The Book as One of Its Own Characters
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The Book as One of Its Own Characters

Hélène Cixous

Books are characters in books. Between authors and books, not everything can be taken for granted. At the point where the author ("I") thinks s/he can close the door on a chapter, the book puts its foot in the door. If I want to explain myself, the book cuts me off and takes the floor in my stead.

The story I have to tell is the story of writing’s violence. I want to write what I cannot write. The book leads me astray, carries me away. It wants to write. It wants me to write it; I want to write the book I am pursuing with my dreams. Will I ever get it written?

A book is not only writing: it is a weapon; it is a misdeed; it is a race for the secret(s). It is a struggle against memory, for memories. One is in pieces; one patches oneself back together. That is why I love the Life of Henry Brulard—a life that is a book in the process of growing its own skin, churning its own blood, getting cold feet, arguing energetically about death and destiny in the kitchen. There is food and drink and enough laughter to bring tears, in books where the book makes a commotion. And there is “no alibi,” as my friend Derrida would say.

1. Die Ursache – The Thing

At the beginning of my autobibliography, I didn’t write books, I didn’t write, things happened, at night. Others would have said “books” perhaps. But I called them things, these residues of nocturnal earthquakes and convulsions. Living speaking frightening things. Untitled lava flow, spread by cracks in the soul. While the author sleeps, the auctor, s/he who deals in reality, belief, the auctor who has the right, the power, to order, sign, recognize, sleeps, the Earth rolls onto its side and opens up lips of wounds. In the morning one found things, as repulsive as poor Gregor Samsa. These were still, at that time, the daynights when I wasn’t there. Except that already the Where was there, an infernal garden, locked away inside the City. The Garden of Things.

The daynights when I would not for anything in the world have put my name to those animated things that had dropped from the mental

entrails of the being that was in my place or in whose place I was myself, these were endless hours, uplifted, haunted, invaded by armies that ended up in the morning on a battleground where I scarcely dared walk, columns of insects occupied the walls, there were footprints or pawprints on my table, and everywhere there were remnants, droppings, fragments, tales, dream-gasps, memories of events flayed bare. Someone was hurriedly jotting down visions, accidents, primitive scenes, in my handwriting, obeying the order to write, an order issued by no one, issued by (the) Order itself, by the City or the Emperor, some orderer with no identity and no face, but who was sending letters to me, already a book, which it was unthinkable that I could evade. I gave in. I gave up in spite of myself and separately from myself. I am still giving in, separation is always part of me still, as it was in the beginning. What has changed is the terror.

I have finally gotten into the habit of this ordering (or order-giving).

The Things were by no means inert, they moved, it was awful. They were still there. They wouldn’t go away until note had been taken of their shapes and their statements. It was windy, the wind raged, one walked in darkness on half-buried squirrels that one didn’t dare touch.

“The author,” that is, the slave of these nocturnal events who would later stop running away from the scandal and admit defeat, in my name, was like Goya’s half-buried dog. I had never seen that Dog before, that half-Dog, it remained halfway between life and death between earth and heaven in an ochre storm spilled out by Goya in the opening onto a void, in Madrid, as soon as I saw it, the day I saw it, it was I, that day, without hesitation, I saw the portrait of my soul, it too unearthed, myself as my yellow-nose dog half alive despite the embrace of death. It was as if I had found the proof and the origin.

I recognized my lava and my larva.

At the beginning of the beginnings, there was a bombardment. Volcanic eruptions. According to me it wasn’t communicable. You don’t publish lava. These weren’t letters: lava. As they settle, though, under the pen that notes, they grow by one letter. Larva. Now they are larvae. They don’t know how well they put it. Larvae bring up in us a slight unjust feeling of repulsion, like every slightly justified repulsion: at issue is the deficiency in our soul, our acquired taste for the definite, the situated. A larva—an insect larva: it’s not this, not that, it’s an embryonic form peculiar to insects that are also not this and not that, like the timeless cockroach on which the whole life of G. H. runs aground and cracks its keel.

These things, roaches, larvae, they terrify and fascinate us. But before the French language designated as “larva” an intermediate state in insectuous genetics, rather late in the eighteenth century, before
landing on the body of those half-buried, half-immersed thing-beings, the word *larva* had lurked in homes. At that time larvae were the spirits of the dead, who pursue the living, spirits in Latin. The origin of larva is *lar*. If I were Edgar Allan Poe, I would call it *art*. The *lares* were called gods, charged with protecting the hearths of Roman life, they looked after the living whom as spirits of the dead they had earlier pursued. Lares, larvae, ancient infernal spirits, turned back into their opposites in the ambivalent turn described by Freud. But the threat is never forgotten. People ask the very spirits they fear to protect their delicate inner hearths. They ask death to guard life, yes. Everything larval is as bad as it is good, living as much as it is dying, attractive because it is repulsive, terrifying because it is inexplicably seductive. In this larval time I was not yet acquainted with the Freudian concept of *unheimlich* but I experienced it quite often. For larvae, in spite of myself, in spite of my repulsion, I had a weakness, a *Faible* as the Germans say. (Let us note that a "Faible" is always a haunting, a foreign spirit-body that one fails to reject in one’s inner hearth, one accuses it and accepts it. Thus I had in spite of myself and because of my dead ones in myself—my father and the countless others in his wake—a "Faible" (pronounced “fay-buhl” in German) for larvae, of the same breed as lava, those thing-beings whose state shifts between two states. Because larvae are not embryos within the maternal body, they lead a life, free, neither herenorthere, outside the egg, that’s what worries me, they are not yet but already.

There had been the bombings of Oran, the bombardments of war, with bombs, descent into the shelters, warning sirens, space becomes extremely vertical, life is a cord stretched between two non-extremities, between above and below ground, between horror and jubilation.

Later I saw cities that had become bombed out: the inside on display, the privacy of domestic life exposed. Anatomy Lesson. The Gutted City. Lethargic. Seeing what is hidden causes a shudder. One can’t prevent oneself from looking at what one shouldn’t see. London strafed, split open, ribs cracked in 1950 still.

There was (had been) the bombing of Salzburg, yet another. Yet another. A series of bombardments. Some shattered the chest of the natal City. Others crushed the images of destiny, daydreams, childhood hopes.

We are born to be bombed and to see suddenly familiar places and ordinary things become naked and spectacular. Then the outside reaches the inside and the inside displays itself brazenly, and there is nothing we can do about it. It is like that mathematical phenomenon called Klein’s Bottles, an inconceivable thing, yet one that exists, a volume whose outside is inside.
I shall be able to give the name of my bombardments.
The Destruction of the world does not happen only once.
There are Mines of evil.

When my father left, leaving an earthsized crater in the place of the
Universe, I thought that everything “had happened.” I thought it was
The End and The First Cause.
But another Apocalypse follows another Apocalypse. As we have
known since the Apocalypse, the vision of the apocalypse takes one’s
breath away. One remains without a voice for a very long time.
As soon as one can recount, there is something like an appeasement
of the household gods. But for forty years there is an impossibility of any
narrative. Forty years: always forty years of desert or muteness. The fainting
spell lasts forty years. Then memory starts up again. During the fainting,
a world remains, a population untold, well hidden, crouching in the
corners, in the stairwell, larvae of young ones condemned to death, who
return as soon as they are dead who besiege us and whom we besiege.

The End is not the end. No more than the beginning begins.

Once my first son died, I was begun again.
There is not an Ursache. There is no Once and for all.
There was not just one country lost. Nor just one son dead.
What the advent (event) of the inexact child caused me (before his return
to me forty years after our common end, after we both ended):
- a slippage, disarray, dislocation, dissolution of borders, a discrediting
  of the world
- a mockery of destiny with respect to calculations: the intrusion into
  real existence of tragic irony, a device I thought reserved for heroes
  of the Theater.

The inexact child was the irruption of the unforeseen, the incalcul-
able, into the presumption of calculations. I was twenty-two years old,
unknowing and totally calm. I was at anchor. I remained in the silence of
its inexactness for exactly thirty-nine years.
Slippage, metonymy, replacement, substitution are the spirits that
came in beneath the unreadable countenance of the child born to me
unknown. The letter of intrusion into my consciousness, not yet formed,
of philosophic irony, was delivered by a neitherthisnorthand child, a
backwards dream.
In shock there is a mental calling off: what one believed one had under
control escapes. The expected child arrives without arriving: The child-
thing does not come into its place. In its place disquietessence oscillates.
What is a child? What is a human being? The words like, normal, law,
own, all the inherited terms, the terms of inheritance, sink away. Questions come to us violently, take us by surprise, without asking or waiting for answers, no, the questions come in place of answers, they answer by mocking our irresponsibility, a global interrogation makes us slip and fall in the street, shakes our cliché-beliefs.

And what is this odd thing, a book?

* * *

TWO SCENES: 1. The doll’s hand
2. Madison’s parrot

The Bombardment bombards space and also time. Suddenly time breaks. At the very moment of bombardment, time pulls back from under my feet. Time’s path collapses in front of me. The future disappears behind a horizon of clouds. The present has slid underground. One looks at the very moment of bombardment from the viewpoint of a cooled-down future. A time has been killed. One no longer knows what side one is on. The human beings who were persons and people an hour ago probably lie under a sentence that flees itself in erratic leaps, as if it could not make up its mind to “let go,” to deliver the message of death. The sentence throws itself into a segmented trajectory, it takes off with a wobbly gallop like a horse that keeps on running with a broken hoof, it is only by stumbling over and over that it approaches what it was hiding and in the end collapses, before the immense heap of smoking ruins under which the fragments of time and their former inhabitants are most likely piled up, as if changed all at once into dead ones by death, as Thomas Bernhard writes.

Careful. Because by continuing under the bombardments we are going to reach the place-moment where writing has its source. Is born of a crevasse between the annihilated world and the next one, from which a night wells up overpopulated with somewhat foreign beings.

It is (will be) recognized by the fact that one does (not) recognize this thing that springs forth, unspeakable, through a crack. Unspeakable: captivating. Like beauty. There is scarcely any distance between the thing of horror and the thing of beauty. There is war, the cause of the instantaneous and totally unforeseeable mutation of species.

At the edge of the abyss one needs to rush into keeping a diary of the inconceivable, so as not to fall into madness. One writes madness in order to keep it there at one’s side and not fall into it. To dwell in impotence and not drown. In a stabilized disqualification, gradually accommodated.
There had just been a bombing. The inhabitants had suddenly changed species. Some were now dead people, others had undergone a different mutation: they had become “Seekers.” Scavengers, that’s what they were.

“At that moment,” said Thomas Bernhard, “I saw all the powerlessness of those who had entered into the war without transition.”

As if one had passed without transition from one country to another, this is how it is to enter without an entrance, to leap over time. Yesterday has become dizzyingly remote. Yesterday has dropped to the bottom of the pluperfect.

Then Thomas Bernhard takes the road that leads to Gätttengasse. In front of the Bürgerspitalk church, he had walked (that was yesterday, but a yesterday carried off in the story of the depths of the pluperfect), he had stepped on a “soft object.”

I believed, when I glimpsed this soft object (weichen Gegenstand) [while I was glancing at the Gegenstand], that it was a doll’s hand (eine Puppenhand), my classmates too had thought it was a doll’s hand, but it was a child’s hand, torn from a child. It was only when I saw the child’s hand that this first American bombing of my hometown ceased being a sensational event exciting the boy I had been and became a horrible intervention of violence and a catastrophe.

The turning point is there: everything is turned in a foreign sense. It is only at that moment that what had been able to pass for eine Sensation can become something else entirely: a thing belonging to the realm of theater, and of excess. Everything changes. Everything leaps onto a land mine, including tenses. From one second to another, one stops being a little boy and moves on to the pluperfect of fatality. Time and tense leap around that unprecedented thing that has to be read in German for its full import to sink in. It is the story of a doll’s hand, a Puppenhand. It is a story of Puppenhand. The story is in German, a language that makes compound words readily and in large numbers. Where we say, in English, a doll’s hand, “the hand of a doll,” German says a Puppenhand, a dollhand. A hand-held-reported-defined-undetachable. We decompose, we articulate; in German, it is the opposite, the word makes a single whole of bits and pieces, a single word that shakes its own hand.

Another striking word here: ein Gegenstand, the object, a word that now commonly has a philosophical value. There in the street someone steps on an “object” that belongs to the philosophical sphere. Other words express the object in German, from the word objekt to the thing, das Ding. But little by little Gegenstand takes up space in the German language, it is made up of stand, the being there, an upright being, and gegen, which expresses “against” in all senses of the word “against,” what
is very close, what is right up against, but also what may be the against of antagonism. *Gegen* is also what is toward, around, about. Around this time, the word *gegen* is used. The “object” is what holds together in a region that is defined by directions, orientations, proximities, or distancings that are *gegen*.

Then Gstättengasse in front of the church, he steps on a *Gegenstand* that expresses the indefinite, the against, the thing that is not-me (an irreplaceable word, it has to be translated in English by “object,” which is not wrong, since *ob*, the Latin *ob*/ject, functions a little like *gegen*/stand, but *Gegenstand* is more abstract, more cerebral than the word object).

Auf dem Weg in die Gstättengasse war ich auf dem Gehsteig, vor der Bürgerspitalskirche, auf einen weichen *Gegenstand* getreten, und ich glaubte, es *handelte sich*—

I emphasize this *handeln* through which, surreptitious, the hand arrives; *handle* in English really means “manipulate,” the hand is at work. In German, *handeln* has the sense of “to be in question.” But this completely trivial word puts the hand, *Hand*, in circulation. As if before the exact nature of the *Gegenstand* comes to clear consciousness, a phantom hand were already saying its name, by premonition.

—es *handle sich*, wie ich auf den Gegenstand schaute, um eine Puppenhand, auch meine Mitschüler hatten geglaubt, es *handelte sichum eine Puppenhand*

I thought it “was a question,” while I was looking at the *Gegenstand*, of a doll’s-hand, and my classmates too had thought that it was a question of a dolls-hand [Emphasis added]

But all at once the hand is not what it is thought to be, that false hand is nothing other than a hand that had been—before looking like a simulacrum of a hand—a hand of another species, a hand articulated with a child, a hand of a third kind: neither a doll’s nor a child’s, but more exactly: a child’s-hand-torn-from-a-child

*Aber es war eine von einem Kind abgerissene Kinderhand gewesen* [emphasis added]

but it was a-from-a-child-torn-child’s-hand

See the gap in the observation of the difficulty of the adjustment: *Kinderhand / Puppenhand*. We are not told: but it was a child’s hand. Nor are we told: it was a hand torn from a child. We are told that it was a
Kinderhand torn from a child. In a wholly subtle way, he tells us that what has been torn from a child is not its hand, not a hand, it is a Kinderhand. In fact there is no clear separation between Kinderhand and Puppenhand. If someone tears off one of your legs, you will not say that it is a man’s leg torn from a man. What the sentence says in an unheimlich way, an uncanny way, is that what has been torn from a child is a child’s-hand. Species arise, like the species of seekers, scavengers-in-ruins. Here is another still unknown species: it “is a question” of a child’s-hand, which is comparable, substitutable, and which is confused with a doll’s-hand. And in that moment when one is stepping on the deceptive thing one is slipping into the world in which only writing can render these slippages, these humanizations-dehumanizations. (I shall add too that one can allow oneself to think about the von, if one does not remain in a sort of realist respect for the scene, because that von could function like a child’s hand, but it can also mean by a child. We are not going to think that it is by a child, but there is a multivalent ambiguity in the von that can make us think about this.)

This Kinderhand is struck, contaminated by thingification: if it has been stepped on because it was thought to be a doll’s hand, this is because it is a sort of doll’s hand. A child’s-hand-torn-from-a-child becomes a Puppenhand, becomes a Gegenstand, a sort of object, it is a piece, a scrap, a scrap but one that is a whole, and it is a sort of terrifying thing. Someone has torn a-child’s-hand from a child, as if that Kinderhand were a foreign supplement proper to the child’s body. Through that hand-that-was-a child’s, that hand disconnected from the human and reconnected to the human by its very detachment, through that lost, mutated hand, writing comes. I place my foot on a hand that puts its hand on my soul. A very slight hostility shoves my thought along.

We have just arrived at the genetic moment of all writing, all literature. I thought it was a doll’s hand, but the doll was not a doll, and the child was no longer a child. The doll and the child rub shoulders. You remember the riddle of the cemetery in Hamlet. Hamlet interrogates the gravedigger: “What man dost thou dig it for?” “For no man, sir.” “What woman, then?” “For none either.” It is for a thing, I am digging for some thing that was man or woman, that is no longer man or woman, and that is one of those indefinable appearances that are alongside us, man, woman child, human being, like and totally unlike, and that bring into our experience the feeling of alteration, of otherness, of another species which we are. That happens to us Gegen. With Gegen writing begins to be born, in the murky region of connections, recognitions, identifications, margins, and for that, for there this foreign Gegend to take place, this disturbance of separations, of distinctions, there has to have been bombardment.
Suddenly, one writes. One writes things, which are foreign things come forth from our night. One writes with a foreign body, a child’s-hand-torn from our childhood. One recognizes nothing.

Later, much later, I get used to calling my former larvae books.

I WANT THE FREEBOOK. BOOKS LIBERATE, DELIBERATE, DELIVER.

Saved from funereal publishers’ fairs, false politeness. Books are not what they want us to think, not the chastened made-to-order compelled to mold and flow into the flowmold of the printed volume, and muzzled in the bargain: when one becomes a book one must not sing, shout, whisper, or—especially—be silent.

But the book when it arrives, in all its states it vibrates, growls, sings, and often remains silent.

In my book there are chickens, dogs, insects. Reciting a lesson Rousseau sees a fly land on his hand. A fly lesson, that is what the book gives me in passing. A lesson of silence surrounding/source of the buzzing.

There are pains as well. The pains do not speak in a linear, monotone fashion. They crack. They shout and go on shouting. Suddenly break off.

Everything that happens to the breath, to the soul, makes music that I make my book play back to me with no holds barred. Language can render everything about the soul, grammar has infinite resources, it acrobats, it sinuates and bends, it has the spine of a cat, it can pass the subject’s head between its sentence-feet.

Into the published volume, in the middle of the story, I let in, let pass, an irruption of forgettings: for example the mongoloid chorus. The percussion chorus of chickens.

It resembles a scene on stage animated solely by interruptions. Stops, fishbones, angles, tracing the agitation of the soul. It resembles the pauses in a Beethoven score.

I adore Stendhal in his personal writing: he gallops down a street in Grenoble, swoops into a ravine, holds back his sentence at the last possible moment. Pulls himself together. I am wandering he says. And takes off in the opposite direction. True false movements. I adore miswanderings. Versatility is vital vice-and versa-tility.

SENTENCES

There is a bond of exchange-engendering between the fact that we—persons, beings, Mensch—produce, send forth, emit things from and of
the soul that are Sentences, and the virtual presence of a book that awaits only the right moment to make itself manifest.

We are chattered chatters. Exhalers-breathers of sentences (= precipitations, elocations of soul states). Words, sentences (1) express (2) shape our state and our fate.

I am a registrar, a gatherer of sentences. Here there ought to be a long dreamy reflection on the semantic, syntactic mystery of a sentence. Sometimes nominal, a body without a verb, a movement without a motor. Sometimes without a subject, without a master, a direction without a driver.

A book lurks, waiting, alert, pulling itself together—a long gestation, years, decades.

A Body pulls itself together, articulates itself. Striker-spirits. Struck. A foreign body prepares itself to speak in the place of my more or less familiar body.

Sentences are the spirits of books.

Sentences are the genetic keys, the unwitting avowals, the minimal beacons, the steam engines, the tanks, the horses, the skein . . .

In every book a sentence lives in secret, a diamond hidden in the paper, under the story.

It is the book’s co-signature, its seal. Its confession and its regret. For example this one: “Was I happy? No, I tasted pleasure.” Or this one: “I should have been happy: I was not.” Or this one:

My imagination had been employed forestalling the harm my tyrants did me and cursing them; as soon as I was free, at H, in my mother’s drawing-room, I had the leisure to develop a taste for something. My passion was: medallions moulded in plaster from hollow mounds of sulphur. Before I had had a minor passion: a love of thorn-sticks, gnarled sticks cut from hawthorn hedges, I believe; game-shooting.

My father and Séraphie had curbed both of them. That for thorn-sticks vanished under the jibes of my uncle; that for shooting, based on the voluptuous reveries nurtured by M. Le Roy’s landscape and the lively images my imagination had manufactured when reading Ariosto, became a frenzy, meant that I adored La Maison rustique, Buffon, that I wrote about animals, and expired finally only from a surfeit. At Brunswick, in 1808, I was one of the leaders on shoots on which we killed fifty or sixty hares with peasants as beaters. Killing a doe horrified me, that horror has grown. Today I can think of nothing more contemptible than turning a charming bird into four ounces of dead flesh.

If my father in his bourgeois fearfulness had allowed me to go out shooting, I would have been more agile, which would have helped me in the war. There I was agile only by dint of being strong.
THE BOOK AS ONE OF ITS OWN CHARACTERS

I shall speak again about shooting, let us return to the medallions. . . .

After four or five years of the deepest and most banal unhappiness, I only breathed then when I found myself alone and locked up in the apartment of the Rue des Vieux-Jésuites, a place I had detested until then. (The Life of Henry Brulard, tr. John Sturrock [London, 1995], pp. 200–201)


I read the intimate Stendhal out of passion for his rhythms. He streaks ahead like a horse like a hound at the hunt like a hunted hare like a falcon like a false consul I mean a false Nap., as he called Napoleon. I read the intimate Derrida out of passion for his Stendhalian sentences. “I am the last of the Jews” he says “I posthumate the way I breathe” he says. Out of passion for the way he rides clichés, his way of spurring on everyday language.

A BOOK HAPPENS

Where do books come from?
A surprising message, sent by a yesterday-foreigner who has today become a fateful necessary stranger.

For a book to come, one must go to a quite foreign country, be born into another memory. It is always a matter of a found manuscript. Describe Sweden, describe the raised stones of Ales Stenar at the southern tip of Sweden. There are, in that place where the earth thrusts the tip of its tongue into the sea, up high, where the sky comes down to earth, fifty-six raised stones left—in prayer?—once upon a time by a Viking about whom we no longer know anything at all, a legacy of stone, with commentary by a countless chorus of totally invisible larks. On this timeless jetty there remains a book that is like a boat. Every book is a boat that remains on land after a crossing.

The boat: the stem is the plow, the sea is plowed and seeded, the earth is plowed and seeded and we do not know it.

Describe Rome ruined alive seen from a rock on Mount Janiculus a magnificent sun is shining, every time, it is here, one tells oneself, that the Transfiguration (Raphael’s) was admired for two and a half centuries. The idea of Transfiguration transfigures us; for a book to come, there must be a City where all memories come flocking back; a city ancient and modern with tombs and gardens, archives and apparitions. And in
the city, a solitude. A solitude sitting on my lap, and without which I would feel alone.

Add to that an enormous inner chaos, a commotion of the nooks and crannies, griefs rising nameless, mournings without objects, regrets without attributes . . . Fears that have taken flight. Fears.

Long muzzled months.

Immense events powerfully minimized (failed love, dead child, betrayal, salvaged love . . .)

The Soul seeks an image in which it can resemble itself.

* * *

A book arrives from a country that yesterday one does not know.

There is a giant called Finn—who clings to a pillar and merges with it in the crypt of the cathedral in Lund. Pillar and giant are inseparable like construction and ruin.

That is it: the figure of the book. When one has encountered it one has received it like an arrow in the shoulder, yet one has not recognized it. But it has fished us out.

Finn comes back, as James Joyce remembered. The end, comes back to begin.

**HOSPITALITIES**

How does the book reach me, from where? When? In the summer. The season of birthings. Subterranean origins, multiple. It gathers like a slow, subtle storm. Readies itself. I do not know it.

Until the moment it sends me *its first signs*. Glimmers, phrases, emotions that belong to the world of writing.

I recognize them with a delay. They are already in place, writing. I recognize them by joy. A sensation of greeting. I open the doors: Welcome! I say. I do not yet know to whom. A hospitality begins.

The book signals, makes “its signs.”

It advances by announcements, by representatives. As in the Bible, one does not recognize them but one receives them. Like it or not. The widow of Zarephath says to Elijah: “I have nothing to eat.” Elijah, the book, says: “Do not worry, I tell you that there is what you need in your home. Believe me.”
I open the doors. A little girl comes in half devoured.
A film about Eichmann.
A square in Paris, St.-Germain-des-Prés, May 1 with false dogs, false explorers.
A three-legged dog.
What is that? An inventory? The day I am not there?
What happens. Blows from the world. Fair or foul.
My instinct, my law: let the blows reach me. Write “The Day I Was Not There.”

I obey, I listen.
I love voices. Docility in the face of storms.
The City is full of Voices. It seems to me that there is always (a) city in
my book. I am in my book as in a city, foreign. The city of my own birth,
foreign. Like my mother, foreign.
There is a foreign city in the city of my birth and vice versa: there is a
birthplace city that keeps watch for me in every foreign city. I could have
been born elsewhere. Was I born in Oran or in Osnabrück? I was born
of Osnabrück in Oran, or Oran in Osnabrück. From Osnabrück to
Montaigne. From Montaigne to New York. The City is the first book that
I read that read me. With all my body, all my blood, all my tears. I was
inside.

Die Ursache is the name of a book by Thomas Bernhard. It begins with
these words: Der Stadt ist, “The City is,”. These words are followed after
the comma by a sentence of incredible length, segmented, a jumble of
clauses. But first there is the City as Being.
The origin of the origin, the beginning of Beginnings: there is a City,
there was a City.
The City is always big, it is always a kingdom and a people. Even
“small,” it is large. Even small like Troy and its three thousand inhabit-
ants it is large like all memory, all literature. A City is—to take.
Even if we leave it behind it never leaves us in peace. It recalls itself. To
what extent do Oran, Algiers, never stop recalling themselves while
passing through and passing for Osnabrück or New Delhi?
The city space is crisscrossed with pleasures and hostilities. Especially
hostilities. The first Cities in literature are cities under siege. We too, are
cities under siege from inside and out. The most powerful enemy is
within.
The city space puts the originary kernel into orbit, the originary
polemic kernel, the polémos, the warrior kernel, there is where it always
begins; it is the family table, that is where war, conflict, polemics begin,
in a room, in a play, in the dining room. And then it dilates, expands,
and we have the city, and the city is merely a play in which a war is taking place. Either it is war, the one Thomas Bernhard describes for us in *The Origin, die Ursache*, and it is a stroke of luck, it is not a metaphor, and it has a power of extraordinary degradation, deflagration. This does not mean that war is not metaphor, it can reach us only with its metaphors, as metaphor. So either it is that war, with bombs, planes, antiaircraft defense, or else it is a larval war with virtual bombs, and from there we shall nevertheless return to the situation of polemics that is *the spirit of the city*. Next one has all the places, all the pieces, all the scenes that are arranged on the great stage of the city, and every time they are miniatures of the city, or on the contrary enlargements of the family scene.

In Rousseau there are countless examples. In his peregrinations he goes from city to city, from dwelling to residence, where every time events take place that are in themselves stage plays, events of polemos, overt or covert confrontations, between representatives of classes, or between representatives of passion. The counterpoints points of flight, of evasion, of repose are always ephemeral, brief moments on islands or in woods. Retreats, refuges, shelters.

* * *

**SHELTERS**

The word *shelters*, its charm in my childhood; its etymological charm: from the Latin *apricari*, to warm oneself in the sun. When the sirens sounded the alarm, at night, in Oran we went down as a family to “warm ourselves in the sun” in a basement on the Rue des Jardins. Shelters are not on earth. They are underground, they are antiaircraft shelters, tunnels, lairs, caverns, caves. The mother of all caves is Plato’s. Afterward it multiplies into apocalyptic dwellings, places where books are hatched.

Or else they are caves on high floors, offices, small rooms that protect the four delicious solitary occupations whose generic names Proust supplies—reading dreaming tears voluptuousness. These four occupations are what put books into gear. But all these rooms are places of origin of primitive *visions*. They are camera, chambers (Kamera, Kammer), boxes for manufacturing images; and sometimes shoe boxes, like the one in which I lay Fips my martyred dog or the one in which Jacques Derrida raised his silkworm.

The City is an enlargement of the shoebox inhabited by small animals. The Theater is its synecdoche. There one is always playing life against
death. Thomas Bernhard played with the idea of suicide on his violin in the little room full of shoes.

The book is a City in reduced form. There one plays at suicide. The book has the form of a fossil shoebox.

2. The Book Makes Its Entrance

THEATER OF THE BOOK

10-23-2000. Dreamed last night fully awake that I was writing the next book, I was beginning to write it in the middle of the night, in a highly awakened dream state, what I was writing rapidly with intensity power and a dense and rhythmic awareness, a symphonic cadence was telling the story of the beginnings of a book, it was gathering together all the events and circumstances of writing that were produced around the author’s plan, her desire and her personal life, the book followed itself step by step, noted its own reflections, remembered the drafting of a text, das Urteil, which one night of feverish notation had sufficed to bring to light, it resembled, it thought, a member of the family of texts similar to a herd of human zebras or wild horses, animal things, nocturnal aboriginals, geniuses, creatures produced by authors in the grip of a deafening trance

I was writing in a thick, lucid bustle, rushed by the shortness of the time of the dream, I was gathering together the daytime causes of this upheaval, during the week I had read the story das Urteil, at least I thought I had followed its unfolding seated in the first row of the pit, but now the story had transformed itself into a hallucination, had gone to my head, had passed into my blood, had spread through my brain, I had smelled its odor, I was hearing its street noises, it was totally contagious, I caught it

I was in its danger

all at once the whole workroom some structure was vibrating I was a city, I was in a city, I was roaming, I was roaming past the pages of the beginning, the subject of my book was its own construction, it was its battlefield, its factory, its maternity clinic but at the same instant I was struck by the idea of the world, of howeverness: for during this lying-in the world around me was in labor, the book that was developing in darkness and promising to be strong and well-nourished was fated to encounter the violent world story that lay in wait for it outside like a twin born barely an hour before. At the window of the room in which, legs crossed under the table, head down, hands (the left hand) clutching the
paper so it would hold still under the pen that was engraving its spine
body bent, weighing, on the body I was fashioning with the hardness that
creates, I was sacrificing all of life to the process, shots rang out in close
succession, salvos shouts of rage as dense and tireless in their repetition
as contractions and the sprays of words that the book was phrasing.

It came to my mind obsessed by the vital fomentation that the book
did not know that it was the offspring of a war, did not yet know this, that
it was being born in the night which forgets, in the grace of a night, but
since night is short, but deep thick vast enough for a work to develop
and ripen in it entirely occupied with its own mystery, it does not yet
know, the work, happily immersed in the night water, bathed in oblivion
and misreading, it believes while believing it holds all of itself in itself.
Thus begins a book like a god delighting in the pleasure of his own
gestures, totally absorbed in the play of a sentence, hypnotized by the
linking of words, captivated to the bone, it does not hear the clamor, the
bursting of shells, the screams of rage, it remains deaf for hours, as if
dead, as if totally anesthetized, as if a soul become paper, as if unaware
of the blood, the weather, the dismemberments

as if it could not be torn up

seated in the depth of a night legs crossed under the immortal table
for hours,

as if drowned by the hours in a mad insolence

as if for want of drowning a traitor to the twin who is screaming in the street

as if a larval worm in the process of larval absorption

as if absorbed—absolved—and without sin

and without sin for six or seven hours, at least, not more.

In the beginning the book absorbs everything it is completely ab-
sorbed in its birthing, on the watch for its fleeting images, leaning over
its own edge, it is fishing, it is the fisherman the line the fished-out the
dragged-up the sin. It hears nothing it sees nothing except the line held
out from its hand toward the object of all its wishes. How beautiful it is
that line whose far end is lost in the sparkling page of the water. In the
beginning the book thinks only of the line, thinks of thinking the line all
the way to its end, following it, remembering it suddenly forever, its
brilliant long stroke, taking pleasure in each of its points, not moving
away from it while enjoying the straightness of its thrust, seizing the
spurt, the purity, the secret of its charm. It pours its whole self into
fishing, into sinning, for this is all it likes to do.

What is sinning? Write the story from ten o’clock at night to six
o’clock in the morning on the night of the 22nd/23rd. The terrible
fatigue and the joy, the way the story unfolded before me while I made
my way through water. Several times that night I bore my own weight on
my back. How everything can be risked, how for all the strangest ideas there waits a great fire in which they are reduced to ashes and rise up again. The sight of the intact bed, as if it had just been transported into the room, Kafka wrote on the 23rd at seven o’clock in the morning. The certainty that I am in the shameful dregs of writing. Only thus can one write, only in this contemplative state, only with such a total opening of the body and the soul can one accomplish the sin of writing. An opening onto the shameless depths, far, far away from the world hurrying by in the street. The shots ringing out on the bridge go unheard.

Between ten o’clock and six o’clock in the morning.

Suddenly the door opens the maid crosses the hall, I wrote the last sentence. Or else it is the reverse: I wrote the last sentence when the door opened and the maid came in. This is the sin: in the story G. B. is writing a letter to the friend who is living abroad. It is a long letter. Once the letter is written G. B. thinks about it, about the letter he has just written. With the letter in his hand he remains seated at his desk his face turned toward the window. The pages pass, from ten o’clock to six o’clock in the morning. G. B. follows the thread of the letter that he is holding in his hand. A friend passes by in the street. The friend offers greetings in vain. The man who is sinning barely responds with an absent smile. He is under the shameful spell of the book.

At the end—of the time—of the absence—of the story—the door opens. All at once. The world enters. The maid. A burst of rifle fire breaks out.

Has the writerdreamer the dreamwriter plunged into the dregs of the soul far away from the world by writing? Or rather in order to write has he plunged in farther and farther away from the world? Has he fled the world in writing? Has he written in order to flee? Or has he lost the world while pursuing a sentence for hours?

—All at once a burst of rifle fire erupts, the pen falls from his hands. Or the opposite. As long as he holds the pen he does not hear the bullets whistling.

How forgettable this world is, how one can move forward in the water of the other world carrying one’s own weight on one’s back for six hours, pursuing the unfolding of a sentence. Suddenly the door slams. The world is rolling along on paving stones. Two men are running across the bridge. They are tossing a young wounded fellow about. The boy is losing a lot of blood. The shirt is drinking it in. The clarity of this red strikes me with astonishment. Everything is so clear. The blood, the noise, the blue of the sky. Clarities like these are unforgettable. One cannot turn one’s gaze away. They open violent windows in the book. Rifles are spitting out green flames.
3. The Letter

There is always a letter in the Book
The Book writes a letter
The book writes another letter, a letter other than the one it thought it wanted to write.
The book is always another letter, an other letter.
A letter is missing. The 600 letters from my father arrive all at once like “a single man”
The last letter is missing, the book says.
All the letters are missing: they arrive: That means: they are not yet arriving, they are going to arrive. The Messiah is arriving! The future present.
The book is written in the place of the letter that one will never write.
One thinks about it. One flees from it.

Kafka’s Judgment Letter (Das Urteil)

Georg writes a letter. To a faraway friend. It is his letter. His letter to himself. How to send it? To whom to send it?
He closes it slowly, fiddling with it, tapping it.
He looks out of the window. One can see the river. The other bank—
The other book. He is on this book and he sees the other book. Between the two lips the tongue flows —
He slips the letter into his pocket. The letter is in his pocket. It begins to act on him.
Unknowingly he does what the letter dictates. It writes him. He does everything that he would never have done and that he should not do. Instead of going to mail the letter to his friend, and to that end leaving his house and crossing over to the mailbox he crosses the narrow hallway he goes to his father’s bedroom in which he has not set foot for months and he goes in. There he is in the box

Letters are manifestations of the disorder of our times. We are temporally disordered, we are prey to Time that is to its essential discordance.
We are divided, buffeted, displaced in place, passed by in the very moment.
The nowlessness, the mindlessness of letters frightens me.
Their elusiveness, their craftiness, their transgressive power. They are always virtually posthumous. Between departure and arrival how much time, how many years, and even death.
In French letter and being, lettre and l'être, are homophonous twins. As soon as I say one I am saying the other. Being is letter is being. Always stolen.

What am I saying! At the moment I write I have passed, I am past, you are future thus past, neither the one nor the other is ever present at the same instant.

Deconstruction of the illusion of communion.

“Regret?” No. Sad and marvelous pleasure of the mystery of the human spirit which is carved into time.

Letter: always missed appointment.

Love letters: we write them anyway, with despair. Letter always says: we missed each other we miss each other, I miss you, you are lacking to me, I am filled with your absence. K. to Milena: I loved you too late

Sero te amau

They say we miss each other in reality but in eternity which does not know time it is written that we met, we passed through this place, “in time”

Love letters are in truth traces in/for whoever will come later.

Sometimes I have the feeling that we’re in one room with two opposite doors and each of us holds the handle of one door, one of us flicks an eyelash and the other is already behind his door, and now the first one has but to utter a word and immediately the second one has closed his door behind him and can no longer be seen. He’s sure to open the door again for it’s a room which perhaps one cannot leave. If only the first one were not precisely like the second, if he were calm, if he would only pretend not to look at the other, if he would slowly set the room in order as though it were a room like any other; but instead he does exactly the same as the other at his door, sometimes even both are behind the doors and the beautiful room is empty.

... You must also consider, Milena, the kind of person who comes to you, the 38-year journey lying behind me (and since I’m a Jew an even much longer one), and if at an apparently accidental turning of the road I see you, whom I’ve never expected to see and least of all so late, then, Milena, I cannot shout, nor does anything shout within me, nor do I say a thousand foolish things, they are not in me (I’m omitting the other foolishness of which I have more than enough), and the fact that I’m kneeling I discover perhaps only through seeing your feet quite close before my eyes, and by caressing them.

And don’t demand any sincerity from me, Milena. No one can demand it from me more than I myself and yet many things elude me, I’m sure, perhaps everything eludes me. But encouragement on this hunt does not encourage me, on the contrary, I can then no longer take one step, suddenly everything becomes a lie and the hunted choke the hunter. I’m on such a dangerous road, Milena. You’re standing firmly near a tree, young, beautiful, your eyes subduing with their radiance the suffering world. We’re playing “skatule škatule hejbejte se”, I’m creeping in the shade from one tree to another, I’m on my way, you’re
calling to me, pointing out the dangers, trying to give me courage, are aghast at my faltering step, reminding me (me!) of the seriousness of the game—I can’t do it, I fall down, am already lying on the ground. I can’t listen simultaneously to the terrible voice from within and to you, but I can listen to the former and entrust it to you, to you as to no one else in the world.

Yours,

F

(Kafka, Letters to Milena [London, 1953], pp. 46-47)

There are (thus) also “still”-born letters.

*Letter to my son to whom I have never written a letter.*

My love, to whom I have never spoken my love,

I am writing in the house that I had built because of you, in haste for you and against you while Eve our mother was keeping you, I was building I was no longer writing, instead of poems I was building I was responding to your arrival in stones for the time of times, I was welcoming you, I was warning you, I was hastily putting up a house where we would be protected and separated, I was making the house to which you never came. A house completed on September 196- the day of your own completion.

I never think about the origin of this house born of your birth. As soon as I knew your name from one day to the next I stopped writing.

I am writing in this house that I built so as never to write again.

I inherited this house in which I am writing you about your interminable passage.

I am calling you by name, I am making you come, I am drawing you out of the unknown nest.

Brief respite for that he, I take in my arms the phantom of the skinned lamb. While I was writing I felt his rough cheek against my lips.

(The Day I Was Not There, Le jour où n’étais pas là [Galilée, 2000], pp. 70ff.)

*The Family Record Book:* a book of dated events, which does not account for the other strata of Time in the family.

What is age? Order? Birth order?

Age on the page. In fantasy?


Great outpourings of one time in another Resurfacings of “present”-that-does-not-pass- marked by “I see.” Memorial hallucinations:

That is what came to happen to me at the Sainte-Foy maternity clinic. I see the scene as if I were myself outside up against the windowpane nose pressed to the glass mouth rounded by curiosity. I see her. She, it is I who that day have just
tipped outside of myself and there is no longer any question of going back into
the house of myself that I have just fallen out of. Time pivots and falls. There is
no more past. The future not yet. There remains a hesitation of the present
badly attached badly detached suspended above the two beds the big one and
the little one. Outside fish are swimming around the aquarium.

She does not get over it. She lingers in a peculiar hour, floating, between two
hours. She has just given birth, on the one hand. On the other hand, what has
just happened is that the one who has just been born has not yet entirely arrived
someplace, he is not in his place, he is still stirring weakly in the wings, on the
outside as if held back by some great uncertainty, as if he is shy. On her side she
does not budge, she waits. The place. She does not think: what a surprise this
child, this child who seems not to be coming back to her, who defers, who
differs, who does not have air, this fish that is gasping as if it were missing the
milieu of water, one expects a surprise but instead of the expected surprise there
is an entirely different one, o mysterious power of the newly arrived who undoes
millions of expectations thousands of years of images, o natural phenomenon
eternally astonishing forever never seen. And this one is the champion. He
escapes her absolutely, she does not remember him at all. She does not conceive
him. She is stopped. Where? At a standstill.

I see the woman struggle in silence with the child, it is happening in one of
those worlds in which from the first step a spell closes in on whoever strays or
ventures there, where the laws of metamorphosis reign, where one never knows
who is pursuing whom during tens of pen-years, where one cannot not hunt the
way one breathes. I see the animal woman and child, seized alive in the burning
gel of a face-to-face the way two cats caught in the last two meters of a kingdom
stay still for hours guarding the last two meters with the patient tenacity of gods
who are measuring out among themselves the last chance at immortality.

(The Day I Was Not There, pp. 51–52)

That day when he was not there cannot pass. Go into the limits
between memory and oblivion. The Day when what I was not there?

* * *

Letters have arrived from Algeria. I saw them twirling before me: they
were the letters r, v, consonants seeking their vowels on my lips. I
dreamed of her, of elle, of I, of wings, ailes, of Al, of laughter. Already Les
Rêveries de la Femme Sauvage was writing itself. I do not remember the
Wild Woman’s Ravine, I still live there with my brother. In the Clos-
Salemblier.

The letters link ravine, reveries, arrive, shore-rive, turn-vire, laugh-rire,
and twirl

Ordered to write I give in, I take myself there slowly, as a body gives in, by
taking itself to a place, turning itself over to someone, complying
unconditionally with the order. *I turn myself over to what has been ordering me to Algeria* since these primitive scenes. Since these primitive scenes I have been ordered—and this order is the order to write, the order to write it. I have given myself over to that order as if to letters of Reveries, I have gone to arrive near Algeria as near the shore where everything arrives, I have given myself over to living the non-event of arrival

*That order into which I have returned*—the order of writing, *arrived from Algeria* of writing from Algeria and that takes me back to it at last, that order is also what makes me *inseparable* from Algeria and the Arabs and separates me from everything to which I belong, that is the Parisian scene, the university, Parisian culture. Separation is *part* of me. I am inseparable from Aicha, Zohra, Hamida, Samia, Oran, Algiers, or, Al El

*THE BOOK THAT I DO NOT WANT TO WRITE* is the book that I do not want to (have) read (to me):

—Always the question of the *secret* will have either led me on or dogged my heels.

*It Must Not Be Said* title of my “last” book. The book gets out of an interdiction by uncalculated false steps. It slips in and out between barbed wire between hedges, like the always furtive and gay text of Henry Brulard.

Who tells me “it must not be said”? On the one hand it is Eve my mother. But she is the champion of paralipsis. First she tells, denounces, confesses, admits and her last sentence enjoins the eradication of everything she was unable not to say. An example of autotransgression.

But on the other hand, on the side of the Other my other, the It must not be said is divine and formidable, it does not gainsay itself, it makes me tremble with terror, it is pronounced threateningly, if you say it you will die, if you eat it—the divine morsel—you will be driven out of paradise.

Now all my life and all my sense and all my strength all my story and my destiny are under a divine interdiction, interdivine should I say? I will never tell the Things of paradise, I take pleasure in mourning the unsaid. It is not that I do not know what to say, it is that I do not know how to write what must not be said. I seek.

What is at stake of course is a sort of crime, but innocent of any guilt. Are my books crime-hiders? They are attempts to confess.

“But I shall never confess.” I tell myself.

And at once I add: careful not to affirm a certainty. Affirmation begins right away to shake it. The battle begins. Between I and the book. The book wants what I do not want. Insidious, the book. Most of the time I do not see it coming or else it is the opposite: seeing it come I push it away, I think I am pushing it away, and in pushing it I yield it the field.

*The Book That I Did Not Want to Write* is *Now My Father’s Letters*. When the
letters—the six hundred letters, so voiceless—arrived, an immense event—I fled them for ten good reasons and the last of these reasons was that I had already written a book to the father, and then in many other books I had noted the return it seemed to me that writing Now would be a fall back into childhood a reiterating complacency, let us add that the privilege granted my father whereas I had not written a book to my mother would be further aggravated, no I will not write it I wrote and while I was sincerely struggling to convince myself, the book denied was nourishing itself with all those questions and all those denegations, the ten reasons one after the other ran out of breath and I gave in, I gave up.

I love the books that write themselves in spite of me and that win out over my ten reasons, that break the tables of the law and disavow the author. But one can neither anticipate nor command them. They are storms. What they break as it crashes down opens the way to sudden appearances of which I had never dreamed.

The Book That I Especially Did Not Want to Write is Osnabrück. In October 1991 I had set a date, I announced its non-arrival, its exclusion, its impossibility, and publicly, in a talk, in Canada. One cannot write about one’s living mother, I had declared, this is a promise. An oath. With these words the perjury had begun.

What “I” bear witness to is first, right now, my secret, it remains reserved to me.

I have to be able to keep secret even that to which I bear witness Jacques Derrida tells himself (Demeure, p. 32)

I seek to bear witness to what I keep secret.

Destiny is that we end by doing what we particularly do not want to do we cannot let it be done.

The books that write themselves in spite of myself. “I am nice nice nice” the book barks. The book is a three-legged dog. I add the phantom leg, the fourth.

Whereas if I have an order, and if I want to order: sterility, impatience.

I love the book that steps forward saying: I am a book. This is a book. But I fear it just as much. Combat: sometimes I am the one that does not want to write it, sometimes it is the book that does not want me to write it

Books that run away, let them run away! I bless them, I pursue them, I beg them

The first pages of the Reveries: the book that I am hunting: The hunt for Happiness. The hunt for Algeria
4. The Book Denied

The first pages of *The Day I Was Not There* a book that presents itself as masked (like the Mongol mask, the mongolian mask)

—I did not see it coming. Only attacks and suffering, like messages, like threatening letters.

What is happening? Indices: symptoms. A text announces itself by signs that are often physical, uninterpreted. States of body-souls. I note them. They demand to be noted. Dreams. But especially states like dreamstates, adrift in full daylight. Then night countersigns. The book that I do not want to write. The book denied. The dumb book

The book is a three-legged dog. The book is Goya’s half-buried dog (*The Day I Was Not There*, pp. 149-50):

What day I do not remember did I see him again once twice three times in Algiers and it was always the same the same smile he at seven months I at five months I at seven months hatching the substitute doubling him with the next child, I hatch him every time the way in which he does not become in which he remains as if sleeping there in the cradle is a pinch of eternity becoming more and more pronounced.

There has awoken in me an urgent curiosity another astonishment arouses me, what has become of him in the meantime, the life that he has led and in which he has led me for such a long time and always with the elegance of someone who is giving off a secret radiance and does not take himself for anyone, a half-buried dog between the yellow eternities, a sublime minuscule dog with strawcolored fur yellow muzzle raised toward the saffron yellow worldwide sun, dog with a gentle profile half caught in the infinite sand, cradle dog slowly fought over by life and death, ineffaceable ochre puppy between the infinity of oblivion and the infinity of memory. He is coming back up now, it is the hour of his return, why now, I ask him and myself.

He “lacks” one paw, half his body, he lacks neither soul nor ardor nor aspiration to the heights. The book is in the process of pulling itself up out of nothingness: where to make its way? Where to dig the tunnels?

A subterraneaness makes the earth shake, the surfaces.

The book takes in the abandoned dogs who have not been taken in by the subject.

The book confesses the limits of hospitality and the contemplative, taking-in state.

It must be said. We have to.

Confessing the limits, the faults, repairs nothing. But it is the ethical minimum.

The book inscribes the debt. Like the book of the Egyptian dead: a
book of useless but necessary remorse. But without falling into humility which is one face of pride.

The book is at fault. As a human thing, as a speaking being.
As a cat it is the flesh that forgives
The animal makes no reproach. It is forgiveness.
The book is a cat whose carnal function is to calm the heart clenched by the abandonment of the three-legged dog
Sometimes the one sometimes the other, always in passing, from the one to the other. There is no greeting that saves, no salvation
Only a greeting—salvation?—that makes a sign of recognition
N.B. I have already said that?
(But I have forgotten.) I have forgotten it. Forgetting is the guardian of the work. If I did not forget I would not write. Forgetting is at work in the work in the writing as in the reading. I have invented the word *oubli*re, to-forget-to-read, to-read-to-forget, to describe the marvelous mystery of reading: every year I forget-to-read-to-forget. Dostoevski, Stendhal, Proust, Rousseau, I read, I read-to-forget-to-read. Every year I come back to their cities, their streets, their scenes, and it is a different work that is born under my other reading.

**UNFORGETTING MIMOSA BRANCHES**

Part of my way of living is after a certain fashion a way of bookreading. Very often events, the-fact-of-living (rather than life), I pass through them, I pass by, I happen to myself, as in a book. And the others too, the others beside me whether foreign or familiar, are at the same time, in a subtle and very tenuous fashion, characters. I feel that there is in me someone who is the process of writing that book. Of writing it of reading it. Life is a book, but which is not yet written, which is the process of being written. I am in the process of writing it and living it at the same time. From time to time something has just happened that is so much more alive than the living that I want to write it down. I do not think “I am going to make a book of it.” I think “I do not want that to belong to the past. I want it to remain present.” I do not think that it is going to be registered for eternity, it is just an act of memory. Example: Eve comes by my house while I am locked in a tête-à-tête with the phantom of a book in my study. When she has gone I find a bouquet of mimosas on my sink. It is nothing. Someone in me reads that scene. The temperature is at the freezing point, we are in February 2001, Eve my mother who is ninety years old has come to put mimosas in my house. While I was not there. As if she were coming to put a mimosa branch on my February tomb and
so produce a resurrection but not on purpose. In February as my father I am dying and I succumb, as my mother I am saved. What is beautiful is that she does not know what she is doing. She does it. As if she were coming to put some life on the sink. And also Algeria. And also the word mimosa. The word sink, évier, as well. Mimosa is ephemeral. It will be dead tomorrow. She knows that I adore mimosa. I think a thought that was as if I were reading it: “My mother came to put mimosa branches on the sink this afternoon at my house.” Eve-my-mother, l’évior vivier, the sink a fishpond, a breeding ground. It is nothing. And I know that it is not nothing. It is a signature. There is neither a word nor a gesture that is not already of the order of the unforgettable. Life which is made up of forgetting is at the same time the bearer of countless unforgettables, which we forget.

What is an unforgettable? The secret depths of nothings, rien. What is a nothing, un rien? A word-with-a secret of the French language. The essence of thing. All that is ungraspably. The substitute for the same the dweller in hollows and caves, edges and almosts, the mimed light touch of the perfumed duvet the miming of all that is not.

The contractability of a luminous instant. The word, a prophetic remnant of a precarious thing that could take place, still. The word remains. The word “remains.” Remnance, remainingness, mimosance, indissouciance. To think that the mimosa was once a mimer, a “mimeuse.” Almost no one remembers. Unforgetting remains fleeting.

The slight flash of mourning humid gleam, aura of the instant noticed instantaneously as if from a little later on: a unique instant that will not be repeated except in memory.

Remembering-time, remembering-dying, co-dying already illuminates the instant

An unforgettable is the instant-scene at once already “remembered,” already coming back (to haunt) already a dweller in the memory-cabinet.

Life passes a raspberry cane through the window of Rousseau’s soul and suddenly he remembers everything. The least recollection of that time pleases me for the very reason that it belongs to that time. . . I can see the maid or the valet busy about the room, a swallow swooping in through the window, a fly settling on my hand while I recited my lesson: I can see the arrangement of the room in which we were sitting . . . an engraving representing all the popes, a barometer, a large almanack; while branches from the raspberry bushes in the much higher garden into which the back of the house was built fell across the window, shading it and sometimes growing in through it.

(Confessions, tr. Angela Scholar [Oxford, 2000], pp. 20–21)
Proust’s life passes a branch of wild currant-bush through the partly-open window of the small room devoted to the four occupations that require inviolable solitude:

I ran up to the top of the house to cry by myself in a little room beside the schoolroom and beneath the roof, which smelt of orris-root, and was scented also by a wild currant-bush which had climbed up between the stones of the outer wall and thrust a flowering branch in through the half-opened window.

(Reembrance of Things Past, tr. C. Scott Moncrieff [New York, 1934], p. 10)

And here his text remembers a raspberry cane passing its arm through the window of a text, yesterday. If Proust has forgotten, his unconscious remembers. The “unforgettable” come to us often in small closed rooms, kitchens or studies, in which we give ourselves over to autoerotic activities (occupations, Proust rightly calls them), “reading, dreaming, tears, voluptuousness.”

A small room is required.

Destined for a more specialized and more vulgar use, this room, from which during the day one could see all the way to the keep of Roussainville-le-Pin, served for a long time as a refuge for the narrator of the Recherche, “doubtless because it was the only room whose door I was allowed to lock,” he says. The same small room, destined to store the hundreds of filthy shoes of the pupils of the Grünkranz school, was used by little Thomas Bernhard to play the violin and to play with the idea of suicide, voluptuous occupations that demanded inviolable solitude.

From behind my back life passes a mimosa branch through the window of memory, every time I play with the idea of suicide, and I come back to life.

In a small room through which one can see all the way to the keep of Roussainville-le-Pin suffering and suicide melt in voluptuous tears, weeping smells of orris root, way up at the top of time the tragic events already allow themselves to be told in the future perfect, the unforgettable promise to be born again with a charm whose power will triumph over the sorrow of the day.

To be more human, one would have to write every time the book that we are in the process of living or reading. I have given an example that is beautiful. But very often it is the opposite. Something horrible. Blood shed, an act of cruelty, of wickedness, an absence of humanity. I note. The note will perhaps never go into a book, but I have made a gesture so that what happened will not be wiped out. A gesture of gymnastics that someone who writes has to practice. Gymnos expresses nudity, nakedness. I unclothe. I take away the forgetfulness that palliates. I do permanent
mental and psychic gymnastics. And that active vigilance is lit like a nightlight in me all the time. It is a job: a ceaseless exercise of attention, of the soul that entertains the possibility of writing. Ministry and mystery. Once a week there is something unforgettable. It is at once already unforgettable: at the moment when that thing is produced I live it as unforgettable. I am going to forget it, naturally, but it is to be kept. The unforgettable is a manifestation of what human beings are either in their wickedness or in their goodness. It is an act, action. An action bearing a meaning. A meaning that goes beyond the moment when it is produced. I do not know what it means at the moment when it is produced but I know that it signifies: it is written down. It was already written to be read.

It is reality that writes, but this writing would not exist if I were not there to read it. An act of writing is required so that these stories can attain the present of the unforgettable. But this act of writing is two-sided: it does not invent reality, it notices reality’s hidden writing. This is how writers have written: having in them the capacity to register in writing, even unconsciously, the passing event. It is a tongue that listens, a tongue that watches sees what is passing. Watches itself see passing.

This unforgettable is very forgettable. At the moment when it is produced, I feel it, the sensation is like the state that follows a dream: I have to note it live, or I do not note and it disappears. It is the same “thing” in waking life: if I do not make the active gesture of noting what I feel, the “thing” does not exist. At that moment the mimosa goes into the trash. But I name it because I feel it. I feel the perfume of mimosa speaking. I feel life. I hear its footprint. If the writing did not come to conclude a pact with the living event that event would no longer exist. Very early, I obliged myself to follow a discipline: at the moment when the unforgettable is produced, something that is going to be forgotten at the very moment when it is produced, I command myself: “Careful! Act!” This is Faust’s motto: “Slow down, moment, you are so lovely.” Verweile doch. Take your time, instant. Take your eternity in your mimosa arms. I take you taking your eternity in your arms.

The mystery is: why, how, does my mother who does not think about words, make herself become a minister messenger of such a necessary signifier.

All that passes knowing.
“Are they holding up, the mimosas?” asks the messenger.
“Of course not,” I say, but they are holding up differently.
“You think you are the author?”

I find this sentence in my head, in a chapter of my book. Who is questioning me? Who is saying you to me?

Is it an internal self-substitution? Am I saying you to myself?

Who, what subject is (am) saying you to me?

And if it were the book itself? Who else would come to challenge me like this from so close up? At the moment when I am writing and taking myself naively to be the author, here is a voice that makes fun of me? Calls me up in the middle of a page, right where I live. Destabilizes me. Disequilibrates, déséquilibre. Déséquilibre!

In case I might have created some outdated illusions for myself, as people did before Freud and before Jacques Derrida, it is there, with its critical voice, the book in person, it arrives in time to remind me that I too am a character in the book, and that no one is here to settle on a meaning or a truth.

It tells me more than a few home truths. The book is pitiless. It uncrowns me, it uncovers discovers me, my weaknesses, it picks them out, puts a stop to them, puts them to work.

It is a stern guardian, clever, ironic. It has an imperious nature. Like an idea-of-my-father. It intimidates me.

Besides, I know that I am always on the page of the other, of the not-I. I am always seated across from myself, especially when I am in the process of doing something foolish while thinking that I am alone in the world, I am completely absorbed immersed in my own company, in my body suddenly I raise my head, and, seated a step away from me what do I see? I see myself in my nebula, I see what I did wrong, what I forgot, I see my other side, I see the whole of which I am a distracted part—I am a half-turn, a quarter-circle away from myself.

I repeat the initial experience of the mirror stage hundreds of times. I come to a halt before this person from the other side, she is I, that one? It is you he she. This feeling of (surprise, disapproval, anxiety) “but what are you doing there?”

Besides, I have always looked at the world (and I have always looked at myself) including myself first of all from the point of view of my first meyou, my brother, my shemblance my freer my otherme, my side of which I was the other and the rib.

If there has been intimacy I mean intimateness I mean in-who-you-me-ness since I began to comment on the world, thus to read, it has been with my brother, right away I always had that he, that stone in my garden, that intimate altercation, that storm, that accomplice in crimes and joys, that autoadversary.
And all at once, yelling very loudly in German, and secondly I always still hear the voice of Omi my grandmother, O, m, i, Oh-me, my anagram and first taleteller, my German Homer, who sang of wars, exiles, voyages, of the tiny mouse people of Osnabrück—and turned my plate full of cabbage into an Achilles’ shield.

Besides, in adolescence I reached the point of being so many others that I sometimes feared I would drown. Jacques Derrida’s “who I am, I?” that anguish of self, I knew it once. I was in a state of overpopulation and dread that turned all events into anacoluthic constructions: an anacoluth is a break in construction bearing especially on the subject function in a sentence. The “rule” holds that a single subject governs the clauses even in a complex sentence. Well, no! says the anacoluth. And right in the middle of a sentence in progress it introduces secondary subjects, intruders, gourmands.

I love anacoluths. I love the word and the thing. I love subterfuge, interlocution, misunderstanding, comedy, vanishing tricks, substitution, metonymic fluidity. I walk in the streets of Prague and I reach the square of the Arms of Oran. At any moment writing can produce these magical slippages (it has a hundred means of making things melt and link together) with which we are familiar in dreams or films. Willingly or not we are the subjects of lapsus.

What a text performs, if we let it, if we do not take it back, is setting the stage for the failure of the idea of the last word.

There is no last word that is not supplanted by another last word.

There is no end. There is no stopping place—for me, a bus, a train—neither at the end, nor at any place in the text. There are impressions or illusions of arriving.

I say a thing not only do my brother, my mother, my son say it differently, but the thing itself says something else, an other thing, while I am saying it.

So I write knowing-feeling-experiencing that everything I write can be held against me, nothing I write can be held against me, I write, knowing that the verb laugh, rire, is in cahoots with the verb write, écrire. And that laughing is the result of seeing oneself writing, so seriously, writing oneself to death.

THE FEELING OF BOOK

The feeling that there was “a book,” an enveloping and supplementary presence in the place where I was taking place, where I was giving myself up in spite of myself with my brother in spite of himself,
happened on February 12, 1949 about 11:00 A.M. in the Saint-Eugène cemetery in Algiers.

Because of that impalpable but intense presence the place, that is, the cemetery, had become a scene of the scene, which we were not only in the process of living through, but also embodying as characters on one side
because of the immense presence of a book that was taking us down as notes and hostages right here among the tombs on the other side
because of the intense presence of the sort of powerful absence in which my father maintained himself in this cemetery where he had been lying since the previous year,
because of the presence of that indeterminate absence of my father as body which I still heard literally not breathing and my brother too,
because of that frightful human disorder at the boundaries between the kingdoms of Life and Death
the sensation that there is a book that is following me, or that I am a book, I am one, without enthusiasm but without the ability to resist, it drives me, I never know who is driving whom nor who is killing me/you nor who is causing whom or what, it leads me, jostles me, sends me, that sensation was born in the Algiers cemetery. It surprises me, it disconnects me, it apostrophizes me it pushes me farther than myself.

(It who? you ask the question? Well so do I. You see? That is a stroke of the book. I was speaking of the cemetery and all at once it is the book that speaks.)

I am Abraham’s donkey. (I have always thought so.) I go where I have no wish to go, holding back with all my soul, but my feet obey. It orders me and encourages me. I give in.

February 12, 1949. I was ten years old and my brother eleven. I was the donkey my brother the lamb. We didn’t have the slightest idea of this. All at once there was a global obscenity. Rending. It was grandma. Our grandmother from Oran, my father’s mother. Such a scene cannot take place without extraordinary consequences. She had a violence. We were driven away. We were there, before a tomb, but driven away, outside. And she like a she-bear, she was devouring the tomb and producing terrifying groans. She was truly crying out to heaven. She was no longer of her species, nor of this world. What she screamed I shall not say here. On the spot we became spectators. In truth this moment was unlivable and we did not live it. There was a witness. There was already a book. There was witnessing. My brother was the witness of me my brother without whose witnessing I would be dead and I was witness for him. We are elements under the wind. I know how God screams.
The thing—is in the process of telling itself: it was passing over us, around, between us, fascinated, dispersed condemned to my father’s death.

Grandma trumpeted while trampling us. There was no use looking for a substitute lamb.

One only survives such events written down. Because the scene has already taken place had to take place had already to have taken place

There is an enormity of apocalypse of which no child could be the author; but on another hand without the immense smallness of a child there would never be any apocalypse. There was a ragged old Ecclesiast who played the role of a beggar among the tombs. There is a time for weeping. There is a time for laughing. We, my brother with me, laughed ourselves to death, we died laughing, we could not help ourselves.

All that was written in the book that was already there except that that day we were read. Later I would write it. At that time I was with my brother a modified child. Without him I would not have been

We were besieged by words, by affects. We were unbelievable. Without my brother to believe me I would not have held up I would not have believed myself. We were suffering indeed precisely from the rawness of belief, from rawness. From a flaying of all that up to now had had a skin as its visible surface: there was no more surface. Every thing, every being, animate, inanimate, thoughts, events, passions, reveries, everything has a skin. A tomb as well. We live under skin and we see under skin. Well, there was no more skin at all. There was no more nudity, either, not of the gentle sort. There was cruelty: the flesh of flayed things.

All that enveloped in the cover of a book into which we had entered dragged by Abraham grandma to the summit of the cemetery.

The steps, stages, ledges, tombs, trunks, everything was pointed and slicing engraving on my brother and me the matricial runes of all my books.

There was a small book. My brother with a false kippah on his head had read—had to read, what was read—the Kaddish in Hebrew of which he does not know a single word, not one treacherous word, as French says. He read, we laughed, we screamed until we cried over that false reading. We were mad fools, false fools, lost in the folly of false-reading. We laughed so sadly. It was because we were not dead.

Books are always traversed by that shudder of survival. We shall be dead and they will go on shuddering.

University of Paris 8

Translated by Catherine Porter