimes a book is acquired for breezing purposes only, even if it will yield one (singularly felicitous) quote only, such as the following, culled from Karl Marx' *Grundrisse*: “production thus not only creates an object for a subject, it also creates a subject for the object.” A hammer for the nail, a reader for the book.

On the road, 2009