

A Melancholic's Survival Kit

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Against all odds, I am, it seems, still in the ring, pressed by an inexorable rope-a-dope technique of quasi-defeat. I depend on my coaches—those who keep me awake enough to have me take the hits—to get back on the ropes. As a survival technique, landing punches in this back-and-forth of borrowed stamina can be wearing, clocking out, on a theoretical plane, with the exhaustion of Metaphysics. Slapped around and Wiped out, I have my complaints to air. For instance, I am chronically annoyed that philosophy has wasted so much of our time on the pursuit of Truth, when the drawn-out matter of its status and overreach indicates the least of our necessities in the face of the outrageous repertoire of human cruelty—an unrelenting combination of dispositions that pummels us without end.

This philosophical obsession with truth-hunting, a stubborn orientation that separates it from literature and art in the widest sense, may require another perspective, however, if we are to get a handle on the complications that face us henceforth. In one of the earlier rounds of his thought, Jean-Luc Nancy pinpointed, by means of Hegel's "restless negative," our need for truth nowadays according to a specific slant, and against the temptation to seek consolation in philosophy (Nancy 2002). I would like to concede the point, for it is undeniable that we tend to seek refuge in edifying discourses offering solace, a habit that serves only to increase the misery of the world's predicament. Prompted by the Hegelian appropriation of the negative, Nancy's articulation pivots on a certain kind of courage that exposes the core of an inescapable ordeal—unsheltered, "we," in our singular-plurality, are thrown into the restless slams of Being. Philosophy should not be used as a "self-help" manual or sedative, a means of forgetting the violence delivered historically and accorded by its own stealth form of compliance. In this regard, the rhetorical contrivance of a "survival kit" needs to deal with the shattering collapse of our vocabu-

laries, their pretense of assuring groundedness, sovereignty, and subject, while bracing an obsolescing concept of the "world" and its corresponding globalizations. I have in mind a survival kit that somehow answers the impossible call of the negative without succumbing to the deluded exuberance of an accomplished rescue or the triumphalism of forgetting. Understanding that Hegel handed art its death certificate, and Nietzsche upped the ante with a notion of scientificity that more or less surpasses art, we enter a field of ongoing clashes that Heidegger would eventually complicate in his own way, rethinking the premises of an eviction notice served by Plato & co.

Ach! There are so many misgivings and serious deterrents constraining thought. Let me go on anyway, prompted by an aporetic suspension of doubt and an aptitude for shadow-boxing. Maybe I can pull up an attitude of grateful world-boundedness, if only as an enabling fiction, which is what a survival kit promises, even as it is skeptically cast.

To the extent that I exist in my spareness as a being, I remain on the gratitude side of "Envy and Gratitude," tending to oversaturate others with thankfulness. This renders me suspicious, no doubt, for what could be concealed in the overload of thanking? What kinds of debts are pending symbolic payoff? Who, barring Heidegger, links thanking to thinking, and look at him ... What does the "gratitude pose" cover or repress, and how does philosophy—which doesn't quite pass any breathalyzer test, but is often drunk on the excess it can give—offer some sort of solace, or its shadow?

In an epoch pockmarked by extermination, one is grateful for the scrap of existence that has been thrown to the bizarre clump of life-clinging vitality that you are. I'm not saying it's easy or suicide-free to kick with life, or that one isn't strained by sheer anguish. One carries an overpopulated and frazzled community of those who didn't make it, still screaming in your invisible headphones.

If it's one's destiny, as my friend, Lacoue, asserts, to be abandoned and live out one's abandonment with no recourse, then the worst of it is that your unique package of persecution is not even addressed to you. You may sign for it at some reception desk of Being, knowing you are

not a destination. And certainly not a destiny. You are no Wagner, and your persecutor is no Nietzsche, saying while shelving you that you are a destiny. You suffocate in your own corner, puffing along. How can I convey the tone here? I do not feel the supplement of jouissance that comes with pity for our predicament, suffocating and portentous. Part of me is over the pity parties the world throws for itself and celebrates on particularly grim occasions. A related part, the unaddressed and unWe part, doesn't really see a point of entry, doesn't feel the right to bloat into a story or sustained reflection. Yet I am trained to scour the unconscious of disaster areas, prodded by a sense of obligation, no matter how thin a subject imposes itself at this time, cutting a path for us. Such a prod, the Stoß, is part of our philosophical heritage, a traumatic punch delivered by an "aesthetic Erziehung." No one has asked philosophy to go on a rescue mission, even when it conspires with theology and nurtures a relation to art. But let us consider, if as a mere thought experiment, where it still proves capable of placing a call or sounding an alert.

Fragments from my survival kit

Ever on the alert, philosophy offers some emergency supplies of meaning when one feels especially exposed and vulnerable (cf. Ronell 2013). Very often, when the chips are down, philosophers can be a welcoming crew – well, not all of them. One has to sift and sort, find the byways, pass the arrogant know-it-all types, overtake the misogynists, manage the analytic philosophers, and leave in the dust those who claim to have a firm hold on truth. Not many are left standing, but they are the worthy ones. They stay close to poetry and music, and let themselves be instructed by literature's astonishing agility off the cognitive grid. There are things that we simply cannot know or understand, events that refuse representation. Literature lives with that sublime stall, and fires off extravagant hypotheses, basking in transgression and feats of rhetorical frontier-crossing. When philos-

ophy becomes accomplice to such stretches of imagination and frees itself up from a certain number of constraints, it can turn in exhilarating and life-affirming performances. It can deliver even when you are seriously in the dumps, ready to call it a wrap. Then philosophical language, as if roused by frequencies of acute pain, vigorously invents a mesh of enabling fictions that helps you cope with incomprehensibilities. There is no getting around the fact of one's helplessness, the way we are faced in so many ways with strains of cruelty on the prowl and someone's killer instinct unleashed. Philosophy is especially good at not making sense, but of cutting through to our core survival issues, which never meant to stand on sense-making ceremony and, despite it all, manage to sideline an historical obsession with Truth, while calling for its uncompromising rigor. Other lines of urgency and unavoidable stalemate push through. Matters of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* are still trailing a question mark, latecomers to the table. Plato invented hell and the perks of authority, part of a mostly symbolic intervention giving a weakened philosopher the upper hand, while other philosophers set up and took down the strictures of theodicy.¹ Nietzsche, harried by Spinoza, drove us beyond good and evil, throwing the whole onto-theological engine in reverse, creating a pileup that Heidegger & co. had to deal with. Some people may not consider such hard-hitting inquiries a reliable source of bracing, but I am making a point about the theoretical conditions for survival in the double sense that Benjamin gave to it, in terms both of *fortleben* and *überleben*. Derrida picked up the relay to give us a thinking of *sur-vie* and what straddles "*la vie la mort*." When he switched over from sign to *trace*, Derrida's thought made our relation to language a matter of *sur-vie*, neither entirely ruled by the domains of life or death and yet inevitably inflected by their relation and fragile boundaries. On a different scale, upon reviewing my own dossier of reflections, I notice that I'm very concerned with the survival of the *misfittest*, those beings who barely scrape through.

1 I have addressed some of the finer points of these statements in *Loser Sons: Politics and Authority* (2012) with a view to Alexandre Kojève and Hannah Arendt's concerns about vanishing "authority," the tragic erosion of a strong philosophical invention.

Of course, many people tend to assume that the study itself of philosophy can bring one down, keeping one mired in dusty philology and speculative overreach – a charge that cannot be altogether denied. Yet, I have to hope it's the other way round: With all its faults, exhausting retakes and dreadful itinerary of assertion, I consider the philosophical attitude a basic component in my survival kit, pushing back on tyrannical dogma and moralistic overkill (cf. Ronell 2013). Even where it becomes despotic in some of its contentions, philosophy, in any case, has done the groundwork that takes to task any easy resolution of problems it faces. I don't see the philosophical attitude putting to rest incessant dilemma, especially when driven by Nietzsche's imperative to test things out and Husserl's sense of crisis.² This means that some trial balloons will burst, hypotheses will falter and, like technical tryouts, thought will have to retract its provisional certitude when tested to failure. Nietzsche makes it a point to secure the insecure nature of the experimental disposition that shares the domain of art and its philosophical training partner.

At times the philosophical probe comes face to face with a basic repertory of distress and our existential impoverishment.³ It does not hesitate to get a close-up of forlornness, the shakes, and other signs of world-weary discomfort (cf. Ronell 2013). These themes arise whether philosophy ascribes or removes predicates of interiority to the so-called human subject. The problem is that we have become *beyond weary* in our exposition, on our last legs and legacy, and have no solid claims on reconstituting the world. Acts of philosophical promise in tandem with Earth herself, have been exhausted, over-dominated, made susceptible to distortion and misstep, steered by human forms of hubris and suicidal frivolity in the sense of Hölderlin's understanding of trespass. Still, there is reason – or unreason – to orient oneself toward the obsessive questioning of a questioning for which philosophy still stands, tormented by a re-

- 2 I have given more latitude to the disruption in and of philosophical thought due to testing and experimental structures in *The Test Drive* (2005).
- 3 *La détresse* would be a prominent facet of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's approach to impoverishment as a philosophical urgency, giving focus to Heidegger's later thoughts on *Armut* in *Being*.

lentless drive that remains excessive and very likely necessary, even where we are stomping on the continual splintering rumble of *Holzwege*. Maybe I am kidding myself, and questioning has lost its edge. It can be the case that no one cares anymore about the philosophical adventure, nor should they. What a congregation of masculinist exploits, pompous and unrelenting! But something locks me in, cleaves me to its preposterous craving for knowledge in an age that devalues and expropriates such claims. And, despite all disclaimers, I can't rule out the danger indicated by a call that still sirens up.

As a type of calling structure the philosophical attitude teaches us to accept and decline certain calls to inclination or action, to call up strength where none seems available. In some sectors, the philosophical attitude jumps off the page to take language into the streets, managing, together with inscriptions of street art, to re-circuit the dropped call of decency, a remnant of *care*, community and their social morphs. Poetry infiltrates social media on rare but poignant occasions to call out or reveal its concealment, lament a predicament of unbelonging. Philosophy maintains a mostly muted repertoire of calls that invite an exertion no longer necessarily part of its job description, though philosophers cannot seem to shake the temptation to heal and clear pathways, offer regimes and recipes for human nourishment and just governance, adjusted with the upgrades or offramps of contemporary refurbishment. Some of this language is admittedly jarring, for it holds witness to our paleonymic strictures, the way we are limited by an obsolescing vocabulary of claims. One cannot say with a theoretical straight face that we can rerun "imagination," "decency," "subject," etc., without adjustment or programmed blowout. For sheerly didactic purposes one still hitches a ride with obsolesced idioms and throwaway concepts, if only to dispense with them when they fall apart. But one cannot simply dispense with a store of inherited signifiers and infratextual relays. They stick to you and are part of the faltering body that we carry and care for. Besides, mere conceptual erosion does not deter philosophy, nor is it significantly fazed by the signs of its own "irrelevance" and philological hurdles. On the contrary.

Not always, and not consistently, not openly stated in the style of cards-on-the-table – but there's usually a *will-to-power element*

pushing philosophical arrangements beyond any ostensible deadline, whether supported or not by a cognitive threshold. When tendencies of inherent *Selbstbehauptung* reach destinal proportions, philosophical intervention can prove calamitous, belonging to a habit of positing edging on prophesy, an often arrogant propensity of the philosophical attitude. One can see why some philosophical tribes take recourse to *mathèmes* and non-representational, objectivist formulae to get their thinking done, in some measure pushing past stubborn metaphysical barriers. I take all these disturbances, licenses, and puzzles into account, limiting the scope of what can be hoped for, putting the brakes on exhortations that can still be made as promises tendered. The very problem of survival qua survival barely can be said to survive today.

Like so many other “exscriptions” (Nancy), including formations such as art and music, philosophy carries a wide-ranging passport. To the extent that it folds in a state of compromised shortfall, often self-acknowledged, philosophy can be found *anywhere* – on the streets, in institutions of higher learning, under a car, on a subway sign, in a breakout room, in discussion with children, or in libraries housed by our penitentiary subculture. From the start, before Socrates walked the walk, philosophy has been easily displaced and rerouted. Set nowadays to travel according to stealth itineraries as well as overt proclamation, it shows up in the plumber's preference for the pre-Socratics or in a stylist's makeup kit as a thinking of rhetorical masking. In America, especially, I suppose, everyone “has” a philosophy or wants to have one, likes to bulk up on its aporetic difficulty/clarity. The people come equipped with a personalized version of *Lebensphilosophie*. I cannot explain why the most unschooled stances are still hospitable to philosophically-pitched statement, how it has come about that the type of inquiry associated with philosophy is vulnerable to widespread libidinal cathexes, particularly in a culture impatient for answers, primed on the shutdown of hesitation, calibrated on “moving on,” known for being fast on the trigger, and being “over it.” Unless the very desirability such inquiry excites takes us back time and again to the origins of philosophical thought as sheer astonishment – assuring not much more than a persistent vertigo of not-knowing. Perhaps, moreover, the connections it main-

tains with alien forms of being, the various modalities of estrangement that philosophy emphasizes, draws a seeker to unprobed borders, welcoming the unrecognizable encounter, the angel, the freak. Or perhaps the philosophical urge to clarify (or mystify), to explain while acknowledging the limits of knowing, the resolve to leave Gd alone while depending on the theological insistence – the way it stumbles into sacred peripheries of thought – keeps one captivated by the exultation of aporia.

Scrambling for its sovereignty, philosophy does not stand alone, having logged in a history of important if ambivalent alliances. Philosophy puts out a call to artistic practice, aesthetic valuation, and the reciprocal bounce of an extreme insight. Today more than ever. In the throes of the pandemic, we contend with a new cocktail of unintelligibilities mixed with ancient fears and forms of contamination, documents of intrusive violence. Along with theoretical comorbidities and the multifactorial collapses therein inscribed, one is invited to think of Artaud's work on theater and the plague, where the staging of calamity – a social abscess – is linked to contagion. It is no wonder that, when world plunges into its nothingness (Bataille's *RIEN*), philosophy hitches a ride on the death-drive, uniquely licensed out by aesthetic practice.

Whatever is left in something like philosophy faces its own annulment and the disappearance of notions associated with the "world" – a vexed entity that cannot be recomposed by fiat. In many ways the world, left behind, persists by the strength of what has been bequeathed to us as the philosophical. One cannot make claims in good faith about a "*Weltanschauung*" to the extent that neither *Welt* nor *Anschauung* survives finitude or seriously proposes to restabilize as viable expositions of Being.

Ach! It is easy to lose one's bearings or any sense of safety. At times, the relation to loss is sprawling and does not stop with a recognizable person or object. Nearly every philosophy that we know has built a sanctuary, however remote and uncharted, for the experience of mourning. Sometimes a philosopher furtively mentions the pull of

loss, even when trying, like Nietzsche, to affirm life's tragic edges and the necessity of mourning a lost friendship or the destructive operations (and operas) of love (cf. Ronell 2013). French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes compellingly of shattered love and the loss of ground. He also admonishes, and I have oft repeated, that philosophy is never where you expect to find it. Similar to earth's coastlines, philosophy recedes from appointed places, finding different hide-outs and morphologies, erodes as it dissipates, weakening its hold and boundaries before it bounds back differently. This recession of philosophy is accompanied by a type of leakage and untrackable dissemination, a mutation that distributes philosophical thought to other districts of Being that cannot as yet be seen, not even by means of existential night goggles or sci-fi timers. While philosophy appears to lose ground, art strengthens on its nothingness, having no remaining illusions about itself that would except the rule of illusion.

Yet the nature of their encounter is still vibrant, spiced with feisty dissent. Where content and meaning structures are voided, the *encounter itself*, and what this interrupts, holds our fascination. The co-intrication of art and the philosophical attitude should not be split into opposing forces or a logic of clashing inscription, even though philosophy gives art fluctuating ratings when trying to dominate a given scene. Some philosophies fuel up on "weakness," allowing for unexpected flares of self-alienation and otherness, as passages from Rousseau to Levinas and Blanchot attest, bracing extremes of self-relinquishment in the thought of passivity and the attenuation of the subject. Still, there's a roster of differences to be accounted for in terms of basic *Einstellungen*, attitudes and attunement, that each modality of Saying carries. I will not even go into the polydependencies that constitute their tentative pairing, the way art and philosophy call to, need and use each other and their various offspring, as if remembering a shared ground of reflection. Let us simply retain at this point the way Greek tragedy turned into Greek philosophy, handing representations over to this other mode of ringing the death knell. Nancy asks us to listen for the vanishing traces of Greek tragedy in the surging self-assertion of Greek philosophy, the spark of fateful drama still coiled in all types of philosophical *Darstellungen* and a hidden theatrical lexicon, mostly evicted from the premises of

philosophical demonstration. We know of Plato's aversion to poetic squatting when he cleared the poets out of the *Republic*, hoping to secure a home for Truth without the intrusive trauma of fiction hanging around, disrupting the presentation of a reliable scheme for just governance. But even when Heidegger, the latecomer, calls on poetry with a friendly enough demeanor, there is the impingement of implicit hierarchies and distortion at work, a massive kidnapping of something like poetic intention.

There are many appropriations of art and poesy in the adventure of philosophical thought – many defining seductions and acts, conversely, that repel the artistic intrusion. The reining in of art by philosophy recalls a familiar story of repressed origins in which the philosophical takeover has a part. Still, a preliminary standoff between the two mega-domains cannot be avoided if we are to be honest about the way the stakes fall and what kind of forces are in play. Their bequeathed values may seem provisional, at points exchangeable, yet remain instructive in a first cut of codified difference. Art has never promised to nail meaning, prescribe grammars, trim behaviors still called “human” – or to point political entities, such as emerging or established states, in ethical directions. Nor, despite its calling, has art proclaimed any reason to establish its own kingdom and apportion a reliable dosage of justice. Often kicked to the sidelines of historical action, art in modernity has fed on its own insubstantiality and allegorical push off points. It may have bowed in submission to myths of representation and mimetic recuperation, yet it has consistently refused to bend like a court stenographer taking it all down, word by containable word. When not signifying its apartness, a condition anointed or appointed by the exigency of self-transcendence, art breaks itself down ruthlessly, at times resembling the portrait of a drunken bystander offering barely a broken syntax of beings and Being, hardly a testimony, close to the sort of unfiltered offering and slice of self-estrangement vaunted by Hölderlin.

Wait. For the record, I do not like such generalities about “art and philosophy,” exhibiting a falsifiable frenzy of meddling in their secret correspondence while fast-tracking dense histories that often bear contradiction and annulment of their principles, grammatical turnarounds and sneaky self-sabotage. Even type A signifiers such

as “art” and “philosophy” are all wrong, part of a shaky inheritance, nor do they account for specific movements and schools, or subversions of accepted labels. So why do it, indulge generalities, why go there? I suppose the uses of not-so-disposable language lay down some parameters for us to go by. At this point of my own history as a reader, I have taken out a permit that lets me condense and squeeze out the essence of voluminous materials, moving the argument along. *Maybe the permit should be revoked, I tell myself.* Maybe it will soon expire anyway, letting painstakingly minute disquisitions on aporia and troubled positing return to these pages. Something in me hopes that I will indeed be asked to back up each of one these fast-paced assertions, a pedagogical indulgence that I relinquish for now. Nothing would please me more than to dive into passages that handle these matters with acuity, so that it becomes possible again to recruit artworks and poetic enunciation that push us along – or *stop* pushing, precisely, in order to halt us in our rhetorical tracks, allowing things to fall apart. A contemporary impulse to suspend philological slow-pacing has gotten me to quicken the rhythm of theoretical demonstration. Ok. Enough of the self-inflicted lament, neither entirely philosophical nor sufficiently poetic. Let us return to Hölderlin's example, with the understanding that this name provides more than a mere example, remaining, after Heidegger, problematically exemplary yet, in my view, unavoidable.

Resubmitted to thought by Benjamin, Hölderlin's “Dichtermut” – together with “Blödigkeit,” the double and voiding of poetic courage – leans into the aporia of heroic delivery (repurposed by Heidegger). The pair of poems features a poetic attitude that stares down the certitudes of philosophical positing in a match of sacrificial exposures. Both philosophers and poets have taken their hits, having been hounded historically by state hostility and, according to different decrees, put to death by political override. Poets and philosophers are dead Daseins walking, unless they have in some ways secured the status of *Staatsphilosophen* or court poets, which can leave them in precarity, like the supreme poet, Torquato Tasso.

Headed for seclusion, Hölderlin focuses on an inner death drive to which the poet succumbs. The rendering of the poetic word emerges in a condition of sheer stupor, whether inspired and intoxicated or more onto-theologically appointed (or both). “Dichtermut,” in league with “Blödigkeit,” teaches us that feeble-mindedness (*Blödigkeit*) fuels the temptation of poetic Saying, peeling away to a core of stupidity. Under the sway of an unshakable stupor, poetry struggles with its own inhibition, a level of diffidence and ground rule prohibition that leaves poetic insight at the altar, radically unmoored. At this point philosophy, with few standout exceptions and Spinoza, scrams.

As Deleuze saw it, philosophy was too arrogant to accept the gift left at its doorstep by literature. That was the gift of *bêtise*, which philosophers thought they could bypass, retaining the bonus of sovereignty and a run of legislative powers. Philosophy, according to Deleuze, thought it could move ahead without confronting barriers posed by fundamental stupidity. Big mistake, calamitous oversight: Philosophy’s arrogant presumption about its superpowers left it vulnerable to internal attack and a shaky premise for self-understanding. There were of course exceptions here and there, such as Schelling seeing the stupid and chaotic origins of the world (an assertion that pissed off Hegel to no end). There were other power failures of cognition and material framing noted as well, because philosophy is too smart and too *parricidal* to snuff out without marking the hideouts of stupidity and instances of non-knowledge in the yields of predecessors. The maneuvers around *bêtise* hinge on a power grab and political presumption, the capacity philosophy exercises for crafting transcendental principles, keeping them under the control of theoretical mechanisms of surveillance. Art operates differently, if it *operates* at all, for it relates to groundlessness and sacred effusions differently, and must befriend the nether world of illusion when reaching for the blueness of the sky. I don’t want to get this wrong by risking the loss of nuance and necessary complication that beset the philosophical inquiry and artistic-poetic delivery – the inevitable return-to-sender notice. Given the leakage and disseminative overflow of these domains they cannot merely be pitted against each other, even where they flee each other or regularly issue eviction notices

from their premises, as if these clashes of transcendence could be regulated.

A hybrid being in this regard, Nietzsche injected himself with art in order to secure a kind of suicide-prevention center. At some points along his journey he wanted to position a buffer against the stark positing prowess of science, or at least to bring the self-explication of *Wissenschaft* around to create new openings for the scientific drive, and attach it to “new galaxies of joy.”⁴ Understanding the bait of rhetoric, its artifice and place in the will to scientific assumption, Nietzsche would not clear science of illusory bolsters, but looked at the way fiction was incorporated and spit out. Nietzsche was the philosopher who reversed dialectics by spitting things out. At the same time, he was no enemy of artifice, urging us to think more seriously about unavowed cultures of intoxication and our *Rausch*-rushes in philological and scientific areas of thought, the various degrees of artificial paradise on which we count.

Theoretical habits that push *Rausch* can go far, as Nietzsche understood. It's all a matter of dosage, he claimed in regard to history and its oppressive weightiness. Dionysian meltdowns, by nature uncontrolled, induce a frenzy of de-individuation in the contrasting climes of Apollonian dreaming. Such boundaries cannot be drawn with absolute conviction. Left unpatrolled, a thirdness happens in this encounter, something neither entirely philosophical nor of art. Still, philosophy tries to hold its own when approaching art. The way philosophy reaches for art and poesy at crucial junctures – or consorts with theological scruples about Being – betrays a strong ambivalence toward its manifold alterities.

At times a movement of repulsion overtakes states of dependency. Modern philosophical relatedness involves domination, if not *need*, when it comes to other discursivities, an adherence to spacing that lends stability when establishing quasi-worlds in the rubble of a pass-

4 I analyze the scientificity of science – the tragic drive and joyous runs of Nietzschean programs – in *The Test Drive* (2005).

ing world. It may be, in Heidegger's phrasing, that somehow *die Welt weltet*, but this does not mean that we bask in a presence – that we have clear access to a remnant of world, or know where to locate the “in” of being-in-the world. Nancy has named our recently shared time here the epoch of haunting. We are swarmed by ancestral roamers who come through, crackling in unanticipated ways. Yet, according to Heidegger & Rilke, due largely to technological gridwork, our ghostly predecessors, especially in North America, have little room to spread transcendence; they are housed in the vacancy of inhospitable spaces, unwelcoming and sterile, repugnant for the most part the approach of ghostly intruders.

Goethe, the great undead, opened up for me the ethics of haunting. What I try to convey by means of his life-and-works can be understood in terms of the inducements, mostly unfathomable, in response to which we subject ourselves to phenomena that exceed us, often evaluated as “great” – freedom, work, or love, a version of Gd. Following the logic of Nancy's questioning, I wonder, What is it that holds sway over us like an unconditional prescription? (Cf. Ronell 2006.) What commands us to obey some hidden yet imperative force that may make sense, at least provisionally, or that may be discoverable outside of us, or on some inner limit still beyond our grasp, ahead of us, or in the past? Without being able to measure it out, there is a distance between us and what commands our moves – or what fixes our immobility. It is a distance that varies, closing in at times, announcing a proximity closer than any intimacy or familiarity we have ever known. At times it speaks to you, guiding you without manifesting itself as an identifiable or subjectivable someone. Yet, you subject yourself to this remote force that disables significant agency, is prior to self-constitution and works according to an ungraspable yet invasive pull. “It could be something that has been lost, obscured and forgotten, leaving you to be haunted by a sense of loss without substance. Nonetheless, what haunts is also a haunt – something that doubles for a place, a familiar place.”⁵ Haunting belongs to the family

5 Nancy (1983, 10–11). See my *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* (2006, updated [1986], xviii), for a close-up of Goethe's impending and still-scary haunts.

of *Heim*; in fact it has never been properly released from the home, Nancy reminds us. The proximity of a command or imperative doubles for the *Unheimlichkeit* that haunts our thinking because, in its remoteness, something very close incessantly pings and impinges, disquieting only to the extent that it burrows thisclose. The most lucid moments are beholden to the haunting foreboding stamped by the apotropaic sign of “home sweet home” – the foreboding abode.

As abode, whatever is to be called home, a familiar dwelling, is related to ethos. The question of hauntings by which we have been invaded thematically and eerily is not merely a strange fixation of filmmakers and obsessional neurotics. The relation to the past is never behind us. Restless and insistent, invisible sticking points of the past obsess, hound, overwhelm, and call up to us, disclosing frenzied effects associated with the force of law. The obsession with what remains unaddressed and yet to be resolved – be this made up of acts of cruelty or the primal scene – involves nothing less than an ethics. The ethical slant has little to do with the Ethics found in philosophy books or contained in works of science or the precepts of an institutional authority or discipline. Nor will it appear as moral sentiment or prescriptive rejoinder. Nonetheless, this epochal sense of impingement can be grasped as an ethics of the haunted. *Haunted*: What this means is that thought is not thinking beyond its time but *in its time*. Pinched by the pangs of melancholic review, the writing of hauntedness writes on this limit, which is that of our time – a time that dissipates, abandons, exposes, marks, approaches and continually throws us. Thinking, Nancy writes, means “exposing oneself to that which comes with time, in this time. In the time of being-haunted, there can and should not be any other thought or ethics – if that’s what it is – other than that of haunting” (ibid.).

Nancy has commented upon the excessive nature of the categorical imperative, a force that holds sway over a subject that in the first place is a subjected singular-plural – haunted, hearing, heeding, adhering to commands. In this spirit, I follow the remote control effects of Goethe’s name (on Benjamin and Kafka – and on so many others: Nietzsche, Freud, Arendt), pursuing effects of literary hauntings that have little to do with a thematizable occurrence, and even less with presence. Something about “Goethe,” oppressive and close, has inun-

dated the dreams and writing of these thinkers, disclosing an unconscious program that jumps barriers and also has played its part in the *imaginaire* of nation-building. Goethe's haunting has long remained in these works and state monuments a point of rare cult vitality, establishing unconscious authority in the different morphs of his immense oeuvre. The name's survival also operates as a menace that seeks a home base, whether infrapsychic or collectively apportioned.

The imposition of "Goethe" and expositions ascribable to Nancy teach us that what haunts our existence now, in our time, is linked to the "domestic" dimension that can never be domesticated – the definition of being-haunted. Whether we are speaking of the categorical imperative or of Goethean command systems, this effect does not belong to the economy which it haunts. Hauntedness allows for visitations without making itself at home (cf. Ronell 2006). Not everyone or every place is ripe for the nearly auratic devastation of the experience of a haunting. According to Heidegger & Rilke, who saw America as an "absolute void," the American household, suffused with technological sterilizers, has vacated the phantom reception center. This extreme instance of unhousing, much different from Celan's untrackable *unWo*, is no doubt a strange projection launched across the Atlantic. Yet, one sees their point, and the necessity they must have sought of establishing a failed experience of hauntedness, with a fleet of ghosts barred from arranging their American comfort zone around New World domesticity. Still, one has to wonder. Don't Rilke and Heidegger have a lot of nerve opting for a place (or *Erörterung*) of "proper" hauntedness? But the point is well taken. Maybe we no longer have homes in some geo-cognitive areas to cushion our ghosts of the past and glimmers of futurity.

In our day, honestly, I'm not convinced of anything that would assure friendly relations with unappeased ghosts, as if the ghosts hadn't been shooed away from genocidal Europe.

My teacher, Jacques Derrida, considered various forms of mourning disorder – the difficulty we have in letting go of a beloved object or libidinal position.⁶ Without seeking analysis, he consulted psychoanalysis. Freud says that we go into mourning over lost ideals or figures, which includes persons or even your country when it lets you down. Loss that cannot be assimilated or dealt with creates pockets of obdurate remainders in the psyche, maybe a crypt-formation or false presence. One may incorporate a phantom other, keeping the other both alive and dead; or, one may fall into states of melancholy, unable to move on, trapped in the energies of an ever-shrinking world. Things become little or belittling. Many of the key themes in films give expression to failed mourning, part of a key lexicon, a relation to death that invents the population of the undead – vampires, zombies, trolls, real housewives of Beverly Hills or wherever in America (a popular television series). In Anglo-American districts, we are often encouraged to “let go,” “move on,” “get over it,” even to “get a life,” locutions that indicate a national intolerance for prolonged states of mourning, discouraging mourners from sitting with loss for extended periods. Yet the quickened pace of letting go may well mean that we have not let go, that we are haunted and hounded by unmetabolized aspects of loss while hitting the accelerator. In Freud's work, the timer is set for two years of appropriate mourning. When Hamlet tries to extend that deadline, the whole house threatens to fall apart, and he is admonished by Claudius to get over himself, to man up. The inability to mourn or let go is sometimes called melancholy. Many of us have slipped into states of melancholic depression for one reason or another, for one unreason or another – one cannot always nail the object that has been lost or causes pain, though Pandemic, weather, and other shutdowns supply plenty of materials for melancholic brooding.

For Derrida, melancholy hosts an ethical stance, a relation to loss inviting vigilance and constant re-attunement. One does not have to know or understand the meaning of a loss and the full range of its disruptive consequences, but one somehow dwells with it, leaning

6 The following section contains passages that were previously published by the author in Ronell 2013 and Ronell 2022.

into a depleting emptiness. It takes courage to resist the temptation to bail or distract oneself from unhinging loss. (In the most recent U.S. election, one chose between a candidate who *deplored* and one who *embraced* mourning: Joe Biden's first act was to hold a ceremony to mark the casualties of the aggressively disavowed virus. His public demeanor has been built on the loss of his son, offering a political portraiture of a leader in mourning. The other candidate, Trump, has mourned no one; he may be too shallow even to house a crypt-formation or relocate suppressed loss. Countries can be profiled according to the way they mourn or refuse to mourn, measuring their capacity to acknowledge loss.) One is largely dissuaded by institutions from surrendering to the exigencies of mourning. Entire industries stand ready to distract the inconsolable mourner, without exception, including during the times of COVID-19. I see no off-switch to the effects of the pandemic, which prompts a new set of focused responses to neighboring areas of thought and artistic practice, taking cues from Montaigne and other seers of contamination.

As for me, I have lost so many friends and essential interlocutors in the recent past. My first attempt to put together a survival kit involved a close friend with whom the book version of an installation was planned. Anne Dufourmantelle and I went far into the question of what an exhausted philosophical corpus could still do for us in impossibly dark times. I abandoned the project immediately after her tragic disappearance. A part of our intention returned in fragments, shuttled into podcasts I delivered for Philomonaco's *Rencontres philosophiques* during the first year of confinement in Monaco and Paris, in 2020. This was a series labeled "Survival Kit for the Anguished," emerging from various theories of *angoisse*, *Angst*, *Furcht*, and psychic effects of viral aggression. Despite discontinuities and unbridgeable caesurae, the idea of a *kit*, together with other emergency supplies packed into philosophical and poetic Saying, offered a subtle viability for thinking the aporias of *überleben*. Poetry has known shipwreck from the starting block, lives by celebrating the departed, inventing new names and addresses of mourning. Philosophy has a long history of handling – or bracketing – the experience of distressed states. Poetry signals from its solitary base, pulsing with anticipatory bereavement. Poetic utterance retrieves loss in the very

turn to the stutter of language, a kind of *stutterance*. Philosophy has a history of calming that stutter, perhaps only until Nietzsche picks it up again by way of philosophizing with a stammer. But philosophy sticks close to pain, too, and knows cruelty. Yet both modalities have stayed close to the edges of non-recuperable suffering, a suffering without returns or rewards in a mystified Elsewhere – without, in some cases, a Christian savings or rollover account. They covered up what they knew with the non-starter of dogmatic truth. Still, there was plenty of room for fissuring and rhetorical indication of another philosophical urge throughout its history that could not simply be blinkered.

(I fast-track the credits.)

Thus the Ancients were concerned with stand-out types of psychic debilitation; Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche probed, each in his own way, into the dark side of mood and temperament; Kierkegaard passed the mic to fear and trembling; Heidegger based his existential analyses on *Sorge*; and Sartre drilled down on sheer nothingness. From day one, philosophers wondered whether it was possible to feel at-home in the world, given our basic homelessness – a predicament that many of them came to see as the uprooted nature of our dwelling on this earth. Many of us counted on these abyss-gazers to land us safely, without much illusion, and somehow to keep us going, even if the trek was bound to be mournful (cf. Ronell 2013). Lately we've been traveling the edges of acute unreliability in language and reference, contending with crashing worlds and the imponderables of disgraced Being in a Schillerian sense that will have to be explored elsewhere, in another survival kit based on Schiller's thinking of "Anmut und Würde," in and despite shattered worlds. Philosophy is built to handle downgrades linked to the unreliability of language's positing stints, the steady humbling of Being. But we, or some facet of what remains of the children of finitude: We are not built to last or to push back incessantly on programmed slap downs (cf. Ronell 2022).

In some ways, what art and philosophy have struggled with since their bursts of documented emergence seems to be slipping away. One feels massively betrayed, abandoned to a hollow in existence. People and institutions, crude bureaucracies, seem to get away with murder, but I have to wonder whether anyone really gets away from the effects of tireless serves of insult, the *jouissance* of malevolence or misconstrual.

Acts of misconstrual, as Shakespeare has shown in his drama on honor and betrayal, can lead to suicide. According to Nietzsche's literary appraisal, *Julius Caesar* was Shakespeare's favorite play among the great works that were produced under that name. The true hero was Brutus (according to Nietzsche), for he had to bear the brunt of betrayal and has initiated for philosophy the thought of the "noble traitor"—how much it takes to go up against a beloved power, a friend, a mentor. I am not sure that those who continue openly to denounce the world-remnant as it forms and deforms, disarticulates, make the grade of "noble traitors," or can be credited with a strategic renunciation of self-interest as in the worlds that Shakespeare commands. In his play those marked as most vulnerable to group psychology remain "unshaken" as the earth shakes and the climate bounds senselessly, striking down randomly, unleashing corpses from their graves—the hits are organized around Shakespeare's name and the registers of Shakespeare. The ghosts glide past one another, earth convulses. I can't say that this weather report accords with our roster of calamities, but the ground has *shakespeare'd* beneath our feet and the general climatology portends ill as updated forms of tyranny sully the earth and deregulate *Sorge* on all scales. Nowadays all this seems cast hyperbolically, a minor spinoff of *Caesar*, a cut and caesura of historical moment, truly a tale told by an idiot ...

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