

Ticket to Ride: a Peruvian Journal

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How tangible the famed 'existential uncertainty' on this long flight to Brazil with moments of turbulence under a moonless night at 1am at ten thousand feet from stepmother earth, and how fragile we all are. Travelling to Sao Paulo on my way to Lima with a free ticket, generously invited by the *Asociación Peruana de Análisis Existencial y Logoterapia* (APAEL) to teach a weekend on Zen and existential therapy to a group of forty people.

In the plane I'm surrounded by Brazilian families and surprised to find *Under the Skin* amidst the airline selection of blockbusters, the tale of a vampiric alien played by Scarlett Johansson prowling the streets of rainy Glasgow in a white van in search of men to victimize and devour. Try to sleep instead: a wink and a jolt in the bosom of sidereal infinity. Had seen the movie anyway, struck at the time by old-hat yet so pleasingly Romantic archetype of demonic beings (whether Klaus Kinski in *Nosferatu* or litigation-prone diva Johansson in this one) craving the ontic joy of life as an all-too-human earthling. Not just demonic folks but angels too as in Wenders's sequel to *Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*) with Bruno Ganz finally human and clumsily burning lips & tongue on cheap hot coffee.

Can't think of anything more touching: lousy hot coffee from a kiosk in a dusty street in downtown Berlin on a nasty winter morning. And yet how glorious, how poignant. Welcome to the world, to the inauthenticity of being human, to uncertainty and anxiety and all things shaky. It makes me weep to think of it. The Buddha had said it all along: the most desirable condition is the human, not in an anthropocentric, 'we are the bees-knees in the food chain' sort of way, but rather 'this is it', open thy body/mind and say hello earth.

Even What's-his-name on Mount Calvary according to apocryphal accounts, in response to one of the thieves on the cross who had truthfully solicited entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, said: 'This *is* the Kingdom' You mean *this* is paradise? Nailed on a cross? Do you mean to suggest What's-his-name was just another Sisyphus?

Welcome to my world, angel or demon or what not. *Eudaimonia* like you never ever see it depicted in all those neuroscientific or existential wisdom-while-u-wait books with multicoloured amygdalae galore on the cover. *Eudaimonia* on a frosty winter day, sipping lousy boiling hot coffee from a kiosk amidst the industrial noise of a dusty old town. *Eudaimonia* on a crowded plane, far from home going god knows where with a faint hum on my lips.

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Positively otherworldly and unshaven after an interminable flight, in Sao Paulo I stumble towards a crowded gate waiting to board for Lima, travelling towards the Peruvian phenomenological brigade when I swear to god whom do I see but the ghost of Roberto Bolaño cueing up at the next gate and he's not going back to Chile, he's off to Buenos Aires instead. Dead or alive this is South no doubt, the crowding and the commotion remind me of Rome, but also strangely of an area in Chicago where I stumbled by mistake one night.

I wonder what I'm doing here – whether I'm expected to expound Northern European ideas packaged as 'existential phenomenology' – a brainchild of Teutonic thought although, I hasten to say, *moi* I always went for the French. And what about Zen – an Indian/Chinese/Japanese/Korean artefact, now with distinctly North-American Protestant morally uptight flavour of personal salvation once you're done with the double-entry book-keeping of course, a tradition which has yet to fully run into European light-footed scepticism from Montaigne to Derrida and which has been in the meantime hijacked by the happy-clappy 'I'll-fix-it-while-u-wait' Mindfulness Brigade.

In any case, and in order to assuage colonizer guilt, I've been reading furiously Cesar Vallejo, a great Peruvian poet and went back to dear Neruda and Machado even and anything Spanish, Southern and as removed from Mittel-Europa as I could find. Except I discover that Machado was beguiled by Heidegger; he had found in the musings of the overrated charlatan in plus-fours substantial conceptual springboard for his own superior versifying. But how can I possibly claim emancipation from the Northern Europeans, with Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* in my hand luggage? Struggling to shake off my somnambulism and waiting for the sight of the great Andes I plunge into the book, only to shudder at the description of Hans Castorp's sight of his dead grandfather. It brings back the memory of my father's body in the mortuary. Someone else entirely: a thinner nose, the desiccated face of a bird who did not manage to hold life in his beak. What happens when we die? At a funeral, a Zen student knocks on the coffin and asks the teacher 'Alive or dead?' 'I am not telling you', teacher replies. After repeated questioning and deep meditation, the student wakes up to the mystery of living-and-dying. You can't just say 'dead', or 'alive'. No Sir, you can't say: *this* is life, *that* is death. It's *deathlife* or *lifedeath*. Apparently.

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Zonked after seventeen hours of flight, it's noon local time when I'm greeted by Roberto and Jessy. Shall I tell them right away that I am my own man, that I am not here to carry the torch of any European predecessors, whether dead and buried with meaningful quote on their headstone in leafy Highgate or Père Lachaise or alive and kicking their professorial feet under the bureaucratic desk of some university psychology department? Shall I tell them I don't really know what 'existential' or 'zen' mean, that if it means anything it has little to do with repeating by heart stale little recipes? Shall I tell them that I am just trying to be my very own self, my very own unsubstantial, interdependent, post-Cartesian, poor-devil self, a free lancer with no horse, a chancer with no capital, a monk with no monastery?

My own response to my own befuddled self is: *wha'ever*. I'm so damned tired as we hop in a taxi and it's like being back to mother India but also grandma Calabria: the reckless driving like there's no tomorrow, like we are being granted hundreds of future stabs at reincarnation so what the hell if you die at noon on a dusty street on a day in August in a car crash.

At a fisherman's tavern packed with locals I open my worn out bodymind to Peruvian food. My god the food is out of this world, a multicoloured treat, a Dionysian onslaught of pleasures unknown to my existential taste buds. Next thing I know, we hop from one taxi to the next like there's no mañana. It feels like I've known Roberto all my life as we talk fervently of everything under the sun, and it's no doubt a very good sign that I like him even though we disagree of Professor H, Teutonic viscous purveyor of camouflaged pre-Kantianism and erector of Aryan defence of Arcadic pre-Socratic *Dasein* against the danger of the Soviets at the door of a mighty civilizations whose emblems are, let's not forget, bad digestion, goose-stepping, and warm beer (my view), and a proper philosopher in a catwalk of over-psychologising half-backed wannabe scholars (his view).

There is also agreement: on the thick cloud of heavy-handed reductionism looming over our battered profession; on the ecstasy of obedience spilling over psychotherapy trainers straight from mid-management and the admin brigade who are in turn harassed by ignorant government officials; on the stale rehashing of same-old, same-old, with the gramophone needle stuck circa 1927 (*Sein und Zeit*) and 1943 (*L'Être et le Neant*); on the desperate appeals to A.P.A, all those sacrificial offerings of quantified empathy and measurable unconditional positive regard; on the criminal neglect of Alfred Adler; on the cartoonish belief that the mind resides in the brain.

Meanwhile as we zoom at breakneck speed in the taxi with Mexican music blaring out I don't fail to notice the myriad scenes of Lima from the chichi to the foul. As the seafont materializes on our right two urgent thoughts go off in my mind:

- 1) How truly abysmal is my ignorance that I didn't even know that it's *winter* in Peru?
- 2) Why has Deleuze & Guattari's dazzling book *Anti-Oedipus* been removed from the consciousness of all contemporary psychotherapists, making it possible to accept wholesale the view that it can all be explained away to some mommy-daddy scenario?

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I can barely stand up, and god knows what I'll say tomorrow on the first day of the workshop, and why would I want to say anything in the first place? Left alone in my hotel room I savour the loneliness of the existential Zen traveller with a sense of purpose as I wash a pair of black socks and dark blue *Gap* underwear under the sad neon light of the tiny bathroom. I tell myself that going to the tiny dark gym next door in the early morning will cheer me up – a long way from the über-worthiness of Viktor Frankl who is the main inspiration behind APAEL – my own 'search for meaning' in a pair of dumbbells, 17.50 kilos each in order to build strong post-existential biceps before the End of Time and the unveiling of Being.

Good news is: I can talk politics if I want. I can for instance illustrate the link between the arbitrary notion of the self, identity, territorialism and the hatred of the foreign by mentioning Ariel Sharon's childhood in Kfar Malal, a cooperative village ten miles north of Tel Aviv. Briefly: his family's plot of land was at first equal to all others but it was the only one demarcated with fences and protected by dogs. Once in a while the family enlarged its plot and soon it became the largest in the village. His family relied on dogs, but had no

friends. Later on, Sharon was in charge of Israel's occupied territories. Hypothesis: similarly with the self, with 'me', 'mine' – it starts there before it gets to nation-state and enemy of the nation-state, see what I mean? *Comprende hombre?* Discuss. I can be myself, in short, *yo mismo*, and what a relief not having to mince my words in front of the invisible jury that presides over our professionalized existence.

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I'm gobbling *Bio-Pycnogenol*, said to be good for jet lag but am not so sure as I stumble in this fading winter light in August seeking refuge first in a church, of all places (stranger in a strange town bewildered by traffic and noise and foreign voices and in need of peace and quiet; what does he do? ends up in empty church – all his existentialist credentials out of the window), and later in a tiny tapas bar with a lachrymose soap on the gigantic TV screen at full volume.

And where do Zen and Buddhism come in? And what about 'zen therapy', whatever that means? Roberto sighs with relief when I tell him that Buddha for me is not a god and the Dharma not a religion, that I couldn't care less about cosmology and rancorous accounts of karma and neat rationalist readings of human and non-human life; that what I do know is that my nose is vertical and my eyes horizontal and that my head is shaven, a trendy hairstyle choice for a bald middle-aged man but also the affirmation that there is nothing now between earth and sky to protect me, not even hair; that I have received *tokudo*, the Zen homeless vows; that I'm still renting, in spite of Cameron wanting everybody to live the dream of being a home-owner; that it has its perks, the Zen life: everyday is a good day; everywhere is my home.

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That night in a dream I walk on an ancient road with a childhood friend. He tells me of his meeting with an old philosopher. 'Did he wear a large grey coat, your philosopher? Did he have longish grey hair? Did he look like Artaud?' He doesn't reply.

We walk arm in arm, a bit clumsily as we don't know if they think it weird to see men walking like this. Then the ancient road becomes our hometown.

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The local gym next door is a rough and rusty place in the heart of the *Barranco*, an area of Lima every local is at pains to describe as 'bohemian'. I'm working-out in the underworld, where men are not allowed on the treadmill but only have access to weights. Amy Winehouse suddenly goes *No, no, no* through the speakers; the afterlife is full of rehab centres, I'm sure, probably run by committed transpersonal therapists, but still Amy won't go there, she says: *no, no, no*.

I like the overcrowded colourful buses, destination *Chorillos*, zooming through the town. After a long walk one early morning I get to *Miraflores*, a yuppie area with the high-rise and the tourists and the squeaky clean shopping area and hang gliders in the perennially grey sky. At lunch Roberto tells me about Max Scheler, a philosopher he loves (I discover he was associated with one of my own heroes, Helmut Plessner, for whom eccentricity is part and

parcel of being human): Scheler and Plessner were neglected, they called themselves 'anthropological philosophers'. Some of their stuff sounds like Levinas but also pre-Deleuzian in conceiving of a transcendence born out of empiricism, a journey through experience and what we summarily call 'matter'.

Roberto exudes calm, solidity – he is unfettered, unconcerned. He tells me of *ayahuasca*, the hallucinogenic drink and rite of passage in Peruvian shamanistic culture. We totally agree on situational ethics. I got to eat a proper steak at last.

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The hotel where I'm staying is full of young gringos glued like isolated monads to their electronic devices. They are ayahuasca tourists on the way to the shamanic trail or back from it.

At the workshop yesterday we worked on the daimonic – what overwhelms the self. We worked on sedimentations. We sat longer in silence, listening to sounds, asking '*what is this?*', and generally walking the tightrope between Zen and psychotherapy. Max, the translator, is 22, and truly remarkable: his experience, his knowledge. He is a therapist and also practices *Butoh*, the Japanese, Artaud-inspired art-form based on movement and theatre that was my infatuation in my early forties. If it weren't such a cliché, I'd describe *Butoh* as poetry in motion.

Poetry accompanies this trip: at first Vallejo, then Machado. Yesterday Roberto played a few poems on his iPod. Vallejo is a good example – a Peruvian poet who went to Europe, to fight the fascists in Spain and then to Paris where he met Artaud and others. Roberto told me over a glass of *pisco*, the otherworldly Peruvian brandy, the whole plot of Sartre's play *The Respectable Prostitute* (1946) – the existential dilemma of the woman who sees a white murdering a black man and is offered money to lie in court. How taken for granted Sartre has been! How many writers would today refuse the Nobel Prize? How many existential practitioners today would be prepared to put ethical and political commitment before the perks and gratifications of a reputable post in an academic world that validates inequality and hierarchy on a grand scale?

APAEL's quarters are in the city centre, one of the rooms has portraits of Rogers and Frankl. 'The next one – Roberto says – will be of Jung' 'Who, that bourgeois doctor?' – I tease him and ask if they'll have one of Fritz (Nietzsche) too. We go to an Arabian cafe. Roberto finds Vallejo's *The Black Heralds* read by Ernesto Guevara. It brings tears to my eyes.

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APAEL's training is rooted in *Logotherapy*. Seminar participants are from varied background. I meet a psychologist who lives in the province, in a village in the jungle. She introduces me to her son. Tells me about ayahuasca, of how she had a vision of the Buddha. Of how when she saw my photo thought 'I know this man'. Of how the town is busy and soulless and how the jungle is full of sounds and presences. One thing is certain: this culture is radically different from Europe and North America. The sound of birds you hear outside is

different. People stroll into the seminar room leisurely; they come half hour, 40 mins late. Seminar spills into lunch, lunch into seminar. Have I become too strict, I wonder, having lived so long in the Presbyterian North? Is there something I can learn here about boundaries? Or maybe the learning is mutual. They give me a puzzled look when I tell them that if a client shows up 20mins late, I'll still end the session at the appointed time.

To elicit more group participation, on Saturday eve I facilitate voice-dialogue work. Voice dialogue work relies on Jung's often neglected idea of personifying (lifted, with no acknowledgment, from Fritz) ie giving autonomous voice to aspects of the psyche, affects, emotions and feelings – the kind of thing you see some time used by Gestaltists. I do this more as a game, a playful thing useful to bypass some of the participants' timidity and get them to speak more freely, rather than giving credit and substance to the notion of intrapsychic 'bits & pieces' as actually (rather than nominally) existing.

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The sky is forever overcast and repeats its refrain on a Tuesday morning with a steady stream of traffic confirming and echoing at 7am the grey heavens and reassuring us that once more nothing will happen to unsettle our steady march towards oblivion. An old man shuffles along under a red and white flag. One of the participants last night said: "The 1970s are long gone, you know. The dream of revolution, idealism, youth, working for the poor and the oppressed. I've seen both sides of the fence and I'm tired. I like where I live, the gym around the corner of my house is clean and shiny, nothing like those places downtown where you can't even get a decent coffee". Sadness overtook me out of nowhere, and on my way out I watched evening descend and I understood winter and I was sad. A tiny island bathing in the sunset, and in the east a giant luminous cross blessing the roaring traffic. *Tsunami Evacuation Area*, the sign reads and another in a manicured park is signposted as a gathering place in case of an earthquake. I shake off life's uncertainty with a visit to a shopping mall – an oasis of light in the advancing darkness – where in a shop window an old couple from a mountain tribe weave multicoloured garments on the spot under the glaring light and the voyeuristic gaze of tourists like me. And I remember now that earlier in the day I had seen a band of boys running behind a flag and shouting slogans. A football team? No, it was the army.

That grumpy old man of musical philosophy, Adorno, comes to mind: is the good life ever possible in a sea of bad life? And I now remember the woman who works in a prison and who spoke towards the end of the seminar, her presence inconspicuous to the point of invisibility: her intervention utterly devoid of any hue of redemption that usually accompanies heartfelt accounts of practitioners who work in difficult environments. No glimmer of hope, her work was relentlessly hard she said, how can you provide anything good in a punitive environment and not been seen as part of the punishment? And so I can't help asking whether psychotherapy offers a mouthful of painkillers to the shipwrecked and a lollipop to our own sense of purpose in the world.

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Two friends take me out in the morning to see the change of the guard in the town centre, with the band in shiny golden helmets and red uniform goose-stepping playing the national anthem and right after, incongruously, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, a hymn to the pagan rites of Spring. In the eternal fuming of traffic under the perpetual grey sky I feel the strange cheerfulness of the shipwrecked and the sense of belonging that comes from belonging nowhere. The kindness of my hosts sweetens my disorientation. How small Europe looks from here: Venezia, Firenze, London, Paris, once upon a time the centre of my world.

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The dream of community and communal engagement – open discussion, debate and friendship. The warmth and camaraderie of the Peruvian practitioners I met puts to shame my sense of 'existential community' in a sheltered life of emails, texts, and the whole rich gamut of non-encounter. How often do I meet colleagues and talk openly about stuff, rather than reviewing anonymously each other's papers, asking for and giving endorsements, picabooing behind the smokescreen of reputation? What does it say about me? Does anyone feel the same? The dream of belonging, projected onto the Surrealists, the Beats, the Existentialists and the Situationists inevitably fossilizing into the narrowness of parishes, tribes and churches. We only meet in training courses where you pay handsome fees for the privilege. Enough ranting, I say, dear reader. The question, if you can be bothered to hear it, is: where do I belong? Coming back to Heathrow, happy to step out after a long flight, I unexpectedly greet the morning with a song on my lips.

I always thought the Beatles overrated, a bit of a boy-band really, in spite of John and George. So why on earth I find myself singing *Ticket to ride* in the stale air of Heathrow airport?

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