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Homeland(e)scape: between familiar and uncanny thoughts

With regard to the superstitions of logicians, I shall never tire of emphasising a small, terse fact, which is unwillingly recognized by these credulous minds—namely, that a thought comes when "it" wishes, and not when "I" wish; so that it is a **perversion** of the facts of the case to say that the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think." **One** thinks; but that this "one" is precisely the famous old "ego," is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an "immediate certainty."¹ Nietzsche

Philosophy is full of arguments that are not verifiable in actual practice. The assertion by Nietzsche is one of those that can be authenticated. We only need to close our eyes, and try not to think. The truth in Nietzsche's claim is realised, not in minutes, but in seconds: thoughts arise, without our wanting. Human beings can think actively, but "thinking" happens also passively without our wanting, without an intention to think.

Wind stirring the leaves

One of the major philosophical issues of the 20th century was the debate revolving around the question of unconsciousness. Terminology and emphasis differs from Freud to Jung and Lacan to cognitive science, but there seems to be some sort of agreement that there is something which works beyond, under or in parallel with our consciousness. 'The death of God' in the late 19th century was also the death of an almighty thinking subject.

Our unconscious actions are not limited to thinking and mental activities. Our breathing, similarly, is a process that is controlled both consciously and unconsciously. Our body-mind ensemble is a set of systems that work both with and without our conscious participation. This is a prerequisite for us to be able to perform different things at the same time.

There is even more to it. Lakoff and Johnson argue in their groundbreaking study of metaphors, that "[the] human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined."² This means that our thought processes are largely structured by metaphors, and the uncanny part is that most of the time we are not aware of this. Thus, language influences and directs our experience of the world to a certain extent and this happens often without our noticing it. If I want to 'demolish someone's opinion by attacking its weak points', I am acting within the framework of a war metaphor: I see an aspect of fight in a situation which is in itself neutral. I could think of arguing as a friendly exchange of thoughts where there is no winner or loser, nothing to shoot down or attack and therefore nothing to defend - this would make me see the actual situation in a totally different light, in a more humane light.

Influence of language on us goes beyond metaphors. Every language has its own peculiarities in depicting the world, and we grow in to this set of relations without our so wanting. For example Japanese and Korean languages have a specific honorific form which makes Japanese and Korean-speaking people act and think in a conversation according to specific conventions which are unfamiliar and difficult to understand for outsiders. Besides this, Japanese honorific spoken language is also translated³ in the body language of bowing.

¹ Nietzsche, *Between Good and Evil*, p.12.

² Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, p.6

³ By translation I don't mean its common implications in the context of written or spoken languages: I use it in a much broader sense - translation from thoughts or sentiments to poems, poems to photographs, photographs to tastes, tastes to vowels and vowels to colours. Translation at this very basic level means simply any kind of transmuting and transforming from one shape to another, in any kind of - human and non-human - encounter where the need for expression arises and the impulse is passed on. Translation as a process of transmuting is thus not an aspect of language but defines generally the transmutational aspect of all encounters, of which the translation between spoken languages is only one expression. Language was born from the need for expression. Translation is the act of this expression and it precedes the language itself. Heidegger says that "we are continually speaking in one way or another" (*Poetry, Language thought*, p.189). I would rather say that we are continually **translating** and **being translated** in one way or another.

Language not only influences our thinking and the way we see the world, but it bends the actual body of a person. Relations (of rank, degree, family etc.) are not in the world, but in the language.⁴

The moon's reflection

Rimbaud was a translator of a most peculiar kind: he assigned certain vowels a colour and created a wild poetic language of his own - black for A, white for E, red for I, green for U, blue for O. Because "everything is simply an encounter in the universe, a good or a bad encounter"⁵, we can say, that for the first time in the history of French poetry, blue encountered the vowel O in a good encounter.

It is a common way to think that poetry and philosophy are the privileged places for vowels, words and concepts to encounter each other. It is true that poets and philosophers are sometimes almost neurotically sensitive to the meanings and relations of words and concepts. This is the very reason why the language in their hands often manifests itself in the most extraordinary way.

This is however a quite romantic view of the matter. As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, poets and philosophers are not the privileged users of metaphors - every human being rows a boat of language in the vast ocean of metaphors, to use a drab metaphor. It is only that poets and philosophers are more sensitive to various aspects of language and it is often through these poets and philosophers that we come to realise the fascinating functioning of metaphors and language.

However, without being a poet or philosopher, every human being has his/her own peculiar way of putting things into an encounter, consciously and unconsciously.⁶ O is not connected to blue for everyone, but it could be connected to something else, to a taste, or a sound (vocalised by a certain person, maybe a mother or a father). The word 'snow' can have an almost metaphysical glow for people living near the Equator. For them it is unfamiliar and fantastic, like Mahāvairocana for Christian or a Logos for a Daoistic. But for a person living in the Northern hemisphere, snow has a colour, sound, taste, smell and a touch - it might even have a certain place or time in memories.

The difference between a poet and a non-poet is that the latter doesn't write down these familiar and uncanny encounters between blue and O or snow and sound. Because of the busy way of life and the wandering of the mind the so-called non poetic person (in us) doesn't have time to quiet down, to listen and smell these encounters as s/he is hurrying through the present - s/he doesn't have time to become aware of them. The wandering of the mind arises from anxiety and craving, and it obscures the pure arising of things in an encounter. How many times have I missed the moon behind the withered branches in the winter night's wind because of yesterdays and tomorrows? The poet (in us) should arise together with the wind and the moon in the present of the here and now.

"We never come to thoughts. They come to us."⁷ When we realise this principle in depth, we can appreciate the working of our mind and the world in a more intimate way. We never come to sights, sounds, tastes or fragrances either, they come to us: "Carrying the self forward to practice and experience the myriad things is delusion. When the myriad things actively practice and experience ourselves, that is the realisation."⁸ We don't come to moon, wind and our breathing, they come to us.

Words are not just words. They act in the world.

'Home' is perhaps commonly thought of as a place of tranquility and peace of mind - a place where one can relax and live according to one's own wishes. The maintenance of this tranquility seems to require a certain kind of mental and material safeguarding, so that it is possible to share the home only with the people we want. Sentimental attachments to things we love and cherish, separates our home from The Others in one way or another. We don't let everyone enter our home - our homes have borders. What about people who don't have a home?

⁴ By language I mean every kind of gesture, sign, utterance and act that is possible to **translate** (in the sense of transmuting) onwards. There are endless languages - human and non-human - which encounter each other. These languages come to existence only in the act of transmuting translation. The purpose of language is not to **mean** something but to translate this something, whether it is a sentence, an image or a silence: 'to mean' is 'to translate'. Language is thus not conceived as a system existing in itself, but it is connected inseparably to a concrete action. Language in itself, as a system, is meaningless - what matters is the ongoing transmutation of languages in a concrete encounter. We don't teach our children the system of language - they learn the language in a concrete encounter. 'A dragon' and Derrida's '**différance**' don't mean anything (in themselves), but they can be translated in countless ways. When we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think something, we are already in the middle of both an active and a passive process of translation - impulse is urging to pass on. 'World', 'language' and 'word' are only words in a language, meaningless and unintelligible in themselves unless they are translated onwards in a concrete action. Honorific language like every other language, takes place in a concrete encounter. Every language is a body language. What is your posture right now? How does your tongue feel in your mouth right now?

⁵ Deleuze, Dialogues II, p.45

⁶ "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of other." (Metaphors we live by, p.5). The act of using a metaphor could be seen as an encounter of things, **translation** of one thing to another.

⁷ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p.6.

⁸ Dōgen, Dōgen zenji zenshū, vol.1, p. 7. Translations from Japanese are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Homelessness is a difficult subject to think and talk about – for living in the streets is a concrete reality for hundreds of millions of people all around the world, while I sleep comfortably between warm sheets every night. Aimless wandering and a homeless way of life might be a desired and valued thing for monks, poets and mystics, but it is hardly so for waifs living in the streets of Jaipur and Buenos Aires. There is something wrong in praising some eccentric poet's homeless way of life, while knowing that there are millions of homeless children without shelter and food. How should we talk about homelessness?

A clear-cut distinction should be made between two words. A man living in the street is *houseless* – not *homeless*. Home is an experience, not a material entity. Every human being has a right to have a home; I even believe that every human being has a home of some sort – an experience of tranquility, at least sometimes. Not everyone needs to have a house – some people actually choose to live without one – but everyone has to have a right to experience home, whether it is a concrete place, a mental construction, taste or a sound. To designate someone as homeless is to take away his/her essential human right to peace of mind.

This is similar to some aspects of self-renunciation, practiced in different religions and meditative traditions. The techniques and the underlying philosophies vary, but what is in common, is the voluntary aspect of the practice. Whether one wants to “drop the body-mind” or “fill oneself entirely with God” the pursuit is always carried out of one's own accord. Voluntary renunciation of the self and losing one's sense of self by disease, acid trip or violence is a different matter. Self can be renounced or cast off without problems if it is based on one's voluntary actions – every other way leads inevitably to a human tragedy. Self and home can be renounced by one's own will, but they are never to be taken away from anyone.

Arriving

If we think of home in terms of inner peace and harmony, it is naturally a place or a state of mind to which we want to return. This kind of ‘coming back home’ is crystallised in Homer's *Odyssey*, which could be seen as an epic of homesickness and returning. Conversely, we can think of home in terms of not coming back to, but ‘arriving at’. This aspect can be seen in the *The Exodus* of the Israelites, which was not coming back to an already existing home, but arriving at a new home that God was to reveal to them in the future.

In both cases the sense of arrival is a connective factor – whether it is a new home or an already existing one. Between departures and arrivals, there is an act of wandering, which can arouse homesickness, because of the feelings of aloofness and homelessness. Homesickness is finally transmuted into joy and happiness at the moment of arrival. But is home necessarily a place or a state of mind to which we arrive? Is there always a home to which one arrives? Are there people who never arrive? Are there people who never want to arrive?

Never arriving flow of the river

**If I cannot dwell anywhere, I will then dwell nowhere,
in this world brief as a grass-made hut.⁹ Saigyô**

Saigyô (1118-1190) is one of the most beloved and respected Japanese poets of all time. He became a Buddhist monk at the age of 22 under unclear circumstances and thereafter wandered across Japan writing poems on nature, human relations and loneliness. Saigyô's poetry is famous for being multidimensional and almost contradictory. His poems often praise the loneliness and aloofness in the midst of nature and elsewhere he directly deplores the fact of being alone far away from people.

Saigyô lived in the 12th century which was a century devastated by natural calamities and a civil war. The Buddhist notion of the ‘impermanence of all things’, which was a central theme in the literature of 12th century Japan, was sensed concretely everywhere. “If I cannot dwell anywhere” in Saigyô's

⁹ Saigyô, *Sankashû*, poem no. 2175.

poem is not a sentimental poetic expression, but it depicts the concrete reality of his times. Many people had lost their houses in natural calamities and wars. Houses and dwellings were seen as epitomising the impermanence of all things, which is depicted beautifully by Saigyô's contemporary Kamo no Chômei (1153-1216):

**The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same.
The bubbles that float in the pool, now vanishing, now forming,
are not of long duration: so in the world are men and his dwellings...
the people are as numerous as ever, but of those I used to know,
a bare one or two remain. They die in the morning, they are born
in the evening, like foam on the water... For whose benefit does he
torment himself in building houses that last but a moment, for what
reason is his eye delighted by them... Which will be the first to go,
the master or his dwelling?¹⁰**

Not only for Saigyô and Chômei, but for all of us, it is impossible to live anywhere with absolute certainty of security and peace. We need only to riffle through a few pages of a daily newspaper to realise this uncomfortable fact. Arriving safely home is not dependent only on our own efforts.

What is there then left to do for a human? Either to live in good faith in an uncertain house with an uncertain life, or to renounce the whole fantasy of permanence and start to live according to this very uncertainty and impermanence - that is: not to build a stable house (but an impermanent hut), not to depend on human relations (because disaster can take away loved ones), not to depend on fixated thoughts about things (because thoughts arise as they wish), not to return anywhere, not to arrive anywhere. This was Saigyô's choice.

"I will then dwell nowhere" means detachment from all seemingly permanent things - house, home, human relations, friend, language, concepts, self - because in their original mode of arising they are impermanent, without an essence, without an abode. Like never arriving thoughts arising in our minds without our wanting, Saigyô wandered homelessly without craving for permanence.

Between the commas

Language is a temporal process and therefore impermanent. It changes all the time. Many post-structuralist thinkers advocate the idea that it is the very process of difference and impermanence of language that enables the meaning in the first place. Clinging to concepts is in vain. Words and language flow, never staying still. Sometimes O is blue, sometimes red.

It is true that we should "substitute the AND for IS"¹¹, but we should also substitute the COMMA for FULL STOP, for nothing stagnates in the universe, ever. Sometimes a nice thought arises, sometimes an uncanny one, a frightening one, an overpowering one. To cling to these impermanent and flowing things, is to build a house on the top of the ever moving tectonic plates, install a family there, put one's every drop of love in there, and then call it - my home.

I live in a house, with my dear wife and Buddha, our cat. The kitchen window faces West; the balcony is on the Eastern side. In autumn evenings I love to watch from the window how the crows on the horizon return to their nests in threes and fours. On spring mornings I sit on the balcony for hours imagining how the dew on the petals of coltsfoot must be evaporating at the wayside. It is the house I am living in - it is not my home:

**My home,
is a white vowel between
two vibrating arcs**

¹⁰ Kamo no Chômei,
An Account of my Hut, p.189.

¹¹ Deleuze, Dialogues II, p.42.

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