

Love at Last Sight

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For Antonio Milano

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Speeding in the dark before dawn the crabby cab driver turns the volume up and it's PM Theresa Must we both hear, after all-night negotiations/consultations, her shaky pitch now shepherding the pigeons of Marble Arch through the window of a speeding cab in the dark streets before dawn. MPs will get some rest, says the radio man, and after a hearty breakfast they'll get down to talks on article 50. Then, out of the blue,

Dark is the morning
That goes by without
The light of your eyes.

The verses from Cesare Pavese's poem come to mind out of nowhere, the very same lines I'd chosen at nineteen for my mother's tombstone.

Hours later, I'm in a sea of travellers at Ferenc Liszt International Airport with a timid sun behind separatist clouds. Huddled for two hours inside a fretting crowd, I shuffle past a notice giving details of the April 7 2017 amendment on the Schengen agreement. 'We must protect our borders'. Yessir. And sing along to the tune of Ogres Network Inc.

I get past the border control at last and I'm out in the street where local politics are now tersely explained to me by Zoltan, who's kindly driving me in a rickety van stuffed with organic sweets to his airbnb. His explanation is so succinct it could be rendered haiku style:
Mr Putin visits Hungary/He loves it here since the day/Victor Orban rose to power.

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Pest from the Buda hills at twilight. Then at night a myriad lights twinkling in the distance. Where are the stars in the city night sky? 'They're all on the ground', say Reed & Cale. Cities know very little of evening twilight as street lights evade the slow passage into night.

Kant wrote of two entwined mysteries: moral law within/starry sky above. No modern city dweller could have conceived this thought, Walter Benjamin noted promptly. Who knows, maybe the moral order too shifted with the birth of this strange new phenomenon: the cosmopolis. Not necessarily, mind you, in the direction of 'losing the great moral

responsibility of the good old days', but simply because, well, change is inexorable, get over it. What's more, the modern city is a living organism naturally conveying the multiplicity of Nature, on a living tableau kindly displaying for slow learners like me the inherent multiplicity of what we habitually call 'me'. There are perks, nevertheless: what I call 'me' now gets to taste *palinka*, courtesy of Dániel and Simon, Hungarian colleagues who organized *Unconditional Hospitality*, this weekend workshop that I'll be facilitating tomorrow. Palinka is a highly versatile fruit brandy, legendary in my personal mythology as I first heard its magical name in Bela Tarr's tribute to Nietzsche, *The Turin Horse*. In the movie a traveller is offered palinka by his host, a farmer who lives in abject poverty with his daughter. As his glass gets generously refilled, the traveller repays the hosts' kindness by recounting a tragic and moving tale: everything has been bought and sold, he says. Everything has been debased – even our dreams and our cherished interiority. And what did we do? We put up with it. And the night gets darker as everything is bought, and sold, and bought again. 'The dove is never free' etc. It's like what someone said to me just the other day:

There is a tunnel
At the end of the light

We're out of the restaurant and still deep in conversation when Simon points out I'm wearing my beanie inside out.

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How am I going to do this? Every phrase I speak is translated into Hungarian, and by the time the translation is over, I forget what I was going to say next. The same bewildering thing happens with comments/questions from participants. Weirdly, we do find a way. Enforced slowness means we move away from the habitual agitation that Sartre thought essential in bolstering a solid sense of self and, you know, keeping up appearances. Slowness unveils the gaps so that we can read between the lines.

Moment after moment,
we come out of nothingness.
This is the true joy of life.

I'm passing through, and God knows when I'll see these faces again. They're so familiar after only an hour spent together. Budapest too is like a delightful old friend, and most delightful of all is the joy I feel in the morning stepping out of the front door onto an unknown street, in an unknown city.

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Pest from the Buda hills in the Blue of Noon. Overwhelmed by the sight of the Danube flowing majestic through the heart of Europe. The cries and whispers of history one might hear through journeying all its 1.770 miles from its Delta in the Black Sea towards the Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria and Germany. This gleaming river, Hölderlin wrote, 'lives in beauty'. How can one 'further enhance' its beauty?

The rock needs engraving
And the earth needs its furrows;
But what a river will do,
Nobody knows.

Watching the Danube flow, one may get to hear on a lucky hour the hum of history. In rare moments we approximate the experience of 'now', and come to see that what we call now is passing. Fast. We may also realize, Walter Benjamin says, that this 'now' cannot be situated chronologically. It is instead, in Giorgio Agamben's breathtaking commentary, 'a constellation in which what has been' joins the hour unexpectedly ('like lightning'). At that moment, 'a particular historical fact is polarized in his pre and post-history'. A moment in history reverberates back to us and becomes for the first time *intelligible*. Benjamin called this the 'now of knowability' (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*). This moment of recognition is *not* metaphysical: it does not acknowledge some 'vital force' at play through the to and fro of history. Nor is it, I'm afraid, an instance of hermeneutic awareness, simply because the 'me' of hermeneutics is revealed in the experience as a figment of history with no sub-stantial existence of its own.

This passing moment (*Augenblick*, blink of an eye) regales me with a daydream of Europe as a place whose borders are porous, as a cradle of visionary scepticism and art; of writers who fled wars and holocausts or left voluntarily, knowing that homeland is a belief and patriotism the last refuge of the thoroughly gormless. I am grateful that this fantasy-love of mine for Europe and the Danube is reciprocated. Nowadays I am called to work elsewhere, in cities touched by the Danube, away from the hamlets of a therapy world in a Mean Small Island where in melancholy moments I confess to feel (nicely) tolerated.

I am inexcusably moved by the beauty of European cities, even when they bury their loveliness in plump imperial glaze, or when the tenderness and pain and love all through their anxious history is brutalized by spiteful architecture or violated by tyranny and arrogance.

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To the modern metropolis belongs the peculiar ecstasy that Benjamin calls *love at last sight*. He was commenting on a Baudelaire's poem, *To a Passerby*. In the deafening noise of a Parisian street, the poet catches a glimpse of a woman in 'deep mourning, majestic grief'. Hurried and graceful, radiating 'the softness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills' she glances back at him:

A lightning flash... then night! Fleeting beauty,
By whose glance I was suddenly reborn,
Shall I see you again only in eternity?

The apparition is concrete; it is alive in a living body. It is not 'archetypal', unless archetypes kiss or cry salty tears; nor is it set *against* the flowing multitude of the city. It is part of that multitude; it skims across its surface; it comes out of the river-like flow of the city crowd. You don't need to be a flaneur/flaneuse to appreciate the accuracy of *love at last sight*. That latent feeling gushing like nectar at the sight of a goodbye waved from a taxi in the early morning. Or even when it just means, with Joni Mitchell, that *you don't know what you got 'til it's gone*. Even if it's a no-strings-attached kind of thing as in Uncle Lou's *Street Hassle*

And then sha-la-la-la-la, sha-la-la-la-la
When the sun rose and he made to leave
You know, sha-la-la-la-la, sha-la-la-la-la
Neither one regretted a thing

Could wandering modern-day streets aimlessly rather than acquiring a mere university degree in cocooned academia be a better prerequisite for being a philosopher? For the lonely walker wandering the city, every street is foreign, even the streets of her hometown. For how can I call a place my hometown? How can I ever call psyche *mine*? Becoming strangers/others to ourselves: the true task of therapy?

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The river is an unequivocal image for how Benjamin saw the movement of history. His view resembles notions present in medieval theology according to which *forma fluens*, the flowing shape of matter, is organized by the force of divine intellect. Adorno feared that the view expounded by his friend was too mystical and non-dialectical. In their correspondence of twelve years (1928-1940), Benjamin explains that it is not divine intellect that does the organizing but 'our own historical experience'. Matter itself – what contemporary thought calls 'materiality' – constructs and actualizes without the intervention of either a demiurge, of

its surrogates, whether 'Being' or a 'Truth' that expects to be unveiled. This process of autonomous construction also belongs to what we call in our psych trade 'research'. Construction is not imposed in the aftermath of data analyses; it emerges from its own intimate/immanent movement, which is how Benjamin conducted his own bungling and inspired research. Interested in just about everything, looking at every corner for emancipatory possibilities, he personified the distant travels of philosophy outside its arbitrary borders and fences. Could this way of conducting research be what phenomenology is in its purest sense? A vivid example of this is the gigantic manuscript on Baudelaire he handed on a spring day in 1940 to the librarian Georges Bataille of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* of Paris. In this doorstopper he comments on topics as many and varied as allegory, alienation, philosophy, poetry in the age of advanced capitalism and more. After reading the manuscript Adorno criticized its 'wide-eyed presentation of mere facticity'. Benjamin took that as a compliment, saying 'you are describing the proper philological attitude'.

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My old friend Antonio came to visit us in London with his wife and kid in May 2017, after a gap of thirty five years. I had wanted to show him the nearby Heath but the rain had been relentless that afternoon. We stayed indoors, drinking wine and arguing as fiercely and as affectionately as we used to do in our youth. Israel/Palestine, the Italian invertebrate Left, Blue Labour, Corbyn's hope, John Berger's writings... We remembered our young friend and comrade Adelchi murdered at 24 by mommy-boys fascist thugs in our native Calabria. Yes, we ended up singing the Internationale, anachronistically, happily, with a hand on our heart, alternatively looking up at the wooden ceiling and at each other.

Huddled together on a sofa after dinner he later quietly confided in me speaking below the other voices in the room. He told me he was unsure about the future. He was ill. He brushed away my worried look with a smile. What truly mattered was this lifelong project he had been working on, a historical fiction based on the life of Homeric scholar Milman Parry and which capitalized on his own knowledge and expertise of Homer's texts. It is a doorstopper, he said, it was nearly done except for what he called some 'probable meetings' that might have happened between Milman Parry, Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem in August 1927 in Paris. They meet at a demo, Antonio said, on the day when mounted police charged demonstrators protesting against the state murder of the two Italian anarchists and migrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, unjustly accused of killing a guard and a paymaster during an armed robbery they'd never committed. Their innocence was later proved,

alongside the vicious anti-migrant, anti-Left and racist biases against Italian labourers that had influenced the verdict. Worldwide protests erupted everywhere in solidarity; Paris was only one of them: in Tokyo, Sydney, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, and Auckland people demonstrated against the cruelty and racism of state and police.

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I had wanted to write a romantic piece on the fleetingness of love in the modern world and I'm now mourning an old friend. Antonio encouraged me to sing when I was sixteen. 'Project your voice! Sing out! Speak!' He put me on a stage at the *Festa dell'Unità* the summer public festival of the now defunct Italian Communist Party, and at other events in public squares ... That's when I started writing my own songs, alongside Chilean tunes in solidarity with the thousands murdered by Pinochet.

I came to Walter Benjamin late and quickly learned to love his erudition, his slowness, his stubbornness and blundering, his legendary meandering through cities and histories, archives and arcades. In my mind I slowly came to associate these characteristics with Antonio, the memory of him juxtaposed to a photo of Benjamin holding a cigarette; his high forehead, the moustache above a full lower lip...

A few months after seeing him in London, Antonio was dead. Our last long stream of emails, before and after our meeting, bore the title *Tutto bene?* Is everything OK? Rereading them now, I notice that a few days before our meeting he had written that it was going to be "a very special evening (not just because we haven't seen each other for ages)".

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Manu will facilitate a few experiential workshops in Europe this year, including *Love, Identity and Transformation* in Bucharest, 31 May-2 June (details: evenimente.arpcp@gmail.com) and *Walk on the Wild Side: Dreams, the Daimonic and the Dionysian* in Vienna 13-14 Sept (details: institut@apg-ipc.at). Please visit Manu's website for more details on events and talks: www.manubazzano.com