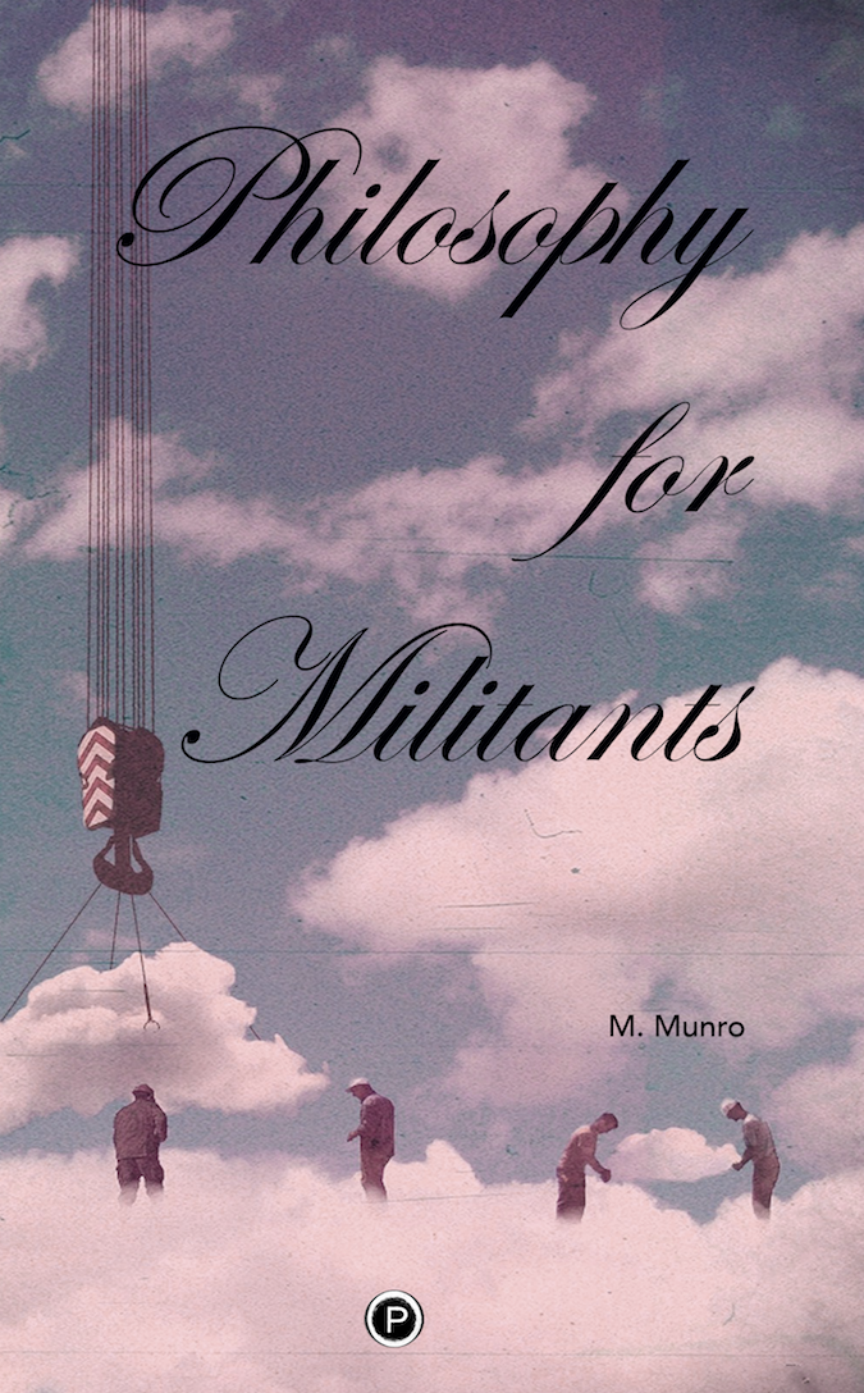
Philosophy for Militants



M. Munro

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dead letter office

BABEL Working Group

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PHILOSOPHY FOR MILITANTS

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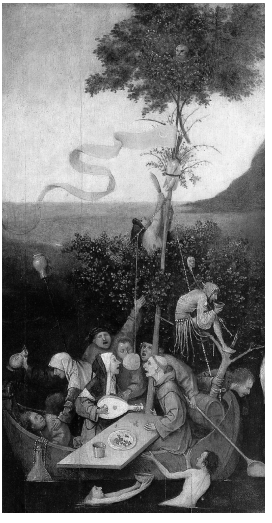

Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490-1500)

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The enigma is that place as such is intuitive without being intuitable as such.

John Sallis, *Topographies*

Here the anaphora "as" does not refer to a preceding referential term (to a prelinguistic substance), and "such" does not serve to indicate a referent that gives "as" its meaning. "Such" has no other existence than "as," and "as" has no other essence than "such."

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

PHILOSOPHY FOR MILITANTS

M. Munro

PREFACE.

NOTE TOWARD A THEORY OF THE MILITANT

> After all, revolution is one of the half-dozen topics in this world worth writing about and the least miserable, even in the face of defeat.[1]

"Either ethics makes no sense at all," Gilles Deleuze once wrote, "or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us."[2] "Not to be unworthy of what

[1] Joshua Clover, "Back to the Barricades," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 6, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/back-to-the-barricades. "The least miserable, even in the face of defeat": perhaps this is what's meant by the striking sentence with which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri famously conclude *Empire*, "This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist": Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 413.

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New

happens to us"—a formulation as curious as it is imperious. What might it mean?

"The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics," Giorgio Agamben has contended, "is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done."[3] "This does not mean, however," Agamben goes on to clarify, "that humans are not, and do not have to be, something, that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be, to adopt or not to adopt this or that destiny (nihilism and decisionism coincide at this point). There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality.*"[4]

York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149. *Logique du sens* was first published in 1969.

[3] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 43.

[4] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 43, author's emphasis. David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 525–526: "One could well argue that if there is any human essence, it is precisely our capacity to imagine that we have one."

In the *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, Agamben recounts a passage where Spinoza "explains," Agamben writes, "the meaning of the reflexive active verb as an expression of an immanent cause"[5]: "*Se visitare*, 'to visit oneself,' the first Latin equivalent that Spinoza gives to clarify the meaning of this verbal form […], is clearly insufficient; yet Spinoza immediately qualifies it by means of the singular expression *se visitantem constituere*, 'to constitute oneself visiting.'"[6] What ethics "means" is none other, and no more, than "the meaning of the reflexive active verb as an expression of an immanent cause" (and therefore cannot but take its cue from Spinoza's example): Ethics is that singular visitation which consists in *constituting oneself visiting* that "something" "that humans are and have to be"—that without which there would be no "ethical experience": the "fact" "that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize," "the simple fact," in other words, and so immanently, "of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality."

Deleuze's formula is found in a book he composed in the midst (and impending aftermath) of the May upheavals of 1968 that shut down all Paris, the city in which he lived. "Not to be unworthy of what happens to us" (insurrection restores to this Stoic dictum its true sense and

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: *Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 234.
[6] Agamben, *Potentialities*, 234.

radicality): In other words, live to warrant victory. Live, in case of defeat, that is, so as not to warrant quarter.

Ethics means this or it means nothing at all: not to be unworthy, whatever happens, of the potentiality that constitutes us.

ONE.

THE UNTRANSLATABLE
Triptych on a Sentence by Rey Chow

§ *DICHTUNG UND WAHRHEIT*

> Strictly speaking, does not thought—or the act of thinking—always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?[7]

Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten. Wittgenstein's imperative translates, "very roughly," "Philosophy ought really to be written only as poetry."[8]

[7] Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*: *On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 42.

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted and translated in Marjorie Perloff, "'Literature' in the Expanded Field," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 184 [175–186]. Thomas Basbøll has noted that Wittgenstein's dictum "means, somewhat less elegantly

Yet how is one to approach that directive? How is one to *read* it—as poetry, or philosophy? If poetry, following Robert Frost, is, precisely, "what gets lost in translation," how is one to place what's proposed here? And where does that leave philosophy?

"Poetry may well be 'what gets lost in translation,'" Craig Dworkin has conceded, "though the phrase should be understood not in the sense of elegiac ruination or privation, but of absorption and reverie—in the way one might be lost in thought."[9]

Only in poetry lost in thought, as in another

than the German, that 'one ought really to *do* philosophy *as poetry*.' The German word 'dichten' is the verb form of 'Dichtung,' which means 'poetry.' To my knowledge there is no such thing as poeting in English": Thomas Basbøll, "Epiphany," *The Pangrammaticon*, June 18, 2005, http://pangrammaticon.blogspot.com/2005/06/epiphany.html. "In any case," Basbøll concludes, "modifying Peter Winch's translation a bit, we can render this more naturally as, 'One ought really only to *compose* philosophy (as one composes poetry).'"

[9] Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 124. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 72: "With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy." Rémi Brague, "Europe," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*: *A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. and eds. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 324 [323–328]: "In this history of translations, one paradox awaits us at the outset: the word itself that designates philosophy was never translated, literally speaking, into European languages. It is the untranslatable par excellence."

language, may philosophy be found.

§ THE UNTRANSLATABLE

> Strictly speaking, does not thought—or the act of thinking—always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?[10]

"To speak of untranslatables," as does Barbara Cassin, general editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*: *A Philosophical Lexicon*, "in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating."[11] Insofar as the untranslatable is that which one cannot translate, it is by definition what one cannot help but translate. And yet, in translating the untranslatable—interminably—what will one have communicated?

However intractable "the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns," whatever the recalcitrance, what will have eluded each of the untranslatable's multiple and variegated translations is, in ceaselessly inspiring them, the incorrigible foreignness of thought (*un*

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

[11] Barbara Cassin, "Introduction," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, xvii [xvii–xx].

mirage interne des mots mêmes, as Mallarmé has it).[12] On this point one should amend Novalis with the words of the German travel writer Waldemar Bonsels: Philosophy really is homesickness—homesickness for a foreign country.[13]

§ EXILE

> Strictly speaking, does not thought—or the act of thinking—always have the capacity for operating like a foreign language?[14]

Near the end of his 1975 novel *Juan sin Tierra*, Juan Goytisolo writes, *Si en lo futuro escribes, será en otra lengua*, "If you write in the future, it will be in another language."[15] That sentence, "like all those of its grammatical form," Daniel Heller-Roazen observes, "is ambiguous": if it's not taken to be "a statement describing a state of affairs (albeit of a

[12] Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Richard Serrano, "Fans, Silk, and Ptyx: Mallarmé and Classical Chinese Poetry," *Comparative Literature* 50.3 (1998): 228 [220–240].

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

[14] Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, 42. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 40–41: "Sometimes I wonder whether this unknown language is not my favorite language."

[15] Juan Goytisolo, quoted and translated in Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Speaking in Tongues," *Paragraph* 25 (2002): 108 [92–115].

particular variety in this case, being ones that have yet to take place)," it will be understood to be "a command, an imperative couched in the indicative mood. In the first sense," therefore, "the words have a straight-forward constantive value; in the second," however, "they have the form of an injunction that could be paraphrased as 'if you write in the future, you must do so in another language,' or, more forcefully and fully, 'if you write again, it cannot be as you have written and write now; if you write again, it must be otherwise, in another language.'"[16] How is one to understand that sentence and the language in which it is written? By what departure will one have heard it for what it says?

"A philosopher begins by hearing his native language as a foreign tongue"[17]—and that for perhaps no one "more forcefully and fully" than for he who was until then a poet: "He wrote of 'the ancient

[16] Heller-Roazen, "Speaking in Tongues," 108–109. Rebecca Walkowitz, "Future Reading," *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015*, ed. Ursula Heise et al., http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/future-reading: "In the future, the future is now."

[17] Michael Kinnucan, "Philosophy in Translation, Philosophy as Translation," *Asymptote* (July 2014): http://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/barbara-cassin-dictionary-of-untranslatables-a-philosophical-lexicon/. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 98: "To be a foreigner, but in one's own tongue, not only when speaking a language other than one's own. To be bilingual, multilingual, but in one and the same language, without even a dialect or patois."

quarrel between poetry and philosophy' precisely to mask the fact that philosophy did not even exist until he composed *The Republic*, where he first announces the quarrel, and that it was he who was on the side of the new and against the traditional."[18]

[18] Alexander Nehamas, "An Essay on Beauty and Judgment," *Three Penny Review* 80 (Winter 2000): https://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/nehamas_w00.html. John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 60: "Here for the first time the structure, the basic constitution, of translation is determined; here the Platonic text declares what may be called the protoclassical determination of translation. But in this determination everything depends on how the single word διάνοια [thought, in a word] is understood."

TWO.

THE THING ITSELF

> One cannot learn philosophy, because *it is not yet given*.[19]

"'Philosophy' is said in many ways."[20] Perhaps foremost among them philosophy may be said to be a question of the transformation of aporia into euporia. But how might aporia admit of transformation? To what part of it falls, if any, its formulation as a question?

[19] Immanuel Kant, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*: *On Method*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 82, Kant's emphasis. See Immanuel Kant, *Logic*, trans. Robert S. Hartman and Wolfgang Schwarz (New York: Dover, 1988), 29.

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

§ FORMS

> Can one speak—and if so, in what sense—of an *experience of the aporia*? An experience *of the aporia as such*?[21]
>
> How does one both present the analytic solution of a mystery and at the same time conserve the sense of the mysterious on which analysis thrives?[22]

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

> the closure of the Athens school of philosophy. It thus turned out that Damascius, the incumbent scholarch, was the last diadoch of pagan philosophy. Through friends at court he sought to reverse the decision. Their promises of help came to nothing more than the offer of a stipend as librarian in one of the provinces against the confiscation of the property and income of the school. The likelihood of persecution drove the scholarch and six of his closest helpers to load books and belongings on a cart and seek refuge at the court of the Persian king, Khosrow Anūsh-

[21] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 15, author's emphasis.

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

> irvan. Thus it came about that the purest Hellenic traditions that the Greeks—or rather "Romans," as they were then calling themselves—were no longer worthy of preserving, came into the keeping of the barbarians.
>
> The diadoch was no longer young; the moment was long gone in which he had thought to concern himself with marvelous stories and the apparition of souls. After the first few months of court life at Ctesiphon, the task of satisfying the philosophical curiosity of the sovereign with commentaries and critical editions was left to his students Priscianus and Simplicius. Cloistered in a house in the north of the city with a Greek scribe and Syrian housekeeper, Damascius determined to devote the last years of his life to writing a work to be entitled: *Aporias and Solutions Concerning First Principles*.[23]

"Tradition has it that Damascius labored on his work for three hundred days and as many nights, that is, for the exact duration of his exile at Ctesiphon."[24]

> And so it was that as he was writing one night the image suddenly sprang to mind that would guide him—so he thought—through to the conclusion of his work. It was not, however, an

[23] Giorgio Agamben, "Threshold," in *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 31 [31–34].
[24] Agamben, "Threshold," 32.

> image, but something like the perfectly empty space in which only image, breath, or word might eventually take place. Or, rather, it was not even a space, but the site of a place, as it were, a surface, an area absolutely smooth and flat, on which no point could be distinguished from another. He thought of the white stone yard of the farm where he had been born, at the gates of Damascus, where the peasants threshed the wheat in the evenings to separate grain and chaff. Wasn't what he was searching for exactly like the threshing floor, itself unthinkable and unspeakable, where the winnowing fans of thought and language separated the grain and chaff of everything?[25]

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

The aporia attains its transformation with a

[25] Agamben, "Threshold," 33.

vision of what may well be called philosophy's "first principle." "What is reached here, that is, is something still sensible (from this comes the term *idea*, which indicates a vision, an ἰδεῖν). But not some sensible thing *presupposed* by language and knowledge, but rather, *exposed* in them."[26] "The thing itself" is thus revealed to be from the first, in so many words, a kind of exile. And perhaps only in exile is it made out: There where "the winnowing fans of thought and language" may in time separate the wheat from the chaff and yet from which, at last, only with difficulty can it be told apart: its story.

§ THE MYSTERY TO A SOLUTION

> Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?[27]
>
> A solution that conserves (because it endlessly refigures) the sense of the mysterious.[28]

A story, that is, that, in its telling, is at one with a "demand" that defines that "purest" of Hellenic traditions: the "unavoidable" demand, "the (endless and endlessly circular) demand to inherit philosophy *philosophically*."[29] "Of course, the issue of how to inherit philosophy philosophically is no

[26] Agamben, "The Idea of Appearance," in *Idea of Prose*, 122–123 [121–123], author's emphasis.
[27] Derrida, *Aporias*, 15.
[28] Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution*, 2.
[29] Simon Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1, author's emphasis.

more decided in advance or at the outset than any other issue in philosophy"[30] so that philosophy, as a tradition, may be said to be constituted by the question of "what (inheriting) philosophy (philosophically) is."[31] How then is philosophy to be inherited? After what fashion, and according to what necessity, must the answer continue to be informed by the question?

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

> beside a herd of camels. Amid the shouts and insults, the men gestured wildly in fierce debate, and we could hear their angry cries:
>
> "It cannot be!"
>
> "That is robbery!"
>
> "I do not agree!"
>
> The intelligent Beremiz asked them why they were quarreling.
>
> "We are brothers," the oldest explained, "and we received these 35 camels as our inheritance. According to the express wishes of our father, half of them belong to me, one-third to my brother Hamed, and one-ninth to Harim, the youngest. Nevertheless, we do not know how to make the division, and whatever one of us

[30] Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology*, 1.

[31] Simon Glendinning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 120.

suggests, the other two dispute. Of the solutions tried so far, none have been acceptable. If half of 35 is 17½, if neither one-third nor one-ninth of this amount is a precise number, then how can we make the division?"

"Very simple," said the Man Who Counted. "I promise to make the division fairly, but let me add to the inheritance of 35 camels this splendid beast that brought us here at such an opportune moment."

At this point I intervened.

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

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

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

"My friends," he said, "I am going to make a fair and accurate division of the camels, which, as you can see, now number 36."

Turning to the eldest of the brothers, he spoke thus: "You would have received half of 35—that is, 17½. Now you will receive half of 36—that is, 18. You have nothing to complain about, because you gain by this division."

Turning to the second heir, he continued, "And you, Hamed, you would have received

one-third of 35—that is, 11 and some. Now you will receive one-third of 36—that is, 12. You cannot protest, as you too gain by this division."

Finally, he spoke to the youngest: "And you, young Harim Namir, according to your father's last wishes, you were to receive one-ninth of 35, or 3 camels and part of another. Nevertheless, I give you one ninth of 36, or 4. You have benefitted substantially and should be grateful to me for it."

And he concluded with the greatest confidence, "By this advantageous division, which has benefitted everyone, 18 camels belong to the oldest, 12 to the next, and 4 to the youngest, which comes out to—18 + 12 + 4 = 34 camels. Of the 36 camels, therefore, there are 2 extra. One, as you know, belongs to my friend from Baghdad. The other rightly belongs to me for having resolved the complicated problem of the inheritance to everyone's satisfaction."

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

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

And we traveled on toward Baghdad.[32]

[32] Malba Tahan, *The Man Who Counted*: *A Collection of Mathematical Adventures*, trans. Leslie Clark and Alastair

"Clever," indeed. How is one to understand the intervention of the Man Who Counted in the "fierce debate" between the three brothers over the division of their inheritance? To what part of it falls that addition—the narrator's camel—that turns out to be no addition at all?

Gabriel Marcel opposes the problematic to the mysterious. Whereas a problem, for Marcel, "is something met with which bars my passage," and is thus "before me in its entirety," a mystery is something whose "essence" precludes its ever being at once, "in its entirety," "before me": it's rather "something in which I find myself caught up."[33] So perhaps problem need not be opposed to mystery after all—perhaps that's what the ingenious Beremiz can be understood to demonstrate. If the problematic is resolved in the mysterious that's because it's into its solution, as into a mystery, that those whom a problem has gathered all with advantage depart.

Reid (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), 11–13.

[33] Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 100.

THREE.

THE RETURN TO PHILOLOGY

> What happens is parting. [*Was geschieht, ist Abschied.*][34]

A well-known story relates that when an editor (as tradition has it, Andronicus of Rhodes) came, some centuries after Aristotle's death, to produce the first complete edition of the Philosopher's works, the volume of fourteen books following those comprising the volume on nature, the *Physics*, bore a designation that in time became a word unknown to the Philosopher himself: "metaphysics," from *ta meta ta phusika*, literally, "the after the physicals," or, more idiomatically, "the ones after the physical ones," "the ones," the books, "after the ones about physics."[35] "Whether or not the story is true," one

[34] Werner Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, trans. Catharine Diehl and Jason Groves (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 37.

[35] Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, "Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015

scholar has commented, in an authoritative volume on the history of metaphysics, "the name is peculiarly apt": "For '*meta*' can also be translated either as 'above' or as 'beyond,' and metaphysics is often reckoned to lie at a level of generality above and beyond physics. Come to that, it is often reckoned to be a subject that should be studied 'after' physics."[36] However *meta* may be translated, whatever interval it may insinuate, whether "after," "above," or "beyond," how is *place* to be understood in the word, no less than in the title, *Metaphysics*? What bearing will that initial designation be said to have had on the "subject" that it names, and how will one have come to situate—*to read*—the intervention of the editor in having supplied it? How, in short, is one to understand the "aptness" of that title in all its "peculiarity"?

In a 1798 fragment Friedrich Schlegel defined philology in passing as the "counterpart" (*Seitenstück*) of philosophy.[37] Philosophy, from the same root, may perhaps be said to be in turn the "metaphysics" of philology.

It will be recounted that Aristotle had no one word for metaphysics. In truth, he had more than one. "Aristotle himself described what he was undertaking in that volume as 'first philosophy,' or as

Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/metaphysics/.

[36] A. W. Moore, "Preface," in *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*: *Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xvii [xvii–xxi].

[37] Friedrich Schlegel, quoted and translated in Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, 25, 125.

the search for the first causes and the principles of things, or again as the science of being *qua* being."[38] "These descriptions," the scholar goes on to comment, "variously indicate both the fundamental character of his undertaking and its abstractness."[39] That the Philosopher's undertaking in the *Metaphysics* may be characterized as both "fundamental" and "abstract" makes the following all the more striking: "In its approach, the volume was a miscellany. It comprised historical and methodological reflections, a survey of problems and aporiai to be addressed, and a philosophical lexicon, as well as direct treatment of its main topics, which included substance, essence, form, matter, individuality, universality, actuality, potentiality, change, unity, identity, difference, number, and the prime eternal unmoved mover (God)."[40] What is to be made of the fact that, despite its "fundamental character" and "abstractness," metaphysics—what Aristotle called "'first philosophy,'" "the search for the first causes and the principles of things," "the science of being *qua* being"—has never been anything other than variegated? However "direct" it may be said to be, not least in the "treatment" of "its main topics," Aristotle's curious volume, in its "approach," was "a miscellany." How is one to understand that "approach"? How is one to approach it?

"There could be no philology were tradition not broken," Daniel Heller-Roazen has observed, "no

[38] Moore, "Preface," xvii.
[39] Moore, "Preface," xvii.
[40] Moore, "Preface," xvii.

field of textual interpretation, criticism, and study were the transmission of texts not already obscure, altered, and interrupted: the immediacy and transparency of understanding would forbid the constitution of a discipline of the study of the language of the past."[41] At root, philosophy and philology are bound by a shared condition of possibility, one which neither, as a "field," can leave behind, yet one with which neither, in its "transmission," can be identified: "already obscure," "altered" from the outset, and there, as by an incipient perplexity, by an uncertain interval "interrupted," "immediacy and transparency of understanding" "would forbid the constitution" of the one no less than the other. That "interpretation, criticism, and study" are necessary, however, is bound to "forbid," in addition, that that be all. Philosophy and philology are each coextensive with the "interruption" they constitute and with which, at the limit, they nonetheless do not coincide: "immediacy and transparency of understanding" "would forbid" each, no less than its "constitution," its possession of a "past"—a past that, as such, had gone unthought and until then unremarked. A single consequence follows, a singular complication. There could be no metaphysics were there nothing "broken," no "tradition" of metaphysics were not its medium, its very element, on each approach, wanting. Wanting, strangely, the question of metaphysics is therefore not, in truth,

[41] Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Tradition's Destruction: On the Library of Alexandria," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 151 [133–153].

one. Metaphysics is a question of first philosophy. Then philology.

FOUR.

THE LION AND THE BALL
On the Secret of Language

> Language is not *contiguous* to anything else. We cannot speak of the use of language as opposed to anything else.[42]
>
> We learn to learn from the singular and the unverifiable.[43]

To conclude his discussion of an essay by a ninth-

[42] Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, "Writing Philosophy as Poetry: Literary Form in Wittgenstein," in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, eds. Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 719 [714–728]. Wittgenstein's emphasis. Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*: *The Art of Rogues and Riddlers* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 9: "'Language,' however, was and remains an obscure word."
[43] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*: *Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 145n49.

century Iraqi writer, "The Guarding of the Secret and the Holding of the Tongue," Daniel Heller-Roazen concedes, "Al-Jāḥiẓ, to be sure, limits his reflections to matters that one can conceal, and that one ought, for this reason, to keep under lock and key. On the subject of the repository of all human secrets, which no one owns,

> the author holds his tongue. At the risk of peering into that guarded common coffer and imagining something where there is nothing, one can, however, pose this question: might language guard something of its own, hidden in everything that is said? Might there be a cryptic thing in speech, distinct from the many matters that one can also store in it? […] The secret of language would be neither of something nor of someone. No skill of speech, therefore, could master it. Yet it would be discernible to the ear and to the eye, even as it accompanied all the motions of the tongue and pen, not least the one that brings them, at the crucial moment, to a halt.[44]

The early ʿAbbāsid essayist "limits his reflections to matters that one can conceal," but "on the subject of the repository of all human secrets, which no one owns"—in a word, language—"the author holds his tongue." How is one to characterize that act of

[44] Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Secrets of al-Jāḥiẓ / Die Geheimnisse des al-Jāḥiẓ* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 11.

discretion? What, in its very reserve, will it have disclosed?

According to the seventeenth-century Chinese critic Jin Shengtan, writing is successful when, "first fixing one's attention on a point, one turns the paintbrush all around this point while letting it evolve continuously."[45] The late Ming writer offers an image in illustration:

> This entirely resembles the lion that rolls the ball at the circus. It is only the ball that matters, but it allows the lion to use all of his agility. In an instant, everyone in the arena watching the lion is dazzled. But the lion is not directly concerned: the people stare at the lion, but he stares at the ball. What is thus whirling around is the lion, but what makes him whirl around in every direction is always the ball.[46]

That around which every such motion turns, no less than that whose position, as its accompaniment, limns each continuously evolving movement, might the "point" central to all eloquence in the remark of the Chinese critic suggest the darkling figure of that "cryptic thing" exposed, in language, by all the subtlety of that protective tact to which the Iraqi essayist had not failed to hold? Perhaps no more, on

[45] Jin Shengtan, quoted and translated in François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 336.
[46] Jullien, *Detour and Access*, 336.

one pass, than this side of an instant's dazzling brush with it.

FIVE.

PLACE WITHOUT DESCRIPTION, OR, THINKING WITH POEMS

> It is not a question of thinking "about" poems but *with poems*.[47]

A great provocation to thought: what might it be to think "with" poems? No doubt there are many and illustrious examples of thinking "about" poems, in

[47] Judith Balso, *Affirmation of Poetry*, trans. Drew S. Burke (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014), 17, author's emphasis. Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), quoted and translated in George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought*: *From Hellenism to Celan* (New York: New Directions, 2014), v: "Every thought begins with a poem," such that what we call a "poem," Derrida writes, "does not hold still within names, nor even within words." Jacques Derrida, "*Che cos'è la poesia*?" in *A Derrida Reader*: *Between the Blinds*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 229 [221–237].

the variegated corpus of writing comprising the tradition of literary criticism, for one. But are there any examples, in the critical tradition or beyond, of thinking *with* them? After what fashion, in line with what criteria, might thinking be said to accord with poems? And what might thinking with poems afford thought?

Because it is indeed, as Balso has it, "a question": How is one to place thought? Might not what's in question for thinking here reveal something essential to what it is to place in question—something essential, that is, to *place* in question?

§ ONTOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES CONFRONT US

> *Ontological* difficulties confront us with blank questions....In each case the observable phenomenon—the text—is the inevitable betrayal, in both senses of the term, of an invisible logic.[48]

> Indeed much of our own trouble has already been taken before we are in a position to know whether questions of this kind are present in the poems at all.[49]

In *De Anima*, in an inquiry into "the sensation of the senses themselves," Aristotle writes "what is sometimes darkness and sometimes light is one in nature" and asks what, in the case of vision, permits

[48] George Steiner, "On Difficulty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36.3 (Spring 1978): 273, 276 [263–276], author's emphasis.
[49] Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), x.

darkness to be distinguished from light.[50] In other words he poses the question: *What does one* see *when one sees* darkness?

§ THIS VOID IS, HOWEVER, NOT A NON-BEING

> This void is, however, not a non-being; or at least this non-being is not the being of the negative, but rather the positive being of the "problematic," the objective being of a problem and of a question.[51]

> To understand a question means to ask it.[52]

An exemplary poem begins, "In a field / I am the absence / of field." The speaker contends, with the very next line, that this "is always / the case": "Wherever I am / I am what is missing."

The poem is titled, "Keeping Things Whole." In keeping with the poem's titular interest, what's to be made of the division that delimits that "absence": the division of speaker from field, of field from speaker? What would it be, instead—in accordance with what will "always" have been "the case," but differently—to be wholly a part of that field, to be of

[50] Aristotle, quoted and translated in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 180–181.

[51] Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands*: *And Other Texts*, *1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Melissa McMahon, Charles J. Stivale, Michael Taormina, et. al. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 189–190.

[52] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 368.

a piece with it and nothing apart from it? How might one think it? How might one *write* it?

§ CONSCIOUSNESS CEASES TO BE A LIGHT

> Consciousness ceases to be a light cast upon objects in order to become a pure phosphorescence of things in themselves.[53]
>
> The *idea* of paper.[54]

Que la blancheur défend, writes Mallarmé: which defends itself by its own whiteness.[55]

§ IT IS NOT WITHOUT REVERENCE

> It is not without reverence that we reduce.[56]
>
> By process of elimination, one is no longer anything more than an abstract line, or a piece in a puzzle that is itself abstract.[57]

What do we see when we read but letters? But how

[53] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 311.
[54] Nicholas Basbanes, *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), xii.
[55] Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted and translated in Henry Weinfield, "Commentary: Poésies," in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 164 [147–241], right column.
[56] Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 414.
[57] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 280.

do the shapes of letters in turn shape reading?

Here limit may be distinguished from boundary, "for limit, like shape, belongs primarily to what is limited and only secondarily to what does the limiting," whereas "to be a boundary, by contrast, is to be exterior to something or, more exactly, to be *around* it, *enclosing* it […]. As such, a boundary belongs to the container rather than to the contained."[58] A question as complicated as it appears simple: Is the letter a boundary or a limit? What—and how—does it "belong" to it to "contain"? (When Agamben once more invokes the Spinoza of the *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, in a decisive passage in the final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, it's to note "this peculiar situation,"[59] "a singular topology"[60]: With reading we seem to have,

[58] Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place*: *A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 63, author's emphasis.

[59] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 27.

[60] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 28. "Only a philosophical topology, analogous to what in mathematics is defined as an *analysis situs* (analysis of site) in opposition to *analysis magnitudinis* (analysis of magnitude) would be adequate to the *topos outopos*, the placeless place whose Borromean knot we have tried to draw in these pages. Thus topological exploration is constantly oriented in the light of utopia." Giorgio Agamben, quoted in Peter Fenves, "Wither Topology? On Structure and Order in *Homo Sacer*," *Stanford University Press* [weblog], July 6, 2016, http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2016/07/whither-topology.html. Hence, Fenves concludes, "a non-quantifiable and non-orientable 'situs' consisting of an un-

in Émile Benveniste's striking formulation, "a process that takes place in the subject: the subject is internal to the process."[61])

What's required, Deleuze and Guattari write, is "much asceticism, much sobriety, much creative involution."[62] They take as their example "the camouflage fish, the clandestine": "this fish

> is crisscrossed by abstract lines that resemble nothing, that do not even follow its organic divisions; but thus disorganized, disarticulated, it worlds with the lines of a rock, sand, and plants, becoming imperceptible. The fish is like the Chinese poet: not imitative or structural, but cosmic. François Cheng shows that poets do not pursue resemblance, any more than they calculate 'geometric proportions.' They retain, extract only the essential lines and movements of nature; they proceed only by continued or superposed 'traits,' or strokes.[63]

In short, and in a "movement" nothing less than "cosmic," "one reduces oneself to one or several abstract lines that will prolong itself in and con-

bounded and thus 'infinite' surface, with only a single side and therefore, in effect, without any (opposing) sides at all. In short, a 'bare' opening, from which a series of other such openings can be envisaged."

[61] Émile Benveniste, quoted and translated in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 27.

[62] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 279.

[63] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 280.

jugate with others, producing immediately, directly *a* world in which it is *the* world that becomes."[64]

§ A WORLD IN SHORTHAND

> A world in shorthand.[65]
>
> The sum of whose movements are known only in obscurity.[66]

In the commentary he appends to his Jin dynasty recension of the *Zhuangzi*, and in attempting to reconcile ostensibly discordant statments on the value of knowledge made in the course of its disparate chapters, Guo Xiang recommends an approach to knowing he places in contrast to cognition, a thought one scholar has rendered "vanishing into things."[67] The character Guo employs here as a verb, *ming* (冥), could be said more colloquially

[64] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 280, authors' emphasis.
[65] Leibniz, quoted and translated in Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*: *Archeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 193.
[66] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*: *Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 86.
[67] Barry Allen, *Vanishing into Things*: *Knowledge in Chinese Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 103–104. The translation is Brook Ziporyn's. See Brook Ziporyn, "Interactivity Without Traces: Vanishing (Into) Things," in *The Penumbra Unbound*: *The Neo-Daoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 65–83.

to mean dark, obscure, or difficult to discern, so that as a transitive verb, in accordance with Guo's use of it, it means "to darken," "to darken" its object.[68]

What might it mean as an instigation to thought that the verb rendered "vanishing," in the phrase "vanishing into things," is indistinguishable by sight from one that means to "darken" them?

§ BETWEEN THE BLANK PAGE AND THE INK

> That writing necessitates the creation of a series of antitheses between the blank page and the ink that divides it up is clear.[69]
>
> More explicit than the experience of sun.[70]

A brilliant line from a late Byzantine lexicon reads, "Aristotle was the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought."[71] No less luminous—nor less revealing, *here*—is Giorgio Agamben's comment on it: Blank, incandescent, thought attains its articulation on vanishing into (as though an afterimage) "the ink of its own opacity."[72]

[68] Allen, *Vanishing into Things*, 104.
[69] Richard E. Goodkin, *The Symbolist Home and the Tragic Home*: *Mallarmé and Oedipus* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), 21.
[70] Wallace Stevens, "Description without Place," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*: *Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 276 [270–277].
[71] *Suda*, quoted and translated in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 214.
[72] Agamben, *Potentialities*, 215.

§ EVERYTHING THUS HAPPENS FOR US

> Everything thus happens for us as though we reflected back to surfaces the light which emanates from them, the light which, had it passed on unopposed, would never have been revealed.[73]

"Poetry no longer imposes itself," in thinking with poems instead of about them, as Paul Celan writes, "it exposes itself."[74]

[73] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 36.
[74] Paul Celan, quoted and translated in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 115.

six.

"UTOPIA IS THE VERY TOPIA OF THINGS"
On Parables

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

> The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.
>
> The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.[75]

"If you only followed the parables," it has been written, "you yourselves would become parables." How is one to understand "follow" here? "The words of the wise are always merely parables," "many complain" in the parable's opening words, "and"—*are therefore*, it's implied: something of consequence is to follow—"of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have." For "when the sage says: 'Go over,' he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and *therefore*"—my emphasis—"cannot help us here in the very least."

How is one to follow that?

"If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares." Because as opposed to parables—as opposed, that is, to "some fabulous yonder," "something unknown to us"—"the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter." Yet to be "rid" of them? By "becoming" parables?

[75] Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa Muir, Edwin Muir, Tania Stern, James Stern, Ernst Kaiser, and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 457. The title comes from Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 103.

"I bet that is also a parable."

"Also" a parable? What does that *also* insinuate here?

Parables, since they are "of no use" there, are opposed throughout the body of Kafka's parable to "daily life," "the cares we have to struggle with every day." But in the parable's final line parable is opposed to "reality." There's an easy equivalence in daily life between "daily life" and "reality." And by opposing parable to each—to "daily life" and to "reality"—Kafka seems to confirm that synonymy. Yet what Kafka does *in reality* is confirm it *in parable*. Parable insinuates between "daily life" and "reality"—and here is its "use," the care it demonstrates—the "merest" divergence ("the words of the wise are always *merely* parables") by opposing each in turn, first one, then the other. So that one no longer follows from the other. Not as it does so easily, so carelessly, as in (thus) "daily life."

To have thus discreetly introduced a certain "reluctance."

Thus (*also*) "the words of the wise."

"All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already." And yet, between "the incomprehensible," which we "know" "already" ("the incomprehensible is incomprehensible," that's "all these parables really set out to say," "merely," "and we know that already"), and what no one has any doubt the sage "means" ("when the sage says: 'Go over,' he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place," but "some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us"), perhaps there's located

"something" that can, in fact, be "designated more precisely": Between the "unknown" and "the incomprehensible," in short, how is one to situate thought in parable? How is one to place it? And conversely, unavoidably: How, in parable, is one to understand place?

Nor least: *What follows*?

"Follow" translates Kafka's *folgen*, so that one could also translate it, "If you only *obeyed* the parables...."

To the question, "Why such reluctance?" ("Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only obeyed the parables...."), one can therefore only reply: *Obey*? *What would it be to obey—or for that matter, to disobey—parables*? And so ask, for that reason, *What would it be to obey parables* only, *exclusively*? ("If you *only* obeyed the parables....")

So as then to have followed, or perhaps obeyed, observed, on so uncertain a terrain, a certain untranslatability.

What's lost thereby?

What won?

The title of the parable is "On Parables." Parable is where the stakes are set, where Kafka sets down stakes. ("I bet that is also a parable.") That the stakes are set in parable does not mean that the fallout can in consequence be limited to it. It is in "the only life we have" and so making of it in its recounting "a different matter" that parable is what "On Parables" will have—with the most scrupulous and uncanny care—*gone over*. You follow? You yourselves become parables.

POSTFACE.

"TO BELIEVE IN THIS WORLD"
Immanence and Militancy

> One can just as easily become a convinced Spinozist (or a firm opponent) with a materialist and atheistic interpretation of the *Ethics* as with a mystical-religious one.[76]
>
> A problem of *economy* and *strategy*.[77]

"Spinoza began with God!"[78] Louis Althusser exclaims. "A supreme strategy"—"the *extreme* essence

[76] Jean-Luc Marion, quoted in Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*: *French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 1. The title is a line from Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*: *The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 172.
[77] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 282.
[78] Louis Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I:

of every philosophical strategy,"[79] Althusser even goes on to say—"he began by taking over the chief stronghold of his adversary, or rather he established himself there as if he were his own adversary, therefore not suspected of being the sworn adversary, and redisposed the theoretical fortress in such a way as to turn it completely around, as one turns around cannons against the fortress's own occupant."[80]

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

§. THE FIRE AND THE TALE: ON INEFFABILITY AND PHILOSOPHY

> Riddles are a truer representation of the nature of reality than simple declarative statements.[81]

Spinoza," in *The New Spinoza*, eds. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, trans. Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 10 [3–19].

[79] Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza," 11.

[80] Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza," 10–11.

[81] Adam Roberts, *The Riddles of The Hobbit* (New York:

"What cannot be told of, we want to know, knowing also," as Arthur Danto put it, "that we cannot say: the ineffable is that about which all that is to be said is that nothing more is sayable."[82] "Still," Danto goes on to say, "one persists in wanting to know, there must be some explanation."[83] "What cannot be told of, we want to know, knowing also that we cannot say"—and "still, one persists." How might one understand that persistence? How does it figure wanting into knowledge, and how might this be said to find in "the ineffable" its articulation?

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

> Fa-yen asked the monk Hsüan-tzu why he had never asked him any questions about Zen. The monk explained that he had already attained his understanding from another master. Pressed by Fa-yen for an explanation, the monk said that when he had asked his teacher, "What is the Buddha?" he had received the answer, "Ping-ting T'ung-tzu comes for fire!"
>
> "A good answer!" said Fa-yen. "But I'm sure you don't understand it."
>
> "Ping-ting," explained the monk, "is the god of fire. For him to be seeking for fire is like

Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20.

[82] Arthur Danto, quoted in Silvia Jonas, *Ineffability and its Metaphysics*: *The Unspeakable in Art*, *Religion, and Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

[83] Danto, quoted in Jonas, *Ineffability and its Metaphysics*, 3.

> myself, seeking the Buddha. I'm the Buddha already, and no asking is needed."
>
> "Just as I thought!" laughed Fa-yen. "You didn't get it!"
>
> The monk was so offended that he left the monastery, but later repented of himself and returned, humbly requesting instruction.
>
> "You ask me," said Fa-yen.
>
> "What is the Buddha?" inquired the monk.
>
> "Ping-ting T'ung-tzu comes for fire!"[84]

When it comes to the ineffable perhaps the least that can be said with any certainty must respect the need for asking after it: "Is it credible that we can be satisfied with a tale that is no longer"—the monk's placid explanation—"in relation with the fire?"[85] Strictly speaking, and however paradoxical, it goes without saying: the identification of the monk with the fire god (and so with the Buddha) obtains *only in inquiry*—in a "seeking" where "asking," in fact, "is needed."[86] Only on asking after the Buddha, in

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

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

[86] André Jolles, *Simple Forms*: *Legend*, *Saga*, *Myth*, *Riddle*, *Saying*, *Case*, *Memorabile*, *Fairytale*, *Joke*, trans. Peter J.

other words, can the monk be said to have "come for fire." And only on asking again, and so having "repented of himself," may he therefore yet come for the first to be consumed by it.

§. "THE HITHER SIDE OF ALL SOLUTIONS": THE PLACE IN PLACE OF CONCLUSION

> Rationality is not a *problem*. There is behind it no unknown quantity which has to be determined by deduction, or, beginning with it, demonstrated inductively. […] The world and reason are not problematical. We may say, if we wish, that they are mysterious, but their mystery defines them: there can be no question of dispelling it by some "solution," it is on the hither side of all solutions.[87]

If we wish to say, after Spinoza, that philosophy is mysterious, that's because what began with God didn't end there: what the *Ethics* co-opts in the last instance and above all, definingly, is mystery, infiltrating it and redisposing it in the name of philosophy itself.[88] The "turn" Spinoza effects follows "as if he were his own adversary": "Immanence" is no

Schwartz (New York: Penguin, 2017), 106: "From this," in short, "we can conclude that the sole or true point of the riddle is not the solution itself, but rather the act of *solving*."

[87] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2003), xxiii.

[88] In Spinoza's words, that is, what we have is "the crystalline elimination of the unsayable in language." Walter Benjamin, quoted in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 54.

solution[89]—the hither side of all solutions, it betrays its impassable designation for the ruthless criticism of everything existing.

[89] Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 161: "What we need to grasp is not another place but a peculiar kind of possibility: the possibility of disrupting the field of possibilities."

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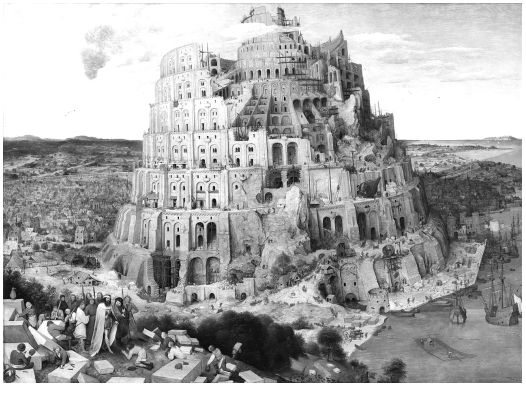

W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a thought-army, a thoughtpack, which would storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament.He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-outsiders. What distances would shine in their eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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Figure 1. Phillip Igumnov, “Cloud Makers” (2010).

Munro, Michael

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