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Tiqqun

Phenomenology of Everyday Life

February, 1999

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From the bottom of a shipwreck
mein sohn, es ist ein nebelstreif
['tis but a wisp of fog, my son]
– goethe, *erlkonig*

There are fragile moments when the bleating unreality of our world, which generally masks the sediments of habit under a compact layer of apparent concreteness, suddenly gushes forth, like a ghost flying out from some crumbling tomb: Absence.

I will here mingle a little more with this metaphysical experience (because it is one; too bad if that startles the cheerful ones and dogs), which appears, it's true, to be the cousin of Nausea as Sartre described it – although it is there that the non-existence, rather than some quivering existence that reality has now been stricken by, unveils itself.

I found myself in a slightly curved street, in the city outskirts where I live. And something was there, strangely, instead of something else that wouldn't have caught my memories – this thing that shouldn't have been there. There was a large

window above an immaculately shined, far-too-new placard, affixed to the wall; on that placard, in rigid letters, the word “BAKERY” was written. Through the window you could see a few display shelves that appeared in a way – and even with quite the frank similarity – to resemble those that are often used to display pastries or some sickening cake or another, display shelves doubtless placed there to perfect its confusion with familiar places; but I wasn’t duped. I was all the less fooled since their enthusiasm had gone way beyond the believable. So, there, planted behind those phantom display shelves, perfectly immobile, standing in an expectant position, was the baker! The baker... and her white apron. And the whole assemblage, so firm yet scattered, was more evanescent than that false manor suddenly evaporating into mist that Mallarmé spoke of, more shifting and impalpable than all the ethers; behind or in it – I don’t know, since it was as if the cloudy screen had with so much finesse been muddled up with what it already no longer covered up, as if it were woven of its own tears – terrible, was Nothingness.

Destabilized by so much foreignness, I decided to go inside anyway – I marched into the emptiness. I already felt how you feel, or how you think you feel upon waking up, in some very hazy dream where you haven’t quite forgotten the feeling that’s passed through you. From that cloud, which was also the cloud of nothingness, my head and my whole body were like sealed off, and thought itself, which sometimes can slide so well like a brazen blade, with a clear but serious whistle, and my thinking itself was that cloud, that gas that spread out as if it were following the physical laws governing the noble gases. All matter had melted or was perhaps sublimated; in any case it was dead at that moment, disappeared. I finally managed, waveringly, to approach the calm baker, who pushed her impossible role all the way to the point of asking me, terrible music with a diabolic candor – since the devil excels in putting on candid airs – what I wanted. Her question made me flinch.

tiality, by just calling it a trip. It goes without saying that this short list of amusements is by and large non-exhaustive.

All these attitudes sketch out negatively a particular terrain, which had to be clarified before positively, which would be that of a critical-metaphysical attitude. Taking a closer look, this appeared as a kind of unity between, on the one hand, the practice of a conceptually powerful dialectic, and on the other, a certain existentialist attention, and a certain *laisser-être* ('let it be'), too. These two approaches, far from being irreconcilable, are incarnate in anyone who knows how to conceive of and feel becoming, who knows thought as a science in the sense Hegel understood it, who knows the purpose of the Figure used, while at the same time being attentive enough to be able to stop at certain moments, before they are suppressed, and squeeze out their content, becoming totally immersed in them (the surrealists had already felt this, but had explained it differently – compare with the summary of the surrealist attitude given by Breton in *Mad Love*). It's a question of considering the Gaze as experience, and thus as a certain tension between two successive moments: the first moment is the sensation of the phenomenon, the second its revealing as a phenomenon. When the critical-metaphysician is shown the moon, he first looks at the moon and then at the finger pointing at it. The phenomenon takes place first off in itself, then, for itself, and from the basis of being for itself emerges being in itself. The Paraclete never comes right away and is always already there. This critical-metaphysical attitude, fixed-exploding, this changing of the gaze, which is not blind, can only really be attained and know itself as such by sharing all these sensations and analyzing them, whether or not these experiences themselves are or must be lived in a solitary manner. Thus we'll be including this section, phenomenology of everyday life, until further notice.

I couldn't look around myself; all the nothingness blinded me more than I could bear. I understood quickly that the only presence that could absorb my gaze, hold it a bit, instead of imperiously repelling it, that the only island of existence that could save me from all this drowning, rather, this drowning of everything, was this woman, disguised as a baker, her face and her arms, emerging alone from the fallacious costume. I suddenly found a kind of Spanish charm in her that troubled me a bit, but oh so much less than all the nothingness that I had to drown in did! Anyway, an existing being, in form and substance too... a being that did not immediately fade away elsewhere. I thought: there's no way that this woman, standing there facing me, in the middle of all this Nothing, all this abyss quickly dressed up as a simulacrum of a bakery, really believes all this pasteboard decor, this shameful pantomime – this whole scene; are we really required to act it out!? No... I had to tell her... tell her that it needed to stop... "Miss, we know full well, don't we, that all this is nothing but an absurd practical joke, and you're not really a baker, that this isn't a bakery, and how absurd it would be for me to play the customer. The age of playing commodity has passed; let's speak frankly and forget all this frightful decor, which fools no one... I don't know how you found yourself in this strange situation – so tell me, what's all this about?" The reply, the only reasonable one, which then filled my mind like a clear truth rescuing me, I couldn't say; my whole being, still cloudy, was still incapable of responding practically to such an injunction from Reason, when a man appeared behind her, grotesquely disguised as a baker, and made me fear that this bad theater piece was going to turn into some kind of vaudeville, a final bouquet on an insolence that had already lasted too long. So I muttered – absurdity! – an unmotivated order for a perfectly random number of loaves of bread, putting off clearing up this affair until later. Still dubious, and now almost getting into the game, by some vice I didn't know I had, I laid down a few coins – to see if this pataphysical scene re-

ally was determined to run its course. It was, and I regretted my lie a bit, since after all, I wanted the truth, not bread. So I left, dizzy and dreaming after the whole event. People around me remarked that the number of baguettes I'd bought (I didn't even imagine that what had happened at that moment even had a name) was singularly disproportionate. And so I told the tale of my adventure, and then, since I couldn't make myself understood, I thought about it alone.

What I'd felt there was true, no doubt about that. The experience had revealed to me, in a brutal way, the unreality of this world, the realized abstraction which is the Spectacle. The whole metaphysical – and thus total and filled out all the way to the existential sphere – dimension of this concept had appeared clearly to me in this private mode of disclosure, and could appear as it really is, as something really strange, posing a problem the essence of which is absolute foreignness, only insofar as it is lived as an experience, as a phenomenon. Habit makes phenomena be forgotten as phenomena, that is, the supra-sensible – must I add that Hegel's famous affirmation too took on a kind of dazzling concreteness, the power of a revelation? And yet, habit is precisely the characteristic means of commodity metaphysics, its manifestation, which never manifests anything but the forgetting of its character as a manifestation... That's how the bulging intuition of Absence also reveals that it's already transcended as such, since it presents itself as a manifestation of the forgetting of the manifestation as such, meaning as the revealing of the commodity mode of disclosure, as the revealing of the Spectacle. When it shows itself thus, Absence is already but a hollow space, a pure absence. It is a positive affirmation of the World about itself. It is precisely the return of all reality and already the possibility of reappropriating it. This whirlwind of paradoxes showed how much my experience had been critical-metaphysical. I also thought back about similar sensations, and tried to make an almost zoological classification of the various textures that the phenomenon

can manifest, from the half-vapor, half-liquid melancholy to that other state, where everything is, on the contrary, quite marked with all the hallmarks of a concreteness so massive that it shocks you (and reality is then palpably too concrete to not reveal itself still as being, in fact, abstract to the point of delirium). All these magico-circumstantial experiences are obviously inaccessible to Blooms that know nothing of solitude, which is often their case. Our contemporaries, for the most part, habitually obviate such unappealed perceptions of the Nothingness, which is also their nothingness, our Bloom nothingness, which terrify them, by massing them against one another in sordid accumulations that they sometimes dare to call friendship, that great powerful word that the worst cockroaches are no longer afraid to grind under their filthy feet when they say no less crudely that they hang out together. There are also a few tools that such a service of forgetting offers, in an equivalent manner to this fallacious proximity: television, walkman, boom box or lighted radio “to give a musical backdrop,” etc. And finally when it appears anyway, that Demon which is critical metaphysics, in spite of all Bloom's precautions, the latter can still try to put one last falsification past, with the reassuring use of a word without any meaning, invented or recuperated for such cases: stress, fatigue: in the cases when the Demon comes in through the window itself, depression, or lastly, if the Bloom in question proclaims New-Age-isms or some other young-cool-isms, he can exteriorize the phenomenon, rather than directly denying the phenomenon's being a phenomenon, and put it on a level of general equivalence, out on the psychedelics market, as a purely subjective experience¹, that is, transform it into poor substan-

¹ As for us, far from considering such an experience as simply subjective, we affirm, on the contrary, its objective and eminently political character.