

## SOCRATES ON THE BEACH

Thought and Thing

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# Socrates on the Beach: Thought and Thing

Joseph McELROY  
Novelist

**P**hilosophy—beware of it (I used to hear as an aspiring fiction writer), it's abstract and analytical where Life is not. Philosophy takes on the general, fiction lives in the midst of the individual, and the storyteller renders and implies and dramatizes and seduces us with a "knowledge of the world which lies deeper and is less subject to perversion and change than all the rules of ethics cut and dried," according to Glenway Wescott, half a century ago; the news safe and familiar "that there is a more precise [...] truth in story than in philosophy," emotion "more fortifying to our wild hearts than any amount of preaching and teaching."<sup>1</sup> So much for philosophy (and teaching for that matter).

The great tragic playwrights of Greece were artists, not philosophers, we hear from a great scholar, H.D.F. Kitto.<sup>2</sup> Closer to home, "I'm no hairy philosopher," remarked John O'Hara. Still closer, friends once upon a time, gifted, who knew the consolation and intoxication of the deeper quest, the body-mind, the questioning of everything a priori a posteriori, the dialectic, knowledge, the world: You don't want to get mixed up in that, there's no end to it.

"Life is not dialectics," said Emerson in "Experience".<sup>3</sup> Yet what is experience but opposition? a voice like my own in the midst of traffic and silence replies—almost a character's, or Nietzsche, whom I don't always hear as clearly as I need to and to whom I wrote a poem when I was nineteen only dimly grasping like some new effect of my health the reinterpretation of myself he urges. Dialectic, fight for survival, doubt in action, philosophy's life has been to criticize: Hume, miracles; Plato, the administration of justice. Like a brilliant expounder talking unchecked all night all day, philosophy is endless in its need of questioning, even when Wittgenstein (who stopped "doing" it and didn't anyway believe in reading it supposedly) describes limits to what we can say; or Spinoza, unflinching psychologist, ends his definitions of necessity and the emotions as he began, strangely comforting in his geometry of how things must be. Fiction on the

other hand models life in an image, a scene, a voice, not a set of propositions, and would only let the supposed larger truth in like a long shadow, or out.

Still, we live to think. Of separations between knowing and not knowing—love and cruelty, a color in a voice and the history of that person; between one mode of government and another, different censorships. A habit of mind, like it or not, not separate from these contrasts. A habit and a bond between what I might have been and what I am. What I am and do.

We think with the thought of others who may reply whether we are ready or not. And we have had with us the thought of Melville and Proust, like existence and time. Writing *is* thinking. Getting somewhere. Even into ignorance. Which is getting ahead of myself in these remarks to you when all I aim for is a useful statement abstracted from a tangled process. Like Virginia Woolf's that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction": which embraces not quite "the problem of the true nature of woman and [of] fiction" while, if you remember her great essay, proposing to "use [...] the liberties and licenses of a novelist" to tell how she got to where she stands, the lecture hall, the people waiting, the questions everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of severe programs for the city-state, Plato's dramatic habit of questioning reminds me good teaching tries things out and doesn't put thoughts wholly new into my head but reminds me of what I didn't know I knew, which is what fiction does, it builds on what you know. Philosophy confirms and undermines and opens beyond the frame of its words, like fiction. Both are writing, even if it be of Socrates talking—right up to that prideful creation of one's death as a deathless masterpiece (in *Crito* and *Phaedo*). Which is also only an idea. Socrates recalls a moment when he might have turned toward becoming an artist who constructs instead of a philosopher who knows.

Seeming opposites, yet in an imaginary conversation, for this is Paul Valéry's Socrates, a shade in some "transparent" afterlife, who in the dialogue "Eupalinos, or the Architect" tells this story of when he was eighteen, confident and heroic to himself.<sup>5</sup> Finding a thing on the beach, hard, white like a bone, light, smooth, shining, Socrates held it in his hand. Whence came it? What could it be? Socrates asks his companion shade Phaedrus, with whom he has been reflecting upon the arts, the making of things, what Phaedrus recalls an architect friend saying once upon a time. That in that unique art of form and use, Eupalinos would "lose [himself] in long spells of expectation" and surprisingly "approach to such an exact correspondence between [his] aims and [his] powers that [he would seem to] have made of the existence [...] given [him] a sort of human handiwork. By dint of constructing [...] I truly believe that I have constructed myself."

Do you recall the poet's useful motto "No ideas but in things"? It's from *Paterson*, that long American document of verse and prose mixing materials to equate a man's mind with a city. William Carlos Williams said he meant that the "poet does not permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context" of the passage. "No ideas but in things."

Which things? Williams's thought? Evidently not. Yet a phrase said to me has an impact, it "stays with me." A theory, say, arguing how to control/punish gang-kids in a present-day Paterson, New Jersey detention center. An argument—would that be a thing? Preserved by memory for dissemination. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins turns words, ideas, said to another into things, brain to brain, housed there. Concrete in some cerebral place or neurological relation. Call them storable ideas, pieces of language transmissible from mind to mind, units of cultural inheritance. He calls them memes.<sup>6</sup> They do not touch or change the germ plasm or the genes, yet they may be analogous to that multiplying or generation process by some fanciful heresy. A person's picked-up idea passed on in speech finds some plasmic path. Observable in your words to me, mine to you, our *thoughts* to one another ("thought contagion," as it has been called). Memes traceable from organism to organism, being to being; biolocatable. Pinpointable perhaps as Mr. Crick in California finds consciousness someplace visible in the brain, as others scout God in some inner space as perhaps a relation of relations definite and there. No, not genetic, not genetic, Dawkins' seductive theory declares. Ideas cannot think themselves, yet they may survive if...

What you do with the idea and what it does for you is what counts. Ideas are probably not "out there." That consciousness is what it's all about seldom served me very well as an idea tragic or comic even in moments of intricate discovery or narrative architecture. I mean, if I'm making up the truth out of what I think I know. Even Valéry in a poem "Un feu distinct" can't get along without flesh, laughter, the sea shell, and the sea. "Euclid saw beauty bare," Edna St. Vincent Millay allows herself, and I must consider that bareness.

Abstraction has a bad name. Yet its vocabularies of reducing may reach the visceral. Shakespeare's thought in *Measure for Measure*, for example, the chilly, riveting, definitive diction. Harold Brodkey's American rhetoric dares often quite general emotional words that work through uncanny idiom and surprising leaps to be concrete—through thought (which was, he said, what he meant by "prose")—physical thought call it. Or abstract naturalism, William S. Wilson's phrase for his own original fiction. And I, with words from unlikely vocabularies, abstract, ambiguous, or humor-implicated, have sometimes found ways for the mess and field of American idiom to hold voice and value close.

Idioms to build people and other pieces of the earth into a motion that could contain or be like their elements or rhythms: formulable stress-strain behavior of fibers and filaments of varying substances, answering and molecular.

Metaphor, it sounds like. Yet our very structure, I think, which may seem to leave out what we're used to finding in novels.

Yeats says we can embody truth but not know it. What is embodying? From the beginning I aimed in my novels to acknowledge scaffoldings and structural elements that should be out of sight normally through some sleight of symbolist implication. Skeletal residues of blueprint or flickering X-ray, biomorphic, engineering, social—micro, macro. Actual subject matters or materials for a structure made from them. They're abstract in that they're the generative models and modeling. Structures less fixed than in motion. Contained to a point, parallel to their elements and sources left visible and parallel to any discourse that might understand and try to embody them, a passion-plotted anecdote, a geometric demonstration which might have its own body or sense appeal.

We fabricate by abstraction, Valéry's Socrates reminds us, as indeed we can act only by ignoring many things. Yet that random thing on the beach flung back by that eighteen-year-old into the "inexhaustible sea perishing and reappearing," won't quite go away. Is it because the philosopher who "[has] need of everything cannot but take a wider view," and this because he's bent upon Knowing rather than (like an artist) Constructing? Yet Valéry's Elysian Socrates evokes with late Shakespearean power that "thing that I was not looking for," that "fishbone weirdly worn," or "ivory carved," "ambiguous object" which "the sea rejects, [...] which the land cannot retain" upon which his "reflections [...] were equally capable of leading me to that philosopher that I became, and to that artist I have never been..." (or so he says). Part and parcel of speculation and theory no less real or risky than the waves' "mighty shapes [...]". "And made of what matter?" Phaedrus, the brother voice or companion yes-man. "Of the same matter as its form: matter for doubt," comes the answer. Yet doubtless a "work of life, or of art, or [...] of time," generated by chance, or by blindly cohering nature, or by human act which must use them and be used by them "bound by an infinity of sequences" in an almost unimaginably mixed bag of relations, almost uncontrollably rich in Valéry's dialogue. Which poses clear-sounding choices, either-or's, that still intersect with others, overlap along a path that may appear only as we clear it. Be a man *or* a mind? (Curious when we think of Socrates himself.) A philosopher or an artist. Architect or budding philosopher "meditating [...] on the fragment of a shell" or bone cast up by the waves.

It's gossip, this old remark that the James brothers switched off, yet useful in passing: that Henry James the author of *What Maisie Knew* and *The Golden Bowl* wrote like a philosopher, while brother William, the philosopher, wrote like a novelist (remember the straight-ahead passages where he gives up on the Absolute because it merely reduces contradictions?).

Novels should be easy, philosophy hard, novels carnal and downright, philosophy elusive, involved, slow: that's the mistake here. No matter that when *Pragmatism* came out Henry claimed he'd been pragmatizing all his life without knowing it. (This brotherly burble meant only that his characters seek in the moral life what actually works). "Dramatize," said Henry James, wrestling with himself, "dramatize." About *The Golden Bowl*, William wrote Henry, "Why won't you [...] sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute [sic] straightness in the style? Publish it in my name, I will acknowledge it, and give you half the proceeds."

In a lecture, brother William credited Bergson with having led him to renounce the method of conceptual analysis, which goes nowhere, abstracting everything important, life itself. With Bergson perhaps exactly if not deeply in mind, Virginia Woolf imagined life going on free seemingly of what is outside her narrative of mysteriously multiple views, an unprecedented structure of impressions in *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and other fictions later and recently appropriated by writers who would reduce her to their level of vagary. I'm changed by what Woolf did so much more than by Philosophy Dramatized in Fiction. The excellent opening of Forster's *The Longest Journey*, which discusses epistemology. Philosophy illustrated in John Gardner's *The Sunlight Dialogues*, not to mention expounded. Nor is Bruce Duffy's unfailingly entertaining *The World As I Found It* what I have in mind, featuring (seen from outside) the Cambridge stars Moore and Russell, and most of all Wittgenstein, transiting out of his job as an aircraft propeller designer into another math of logic and its life. Closer to it, admirable Nabokov in the abrupt, alarming bursts and patterns of *Bend Sinister* showing us the working spirit of a professional philosopher. Even pre-modern George Eliot's honorable thinking (in Henry James's honest if blinkered remark) "drily abstract [...] undigested by her art" which F.R. Leavis rather murkily calls "an emotional quality [...] [the] presence of the author's own personal need."<sup>7</sup> Uncanny and palpably concentrated, unpredictably patterned is Thomas Bernhard's *Correction*, a terribly concrete body of mind-habit on collision course with obsession yet no tour de force, worth a dozen fabulous moral allegories of the philosopher turned novelist Iris Murdoch massively in a class by herself. William James grants

that if Bergson's raw life unverballed is the thing and concepts merely practical and hard to break ourselves of, as of the tradition that treats logos or discursive thought as the sole avenue to truth, concepts *are practical*.

Our late coworker Donald Barthelme told fiction writers, "Read all philosophy." He meant that you would find rigor there, models of meaning, question and tension, I believe, and I believe he meant that you would find there lines and strokes of clarity plotted by a passion for sense. And I am not (here, anyway) calling philosophy fiction but identifying fiction with a process which can use all the mind we possess, trained who knows how—not by *not* reading. Reading philosophy as exemplum or exercise maybe to take you back to the "hundreds of masks that belong" (as Beckett says in *Proust*) "to the objects of even [your] most disinterested scrutiny." Barthelme's criticism of life was voiced on the edge of the general and discursive, which he made hilarious and intimate, for the fictions he dreamed up seemed as palpable as they were double-tongued toward the abstraction that isolates and illuminates us and makes us absurd: "Self-regard is rooted in breakfast. When you have had it, then lunch seems to follow naturally, as if you owned not only the fruits but the means of production in a large, *faux-naïf* country."<sup>8</sup> *Read all philosophy?* I think Barthelme meant issues clearly tracked that would help a fiction writer be clear and interesting. Issues like, off the cuff, How do you know? Why kill? Where'd you get that soul? Did you see my...? Why do you remain with us? Because I have not been able to imagine anything better. Because, and Donald Barthelme would not have said except in parody what I say straight on, philosophy is a circulatory system of attention and depth. And philosophy, it occurs to me, more than any written-down text, is power. If often the power to scrap what you've written.

Henry James in his not-at-all-Bergsonian-text-of-Consciousness is like any fiction writer a leaver-out and in this obvious sense an abstracter. Of Balzac's life work, "one of the most inscrutable, [...] unfathomable, final [sic] facts in the history of art," James (who would never have catalogued the antiques in a room) perhaps exaggerates the quantity and mass into aesthetic enigma. How Balzac could have (I add, *supposedly*) "lived at large so much if, in the service of art" (i.e., holed up in his room writing) he "so [...] abstracted and condensed himself." James's answer describes James: "He could so extend his existence [...] because he vibrated to so many kinds of contact and curiosity [...] it multiplied his experience [...] he was always living in the particular necessary [yet] fencing himself in against [...] the personal experience [...] to preserve himself for converting it into history [...]."<sup>9</sup> More curiously abstract is James on motion (sensing, in what seems only a reviewer's principle of practical craft, in George Eliot's *Romola* that "Movement lingers in the story, and with it attention stands still in the

reader.”)—for on Balzac he betrays almost a *science* abstracting kinetic enigma: “He is, I grant, too heavy to be moved; many of us may stray and straggle, as I say—since we have not his inaptitude largely to circulate. There is none the less such an odd condition as circulating without motion, and I am not so sure that even in our own way we do move.”<sup>10</sup> Flannery O’Connor felt something was happening to her “in slow motion” when she read James, “but happening nonetheless.”<sup>11</sup> A perceiver with vocabularies of presence and of qualities-at-stake to plot things through as they *become* the field on *which* (“if feeling is profound”<sup>12</sup>) he plots relations somehow unavoidable (whether or not his experience left him any choice): thus to dissect and recompose and love the symposium of the text as it abstracts not so much from betrayal and lust as from their physical touch and into molecular forms of action and compound, sublimes the furniture of greed and the costume of custom, in thought that is practically a system, a habit or fineness anyway of qualification and quest to pursue like a dialectic the nuance that casts a true shadow, which is the fuller issue beyond the near melodrama. Was it even intercourse he had with ideas? No question. Henry wrote mystery dramas of the moral psyche, the demanding consciousness haunted by relations thought through. Consciousness? A word I’d come to dread till William Weaver rendered it as the cognate “conscience” translating Svevo’s *Coscienza di Zeno*.

More upon American fiction than European lies a burden of naturalist documentation, a put-up-or-shut-up proof that you know the place or job and you write what you know or may recently have learned. Know what, though? The gap Tocqueville saw in us between the miscellaneous daily particular and the transcendent metaphysical—remember that this gap itself enshrined a suspicion of intellect, of philosophy, of abstract thought or rhetoric. Dreiser a hugely awkward, clumsy writer but a strong one, puts all that weight of detail down on the page but also expounds with equal clumsiness his analysis of things as if he didn’t know that implicit in his stories he already had a great idea: that this American determining system was a killer, as Lawrence said so differently. The discursive in Dreiser doesn’t trust the story to say it all, yet it thinks things through. Melville’s suspicion of intellect finds everywhere the most riveting means of doubting what thus comes endlessly into being. His deepest passages are the ambiguities arising *from* action and things but weighing them at a decisive remove: he despairs at our thought but goes on with it (the most interesting mind in American fiction still) this quest, this exponential question navigating nullity but pursuing metaphysical conclusions which are an alternative language of judgment and doubt parallel somehow with that of the tale. Deep, beyond pessimism, those sentences, seeming to generate great seminal passages as much as books. Convincing, often more than the



detailed technical work of the foretopman with his disturbing simplicity or the harpooner with his dangerous devotions. I say this thinking of certain American novelists who are compared with Melville because they describe work, jobs, manual occupations in proud detail, they are “in” it. Yet what do they make of it?

Inside and outside troubling my coherence. No knowledge without being in the mess of things: no idea without standing outside. The word insists. We risk total immersion to know what’s happening.

On one hand call us consumers consumed with things that seem as greedy for us as we for them for we are information, and on the other we’re citizens wise and passive through whose consciousness often of our endless rights flushes effluent euphemism that turns us bland and abstracts from us down the drain some surprise and wild will and root. So if I contemplate the camouflage toilet paper hunters clandestinely use in my woods in case of emergency, or read in the novelist Joy Williams’s essays *Ill Nature* how the melaleuca tree, an Australian myrtle once planted by the Army Engineers into the Florida Everglades, by accidental overkill pumped them dry, or learn that thousands of songbirds have died smashing up against communication pylons and guy wires, or ponder a million glimmering fertility dishes of menstrual eggs that must not go to waste, or parse the global language screen spoken by all governments and corporations down to Exxon’s vocabulary making its thirteen hundred mile oil spill go away, or track billion-dollar pharmaceuticals suing to remove from the market cheap generic pills a tenth the cost and perfectly good substitutes for allergy sufferers, I might wonder not if we are dying, which is obvious, but more to the point if the materials we are made of have changed, like those of our in-the-pecking order predeceasing animals and plants.

I hear, “It is what it is” (which means in my native tongue, Don’t interpret, you can’t know; don’t complicate it; it’s not worth thinking about). And I hear, “You think too much” (which is itself a thought—and not a very interesting one, in a time when having heard Wittgenstein note the prefatory evasion “I think that...” we now endlessly hear “feel” substituted for “think”—which is not Lawrence or Virginia Woolf but everyday self-inflation and tone-deafness and therapy too).

Even as history recedes for so many and with it the education it bears, the material of us is changing, chemically and I suspect cerebrally. But if I turn the glass, the events visible in the grain of oak boards composing my kitchen table bring concrete and abstract closer—traceable events of growth or weather in the wood, conceivable, intriguing, historic there in the strong grain of a dead tree. Or I appreciate a woman’s selfish, thoughtful drive to use available science to have a child. Or in old maps of New Amsterdam/New York I see the streets finding new angles and lengths amid the expanding grid

which gradually imagines Manhattan thinking its way northward into its island sequential as it is still a field of possibility, improvisation, feeling, geometry and intuition, at times a fragmentary order like Butor's *Mobile* (do you know that book about America?) which refers us (as Roland Barthes says) to "an infinitely sensitive mobility of closed elements."

I have gone on writing (and perhaps I must stop doing so) mostly about the warm separateness of men and women, their city, its shifting look, work, and plan, not only my home town subway that opened in 1904 and all the details of its construction (and now, if I may be in two times, seven months after this talk in Orléans—reconstruction) like bridge building, but its meaning, its habit of passing through an invisible city to let you off and up to the surface somewhere, action, children, work force (we say) changing and meeting and not meeting one another, "things here below," the title of a story I'm writing—but the invisible city past and inside you (what Bachelard would have done with the New York subway), and patterns mobile, abstract, and like layer on layer of thought, yet inherent and I've hoped biophysical, infra-structures scoped by all our precise knowledges and intuition. This was mixed and a risk, it led me everywhere, it led me by analogy and question and probably some ear-to-the-ground naturalism of my own to science, where I had often been anyway. You could see me as a great dilettante or writing what Lawrence called the one bright book of life—a microscope, a telescope, an ear for American language, a walk in the woods, anatomy, recently all the -ologies of flight from raptors to finches to hang gliding, from helicopter to osprey (which was a remembered sea bird in *Plus* but for a moment in my new book the name of a military aircraft—highly suspect though they want to spend another billion on it—, that can lift and lower like a chopper but also tilt its engines forward and fly like a regular plane faster than a helicopter and less vulnerable) to winds that I have also studied like the sands of the desert—and of the shore, "the plinth of Hellas," Valéry's conceptual architect Socrates imagined the waves crashing onto.

This Socrates had to choose between being a maker who abstracts, and a thinker who must comprehend the whole of Nature. It must have been as a man *and* mind that, thinking about what he would have made as a maker, Valéry's Socrates thinks himself to the threshold of what he never built. Not needing to imagine a series of possible buildings like a Borghesian Rem Koolhaas, he shapes the *principles* of building, which are three: utility, with a view to the body; beauty, for the soul; and solidity, to resist the movement of nature to dissolve and corrupt what he makes. Utility, beauty, solidity: "These three only architecture demands and carries them to their highest point."

Questions break in like half-worked materials. Philosophy is the need of questioning. I reread Valéry, go back, feeling in this finished work the writer reluctant for years to write, the anti-Pascal unwilling to deal directly

with philosophy... Whereas in objects made by Nature maker and made are indivisible, objects made by *us* are due to acts of thought; and whereas all bodies which live or have a sort of life (like crystals) are engendered in nature not by acts but by principles, when *we* make things it is by principles “imposed [...] from without upon the material,” “a tyrant’s” measured “acts”—strangely like some analytic process Bergson disparaged as “dissective and shallow.” Acts like distinguishing an arm from the gesture it makes and conceiving a *purely possible* relation between gesture and arm—this might be Valéry’s thinking picture of his own practice but it doesn’t seem like mine. Which seems much more like Nature as Valéry’s Socrates sees her “push[ing] from all sides at once [...]”, mixing “obstacles [...] with her motion, go[ing] round them or mak[ing] use of them; as though the path she takes and the object that follows it, the time spent in covering it, the very difficulties it presents, were all of the same substance.” In short something more like Bergson’s intuition, my improvising. Surely the fiction writer will separate *and* unite, intuit *and* analyze, enter and merge with natural resources of mind and its anatomy in motion. Even the web of strangely concrete abstracting by *which* we are part of nature and imitate it, though in its grip and path and tread that makes and unmakes fiction like Pascal’s river the moving road that doubly takes us where we want to go.

In it, outside it, I “act” *as if* this were true: confirmed now by Valéry, “[pursuing]” not wholly actively a “reverie of reasoning”, narrator (who like Stevens knows supreme fiction must be abstract), solipsist sometimes, who in this Elysium probably won’t (though maybe would like to) meet an external force taking the game out of his hands: at all events architect of this dialogue spoken by voices figured in their metaphor and dialectic, forming backwards and forwards of its elements a structure I can use and am half confirmed by even though I will rattle the windows, reminded by Nietzsche that no view “*must be*” and dogma will have its day but will hide where it’s coming from, its origins. Philosophy, the need of questioning—I would not seek it if it were not half in me. Yet it is no more in a *place* than (to shift gears) my Consciousness is mainly of itself. How the objective world came to be, Pascal’s reasons of the heart no more than Stephen J. Gould’s bountiful contingency can show me so far. But that world outside is unquestionably what I write about.

How honest am I? From some beginning (myth or self-deception) I have thought of events in motion as being not so much in sequence as in a spatial spread. In an uneven matter-scape of possibilities. A thousand islands, an Aegean dream. What I called to myself a field (loosely and self-servingly in the fifties and sixties, later quite accurately as some world or means through which a force communicates its influence).<sup>13</sup> You could have sequences *in* a field. But field ranged elastically among indeterminacies and

shifting chances, which is how I saw the principal events in *A Smuggler's Bible*, a first novel of incomplete stories trying to gather and fall apart at the same time, about being on the edge of betrayal—which I suppose is a subject in all stories. One reviewer called *A Smuggler's Bible* a mandala, another “saw” its language of layered memory as patterns in the wood of living trees. *Hind's Kidnap* was (and is) a sequence of three incomplete sequences, the first broken off in favor of a second already in its middle stage, the third a sequence according to a quite different principle, also entered in midcourse. In *Ancient History* a narrator keeping two of his close friends separate, multiplies clocktime in memory, turns causality plural and uncertain. This took on a political meaning in *Lookout Cartridge*, in *Plus* a biological or spiritual—cause-effect displaced sometimes into mere juxtaposition. If *Women and Men* shrouds cause in multiplicity and in the multidirectional structure pivoting, pitching, and yawing in a space-like history, *The Letter Left to Me* quite strictly mobilizes present past future in a continuing instant of pride and grief, weakness and strength.

I have had trouble with Time. Worked against it and its gods, imposed on it rule and rulelessness as upon material of myself. Associated it, blamed it, with cause and effect, seen it fore and aft and been haunted by Sequence as by Conscience. Time sequence has a way of falling apart under the glass of my concentration. Proust agrees that chronology is the least interesting of the narratives that keep us [...] from falling apart; exactly *when* Marcel met Odette at Uncle Adolph's is nothing next to what Marcel feels—or *why*—when he goes home that day, and tells on Adolph.

A storm, a statue, a passing word, a passionate pursuit: I place side by side three or four events or themes from different times (here it is *Women and Men*) and, collapsing time, at once rebuild and excavate a reality that penetrates cause while bypassing it: can I bypass chronology without denying cause? Our peculiarity, Valéry believes, is to create in two kinds of time. One runs on in a domain of pure possibility—within that subtle substance which can imitate all things and combine them with one another to infinity. The other time is Nature's, which in one way contains the first for we mortal makers are in nature, and in another way is contained by it, for we conceive Nature, recreate and research it, manipulate it even unknowingly. And in nuances Nietzsche makes me impatient with.

Reflecting on time, cause, possibility, on writing and a new life, I'm put in mind of *On The Genealogy of Morals*. Of the strong—their desire to find enemies, resistance, and triumphs. Of the weak—self-sacrificial, inward, contemplative, and what Nietzsche calls their “slave morality” and its alleged strategy to interpose between doer and deed the “soul” or “subject” which is *that in the person that does not act*. Thus, the weak establish weakness as freedom and undermine the strong by interrupting

action: while their invocation of “weakness” can be made into an entity (soul, subject) that can hear them, as a wizard might invent demons to hear the spells he casts. The analogy comes from Nickolas Pappas, whose analysis of what he calls “bi-directional causality” in Nietzsche takes me where I want to go.<sup>14</sup>

Not in these remarks through the celebrated mechanism of resentment and vengefulness, or how clarity of choice yields to an entanglement with guilt. Not the familiar drama of force failing to finding a way to act so it turns around to produce *internal* action—resentment turning inward—and creating values!—that rough analysis that took me by storm four decades ago and became a lifelong inspiration I was doubtless unequal to. But another matter today: Nietzsche’s causal interpretation of *how* slave morality won out with this soul strategy. In Essay 1 of *The Genealogy* first comes slave morality, then, corresponding to its unconditional demands, the soul (or subject); which, however, in Essay 2 becomes the *prior* “soil on which slave morality grows. So which is it?” asks Professor Pappas who in his detailed reading points to a quite common doubling or inversion of causal sequences in Nietzsche’s analysis of guilt and religion and elsewhere. For example, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Apollo the son of Zeus is conceived of also as his father. And in a curious inversion of the Oedipus story Nietzsche associates with a Persian idea that “a wise magus can be born only from incest,” the same man who solves the riddle of nature [...] also must murder his father and marry his mother. But this sequence reverses the Oedipus story and hides its temporal order. In *The Gay Science* he calls causal explanations false to the phenomena we attach them to, and sequentiality a lie we tell ourselves. “We have uncovered a manifold one-after-another where the naive man and inquirer of older cultures saw only two separate things.” Nietzsche seems to believe that causality does not inhere in certain events that created the present, though Professor Pappas wonders if Nietzsche’s bidirectional causality might be a means of “keeping an originary event blurry before our historical eyes.” For the fiction writer, for me, it is closer to a tension of dramatic truth than to blur. Nietzsche imagines another kind of intellect: “[...] that could see cause and effect as a continuum and a flux and not, as we do, in terms of an arbitrary division and dismemberment.”

We are each of us students (or blocked students), every instant of our days and nights, god help us. I was once in agreement with Tolstoy, the putative science admirer Tolstoy in the disparaged interstitial passages of *War and Peace*: that a thorough knowledge of cause and effect is in theory available to us if we could only amass the facts. Yet I have found myself plotting the history of certain characters of mine as phenomena in a field of possibility more than in a chain linked by demonstrable causes that are

themselves also effects. (Is this like Emerson's notion of a mysteriously preferred Presence versus Deeds in the essay on "Character"?)

Not, as if I could not know—as I do—why a young Canadian woman, apparently subject to some abuse (though not unloved) growing up, then a philosophy student, leaves the person she is now with and flies (or flees) to the challenge of being an actress in New York. We learn to some extent why she takes this action yet this matters less than a technique and ethos of acting. A present learned and found on her instincts more than from any teacher and suspending this history of hers.

Turning away from the *causal* past to a present impulse. This is her arbitrary exclusion of a history of abuse that filters into the story not as past documented but in a form of her own that works to transform an awful family history into a new life. One set of causes you could say replaced by another, or by creative acts. It turned me back to Nietzsche, reminding me of his bidirectional causings woven chaotically into my younger wrestling with will.

Was she born One and has become Several? Or was she, like Socrates in "Eupalinos" and like the man (the central character in my forthcoming *Actress in the House*) whom she meets at first without knowing it in New York (which is and is not America I know all over again reaching the end of this revision months after this paper was delivered in Orléans), born Several only to become One?

When I tore this talk into new pieces just before the car came to take me to JFK on May 22nd, I knew I didn't have the sequence yet (wherever it was). Marc Chénétier offered me a stapler when I arrived in Paris, but "Now that I have come to the end I am a little more ready for it," I said in Orléans on May 25th to some of you who will read months later this still-in-progress version abstracted from several originals by some preparation in myself that was waiting to do so and as well by wonderfully moving circumstances such as e-mails to and from new friends and having traveled back and forth twice across the ocean and then looked at these words breathed through the unclear air of large structures collapsing before my eyes eight blocks away in my own lower Manhattan neighborhood on 9/11 and found still more to do, "[...] even if absence / drifts toward me like a gray draft from the stage [...]"<sup>15</sup>

Made of words, which by Valéry's Socrates are ranked well below the power of architecture, its beauty, utility, and stability. To think again. To make something that could be presented to the angel as the best you could do. A translation even of what you think you know. Rilke's waiting and waiting; then his tumult of work. His last work, a translation of "Eupalinos..." Parts of a life reassemblable by you never know who.

## NOTES

1. Glenway Wescott, *Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 19-20.
2. H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, 1954) v.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *Selected Prose and Poetry* (New York: Rinehart, 1955) 237.
4. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1946) 6.
5. Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos, or the Architect," *Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 63-150.
6. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976); *The Extended Phenotype* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982). Also quoted: Aaron Lynch, *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society. The New Science of Memes* (New York: Basic Books, 1996) [one of many books that make use of Dawkins].
7. "George Eliot," in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, Ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 237.
8. Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Bantam, 1968) 105.
9. Henry James, "The Lesson of Balzac," 1905, *The House of Fiction. Essays on the Novel*, Ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957) 68-69.
10. James, 84-85.
11. *Letters of Flannery O'Connor. The Habit of Being*, Ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 99.
12. Marianne Moore, "Picking and Choosing," *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1951) 52—herself recalling T.S. Eliot's remark about James's "mastery over, his baffling escape from Ideas" ("In Memory," *The Little Review*, Aug. 1918), that he "had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it."
13. I adapt Brian Greene's definition in *The Elegant Universe. Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Search for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Norton, 1999) 416.
14. "The Mutual Causation of Chance Events—one origin story in *On the Genealogy of Morals*." A section from Prof. Pappa's work-in-progress on Nietzsche.
15. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Fourth Elegy" (lines 29-30), *The Duino Elegies*, as translated by William H. Gass in his uniquely rich book *Reading Rilke* (New York: Knopf, 1999) 199.