

# For the Stones to Bloom<sup>1</sup>

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## *Everyday uncanny*

Last year I was invited to a Symposium on the theme of *Life* that took place in late August in Vizitsa, a village in the Mount Pelion region of Greece. A gathering of psychotherapists, philosophers, and queer psychoanalysts. The starting point for my presentation was Charles Dickens's story *Our Mutual Friend*, the tale of a man who collapses in the street. The day before I delivered my talk/performance, the very same thing happened to me.

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Up early on this Friday morning 30 August. The place is beautiful, surrounded by forests and with an exquisite traditional architecture. A convivial breakfast of yogurt, homemade jam, boiled eggs, toast and coffee in a garden filled with the hilarity and tenderness of my new friends, many of them from Thessaloniki. Philosophy is born in friendship. Later in my room I listen to an old favourite, Rain Tree Crow's *Blackwater*. "Come lead me through the morning for the land that I long to see again", David Sylvian croons adorably to a backdrop of Richard Barbieri's strings and Steve Jansen's inimitable percussive brushes. From the open window the sound of bells and chanting from the nearby orthodox Church. Far in the distance, the sea, the Pagasitikos bay glimpsed through the clay tile roofs.

I bring up Margarita Karkayanni's paper on Nietzsche's *Genealogy* which she'll deliver in a few hours: *Life as the Will to Nothing in the Third Treatise of the Genealogy of Morals*. Can't wait to listen to her talk (in Greek), following the word-by-word translation I uploaded. She is three people gradually becoming one: (a) the intriguing face peering from a black & white photo on the Symposium webpage; (b) the person who spoke to me during a break on the first day and told me about sailing, Crete, of the beauty of the sea; (c) the person who introduced Michalis Tegos's stimulating talk on Alain Badiou yesterday morning. It takes me a while to realize that she's one and the same.

Walking towards the outdoor venue, as the heat slowly starts to rise, I feel increasingly dizzy. I call the oncology nurse in London but there's no reply. I go up the café and order an iced

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<sup>1</sup> This article is abridged from two different chapters in the book *Difference and Multiplicity*, Routledge, 2015

coffee. It makes things worse. I now feel the ground disappearing from under my feet. I nod in the direction of Ioannis, sitting at the next table with friends. He realizes something is up. He tells me to lie on the bench then runs and comes back two minutes later with Nikos. They know what to do; Ioannis is a psychiatrist with medical training, while Nikos is the cool-headed anaesthetist I was introduced to the night before. Before I know it, I'm in a car and we're zooming to Volos' hospital on the coast forty minutes away. We stop a few times as I keep throwing up. The car radio plays Nina Simone's *I feel good*. I find the strength to hum the tune. The song had brought to mind Wenders's film *Perfect Days*. Maybe this is it, I thought; the trees of an intense green, the mediterranean blue vault overseeing a splendid late summer day. Not a bad way to go, so I try to sing and my two friends sing with me.

The doctor keeps me in A&E for three hours – kind, good-humoured, supportive. I lay under a metal blanket, an astronaut hovering between waking and sleeping, surveying dark mazes and chiaroscuros in Hades. Nikos moves things along without fuss and urges the doctor. After the scan and the scan print out (part of my performance next day), we leave. The light of the early afternoon is magical and while Nikos goes to pick up the car Ioannis beckons me to come closer. Look, he says. At the end of the road, the sea. I weep with uncontrollable happiness. Driving back, a surge of joy and gratitude for these two men, for their presence of mind and generosity. Happy to be alive. The radio plays James Brown's *Sex Machine*, 'Get up (get on up!)'. That's all I wanted, Nikos said, for you to get up and be well, Manu! That brought tears to my eyes. Then uproarious laughter from all three when I add, Not sure about being a sex machine right now though. We owe a visit to Chiron's cave, centaur and healer – Ioannis says – it's just near here. He lent us a hand.

The scary moment passed and I am grateful for the magnificence of life. "Life and death are of supreme importance – we chant at night during a Zen retreat – time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Let's strive to awaken and not squander our life."

*Keep your mind in hell and despair not*

Heavy rain and thunder in the early hours next day. Feeling complicit with life's beauty and terror. I slowly resurface, and by the evening I feel ready for my talk/performance. To get in the mood, I wear a Joy Division T-shirt and a Versace tie on top. I'm scheduled last, after a talk by Vassiliki Roussou on Daseinsanalysis and schizophrenia, and a generous appreciation

of my book *Subversion and Desire* from both Yannis Riga and Chloe Kolyri. When my turn comes, I do *hokotai*, the Butoh ash walk, while speaking and reading. Soon it gets dark and can't read my notes. As I move slowly among the audience, one after another torches from people's mobile phones lit up, allowing me to read. I lie on the ground now, singing softly: *summer came and went, it passed us over. See her cry, see the face I loved.* I walk backward, speaking of redemption and catastrophe, of ecstasy and relinquishment, of dark soundless nights. Manos enriches my performance intoning a humorous tune in Greek. Maria does it by singing the aria *Lasciatemi morire* from Monteverdi, the same Maria who found me alone in the small church that morning and whispered in my ear a religious song in Greek.

Later in the square, by a one-thousand-year hold plane tree I have supper with Kakia and Margarita. I learn that their research supervisor had been none other than Gillian Rose. This stops me in my tracks. Gillian Rose! A delightfully difficult, heartbreaking/heart-opening philosopher, author of masterpieces: *Love's Work*, her account of facing terminal cancer; *The Broken Middle*, on Kierkegaard; *The Melancholy Science*, on Adorno. Then we all get up and dance to a traditional tune. Maria sings accompanied by a group of musicians. We join Chloe in her beautiful dance, our inspiring friend and mentor Chloe Kolyri. Minutes later the square is flooded by torrential rain.

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Sunday it's goodbyes, and why are we made in such a way that we're always on the verge of leaving? This is home. The South – of Europe, of psyche populated by many gods, neither one god nor the conspicuous non-god of the Presbyterian North. This is home; I can afford to vacillate and fall, knowing that I am held and loved and understood, that I can fall and go on falling and discover that I can no longer fall, and that this is what flying is, as in the poem Christina Katsari sends me days later. She also explains to me that the epigraph on Gillian Rose's *Love's Work*, 'keep your mind in hell and despair not', is from St Silouan, an Eastern Orthodox monk originally from Russia.

As I step out next morning in central Athens, a preternatural light floods the cobbled streets. I spend some precious time with Margarita, Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche, as I now call her, both of us perched on a stool outside a café sipping a foamy cappuccino right in the middle of the Monday morning bustle. I keep asking her about Gillian Rose, and will she right a chapter in the Affect book? I am delighted to hear she will.

On my way to the airport, the cab's radio plays Bowie's camp version of *Waiting for the Man*.  
Life is good.

*For the stones to bloom*

Then in October I find myself in my hometown of Lamezia, Calabria, invited to do a *butoh* performance and a one-day workshop at *Tip Teatro* in the old part of town. Hadn't been there for forty years, and stepping out of the plane late at night, my first impression was that I had landed in Greece. Layers of history peeled off to unveil an ancestral place unharmed by distance. I meet Subhaga at the airport. We embrace with the tenderness of nearly half a century of friendship. Friend, comrade, confidante, fellow writer, dreamer, conspirer, our mutual love shuffling through decades. Subhaga rekindled my mother tongue, half-forgotten through my wayward pilgrimages to India, Germany, California, England. I meet Dario, the theatre manager. We drive through the silent outskirts of a place I don't recognize. We sit in a mansard, sweet talk, feeding on walnuts, autumn itself eating from our hands. Alone in the small hours I glance at the night sky of my childhood, *nothing lasts forever*. No nostalgia but the familiar longing, sweet shipwreck in the sea of life. Next morning it rains and rains in the old part of town. Dilapidated houses, overgrown reeds, faded icons of the Virgin. We're inside a Tarkovsky film: rain, verses of his father's poetry, a quivering candle in a deserted pool. By a commemorative stele we pay our respects in the place where our young comrade and friend Adelchi was killed by fascists almost exactly fifty years ago. The killer was one of my classmates.

The theme for my performance is Walter Benjamin's *angel of history*, inspired by Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*. I brought the angel to Greece, Hampstead, in an abandoned house in Leyton, then Cambridge, and now my hometown. Wide-eyed, his mouth open, his wings spread, the angel walks back from the past. For us the past is a sequence of events. The angel sees catastrophe, the piling up of ruins. He wants to stay, wake the dead, redeem what has been broken. It's impossible. A storm rages from Heaven, propelling the angel backwards, towards the future. The name of this storm? *Progress*.

*In the dead of night I open my eyes wide. Ancient and new towns engulfed. Tall shadows everywhere. Chained to a rock, a Brighton seagull chews my organs. I alone hear Ann Quin's*

*distant cries as she drowns off the old pier. From the promenade cafes, echoes of the Lambrini Girls' God's Country. I'm falling forever until I can fall no more and this is how angels are made, from falling and breathing celestial debris.*

Meandering through the streets of Naples, Benjamin and his lover Asja Lācis (the Latvian theatre director and actor who worked with the Bolshevik theatre and later with Brecht) noticed the porous stone and architecture, the intertwined construction and action in stairways, porticos, and courtyards. They caught Naples's spirit, its verve for improvisation, buildings as a stage, splintered into synchronized animated theatres. Everything here, Benjamin reflected later, wants to become the theatre of the new, shunning certainty and conclusion.

I nursed, absorbed, and digested these and other images, allowing them to inhabit my body. Fast clouds over Paris as evening shadows are falling. Benjamin walking the Parisian streets alone, thinking of another *flâneur*, Baudelaire who in the poem *À une Passante* gave birth to the modern feeling of love at last sight. Each cornerstone sprayed sparks, from every gate darted a flame.

The angel is everything I have left behind. People, but above all things, infused with ghostly presences. My slow walking in the semidarkness of the venue becomes strained. I no longer walk on my soles but on the edges of my feet. As I stumble, I begin to undress; moulting, leaving exposed another layer of my ghostly presence traversed by those I've loved and lost. In September 1940 Walter Benjamin and a group of refugees made the hike over the Pyrenees from Banyuls-sur-Mer in France to Portbou, Spain, trying to flee Nazi-infested Europe. Normally the hike would take ten hours. It took him two days. His guide, the resistance fighter Lisa Fittko, nicknamed him 'old Benjamin' because of his ailing health despite his young age and remarked on his unfailing kindness in all his interactions with her. He carried a heavy black suitcase. It must be saved at any cost, he told her. It contains a manuscript that is more important than myself.

Benjamin would walk for ten minutes, then rest for one minute. It was by no means an easy hike; rough mountain terrain, long stretches where one had to clamber over rocks without a discernible path, and often on the edge of a cliff.

*I walk on eggshells, on nails, on glass, the music hinting at crumbling earth. The audience becomes one animal body of variegated hues and intensities. The music turns vampiric, the wounded earth reclaims its dead, the maimed, and the stillborn.*

Fittko carried a map sketched by hand, and when the small group got to a clearing next to a huge rock, she resolved to turn back to Banyuls. Worn-out, Benjamin refused. He spent the late September night with no blanket or provisions in a dangerous place, a rough mountain region with wild bulls roaming around and smugglers.

The rest is history, in Benjamin's sense, an inescapable movement towards catastrophe with a faint but steady hope for redemption. The end of his life reflects the melancholy view he had of history itself. When his body was found in a hotel room in a small village in the Pyrenees, the diagnosis declared cerebral apoplexy. He had taken a large dose of morphine – all planned beforehand in case things didn't go well. Franco's regime had cancelled all transit visas. The Spanish police told the small group of refugees that they would be transported back to France. Fearing the possibility of being taken to an extermination camp, Benjamin took an overdose of fifteen morphine tablets. His precious manuscript was never found.

I don't see a way out, his hand-written note read. I have no other choice. My life comes to a halt in a small village where nobody knows me. Please pass my thoughts to my friend Adorno, he wrote, tell him the situation I found myself in.

*I take off the grey-black suit I rarely wear. I fall on the ground half-naked as in the black and white photo my parents took of me as an infant chuckling with delight at the world. Lying on my back with arms and legs stretched out I sing a line from an old Italian song of longing, of lost love, a song of memory and dream.*

There have been, as it were, *four* Benjamins, if one looks at the main interpretations of his work following his death, all stemmed from Benjamin's own friends. Gillian Rose examined these views and saw one of them as misleading, Hannah Arendt's, who gave an "existential" spin, Benjamin's subtle insights relegated with an *ahistorical* view of the so-called "human condition". Then there was the Brechtian interpretation, aligned with Benjamin's interest in anti-illusionist art. Another view, championed by the Frankfurt School and in particular by Adorno, reads Benjamin in a Hegelian/Marxist key. Finally, his friend Scholem echoed and amplified Benjamin's interest in Jewish messianism and religious thought in general.

In my performances, I pivoted on these last two as I found the cross-fertilization between the secular and religious redemptive narratives most inspiring for our own troubled times.

The angelic dimension should not fool us. “Your dance was terrifying – a person in the London audience said later – it evoked past horrors”. An apt response. Alongside benediction and melancholy, the angel’s gaze in Klee’s painting contains horror. Wanting to redeem a shattered past blooms out of the stone-cold irreversibility of horrors and genocides. Can a stone bloom? A poem by Paul Celan dedicated to his lover, the writer Ingeborg Bauchman, suggests that it can. It is high time for the stones to bloom. Contemporary philosophers of materiality would concur, for there is no such thing as the inanimate. Gillian Rose must have thought something similar when aged sixteen changed her surname from that of her harsh biological father Leslie Stone to that of her stepfather, the kind, humorous Irishman Irving Rose.

*Manu is a psychotherapist, Zen priest, and Butoh dancer. His forthcoming book is Difference and Multiplicity: Adventures in Philosophy and Psychotherapy. He will run 6 online seminars from May 2025 on Affect Therapy. He will lead a Zen Buddhist Retreat in the Lake District, 21-26 September. For details of these and other events, including Butoh performances, visit [www.manubazzano.com](http://www.manubazzano.com)*