

Some New Opinions on Matter

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We wish for certain things to be true; we postulate or propose that certain conditions exist. An example that may help to make the undefined elements more understandable is the written word.

An osculum is a little mouth. To osculate is to have contact with or have characters in common with.

The older woman and the younger woman decide to meet for breakfast. On the street they walk slowly, their deliberate steps a camera's movement in the black-and-white newsreel footage of a European city during the war at a moment when the worst of the shelling has just stopped, with the ruined remains of buildings on each side and occasional eruptions of smoke or falling debris catching the eye. Their conversation traces a lyrical soundtrack, an arrangement of strings over the buzz of a straggling bomber or the heavy grind of a military transport. They want to continue talking but they are cold.

Later the older woman explains how the decision by the mayor of her large city to spray pesticides over the entire metropolitan area obliged her to leave the city, and her family, for three months.

They represent someone but they are not its or his name. In not being his or its or her name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything.

The Hungarian mathematician Janos Bolyai said, "I have created a new universe from nothing."

This is the subject in which we never know what we are talking about nor whether what we say is true.

Some day our efforts may be chronicled in a storehouse of culture, like a failed expedition across the antarctic continent, regarded not for what we set out to accomplish but for the fact that we accomplished anything at all, that we survived our own poor preparations and excessive ambition, that we managed to leave any trace of our passage through a landscape that can rightly be called hostile only when we regard it for our purposes alone, that must, when regarded on its own terms, be called self-sufficient or, simply, indifferent. Our surviving artifacts—the few paltry items of civility that raised us above the bone age, that showed some technological intelligence and complex manipulation of our environment, the modest gifts we made one another, simply more personalized adaptations of the ordinary supplies we all shared—all these might some day astonish as much as Crusoe's goatskin trousers. The photographs that capture the

ordinary alongside the magnificent, the jerky films we made of one another, then as now as astonishing for the bare functionality of the crude technology as for anything we managed to portray, though then and now the very fact of our existence in our extreme circumstances making for astonishment enough, and just going through our day, feeding the dogs, feeding ourselves, in itself comprising a cinematic event.

He said that what we call fame is nothing but the sum of all mistakes circulating about one individual.

The boxer meets an opponent who is a dream-distortion of himself in the sense that his weaknesses, his capacity to fail and to be seriously hurt, his intellectual miscalculations—all can be interpreted as strengths belonging to the Other; the parameters of his private being are nothing less than boundless assertions of the Other's self. This is dream or nightmare: my strengths are not fully my own, but my opponent's weaknesses; my failure is not fully my own, but my opponent's triumph.

The Puritan sensibility would have understood a mouth filling with blood, an eye popped out of its socket—fit punishment for an instant's negligence.

She returns to the site where the woman staged her own drowning, and imagines her own lips blue against her waxen skin, her matted hair pressed to her brow, her own head flung back sharply in the arms of her pursuer. The heavy iron chain that separates her from the water's edge, the steel-cold waves that pound against the stone breakwater, the very quality of light in the early dusk—all have become more tangible to her since she witnessed the woman exhibiting a state of extreme distress. That the woman was feigning the distress in order to delude her pursuer, that she was herself no more than a fictional creation, and her image as immaterial as a beam of light, did nothing to detract from the tangibility.

It is possible she needed to believe that the horizon and the stars were hopelessly obscured behind the night clouds, that the sextant was useless. It is possible she was one of those who could steer to the correct course only when she believed that navigation was impossible.

The two women go to see a film, about which one woman tells the other she believes that the couple in the story resemble herself and her own lover, she being the wandering adventurer whose curiosity and taste for thrill lead him more than once into a dangerous situation; and her lover, the ravishingly elegant socialite, intent on taming the adventurer's wandering ways or accompanying him if that need be, whatever might prove necessary for the realization of their love. The dazzling beauty at first appears bored and even irritated by the adventurer's thrill seeking. His resistance to their relationship appears based on true incompatibility: he is not temperamentally disposed to appreciate exquisite clothing and its attendant graces; she displays no taste for dangerous locales or the pursuit of misadventure.

Slowly, however, a reversal emerges between the two. The adventurer, disabled by some previous bravado, cannot pursue his latest intrigue, and so enlists the aid of his socialite. At first reluctant, the young beauty comes to immerse herself in the drama of a suspected murderer and the search for evidence to incriminate him. While her immobilized lover looks on in white-lipped alarm, she thrusts herself farther and farther into the pursuit, finally facing a danger beyond any her lover had imagined for her. Her bold, even reckless undertaking, her face-to-face encounter with the killer, her assault and near-death at his hands, have the glorious effect of cementing her lover's desire for her. Yet even while our hearts swell with this realization, the question must be asked: were his affections quickened because, in witnessing her endangerment, he realized how vital, how irreplaceable the girl was to him? Or because, in regarding her fearlessness, he decided she was after all an adventurer worthy of the name, and therefore a pleasing companion for him?

The greater question is of the girl's own motives—was her feat of daring one that came about spontaneously, and therefore a contradiction of her behavior thus far, with her absorption in social graces and her impatience with thrill and intrigue? Or was this act merely a further demonstration of her feminine wiles—was she aware that her display of bravado, undertaken in her customary feminine attire, would capture her lover's heart by its very unexpectedness or incongruity? Either interpretation leaves the girl's character pushing uncooperatively beyond its bounds. If femininity is not an involuntary helplessness but merely a matter of taste—if the feminine character is as capable of daring and strength as the masculine, but merely chooses not to display it, then surely our current fixation on the excavation of gender is no match for the beguilement that comes of encountering your love moving toward you out of a crowd with an unrehearsed smile for you and you alone.

It is a geometry, a familiar, even friendly system of order, the vectors with their helpful arrows, the two planes intersecting agreeably to form a line, the angles uniting into a cooperative arrangement of interior and exterior space. But for naming these shapes she has no vocabulary and must refer to approximations.

A few days after they see the film the woman writes to her friend that the fixation of a minor character on the red glow of his cigarette burning in the dark is like something she has often searched for, like a picture of time.