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Learning to live with ghosts

The practice of research

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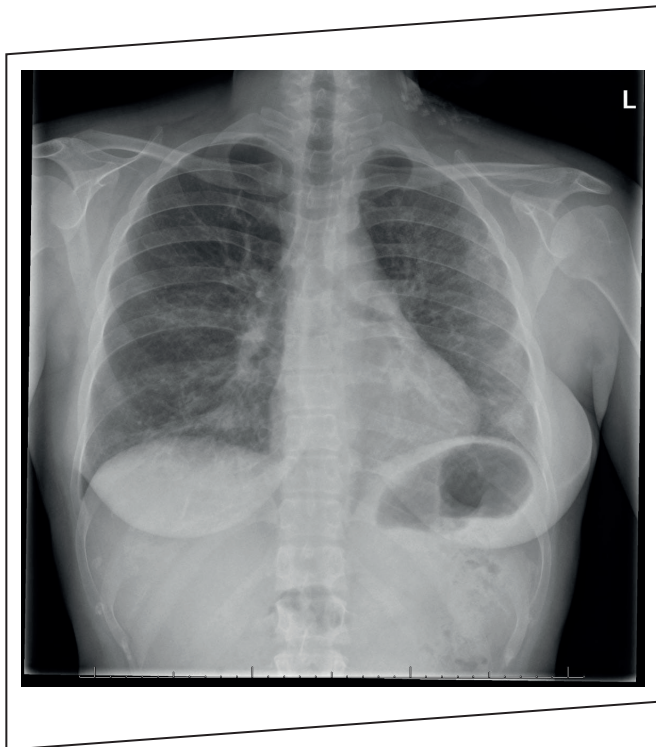
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Learning to Live with Ghosts

The Practice of Research



Moosje Goosen



UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM
Geesteswetenschappen

Learning to Live with Ghosts

The Practice of Research

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam op gezag van
de Rector Magnificus prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie, in het
openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op donderdag 5 oktober 2023, te 16.00 uur

door Moosje Goosen geboren te Bergen op Zoom

Promotiecommissie

<i>Promotores:</i>	prof. dr. P.P.R.W. Pisters	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. E. Peeren	Universiteit van Amsterdam

<i>Overige leden:</i>	prof. dr. M.G. Bal	Universiteit van Amsterdam
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	prof. dr. N.W.O. Royle	University of Sussex
	prof. dr. J. Tougaw	The City University of New York

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

For my mother

And the body. 'The body'. That sad grey dishrag philosophers hang inside the door beneath the sink.

—Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*

theory is good but it doesn't prevent things from existing

—Anne Carson, *The Albertine Workout*

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In loving memory of my mother, Dees Goosen Lemette, and my mother-in-law, Rampati Chierandjoe Moti.

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An Introduction Is Also an Ending

The following collection of texts reflects research I did over nearly a decade, in the framework of pursuing a doctorate degree, but with an intention to learn to live with ghosts. I would like to learn to live with ghosts. What (or who?) do I mean when I invoke these “ghosts”? Having been brought up between cultures – Dutch, Indonesian, and *Indo* or *Indisch* – I was taught to believe and not to believe in spirits.¹ From a young age, I was made to accept the living contradictions of belonging/not belonging in two very different family homes. So I do and I do not believe in ghosts: I believe in contradictions, in contradicting myself; I believe in the inconsistencies of life, determined by change. This is the spirit that breathes through this writing.

The ghosts of these texts appear from life and theory, in life and in theory. The writing was sparked by two elements finding each other through time and space: the experience and memory of a ghost or phantom sensation by the sudden loss of feeling in my arm, a reverse phantom limb, when I was a child; and a continued reading of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, a text that releases multiple ghosts, not just relating to Marx and Marxism, but also to the more general concerns about “doing” (and maybe believing in) theory, philosophy, ethics, as a way of life. For Derrida, the ghost or the spectral is “a concept without concept” (1997, 23), as it refuses to be conjured by the magic language act of definition, summoning a subject by the words “*this is...*” Being dies with the appearance of a ghost that isn’t, but *does* something; a ghost haunts, and in this body of writing it haunts by effecting change. In her research on spectralities, Esther Peeren, following Derrida’s writing on specters, analyzes “the conceptual force of ghosts and haunting” (2013, 9) as indeed, a *force*, a powerful disturbance that refuses form and appears from a supposed outside, the other side, the off-side: “The specter stands for that which never simply *is* and thus escapes the totalizing logic of conventional cognitive and hermeneutic operations. It cannot be reduced to a straightforward genesis, chronology or finitude and insists on blurring multiple borders, between visibility and invisibility, past and present, materiality and immateriality, science and pseudo-science, religion and superstition, life and death, presence and absence, reality and imagination” (Peeren 2013, 10). To live and to do research with ghosts, therefore, is to learn as if for the first time, always anew. What can be said about the ghost, the specter, or the phantom in my own research is that it remains undecidable in experience, and *as* experience – when I mean to invoke a ghost, it is never just in theory. It is the experience of

¹ As a result of Dutch colonial history and its presence in the Indonesian archipelago from 1815 to 1949, named *Nederlands-Indië* or the Dutch East Indies under Dutch or Batavian rule, the Dutch distinguished between inhabitants of Dutch or European origin/ancestry in the colony (with different rights and privileges) and the Indonesian (and Moluccan) population. After World War II and Indonesia’s independence in 1949, and upon “repatriation” to the Netherlands, these former inhabitants of the Dutch East Indies kept (and keep) identifying commonly as *Indo* or *Indisch*. My grandfather’s family was of mixed heritage and fell in between these identifying classes with and without benefits of colonial rule. My grandfather married my grandmother, who was Indonesian.

becoming- knowledge, without it acquiring a final form. So, instead of an introductory overview, a warning here, about what is to come: nothing in the following texts is definitely decided for, or against.

But a text cannot be about nothing, nor about everything, even when it tries hard not limit itself. In this body of writing I engage with a question that ties together philosophy and life; I ask it there where scholarly traditions and lineages meet with the pulse of private experience, and everyday life: *How to live?* How to act “naturally” in this dazzling bewildering state called existence, for which there is no rehearsal, no outside? We long to know, to be wise on the subject: we have a deep desire to gain insight, knowledge about ourselves. *Philosophia* – this love for wisdom – is more (and less) than a scholarly tradition: it is an expression of the human exploratory nature. We want form and closure, where there is no absolute form: imposing form is our resistance to the impermanence of existence.

“I cannot keep my subject still” Michel de Montaigne wrote in one of his Essays (2003, “Of Repentance”). As I am writing this I am looking back at the years of this research project in the making, a long process of hiccups, intermittent writing and letting go, keeping the thinking suspended, sustaining it with minimal means, while simultaneously attending to different matters, other priorities (hence the long duration of this project), and what I feel is a certain resistance to finishing, because this writing without limits can go on and on and on. But it would be a burden to continue as well: life wants to move on, it wants to let go. When I think about myself throughout these years, I see myself unsteadily, not like a still life or portrait picture but moving in and out of focus, losing my features, graying, paling, tanning, gaining weight, losing weight. Changing my mind a hundred times. In perpetual motion, I am that ghost that refuses form. I cannot keep my subject still, either. Life is unpredictable. How to reconcile that wild nature with a philosophical education, an academic training that is always to some extent institutional, carrying a promise, or at least a dream, of getting to “know thyself”?

I started this research, there where I could not keep my promises any longer; where, in Nietzschean terms, I could no longer promise to love philosophy unconditionally (nor could I vow to hate it). In this collection of texts I look at the intimacy of illness and the body as sabotaging the practice of scholarship. Parallel to this research, I was diagnosed with an incurable auto-immune disorder, which required me to prepare for death, or a lung transplant, the latter of which I received in 2017. From the supposed outside of my private time and life; from my sick leave; out of office, I have tried to deconstruct the style of knowledge formed by philosophical scholarship, conducted according to the unspoken rules and limits set by academic traditions, while at the same time doing the necessary, practical research about life and death myself. Engaging with the age-old existential questions that have occupied philosophy from its beginning – How to live? How to die? – and in dialogue with, first and foremost, the work of Jacques Derrida, I have attempted to describe the tension that arises when, becoming ill, these general questions become particular and come to *matter* personally. No longer just in theory. How am *I* to live? How am *I* to die? How to continue practicing philosophical inquiry while ill, when the body is foregrounded by continuous practical concerns? Illness is commonly understood as a disability. But it also opens the ability to

observe aspects of life that in good health function transparently and thus remain absent from conscious experience.

Although the figure of the ghost in popular culture is commonly imagined as without body, in this research I argue through my writing that it is the body that haunts scholarly writing, like a ghost, in its repression. Here, the ill body effects a palpability of something, some *body*, that so often remains out of the picture in the practice of research. As a ghostlike force, it is able to raise questions about authority, narration, subject-object dynamics, objectivity and subjectivity that are disregarded in academic writing, for convenience's sake. Combining elements of prose and fiction writing, describing experience in a phenomenological tradition, I deviate from the norms and conventions of philosophical discourse, and make a hauntological intervention into philosophy, from its spectral margins, from my sick-bed. As such, this research looks at what thinking as a practice and experience embodies, and under what conditions it is made possible. It argues for the presence of literature and poetry in and as philosophical thinking – as an alternative method to engage in the questions of life (and death), always as lived experiences, instead of object(s) of knowledge.

In an attempt to *perform* this argument and let the writing do the work, this research is also a collection of texts that refuse to be reduced to summary. Nevertheless, here I will try to offer some guidance in the reading of it. This first introductory part of the writing consists of a tentative feeling out of the field in question – establishing its parameters by means of open questioning. Part 1, Learning to Live, looks further into a fundamental question in the practice of cultural analysis, directed, here, at philosophy: Who speaks, when philosophy is spoken? Who can speak the truth, or voice their opinion? Whose voices are heard, and whose are unheard of? In Part 2, Learning to Die, I try to distinguish between death in life and death in theory, analyzing both phenomena and their effects in texts by Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Edgar Allan Poe. Part 3, There Is No Is, returns to where I started this research project, with a reverse phantom arm, my subsequent fascination with phantom limbs, and fiction as a speculative exploration and experimental tool for medical concerns, as exemplified in a short story by an American Civil War-era neurologist from Philadelphia, Silas Weir Mitchell (“The Case of George Dedlow,” 1866). Finally, in Part 4, I have employed my own experimental writing to test and manifest a formless abstraction – a ghost – that concerns me in my life: my lung transplant donor who “exists” because someone, some body, has died. This aporia, I hope to demonstrate, can only be addressed by fiction, as a form of writing that imagines rather than defines, and opens up to life, rather than narrowing it down. Thus, my conclusion, if there is any, is fiction, as an invitation to an alternative style of thinking: I end with *On Wards*, an experimental work of autobiographical fiction about the experience of *having survived*, thanks to organ donation.

“I have a philosophical tendency,” I say to myself this morning, finishing this very long-term project. It is something like a tic, or a gait, this tendency – a walk of life. One step and another. I want to know. And I continue to want to. Right now, the tendency consists in my scrutiny of the moment. For instance, this, here: the soft tensing of the upper body, lifting

itself up in anticipation, straightening the spine, expanding the rib cage, pushing outward diaphragm, solar plexus, and abdomen, down to right under the belly button, as I inhale deeply and consciously, yes, right now, taking this breath. Then, also now, the relaxation upon exhaling. A long and silent sigh. The relief of letting go.

Dear Reader,²

Whenever Zen Master Gutei was asked about his teachings, he simply stuck up one finger. “What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?” riddled the Sphinx. Captain Ahab said to the carpenter who prepared his peg leg: “Look, put thy live leg here in the place where mine once was ... Where thou feelest tingling life; there, exactly there, there to a hair, do I.” But when Gutei’s disciple stuck up *his* finger, Master Gutei cut it off.

Marx stood Hegel on his head. A nurse asks, “How many fingers am I holding up?” Roland Barthes had a piece of rib removed. Look: Saint Agatha holds her severed breasts on a silver platter. René Descartes once asked himself: “How can I deny that these hands and this body are mine?” Then Marx turned it over and placed philosophy back on its feet.

“Philosophy limps,” said Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Lord Krishna has six arms. Scylla has twelve dangling legs and six long necks with a gruesome head on each. “Where’s your arm?” A child asked the woman at the grocery store. “You mean leg,” the woman replied. “Where’s your arm?” the child persisted. “You mean leg,” the woman said again. “My leg got sick. I had to take it to the hospital.” At the field hospital, Walt Whitman noticed “a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart.” In a seminar lecture on anxiety, Jacques Lacan says he sometimes dreads forgetting his arm in the metro – “like a vulgar umbrella.” On screen, a young Hollywood actor by the name of Ronald Reagan wakes from surgery, looks at the empty space where his legs used to be, and screams, in agony, his scripted lines: “WHERE IS THE REST OF ME???” “Oh Jesus I have to work with that arm why did you cut it off? Why did you cut my arm off answer me why did you cut my arm off? Why did you why did you why did you?” says Johnny. Abraham Lincoln described the American South as a diseased limb. “And this limping,” Merleau-Ponty proceeded, “is its virtue.”

Wilhelm Röntgen took an x-ray of his wife’s left hand, with the wedding band still on her skeletal finger. Alice tells the Cheshire Cat: “I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly.” And the cat said “All right,” and vanished quite slowly this time, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. “Three.” the patient tells the nurse. “You are holding up three fingers.” Villanayur Ramachandran notes that some people continue to feel a ring on their phantom finger, or a watchband on their wrist. He says that a girl who was born without forearms used her phantom fingers to solve arithmetic problems. Later in the *Meditations*, Descartes writes: “... I have learned from some persons whose arms or legs have been cut off, that they sometimes seemed to feel pain in the part which had been amputated.”

Paul Wittgenstein played piano with his phantom right hand. Charity Tilleman-Dick, a soprano, sang opera with her donor lungs. The piece of rib, wrapped in medical gauze, was kindly returned to Monsieur Barthes: Voilà. How many fingers? “No fingers.”

² See Appendix C for this text with references.

The first human-to-human heart transplant was performed in 1967. In 1925, the Russian novelist Mikhael Bulgakov imagines a dog with the brainstem of a man. Is it a dog who thinks like a man, or a man who walks like a dog? Grandmother Eva may or may not have let a train run over her leg, so she could collect the insurance money. Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian miraculously transplanted a leg: the leg was robbed from the grave of an Ethiopian slave. "I haven't got any arms Kareen. My arms are gone. Both of my arms are gone Kareen both of them. They're gone. Kareen Kareen Kareen," said Johnny, despairingly.

Gilles Deleuze had a lung removed, in 1969. Jean-Luc Nancy was the recipient of a donor heart, the first successful transplant of a heart in France. The first lung transplant was performed in 1963, on a Mississippi prisoner, named John Richard Russell. He died eighteen days later. In old paintings God is often no more than a depiction of a single hand, appearing from a corner or a cloud. In the Congo, a rubber plantation worker looks at his own hand. It has been severed by members of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company militia. "We do not even know what a body is capable of . . ." Spinoza said. Somewhere in the world, someone steps on a landmine. We do not know where exactly, we do not know when.

An Army General visits the museum that exhibits his amputated lower leg bone. Others follow his example, looking for their own conserved limbs. "3486, 3487," the spirit medium says. "They are my legs, my legs!" the amputee cries out. They are in the museum! Judith with the head of Holofernes. Cancer, gangrene, diabetes. Cicero's severed hands and head. The severed heads of Cosmas and of Damian. Einstein's brain cut into pieces.

"In many the hand seems to be at rest," the Philadelphian physician notes, in his reports at the hospital for injured nerves, also known as the Stump Hospital. "Others carry with them a hand in a state of more or less violent flexion, and possess but slight control over it," he adds. How many hands? "No legs. No more running walking crawling if you have no legs. No more working. No legs you see. Never again to wiggle your toes. What a hell of a thing what a wonderful beautiful thing to wiggle your toes." It's Johnny again, without his legs. Jean-Luc Nancy lived to old age with his transplant heart. Audre Lorde had a mastectomy, but died, too young, of cancer. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick had a mastectomy. Susan Sontag had a mastectomy. Jo Spence had a mastectomy. My friend had a mastectomy. Phantom breasts are the lesser-known sisters of the infamous phantom limbs.

Bruce Lee tells his apprentice: "Do not mistake the finger pointing to the Moon for the Moon itself." "Without fingers I point, without arms I stretch, without feet I run. What am I?" What am I? Blaise Cendrars wrote: "... the mind strays, trying to follow, to situate, to identify, to localize the existence of a severed hand, which makes itself painfully felt ... somewhere outside of the body, a hand, hands which multiply and fan out, the fingers virtually crushed..." What is the sound of one hand clapping?

My leg is in the hospital. My leg is in the museum. My lung, removed, lay in a crescent-shaped stainless steel dish. It breathed no longer. Prior to *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott wrote stories about the scramble for arms and legs of soldiers who would come out of their graves on Judgment Day. Silas Wegg does not want his body "dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there." I want my leg back, I want it back. Whitman sees, in 1855, "the beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms." But writing, Wilhelm

Flusser wrote, will always persist, “like a useless appendix.” Marie Curie’s handwritten notes are radioactive: in order to read her notebooks one must cover oneself with lead. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley kept the heart of Percy in her drawer, where it was discovered after her death.

Roland Barthes threw his “rib chop” from his balcony. It was time for him to part with it. When the bodily remains of Descartes were exhumed from its grave in Stockholm, the French ambassador took as a souvenir a bone of the philosopher’s right index finger. He said “it had served as an instrument in the immortal writings of the deceased.” How many fingers? Just one. Jacques Derrida once said, “Everything comes down to the ear with which you can hear me.” Van Gogh’s ear lobe. Freud’s ear – “the most famous ears in history,” Michel Foucault said once. On his deathbed, according to his friend Hervé Guibert, Foucault spoke only in cryptic sentences: “I am afraid the potlatch won’t come out in your favor,” or, “I hope Russia turns White once more.”

Friedrich Nietzsche said that his genius was in his nostrils. A woman says: “Stop staring at my breasts.” Johnny lost nearly everything: his limbs, his hearing, his speech, his sight. Barthes insisted: the author is dead. He is, he is, he is. But then, Dr. Frankenstein screamed, “ALIVE! IT IS ALIVE!”

“Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt,” said Jane Eyre.

This is a collection of texts about the effect of bodies on writing and writing on bodies.

An Antibody of Writing

“Thou art a Scholler—speake to it, Horatio”

I start writing what is an antibody of writing. The antibody: “*a blood protein produced in response to and counteracting a specific antigen. Antibodies combine chemically with substances the body recognizes as alien, such as bacteria, viruses, and foreign substances in the blood*” (OED). The antibody is pro-body: it aids in protecting the organism from what it doesn’t recognize as itself. In doing so, the antibody combines with what is foreign, without becoming it. Over the past two years, since the first breakout of Covid-19 and its global circulation, antibodies have become part of human culture. They no longer exist merely on a cellular organic level, but are entities talked about in the news, in politics, in schools, at the vaccination center. They have acquired agency in culture. To have or not to have them triggers responses: suspicion, reassurance, but also anger or fear, and the right to be or not be somewhere. Like the viruses they help fend off, they remind us that we are both more and less than ourselves, and that bodies are coexistent with each other through our collective breathing in and out of the same air – a shared resource.

The antibody here is not a metaphor; it is not a “thing” that I have on my mind. (Irony has it that, until the autumn of 2022, being immuno-compromised, I had no Covid-19 antibodies in my body either). For me, the antibody is something to think *with*, think *through* these texts to follow. I do not “know” these things. A condition for knowing is that I turn the thing into a figure: thinking is where I figure it out. Here, I use the formlessness and invisibility of the antibody to retrieve the quiet bodies, repressed lives, from the project of research. What, when the object we want to figure out refuses to take form in our figuring, in our projection of ideas? In its recalcitrance it starts to “speak back,” as Mieke Bal, co-founder of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, has argued.³ It speaks back to the theories we use, the methods we employ – it speaks, at times, to our frustration. Research is not entirely in our control: we are not masters over what unfolds when we seek out knowledge. When an object speaks back and suggests that we, scholars, subjects, do it differently; that this, whatever this is, is not quite working, should we speak of failure? Should we quit, give up?

In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder writes that “[i]nsofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction; we then experience the body as the very *absence* of a desired ordinary state, and as a force that stands opposed to the self” (1990, 4). Something that wasn’t an object before, begins to speak back – but back at itself, from the place that holds the subject. A case of subjectivity? Yes and no. Philosopher Havi Carel argues that this sudden and heightened attention to our own being as body in dysfunction also turns illness into a philosophical tool. “Through its pathologizing effect illness distances the ill person from taken-for-granted routines and habits and thus reveals aspects of human existence that normally go unnoticed”

³ On the practice of cultural analysis, see Bal’s *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002).

(2018, 5). In this research, there is a phantom arm that performs dysfunction and disruption: what is this body part that is gone now, that I have also felt, as if for the first time, in the brief instant of its loss? What is this, *who* is this?

I will not talk too much about this phantom now; it will return. But in this antibody of writing this phantom can only appear as something else –indeed, as apparition – out of the researcher’s reach. It shifts the attention to something (someone) else: research, scholarship, philosophy as a practice, a physical, psychological and emotional labor that is so much more than its outcome, its having-figured-out. That is what I have to say about the phantom for now. The academic form still often restricts its field to what is seen: in most cases it does not make explicit, nor takes an interest in, who is doing the seeing. Methodology and tools for analysis are presented as if they exist apart from a subject who does the analyzing, methodologizing. Feminism, anti-racism, intersectionality and decolonial thinking have reacted against this form by bringing their writers’ bodies and lived experiences to the table. But this seems to remain something to take up only when the body is indeed speaking (screaming) back in its defiance to the norm. As if “normal” bodies do not need to get out of bed and be taken to work in order to think, write, read, and do what scholars do. What the antibody and my phantom arm remind me of is that scholarship is not merely a project of the mind. Nor is it necessarily about bodies, but it is always done *with* bodies.

I would like to learn to live/to die. A philosophical wish and intention. How to avoid that its project turns into an object, into an *about-ness* rather than, well, life’s liveliness, its messiness and eccentricities? What is a normal life? I want to live philosophy, not know it.

Let’s not pretend that philosophy isn’t on the defense: to philosophize is to take up an argument. What is the antibody of this writing, and in whose defense? During these extended years of my doctorate research, due to the circumstances in and of my life, I changed position. I changed over time, not just my body, but my mind or maybe, my allegiances. I grew ambivalent (which is to say: I lost all of my academic defenses). Philosophical texts that I had read before acquired a different meaning in a life that, for reasons that will become clear, I had to learn anew. It was as if I came to these texts as a different reader (and I was, I am, and will be, of course, always differently reading). As a matter of fact, I often had the feeling I had to defend myself *against* philosophy, against life on paper, in theory, in an ideal setting. One becomes a dysfunctional scholar when one changes one’s mind midway, breaking with the projected trajectory of thinking. Should this be considered a failure? Or is this what thinking is, not the affirmations but the disruptions; the straying-from; the reluctant insights – yes, *but*. I confess here that I became estranged to the words and arguments of philosophy. What had been affirmative and respected, combined (confused) itself with the strange (well – strange? combined itself with my recalcitrance) and vice versa. Here I let the antibody do the speaking. It is through this writing as an antibody of writing, struggling with form and the academic genre, that I could open up and attend to this confusion, without letting the unknown be absorbed by the familiar. That is to say: without pretending that I can inhabit both, philosophy and myself, in one homogeneous, harmonious body.

The following texts attempt to respond to and speak from what has been considered foreign (and perhaps dysfunctional) to the practice of philosophy. Western philosophy, if not anti-body, at the least has always had its suspicions about the body, because of its impermanence and its capacity to change the mind. A body is always many things at once, and many things changing under various conditions throughout our lives. It is from these various changes, as an unstable subject, that I write and insist on writing.

The antibody operates or “counteracts” in response to the sudden presence of an unknown agent, and as a means to protect integrity. And isn’t the integrity of a “field” at stake in maintaining an idea – a single idea, or a field of ideas, such as, say, philosophy? In an article from 1978, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” Richard Rorty argues that philosophy is something non-essential and something non-definitive at best. He writes:

... there is no way in which one can isolate philosophy as occupying a distinctive place in culture or concerned with a distinctive subject or proceeding by some distinctive method. One cannot even seek an essence for philosophy as an academic *Fach* (...) The philosopher’s own scholastic little definitions of “philosophy” are merely polemical devices – intended to exclude from the field of honor those whose pedigrees are unfamiliar. (Rorty 1978, 142)

If this were really the case, one would think that philosophy was always bound to dissolve in the broader field of humanities, haunting rather than taking up disciplinary residence. But the fact is that this supposed “no thing” that is called philosophy is still here, still being studied, passed on, and respected, not only for what it has to offer, but certainly also for what Rorty considered nearly half a century ago to be its “merely polemical devices” – and with these, its exclusions.⁴ Like other disciplines, philosophy as a body of knowledge is formed and formalized by its defenses, by what it argues it is not, whether this argument is outspoken or silently agreed on (or taken for granted). To speak of integrity one must expel: the field of philosophy is established by its counteractions (the counterarguments) against a supposed outside – an outside, which, of course, only exist in relation to the field.

In a culture where argument is viewed as a dance, would we still be arguing? George Lakoff and Mark Johnson asked in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, 4-5). My intention is not to denigrate philosophy – this is not an attack. With the texts brought together in this project, I try to respond to the antibodies of philosophy with my own antibody of

⁴ Take, for example, the letter to *The Times* (London) published on May 9, 1992, protesting the Honorary Degree Jacques Derrida was to receive from the University of Cambridge. In the letter, written by Barry Smith and signed by seventeen other philosophers from prominent universities, Derrida is called “a cause for silent embarrassment” of his French colleagues; his work is described as “stretch[ing] the normal forms of academic scholarship beyond recognition,” “defying comprehension,” and consisting of “semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship.” The letter explicitly states that, as a philosopher, Jacques Derrida is not deemed worthy of an honorable degree in a distinguished university (Smith et al. 1992).

writing. Not to take up an argument (a fight) but to initiate a possible choreography, a different kind of dance with ideas for which it takes two: the object and its subject, the thinking and the body.

Theoretical interlocutors

This research has always been inspired by the ghost, the specter, or the spectral as a mode (and a mood) of attending to the un-proper and unformed which carries in it the potential of a process, an initiation, an invitation to create and become: a becoming-form. The ghost is undefinable, unlocatable and, as an effect rather than a thing or being in itself, it leaves this un- in its trace. Un-, as Elissa Marder argues in regard to the unconscious, is not in opposition to, but “a radically different mode of thinking about making meaning” (2020, 233).

Learning is a form of becoming. This is my belief in knowledge, formed by my long-term engaged reading of – and living with – Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. A book not quite containing but *releasing* ghosts, whose hauntings begin with an anonymous subject, someone, stating their desire: *I would like to learn to live*. This desire, which is out there on the page and in me, resonates throughout these writings, as a place to return to again and again, retracing my steps, reiterating my intention. Yes, I do believe in the project of learning and inquiry. But I also believe in ghosts, in the sense that it is with their unexpected, sudden appearances and disturbing actions; with the silences they generate within the so-called body proper (whether of a person, a text, a field), that we can catch glimpses of ourselves, our own being and doing, doing the thinking. In their introduction to *The Spectralities Reader* María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren write that “[the specter’s] own status as discourse or epistemology is never stable, as the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes that which is placed outside it” (2013, 9). To side with ghosts is also to take risks and be unable to state beforehand how things will turn out. Hence, the ghost in and of this writing is not a method but a stated willingness to deviate from that path of thinking. To live with ghosts, one should not look for straightforward answers or conclusions. The way of the ghost is always indirect: it won’t act as a reliable narrator of itself (let alone of others). Hence the difficulty, as Derrida points out, for scholars to “speak” with the ghosts and to subject them to scholarly inquiry (2006, 11-12). This does not mean that “anything goes.” The ghost often arrives with its own demands. My reverse phantom arm, which will appear in Part 3 of this text, is my first and foremost ghost, the first “ghost” in my life that asked of me to regard myself, to initiate an inquiry into myself. But ghosts are multiple and multi-interpretable, so they will appear throughout these texts in different guises: as repressed or unruly voices, as dead authors that refuse to die, as wounded soldiers and mourning weavers, and implied readers. As a breathing, a pair of breathing lungs.

What do we allow to appear? In order to appear, as a dead person, a translucent figure, invisible entity or “something felt,” ghosts rely on a body doing the perceiving. They require a person who senses and tries to make sense of a perceived situation, generally one of unease. Ghosts emerge from (and arguably as) an excessive reading into events, which means that, possibly, one ends up misreading the situation – although one can never tell for sure. The most chilling ghosts I have encountered in literature are those seen by unreliable narrators: Eleanor Vance, for instance, in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James, to name just two examples.

But do not expect to *see* any ghosts in this writing. Its ghosts are noticeable only in their effect, as a trace and non-essence that takes part in the process of trying to name, define, outline, and figure out, without being there as a present “thing.” It is the non-essence of my temporarily missing arm, a phantom limb, but also the indefinable that gives shape to philosophy, and all that, in and as its project, remains unspoken. The ghost is there “not there,” already gone, already out of sight, always on the move, in perpetual motion. What it does make visible or manifest, as the abovementioned examples of ghost stories point out, is the one who is chasing the ghost, obsessed by it, swearing they have seen it with their own eyes – the narrator, and its potential unreliability. That is to say, in this case: me.

Mieke Bal writes, in her Preface to the Fourth Edition of her seminal work on narratology, that it is typical of Enlightenment thought to think that “the subject can stand outside of what it criticizes, analyses, understands” (2017, xx). This writing is indebted to Bal’s proposal to look at narrative as a cultural attitude, and narratology as a perspective on culture. That is, in her words, “a narrative theory that enables the differentiation of the place of the narrative in any cultural expression without privileging any medium, mode, or use; that differentiates its relative importance and the *effects* of the narrative (segments) on the remainder of the object as well as on the reader, listener, viewer. A theory, in other words, that defines and describes *narrativity* [my emphasis], not narrative; not a genre or object but a cultural mode of expression” (Bal 2017, xx-xxi). Halfway through the book, Bal makes a seemingly off-the-cuff remark: “aiming for objectivity is pointless” (2017, 132). The sentence is telling. Not only is the aim itself beside the point; if objectivity could be obtained, it would be point-less, out of this world, lacking perspective – lacking, thus, what we human beings can still consider to be a view. If we accept that objectivity is not in, or even of, our visual scope; if we accept that the world is returned to us in our particular embodied and situated view of it, focalization, defined by Bal as “the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen (...) as a component of the content of the narrative text” (2017, 135), becomes itself a “point” of interest.

Focalization is a narratological term, coined in 1972 by Gérard Genette to reformulate existing definitions of point of view in terms of access to narrative information. Mieke Bal, in her “reviving” of the concept, places emphasis on the relationality between the one who speaks and the one who sees, so that focalization becomes a means to analyze the effects: What could this relation between the one who speaks and the one who sees, between

who sees and what is seen, reveal about ourselves and others, about our interaction with others, with objects?

Let me clarify this with a quick and timely example. In the first year of the pandemic, in an interview with *The White Review*, Havi Carel states that “[w]ith COVID-19, we exist in a world of experience which is, to a certain extent, prior to science” (Ghosh 2020). This in itself holds nothing new: science must always necessarily come after, after the apple falls from the tree. Epistemologically, this is an exciting but uncertain time. We live in a shared field with no common ground. In this state of becoming-knowledge, in which “experts” are still looking to find answers, and in which mistakes and corrections are being made in real-time, causes much anxiety. It reminds us humans of the fact that truth and reality are always under some degree of contestation, and are a matter of public negotiation. In times like these it deserves to shift focus and make, not the object that we try to grasp, but the viewing itself our common interest. It is here that I propose focalization can prove to be significant in and to our lives. Who is telling what is seen? Who speaks, who sees? Focalization, in Bal’s conceptualization – as a concept that connects seeing and speaking in their relation to agency, power, and accessibility – will not give any satisfactory knowledge about the “object” in question, but opens up a different kind of inquiry, of how we sense and make sense of an unsettled matter.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion said (2009, 11). We, researchers, scholars – we, too, tell stories in order to live and understand the world we live in. Stories in which the objects of our thinking make perfect sense, and in which they are granted existence within a certain order. Narrativity, other than objectivity, is a dance that takes two: if narrativity is something that, as Bal suggests, is (culturally) expressed, this consequently asks for a consideration of who is doing the expressing. This research takes into account its own narrative mode and with it asks, Who speaks? Who speaks in the making of knowledge? Under what circumstances? And what kind of images or, *imagination*, could narrative research be capable of releasing, as an alternative to so-called objective knowledge?

I do not believe in objects without “thinkers” – whether the thinker is a scholar or a spider in search of a nook, or a hammer that treats everything as a nail. I think, therefore the object as a manifestation of my thinking can exist. Therefore, I can exist. To make you “see” what I mean, let me finish with an actual story. It’s an old story about a phantom creature. In Julio Cortázar’s “Axolotl” (1964), a first-person narrator describes how he has become an axolotl in the aquarium of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. One day, he tells, he makes a visit to the aquarium, where he sees a fish tank with an axolotl in it. It is the first time he sees an axolotl and he is instantly captivated by this larval ghostlike species with its pink translucent body; with its eyes of gold “lacking any life but looking,” and its feet “ending in tiny fingers with minutely human nails” (Cortázar 1978, 5). He is so fascinated with the creature that he returns to the aquarium the day after, and the day after, and the day after, every morning and sometimes afternoons as well. Always to observe and inspect the axolotl, forgetting time and place. In his desire to know more about the creature and in an attempt to understand “the impenetrable thing of their lives,” the narrator projects aspects of his own being onto the

axolotl. Consequently, he begins to see it more and more in terms of his own humanity. This eventually leads to a literal and fantastic turning point in the story. With his face pressed to the fish tank, looking at the silent and expressionless axolotl on the other side of the glass, he sees, at first, the creature staring into the depth; a vision that dissolves in a subtle shift of focus which reveals his own reflection in the glass, which makes him see himself, looking at the axolotl but also at himself. In the next moment, he sees only himself, but from the other side of the glass. He has become the axolotl, looking at the human that is looking back at him. Focalization has shifted to the axolotl, but to the axolotl-as-human: the narrator is still one and the same. Or is he? Trapped in a fish tank at the Jardin des Plantes aquarium, the narrator can only wish that the human being now looking at him on the other side of the glass will decide one day to tell a story, a story about himself on the other side.

This antibody of writing is pro-axolotl. What follows is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of ongoing relationships, with books, with humans and non-humans, with authors, dead and alive, with ideas, many ideas, with things – and especially with no-things.

This is a collection of texts about many things, but the many things are stand-ins for an object that remains out of reach.

1

Learning to Live

every living step is a philosophical choice
—Simone de Beauvoir

This is a collection of texts about reading.

A Ghost Story⁵

April 22, 1993. Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally.*⁶

I would like to learn to live. The phrase always arrives on time. I read, and with these words, something (someone?) has sprung to life, or at least to mind, by expressing a desire. I would like. I would like to bring into this world a learning that is at the same time lived. I would like to learn the doing of it – live, living, learning, tangled up, word for word, word with world.

Someone, *you or me*, steps forward out of an emptiness, into this scene – but what makes a scene? What is necessary to set a scene, to distinguish it from what it is not? Actors use stages. Lecturers a lectern. In this scene, there is nothing to see, nothing to describe: no room, no school in which to do the learning; no shadows, no light, no time. Just two, three words; you or me, one-two-three, the expression of a desire. I would like. Words, dying to come alive and learn. Learn, what exactly? What about life makes itself knowable from the outside; outside the scene? I want you to imagine this, but it is impossible to make you see: you would have to read it for yourself. To read it – you would always have to do this yourself.

Maybe the scene is the scene of reading, which we do at our own expense. (And for our own benefit.) Someone, you or me, steps into a book. I open the book: I step into a space that is no space. I enter a reading state of mind... Whose mind? Yours and mine. Self to self. You or me, forgetting ourselves. Forgetting the “or” that distinguishes you from me. I play host to character, to pronouns, visions, grammar, as well as feelings, abstractions, ideas. As I am reading I am thinking, no – producing – a time that is elsewhere, but within the time lived. I become more alive, less alive, I play dead. “I am dead,” someone says in a story, and I repeat him. I am, I am. I am dead. I become you, we become none. Who or what lives, and dies, fulfilling its desires in me, taking over, not taking my wishes into account? What do I desire? I. Reader, absent, host. But also: the missing link?

In the words of Hélène Cixous, reading is “an act that suppresses the world. We annihilate the world with a book” (1994, 19). We make and unmake worlds. We come to it and come to our senses: same sense, different world. I read and I process the reading, I let the words sink in. Sink in, where exactly? Where, what is this scene, who makes the scene? If it is in me, is it in the world, as well? I am more than text and text is more than me. Language does this. Occasionally, words make my neck hair stand on end. As if they sneak up, not from the page but from behind me. Life is bigger than books. Books are bigger than life. We

⁵ Parts of this text were used in the essay, “Learning to Live with Ghosts” for *MAP Magazine*. See Goosen (2022).

⁶ The opening words of a plenary lecture by Jacques Derrida, presented at the University of California, Riverside at the conference “Whither Marxism,” April 1993. They are also the opening words of the published text (Derrida 2006), which first appeared in French (1993) and then in English (1994).

annihilate the world with books but produce a virtual space, elsewhere, but within the space lived. Within the body that does the reading. Yes, literally: we take up space and time living. Make up space and time. *This*, I can say, this particular space and time, is constituted by my living it through and through, giving it substance, making it matter. To read is *also* to live, with or without substance. The book is an exchange, your life for my loss, this world for that, word for word. In my mind I sound my reading with an inner voice – whose voice? I speak and listen at the same time, listen to myself in the words of someone else, an external inner voice that gives, receives, speaks and listens, all at once in one single reading.

Each time I read, I die a little, to come back a different person. Paul Ricoeur writes: “the process of composition, of configuration (...) is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative” (1991, 26). The missing link. I am making while being made: I am told to live, again and again. I die, I am dead. *I would like to learn to live*. I would, I would, I want to. I still want. I open the book, this year, last year, for the first time, a long time ago, in five years. I read in these words, now, something of myself. I listen to myself sounding these words, their call. Cixous again: “The texts that call me have different voices. But they all have one voice in common, they all have, with their differences, a certain music I’m attuned to, and that’s the secret” (1994, 5). The book is a voice, it is a secret. It is a secret passage to be read. An initiation. An invitation to get lost; to lose oneself in the call of another who is already within oneself but whom one cannot know. The book is a song, it is music, it is silent.

The book: *Specters of Marx* by Jacques Derrida, translated into English by Peggy Kamuf. Specters, as its title suggests, is a book of ghosts, or rather, a book that allows ghosts to appear and disappear from reading. I never finished the book: I never read it from front to back, beginning to end – nor have I ever stopped reading *from* it. *Specters* has become a book to me that therefore also “reads” my mind; the traces, the memories of my reading. My life. I come back to its text, in different times, stepping back into that opening scene that is always a different one, because, well, because it includes *me*. That scene *is* me, because I stage it, with my existence, my being as a reader.

I would like to learn to live... This is the stage, the base, the plane, the background for something to come, to be invoked into existence. I have let these words sink into me and into my reality. I have taken them in consideration on different occasions, with a change of mind, a change of heart, shifting my reading attention from learning, to living, to death – *my* death, Derrida’s death, the death of my mother and my mother-in-law. Focusing, then on specters, then on the spirit of Marx, then on my own written notes and questions in the margins. I too am haunting this text with my coming and going, flipping through the book’s pages, skipping fragments or entire chapters, reading backwards, adding notes, spilling tea, leaving crumbs in the book’s folds, underlining here, there, some word, something, what thing? Whatever makes particular sense to me, what calls me out, in a particular reading, sometime in the past, present, or future.

No – I know. One is not supposed to read philosophy like that, like a self-help manual, for personal use.⁷ One should not *actually* consult philosophy books in order to learn to live. Reading and re-reading nonetheless becomes a reflexive matter; the pages turn into a mirror. I “see” myself returning to them differently, requiring, this time, prescription glasses or (this time it is winter) an extra sweater. Having lived a little in the meantime. I am not the same body I used to be ten years ago, I am overflowing. I remember reading out loud on a New York rooftop, long ago, the opening sentence of the first chapter of *Specters of Marx*: “Maintaining now the specters of Marx.” “That’s not a proper sentence,” a friend had commented. “That’s not how you begin a text.”

And it is true that without beginning this text cannot end.

And it is true also that this object without beginning without end; this book that I carried with me over the years from house to house, started behaving in a ghostlike manner, challenging me, twisting my perspective, testing me – my rationality and superstitions. The solidity of the ground underneath. (That scene – the base, the plain, the stage. The desire: I would like to learn to live.)

I would like to learn/to live.

In the early spring of 2014, I was awarded a PhD fellowship by the University of Amsterdam. The news reached me via a congratulatory email, which I read in a hospital bed, while hooked to an IV bag of high-dose steroid medication. This pulse therapy of 1000 mg methylprednisolone per day was administered to suppress inflammations, caused by a rare autoimmune disorder that had only recently been diagnosed. I had been told that the chronic inflammations in my lungs caused healthy pulmonary tissue to turn into scar tissue, a process called fibrosis. Slowly, the pulmonologist explained, my lungs were turning into scars. Prior to the telling there had been at least two seasons of inexplicable, incessant coughing, vague pains, and unimaginable fatigue. My breath had been short without apparent cause, until one day a doctor listened through his stethoscope and heard “a crackle” in the lungs: the signal of my disease.

⁷ On occasion, one is: British philosopher and writer Alain de Botton opened The School of Life in 2008. In addition to its London location, it currently has branches in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, and Sao Paolo. It is promoted as an education on getting to know oneself. However, this is framed in – and its complexities smoothed by – a neoliberal discourse of self-betterment: “The School of Life is here to help you learn, heal and grow. We are devoted to bringing you calm, self-understanding, better relationships, deeper friendships, greater effectiveness at work and more fulfilment in your leisure time.” (Quoted from their website: <https://www.theschooloflife.com/about-us/>). The School of Life caters to individuals and companies, in (online) therapy sessions, retreats, trainings, and indeed, self-help books. Is this, then, where I would see my desires about philosophy fulfilled? I do not at all feel addressed by The School of Life’s “promises” packaged in pre-fab courses, business trainings, and bestseller books. Learning to live, as I imagine its radical possibilities, does not have an agenda, nor, even, a form (a curriculum). It definitely does not have a price tag.

The crackle
The signal
The sign

I had always thought of signs in terms of language – but this was its sound. The crackle was inconclusive. Surgery had been required to retrieve the disease’s name. The name: non-specific interstitial pneumonitis. Secondary to an undifferentiated connective tissue disease, the rheumatologist added. NSIP, UCTD: Here you have two acronyms to take home with you, to identify with, and to express to the world.

Language responded with unkind, indifferent precision. Words were too exactly inexact, placing my condition in a provisional category (*to be* specified, *to be* differentiated) that seemed to demand of my condition, my ill health, to make better sense. Can you be, perhaps, a little more specific? Ultimately, language pointed at something that had no existence in my imagination or that of others. NSIP, whatever it means. “I am sick with this term, this acronym.” How to be ill in a meaningful way, when all words fail? I often gave people the simplified version of my condition: my lungs were dysfunctional, my breath too short, causing a deficiency of oxygen in my blood. An acquaintance replied one day, in an email, “It is a rather philosophical ailment! To be made aware of each breath one takes!”

The scarring: the sign
The breathing: philosophy
The mind in awareness

My body was doing it all at the same time.

The day I received news of the academic fellowship I was also told that the steroid pulse therapy had been ineffective. The drugs that, I had read somewhere online, “could knock out horses,” had not knocked down the frenzy caused by my derailed immune system. Some medication is harmful in itself. It was useless to extend this treatment: I looked puffed up from head to toe. The fibrosis would be unstoppable, the scarring irreversible. A last resort would be, in the doctor’s words, “a new pair of lungs.”

New lungs. My thoughts tripped over the incongruity of these words combined. They prompted a mental picture of shoes, which I imagined to be around the size of lungs. They wouldn’t be new of course; they would be worn, bearing the imprint of their previous owner. I had never considered the size of my lungs before. I had only just looked at them for the first time, a few weeks ago, on x-ray on my doctor’s computer screen. “It is, of course, really only a last resort,” the doctor added.

A lung transplant is for later. And yet, it is a calculated matter. Different factors have to be taken into account and weighed against each other, pros and cons, pros versus cons, prognoses with and without, so that, clinically and statistically, an opportune window in which to perform the extreme procedure – if at all possible – can be estimated. Chances minus risks. Years with transplant lungs minus years without. Age, underlying conditions, history of

disease, physical strength and endurance, mental health and motivation, likelihood of survival. And so on. Everything scrutinized, measured, monitored and calculated, because “new lungs,” as the doctor had called them, obviously aren’t in steady supply, like shoes are. Someone would have to die in order for me to survive. This was a fact. It was also a brutal affront to logic, to reason. Even though my life and illness would not have any causal relation to this death, the latter *would have* to my survival.

The breath: philosophy
New pair of lungs: irrational,
the end of reason, rationality

I felt the limits of my sense of logic, its shortcomings, with my failing lungs. I can’t remember why but I had to stay in hospital that night, restless hours on a ward with three other patients, each of them at least twice my age. I was thirty-three. I was very aware of the sounds, the light, the air inside the room. Time was palpable. The night felt like a magic portal into the future—but which future? And whose? With the lung transplant still far too unfathomable to ponder in that moment, I also had a more pressing, practical decision to make: scholarship or illness? Was it a matter of choosing? Did I have a choice? Earlier that day, I had already accepted the university’s invitation, having responded with an email that made no mention of my whereabouts. But now, on the ward, awake at night, lungs on my mind, I began to doubt the decision. Does grave illness permit time, energy, and occasion to anything else than life itself? What would be in my best interest and would it be fair to act in my own interest, with many others competing for this scholarship? Was it correct to claim a space and future when that future seemed more uncertain and unreliable than that of others? And why devote my time to academic learning when life was giving the hardest lessons, without my asking, and for free? Already a philosophical reasoning of some kind had begun with this practical question: accept or turn down the opportunity towards pursuing a doctoral degree.

The next morning, before my discharge from hospital, the doctor and I had another conversation. He asked me how I had taken the news. I told him about the other news I had received – the good news, the scholarship. While he congratulated me, I also told him that this news had turned sour overnight, with the rising realization of my health so undeniably compromised, and my future in general at stake. Bad timing, isn’t it? I said, and I told him I was at a loss. In the short time we had gotten to know each other – a couple of weeks since the first x-rays and diagnosis – this doctor had always been very straightforward with me. He took a moment, before he spoke. “If I were to tell you that you will have five years...” He paused. “In five years,” he continued, “do you think you will have regretted it – the time, I mean, writing your dissertation? Or would you regret not having done so?” I did not have to think long. “I will regret *not* having done it,” I replied. “So there’s your answer,” he said.

In the film *Ghost Dance* (1983) by Ken McMullen, the young French actress Pascale Ogier asks Jacques Derrida: “*Est-ce que vous croyez aux fantômes?*” Do you believe in ghosts? He sits in his office chair, pipe in hand, at a desk that is covered in papers. Playing the role of the academic. Playing himself. It’s a difficult question, he replies. In typical meta-critical fashion, he knows that we know that he knows he isn’t presently there when we will watch him answer the question. We, viewers. The viewer: *I*. So he says to Pascale, “*Est-ce qu’on demande d’abord à un fantôme s’il croit aux fantômes? Ici, le fantôme, c’est moi... [...] Je crois que l’avenir est aux fantômes.*” Are you asking a ghost whether he believes in ghosts? Here, the ghost, that’s me. I believe that the future is up to ghosts.⁸ I have often watched this scene on YouTube. Pascale Ogier is immensely beautiful, with her arched eyebrows, her pearl earrings, her hair up. I cringe when I watch the dialogue that follows, between her and Jacques Derrida. It seems to me such a show act of male intellectualism and French academism – Derrida being his usual clever self, self-conscious and cunning. Pascale is there to admire the professor, in all her prettiness. But the scene also moves me because, *he*, Jacques Derrida, the star philosopher, loving to perform this game, to my own slight annoyance, is, of course, now dead. He really has died, since. His death off-screen turns him all the more human there, back in that moment. Imperfect. A little swanky. Not a ghost at all: a human being. When at the end of the scene, he asks Pascale the same question, she answers without any hesitation, “Yes, certainly. Now, absolutely. Yes, now I believe in ghosts.”

If you had but one day to live...

If you had a year to live...

Five years...

What if? Too big a question here, too much possibilities, too existential.

But the unexpected future perfect of regretting something in a future that already *has been*, with all the potential hurdles along the way, already past; looking back, but from a moment in time that is yet to come, five years ahead... Back in that hospital I was suddenly doing deconstruction on doctor’s prescription.

Deconstruction has been called, among others, frivolous, nihilistic, trendy (followed by its inevitable being out-of-fashion), a-political, a silent embarrassment, cancerous, inconsequential.⁹ But the imagined future perfect that was offered to me that morning by my

⁸ My translation. In translations, “*Je crois que l’avenir est aux fantômes*” has commonly been translated to (or cited as) “the future belongs to ghosts.” See, for instance, Derrida and Stiegler (2002, 115). I offer this alternative translation because I think Derrida argues that the ghosts he alludes to are to be considered in terms of agency rather than belonging. A future that is “up to ghosts” also conveys the sense that what is (still) to come, (*l’avenir/ l’à venir*) is out of one’s own hands, i.e., it is up to what is other to oneself.

⁹ Barry Smith, the writer of the letter to *The Times*, May 9, 1992, against Derrida receiving an Honorary Degree, revisits the letter, seven years after, in an interview with Jeffrey Sims. His discontent with the work of Derrida has not subsided. In the interview he likens Derrida’s “disrespect for the rules of grammar” to “a psychopath [that] throws acid at a Rembrandt painting” (Smith and Sims 1999, 155) and speaks of his concern for the “cancerous growth” of Derridean thought (Smith and Sims 1999, 156).

pulmonologist had given me something to think about. Something rather than everything. Or nothing. Deconstruction, in that moment, made perfect sense to me and my body. I was deconstructed, I fell to pieces. In a small consultation room, in a hospital where I was about to be discharged without recovery, it was as if the doctor had just asked me, But do *you* believe in ghosts? No room for speculation here; this was a pragmatics of survival. Did I believe in futures that may never materialize? Yes, my unambiguous answer was yes, YES! I will regret not saying yes – yes of course, now, absolutely, and forever to come. Even if this future was still and would always remain conditional, my regret was not: it was real. It had its effect in the real world. It was vital in my giving this writing, its having-written, a chance.

We had “read” the future, and I had reconfigured my life accordingly. It did not matter in that moment if this future would also become real: it never *was*, this wasn’t the point, it had always been about here and now. In an interview from 1993, Bernard Stiegler asks Derrida to revisit the scene with Pascale Ogier, that scene in which he introduced his philosophy of ghosts (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 119). Derrida responds that he “regrets the expression that came to [him] during its improvisation” (119). He does not explain what he regrets exactly, and why, nor does he take back his words. Instead, he offers a memory, about a scene in a classroom, a couple years after the release of *Ghost Dance*. Inside the classroom, together with students, he watches the film and sees Pascale appear in the particular scene. He sees Pascale, who died of a heart attack a year after the film’s completion. He sees her looking back at *him*, both there in the scene and inside the classroom, and tell him straight into his face (into the camera) that, Yes, now she believes in ghosts. Absolutely. But there is something disturbingly true about the way she says it *now*, the way these words maintain their deferred message. For, what Pascale in *Ghost Dance* brings home to Derrida, in the cold matter of fact of her death, are his own theoretical insinuations, his flirtations with death – but differently now, with consequence, actualized, and “for real”. Actualized, not by *his* death but by hers, unexpectedly. This was not what he had in mind. *Le fantome, c’est moi*, Derrida repeats to his future self, not realizing there that the future is *really* not up to him: it is not for him to decide when and where the ghost appears. It is always an other, another ghost that appears, returns from the future; another who comes back to haunt and tell him that, Yes, Jacques, you were absolutely right, you are always right, you had it right all the time: the trace of life in cinema produces ghosts.

The ghost is always different, deferred, maintained in its *différance*. You cannot know when and in what guise ghosts will do their haunting. In a classroom or in a hospital bed, from the past or from an unrealized future, in a book, a film scene, with a young woman or a white-haired professor, in your imagination, or in the manner of a doctor’s advice. In *Specters* Derrida wrote, perhaps most of all to remind himself: “the last one to whom a specter can appear, address itself, or pay attention is a spectator as such. At the theater or at school (...) As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to what is necessary: speak to the specter” (2006, 11).

Now, *I* see myself seeing the scene from *Ghost Dance* and I see theory, philosophy, I see Jacques Derrida with different eyes. No longer just in theory. I cannot see the future but I believe I have already been there.

I would like to learn to live. In ill-being, the wish to learn to live, under challenging and self-undermining circumstances amounts to the mental and physical effort to endure, sometimes minute to minute. A sick person is often first and foremost sustaining life, placing all bets on tomorrow, with their whole being towards the *will have been* of another day. Do you believe in tomorrow? Yes, I do. Life produces the spectrality of a death to come, but spectrality *also* produces life. I have always projected my survival, there on a phantomatic screen of a not-yet and perhaps never existent future, five years ahead in time. Even if what my pulmonologist insinuated that day, could and might have been a different story – or rather, just that: five years. Five years to live.

Three years after this conversation, I was back in a hospital bed, this time on high flow oxygen, waiting for that last resort, a pair of donor lungs, which I received in the early spring of 2017.

Specters of Marx. I open the book again to the page with the sentence: “What does it mean to follow a ghost?” (10). In my Routledge paperback copy with its black-and-red dotted cover, the page that contains this question is dog-eared and marked by the traces of at least three different pens – different times, tracing moments of reading, thinking, and engaging with this text on my own terms, in my own life. What does it mean, what could it mean? What does this text tell me? Which words does it regret and take back, which notes do I cross out, perhaps now, or in a future moment? What speaks differently to me, as I have become a different person, someone else? Who is that person reading, learning, wanting to learn; learning to live? Those have been my questions for over a decade of time passing, reading and re-reading while aging, changing: living, in the footsteps yet to make.

This is a collection of texts about my indecision between philosophy and life. This is a collection of texts without beginning without end.

Exordium (After *Specters*)¹⁰

I

I would like to learn to live. But literally, from head to toe. Where to begin, with the head? With an exordium, Cicero instructs. Exordium, the beginning of a discourse or treatise: “an address bringing the mind of the hearer into a suitable state to receive the rest of the speech” (Cicero 1913, 256-257). Derrida, in his exordium to *Specters of Marx*: “If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* that are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of *justice*” (2006, xviii). With the exordium, Cicero teaches us, the orator calls for the attention of the audience. Its function is to prepare the crowd. The orator makes his appeal: “Listen.” The exordium is a cue for the crowd to turn into an audience, and to tune its ear to the voice that is about to deliver a public speech. The audience may not know beforehand what this voice will have to say, and if what it has to say is something that it wants to hear. It is of vital importance therefore that rhetoricians establish themselves, with the exordium, as reliable and trustworthy. A trustworthy man – male, for the ancient Greek or Latin speaker is male – knows when to speak and when to contain himself. “Believe me, take my word,” he says. And the audience receives him, his word. To prepare oneself for listening is to give trust or, to suspend distrust, disbelief. To surrender oneself to the words that are about to be spoken. Nothing much is said in the exordium. The exordium seals the pact, creates a temporary bond between speaker and listener. A relation is established.

The etymology of the Latin word exordium takes me elsewhere, away from court and assembly where speech is public, rational, and exclusive to men. Exordium, from *exōrdior*, *exōrdiri*, which means to begin a web; to lay the warp, to weave (Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary*). Before I can begin to weave, I must begin by laying out the warp. Beginning, making a beginning, the warp does not yet amount to the weaving itself. It is less and more than that. One lays out the strands, the *possibility* of weaving as such: texture, pattern, image. It all begins before beginning, with a lay out, a laying out of terms: the conditions of my weaving/speaking.

Here I’m reminded of Penelope who, waiting for Odysseus to return home, each night unravels the burial shroud she has promised to weave for her father-in-law, Laertes; one last honor to her husband, presumed dead, before she will move on and pick a suitor. Each day she weaves; each night she undoes the weaving. And all this time, there is no evidence of

¹⁰ *Specters of Marx* begins with an exordium. Exordium: “Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*” (Derrida 2006, xvi). In the exordium, Derrida invokes a ghost, the ghost – a conjuration. His exordium echoes that of another text: *Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa...* *A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of communism*, opening of the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels.

Odysseus; he is not seen, neither dead nor alive: no body is waiting for the funeral rites to be performed. For three years, Penelope weaves and unweaves, to delay the completion of the shroud, made to bury the past of the father *and* the son Odysseus, her husband, still missing/being missed. She cannot make it past, she cannot get past it, she resists moving on. She does not have any intention to proceed, with the suitors that are waiting for her in her house. The weaving and unweaving protects Penelope, suspends death. It keeps the mourning in suspension. In the Introduction to Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*, Wilson writes "the deceptive plot of Penelope (...) is meant to be forever in a state of becoming, not completion" (2017, 46). Her weaving is a moving without moving on. A doing without ever being done. It's a becoming in silence, in secret: weaving *instead of* speech.

In Odysseus' absence, Penelope has no right or power to speak. She has no equal to speak to. According to the hierarchy of her royal home, she is only permitted to speak *down*, to her slaves. Even her son Telemachus tells her so:

Odysseus was not the only one
who did not come back home from Troy.
Many were lost. Go in and do your work.
Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves
to do their chores as well. It is for men
to talk, especially me. I am the master.
(Homer translated by Wilson, 2017, 116)

What she lacks in power of speech, is exchanged for skill and craft, used by Penelope to weave in silence, to her own ends – without end. With her tactile and tactical mastery over the loom she devices a deferral. It is her potential survival: as long as Odysseus remains missing and is not declared dead, Penelope can continue living as his wife and refrain from picking a suitor to re-marry. This secret cycle of weaving and unweaving, doing and undoing, is her way, her only way, to keep her fate in her own hands.

Exordium. So I begin with a burial shroud, but to unravel:

II

"Cicero says that philosophizing is nothing other than getting ready to die," Michel de Montaigne wrote in one of his *Essais*, here in English translation (2003, 89). He proceeds: "That is because study and contemplation draw our souls somewhat beside ourselves, keeping them occupied away from the body, a state which both resembles death and which forms a kind of practice for it" (89). *I open the book: I step into a space that is no space. I enter a reading state of mind... Whose mind? Yours and mine. Self to self. You or me, forgetting ourselves. I play host to character, to pronouns, visions, grammar as well as feelings, abstractions, ideas. I become more alive, less alive, I play dead. I play (g)host.* The reader

inhabits a text, its contents, visions and ideas. She is, quoting literary scholar Peter Schwenger, “possessed by words” (1999, 8). Montaigne suggests that by reading philosophy, we make room for ideas, becoming less conscious of who and what and where we are.

To philosophize, then, is to read to forget oneself.

Or –

Montaigne opts,

to philosophize is to learn to die “because all the wisdom and argument in the world eventually come down to one conclusion; which is to teach us not to be afraid of dying” (2003, 89).

To philosophize is to be passive, receptive, possessed and to lose oneself in reading,
or –

to philosophize is to be actively presently there, bringing death into mental focus.

Philosophy begins with these two options, this contradiction. To contemplate in order to forget the here and now of breath and heartbeat; or to contemplate in order to remember the future of ceasing breath and heartbeat.

To philosophize is to learn to admit: I do not know. I have a vague sense. Illness, grave illness, often begins, not with the absolute certainty of something wrong, but with the awareness of something being slightly off. A vague sense. Vague complaints, symptoms misread, mistaken, unnoticed. It began, in my case, with a sense of my breathing being not quite right somehow. That “somehow,” at first, without the proper words to indicate the precise concern – and doctors reassuring me that, ergo, nothing is the matter. Something was undeniably the matter when shortness of breath prevented me from carrying out my everyday routines: crossing the bridge that required cycling uphill, running for a train. Walking, four stories up, 58 steps to our top-floor front door. What had been there all along, before becoming ill – the quiet functioning of all things everyday, the smoothness of my movements, my body acting unobstructed, on purpose and intention – all of this: suddenly a this. What is the nature of this? What’s wrong with this? What could it be? To philosophize is to ponder the possible existence of a *this*, by starting to question it.

To begin philosophizing is to begin to learn to die or at least, to have that intention. I would like. I would like to learn to die – but do I, really?

And do I have an option? To learn, from books and life, from others and myself. From data and statistics: “The median survival for patients of ... is ... years,” I involuntarily read one day, in reference to my disease. Diagnosis, prognosis.

Should I not wish to know in what exact amount my days were numbered?¹¹ An old friend had asked, via Facebook Messenger: “What’s your prognosis?” We hadn’t spoken to each other in about fifteen years.

I would like. I would not like. I’d rather you would not ask. I would like you to get on with your life, just as I would like so much to get on with mine. Like Penelope, I would like to turn and twist around my fate, to unweave and delay it, and remain inconclusive, ignorant and in denial. I do not want to learn to die, not now.

Philosophy, the school of death. How does someone show up to it voluntarily, every day, with hope and ambition, with the persevering will to learn, to know, or even simply, in good spirits? I was – I still am – not so sure how to answer that.

In my edition of Montaigne’s *Essais*, a footnote suggests that Cicero who read Plato who gave his account of Socrates’ philosophy, changed the course of Western philosophy by a word.¹² To philosophize, in Cicero’s translation, is to *prepare* for dying – not to *practice* it, as Plato had suggested in Greek. Socrates practices death; Cicero forms an idea of death. Socrates pays his principles with his life. Cicero will think about it.¹³

Who, I am wondering today, was able to hear this change brought on by Cicero’s choice of words? Take my word, he says. Believe me. *Tota philosophorum vita commentatio mortis est.*¹⁴ The Great Art of Dying, suddenly a skill of learned men, with philosophy as their intellectual ally, their studious preparation. I guess those who would have objected with their bodies were simply not within earshot.

Rest up
Get well soon –

The words we write on postcards to the sick. Get well, get back to health. Rest, stay quiet. Stay quiet: do not speak. Some two thousand years removed in time from Cicero and his listeners, I am involuntarily learning to die. I have learned a thing or two; I am teeming with life perceived in illness as new, unknown, a territory not entirely my own. I am learning, discovering, noticing physiological marvelous manifestations. My blood pulsates with light: I can see it in and as

¹¹ One must know – one wanted me to know, one wanted to know *of me* – when the uncertainty of this condition would find closure. But consider this: the perversity of an exact knowledge that does not mean anything in any individual case, except to “us” as a statistically constructed “body,” as if half of us would live x amount of years, and the other half would not.

¹² “In Plato (*Phaedo* 67D) for Socrates, whom Cicero is following, *to philosophize* is to *practice dying*. However, Cicero translates ‘practice’ not by *meditatio*, which means that, but by *commentatio*, which means a careful preparation” (Montaigne 2003, 89).

¹³ Paraphrased from the essay, “Learning to Live with Ghosts” for *MAP Magazine*. See Goosen (2022).

¹⁴ Cicero 1. *Tusculanae Disputationes*. 30. 74 (quoted in Montaigne 2003, 89.)

my sight. Bright, dim, bright, dim, on and on. I also hear blood rushing through my ear, it sounds like a wave receding from the shore. My muscles have a memory of my habitual rhythm of movement, before I fell ill. I have to learn to move slowly, sloth-like, rationing the oxygen inside my body. Learning to make my move before I am out of oxygen. I am adjusting to ever-decreasing percentages of it in my blood. I want to tell strangers, Look, see how I'm surviving under these extraordinary conditions! But the condition is life, just life, and most people do it effortlessly, without thinking.

I do, I do life, I notice, I no longer just am. I no longer coincide with it naturally. It makes me think, all the time. I notice things for the first time. I notice things, *as* for the first time. Never before have I observed the world with such clarity and attention. My mind is in overtime. Think about it: there's plenty of time to think on a sickbed. And yet there's also no time to lose. To be ill is to fall in time's paradox: the hours, the minutes, the seconds become moments. They contract and expand, time becomes freakishly life-like – like a heart's beating, or lungs breathing. I am time, time is me, I am, I'm doing being, I am running, breathing, not enough breathing, running out of life.

In this state of mind, I jump from bed to bed, from mine to Montaigne's to that of Virginia Woolf, who wrote, in 1926, about the insights of being ill, while being ill. "I'm in bed with influenza," she writes, "but what does that convey of the great experience" (Woolf 2012, 8). Indeed, what does such a name say about the Great Indoors Intense Experience of Being Ill? Lying recumbent, staring out of the window towards the sky, Woolf shares her unique, horizontal point of view with the reader: "This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it! – this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and wagons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making ramparts and wafting them away – this endless activity" (2012, 13). Yes, *this*, and *endless*, and *active*, without knowing: without us ever having been aware. This. But who is listening, prepared to listen?

Illness, nagging and demanding illness, forces me to reconsider every aspect of my life. Existence, identity, selfhood, body, social interaction, work, financial dependence, values, friendships, family, habits, expectations, autonomy, physical movement, physical appearance, home, stairs, practical needs and need for care, opinions, ideology, space, time. And so on. But also, illness. Illness as such, which I have always conceived in terms of lack and disability: paralysis, dullness, inaction, inertia. "Rest well." I hadn't realized it is also a place, a scene of restless, if involuntary, learning – not in spite of ill health, but *because* of it. I would like. I would like to learn to maintain life: to survive. There is a tremendous lot going on in and around the diseased body, including a mind that wonders at the body's condition and is seized by its surprises. To philosophize is to become intimately aware of life, and this includes dying. To feel it nearing is a marvelous aspect of life. As Sallie Tisdale, who has written about her experiences as a palliative caretaker, describes: "[a]t some point, most of us

shift from realizing that sooner or later some future self will die to realizing that this very self, me, precious and irreplaceable me, will die” (2018, 27).

Yes, this self, this. This flow of time occupying space, this space occupying time, will one day be emptied, void of me. This absence will be noticed from time to time, but precisely as such: in absence. We do not die in abstract or universal terms. To philosophize is to embody, with my entire being and awareness, this “precious me” that will cease being me, one day. Teach me how to do this, how to embrace myself.

The irony, which is also philosophy’s paradox, is that those who are actually learning to die have other, more pressing matters to attend to. They are too busy doing the dying, not on a public square, not for an audience, not even for themselves.

I read Havi Carel, a philosopher who suffers from a rare respiratory disease, because she, like I had to, must come to terms with the idea of a potential lung transplant. Now that’s what I call a philosophical ally! I fantasize about exchanging practical advice. I don’t know what keeps me from it. In *Phenomenology of Illness*, Carel argues that the “overarching change to experience,” something that may be common to people suffering from serious illness, “deserves philosophical attention” (2018, 4). She does this within a phenomenological framework. Because the supposedly objective disease (that doesn’t exist separate from one’s being) and the subjectively experienced changes that illness brings about, are just not one and the same. Not even the same thing from a different angle. “Illness,” Carel writes, “is the experience of disease, the ‘what it is like’ qualitative dimension as it is experienced and made meaningful by the ill person” (17). What it is like to experience symptoms; but also, what it is like to depend on the judgment of doctors; to trust doctors, to advocate for your own needs and wishes, to receive sympathy, understanding, or the opposite; to meet the absence of an elevator in public space. “Disease is to illness what our physical body is to our body as it is lived and experienced by us” (17). First-person, third person: different bodies, different worlds. A different focalization. One from the body, another about the body as object.

To learn to die, or to study dying. Practice or preparation. Realization and theorization: these two contradictory readings of Cicero’s writing are held together in Montaigne’s interpretation of philosophy. Western philosophy as being, on the one hand, a method using reading and thinking so as to forget the body, in an experiential rehearsal of the eventual loss of self. Philosophy as being, on the other hand, a study, using reading and thinking so as to learn to reason, to argue, and to argue not to be afraid of dying, rehearsing and repeating its idea. Conscious, unconscious. Unconsciously, Montaigne approaches death by a forgetting of the self, his conscious will and intentions. Consciously, he constitutes himself as a subject, bringing death – a death, *his death*, his very self that will die one day – into mental focus.

Myself, my selves – the one that demands to be a presently active, speaking, thinking subject, and the other who wants to let go of herself and remain with, *in* the experience – are conflicted in my learning. Illness as philosophy; philosophizing while ill. It seems impossible

to prepare (study) and practice at the same time. I often feel as if I have to make a choice between philosophy and living, between pondering or positing an idea and coming to regret it with my life. No longer philosophy *as* or *for* or *about* life, but life in opposition to it. How did this happen?

Exordium. I weave and unweave, weave and unweave, in circles, in cycles of day and night: doing, undoing, beginning without end without beginning, not knowing what to do with this newly acquired knowledge.

III

Then, this (*another this*): Illness puts me to shame, puts me in my place. Which place, where? A strange thought or rather, a vicious address: an inner voice more destructive than disease besieges me, self-righteously, when I am told that I am ill. *Well, what did you think, who did you think you are? Did you think you could get away with your good life, your ambitions, be better, reach higher, aspire? This will teach you!* I was seized, struck by its voice. I wasn't aware of it having been a part of me: the part that considered myself undeserving for the life I had in mind, the goals and future I desired, this voice. It was the voice of the place I had grown up in, and that had grown inside me; of the teachers in school, the mothers and fathers of others, putting me in my place: behave, be normal, be a *good girl*, it is good enough for you. This voice, that prevented me from growing apart from this milieu, that scolded me, *because* of my learning and desire to learn, the desire to know myself differently.

When, in 2020, I am reading *A Girl's Story* by Annie Ernaux, in English translation by Alison L. Strayer, I recognize this voice, its conflictedness, that shame, in what she writes. Hers is an entirely different story, history – a different life, different memories, a different reflection altogether – and yet it is there all the same, I feel that feeling of hers as mine, here, within me. Ernaux, in her seventies, recalls in detail the events in the summer of 1958 that led her, seventeen, to sleep with a man for the first time. Through her writing of the memory, she tries to excavate this fossil of a girl with all her complicated and confusing sexual desires, *before* she was repressed by another desire, or rather, an ambition: the wish to study philosophy. Which, she writes, was also a desire to escape the provincial working-class milieu of her upbringing. "It's crazy how reasonable one can become under the influence of philosophy," she writes (Ernaux 2020, 94). Reasonable. "By forcing me to think, repeat and write, over and over, that other people must not serve as a means but an end, and that we are rational beings, *ergo* unconsciousness and fatalism are degrading, philosophy has done away with my desire to flirt" (94). Poof! Gone. People must not serve as a means: a sentence you write in a lined notebook, as a punishment. People must not serve as a means. Philosophy as a lesson in life can become disciplinary when its education becomes a form of *dressage*, Derrida writes in *Specters* (2006, xvii). It will teach you, tell you what and what not to do, it will put you into place.

Either you are a girl, or you are a philosopher. Ernaux realizes in her seventies that there was no place for the existence of that girl who acted, if foolishly, whimsically, and naïve, on her sexual desires, her dreams. Philosophy has no place for a girl of seventeen to learn to live.

Rolf singing to Liesl in *The Sound of Music*, Technicolor film of my youth, broadcast on Dutch television every year on Christmas eve: “*You wait little girl on an empty stage for fate to turn the light on, Your love little girl is an empty page that men will want to write on...*”

... *To write on...*

She’s still embarrassed by that younger self. “I too wanted to forget that girl,” Annie Ernaux confesses, having expelled her from her own self: *that* girl, in the third-person. “Really forget her, that is, stop yearning to write about her. Stop thinking that I have to write about this girl and her desire and madness, her idiocy and pride,” she writes. “It is the perpetually missing piece, always postponed. The unqualifiable hole” (2020, 16).

These words land in me while I am reading and I feel inside me that shameful part that, I assume, each of us has and that one wishes – and learns – to look away from, even if it is also the place from which we have seen, have told, and have made sense. First-person, unqualifiable hole. For it is also from *this* experience of *that* girl, Ernaux realizes, that her writing, the desire to write, originates: her writing (prose, memoir) as a form of philosophical analysis, getting to know oneself. Ernaux: “I am not constructing a fictional character but deconstructing the girl I was” (2020, 52).

And from where, you may think, this sudden need to drag *her* into my writing? *That* girl, why she? I do not wish to instrumentalize this girl Annie, nor do I want to humiliate her. It is rather that she speaks to me directly, singles me out from the virtual space of reading, where she fills in a part of *me* that I myself can’t look at; she stands in for something I do not fully understand about myself.

Illness put me to shame; put me into the memory of a younger female body that knows intimately how shame feels, when she is singled out. And now, the ill body: I do and do not know this body. I recognized, relived its embarrassment. Illness prompted this memory of being a girl put back into her place, a girl being laughed at, for the dreams she has. Like the girl that Annie Ernaux tries to re-incorporate into her story with her re-writing as memory, she remains a missing piece to me, but she is sensed in her repressed absence from my consciousness, through the appearance of this seventeen-year-old Annie, whom I have incorporated into my reading body: who *possesses* me in reading.

Isn't she entirely beside the point? You may ask. But what is the point? What is the use of writing if we cannot acknowledge our desires and disturbances, precisely when they appear? Beside the point is where I want to take this, to give occasion to the unexpected turns that thinking makes, and *enables*, molded as it is by time, by life and reading. Knowledge was never made in a straight line.

Everyone writes under given circumstances. No one writes in or from a void. My everyday life in illness (from pre-transplant serious illness to post-transplant chronic condition) dictates my process of writing: what I can and cannot do. Priorities keep changing, all the time, from work to rest, to health and urgent matters. Visits to the hospital and hospitalizations. Everything but life itself is always beside the point.

Illness is not so much a point of view, as a full immersion into what presents itself in and as life, in its immediacy, to the senses. Should this not be the concern, the desire, of philosophy? Everything that seizes my attention becomes for that moment, the sole matter. It is, as Woolf described, a feverish kind of indulging in the world: obsessive, revelatory (and at times, hallucinatory), with no eye for anything else. With great eye for what one happens to encounter. Some would call it: the opposite of learning. Girlhood or learning. Illness or philosophy. Today, on this particular day of my reading and writing, I am with Annie whom I don't know, but who is presently fully released in me, alive – made alive – by the writing of Ernaux. Why suppress her again?

Why not let her speak?

IV

Begin. Beginning. Begun. Learn. Learning. Done. I try to make up my mind. The ambivalence I feel towards philosophy *from the beginning* is that it is both not the place and the *only* place for women: for “girls”; for the ill; for all those in defiance of their supposed or assigned place in the order (the hierarchy) of things; those who are excessively philosophical and do not have it in them to contain themselves.

By the writing of Virginia Woolf, the sickbed of mild illness transforms, like pumpkin to coach, into an enviable place. (Of course this feeling may well vanish when the clock strikes 12; writing is after all, a sort of magic.) Bed-ridden and with fever, Woolf envisions herself as a deserter of “the army of the upright” (2012, 12), exempted from following the rules and commands of civilized behavior. What kind of scene of learning is this, can it be a site of learning at all? In Woolf's bed there is no place for shame. From her sudden, unexpected horizontal point of view, she can look at the upright *as* upright, for the first time. Excused by pains, by her temperature, she succumbs to a “rashness” (22) that

permits her to read and think uncompromisingly, oblivious to how one should behave, without purpose or plan. And look where no plans are taking her! “There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional), a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” (11).

To think without upholding respectability, disobeying the rules of health; without keeping up appearances (I am writing this in my pajamas), giving in to all desires of mind, soul and body, acting on one’s impulses, one’s needs and neediness, is still today, philosophy’s other. Illness is thought of as incidental, anecdotal, even though a common aspect of life. Truth needs to be considered not blurted out. Be reasonable; make up your mind. Take Cicero’s word for it: philosophy is what constitutes a civilized mind, the one to take with you outside like an umbrella when it rains – distinct from the madness that you leave at home.

Reading Woolf reveling in her magnified sense of her surroundings, brought on by influenza and fever, one must realize that writing also conceals by opening up its particular perspective; that it can never reveal the complete picture, in this case, of being ill. Illness is particular and so is knowledge. In Woolf’s essay it is this insight that presents itself as a physical condition. Full immersion *and* incompleteness. We cannot be the omniscient beings we might want to be, and always already have broken down in fragments of our related selves. Learning is never absolute, never-ending, it isn’t done in indifference; one must remain surprised by clouds, by Shakespeare, by one’s own thinking, sensing, and making sense. One cannot report objectively “on being ill”, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing to learn there.

Is this why I struggle with Susan Sontag’s essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), that iconic text, much referred to, still today, in writing about the experience of being ill? Why? Maybe because she makes such an effort in treating this “subject” (her cancer, potentially killing her) as if from the outside. Rationally. No matter how often I read the essay, I get lost in the argument. I read between the lines a repressed rage for the fact that, in the end, conclusively, reason cannot do away with illness and death. Sontag’s arguing does not help her in any way to accept this. I read her ability to make an argument in spite of illness, as a form of self-defense, which, at the same time, seems a pretense to me, of a woman pretending to have it all under control. Containing herself. Containing the cancer, preventing it from spilling over into the emotional lives of readers. Why is this pretense seen as a virtue? I do not want to encourage the pretense. *Illness as Metaphor* reads to me as an essay that is, ultimately, written to remain undefeated, upright at all cost, at the cost of oneself.

V

Exordium. Someone steps forward and says. Says, I have something to say. Obviously (of course! she yells from her bed) there is something fundamentally wrong with

the way Cicero presents beginnings, presents *himself*, the rhetorician, as a trustworthy man. Rhetorical speech, the speech of reason and of reasonable speech, foundational to Western philosophy, *begins speaking* from the presumption that everyone is in the condition to do so; that everyone is able to open their mouth and be heard, having an equal opportunity and ability to do the speaking. Cicero speaks from the blind conviction, or ignorance, that all speech is heard equally and not silenced, shunned off, or laughed at. That it won't be repressed in shame, in silent embarrassment, or fear to come across as irrational.

In other words, Cicero presumes that the way towards speaking, towards the steps forward into civic and public space, on a forum, on a stage or behind a lectern, inside a classroom, is always paved and welcoming, unobstructed by conditions of life. Cicero is in a position to assume that the strands will already have been laid out for him, and so he thinks, for everyone. His speech is the weft into what is a given to him, already there at his disposal. It is the one who has *no* place to speak of and to speak from that knows better: the girl, the sick, the shameful, the slave, the dying, they know that the weaving of speaking begins before the opening of the mouth.

As I keep on reading randomly in order to pass time in bed – reading, as Woolf would say, without agenda – another seventeen-year-old girl appears, this time in the writing of Toni Morrison. Confronted with a history of statistics that equals rice to tar to humans, she condemns an academic scholarship that trains students “to make distinctions between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor but not between rice and human beings” (Morrison 2019, 43). What is reasonable about a learning that cultivates disinterest; a learning to forget the capacity to see or make a difference? Morrison continues, “That is what indices are like, of course. Not the fan-shaped spread of rice bursting from the gunnysack. Not the thunder roll of barrels of turpentine cascading down a plank. And not a seventeen-year-old girl with a tree-shaped scar on her knee – and a name.” (43). A name, it must be said, that we do not know.

Not one, but *two* seventeen-year-old girls possess me now. Girls who couldn't be more different – and their difference must be acknowledged. They sound their distinct silences within me. One begins to see, *to hear*, a pattern in the weave.

I revel, unravel, turn back in time to the Greeks of Western beginnings, to Greek beginnings. The ancients, poet Anne Carson writes in an essay on the gender of sound, did not only speak highly of rhetorical speech but also of literal voices emanating from bodies (Carson 1995, 119-142). Voices, which, Carson demonstrates with her reading of classic texts alongside modern poetry, are not the same as, but have often been conflated with, speech.

In ancient Greece, reliable speakers had large, loud, deep voices. Opposed to these are the high-pitched voices of the female, the mad, the witch: *unheard (of)* in philosophy. There is no ear for this sound in philosophy – for girlish giggles, for the moans and screams

of giving birth and those of women mourning openly and loudly, or for the soft humming of mothers singing to their babies.¹⁵ Aristotle ascribed “the lower pitch of the male voice to the tension placed on a man’s vocal cords by his testicles functioning as loom weights,” Carson writes (1995, 119).

The warp-weighted loom used in ancient Greece is a vertical instrument with ceramic loom weights hanging at the end of the warp’s threads to keep the bundles taut. The strands make the warp but the weights make it operable: they establish the functional parameters of the loom and the fabric that can thus be woven with it. As I read in an article for the *Oxford Journal of Archeology*: “The thickness of a loom weight, and thus the width of the row of loom weights hanging closely together, defines the width of a fabric and – together with the weight of the loom weight—the thread count and density of the fabric.” (Mårtensson, Nosch and Strand 2009, 373).

Exordium. Before the warp, before the beginning, there is the weight and this weight, according to Aristotle, is masculine. The strands are laid out biologically, sexually, by the weight of the testicles. To say, “take my word” and to be given that trust; to *sound* reliable, one must be a man. This also implies that women with their weightless genitals, their voids, are unreliable speakers, from the beginning (before the beginning). No warp without weights. The high-pitched sounds of a woman have no place in public space, at the forum, before the law: she shrieks and ululates in the mountains, on the beach, and from rooftops. Like Cassandra who blurts out truths that are not taken seriously and are judged irrational. *Aiee! Aieeee! Apollo! Apollo!*

A woman’s place is behind the loom. But even the loom is not hers to claim. Aristotle turns the loom into a metaphor for the speech of the upright and rational male, silencing with it the silence of the woman weaver. Man talks the female, if not literally then certainly symbolically, to death. She has already been talked out of the talking that matters, *before* the rhetorical beginning that begins, precisely, with speech as if it were always already the matter, a natural matter of men amongst men.

¹⁵ Sara Cohen Shabot looks at aspects of sound and gender in specific relation to obstetric violence, which she defines as a specific type of medical “violence against women *because* they are women” and, more specifically, “because the laboring body is perceived as antithetical to the myth of femininity” in a patriarchal society (2016, 233; 245).

VI

Now someone, somebody, *a woman*, comes forward and says,

I would like to learn to live finally.



Fig. 1. Penelope at her loom. ca. 430 BCE. Museo Civico in Chiusi.

This is a collection of texts written from the unqualifiable hole.

Take My Word

What came first, the weaving or the text, the metaphor or the reality? I want to describe a situation of the elements so far discussed: men, women, bodies, voices, speech, reason. A situation in which speech turned perversely the way Aristotle had imagined it – but not so reasonably.

Steenbergen, a small rural town of 13,500 habitants, is located in Noord-Brabant, a southern province of the Netherlands. It is about 10 kilometers from the city where I grew up. Steenbergen was in the news in 2015, when local council plans for a so-called AZC, a center for asylum seekers, were met with opposition from its inhabitants. This took place at the height of what the European Commission had tactfully labeled the “European migrant crisis,” a bureaucratic deflation of the actual crises going on: people fleeing from war situations in Syria and Eritrea, or from dire living circumstances in countries across Africa and the Middle-East. The town of Steenbergen wanted to take in consideration the reception of some six hundred refugees, an amount that many inhabitants felt disproportionate to the town’s population. Some also feared the idea of Muslim foreigners coming to live in their town: 2015 had set off with the shooting at the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris on January 7, a terrorist attack claimed by ISIS, which provoked anti-Muslim sentiments across Europe.

To voice and listen to the concerns of its inhabitants, the council of Steenbergen scheduled a public meeting at a local school gym, inviting people to speak their mind in scheduled time slots of 5 minutes per speaker. The announcement of this town meeting went viral on social media, where the issue was taken up nationally, causing a frenzy of online hate speech and racist slurs. Thus, on the day of the scheduled meeting this was no longer solely a town’s issue. The situation in Steenbergen had in fact become so tense that local authorities had to call a state of emergency. Shops and cafés had to close; the Dutch riot police (ME) stood guard outside the gym, while the council inside was seated near the exit so that its members could leave abruptly in case of unrest. More than seven hundred people showed up at the gym, local and non-local, most of them dissatisfied with the potential plans for an AZC in Steenbergen. National news media were present to broadcast the public grievances of what on television later that evening looked like one angry aggressive mob.

I was caught up in my own confusion watching the news that evening – angry, but also wondering who was listening to whom and what for. The media was there in wish-fulfillment: what it provided was, indeed, a televised angry mob in Steenbergen, for my moral outrage. One wonders, Did my indignation of what I saw on the news that evening contribute to the sheltering of refugees? Did it provide a roof?

Some twenty people had signed up to speak publicly that evening. Only one person, a woman named Dasja Abresh, a former member of council, spoke in favor of the plans that night. This was hardly a surprise. And what she planned to say, sadly had no sensational news value to the reporters present. What *was* of interest to them, however, was that her speaking time got interrupted by loud booing, whistles, and aggressive gestures from members in the audience. When she remarked, in response, that her freedom of speech was jeopardized by the threats and attempts to silence her and those who shared her opinion, a group of about thirty white men stood up and started to chant, repeatedly:

THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE
THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE
THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE
THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE
THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE
THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE¹⁶

Neither the moderator, nor any of the present council members, nor anyone in the crowd, came to the woman's defense. On YouTube, where the full recording of the evening is archived, one sees men and women in the audience laughing in quiet consent. Not just men. Women also think "there should be a dick in there." Other men stand up to join the chanting. The comments under the YouTube video are turned off – presumably to prevent further insults, racist or misogynist.

The meeting in Steenbergen set the tone for other such confrontations across the country. In an item of the Dutch news program *Nieuwsuur*, Sander Booij, a young man from Steenbergen who spoke against the AZC at the town's meeting, comments, one year after: "We set the example for the rest of the country. If you make your voice heard and show your disagreement, council members will have to listen."¹⁷ Indeed, the plans were abolished after the town's meeting, and the AZC was never realized. It is simple: in order for someone to listen, you will have to make yourself heard. Aristotle used the analogy of the loom to emphasize the masculinity of deep reliable voices and speech. Reasonable guys have reasonable voices. They have Dutch names, like Sander, and they set the example for the rest of the country.

It is for men to talk. Women should stick to the loom and distaff.

¹⁶ The number of times it is distinctly audible in the footage. SLOS. "Raad Steenbergen - 21-10-15 - Beeldvormende vergadering (AZC - vluchtelingenopvang)." YouTube video. 2 hr., 8 min. Posted October 22, 2015 (1.18.05-1:18.20).

¹⁷ My translation. NOS. *Nieuwsuur*. July 30, 2016. See also: Karin Bakker, "Steenbergen: het protest dat 'de toon zette voor azc-debat,'" NOS online. <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/collectie/8549/artikel/2122272-steenbergen-het-protest-dat-de-toon-zette-voor-azc-debat>.

In his lecture “Femininity,” Freud describes weaving as a female invention born out of lack: as with pubic hair, women weave out of shame for their anatomy, their lack of penis (Freud 1933 quoted in Weissberg 2010, 668).¹⁸

Four years later, in 2019 in Maresfield Gardens, London, I stand in front of Freud’s famous couch, covered by a perhaps even more famous rug (in fact, one sees little of the couch, because the tapestry is draped on top of it). If the dream of Irma marked the beginning – the “discovery” – of psychoanalysis with a visionary glimpse up Irma’s throat, the couch has been, and still is its material base.

In “Ariadne’s Thread” (2010) Liliane Weissberg asks a simple but overlooked question. What could it mean that this base is covered with a tapestry? What and whose shame are covered up by that intricate and beautiful, deep-red thick Persian rug?

When I watch Dasja Abresh on YouTube, speaking at the school gym, I see men in bomber jackets, raging faces. Arms, hands, fists up in the air. Everyone white. White with anger. There is a word in Dutch for the drowning out of one voice by another louder voice, or voices: *overstemmen*. A literal translation of the word is to over-voice, to out-voice: to overrule or cancel one voice by the sheer volume of another, so that not only is a voice obstructed from being heard, but with it, it is substituted by another – insults, cursing, nonsense, in this case. Men are at an advantage here, because they, well they tend to have the louder, deeper voices.

There is much to say in Freudian terms about the statement that “there should be a dick in there” [*daar moet een piemel in*], which in fact is difficult to translate to the letter. What it says, what is suggested, is that this woman needs to be fucked back to her senses, or simply be fucked so as to be silenced. She needs a man. In Dutch, it speaks multitudes, not just about the men who chant these words, or about the woman to whom these words were addressed in this case, but about speaking and having a voice as such, and making yourself heard.

“Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day,” Anne Carson writes (1995, 120). Dasja Abresh made the news that evening, not for what she had to say, but for being scolded by members of the audience; prevented, literally, from speech and speaking up against the majority, to the extent that what one remembers about her public speech is that despicable chant that overrules, drowns out, and therefore silences her voice. Exordium: take my word.

A scold, according to the *OED* is, “(a) In early use, a person (esp. a woman) of ribald speech; later, a woman (rarely a man) addicted to abusive language, (b) a woman who disturbs the peace of the neighbourhood by her constant scolding.” Derived from the old Norse *skáld*,

¹⁸ Both in German and Dutch, the word for pubic hair translates as “shame hair.”

which I further find out, means poet. A scold bends language, disturbs the peace with her (rarely *his*) speech.

From the Middle Ages onwards, such a woman was physically punished, *scolded*, by a scold's bridle (sometimes called a witch's bridle or, branks); an iron mask or frame that folded tightly around the head and muzzled the mouth. The bridle bit or gag literally held the scold's tongue tied, preventing the wearer from making the sounds to form words. From this time, then, scold (noun and verb) could refer both to the woman's speech *and* to her silencing. Both were a public matter: the scold was to be prevented from speaking in public, and scolding was a silencing of women for others to take notice of, in public.

So, Freud, I ask you, what's up with the rug? H.D. wrote about it in detail, in her journal of her analysis (2012). Should she lie on the rug, under it? She wonders. Should she fold it neatly, when the session is over? She was Freud's subject, but only so that she could analyze *him* as well; she wanted to be his disciple, in order to become, like him, a psychoanalyst. She wanted to learn. In her writing, the Vienna practice comes to live; comes to live more than in his last practice in London with its silent requisites, where Freud is absent.

Freud, who in his dream wants Irma to open her mouth widely so that he can inspect her oral cavity. There "... on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkably curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinate bones of the nose" (Freud 2010, 132).

Irma is telling him something without speaking, in dream language. Freud's specimen dream of psychoanalysis is remembered at the cost of what "Irma" (Emma Eckstein) may have wanted to say outside the dream, but which she kept discreet. From Freud's correspondence with his close friend and colleague Wilhelm Fliess, we know that Emma had undergone a disastrous surgery, which had removed her nasal conchae or, turbinate bones – a treatment based on Fliess's nasal-reflex theory, which conflated sexual organs with afflictions of the nose. The surgery had been performed by Fliess on Freud's recommendation.

When Irma/Emma Eckstein suffered from recurrent and profuse post-operational hemorrhages, Freud wrote to Fliess that these were hysterical "wish-bleedings," suggesting that they had nothing to do with the half meter of gauze that was retrieved from her nose, left there by accident, by Fliess. Neither in the dream nor in life does that half meter of gauze really come into psychoanalytic existence.¹⁹

¹⁹ This is one of the subjects of the controversial book by former psychoanalyst Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (first published in 1984), the arguments of which have been criticized widely, as well as reported on in Janet Malcolm's *In the Freud Archives*, published that same year. Even though Masson's theories, based on his archival findings, have been written off, the correspondence between Fliess and Freud, also published by Masson, cannot conceal Fliess's malpractices and Freud's lack of a critical response. See also Masson (1985).

To scold is to close the door of the female mouth in public. Dasja Abresch was scolded by men shutting her mouth, shutting her door, substituting one opening of her body for the other, or simply, in Aristotelian spirit, by conflating them.

THERE SHOULD BE A DICK IN THERE.

Not even in *her*. She is no longer a person, a woman, she is a scold, a bad mouth, only so much and so little as her openings, which trouble and disturb and should remain shut, or else closed shut. And it is men who shut her up, drown out her voice by their deep, loud chanting of words that say what these men are already signifying with their bodies, their gestures, expressing one way and the other – if not one way, then the other – that she, woman, scold, should be shut up and shut out by a man. It is men and their genitals that decide who speaks and who is prevented from speaking.

Anne Carson ends her essay on gender and sound wondering “if there might be another idea of human order than repression,” a different style of knowledge and getting to know each other, which is not invested in yes *or* no, for *or* against (1995, 136). What is the sound of philosophy, who speaks? What the writing of Anne Carson, Virginia Woolf, Annie Ernaux, and Toni Morrison have in common is that for these women philosophy must always begin by imagining an alternative, in literature: in writing while ill (Woolf), in memoir (Ernaux), fiction (Morrison), and poetry (Carson). In forms of discourse that do not put people in their supposed place. Not just another perspective, but a different “strand” of thinking that is not fixated on what is and isn’t but imagines *what can be*. As Morrison proposes, an active imagining “in which the thrust is towards the creation of members of a society who can make human decisions. And who do. It is a scholarship that refuses to continue to produce generation after generation of students who are trained to make distinctions between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor but not between rice and human beings (...) between the weight of a barrel and the sanctity of a human head” (Morrison 2019, 42). Between a young man having fled the Syrian war, and the disproportion of his “kind” to those who live in prosperity and do not wish to be confronted by other people’s realities.

That is the warp I propose to lay out here. Not a point, not a line of thinking or a well-built argument, but a texture. Exordium. Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: I would like to learn to live finally. Philosophy as inquiring, not into the “nature” but into the fabric of life.

All the way to the end of both his life and writing – on page 1218 of my Penguin Classics edition of the *Essays*, too thick too open completely without its pages falling from their mass paperback glued spine – Michel de Montaigne changes his mind. “Oh what a soft and delightful pillow, and what a sane one on which to rest a well-schooled head, are ignorance and unconcern. I would rather be an expert on me than on Cicero,” he writes and with it, cuts himself of a lineage of learned men, a philosophical genealogy (Montaigne 2003, 1218). In order to do the dying and die finally, on his own terms.

It takes a lifetime. It takes a life.



Fig. 2. Audience members during Dasja Abresh's speaking time at the "Beeldvormende vergadering (AZC – vluchtelingenopvang)" in Steenbergen, October 21, 2015. Photo ANP.



Fig. 3. Athens, Agora Deposit U 13:1, Select Loom Weights (Courtesy of Agora excavations, ASCSA) published in: Harris, Lewis, and Woolmer, eds. *The Ancient Greek Economy: Markets, Households and City-States*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Body Writing, or: ___ and | Together in a Room²⁰

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion wrote (2009, 11). Mieke Bal writes, in *Narratology*, “[a] narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof” (2017, 5). The narrative text is the structure that holds, produces, the content (story). Philosophy is a narrative text for the stories we tell ourselves in order to live: *I would like to learn to live*. But it is by far not the only narrative text that can accommodate stories of life, as literary writings such as those by Woolf, Morrison, Ernaux, and Carson point out (and of course there are many other alternatives – these were the texts that called *me* out in this particular time.) What these texts have in common is that they are focalized differently, and often more explicitly, than the conventional scholarly text.

Focalization is a narratological term bringing together existing definitions of perspective and point of view, as a component of the narrative text. Gérard Genette, in his coinage of the term, is concerned with degrees of access to narrative information. An omniscient narrator “knows” more about the story than a narrator that narrates from the point of view of a character. The narrator may also leave information out, as is the case with the detective story, for example. “[B]y focalization, I certainly mean a restriction of ‘field,’” Genette writes (1990, 74). In other words, the “field” of the story is opened up from a certain perspective, which may or may not coincide with that of the character(s). For Genette, focalization is a means to locate and identify a perspective: is it shared by narrator and character, or not, or only partly? And how does this give form to the story told?

Mieke Bal, turning the typology into a concept for analysis, places emphasis on the *relationality* between focalizer and focalized. In this way, focalization is no longer merely a matter of pointing at relations, but it becomes a means to analyze its effects: What could the relation between the one who is narrating and what is seen reveal about subject and object, subjectivity, and the way in which subjectivity shapes perception? What does it say about the power of the one that speaks and presents the reader/viewer with a particular view? With this reorientation, Bal introduces an aspect of point of view that remains outside of Genette’s classification-oriented scope, by addressing the particularity of the viewing (or more generally, of perception) as something that is not merely an element of the narrative but a generative part. As she points out, “a small child sees things in a totally different way from an adult, if only as far as scale is concerned, but also due to the knowledge and experience that inform understanding” (Bal 2017, 135). A toddler sees a world of wonder and discovery, a new parent sees a world of potential danger: different stories of the same environment.

Narrative is not enabled by the access to a “field,” as if the field were out there already, waiting to be told. Rather, it is established – it manifests – in the process of a perceiving subject trying to grasp and interpret the field, and with it, give it shape. One could

²⁰ An earlier, Dutch version of this section appeared in *Mr. Motley*. See Goosen (2022).

go as far as to say that there is no field, only fields of perception. This is explicitly so in fiction, where the field is produced from the writing.

To focalize is to engage in a circular logic: what is seen and understood from having-seen relies on who is seeing. Moreover, and with her example of the child perceiving their surroundings, Bal demonstrates that we “see” the stories we tell ourselves with our entire bodies, our senses, cognitive sense, and memory. We see with our hands; we see in panic and in fear; we see the world rose-colored when we are in love. We see, with big egos, afraid not to be seen; with small hearts, with insecurity and curiosity. We see based on what we saw before. We differ on what it is we see. We look away. The baby’s mouth searches with hunger for the mother’s breast. A hand reaches for a doorknob, already anticipating its next action. A spider needs another side, it looks for a nook, to spin its web. The focalizer “sees” their story unravel, not quite before their own eyes: the story is always part of them already, they take part in the fabric of it.

By convention, the scholar is encouraged to separate themselves from the story, writing from a third-person or plural “we” perspective, as if they as an individual do not partake in the narrative text. This, so that there is a clear object of research to distinguish and consider, without the interference of someone who did the actual consideration. Objectivity is what we call this story we tell ourselves. It is a story that asks for some suspension of academic disbelief: we know that objectivity does not exist, and yet we agree to pretend for the duration of this story that the object is “out there” without the act of perception, previous to the scholar’s having thought and conceptually constructed it into its particular shape, into something worthy of consideration. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison argue in *Objectivity*, objectivity involves a kind of “seeing not as a separate individual but as a member of a particular scientific community.” Daston and Galison look at the mid-nineteenth-century rise of the “scientific self” that negates subjectivity, and becomes “diametrically opposed to the artistic self,” who was expected to express their subjectivity and personality (2007, 37). The scientific subject extracts itself, abstracts its own being from the doing – becomes the abstraction of a person, one step removed from their body. An objective text is focalized not with a body but as belonging to a larger body of knowledge. The individual disappears under the guise of the impersonal “one” or plural “we,” is spectralized by the frequent use of the passive form – “it is said that...” The resulting narrator of the text is interchangeable with others who share these ideas; the specificity of a mind and body having thought these ideas is restrained, repressed from the text.

There are, of course, examples of respected scholarship, both recent and older, that play with form and experiment with writing; Jacques Derrida being the inspiration for a creative and critical writing that yields innovative thinking between literary criticism, theory, and philosophy. Nor am “I” the first or the last “I” who speaks in scholarship, but this point of the fully lived experience of research – the phenomenality of thinking in time and space – is something that needs more than pointing out. It needs the repetition and persistence to be seen, not as incidental but inclusive of the philosophical field. So it precisely needs restating,

in all its possible experimental forms and styles, its exceptional instances, its particularities and eccentricities, in order to invade what is seen as traditional about philosophy.

Why do I matter, why should it matter? My reading of Jacques Derrida flirting with the *idea* of death in theory changed radically when I had to think of practical matters concerning my own death. Should I write a will, just in case? Will these be the last words written? In 2016, when donor lungs became a necessity for my survival, no longer something that could be postponed into an abstract future, all the things I should have started considering sounded preposterous – as if I was *playing* dead, an imposter. It is so easy to write about death when it is not really of your immediate concern. In the summer of 2016, when I was very ill, I insisted on going away; I had to go elsewhere to settle these matters, put things on paper. I couldn't do this from my own home, it would have been too painful to think about these things in this intimate setting, where I lived with my partner. In the rental I had booked for this occasion, I ended up watching films, reading poetry, sitting outside in the sun. I took long baths in the evening listening to podcasts and music. I fully embraced all the distractions from whatever it was I had come here to do. The house I stayed in was full of knick-knacks and expressions of the young female owner – she had an amazing poetry collection, there were mineral stones, ceramic miniatures. In the bedroom was her make-up, and on the wall a poster of an iconic photograph of young Susan Sontag. I enjoyed these sparks – hints of the owner's life, and indeed it was life I felt so very sensitive to, not death. The answer to death's practicalities, in my thirties, in a sublet rented for the occasion, was to LIVE LIVE LIVE with all my senses, even with my failing lungs that kept me from living a more active life. I insisted on continuing my reading of Jacques Derrida, but also felt that our "friendship" (through my reading and in my mind, we had become friendly, I had befriended his ideas) had taken a turn, almost like there was a betrayal in his writings: you did not prepare me for this.

Like science, scholarship writes its "field" as if its stories were not narrated by someone, excluding with it, from its scope, that which has intentional narrative quality, and a particular subject who speaks from a particular place.

It took becoming ill to really feel, or rather clash with, the image of the researcher/scholar as "unbodied" narrator, and with how limited that fiction is. I am hardly the first person pointing this out, and I am absolutely indebted to the work of feminism, black studies, queer studies, disability studies, and so on. This research wouldn't be complete without any reference to positionality and intersectionality, as working concepts for the ways our identities shape our forms – and conditions! – of inquiry. My intention here is to focus on the structural aspect of research as a form of narrating in which decisions are made about focalization. Do I, as a researcher, acknowledge that what comes in the picture as narrative is the result of my own perception, or do I present myself as an omniscient narrator? Which "body" do I inhabit in my writing: no body, my personal body, someone else's, a collective body? I am less interested in identity as a permanent point of view, and propose the concept

of focalization as a narrating body that one temporarily identifies with. In our lives we inhabit different identities that change according to time, space, and context. The fascinating aspect of illness, I'd like to emphasize here, is that one may suddenly "get" it and also potentially lose it again in life. If at all an identity, it is one of impermanence, change, interruption, and the insight that life is all that. My perceptions changed radically during grave illness, a perspective I no longer embody fully now that I am in a state of better health. It is these perspectival shifts, and the awareness of the resulting changes of narrative and changes of mind, that I am interested in.

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In her interview with the *Rolling Stone*, a year after the publication of *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag says she wants to learn to write in a way that is less punishing for her body. Right down to her diary, she is very strict with herself: when undergoing aggressive treatment for breast cancer, she writes, "I feel like the war in Vietnam" only to cross it out immediately or at a later moment (quoted in Roiphe 2016, 51). The expression goes against all her critical principles, her stubborn rationalism. Illness is not a metaphor, nor is war. Therefore, she reasons, I do not feel this, I have never felt this. Not in these terms. In another notebook, she quotes W.H. Auden: "I must have knowledge, and a great deal of it, before I can feel anything" (quoted in Roiphe 2016, 33).

But it is not her academic rigor that Sontag means to unlearn, when she says she wants to write in a less punishing way. In the *Rolling Stone* interview, she is referring to the writing itself, the actual physical act. "I try to imagine, for instance, what it would be like to write and feel really comfortable. I tend to write first drafts lying on a bed, stretched out. Then, as soon as I have something to type out, I go to a desk and a wooden chair and from then on it's all at the typewriter" (Sontag and Cott 1979). That's how I picture her, sitting upright in an old wooden chair, behind a desk that is buried under piles of books and paper. Tackatackatack, says Susan Sontag's typewriter.

Virginia Woolf wrote her aforementioned essay *On Being Ill* in 1926. When, in 2013, I became ill, I remembered this text vaguely, but intensely, like a fever dream. *On Being Ill* doesn't just give words to the experience of being ill; in its form, the essay follows the vagaries, the contradictions, the looming of visions and wandering of thoughts; the slowing and stopping, then speeding up of time. Woolf describes the bleakness, the childish longings, the sleep and boredom that can overwhelm you, but also the extreme wonder and euphoria that can captivate someone ill, in their altered state of consciousness. Woolf wrote the essay in bed, during a prolonged period of illness. (In addition to bouts of depression, Woolf struggled with a chronic weak and unstable physical health.) I reread her text on my own sickbed, searching for connoisseurs, the experienced, the afflicted – teachers who could tell me how to do this. One problem with getting ill is that you are it, sometimes very suddenly, without knowing how to. How to live? How to learn to live anew with illness, and the realization that you no longer have endless time, no longer "forever" to live to figure things

out? While reading, I saw myself mirrored in the writer of the essay. Literally. From bed to bed, I recognized her unique perspective, her pose: lying on her back, in a dressing gown or under a blanket, with nothing but time on her hands.

When I think about Virginia Woolf and Susan Sontag, I think about argumentation versus stream of consciousness, a soft mattress and an uncomfortable wooden chair. But also: giving form to a new situation, a transformative situation. Thoughts, feelings, experiences, prompted by the body. The writer as body and the body as writer.

Woolf writes: the philosopher “kick[s] the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery” (2012, 5). Does it matter that thinking takes place in and from a body? In his *Meditations*, René Descartes asks himself, “How can I deny that these hands, this body, are mine?”²¹ And proceeds in doubt, denying it in search of the pure self. See here: the foundations of Cartesian dualism, which thinks it can think away the body. In the Cartesian tradition, the body acts as a transparent interface between the self and the world. But what if this window becomes tainted by disease or injury? And you can no longer see through it without also seeing the stains on the glass?²²

Whereas Sontag seems to want to polish the stains in her critical and impersonal approach, (re-)claiming space for rationality within the turbulent state of being ill, *On Being Ill* makes an attempt to effectively manifest the stains, by speaking from it. From the above fragment, in which the narrator likens the body to something as particular as an old leather football, emerges a persona, someone who has sympathy for this sorry matter of worn-out bodies being neglected, “kicked across leagues of snow and desert.” This person has *eye* for this deflated “thing” that has been treated without respect, this thing that just won’t go away, even as you kick it, or look away from it. The narrator narrates the old leather football into being: it wasn’t there before her telling. All this time, this ball outside the picture, now in someone’s vision. In Woolf’s narration, in her words, through her eyes, her mind, minding the body, it is suddenly kicked back into the field. Focalization is a matter, not only of what the focalizer decides to bring into the field of perception, but also of what he or she is able to regard a possibility within that field.

Woolf writes that, in her time, little has been written about the experience of being ill, and that therefore the ill person will have to search for new words to express feelings of pain and suffering. In her essay, the writer explores the possibilities of language, tries out potential descriptions. *On Being Ill* is a text asking to be experienced in the first place. But it does more than that: it presents the sickbed as a thinking space, a literal space to think from,

²¹ This is also the title of an essay by Judith Butler about linguistic construction and the body, arguing “that the body is not known or identifiable apart from the linguistic coordinates that establish the boundaries of the body – *without* thereby claiming that the body is nothing other than the language by which it is known” (2015, 20). About the title of their essay Butler writes, “[t]hese are, of course, Descartes’s words, but they could be ours or, indeed, mine, given the dilemmas posed by contemporary constructivism” (18).

²² In Woolf’s words: “Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache. But no; with a few exceptions – De Quincey attempted something of the sort in *The Opium Eater*; there must be a volume or two about disease scattered through the pages of Proust – literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible, and non-existent” (2012, 4).

and a mental space. Thinking, Woolf demonstrates, can be done lying down and from inside a bed, and this engenders a kind of thinking that extends beyond a change in body pose – a new form of focalization. Woolf suggests that it entails a cultural shift, a different attitude: as soon as we choose or surrender to the bed “we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters” (2012, 12). In Woolf’s vision, reclining is no longer associated with passivity or laziness, but a sign of resistance, a corporeal recalcitrance against the abiding citizen who shows up to work every day. In bed, in full surrender to the pleasures and burdens of the body, thoughts have free rein, liberated from conventions and agendas. In bed you can think revolutionarily.²³ *On Being Ill* is therefore also an ode to the sick person who turns over in bed one more time, turning their back on “good” thinking.

There is something rather unreasonable about Descartes’ reasoning. For a body, a pair of hands, can only be denied if they participate smoothly, silently: when the body is able to recede into the background, so that thought is unhindered by the flesh. Pure thinking, according to René Descartes, is possible only with a healthy body that absents itself when necessary. Only then, his philosophy implies, is it possible to get to the true self. With this, Cartesian dualism excludes the sick from philosophical discourse.

A body that becomes ill does not suddenly stop thinking. When I was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease that irreversibly damaged my lungs, not only I, but with it, my world, changed drastically: my ability to move and exert diminished, my world became smaller; I became more attentive to detail, and I experienced everything with a new intensity, colored by the realization that all life – including *mine* – is finite. You see: clichés regained their meaning. My world broke down into extremely slow and carefully planned steps, so that clock time actually seemed to speed up. I was always late delayed belated. Each step became a statement of perseverance – no longer simply a means to reach my destination. The world threw up obstacles in the form of stairs and the absence of elevators. Most notable was my breath, which was at the forefront of every moment, every move, every action, continually demanding my effort and attention. A form of 24/7 meditation, here, now, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. Day in day out.

²³ Of course, the question remains: who notices? Who is being noticed? In her manifesto “Sick Woman Theory” (2022), Johanna Hedva asks, “How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can’t get out of bed?” She criticizes Hannah Arendt’s definition of the political, pointing out what is obvious to the sick, the disabled, the disenfranchised: “If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed *apolitical*—simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street.” My assumption is that my answer to Hedva’s question would not be unlike hers: turn your words into bricks.

One is supposed to leave the body at home when entering the academic world: the researcher must not be hindered by their own subjectivity, or by their everyday concerns. That is where the sick person ceases to exist as a researcher. Of course, there are academic thinkers who, despite their illness, continue to function as if nothing were hindering them. They can do so because of their adaptability, helped by medication or other forms of treatment, or by sheer force of will. Susan Sontag makes clear in the opening of *Illness as Metaphor* that this text is not about her. “I want to describe, *not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there* [my emphasis], but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation” (Sontag 1979, 3). But there are also thinkers for whom illness is all-encompassing. In my own experience, severe illness has been transformative and something I cannot renounce or fully recover from: that is what defines illness for me. Understood as such, illness requires not only emancipation in the most practical terms (sick leave, adjustments in and of the workplace, opportunities to work from home, and so on) but also structural changes. The academic form should not be the only possible way to arrive at knowledge and understanding. Considering the fact that academic knowledge is understood as a body of knowledge created by more than one – a community – there should be space and openness for a plurality of form.

“I have come to adopt a stance of radical unknowingness” (in Woolf 2012, 115). These words by Rita Charon, physician, scholar, and founding director of Columbia University’s Program in Narrative Medicine, are written, not in the context of philosophy but of care. “As long as I don’t assume anything about a person in my case, I may learn something that will help” (Woolf 2012, 115). The body opens registers of knowledge and unknowingness that may remain inaccessible to the mind. In illness, I acquired new wisdoms of personal relevance. As a nurse, Julia Stephen – Virginia Woolf’s mother – devotes one section of her guide for caregivers, *Notes from Sick Rooms*, to the problem of bed crumbs: a problem you didn’t realize was one until you find yourself in a hospital bed, and right there and uncomfortably so, it is not science, or philosophy, or spirituality, but the removal of those tiny irritants that will make all the difference. Stephen: “Among the number of small evils which haunt illness, the greatest, in the misery which it can cause, though the smallest in size, is crumbs. The origin of most things has been decided on, but the origin of crumbs has never excited sufficient attention among the scientific world, though it is a problem which has tormented many a weary sufferer” (in Woolf 2012, 57). In the biases of metaphysics (presence before absence, life before death, being before non-being, etc.) there is also a clear hierarchy of knowledge, beginning with philosophy, then poetry (or literature), and all the way at the bottom, below the “common” knowledge, that specific practical wisdom gained by caregivers, nurses, undertakers, in the actual every day (every. single. day) confrontation with life and death. It is all too easy to oppose this practical knowledge about and *for* the (suffering) body to the kind of abstract thought that constitutes philosophy. But the empirical approach to a patient whose life is on the line can infuse knowledge with a new kind of sense – literally, as in, a *sensibility*. More so, the fact that *all* decisions in a context of care have concrete and lived consequences for the patient in question, necessitates an ethics from which many a philosopher or researcher could learn. Care is given, always with the presence of mind

that the ill body and being speaks back in existential (and sometimes unwanted, unwished-for) ways. How do we make decisions, in spite of the radical unknowing that makes us hesitate and doubt; what *kinds* of decisions do we make in light of that radical unknowingness?

How to turn theory into a practice that can be done in an everyday life of ill-being? I am not talking in an ideological sense, but from a practical point of view, with care for my personal situation. How to engage in thinking if you lack the concentration to build an argument, reach a conclusion? If you cannot make plans, or promises into the far future? Can theory still be meaningful without the purpose of making solid, armored statements? One way of experimenting with theory under the flawed conditions of life would be, for me, not to hypothesize or try to make a solid case from the outset but to begin by showing simply what is inside the case – what *is* the case – at some moment in time, and see where that thinking will lead. Without a line of argument there is still a line of thought expressing itself, leaving, perhaps, a trace of bed crumbs in its wake.

Being ill taught me both the “realness,” the effect of language on life, *and* its occasional meaninglessness, beginning with a diagnosis that spells it out, indifferently: NSIP, non-specific interstitial pneumonitis; UCTD, undifferentiated connective tissue disease; this means nothing outside of a medical specialist’s discourse. (And even the specialists hardly talked in these terms; they preferred to speak about its manifesting symptoms, such as fibrosis and chronic inflammation). A metaphor can punch you in the gut, and sometimes it is the *lack* of a metaphor or word(s) to give shape to the illness as lived, that hurts, at times physically. I cannot say language is this or that in a state of being ill, but in my experience it did become something I had to live with in a more labored relation, tending its wound, as if it were another dysfunctional organ, on top of my failing lungs.

Illness is a form of existentialism, prompting existential thinking. As noted earlier, Havi Carel proposes illness as a philosophical tool and tool for inquiries into ontology and epistemology, as it “disrupts the meaning-making we routinely engage in” (2019, xii). “Through its pathologizing effect, illness distances the sick person from routines and habits we take for granted, and as such it reveals aspects of human existence that normally go unnoticed” (Carel 2018, 5). From this perspective of change, which is also the (temporary) loss of a previously held perspective, the sick person becomes aware of changes in aspects of meaning-making processes, aspects that in good functioning remain under the surface and hence, are left unquestioned. Descartes’ hands. Breathing with healthy lungs. The common ground of the upright.

As a writer/researcher with a chronic medical condition I would like to develop forms of writing that include the weight and gravity of the body. By this, I mean the body as a perspective, a particular focalization – not only as a subject or identity (“the sick”) but even more so, in a most literal sense. For example, as a body with a short attention span, because of

its continuous demand of care, I am more “comfortable,” to speak with Susan Sontag, with the writing of short texts. They are less punishing to my body. When I was still severely ill, I couldn’t think more than a day or two ahead, let alone sustain an argument over a long period of time. I could not make any promises, at the outset, about an outcome in an uncertain future. Illness means to become familiar with change against your will and expectation, contradictions, incoherence, and knowing that this may change your mind – knowing, deeply knowing, that nothing is permanent. I do not have a blind belief in reason any longer, and the only matter I will defend with my life is life itself. I want to be open about this position in my writing. I do not want to pretend that my thoughts are for ever. I also want to write with the awareness of a reading body on the other end, with whom my text is shared and who can be addressed, singled out, by my writing. I do not write from a void, into a void: I write, to speak with the poet Lyn Hejinian, to a community that doesn’t exist yet, but is summoned into existence by those who will have made sense of my writing.²⁴ In short, I want to introduce forms of writing that relate its knowledge from human to human, not mind to mind: “from my life to you in your life.”²⁵ I propose to call this “body writing,” which I distinguish from other scholarly uses of the term as a form of writing that explores the effects of bodies on text and text on bodies.²⁶ In addition to the academic text, this can take the form of fiction or narrative, memoir, poetry, experimental writing; genres capable of sharing experience and forms of consciousness. My aim here is to create a possible thinking space where these forms of thought can meet in equality, where a horizontal line can cross a reclining one.

“But don't you think you would write differently all naked, wrapped in velvet?”

Susan Sontag asks in the *Rolling Stone* interview – more to herself, I think, than to the interviewer. “Wouldn't you like to try it sometime?” a fictional Virginia Woolf says to her, in my imagination, from a bed that stands by the window so that she can peer endlessly, continuously, at the clouds. I wonder how I would have read the naked writing of Susan, wrapped in soft but thick velvet, gold or of the darkest blue – a story that never happened.

²⁴ “... even solo sailors and hermits living in total isolation in desert or mountain caves belong to communities – communities, in the broadest sense, consisting of the persons for whom solo sailing or hermitism is meaningful. These communities do not, as such, preexist the solo sailing or the hermit’s retreat. In a profound sense, the person setting forth alone to sail or entering his or her hermit cave, in doing so, summons into existence the community in which to do so makes sense...” (Hejinian 2000, 34-35).

²⁵ A quote from writer Katherine Mansfield’s personal journals, which is also used as the title of Yiyun Li’s memoir *Dear Friend, from My Life, I Write to You in Your Life* (2017).

²⁶ A different example is Paul Auster’s *Winter Journal*, described by the author as a “catalogue of sensory data,” a “phenomenology of breathing,” and summarized on the back flap as an “examination of his own life as seen through the history of his body” (2013, 1). Although Auster himself does not refer to this text as body writing, literary critic Jack I. Abecassis (2014) uses the term in the title of an essay in which he compares Auster’s writing in *Winter Journal* with the writings of Michel de Montaigne. In Chinese literature, the term “body writing” became trendy in the 1990s, in reference to a genre of works by women writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian, who in their writing focus on the private and bodily experiences of women. Elsewhere, it has been used to refer to, amongst others, feminist or other writings focusing on the bodily, as well as to the “writing” that the body may do by itself, leaving traces or signs for forensic scientists (for the latter, see, for example, Taylor and Hnilica 1991). In none of these cases has it been conceptualized as a relational matter between body and writing/reading.

This is a collection of texts written over the years, while ill.

I Hear Voices

Literature was born, Vladimir Nabokov said, not on a day when a boy who cried wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: it was born on the day when a boy cried wolf, and there was no wolf behind him (Nabokov 1982, 5). To talk about literature one need not look for wolves, not even for the phantom of the wolf conjured by the boy's cries; one listens to the boy's cry, a voice that is heard across the valley.

Here a woman writer wonders whether literature could have been born the day when a girl came crying wolf, and there was or wasn't a wolf behind her. Or when one girl cried wolf, saying that the wolf had assaulted her, and five hundred girls came running straight out of the Neanderthal valley screaming, #metoo #me too #me too.

Literature begins with voice. A voice, Roland Barthes argued, in his seminal 1967 essay "The Death of the Author" (transl. Stephen Heath), that belongs to no one. A voice that does not emanate from air pressed from lungs, through vocal cords and further up the throat; that does not roll over the tongue, onto its tip, between teeth and through the lips. The wolf isn't there. *The boy isn't either*. And the one who, one step further removed, imagines the boy that cries wolf and is about to write it into story, isn't even part of the scene. Literature was born the day a text cried wolf, and there was no cry to hear.

A woman cries wolf. What is its sound?

And what about this voice, this one, the inner voice that I hear while I am writing, a voice between and beside the point? Mine and not mine. *You* are not supposed to hear it. It hesitates; it gives voice to what is happening during this process of writing. This. This moment. Alive.

It whispers things that aren't meant to emerge as text, as words on the page, read by you. This voice is questioning, often second-guessing; it is annoyingly self-conscious. Voicing a thinking that is done to myself, unedited, not meant for others: not interesting enough and unreliable. *Are you sure? Are you sure of yourself?* It says all the things that do not make it into the writing. Except here. Is she a wolf? A she-wolf?

According to Barthes, the voice in literature belongs to no one. To illustrate his point, he quotes from a novella by Honoré de Balzac. "In his story *Sarrasine*, Balzac, speaking of a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: 'It was Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling'" (Barthes 1995, 142). Who is speaking in this way? Barthes asks. "Is it the story's hero, concerned to ignore the castrato concealed beneath

the woman? Is it the man Balzac, endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it the author Balzac, professing certain 'literary' ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin" (142). It is this special voice that cries ~~wolf~~ woman. A voice that belongs to no one, no-body. And not to a woman.

Barthes imagines the voice of writing as a kind of phantom voice, disembodied and stripped from the physiology of speech, male or female. The literary voice is speechless, in the most literal sense; it is to be *read*, and therefore has no single speaker. It loses its singularity in the instant of writing: "[T]he voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins" (Barthes 1995, 142). The author's death liberates writing from metaphysics and teleological speech; releases it from the notion of a body that speaks its Mind, from here to there, from me to you. "We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash," he writes (146).

The author has no mastery over what – and whom – it unleashes in this space. A woman? A wolf? "Is it right to create beings like Heathcliff?" Charlotte Brontë asked in her Preface to the 1850 edition of her sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. "The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself," she suggests (Brontë (Bell) 1850). Sometimes, a dark stranger appears at the door of writing and the author starts producing ghosts.

Charlotte,	Currer,
Emily,	Ellis,
Anne,	Acton and

of course brother Branwell who was just Branwell – they all died young. But that's a different story.



Fig. 4. The Brontë Sisters + Brother Branwell, removed. By Patrick Branwell Brontë. Oil on canvas. Ca. 1834. National Portrait Gallery.

“Linguistics [shows] that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person,” Barthes writes (1995, 145). It doesn’t matter *who* cried wolf; it is precisely so that literature can do the crying *without* the boy. But is this so? Doesn’t the body-less cry of “Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling” evoke a voice that is unmistakably male? Enunciation is an empty process, Barthes claims. There is no need for a person to fill it with their presence: the voice that cries “Woman” in Balzac’s story focalizes from a subject that has no origin in a body. As Barthes points out, its voice could be anyone’s: the story’s hero, the man Balzac, the author Balzac, universal wisdom or romantic psychology. But not a woman’s – unless she were to make a parody of herself. Here is how a woman reads Barthes’ early writings, and reads, with her whole being, how matter-of-factly women are overlooked, excluded from the possibility of this “special voice” belonging to “no one.”

To be no one, no body, presupposes a certain freedom to disregard one’s body as one’s own. Not every author can lose their voice, have their symbolic death, without putting their own life at stake. One need only recall that the Brontë sisters, in their time, could not produce “Woman” *from* the voice and body of a woman, a female author, as has been pointed out before in Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic*.²⁷ They had to give up

²⁷ As they write in the Preface to the First Edition (1979), “[e]nclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, these literary women were also, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs of what Gertrude Stein was to call ‘patriarchal poetry’. For not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored” (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, xi).

their sex in order to be able to get published, to be read: a different kind of “death” of an author. Curris, Ellis, Acton.

Who, in turn, wrote novels that could not have been voiced by a colonized body, as the poet and writer Dionne Brand describes in her essay *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*. Writing about *Jane Eyre*, she says: “Imprisoned above in the attic is Bertha Mason and underneath in the drawing rooms and parlours is the gaiety produced by the excess of the plantation, the violence un-regarded as violence; experienced as power, wealth, and well-being” (Brand 2020, 31). Indeed, the voice of the body of Bertha Mason is reduced to a “growling” (30), which, in Barthes’ arguing, could come from anyone – anyone *but* the colonized. It takes a woman to see this: anyone, *but*.

Six years after “The Death of an Author,” Barthes rereads *Sarrasine*, this time for his book-length structural analysis *S/Z* in which he illustrates the workings of a network of codes that “write” the text, in the process of reading. Where “voice” was abstracted in “The Death of the Author” by its extraction from body and origin, here it evolves into metaphor: “Alongside each utterance, one might say that off-stage voices can be heard: they are codes: in their interweaving, these voices (whose origin is “lost” in the vast perspective of the *already-written*) de-originate the utterance: the convergence of the voices (of the codes) becomes *writing*, a stereographic space where the five codes, the five voices, intersect” (Barthes 2002, 21). Text, as Barthes had argued in “The Death of the Author,” does not derive from thought; thinking arises from text, through the release and interweaving of these “voices.” *S/Z* is a paradoxical text because it offers Barthes’ unique reading: it allows us readers to read with, or *as* Barthes, over his shoulder, so to speak. And so, as a reader-author, he isn’t dead at all: we can embody him as reading the story into a particular text.

A short summary of Balzac’s story: *Sarrasine* opens with a man, the unnamed narrator, sitting in a windowsill at a salon hosted by a French earl. With this trope of the window, being both on the inside and outside, the scene of liminality is set. The narrator has brought a woman to the ball, and she is soon met by a mysterious guest of the salon, an elderly man with a sickly appearance, who is described as a “ghoul,” a “Spirit,” a “fantastic apparition,” and “Death himself,” with a “cracked voice” and “tiny legs (...) like cross-bones on a gravestone.” The narrator takes her out of the room and says he will tell her a story, if she promises to see him the next day. What follows is a story within the story, about a man called Sarrasine, a sculptor who travels to Rome and falls in love with the opera diva Zambinella. The reader is told that Zambinella is a castrato singer, but Sarrasine, blinded by love and obsession, isn’t aware of this. The reader focalizes with the narrator, knows more than the character. At the end of this story there is a double reveal: to his shock, Sarrasine discovers that Zambinella is a man. Meanwhile, the reader, who assumed they were siding with the narrator, discovers that they, too, have been tricked, as it turns out that Zambinella is the eccentric old man whom they met earlier in the story, at the salon.

The story helps Barthes to make his argument: nothing in or of the text is fixed, determinate. One thing can mean its opposite. Balzac's story then isn't just the object of analysis; it also functions as an analogy for the structural undecidability of a text. Narrative voice, structural voices, symbolic voice, and singing voice intermingle as Barthes writes about the "codes" of a text in which an opera voice makes a character fall in love blindly with its singer.

Can a reading outdate itself? Central to Barthes' reading of *Sarrasine* – a name that is, he argues, suggestive of the female gender, were it not for the second *s* that substitutes the expectant *z* of French female names—is that "the biological axis of the sexes (...) is replaced by the symbolic axis of castration" (2002, 35). Snap. I should not take this literally. A voice cut off from its origin, by a *z*, cut from the name, and the cutting movement of *Z* itself.

Barthes voice also performs a cut. *S/Z* is often called a methodical *dissection* of a text. An analysis makes cuts to figure out, to sculpt the object in its view, for which the story of *Sarrasine* the sculptor could also serve as an analogy. Karen Barad, in her philosophy based on quantum theory, theorizes that in the use of apparatuses to study objects, we perform agential cuts. "Different agential cuts produce different phenomena" (2007, 175). Now we observe particles; now we observe waves. In Barthes' "cut" the story is premised on a difference between male and un-male (or, in the guise of *La Zambinella*, she-male); between those who castrate and those who are castrated. But, as he himself emphasizes in *S/Z*, this castration is relegated to an entirely symbolical order. It is as if the actual physical cut were no longer part of the story – the cut that produces the vocal soprano and gender confusion that sets the entire plot in motion. Barthes maintains that physicality, or matter, doesn't matter in this text; he even suggests that it would be wrong to assign the character of *Zambinella* the role of the castrated, for s/he is sometimes passive, sometimes active.

What does it mean to read this story, and Barthes' reading of it, in the twenty-first century, as a way to get to know Barthes; to understand his later work, his way of thinking and, shall I say, his authorship? Does reading a rather old-fashioned text based on an old story (for the passive reader, Barthes claims) become entirely useless? What do we do with texts that have this tremendous cultural capital but are no longer read, in use – at least, not with the spirit and contemporaneity of its first readers?

Woman reads text in 2020. In my reading of Barthes reading Balzac, I am drawn to the figure of *Zambinella*. Because of surgical interventions – cutting away then replacing a pair of lungs – my body resists being addressed symbolically or metaphorically without question, hesitation, or conflict. Never without wanting to return to and restore the flesh and blood that is drained by this kind of thought. And in that urge to feel, with my body, as a body, I realize I have never given any thought to the physical *non-symbolic* implications of castration – *actual*, actualized by sharp surgical instruments, not with words. Or chemical castration, in use today to treat/penalize sex offenders. I search online and start reading about the history of the castrati; the life that the character of *Zambinella* embodies.

“What singing! Imagine a voice that combines the sweetness of the flute and the animated suavity of the human larynx—a voice which leaps and leaps, lightly and spontaneously, like a lark that flies through the air and is intoxicated with its own flight; and when it seems that the voice has reached the loftiest peaks of altitude it starts off again, leaping and leaping, still with equal highness and equal spontaneity, without the slightest sign of forcing or the faintest indication of artifice or effort,” music historian Enrico Panzacchi wrote, having heard one of the last castrati perform at St. Peter’s Basilica.²⁸ The voice is a bird. The bird is the metaphor: she flies and is intoxicated with her own flight. For a moment I am back in the valley of the wolf where the high-pitched cries make birds fly up from tree branches. But the voice is an actual voice.

I further read that, since the reign of Pope Sixtus V (1521–1590), the Roman Catholic Church observed St. Paul’s biblical injunction: *mulier taceat in ecclesia*.²⁹ Let women be silent in church. Stick to the loom and distaff. It is for men to speak. The Church did not want the women to speak but it wanted their voices, and to keep the sound of these voices within the church, Pope Clement VIII (1536–1605) proclaimed that the castration of talented young choirboys was *ad honorem Dei*: permitted “to the honor of God.”

The first official castrato entered the Church’s choir under his rule, in 1599; Alesssandro Moreschi, who retired from the Sistine Chapel Choir in 1913, was its last. Castrati singers also began performing at the theater and opera when, in 1686, Pope Innocent XI banned women from appearing on stage altogether: the Church helped opera houses recruit castrati for their female soprano roles. [Enter Zambinella.] Farinelli, the famous castrati singer, sang the highest note customary at the time, I read: C6.³⁰

Am I digressing? Always, yes and no. Weaving and unweaving. Is this part of Balzac’s story? Yes and no. History appears there, matter-of-factly, in a single paragraph, towards the end: “Did a woman ever appear in a Roman theatre? And do you not know what sort of creatures play female parts within the domains of the Pope? It was I, monsieur, who endowed Zambinella with his voice. I paid all the knave’s expenses, even his teacher in singing. And he has so little gratitude for the service I have done him that he has never been willing to step inside my house. And yet, if he makes his fortune, he will owe it all to me” (Balzac 2015, 43).

I continue my reading online, learning that this God-permitted castration – cutting the blood supply to the testicles, or amputating them altogether – had to be performed around the age of eight: before puberty would break the young boys’ angelic voices. Many boys died during the operation or from complications. Nevertheless, at its height Italy was producing about 4,000 castrates a year. 4,000 voices of the finest kind: soprano, mezzo-soprano, and contralto. Lack of testosterone caused the limbs of castrati to grow excessively long, their

²⁸ This was probably Giovanni Cesari (1843-1904). See Martha Feldman’s *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (2016, 126).

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:43.

³⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farinelli>.

ribcages unusually large. This, I read on a Wikipedia page, “gave them unrivalled lung-power and breath capacity.”³¹ An image of the adult Alessandro Moreschi confirms this. His chest is voluptuous and round – buxom, I am tempted to say. Moreschi is the only castrato singer to be recorded solo, albeit when he was in his forties and long past his prime. Who sings, who speaks? Who cries Bird?

On YouTube I find a clip called Project Moreschi, posted by a fifteen-year-old boy named Brian, who, he writes in the description under the video, wanted to “reconstruct” Moreschi’s young voice by means of technical distortion.³² The voice of a boy Brian’s age. I like the idea: two teenage boys across time, engineering voices. When I hit play I am surprised by my physical reaction. I hear a voice that sounds eerie, spooky, sending a shiver through my body. Of course, this sound is pure fantasy –the fantasy of a listener imagining what a “wrenched creature” like Moreschi must have sounded like. It is a fiction, based on assumptions, a ghost story about the dead Moreschi. In fact, it is how I would imagine the voice of a ghost: shrill, echoing, rising and falling, mournful, lamenting its own sound. Neither male nor female, neither young nor old. Real *and* unreal. A little like the church organ that accompanies his singing in the recording...

Am I still reading the same text? What kind of reading is this? Digression? This is where Balzac, then Barthes have taken me, listening now, on a winter afternoon, to a ghost perform in the fantasy of a fifteen-year-old boy:

*Domine salvum fac regem
et exaudi nos in die qua invocaverimus te.
Gloria Patri et Filio,
et Spiritui Sancto.
Sicut erat in principio
et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum.
Amen.*



























And why does life, organic life – long limbs, enormous lungs, larynxes, vocal chords and cut testicles – stand no chance in Barthes’ reading? Why is it so difficult to connect with the flesh in theory? As if actual castration does not have actual consequences; as if it isn’t irreversible, this cut. It’s Barthes who performs the symbolic castration of the text, as an authorial reader.

Despite his book-length reading, Barthes argues that *Sarrasine* is a “readerly text” that doesn’t require the active participation of the reader. It is, to extend his symbolism, a text for the castrated. Barthes compares the readerly text to a musical score:

³¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castrato>.

³² Brian Hernandez Rulli. “Project Moreschi (reconstruction of his young voice and without scratches).” YouTube video. 5:29 min. Posted October 12, 2018.

brings everything together, like the strings, are the proairetic sequences, the series of actions, the cadence of familiar gestures:

LEXIAS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Semes													
Cultural codes													
Antithesis													
Enigma 1													
"Deep in"													
"Hidden"													

The analogy can be carried even further. We can attribute to

Fig. 5. From Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1973, 29).

“The divisions of the syntagm (in its gradual movement) correspond to the divisions of the sonic flow into measures (one is hardly more arbitrary than the other). What stands out, what flashes forth, what emphasizes and impresses are the semes, the cultural citations and the symbols, analogous in their heavy timbre, in the value of their discontinuity, to the brass and percussion. What sings, what flows smoothly, what moves by accidentals, arabesques, and controlled ritardandos through an intelligible progression (like the melody often given the woodwinds) is the series of enigmas, their suspended disclosure, their delayed resolution: the development of an enigma is really like that of a fugue; both contain a subject, subject to an exposition, a development (embodied in the retards, ambiguities, and diversions by which the discourse prolongs the mystery), a stretto (a tightened section where scraps of answers rapidly come and go), and a conclusion. Finally, what sustains, flows in a regular way, brings everything together, like the strings, are the proairetic sequences, the series of actions, the cadence of familiar gestures” (Barthes 1973, 28-29).

It is a composition that in its verbal and visual analogy “speaks” but as music remains silent. And isn’t the *silence* of *Sarrasine*, which is also implicated in Balzac’s story, composed of off-stage, actual off-stage voices: female bodies excluded by canon law? *Mulier taceat in ecclesia*.

It is the spectral silence of those that *do not speak*, neither in Balzac’s story nor in Barthes’ reading, that emerges from my reading of *S/Z*, nearly fifty years after – it is the book I would like to read.

Why is everything, always and precisely in men’s eyes, a castration complex? Is this not itself the result of a strictly analytical cut, a conjuring of the dreaded object by one’s precise fixation on it? Here’s another Woman reading a man reading a man: Hélène Cixous, who, in “Fiction and its Phantoms” (1976) offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of Freud’s

reading of Hoffmann's tale of *The Sand-man*, in his 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche."³³

Another story that involves a catastrophic misjudgment of women/Woman: Nathanael mistaking the automaton, "wooden doll" Olympia for a living female beauty.

Freud's reading is entirely in support of, if not distorted by, the argument he wants to make, namely, that Nathanael's anxiety about the Sand-man's "fetch[ing] children's eyes" (Hoffmann 1885), is a substitute for an underlying castration anxiety. In minimizing the uncertainty and confusion that the presence of Olympia engenders, Freud, Cixous argues, creates a misrepresentation of what in her view constitutes the tale's strangeness, its uncanny quality. Freud practices what he preaches: his reading-repression is a wish-fulfillment of his own analysis, *his* take on the story, *his* reading – the agential cut made by psychoanalysis. "The dialogue entered upon with the reader is also a theatrical artifice in which the answer precedes and envelops the question," Cixous writes (1976, 532). Freud the reader has little sight for Olympia, or Clara, who interprets Nathanael's anxieties about Coppelius/Coppola as a form of projection ("this mysterious power...in its futile struggles to attain the form which is to be the reflected image of ourselves" (Hoffmann 1885)).

Freud's reading and analysis is paradoxical in that it runs counter to his fascination for the uncanny – which, as the dictionary references he cites point out, always remains provisional and incomplete. In his attempt to make the uncanny decodable, Freud undermines his earlier stated belief that the effect of the uncanny lies in its irreducible strangeness. But his desire to define, to master the text, is greater, and with it he reduces the strangeness that he is after in his thinking. Having "solved" its enigma with the reassuring analysis of a castration complex, Freud undoes what he himself acknowledges as the uncanny's active power. In his own psychoanalytic logic, he castrates the story's uncanniness. In Cixous' words: "Freud pruned the story of its involved narrative structure, of the heterogeneity of its points of view, of all 'superfluous' detail (...), pruned it of any meaning which did not seem to contribute to the thematic economy of the story" (1976, 534). Castration anxiety is always better than the anxiety about having no control, and the realization that some meaning remains out of analytic reach.

Who cries wolf and who cries castration? Cixous writes that "The Uncanny" reads to her "less as a discourse than a strange theoretical novel" (1976, 525). I agree, it operates like a work of fiction: it operates as if Freud is a character narrating a story within a story – not unlike the narrator-character of *Sarrasine*. In "The Uncanny," Freud seduces me into his (re-) telling of events: the story of a male organ that wasn't there in the first place, but is now threatened to be cut from the story, and like nail to hammer, sees nothing but sharp objects in its view. It is analogous to the blinding effects of doing research, producing research. What do I believe and therefore see to affirm my believing, what and how do I decide to tell about the observed as an effect of my observing? There is always repression when there is an agential cut made; we cannot see everything all at once.

³³ Translated into English by Alix Strachey (1925). Hereafter referred to as "The Uncanny."

And I, what do I deny? To repress or not to repress illness in practicing scholarship is a question that I keep asking myself – a question that should not appear in the writing, should have been answered *before* the writing takes place, outside the writing, exterior to the research. As if writing takes place in a lab. Supposedly my ill-being is none of your business. Do I pretend that life does not get in my way – the troubles, the pains, the unforeseen changes? Do I ask you to look away from it, like Sontag did? Do I “kill” my authorship and sacrifice my body for the sake of so-called objective scholarship, disembodied, neutral, distanced, an ideal subject? Or do I walk into this scene and picture, risking that you will judge me an unreliable narrator, full of anxieties and uncertainties, and unresolved questions. It is necessary for me to have, *to keep*, a doubtful perspective, to maintain multiple readings of life itself, given the circumstances that change continuously when living in unstable health.

In his reading of *The Sand-man*, Freud does not pay much attention to the effect Olympia has, or could have, on the reader. It is he who becomes a thief of sight, of eyes that may see things differently. In a text written for the conference “‘We ourselves speak a language that is foreign’: One Hundred Years of Freud’s Uncanny,”³⁴ Elissa Marder turns to the prefix *un-* in psychoanalysis, and with her writing returns its weirdness – its uncanniness—to Freud’s text of the uncanny. *Un*, as Freud wrote, “is the token of repression” (as quoted in Marder 2020, 234). Marder writes: “‘un’ indicates that the unconsciousness is not merely a negation of consciousness, but a radically different mode of thinking about making meaning” (2020, 233). The *Un* of *das Unheimliche* is an undoing only in so far that it undoes the distinction between what is *heimlich* and what is not, between what is strange and familiar, what belongs to the home and what does not. In her text, Marder asks, repeating Cixous words: “And what if the doll became a woman? What if she were alive? What if, in looking at her, we animated her?” (2020, 235). Indeed, what if? What if we gave the voices their bodies and bodies their voices, what if women were to speak back from these texts – Balzac’s; Hoffmann’s; but also Barthes’; Freud’s?

And what if Freud had been a woman? A question too silly, too absurd and fantastical to ask, for its answer would need to bring an entire new field and history of the field – a phantom psychoanalysis – into being. In “The Uncanny,” Marder writes, the prefix “‘un’ not only troubles distinctions between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the emergence of the new and the return of the repressed, reality and fiction, but also points to the expression of something that psychoanalysis can neither fully describe nor explain” (2020, 232). Not because of lack or loss, but because it is analysis’ blind spot, or navel: the well, the base, the unqualifiable hole, the homeliness provided by a sturdy sofa, with a thick rug to lie down on, or under.

Wait – am I not now weaving an analytic web myself? Well, yes of course, Herr Freud, I am a woman, weaving is my nature!

³⁴ A one-day conference organized by Nicholas Royle. Sussex University, June 21, 2019. Texts of the presentations were collected in *The Oxford Literary Review* 42.2 (2020).

Like Marder, who picks up on Cixous, I pick up on Marder in this unraveling reading thread of *Un*. So here goes: And what if Olympia were not silent?

To Barthes' imaginary music score, I propose to add a sixth code, an extra bar, a voice that has no voice. The un-code. The unheard and unheard of. Penelope, unweaving in silence under the cover of night. Who speaks? Who is silent? Reading *Sarrasine*, and Barthes' reading of *Sarrasine*, I embody this voice, the void, with my own being and return its words, in its own words, with a poem that I will call: *Unsung*.

UNSUNG

Woman herself,
with her sudden fears,
her irrational whims,
her instinctive worries,
her impetuous boldness,
her fussings, and
her delicious sensibility
C6 , C6 , C6.

Ps.

To sing the song of not-knowing is also a form of writing. Not to cultivate ignorance or fetishize enigma but, on the contrary, to be honest, pragmatic and realistic: I do not know how to cope with x , I do not know how to solve y . I do not know how to cope with the not-knowing. Can we simply take off from there?

I don't know,

is this a viable statement to make, on a psychoanalytic couch, on my living room sofa, in bed, behind a lectern in the university? Or must one always sing that song in private?

This is a collection of texts that must be sung.

2

Learning to die

the day will come when we cross the border between theory and fact
—Sallie Tisdale

The Death of Derrida and The Death of The Death of the Author, by The Death of the Author's Mother

I would like to learn to live finally. Derrida, in his texts, in his words, said everything with extreme deliberation—but with deliberate ambiguity. Beginning with *someone*, a third person—no, *you or me*, *vous ou moi*, who *comes forward*, from where? to where? *and says*, to whom? *I would like to learn to live finally*. Well, why *would* he? How *could* he? Or she? Or you or me? Who speaks? Why finally? But what does it mean? Does everything always have to mean a thing, or *anything*? The pleasure of reading a text by Derrida lies in this thinking confusedly, not quite in unison but together. You and me. *Vous et moi*. Obviously this requires a considerable amount of trust from the reader. Perhaps also some suspension of disbelief.

Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa. A specter is haunting Europe, the famous first lines of *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels reads.

Psssst. Did you know that Marx had a lisp?
Ein Gessssspensssst geht um.

The opening, the exordium, the promise: Take my word, it is going to come. The wolf is going to come down the valley, coming after you. When I am reading, I know I am not reading the author's mind but there is a sense of making space or occasion, mentally, for something to occur in me, which is not me but no longer external to me either. Reading is not only a matter of symbolic voices structuring or coding the text, as Barthes suggests in *S/Z*. Reading is also an act of hearing voices and their personal call. You are singled out by a book, it seeks you out, mesmerizes you with a voice that in this moment, seems to speak to you only. Other voices leave you indifferent. You recognize yourself in others that you do not know.³⁵ For practical reasons, reading presumes a voice coming from – well, from *somewhere*. Between you and me, between life and death, between writing and reading. Between a lisp and those words on the page, on the cusp of life – sort of.

One thing illness allows me to do is to read in bed, unapologetically. Sometimes to escape reality; sometimes in order to accept what is real and cannot be escaped. I read novels, poetry, philosophy, memoirs, essays; I read classics, many for the first time, and also many contemporary novels. Just like Woolf in her bed, I have no agenda for this incessant reading, other than just passing time. Many of these books found their way to this text. Ill in bed I am living a life of the mind, but with an ailing body.

³⁵ For a study about recognition and acknowledgement in reading, see Rita Felski's *The Uses of Literature*: "Recognition is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self" (2008, 49).

Specters of Marx is one of my companions, keeping my mind occupied. Sometimes I feel as if this book is really teaching me how to live, other times I resist every word in it (the book is also an object, which turns weathered), and I want to throw the book across the room. I develop an intimate relationship with the book, with its teller, to which and whom I can always return. It's a book that I take to bed and have fights with.

You pick up a book from the shelves, reread it after years, and are struck by it, for the first time: it's a mystery to you why this didn't happen in the first place, when you first read it. *The Plague* by Camus is suddenly charged, contaminated as it were, by the Covid-19 pandemic. A book sits silently on the shelves, waiting for the right moment to speak. (To speak to *you*. To speak *now*. To speak back to the present.) Sometimes the opposite happens: the relevance of a book disappears over time, its meaning gets lost to you. Where does it go? Books – not always, not every book – are charged by a subtext coming from life: events in the life of the reader or the author that color and taint the reading. No, there is no outside-text, but there is so much, outside the text!

The author cannot dictate this enchantment of the voice into being – they have no mastery over what it unleashes in and with the text. But neither does the reader. Adventurous reading, being seized by reading is not methodic or programmable, never completely predictable.³⁶

Specters of Marx had been on my mind so often that one night Jacques Derrida appeared in a dream. He had his nose painted black, like a raccoon. Possibly with a Sharpie, with which he had also signed our digital kitchen scale, in very uncertain handwriting. "Derrida, for M and M," I read. He stood next to me. "Tomorrow," he said, "we talk about signification."

I consider my own death, through the considered deaths of others. "[T]he possibility that I be dead" is necessary to the statement of I am; not to its supposed opposite, I am dead, Derrida argued in *La voix et le phénomène*, published in 1967, the same year Barthes wrote "The Death of the Author" (Derrida 1973, 96-97). I will be dead one day and therefore I am (already) now. There is no denying of death in Derrida's writing. As Leonard Lawlor, the translator of the work's second English edition writes in his introduction: "It is possible to say of it what Derrida says of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. *Voice and Phenomenon* contains 'the germinal structure' of Derrida's entire thought" (Derrida 2010, xi). In another work about Derrida, Peggy Kamuf writes, "the unreadable condition of mourning underscores all of

³⁶ As Derrida says in his last interview, "Each book is a pedagogy aimed at forming its reader. The mass productions that today inundate the press and publishing houses do not form their readers; they presuppose in a phantasmatic and rudimentary fashion a reader who has already been programmed. They thus end up preformatting this very mediocre addressee whom they had postulated in advance" (2007, 31).

Derrida's mature thought, beginning with *Speech and Phenomena*" (Kamuf 2010, 2).³⁷ Derrida's project of deconstruction departs from this movement towards death and back to life. In *Speech and Phenomena* he argues that in the written language I can be both alive and dead, there (and) not there. The life of the "I" that signs (expresses, indicates) is inconsequential to our comprehension of its appearance in writing. The "I" that says "I am ..." does not in fact need to exist at all. "I" might as well be fictional, false, or dead: "[je] suis ... veut donc dire originairement je suis mortel." Therefore, "I am" originally means "I am mortal" (1973, 60-61). I will be disappearing from "I" in the instance of my having-written, or rather: I can only temporarily possess this "I" with my presence. This structural, originary absence from myself, this death of the "I," de-ontologizes – or, as Derrida would write later, *hauntologizes* – the subject that is writing. It is a different death to the one imagined by Barthes: Derrida's death is also spectral but not figural. It is an actual death to come, someone's death, already in effect (as trace, effect) in the instance of writing.

I came to read Derrida with a considerable delay, he was therefore always late, "the late Derrida." I do not know where I was the day he died, I never learned of his death in that way. It seems only appropriate that in my reading of his work, his actual death has already been surpassed – but *actually*, no longer just in theory. Actually. I hesitate to write the word without quotation marks. Actually does not exist in theory. But we all know what it means in the case of a dead body, when funeral arrangements have to be made, when there is no time to waste, because a body is wasting away—be quick, don't hesitate: burial, cremation, pick a song, what song? Pick clothes – not yours, that'll come later. There is no time for this or that. Decisions have to be made and they are made forever. Only when it is all over, when condolences have been offered and received, when the last people have left and the formal clothes are hung back in the wardrobe, only then is one allowed the time to realize that, really, actually – yes of course – *someone*, not just some body, is gone, dead, forever dead; someone whose passing leaves relatives and friends bereaved. In Derrida's case, obituaries were written. The French newspaper *Le Monde* editorialized his death in a 10-page (!) supplement, which included photos of his writing desk and his collection of pipes. That person, owner of these pipes, is gone. *Ceci ne sont pas de pipes de Jacques*.³⁸

When I read, I like that I am being spoken to in a unique style of being or having been: of sensing and making sense in a language and usage that is or wasn't mine but gradually, maybe, becomes part of me, grows on me, in my reading that turns its foreignness into a form of intimate self-address: I am addressing myself as Jacques Derrida.

One day my friend K visits me and notices the two volumes of *The Beast and the Sovereign* by Jacques Derrida on my reading pile in the windowsill. She

³⁷ Kamuf refers to the title of the first English translation by David B. Allison. Unless stated otherwise, I will make reference to this first translation (1973).

³⁸ See also, Goosen (2022).

says, “Did I ever tell you that I was there at those seminars? The room was always packed.” *There*: it took me by surprise. Through the laborious reading of Derrida’s texts, having listened carefully to his thinking, at times reciting his sentences out loud so that I could better follow, “hear” him think the writing, I had developed an intimacy with somebody that was also nobody – that is to say, with somebody who was *actually* already dead. In Derridean spirit, and *with* his spirit, this is where I had always brought his figure to life. In my reading of the posthumous Derrida, each word in his writing rehearses, not his death, but his *survival* in and as language – the traces of it, beyond the opposition of life and death. This survivor, his spectral trace, has little to do with the life and death of bodies and his dead body. Derrida the survivor is not a derivative of someone who came before but something (no longer someone) else. In his words, he has become “*le plus d’un*” (Derrida 2006, xx), “*no more one and more than one.*” Something altogether different.

The implied fact of his aliveness, his *having-lived*, remarked upon casually by my friend in my living room; her memory of his once-having-spoken out loud in a lecture hall crowded with people listening – *listening*, not reading; an audience, amongst whom, my friend at a younger age, a student in Paris, produced in me the sudden and brief effect of a ghost apparition. Yes, obviously I had seen and heard Derrida speak before: in film and documentaries, in recorded lectures and in television interviews, all readily available today on YouTube. I understood and understand, clearly, that he must have been alive once in order to have written his work. But it was my friend’s casual remark that produced for me, posthumously and for the first time, his *body*. This sudden apprehension after the fact, the memory of his person of which I had no actual memory – this *flesh-back* – seized upon me in a ghostlike manner. In that brief moment, it really had seemed irrational and absurd to me for my friend to be part of that history where *this* future, this future of his work after his death, in books on my windowsill, had yet to take place. There not there: an apparition, a haunting; not at the École des Hautes Etudes de Sciences Sociales but right inside my living room.

“What does it mean to follow a ghost?” Derrida asked in *Specters* (2006, 10). It only occurs to me now to ask this question to its author. What does it mean to follow *you*, Jacques Derrida, a little too late in the game, when your stardom and the “hype” of deconstruction in the academic world has long passed and the birds have migrated elsewhere? What does it mean to follow you, ghost, who has passed away and whose thinking is now, by many, considered passé? Where do I follow you? In a review of the revised translation and 40th anniversary edition of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (2016), Geoffrey Bennington writes, “Derrida’s simple insight, with its almost unimaginably, fractally complex implications, *is difficult to stay with* [my emphasis], and, especially since his death in 2004, intellectual fashion has tended to bypass its complexity and settle back into the more familiar terms of science, ontology, and, especially, history, as though the mere passage of time could make it

go away.”³⁹ He is made *Heimlich*. As though, like what is expected of us when we mourn the dead, what is needed is “a certain lapse of time” (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*: 244), for deconstruction to be overcome and safely buried, sanctified, in the annals of philosophy.

“I live my death in writing,” Derrida said in his last interview, with Jean Birnbaum for *Le Monde*, just two months before he died (Derrida 2007, 32). Death brings life to a conclusion. But a conclusion that opens new avenues for the reading of his work, or rather, a new reading *direction*: survival, *sur-vie*, no longer from this side of life. A second act in the scene of writing: “I live my death in writing.” I maintain my survival in writing, having-written, *maintenant*. Both living and dead. Out of the question of life or death.

Life, death, actual life, actual death and “actual” death with the scare quotes of a suppressed anxiety for endings and finality; on this hand and the other, this and that and his and his and mine, cut from life: this reading confuses me. I no longer know whose death is whose and whose wishes I should respect. As Michael Naas, scholar and translator of Derrida’s work, writes in the Introduction to his collection of essays, *Derrida from Now on*: “While [his] death in October 2004 must thus be lamented and his absence mourned, it must also be understood as a unique opportunity for his work. It is perhaps now possible as it never was before to read that work on its own terms” (2008, 9).

On the one hand... One must grieve his death, his actual, physical passing. *On the other...*

Two deaths converge, producing an aporia that, I imagine, Derrida would have welcomed. For, on the other hand, death also means to cut off writer from writing, voice from speech, reading from the intention of the author. To read the text, in other words, as if the author were already dead – *figurally* speaking, as Barthes had suggested in “The Death of the

³⁹ One need only to read some of the comments under the review to see this reaffirmed by readers of the *LARB*: <againaristo> “I don’t much care for Derrida any more, and I think his readings of Heidegger are unhelpful at best and incorrect at worst.” <aristocoment> “Also, I would say that reading a few lines of Wittgenstein is far more instructive about the question of language than a whole essay by Derrida on the subject! Derrida hardly made any clear arguments! Wittgenstein did. As did Heidegger! They did not waste words like Derrida.” <Emily Toth> “As someone who was a grad student at Johns Hopkins when Derrida was god, I somehow didn’t get the religion. I still don’t. It struck me then, as now, as boring and self-indulgent, and it was nowhere near a substitute for literature. Forty years later, with the deep decline in grad school interest and employment possibilities, I wonder who really cares about this.” And so on. For Simon Critchley, author of *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992), arguing for the ethical turn in Derrida’s work, its relevance waned even earlier. In an interview he says: “It’s peculiar the way Derrida dropped from my attention at a certain point and I don’t fully understand why that happened. Partly it has to do with a sort of frustration that I think I felt and a lot of people felt with what was happening with his thought in the 1990s. It seemed to be the wrong discourse. The last time I really taught Derrida at Essex was *Politics of Friendship* and *Specters of Marx* and it seemed somehow irrelevant to the students I was teaching it to, and this really struck me. It was maybe the wrong moment for Derrida’s work, that scrupulousness and care and patience and whatever just seemed to be suddenly irrelevant. The time required something different, and there was an enormous impatience with that scrupulousness. I suppose some of that impatience infected me. I wrote something after his death but in the last ten or fifteen years I haven’t been engaged with Derrida in the way in which I was” (Critchley 2013, 61).

Author.” To turn this actual carnal death into a symbolic death and read the text, on its own terms.

But does the actual death of the writer who lived his death in writing not also speak “from now on,” to use Naas’ words; speak and *mean* it, now that he will no longer just be dead in theory, no longer already dead in writing, but *still, still dead*, forever, and also from now on, still alive? There is nothing metaphorical, symbolical, figural about this anymore, this is life, real-life versus un-real-time text, and the first always sheds its light over the latter.

Ici, le fantome c’est moi.

Yes, here, now, it is.

From now on dead. But who, what, and how many deaths? The author lies buried in a French cemetery under a marble stone inscribed with his birth name, Jackie Derrida: the son, the boy, the name he was given by his parents. The first and last sign we have no control over.

In Derrida’s texts, the sign of death performs, on the one hand, not an end but a turn, a strategic turn, a physical hurdle on the linguistic path to a hauntological Nirvana of sorts where nothing “is” but beautiful impermanent strokes of sublime language, in which he leaves (and lives) his trace. That was his wish. On the other hand, his death inevitably means more than that. It isn’t only spectral. It *touches*, moves people who mourn his loss outside the text, in life, the missing author who no longer will be writing anything new; the absence of someone, noticed when looking at an empty desk, pipes unsmoked.

Death of the author: the “pleasure of the text,” as Barthes suggests; a “unique opportunity for his work,” as Naas wrote. Death of the author: “painful unpleasure” of loss and mourning, in the words of Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1971, 245). One must begin to undertake this, at some point; one cannot forever stay in denial. How confusing death is. Something we can and cannot read. What a painful contradiction. There was very little pleasure for Michael Naas in thinking the “unique opportunity,” I imagine.

May 22, 2021. My mother passes away. Her eyes fall open, I do not know if she still sees through these eyes. One last look. She nods, and we do not know if it's a conscious nod or not.

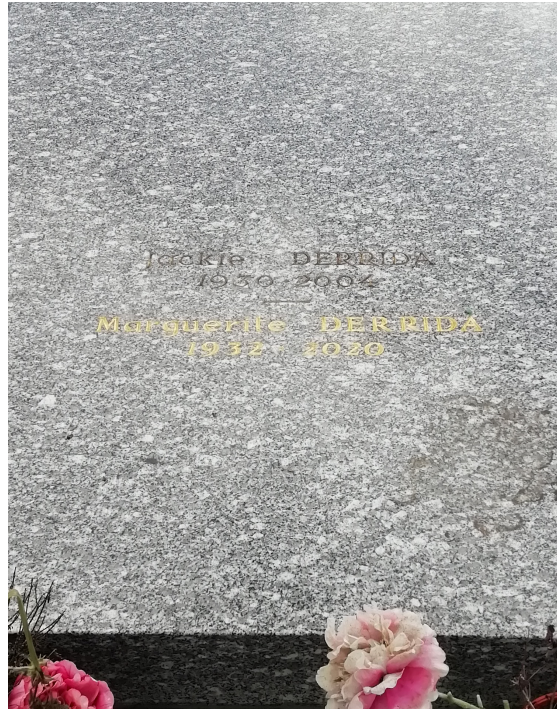


Fig. 6. When I look up an image of Jacques Derrida's grave in 2021, I see that the grave is no longer the same: the name of his wife, Marguerite Derrida, has been inscribed under his. She died, I read, in 2020. Photo: ManoSolo13241324. Wikimedia Commons. Tombe de Jacques et Marguerite Derrida au cimetière communal de Ris-Orangis. 2021.

This is a collection of texts in need of mourning.

Heathcliff cannot live with the death of Cathy: “Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living. You said I killed you – haunt me then. The murdered do haunt their murderers. I believe – I know that ghosts have wandered the earth. Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad. Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable!” (Brontë 2016, 207). There is no voice for the loss of words, only platitudes:

I have no words

I am at a loss

I have lost you

I am so sorry for your loss

Roland Barthes started making notes the day after the death of his mother, notes on grief and mourning. He cannot analyze or structuralize it, only write it, mark it with writing. Here in translation by Richard Howard: “Sometimes, very briefly, a blank moment – a kind of numbness – which is not a moment of forgetfulness. This terrifies me” (Barthes 2011, 26). Death. Can one ever begin to understand it? What’s the use of examining grief if you cannot tell, as with a broken leg: six weeks of healing will do? Mourning, though a “normal affect,” according to Freud, consists in irrational behaviors and repeated reality-testing (1971, 243–244). Repetition: morning, another day. Another mourning dawns upon you, and another, in the world minus the deceased. It takes time to remember this. No one can tell you how, and how long. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf puts death in parenthesis: “[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out remained empty]” (2018, 124). Mrs. Ramsay’s absence is there, right within arm’s reach, but not yet integrated into life and language. Death: fiction or reality? Unforgettable and un-remembered. I read Barthes’ blank moment as language in parenthesis to itself, reaching out for the unspeakable.

2019. I recognize in Barthes’ brief flashes of blankness, something that has seized *me* at times, literally—something that feels, I imagine, like a micro-seizure, signaling my impossibility to process my death rationally. Yes, a seizure, a glitch. I die at the thought of my death. This thought cannot be thought. But what is unspeakable is not without sense. There is sense, always, and also in the un-coded and the unheard of.

2020. After my transplantation, the prospect of my death seems once again deferred, a little further removed from the moments that make up everyday life. The glitches still occur but are sparked by something, *someone* else: they happen when another impossible thought crosses my mind, the no-thought of my breathing with lungs that also belong to someone else, someone who is dead. Whom I don’t know and will not know. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s words: a

metaphysical adventure (2002, 3). What I try to think exactly, in that moment, remains utterly strange – blank, a foreign object on my mind.

2022. And it still baffles me. The brief flashes of blankness, once written by Barthes, now take place in my own mother's absence. I cannot go back to his *Mourning Diary*, I cannot let his words fuse with my own confusion that must remain particular – *my* confusion, *my* mother, *my* loss. Her death.

With death just an arm's length away, everything changes, especially death. In the last course Barthes gave, the lecture notes of which are collected in *The Preparation of the Novel* (2011), translated by Kate Briggs, he dedicates part of a session to the "return," "release," or "de-repression" of the Author. It's as if Barthes takes back his words and retracts the author's death. (If only one could do that in real life!) An Un-death of the Author: the return of the author as ghost. In Barthes notes he regrets that with the author's figural death, he may have encouraged a lack of curiosity for the person who writes; for the personal life in which the writing is done.

A reader should look for this author, he suggests, not to interpret the text but to get to know this person a little, like a friend. And, he adds, to put "a little bit of 'psychological' affectivity back into intellectual production." Authors *are* humans, physiological and psychological beings, after all. And apart from writing they also live and die and change their minds... In his notes Barthes promotes his advice with the confession that he sometimes prefers the "*biographical nebulae*" of certain writers – Kafka's *Diaries*, Tolstoy's *Notebooks*, et cetera – to reading their "work," as if he were to say with this, It's alright, go ahead, don't be afraid, you can welcome these beings back in your life (Barthes 2010, 208).⁴⁰

Death in confrontation with life: no longer "Death" in theory but *a* death, something personal and to take personally. I return to Barthes' early essay on the death of the author. This is the magic that text allows me to do: return, with the knowledge of a future to come. With the regrets of the future. "Language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together' [*suffit a faire tenir langage*]," Barthes wrote (1995, 145). Subjects don't need burials. Mothers do. Roland Barthes was buried next to her, in the same grave. But if I give my imagination free rein, he appears elsewhere. I see *them* appear – Roland Barthes, mama's boy, and Jackie Derrida – stuck together in a grave, quarreling like brothers. Derrida, who once wrote in memory of Barthes: "He was, I mean he remains, one of those of whom I have constantly wondered, for almost twenty years now, in a more or less articulated way: What does he think of this? (...) Especially, why not say it, since this should surprise no one, at the moment of writing" (Derrida 2003, 56). Why not say it. The death of an author: it is not always so readily accepted by readers. That's why the two are here together in this restless

⁴⁰ As if there is a neat division between the writing of one's "work" in life, and life writing: a suggestion that in itself implies that author is always very much alive, and that it is a matter of convention and choice to regard him or her non-present in writing.

grave inside my head from where they continue to entertain their thoughts on the subject of death.

The subject.

The subjects.

The subjects that are now dead.

Un-Disciple

“I’ll teach you!” This, I expect your ear to recognize, is said from a position of dominance; someone teaching you a lesson, whether friendly or with force. In the Exordium of *Specters*, Derrida names three modes of address between which the learning of life itself may be realized: address as experience, address as education, and address as training or taming [*dressage*] (2006, xvi-xvii). We may discern in these the figure of the parent, the teacher, the trainer, the master. But how does one learn life from life itself and from oneself? This, Derrida suggests, can only be maintained with a ghost. Who? Where? And how many? We do not only depend on the other in us but also on our non-being no-selves, our future ghost of no-longer-being-alive, in order to “learn” to live ethically. For we will outlive our selves as others, in the minds and memory of others: the future is already watching us. Life, as Derrida says elsewhere (Derrida 2007), is always already beyond itself, is structural survival. *Survie: La vie est survie*. Living, living on, outliving.

Although texts outlive their writers, it is also usually the case that a reader lives on after reading. The reader moves on to other things in life, or other readings. Time passes and the reader forgets. Forgets or remembers a text in fits and starts, having taken from it, perhaps but not per se, a little bit of wisdom while also having erased significant parts of that same text from their mind – not even deliberately so. What I’ve learned from reading *Specters*, over more than fifteen years of my life, is that readers change and age, and change their mind. I come to this text again and again, but differently. A text seems to me a sort of teaching in the form of a gift, the text expects nothing in return.

Is *Specters of Marx* a book about ghosts? Yes and no.

Specters leave doubt, they break rules, they walk through walls. We cannot predict, only wait and anticipate – dread or desire – their coming. “One watches for the signals, the tables that turn, the dishes that move. Is it going to answer? As in the space of a salon during a spiritualist séance,” Derrida writes, “but sometimes that space is what is called the street” (2006, 123-124). Here’s a ghost, a specter of Marx, not inside the house but on the street. “A specter is haunting Europe,” striving towards becoming, from a future to come. And from a space that is sometimes called the street. A future to come remains unseen and unforeseen. In that sense, the fall of the Berlin Wall on the evening of November 9, 1989, was paradoxically spectral and considerably Marxist *in spirit*. It haunted the crowds that gathered at the border crossing points, shouting, in ever-larger numbers, to open the gates. Unauthorized, incalculable, it took its cue, not by command, but from a general confusion arising from a misread document of updated travel regulations during a GDR press conference, the implications of which – East-Berlin opens its borders – almost immediately went viral over the news wires. History had already, if unintentionally, happened. “The journalists,” a *Washington Post* reporter recalls, “had gotten ahead of reality – though reality was about to

catch up.”⁴¹ When Erhard Krack, Mayor of East Berlin, was asked in 1982 what would happen if the Wall were taken down, he had answered: “What you are asking is a philosophical question. Let us get back to reality.”⁴²

There is always first the unthinkable before reality – another specter of Marx.

Is it going to come? Do we still believe it to be happening, in the space of the street, where life takes places in currents of movement? Where Lady A. is waiting, having just missed her 14.36 bus?

I keep thinking of philosophy as something else, something about which I remain undecided, as if I were still in that hospital bed, weighing my options. “The question *what is philosophy?* can perhaps be posed only late in life, with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely,” Deleuze and Guattari suggest at the opening of their book *What is Philosophy?* They continue: “It is a question posed in a moment of quiet restlessness, at midnight, when there is no longer anything to ask.” Midnight, of course, is the time of ghosts. Between day and night, marking a passage, *from day to night*. To ask oneself the question, in medias res, in the middle of philosophy and from its supposed center, is to already leave it beside itself. One can hint at it, speculate, and make allusions, but it is impossible to define it from this position. “Instead of being seized by it, those who asked the question set it out and controlled it in passing,” Deleuze and Guattari proceed (1994, 1). In wanting to define philosophy, one is defying what philosophizes; one is turning it into a fixation.

To ask *what is philosophy?* may be as incongruous as asking *what is a ghost?* this thing that “[defies] semantics as much as ontology” (Derrida 2006, 5).

What is a ghost?

What you are asking is a philosophical question.

⁴¹ Mary Elise Sarotte, “How an accident caused the Berlin Wall to come down,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2009. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/30/AR2009103001846.html?sid=ST2009103101419>.

⁴² Perhaps the last person who would recognize a revolutionary Marxist – or rather, Derridean deconstructionist – spirit in this remarkable piece of history, I ironically stumbled on this information in an earlier-referenced interview with Barry Smith about the “Derrida Affair” (Smith 1999).

This is a collection of ghost stories.

“I am dead”

“Yes;—no;—I have been sleeping—and now—now—I am dead.”

These strange words are spoken by Valdemar in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.” It describes the case of an experiment of mesmerism conducted on a dying/dead subject, Ernest M. Valdemar, as recounted by the anonymous experimenter P— —.⁴³ As with many so-called curious cases and case histories of the time, real or fictitious, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” first appeared in the popular press.⁴⁴ It was published simultaneously in the December 1845 issues of *The Broadway Journal* (of which Poe had been an editor) and *American Review: A Whig Journal*. Poe biographers suggest that the story has been inspired by a letter printed in *The Broadway Journal* earlier that year, from a New York physician who recounts a successful surgical operation on a patient held “in a magnetic sleep.” Poe’s story shows a striking similarity to its writing, both in style and narration.⁴⁵ In fact, Poe borrows extensively from medical discourse and existing

⁴³ I always take pleasure in this suggestive clue of the unnamed P— —. Not just P., not P—, but a P with two omissions. P O E. The author here is an experimenter himself, someone who mesmerizes readers with his magic spell of fiction.

⁴⁴ As Karen Roggenkamp (2005) points out in her study of nineteenth-century news publishing, storytelling would become central to nineteenth-century news coverage, giving rise to what is known as new journalism, a kind of reportage in which inaccuracy was “excusable as long the imaginative writing is confined to nonessentials and is done by one who has in him at least the desire to represent the truth.”

⁴⁵ This letter by Dr. A. Sidney Doane of 32 Warren Street, New York, was printed earlier that year, in the *Broadway Journal* of February 1, 1845, portions of which are quoted here: “On the 16th of January I was requested by my friend Dr. S. Vital Bodinier, recently from Paris, to witness the extirpation of a tumor from the neck of a female, which he said would be performed without her consciousness, and without suffering, ‘while she was in a magnetic sleep,’ he having operated twice under similar circumstances in Paris, and with success. (...) I went to No. — Chambers street, previous to the hour appointed for the operation (which was half-past one), in order to witness the process of putting the female to sleep. After being in the house about five minutes, the patient came into the basement room and seated herself in an easy chair. After an inquiry or two as to her health, and feeling her pulse, which was natural, Dr. B. proceeded to make what are termed ‘magnetic passes,’ and so successfully, that in five minutes the eyelids drooped, and in ten minutes — say at twenty minutes of twelve — she was sound asleep. I learned from Dr. B. that she had been placed in this state some ten or twelve times previously, with a view to secure her entire insensibility ... I left the patient at twelve o’clock, still sleeping soundly. (...) I returned to the house at quarter past one, in company with Prof. J. W. Francis and Mr. J. S. Redfield, the publisher. A few moments after, we were joined by Drs. Mott, Delafield, J. Kearney Rodgers, Taylor, Nelson, Dr. Alfaro, a highly distinguished physician from Madrid, Mr. Parmly the dentist, and one or two others. Descending to the basement, we found the patient still asleep ... [The tumor] was the size of a pullet’s egg, and the operation occupied two and a half minutes only ... [The patient] continued to sleep on quietly and calmly through the whole of it. Dr. Bodinier seemed to be operating rather upon a cadaver than on a living being ... I ... went again to the house at ten minutes past four. She was still sleeping, but at quarter past four, the time indicated, she was *demagnetized* by Dr. B., Drs. Taylor, Parmly, and others being present. I immediately inquired, ‘How she felt?’ She answered, ‘rather tired.’ ‘Had she suffered during her sleep?’ She said, ‘No.’ ‘Had she been cut?’ She replied ‘No, the operation was to be performed the next day,’ as Dr. B. had previously stated to her would be the case. She was now shown the tumor, at which she seemed much surprised and gratified. Since that time the patient has recovered rapidly, and today, Thursday, one week since the operation, the wound is entirely healed, and she has resumed her duties in the family” (Mabbott 1978, 1228-1229).

case histories, which had become the primary form of medical writing in the nineteenth century. With clinical detail, the narrator P— relates how Valdemar was brought under his spell “*in articulo mortis*” (Poe 2008, 136) and held in a hypnotic state for a period of several months, a time during which Valdemar remains responsive to questions. In ever troubling bouts of speech and utterance, the latter reports on his status of being dead. When his body/corpse is finally released from its trance it dissolves in an accelerated process of decomposition, described here by the narrator:

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of “dead! dead!” absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once – within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity. (148)

What is a case? What makes a case? With its multiple histories in medicine, law, and religion; as a legal case, a moral case, a curious case, a case precedent or case experiment, a court case, case study, criminal case, medical case history, a trying case, or even, the world itself, “as all that is the case” (Wittgenstein), it defies any simple or singular definition. In a study from the nineteen-sixties, literary historian André Jolles considers the case to be among the “simple forms” of human engagement with the world; “a possibility for the world to actualize itself in a definite way” (2017, 137). Like other simple forms (legend, saga, myth, riddle, saying, memorable, fairy tale, and joke) the case is thought-*as*-form, a particular manifestation of thinking with which we construct our sense and comprehension of reality. The case, Jolles argues, arises from “the mental disposition that imagines the world as one that can be judged and evaluated according to norms” (2017, 144). Lauren Berlant, in an issue of *Critical Inquiry* themed on the case, argues that at the root of the case there is a “problem-event” or “obstacle to clarity,” animating “some kind of judgment” (2007, 663). She adds that “to ask the question of what makes something a case, and not merely a gestural instance, illustration, or example, is to query the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and take lesson from” (663). Hence, before any judgment or appeal to judgment can take place, there needs to be an object worthy of attending to and take lesson from. Not all problem-events trigger a desire to ponder, judge, or evaluate. Tautological as it may seem, the case thus always in the first place needs to make a case for itself.

Valdemar’s case in its distilled form is an event that prevents itself from happening. The I cannot make itself dead, though it cannot return to life either. The proposition “I am dead” remains unresolved. You can re-open its case again and again, never arriving at a satisfying conclusion: Valdemar is still dead and not dead.

Both Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes took up this case in their work. In 1973, in his “Analyse textuelle d’un conte d’Edgar Poe,” (translated in 1977 by Donald G. Marshall), Barthes provided a structural reading of the story to analyze the way in which the reading mind is triggered and engaged into signifying text, comparable to the analysis he had done previously in *S/Z*. Hence a reading, not of the contents of the story but of the various ways in which the reader activates and animates the text, making sense of its potential meanings. In Valdemar’s speech, “I am dead,” Barthes observes a survival in language that has the threatening power to self-destruct. He writes, “... the connotation of the word (‘I am dead’) has an inexhaustible richness. Certainly there exist numerous mythic narratives where death speaks; but that is in order to say: ‘I am alive.’ There is, here, a veritable *hapax* of narrative grammar, a staging of a speech that is impossible insofar as it is speech” (Barthes 1977, 9). To Barthes, the problem-event is the untenable discourse of a speaking dead subject, who, in his speech as a dead man, “encroaches” upon life. “There is an undue nibbling of one space on another,” Barthes writes (1977, 10), which finds its symbolization in the literal rot and decay that is taking over Valdemar’s body. Barthes: “The uselessness of the utterance is part of the scandal: the point is it affirms an essence *which is not in its place*” (1977, 10). Either Valdemar or the time is out of joint. “I am dead” is dysfunctional, excessive, in excess of death and life, it has no place to speak of in this world. This is speech that speaks for its own sake, maintaining its indecision, keeping us indecisive about what it wants, what it wants to say, and what *we* want from it. In this impossible instant of a dead living man that speaks, *we*, we as readers are to decide whether we let Valdemar die or keep him alive. The matter of life and death, in Barthes’ reading, is not a metaphysical question but a matter of the power of reading.

In the same year of his analysis of Poe’s story, Barthes also published *Le plaisir du texte* (translated in 1975 by Richard Miller), in which he distinguished between the “readerly text” that conforms to our pleasures and place in the world, and the bliss or *jouissance* of the “writerly text” that “allow[s] the reader to break out of his subject position” in an explosive, orgasmic reading of a “language in pieces, culture in pieces” (1998, 51), a bliss that erupts from an indeterminacy of language. As Barthes points out at the beginning, “the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment” (3-4) but a pretext for things to fall apart; a dismantling of “ideological structures, intellectual solidarities, the propriety of idioms, and even the sacred armature of syntax” (7).

Where better to locate the bliss, *petit mort*, of language itself, than on a tongue that is meaningless, confuses life with death and vice versa? Valdemar makes a brief cameo in *The Pleasure of the Text*, but it is in Barthes’ analysis of Poe’s story that this visceral tongue, quivering, vibrating, rolling inside the cavity of the mouth, makes its case for Barthes’ notion of *jouissance*. As Barthes points out in his textual analysis of Poe’s story, there is a symbolism of the tongue, this “phallic organ which starts to vibrate in a kind of pre-orgasm” toward the scandalous eruption of its impossible and improper words, “I am dead.” The erotics of reading, as suggested here by Barthes and further elaborated upon in *The Pleasure of the Text*, does not come out of the blue but from his reading of Valdemar’s utterances; this

tongue, which in Poe's phrasing "ejaculates" the words "dead! dead!" in a plea to arrive at meaning, absolution, releases thus the "paradigmatic disturbance" – culture to pieces – of death and life that are no longer in strict opposition. The analogy between Valdemar's visceral eruptions and the impropriety of language releasing itself from its fixations is so perfect that it almost seems as though Valdemar's case were written with Barthes' future response in mind, seducing him into its structural conundrum. To speak with Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*: "The text you write must prove *it desires me*" (1998, 6).

I derive pleasure from text as much as from life. Valdemar's case excites me. With my own tongue, presently, I am trying its case: I - am - dead, three syllables, the meaning of which remains open and unresolved. Valdemar's body/corpse speaks to me not *of* transgression; it transgresses – life, death, the integrity of bodies and language – *because* it speaks. His speech liquefies language, which turns "glutinous" and "gelatinous." Death seeps into life and vice versa, to the extent that language itself spills over and can no longer contain this body/corpse within the paradigm that categorically excludes life and death from each other. Here, with the speech of a dead body, I am able to hear something differently: to think an alternative. The dead, they also live in language. In the presence of a dead speaking body, language turns in on itself and signs begin to acquire a life of their own. I am alive because I say so: "I am dead." I appear through disappearance, I am there not there. Valdemar lives and outlives his death and this is possible under the spell of language and its mesmerizing effects.

Valdemar's speech also excited (*desired*) Derrida, who used his words as one of the epitaphs of *Speech and Phenomena*. Valdemar dies a corporeal, visceral, gut-wrenching death, but not in Derrida's project of deconstruction, where, lifted from his context, the undead dead man remains forever in suspension between life and death. Voice is logos, "presence and self-presence, in the present" (Derrida 2010, 3) and Valdemar's utterance, "I am dead," problematizes this statement, localizes its problem, simply by voicing these words. An echo of a voice signals/signifies itself as if to *sound* its idea, before the analytic distinction and solidity of an argument that is expected from a work of philosophy: the case has already presented itself. In citing these unsettling words, the reader intuitively understands the text's queries. Already there is a problem calling itself into being, before the question: the presence of an "I" that (still) is, made possible by language that signs in one's absence. As Leonard Lawlor points out in his introduction to *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*, deconstruction is the project of the "experience of non-presence," which amounts to the experience of language and the sign. Responding to Husserl's theory of language in his *Logical Investigations*, in which Husserl makes the distinction between an indicative and expressive function of the sign, Derrida argues that "the signifying function of the *I* does not depend on the life of the speaking subject" (1973, 96). *I* do not in fact rely on my self-presence. I can be you who is reading, or I can be no longer, and still be there in writing. Valdemar does not need to be alive to express that he is now dead. Some "thing" expresses itself in its absence. And it keeps expressing, regardless of whether there is life or

not. The I does not belong to me, nor to life. “This,” Derrida writes, “is not an extraordinary tale by Poe but the ordinary story of language” (1973, 97).

As noted, Peggy Kamuf, translator of *Specters of Marx*, writes in a collection of essays about Derrida, “the unreadable condition of mourning underscores all of Derrida’s mature thought, beginning with *Speech and Phenomena*” (Kamuf 2010, 2). And Lawlor, who did the second English translation of *La voix et le phénomène*, writes in his introduction: “It is possible to say of it what Derrida says of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. *Voice and Phenomenon* [the revised title of the 2010 translation] contains ‘the germinal structure’ of Derrida’s entire thought” (Derrida 2010, xi). Mourning without end, as Derrida would say later in life, begins before the specter arrives in his work, with the undead Valdemar.⁴⁶ Valdemar, as Derrida suggests, refuses the single-minded dead sentence/death sentence of absolute meaning, breaking out from the closed system of metaphysics, into an infinite or “ultratranscendental” (1973, 15) open-endedness from where the question “Is it alive? Is it dead?” is no longer of relevance. In fact, to ask this question would amount to an undue exorcism: try to stabilize Valdemar’s speech and you will end up, *essentially*, with a decomposed mass of loathsome matter.

“I am dead.” I cannot get over it. I mourn this death without end. I can reopen this case again and again.⁴⁷ while its claim remains unstable, uncertain. No matter what I do, Valdemar is still both dead and alive. In her analysis of case writing, medical historian Gianna Pomata reads the case in its various historical and epistemological contexts, arguing that it belongs to an “epistemic genre” of texts that are developed “in tandem with scientific practice” and as such also becomes the story of the ways in which these practices give particular form and style to knowledge, exposing the patterns that govern our thinking (2014, 2). This allows for a reading in which the case’s object is not taken for granted as “just there,” awaiting our thinking, but instead may help understand how, in the case’s behavior as text, something is quite literally brought to mind as an object worthy of cognitive attention, capable of shaping and possibly changing our minds. In Valdemar’s case, this opens up the question, not of a dead or living body, but of why, in its historic time of writing and publication, questions about the uncertain nature of life and death were of such particular and popular interest that they captivated the cultural imagination. When a case succeeds, Berlant suggests – when we take up the question or problem-event as an object worthy of our thinking – “a personal or collective sensorium shifts” (2007, 665). And at the same time, what we bring to the case (Barthes, Derrida, you, me), the social, historical, cultural, disciplinary, or

⁴⁶ Derrida does not exclusively write about death in terms of the specter and / or the spectral. In “Demeure,” Derrida’s critical commentary on Maurice Blanchot’s “The Instant of My Death,” he writes about the near-death of the soldier in Blanchot’s (auto-biographical) story. Surviving his death (being spared when he is already in front of a firing squad) becomes, in the instant the man is released, “the accident of a life he no longer possesses” (quoted from Stanford University Press’s book summary, Blanchot and Derrida 2000).

⁴⁷ Like so many others, I, too, have long been fascinated by this story. I first wrote about it in my Master’s thesis: Moosje Goosen, *Scientific Investigations: In Search of a Textual Corpus of Phantom Limbs* (University of Amsterdam, 2009).

other specific context that directs our reading – also inevitably alters the case, changes or makes the matter.

I am dead: its case for (post-)structuralism and deconstruction (or later, *hauntology*) has been made. But it is made based on the fact that Valdemar says it, “to the letter,” i.e., he says it inside text and, more specifically, in fiction. The case is fictitious but with an epistemic effect in the real world, where its case is taken up by philosophy. Philosophy cannot make the case in point by itself; it arrives at its truth by means of fiction.

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” is a classic tale of horror that builds up to the “liquid loathsome” released by the finality of Valdemar’s death. Poe’s tale borders on what might have been plausible to the reader of its time, when mesmerism was still held to be (pseudo-)scientifically beneficial, or at least sensational enough to attract wide audiences. The horror of Valdemar’s rapid dissolution also provides the relief of an order restored: in the end, the story itself is a closed case. Death *or* life. Matter is what matters to this destabilizing ontology. It’s how we can verify that death remains, after all, final. This is the case Poe’s story makes, in contrast to those made by Barthes and Derrida. In the latter, Valdemar figures as text, whereas in Poe’s story he is an actual body/corpse that can be seen, touched, smelled, and, disturbingly, listened to.

In his *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy, Eugene Thacker writes that we can speak of the horror of philosophy when the latter “reveals its own limitations and constraints, moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility – the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a nonphilosophical language” (2011, 2). Horror, in its fantasy of an “outside” (non-human, non-being, non-earthly, and so on) can shake systems of belief and habits of thinking, there where philosophy hits its own epistemological walls. On rare occasions, as with “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” it suggests that our epistemological sense of the world is one system of belief among others. In other words, horror can disobey the rules that govern our thinking about being and reality in a way that philosophy, limited to what it deems the truth, cannot. Fiction can thus think ahead of philosophy. This fantasy or madness of fiction is not opposite to knowledge but something that makes the becoming of the latter – the developing and establishing of new thought and ideas, imagined in and as fiction – possible. He who says “I am dead” is out of his mind: these words are forbidden to a philosopher. Derrida called its thought *unheard of* (1973, 153), which is horrifying precisely because we do not know how to sound it with our bodies.

As Thacker argues, genre horror is inscribed in a Kantian paradigm where the experience of this confrontation with the limits of our thinking is sublime: “while we cannot fully comprehend this non-object, this nothing,” – in Valdemar’s case, his coherent speech as a dead body – “we can, at the very least, comprehend this incomprehension – we can think the failure of thought” (2015, 117). “I am dead” brings thinking towards the edge; it confronts the reader with the limits of a metaphysics of presence. A different mode of thinking is required to make this thought accessible, knowable.

Life *or* death is the norm. Are we willing to question and re-evaluate this norm, based on the problem-event posed by Valdemar's speech? That is the case presented by Valdemar. Poe makes the event worthwhile by means of spectacle, suspense, and slow build-up. By framing the event as near-implausible, the story does the opposite and misleads the reader into judging the text as a factual account:

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not -- especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had farther opportunities for investigation -- through our endeavors to effect this -- a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations; and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief.

It is now rendered necessary that I give the facts—as far as I comprehend them myself. (Poe 2008, 136)

It is an exordium of sorts, winning trust by preempting the disbelief of the reader before the story takes off. And with success: many readers in 1845 were willing to believe that this first-person account was true. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish here between the case taken from the story by Barthes and Derrida, and the story told as a case by Poe. For in Poe's story, the case is solved by the dissolution of Valdemar's corpse: the order is disturbed only to be restored in the end. The crisis in the order of life and death is what constitutes the metaphysical plot of Valdemar's case. Valdemar verbalizes this crisis by speaking, which is also a crisis of speech. A dead body expresses life by uttering language, but this language expresses death. Valdemar's speech is a physical expression of life, and a linguistic sign of death: it is where the crises of body and language intersect. For he does not just express his death in written language: he *speaks*. Poe's use of speech or quotation marks leave no doubt about this. "I am dead." Someone is speaking, but from a tongue that shows signs of decay:

There was an instant return of the hectic circles on the cheeks; the tongue quivered, or rather rolled violently in the mouth (although the jaws and lips remained rigid as before;) and at length the same hideous voice which I have already described, broke forth:

"For God's sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick! — waken me!—quick!—I say to you that I am dead!"
(147-148)

This tongue, isolated from the other parts of the mouth – jaws, lips, which have already turned stiff – produces sounds that can be broken down, per syllable, into language:

I have spoken both of “sound” and of “voice.” I mean to say that the sound was one of distinct—of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct—syllabification. (145)

Valdemar’s speech, “—quick!—quick!—,” “dead! dead!” consists almost exclusively of single-syllable words that in their repetition produce rhythmic bouts, like the spirit rappings or startled speech of a medium during a séance. But because of the gore with which the narrator describes Valdemar’s physically altering state, the reader is unremittingly reminded of this speech’s source, which isn’t ghost-like but visceral: a stammering tongue – blackened, swollen, quivering – that is increasingly incapable of performing the muscular movements required to properly enunciate and articulate words. There is a body that wants to speak: it wants to make sense in life’s absence. Someone apparently is *dying to speak*, but dying after the clinical observation of his death:

At the expiration of this period, however, a natural although a very deep sigh escaped the bosom of the dying man, and the stertorous breathing ceased – that is to say, its stertorousness was no longer apparent; the intervals were undiminished. The patient's extremities were of an icy coldness. (141)

This life in death is considered abject: the narrator considers it “madness” to attempt to describe “the hideous whole,” the sound of which, he is sure, has not ever reached “the ear of humanity” before. It is “gelatinous” and “glutinous” – like the fluid excretions that leave the body post-mortem. In the words of Julia Kristeva, “[t]he abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to the *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning (...) what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1982, 2). The voice itself is abject, emanating from the cavernous depths of a cadaver. “I am dead.” It rattles, gurgles – it means nothing. Valdemar’s dead body expresses “nothing” as if nothing were something in and of itself, a monstrous essence. In Poe’s story, this monstrosity wants to return to normalcy. Poe’s plot suggests that language as we know it does not really want to say “I am dead.” It wants to resume life, even if that means its end. The time of the ghost that is out of joint in language, as Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, is “[n]ot a time whose joinings are negated, broken, mistreated, dysfunctional, disadjusted, according to a *dys-* of negative opposition and dialectical disjunction, but a time without *certain* joining or determinable conjunction” (2006, 20). Poe’s story hinges on/off precisely such a dialectical disjunction and therefore ultimately does not undermine the biases of

Western oppositional thought that Derrida wishes to undo with deconstruction.⁴⁸ Where Derrida sees a ghost appear from this case, there is for Poe, at the end, only a definitely dead body.

To stay under its spell and to maintain its philosophical problem, Derrida and Barthes need to distinguish the case from the story. They need to extract the phrase “I am dead” from its place and meaning in horror fiction where “its guiding *metaphysical* principle is ‘flesh’” (Thacker 2011, 115, my emphasis), and the case closes with a dissolution of the monstrous dead body. The following, in Derrida’s conjuration of Valdemar-as-ghost, remains untold, unseen:

The eyes rolled themselves slowly open, the pupils disappearing upwardly; the skin generally assumed a cadaverous hue, resembling not so much parchment as white paper; and the circular hectic spots which, hitherto, had been strongly defined in the centre of each cheek, went out at once. (...) The upper lip, at the same time, writhed itself away from the teeth, which it had previously covered completely; while the lower jaw fell with an audible jerk, leaving the mouth widely extended, and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue. (144)

Derrida is interested in the un-heard of sound of the specter produced by text, but the reader of “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” also hears something else emerge from it. I read Valdemar’s scene of dying and, in my mind, I listen to the “audible jerk” of his lower jaw. That is the *sound*, not the speech, of someone who is dead. I do not know this sound – I try to produce it myself, letting my own jaw collapse with force, repeatedly, but to no avail. And yet, I have heard it, with my own mind. I suspend my disbelief in the sound of collapsing jaws and, in giving ear to it, in lending my ear to its fiction, it reaches me, with the force of a disjointed jaw that snaps out of place.

Even though *The Communist Manifesto* begins spectrally, with a ghost, *ein Gespenst geht um in Europa*, Marx, it turns out in his later texts, ultimately did not believe; did not want to believe; held his disbelief in ghosts so firmly that he had to get rid of them. “Marx is very firm: when one has destroyed a phantomatic body, the real body remains” (Derrida 2006, 163). That is the plot presented by Poe in “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar.” But not in Derrida’s case of ghosts that remain indestructible in their infinite flight from being and non-being. Derrida: “we understand the word *I* not only when its ‘author’ is unknown but when he is quite fictitious. And when he is dead” (Derrida 1973, 96). In Derrida’s case, it doesn’t matter who speaks or who originates “I am dead.” In a deconstruction of “I am dead,” death

⁴⁸ Derrida, via Blanchot, notices this impulse in Marx, “who does not live comfortably with this plurality of language that are always colliding and disjoining with each other in him” (Blanchot as quoted in *Specters*, 43) but does not mention it in Poe’s case.

does not matter, but *literally*: there is no matter in language that experiences death. Finally, then, to Derrida, the tale of Valdemar is not a tale of terror or of horror, nor is it a fantastic tale. “This is not an extraordinary story by Poe, but the ordinary story of language” (97). But such a reading requires that he disposes of a body – Valdemar’s body, that of the individual who makes the case. In the inscription of his words at the beginning of *Speech of Phenomena*, Derrida lifts the phrase from the body of Valdemar, who is paradoxically left speechless.

How many ways are there to say, without saying, I am dead? A last breath, quiet or disquieting; the silence of a corpse, under a grave stone with an inscription – a name and date, a word of remembrance. The living appearance of someone dead in a dream or, vice versa: Abraham Lincoln dreaming about his own dead body, days before he died: “Who is dead in the White House?” A hospital monitor translating the heart’s monitored message, “I am dead.” And alternatively, how many ways are there to say, and to mean it, “I am dead” when alive? Compare Valdemar’s speech to a note from a 50-year-old man from Massachusetts who wrote the words:

I’m done with life
I’m no good
I’m dead

before he committed suicide (Critchley 2015, 49).

There is, as Barthes mentions, a metaphorical use of the phrase. It is, in Barthes' words, "what a woman says who has spent the whole afternoon shopping," (1977, 10). Or, I might add, what a woman says when she has spent the whole afternoon listening to a man talk about himself: "I am dead!" "I was talked to death!"

Consider now the same sentence, "I am dead" when Derrida writes in memory of Roland Barthes, his friend and colleague, in "The Deaths of Roland Barthes." Both had thought with the sentence, in their work, turning Valdemar into their ally. What pains Derrida in this particular instance of his citation is that Barthes "... was never able to say 'I am dead' literally or according to the letter" (Derrida 2003, 65). In other words, what pains him is that these same words, this phrase that, in a different case, negated its meaning, could not undo the death of Roland Barthes.

This is then also the intrinsically sadness of the ordinary story of life and language: that neither Barthes nor, at this moment in time, Derrida could ever say it to the letter. Posthumously, these words no longer purely speak theoretically but convey an extra message, a postscript: that, in fact, you have to be dead to unlock the truly magic effect of the words in writing:
"I am dead."

What does it mean to follow a ghost? What does it mean, in the field of my own research, cultural analysis, to listen and to "always allow the object to speak back," as Mieke Bal says, "even though obviously," she adds, "the object cannot speak" (2002, 45)? How does this "obvious" fact of its actual silence, its non-speech, present itself to me? How does it sound in my sounding of the words, "I am dead"? The actual silence of objects, there where it speaks its "irreducible complexity" (Bal 2002, 45) – this silence has crossed the path of my listening, frequently. So frequently that I should be able by now to recognize its sound. But never as something recognizable, for it is a sound that I cannot hear – a sound unheard. To that extent, I argue, the object of cultural analysis amounts to everything and nothing but a ghost. For we can say that, even though the object cannot speak, we should listen to this ghost in whom, in which, we should believe, with a certain deafness to what we know or think we know.

Derrida, speaking here:

"(of course they do not exist, so what?)" (2006, 219)

Does Valdemar speak back to Derrida, in speaking to him from his quivering "swollen and blackened tongue?" Do I speak back to Derrida in speaking both for and against him, undecided? Does he speak, still speak to me? Who speaks? Allow me to speak: speech, in the practice of cultural analysis, is the locus, *the voice*, of recalcitrance. No matter what we say about our objects of analysis, these objects point to our conceptual or theoretical

pinpointing, our attempts to identify, to localize its presence, in an imaginary unheard and unheard-of speech with which it says: “this is me saying this is not me” or “you have gotten it all wrong.” Speech, as a figure of speech, speaks of the limits of the work we do as scholars or researchers.⁴⁹

Now, in this analysis of the object, which is both something observed and something observed *in us*, part a product of the researcher’s mind, how to remain cautious of the object’s silent speech; how to account for the fact that, obviously, it cannot speak, there where we allow it to speak back? How do we, in and as research, give ear to this speaking back? In other words, how do we speak back to its speaking back?

This is in my opinion where the intellectual and creative challenge of cultural analysis lies: in this speaking that is constituted always already by responses and response-abilities (Barad 2007), by speaking with, for, against, but always in loving confusion with the other that is the object on our mind and yet also escapes our imagination. The object speaks back in our recognition of its recalcitrance; in the iteration of its silences, by allowing it to speak *against* the theories that we employ, *against* a single-minded line of inquiry. Consider Valdemar, whose speech is recalcitrant to its own signification. It preempts, in a way, its instrumentalization for other ends – even where it concerns such an open-ended enterprise as deconstruction. Valdemar’s speech is recalcitrant *and* disobedient: it does not wait for its turn; it does not wait for the approval of someone who will “allow” it to speak back. It speaks, no matter what Derrida or Barthes or I am saying of it here in addition. It does not need to speak back; it has already spoken.

I am dead.

And no one will say it according to the letter.

⁴⁹ I prefer the word researcher, because it suggests that research begins in the repetition of its search, when the researcher revisits in a critical light that first impression that the object leaves on their thinking, and vice versa, their thinking on the object. That is to say, the researcher is always in search of the object in a critical mode, requiring a second glance, a third, a fourth, and so on...

This is a collection of texts that are written by someone who is still alive.

3

There is no is

Phenomenology of a Missing Arm

I was about ten years old, cycling home back from school. At a certain moment, on the other side of the street, a girl about my age came cycling from the opposite direction. I looked at her, she may have looked back—I don't remember. We didn't know each other but I had seen her before and knew that she missed her forearm. I had never given this much thought. But on that day, seeing her approach on the other side of the street, sitting upright on her bike, her feet pedaling, her right hand holding the steer, I was seized by a strange sensation: I stopped feeling my arm, up to the elbow. My arm, the lower right arm with its right hand and right-hand fingers; this part of me that had always been with me, all the time transparently there without my thinking, suddenly disappeared from my being, from being *me*. The habitual feeling of having this arm escaped from me entirely. In its place, I perceived something strange, a voluminous absence. Something had risen to consciousness, in its apparent loss. It wasn't a thought but an actual sensation, a sudden physical insight into my corporeal condition. I assign these words to the memory of an experience, some thirty years later, but it did not need a cognitive cue and I still feel that language falls short in describing this loss.

What can I say. It just happened. In a flash, prompted by my seeing her, she, holding onto her steer with her one hand; the other hand "not there," my own arm paused, refused to co-exist with me—as if the absence of the girl's arm now inhabited mine. Nothing had happened to it; I looked at my arm, my hand. All was there. But it was there as something exterior to my existence. This lasted no more than an instant. But it was as if my arm's entire history of movements in time and space, its "naturalness," had in that instant abandoned me. I never felt something like it before. It so unsettled me that it literally threw me off balance. My steer wobbled; my front wheel took a turn. This shook my arm back to life, back into its place. Its normal sensation had returned as promptly as it had disappeared, and I cycled on as if nothing had happened. I don't know if the girl across the street had noticed anything, she had also cycled on and was already gone, out of sight.

Next moment. Thinking: What just happened? Thinking (still on my bike): I must figure this out. Thinking: I don't know what just happened. I want to know. Thinking, now: I want to learn (to live). Meaning: Can I give form to this experience, this out-of-the-mind existence, this – this, this weird ontological *thing* – my arm/no-arm. But no, hold on – this absent arm that is no thing, that has no form, it is already gone: not out of sight (it is not a visual matter), but out of sense. It is non-sense. Irrational? Unknowable. This absent arm, this absent form, is void of sensation and meaning. Meaning: I cannot "think" its absence back into being, into its non-form. I cannot distance myself from it either, I was part of the experience. I am, I am also this loss. What, how, whose is this thing lacking?

What if I need to begin here, empty-handed, without figure, without background? With no thing: just the emptiness of my whole being, brimming with potential.

This is a collection of texts in search of an arm.

Phantom Subjects

How do you name a thing you do not know? How, as a researcher, do you define what it is you want to know, *before* you know and have found the reasons and right tools, the methodologies that guide you in this process towards knowing? In my writing, grasping for words, establishing a space and a temporality from which to “speak,” picking up details, leaving other details aside, I try to settle the matter of a nebulous thinking, this ongoing swirl of the mind, into a mental formation. It is from my writing that the thought – *the having-thought* – begins to assume form, as an object on my mind. A thought-form: a missing arm. No, hold on: not the arm itself, but the insight into the feeling of always having had this arm, by its brief anomalous loss. In this apparent loss of an arm, something – *someone* – steps forward into being, on my mind. *I would like to learn to live.*

Myself/no-arm/no-self; no longer the quiet supporting structure for my experiencing – the base, the background – but experiencing its own being. Who, what is this absence? What to name it? A reverse phantom limb? Slowly the object, the becoming-thought of a missing arm comes into being by my formulating it. Arm arm arm arm arm gone arm arm. No, that’s not it, not really. The form escapes me. This ceaseless thinking about a thing that is no thing appears and disappears from my mind, it ceases and arises. Like a breath. It is never a fixed thing, this thought, this questioning. It is a thinking I try to settle with my writing.

Object-in-becoming, shaped by questioning: How does it feel to have arms? To have a body? To not have a body?

I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things... Descartes, First Meditation (2017, 19).

In the *Meditations* by René Descartes, the philosopher asks himself, on the first of six supposed nights meditating on life: “How can it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?” Six nights of thinking, interpreting, interrogating, reflecting, all the time practicing a certain belief, *I am, I exist* – but through an act of disbelief and disappearance, taking nothing for granted. Descartes wants to be certain. He wants to know that he is not being fooled into believing that the world exists, that he exists. He is certain that God exists. In order to re-establish this certainty, he suspends all his beliefs, begins to doubt...

He sits by the fire, in his winter evening gown, reasoning, arguing, doubting. Settling the matter with words, into writing. How can he deny himself the world, his own being? How to enact this denial without becoming, as he speculates, “a madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass?” (Descartes 2017, 16). He knows he isn’t mad; he has no reason to proof

this. (And why not, actually?) Instead he proposes to lose himself without getting lost, over these successive nights of practicing philosophy.

I perceived by my senses that I had a head, hands, feet and other limbs making up the body which I regarded as part of myself, or perhaps even as my whole self ... (59).

In the Sixth and last Meditation Descartes turns to the question of the existence of physical things, including his own body. In order to do so, he must make distinctions: between God and men, between men and his others, men and objects, and between objects. But most importantly, he must distinguish himself from all else. How to figure out himself? Over the course of this week, he has slowly disintegrated: *res cogitans*, *res extensa*; extended, non-extended; sensory perception, cognition. Cutting and extracting, mind apart from body, certain and uncertain, self and no-self. No-hands, no-head, no-body. The old philosophical injunction: Know thyself. Descartes denies himself his hands, his body—if only temporarily, in order to get to know, really know, and re-constitute the indubitable indestructible self.

Then, on this sixth night, Descartes releases a ghost.

“The conclusion that material things exist is (...) suggested by the faculty of imagination, which I am aware of using when I turn my mind to material things” (Descartes 2017, 57), he begins. Imagination, he explains, is distinct from pure understanding. Descartes uses the term imagination to describe our faculty of forming images with the mind, mentally replicating what has been perceived before by the senses. Imagination is a thinking learned by having a body. For Descartes, there is pure understanding, which doesn’t need the world outside the mind; and there is imagination, which “seems to be nothing else but an application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it, and which therefore exists” (57). Here, Descartes argues that the mind, which is pure, is in intimate relation to the body, which therefore also exists. But he also argues that imagination is not essential to the mind. “For if I lacked it,” he writes, “I should undoubtedly remain the same individual as I now am; from which it seems to follow that it depends on something distinct from myself” (58). With or without imagination, he contends, he will remain “undoubtedly” the same—he lacks the “imagination” to think of himself other than a thinking being.

Insofar that there is pure understanding for which we do not need the body in its interaction with the world, there must, according to Descartes, be other forms of thinking to which we can assign all those worldly thoughts, these impure forms – a leather shoe, a red burning coal, a thick woolen gown, a quill – and for which we rely on other faculties than the pure mind alone. It is with this tautology, keeping imagination out of its loop, that the body is split – hands, head, limbs – from the mind in what has become the Cartesian philosophical tradition.⁵⁰ “I can (...) easily understand that this is how imagination comes about, *if the body*

⁵⁰ One must bear in mind that it is the interpretation of his work that solidified the tradition. “Doubt” is a method in Descartes’ *Meditations*, if not, in narrative terms, a plot device. But the true doubt that haunts the text, as is pointed out elsewhere by Mieke Bal, is his struggle with the understanding of the body-mind relation. To demonstrate, I quote here at length from the same Sixth Meditation: “There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something

exists,” [my emphasis] Descartes proceeds, “and since there is no other equally suitable way of explaining imagination that comes to mind, I can make a probable conjecture that the body exists” (2017, 58). If the body exists, then this is how imagination functions. Therefore the body *must* exist, because if it wouldn’t, imagination would taint the essence of mind, no longer solely constituted by pure thinking. More than reasoning, this is a figuration that re-asserts the philosopher’s assertion – a way to keep the figure in place. The body is the wish fulfillment in the argument of a pure mind. Descartes’ interpretation of the imaging faculty ontologizes the body on the one hand, and the mind on the other, in such a way that the self is chased out of the body.

In order to distinguish self from body and cast himself as a thinking being, Descartes *needs* the logical interference of the faculty of imagination, without which – he also claims – he essentially remains the same. Imagination is and isn’t there. It has to appear in order to build his argument, but only to disappear again, once it has split body from mind. Exit ghost. Imagination performs a spectral function in the thought that is figured out, but it does not have any presence in the figure itself.

Descartes does not exist because of his imagination, therefore he exists because he thinks. Once imagination has been constructive to Descartes argument – the absolute certainty of the self that exists as a thinking being present to itself – imagination ceases to have significance. It is as if it produces the existence of a body, for the sole reason that the mind, the self, can ultimately transcend from it. After six nights of doubt and self-evaluation, Descartes’ belief in God and himself are reaffirmed and fortified – but with the work of a ghost.

This is reasoning beyond a doubt, and it is nothing like the madness of men believing “that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass.” It doesn’t occur to Descartes that he, too, has made himself in a particular image, figured by his convictions and repressions: a self that is made of mind, of thinking only.

Myself, no self, loss of self. My lost arm is a phantom. It’s a phantom subject. It’s a quasi-object. How can I take critical distance from something that is part of me, even in its disappearance? How can I deny that it is mine? Is not mine? I cannot dismember it and make it an object of inquiry, it is pure experience. But an experience that proposes knowledge – insight, a revelation? – about life, existence: is this not what philosophy is about? Philosophy, from the Greek word *philosophia*: love of wisdom. It is with the loss of my arm that my love of wisdom took hold, when I was a child. This was adventurous knowing, wanting to learn, wanting to figure out life.

wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on. So I should not doubt that there is some truth in this. Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit” (64). But he also concludes that “knowledge of the truth (...) seems to belong to the mind alone, not to the combination of mind and body” (Descartes 2017, 65).

But how to share this knowledge that I can't figure out in words? How to give form, not to the supposed object, but to the desire for inquiry? And how to turn this into an arguable point: *therefore, blah blah blah*. No, I don't think you understand, not *therefore*, just *there* and *then*: an insight into being is what I want to share. Not the notion of it but the living, the aliveness of thinking itself. Thought as form: as a fluid mental sculpture prompted by experience, surprise at life. I do not know how to make you see this; how the brief loss of my arm gave an insight into my existence, how it is something profound and yet, less solidified than argument, too ephemeral to be studied, but experienced, and life-affirming. How to figure out this something, without knowing it, without pretending to come to a conclusion, a definite form, and without the therefore of logical reasoning? Just writing, experiencing, practicing thinking. Is that possible in and as scholarship?

Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*.

I would like to learn to live. The phrase always arrives in time (and as if for the first time). I read, and with these words, something has sprung to life, or at least to mind, by expressing a desire. I would like. I would like to bring into this world a learning that is at the same time lived. A learning of something, something of which the learning itself is part.

In her book *Image-Thinking* (2022) about the processes of making and thinking that constitute her research, Mieke Bal describes a theatrical scene from her video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* from 2019. Don Quijote is on stage, trying but struggling to tell his story. Pancho Villa sits in a chair on the side, prompting the words of the script when needed. Bal writes: "these two figures can do what they do because they have a space in which to do it. That space is a stage; hence, a fictional and visual one" (2022, 2). Thinking will happen in that space intended for it. It is a fictional space for speculation, among real persons, about things that matter to Don Quijote. And with that, matter to "us" – the us that reads, interprets, sees, thinks, feels. Any possibility for research begins with the recognition of such a space for questioning and creating questions. On the stage provided for the occasion, Don Quijote and Pancho Villa can act out, *enact*, a scene. But not just them: a crew, including Bal, observes their acting, gives instructions, negotiates possible outcomes. The actors agree, disagree, discuss, and may give their own suggestions. During the filming of the scene, a group of unannounced visitors walk into the theatre, audibly. We hear them murmur in the background: life gets in the way. But no—life too; life, *especially*, plays its role in what is on stake here. All these factors, human, non-human, planned and unplanned, bring something to this space where something, some thinking, is gradually figured out.

To figure out: to think about something or someone until you understand it or them. It is from the understanding that something, someone will acquire form. Bal proposes "image-thinking" as a way of making "complex, abstract knowledge concrete and thus, clearer for [one]self and understandable for others" (2022, 3). It matters whether you figure out Don Quijote from a detached, rational point of view; as a writer or as a reader, or, say, from the point of love. The scene ends with Pancho embracing Don Quijote as he is crying, failing to tell his story.

The literary character Don Quijote is both formless and pluriform. He will appear differently from different readings and approaches. Is this a form of madness? It depends on how you see it. Like Don Quijote, the objects of our inquiries – our research objects, subject matter – are ghosts, becoming-forms, always and only provisional. Bal focalizes Quijote's story through him, on stage, filmed by a camera; here he appears by himself, struggling, suffering to narrate. Pancho Villa comes to his rescue: not with an answer but with an embrace.

To learn to live:
to figure (out) the space and time occupied by yourself.

Image-thinking does not limit itself to visualization in the strict sense: a figuration can also be a mental formation. Here I propose the term "thought-form," as a subtle way to think about (and with) other forms of figuration than visual-oriented processes of research, for instance, in writing.⁵¹ Fiction can provide a space for figuring out, without having to give actual settled form outside one's imagination. It can create this form without images: we can imagine a structure of thought without having to "see" it. In *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* by Mieke Bal, this fiction is enacted in a theatrical space. But this space does not have to be material. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida creates an opening scene with minimal means: someone, you or me, comes forward and says something. And with it, a virtual space, abstract but "there," has opened up. I do not "see," it has no image in my mind. But with this no-image, attended to in the reading, a space rises for the occasion to think, from that simple but enigmatic cue, proposed in writing: *I would like to learn to live finally*.

It is a fictional opening to a theoretical work. In this scene, "someone" steps forward, up front, into the light or into the picture, we are made to imagine. We are invited to speculate who this qualifier, "someone," could be the signifier of. It could be me or you, it doesn't seem to matter. Or rather, it matters that it doesn't matter. As in fiction: me for you, you in me, you as me. One of the thoughts that will emerge from this mental space created by Derrida's writing is that thinking doesn't happen in isolation. You *and* me. It is always entangled, seeking to establish a common ground, which cannot exist single-mindedly, nor in the mind only. Someone rises to the occasion: *I would like to learn to live finally*. I would like to come to life. You come to life, in me: I come to learn with you.

This thing (my arm) that isn't: what is it? What to make of it? I do not know and I want to learn. *I will think this over*. A scene is set. I will revisit, search and re-search for it again and again, remembering, dismembering, re-membering, imagining. Imaging: *How does it look?* What does loss look like? Does it have an image? How do I turn this particular absence into something for others to imagine, something to "see", to grasp? Sensing my arm out of order, I am prompted to wonder who, what disrupts the order, what does the arm in its

⁵¹ Not to be confused with the "thought forms" proposed and visualized in the work of theosophists Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation*. First released in 1901 by the Theosophical Society, *Thought-Forms* was an exploration of the visual manifestations of thoughts and the notion that they exist as objects.

absence has to say? I try to step back into the scene of my memory, where I process my learning: How? What? Why? Why “it,” why this, why me? An it and an I negotiate each other into a relation.

Someone can step into a video installation by Mieke Bal and participate in the thinking, in *making* the work, and making it *work*, Bal writes (2022, 6), just as she brings her own learning to the stage, a setting she and her collaborators have created for the occasion. A set, a stage, a scene. They are meaningful places because they make the players aware of their involvement and agency in the process. The actors performing Don Quijote and Pancho Villa are aware of the roles they are acting out. I think it matters for Bal to create these fictions, not just to make thinking happen, but to consciously imply herself in the object of her thinking: reminding herself that she is also playing her part as a researcher. She is not so much directing the space; she is one of the various agents (or interlocutors, as she calls them) that make it happen. She, too, is “on stage,” so to speak – even if not visibly there. Here we get a clearer picture of what research entails, i.e., not some action or intention that a subject applies to an object, already “out there” in the world, but an enactment that constitutes both the object and the subject of learning, reciprocally. The scene played out by Don Quijote and Pancho Villa prompts specific thoughts, feelings, urges, and ideas of the maker-thinker; she, too, is cast in a particular light. The scene ends. Pancho Villa holds Don Quijote, who is being held, as he realizes he cannot tell his story. This is where Bal chooses to end the scene. In an embrace between teller, failing to tell, and listener, listening, regardless.

After that initial experience of my disappearing arm, I have lost and regained limbs on other occasions, always, and only, when seized by the sight of someone missing an arm or leg.⁵² Whoop! There goes my leg, my arm, there goes my sense. The last time I “lost” a limb I was in the hospital and saw a man in the corridor walking on crutches. His left leg had been removed right above the knee. As I walked past, I looked at the space where his leg used to be. My mind filled in the missing movements of the amputated limb and in that instant, I felt my own leg weaken, growing faint, as if losing consciousness but only in the leg.

There is a returning desire to give the experience a form. But the paradox of this writing is that, in my describing these lost limbs, I end up with legs, arms, hands: not with the lack or loss of these. The absence goes away with my giving thought to it: with my intention and attention. It escapes my conscious learning. I cannot look at a missing leg or arm and “think” absence. It has to take me by surprise. In that regard, my arm/no-arm remains a secret I cannot conceive. I do not “have” it, I cannot keep it: it happens *to* me. Whenever I try to focus on its loss; when I try to grasp it, the loss itself gets lost. In my describing it here, it does not solve the doubt it raises. Rather, it releases a questioning without end, without knowing: the *feeling* of not-knowing and of formlessness that precedes and leads towards the

⁵² I wrote about another instance in my Master’s thesis, involving an encounter with a veteran of the Royal Dutch Indies Army (KNIL) during a visit to the Pasar Malam Besar (Grand Market) in The Hague, with my Indonesian grandmother (Goosen 2009).

motivation to think, in order to get to know; in order to give form. Hence, the experience does not make me know, but helps me understand something about knowledge itself. My present absent limb/the absent present limb about which I cannot make up my mind causes an epistemological stutter, a thinking with pause.

Parts of these texts were written in bed.

In her autobiographical writing, “A Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf remembers special instances of her childhood that she calls “moments of being” (1985, 79). Although the reader never gets to learn what they mean exactly, it is made clear by Woolf that these moments stand out from the nondescript “cotton wool” (72) of how we live our lives most of the time, not particularly aware of our being alive. Nicole L. Urquhart points out, in an article published online, that “it is not the action, but her awareness that sets the moment of being apart from other experiences.”⁵³ They are, Woolf explains, moments of extreme clarity, although without explicit message. In these moments nothing really happens to the world, and yet she feels reality has intensified, in an altered state of awareness. Something has happened to her perception that makes her experience the world anew. To indicate what she means, Woolf tries to describe a number of these moments. One is of her seeing a flower and seeing it *differently*, suddenly seeing, as she writes, “the whole” of it. “I was looking at a plant spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later. (...) When I said about the flower ‘That is the whole,’ I felt that I had made a discovery. I felt that I had put away in my mind something that I should go back [to], to turn over and explore” (71).

What does she mean by “the whole”? It is something without explanation, to store in the mind for later. It is too much, too intense, too “whole” to see as a distinct form, and she is unprepared to understand the insight of it in the instant. Sometimes you don’t have the intention to think while questions, or rather, the urge, the need to form questions, wash over you. In her “discovery” of the flower, Woolf realizes something without reason, without cognitive understanding. She registers, in this revelatory moment of the flower, something happening to her: she is seized by the paradox of its clarity. She does not have the words for it, except for that “the flower is the whole,” whatever this *may* mean – *may come to mean*, in a future moment, once it may have been figured out. She believes it is worthwhile to do that, to see if she can understand, although she isn’t sure whether she’s able to: not now, not right away. Hence, with the revelation, some other “thing” has come to life, has sprung to mind, a mental space where she will store it away for later, so that she can come back to it and learn from it, re-turn and re-search its revelatory qualities.

A space to figure out something can be many things and places: a notebook, a posture (Rodin’s *The Thinker*; Descartes meditating in his evening gown, in front of the hearth), a time scheduled for it, a classroom discussion, a university, a fellowship, a room of one’s own. It can be fictional, artificial, it can be real. Sometimes you fill that space with your own body and time.

⁵³ Urquhart, “Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction.” Year unspecified. Writing@CSU (Columbia State University). <https://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/matrix/urquhart.htm>

This is a collection of texts where things are only partially and provisionally figured out. This text is never “the whole.”

Woolf's moments of being are exciting to her in every possible way: they are overwhelming, thrilling, they have the power to destabilize her. In fact, it is her putting the moment away for later "to turn over and explore" – the future perfect of its *will have been thought* – that makes experiencing these wild moments bearable for her at all, and formative to her writing: "after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer" (Woolf 1985, 72). This possibility of a writing to come, of deferring the shock of the pre-reflective instant to a future reflective writing, does not only designate a space for learning; it is also the writer's means of handling the terrifying encounter with something as yet unknown. Writing for Woolf is a means of coping with life, a way of being-in-the-world, rather than, in classic philosophical terms, a means to understand life, of "knowing thyself." Writing is her way of accepting that we do *not* always know ourselves. Not in every moment. Woolf establishes a relation between life and writing, a *possible* future writing, to come back to these moments of lived experience with sustained attention and potential understanding. The actual writing allows the space and time for figuring out. It is here that "the flower that is the whole" may or may not come to exist to others. Woolf: "I feel that I have had a blow; (...) it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words" (72).

With this stubborn missing arm of mine, my own phantom, my being here as a researcher, appears on the scene. It cannot be seen without a thing looking back at me from the other end. So even if I cannot make you see my ghost arm, this arm sees me, and makes me visible to myself. Cultural analysis proposes to analyze objects, while allowing the object to speak back to the concepts and theories we as researchers employ in order to make these objects matter. This becomes very obvious when dealing with a recalcitrant object like my missing arm, which in its ambiguity will always partially resists the epistemological efforts to put its mystery to rest. However, this resistance is always at work in more or less subtle ways, as soon a scholar makes the claim, "this is..." when in reality no object can be absolute, permanent, or absolutely present.

In cultural analysis, scholars allow the object to test and criticize their theories but not necessarily themselves. How do we know if the object we construct in our thinking thinks we are biased. How do we acknowledge that we remain incomplete in our view, unreliable in our narration; that it is not in our human nature to be omniscient? My missing arm that has no form, no visibility – nothing for the observer to say with certainty, "this is," – requires me as a researcher to take a look at myself. What do *I* make of this thing that is *no thing yet*, whose blanks can be filled in with different forms of understanding? It is with this in mind that my missing arm enacts an ethical role in my research, in making me see what research *does* and how, in a new materialist sense, this doing *matters*.

Perhaps I should write about my failure to become a scholar. I still do not “know” my missing arm: it resists becoming a thing. And research should always be about some thing. The arm keeps haunting me in the present; keeps my thinking alive and in motion. My motivation for scholarly research has to do, not only with the arm’s enigma, but more so with the awareness of the flowering of a question, *not yet formulated*. This is the object of my research that I cannot obtain: thinking in its becoming, rising thoughts, impressions that do not last. The experience of my no-arm instilled in me the realization of something still inarticulate, but germinated already by lived experience.

Experience that causes a startled mind; the conscious confrontation with a limit that is at the same time an invitation,

I do not know.

As Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, scholars concern themselves with that which can be reasoned: with what is verifiable by logic and constructed by argument. In doing so, scholars repeat in their vision what is, already is, or has been. “Thou art a Scholler – speake to it, Horatio,” Marcello says in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, commanding Horatio to question the “thing” that has appeared as the dead king’s likeness. Conjuring King Hamlet’s ghost, pondering its effects, its hauntings, Derrida writes: “Scholars believe that looking is sufficient” (2006, 11). They scrutinize, they objectify, they reason and rationalize. They can speak the thing-in-question into being but they cannot speak to the formlessness of what is not yet, no longer, or may never be. Scholars do not know how to live with ghosts; they prefer to shove them underneath the bed in which they sleep comfortably at night. In the morning they wake up and return to rhetoric and argument: the age-old, same old story that scholars tell themselves in order to affirm life.

My no-arm proposes a formlessness that resists my giving form with thought. The confrontation of an epistemological or even ontological limit is the confrontation with some kind of ghost. As Esther Peeren writes in *The Spectral Metaphor*, the ghost’s “power is mostly exercised through the imagination” (2014, 3) precisely because it cannot be fully known. To interrogate it like a scholar, detached, disinterested, disembodied, is to chase it away and exorcise its unsettling force. Yet, to do nothing means to be overpowered. Derrida, as Peeren and Blanco point out in *The Spectralities Reader*, is not interested in hunting down ghosts, but rather in “[using] the figure of the ghost to pursue (without ever fully apprehending) that which haunts *like a ghost*, and, by way of this haunting, demands justice, or at least a response” (2013, 9). Ghosts appeal to our “response-ability” (Barad 2010). Blanco and Peeren proceed, “[t]his quest cannot be called a science, or even a method, as the ghost or specter is seen to signify precisely that which escapes full cognition or comprehension; ‘One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge,’” quoting Derrida (2013, 9). No longer or not yet. As a figure of transgression coming from a place beyond (beyond knowledge, beyond the opposition of life and death, beyond the logic of cause and effect), this quest cannot be called science, but it can speak *of* science. The ghost, occupying the liminal space between what is (science) and what isn’t (science), exposes limits one cannot recognize or conceive consciously without it, even though it (the limits of an epistemological field) was always there for everyone *not* to see. In the case of my missing arm, the ghost – its ghost – exposes the limits of a body, what my body embodies: the feeling of being. And on a larger scale, the limits of a discourse in which to grasp this arm and make it sensible for others.

This is a collection of texts about the practice of research

I would like to learn to live, in the timespace that is occupied by myself. In the moment of disorder, disease, disturbance, I'm thrown *out* of that space and say out loud, to you or me: "I do not know," and perhaps this not-knowing is the truth of the moment. Philosophers cannot learn to live simply from their stated intention; from their armchair, or like Descartes, in front of the hearth. In order to learn from life, one needs to be caught up, immersed in existence, washed over and taken by surprise. One must think and feel with hands and feet, or with fever in bed – not when the fever is over and life settles back into the comforting cotton wool state that normalizes the most fundamental aspects of life to the extent that we do not notice them functioning anymore. It is in the tear of the fabric; in the skipped heartbeat, the raised temperature, in an altered state of being; being consciousness of change, that life creates a space to learn from itself.

I imagine a philosophy that begins in old age, in the ailing body, the brittle bones, the lost limb, in vertigo, the glitch in perception – when the thinker cannot think away his body in time and space and is brought back to his senses, so to speak. A philosophy that opens, with an imperfection, an incompleteness: *I do not know, therefore I exist*. Therefore I exist with the desire to learn.

February 2017. These hands are mine, this body is mine. I am this body, 157 centimeters tall – too short, I am told, to house the lungs of an average Dutch person (on average, the tallest people in the world). Therefore, even though I have been at the top of the waiting list for donor lungs for some time, I am waiting, waiting and hospitalized, waiting, waiting in hospital, while large Dutch donor lungs are donated to others. How can I deny that this under-average body is mine, can I?

February 2022. These hands are still mine. These lungs are no longer mine/are now mine. They are not made of earthenware or glass. They are made of someone else, not myself. "We" – whoever we are – we live in coexistence. In continuation of two lives lost without the medical intervention of this donor transplant. One self. No self. Two selves. Each morning we wake up in this confused knowledge, not knowing each other. I am, but you are no longer. Therefore I exist.



Fig. 7. Prosthetic apparatus for a case of uterine double amputation of both thighs. CP 1553. Otis Historical Archive, National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Absence against Background

Figure 7 shows a pair of legs, artificial legs that stand center and in stiff, upright position, wearing knee-high white socks and leather lace-up boots. In my mind I can hear the sound of these shoes, their wooden heels clacking on the tessellated floor tiles as they walk into or out of the gilt oval frame. But they do not walk. Legs do not walk without a body, without a person making them. And even then, even when these legs are set in motion, moving, walking, will they “walk,” step by step, as legs do? Are they plural – two artificial legs, held together with a belt at the hip – or is this something singular, a “prosthetic apparatus,” as the caption reads? “Right stump 4 in – Left 2 ½ in.” I can’t quite decipher what is written next – succeed, success, or successf. – but the final word leaves no doubt: “Perfect.” A perfect fitting for two amputated legs, very high up.

“Every advertising executive knows that some images (...) ‘have legs,’” W.J.T. Mitchell writes in “What Do Pictures Really Want” (1996, 73). An image with legs walks away with itself; it moves, and takes us places. In Mitchell’s words, these images have “a surprising capacity to generate new directions and surprising twists in an ad campaign, as if they have an intelligence and purposiveness of their own” (73). Here, the object starts speaking back: images with legs “tell us” that they, too, have agency and partake in the process of making sense.

These prosthetic legs are given a certain meaning in their given context, the context in which they are deemed perfect. In this context, the legs are supposed to obey, to give a perfect performance of their assigned intention. But these perfect legs are and aren’t there. “Knowing,” Karan Barad writes, “is not a bounded or closed practice but an ongoing performance of the world” (2007, 149). To know these artificial legs can mean different things; to the person who stands on their “feet”; to the maker of the prosthetic apparatus; to a doctor, a general viewer, and so on. What may be perfect to a doctor may still be an inconvenience to the person who can walk on these legs only when supported by crutches. What Barad suggests is that the process of learning and getting to know is in itself a form of world-making, an epistemological (re-)arrangement of the world, from which the subject and the object emerge, in dynamic relation. The legs in *Figure 7* are no legs at all *and* they are many legs, to many different people.

As scholars, researchers, thinkers, we bring objects into a particular, mental formation for others to grasp. We propose a world in which they make “perfect” sense. Meanwhile, and from this proposed world, these objects form us too. We are made and unmade by our particular attention to, and articulation of them, always searching, re-searching for the proper shape of thinking we will give them. Thus, objects of research are not simply and not only the outcome of seeking and producing knowledge, but relational elements in a mutually creative process of becoming in which agency is a matter of, in Barad’s words, “intra-action.” She writes, “Cuts,” let’s say, decisions, measurements, thought forms, “are enacted not by willful individuals but by the larger material arrangement of which “we” are a part,” and concludes that “[c]uts are not enacted from the outside, nor are they ever enacted once and for all” (Barad 2007, 178-179).

Not every image of artificial legs has legs. This image of artificial legs provokes me to think outside of its frame. The legs in the photo, numbered 1553, are the markers of a person that is missing in the picture: someone who I expect to complete or complement the image. The photograph performs a restlessness. Besides the legs, I am seeing the *carte de visite* oval frame with the handwritten notes and doctor's signature; I see, behind the legs, a dark and partially draped curtain, used in photo studios for background contrast, here playing a symbolic hide and seek; I see a beautiful tile floor – not the clinical floor of a hospital but perhaps that of a doctor's home practice – and of course I see the legs themselves, dressed with elegant shoes and warm socks, despite the fact that these legs and feet have no sense of heat or cold. What I see and do not see is the “open” space in the composition, above the legs, just enough to imagine a torso (but not a head).

The photo was made for the Army Medical Museum in Washington D.C., established in 1862 by Surgeon General William Hammond for the purpose of “illustrating the injuries and diseases that produce death or disability during war, and thus affording materials for precise methods of study or problems regarding the diminution of mortality and alleviation of suffering in armies.”⁵⁴ The Civil War caused a level of carnage of unprecedented scale. In its four years, it effected some 700,000 dead; around 60,000 amputations were performed, mostly haphazardly, in field hospitals. Thus, inadvertently, the War's battlefields came to double as grim field labs for medical study and advancement. With so many cases of gunshot wounds, infection, and other forms of injury “emerging” from the war situation, Hammond saw the opportunity for a federal medical research institute where the practical medical knowledge of these cases could be shared, studied, and compared.

It would become the first institution to make an attempt at the standardization of medical information in America. As Civil War historian Shauna Devine points out, “[o]nce the project got underway American physicians saw the museum as a new source of medical vitality, a center of learning that could institutionalize pathology and lay the foundation to both reform and develop American medicine along more scientific guidelines.”⁵⁵ Hammond gave the museum's first curator, Dr. John Hill Brinton, the resources and authority to collect specimen from military hospitals. His description of the manner of acquisition deserves to be quoted in full:

First of all, the man had to be shot, or injured, to be taken to the hospital for examination, and in a case for operation, to be operated upon. If all this were taking place in a city hospital, or a permanent general hospital, the bones of a part removed would usually be partially cleaned, and then with a wooden tag and carved number attached, would be packed away in a keg, containing alcohol, whiskey, or sometimes salt and water. Then, when a sufficient number of specimens had accumulated, the keg would be sent to Washington and turned over

⁵⁴ George A. Otis, “Notes on the Contributions of the Army Medical Museum,” Feb. 7, 1878. Scientific and Historical Reports: Records of the Record and Pension Office, 1814-1919, File A, Entry 41, RG 94, NARA.

⁵⁵ Shauna Devine, “The Civil War and the Army Medical Museum. The Shaping of American Medical Science,” National Museum of Civil War Medicine, February 15, 2017.

to the Army Medical Museum, where the preparations of the specimens would be finished, so that they could take their place upon the shelves. The memoranda or histories of these specimens would in the meantime have been forwarded to the Surgeon-General's Office, and after having been fitted to objects and their truthfulness assured, would be entered into the books of Histories of Specimens, preserved in the museum, and under the care of the Assistant Curator.⁵⁶

The museum's objective is made clear: collecting specimens that illustrate "the injuries and diseases that produce death or disability during war." Tissue, bones, bone fragments, and amputated body parts were collected, prepared, catalogued, and preserved as objects of knowledge. After the war, a certain Louis Bagger writes in Appleton's Journal: "A visit to the Army Medical Museum in Washington is replete with interest and information... To the student of surgery and medicine it affords advantages which are offered nowhere in this country – and in some respects, it may be said, not elsewhere in the world – and hence it possesses a national value as an institution of learning aside from its more popular character as a collection of curious objects."⁵⁷

As an institution of learning, and in addition to the human remains requested by General Hammond, physicians were asked to write case studies, provide drawings and photographs (for which artists and photographers were hired), and cast mutilated body parts – all to visualize this vast body of injury and loss.⁵⁸ However, and as its name points out, the Army Medical Museum was also established as a museum from the start, taking museum matters such as aesthetics, pedagogy, history, display and entertainment into account. Looking at European medical collections, the museum was modeling its own template for the establishment of a field of military medicine with competing discourses and registers of imagination. It wanted, on the one hand, to obtain a scientific status while on the other, it felt urged to tell the story of the military cause. For the public it also played a role in practices of national mourning and personal grief, as an institution that materialized the loss of so many men during the Civil War.

In other words, it had not figured out a single narrative. Having to figure in these different modes, the objects and images in the collection of the Army Medical Museum could of course never just perform the so-called objectivity of a specimen, just as the museum's exhibits could not only serve rituals of grief. In their multiple functions these collected objects and images never acquire definite form; rather, they make several transitions and different

⁵⁶ John H. Brinton. *Personal memoirs of John H. Brinton, Major and Surgeon U.S.V., 1861-1865*. University Archives, Digital Collections, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, Maryland 20814.

⁵⁷ Louis Bagger, *Appleton's Journal*, (New York: March 1, 1873), 297.

⁵⁸ This material has been compiled in the six-volume, 6,000 page illustrated *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, which took over twenty-three years to complete (see Connor and Rhode 2003).

appearances, effected by their context. Reversely, they also influence the context of which they are made part. Note for instance how, even before these objects enter the collection, their desirability enacts a subtle shift in the causal relations between collector and collected: “*First of all*, the man had to be shot or injured...” [my emphasis]. Rather than collecting *because* of the occurrence of bodily injury, the museum’s collecting drive or “archive fever” (Derrida 1998) suggests the need for these occurrences to happen. This cannot be seen simply as the relocation of human remains from a to b: the museum re-figures them, and itself, in a different performance of the world, to speak with Barad. To label those bones and amputated limbs as “specimen” is to re-arrange this matter in a dehumanized form, which, in its turn, also transforms the collector into a disembodied, detached subject that puts the human remains before the human. Brinton went even further than requesting specimens from hospitals: he travelled to battlefields and field hospitals where he exhumed buried limbs and bodies. This active form of acquisition, motivated by practices of collecting, research, and display, creates a dynamic in which subject (the museum) and object (specimens) shape one another in a process of intra-action.

“Intra-actions,” Barad writes in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, “cut ‘things’ together and apart” (2007, 179). As such, they produce things to see, create temporary figures against backgrounds. Artificial legs. Prosthetic apparatus. Person without legs. Legs without person. Person with prosthetic limbs. Following a phenomenologist framework, Barad, using concepts from quantum theory, argues that things, qualities, and beings that are commonly considered as separate – whether it is self from other, subject from object, life from non-life – do not in fact precede their relation as separate entities. Rather, she writes, “‘they’ and ‘we’ are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts ‘we’ help to enact” (Barad 2007, 179). Thus, selfhood is not self-given, nor does the object have its particular form or formulation without a subject that has the intention to figure it out, and learn from it. Learning brings worlds into existence, in which object and subject co-figure.

In a letter from 1866, just after the end of the American Civil War, George Otis, then curator of the Army Medical Museum, writes to a certain Dr. Hudson, “I hereby authorize you to have photographs taken of [amputation] cases of special interest. As near as may be they should be uniform in size with those taken at the Army Medical Museum, of some of which you have copies” (quoted in Connor and Rhode 2003, 8). Signed by Dr. Hudson in the bottom right corner, *Figure 7* or “1553,” as it is catalogued, is one of this doctor’s contributions to the museum’s collection.

Agential cuts are made to let the object figure in its desired view.⁵⁹ In the case of the prosthetic legs shown in *Figure 7*, the legs are cut from the rest of the body, performing an additional symbolic amputation from the head down to the hip. Here, the cut is made in order to turn these legs into plain objects: a perfect prosthetic apparatus. Whether it is judged perfect by the person whose legs it replaces does not matter here. We are made to focalize with the doctor who has only eyes for his successful product. If we were to focalize with the amputee, we may have seen him standing there with crutches, or with a hand resting on a

⁵⁹ For an in-depth analysis and theoretical definition of “agential cuts” see Barad (2007, 132-189).

chair or table for balancing.⁶⁰ Wearing such prosthetics was often very painful. In Hudson's view, the legs make a perfect object, and it is the object that is the case to him here.

But the museum's recording of these specimen, its making of images for the sake of medically knowledge, hadn't been fully figured out yet, hadn't settled on a definite form, and *Figure 7* resists the case in which it is cast. Different aspects of the image suggest that there is a missing subject: the portraiture features of the photo; the *carte de visite* frame used for individual and family portraits; the socks and shoes on this apparatus, keeping the "feet" warm. All these elements suggest that these legs are *someone's* legs. Because of this person's implied presence, they appear anything but lifeless and defy their assigned objecthood as specimen. The legs seem only temporarily put on hold, their aliveness suspended by the absence of the human being who routinely dresses his body with these fabricated legs. In this photo, and even though these legs stand frozen, they hint at their potential to be animated, incorporated – to disappear as object. As if they are possessed by their owner; as if, indeed, the photographed object is haunted by its subjecthood. This subject, the person whom we don't see, is not inside the image, but is still *of* the image. My imagination, my sympathy, is not with the parts but with what it is part of: a body. Despite Hudson's intentions, this visual record of a "prosthetic apparatus" does not make the cut, so to speak, from human to object: these legs disobey disembodiment; they resist separation from the subject. Yes, they belong to *someone*, a person who may be seated in a chair in the same makeshift studio, waiting, just outside the frame, for the photographer to complete his task so that he can put his legs back on. What the image seems to capture, then, is not so much an object, or the person who completes these legs, but the intra-action at work between different actors in the process: doctor, photographer, object, legs, amputee, viewer, studio, museum context, and so on, resulting in a visual indeterminacy between these legs' articulation as either (part) human or object. Just as these prosthetics are made to replace the lost legs of a person, this image performs a prosthetic function as an extension of the case that the photo inadvertently makes, which *isn't* their status as inanimate object but their significance to and as living thing, quasi-body part. In their recalcitrance to become objects, the legs in this image with legs illustrate that it takes human interference, active measures, a literal figuring out, to cut and create the object of research.

⁶⁰ There are also photos in the museum's archive portraying men wearing their prosthetics. One of them is of a young man, Private Columbus Rush (Company C, 21st Georgia, age 22) posing next to the bottom of stairs, holding a thin stick in his right hand while his left hand leans on the railing's knob for balancing. National Museum of Health and Medicine.



Fig. 8. Robert Fryer. Amputation of third, fourth, and fifth metacarpals. PVT, Company G, 52nd New York Volunteers. Wounded March 25, 1865 at the Battle of Hatcher's Run, Virginia. Photo: National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Photos produced by and for the Army Medical Museum during and after the Civil War years frequently hover between portraiture (of a human subject) and depiction (of a specimen). *Figure 8* shows an amputation of a right hand's middle finger, ring finger, and pinky, but it depicts this in a way that the viewer will see the young man whose hand it is, rather than the specimen he exposes by posing in front of the camera. What kind of medical knowledge does the image convey? With the war ongoing, the museum struggled with the conflicting narratives it wanted to tell: objectivity for medical purposes, and subjecthood for war morale.

In *Figure 8* we see a young man wearing his soldier's uniform, holding his right hand with missing fingers over his heart, as if pledging to serve and sacrifice for his country. In contrast to *Figure 7*, the photo is accompanied by the name of the soldier: Robert Fryer. The caption also informs that he was a private (a soldier of the lowest rank) in the 52nd regiment of

the New York Volunteers. The information, both visual (his uniform, his pose) and textual, suggests that he lost his fingers in battle. And because of those missing fingers “seen” in this pose, we may recall images of Napoleon, who is often depicted with his right hand concealed in his jacket. Robert Fryer is still very young but looks undefeated, in dignified pose, upright, almost as if taking pride in his loss. Even though the missing fingers are the photograph’s subject, this is, in the first place, a portrait of a brave young soldier.



Fig. 9. Robert Fryer, seated. Photo: National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Compare Fryer’s “portrait image” with another photo taken of his amputated fingers, *Figure 9*, to see a different photographic “cut” of the same amputations.⁶¹ Here, Fryer also poses with his hand over his uniformed chest, while his left hand holds a writing board with

⁶¹ Robert Fryer’s photos were presumably taken by surgeon Reed B. Bontecou at Harewood Army Hospital in Washington D.C. Bontecou, who was an amateur photographer, took many photos of his patients, documenting their injuries and bullet wounds. He was the largest contributor of photographs and specimens to the Army Medical Museum.

his personal details written in chalk – ready for erasure and replacement by yet another name of another injured person. Here, Fryer is one of many; someone else will soon sit in this same chair for his photo to be taken: these photos, showing evidence of disability, were often used by war veterans to apply for a state pension. In this photo Robert Fryer sits in a simple wooden chair. Below his Union army jacket he wears worn trousers that appear too large for him, so that he looks even younger, really only a boy, not yet “fit” to fight. Just like in the other photo, his hand is placed on the chest but here this does not appear as a gesture of military pride: it simply seems to be the only place to properly show the hand with the missing fingers, above the writing board, and against the dark cloth of the uniform. Same Robert Fryer, different world. Even a technological medium such as photography, understood in its early years to fix an image without interference of the human eye, could not produce objectivity: these photographs could just as easily (and unintentionally) become unfixed again, unsettled and un-formed, in processes of intra-action. As Karen Barad writes: “[i]ndeterminacy is never resolved once and for all. Exclusions constitute an open space of agency; they are the changing conditions of possibility of changing possibilities” (2007, 179).

In a Derridean spectral context, this implies that such exclusions – the agential cuts made in processes of intra-action – are capable of undoings, reversals, or *hauntings*, even or especially in matters of “life” and “death,” human or non-human, animate and inanimate. “Hauntedness,” Avital Ronell writes, “allows for visitations without making itself at home” (1993, xviii). The human in *Figure 7* is there not there, missing his leg; the image is haunted by his absence from it. Robert Fryers’ missing fingers play hide and seek: exposed to the camera they are the evidence of their absence. What these images reveal is that vision itself is haunted by the visible as such.

This is a collection of texts that were inspired by phantom limbs.

During the Civil War, and because of its occurrence on such a large scale, amputation gained a paradoxical visibility. People missing a leg or arm became a common sight. An invisible “something” presented itself to human vision, even though the “thing” itself – the loss – remained a-visual: the no-leg or no-arm of an amputee is not an absence that is visually represented but an absence perceived as such. In a time and culture so characterized by loss, “the visible” as such becomes part of a collective project of mourning. Mourning, as Derrida suggests, “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead” (2006, 9). We want to see what or whom we have lost. In the occurrence of death, seeing the dead body is akin to knowing or, rather, to processing the shock of not-understanding.

Here, the Army Medical Museum came to play a role as a place of loss and restoration. As the historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes about the amputation of limbs during the Civil War: “These arms and legs seemed as unidentifiable – and unrestorable – as the tens of thousands of missing men who had been separated from their names. The integral relationship between the body and the human self it housed was as shattered as the wounded men” (Faust 2009, xvi). A visit to the museum that displayed bones of so many injured military men could take the form of literal re-membling. In its current existence as the National Museum of Health and Medicine, the museum still likes to promote the story of Major General Daniel E. Sickles, who, during the Civil War, had his amputated leg sent to the museum with personal greetings, and over the following years would visit his leg bone on the anniversary of its amputation. On the other hand, soldiers who wished to claim back the bones of their lost limbs were told that these were property of the military. So it is a remembering possible only at the service of the larger “body” of the nation.⁶²

A culture that privileges presence and visibility always ends up with visible matter: something localizable, something seen, or the failure of seeing. What it grasps in its scope, but what it cannot figure out in this thinking with images, is that which has no visibility as such, or what film theorist Akira Lippit calls the avisual. Avisibility, he argues, “determines an experience of seeing, a sense of the visual, without ever offering an image. (...) All signs lead to a view, but at its destination, nothing is seen. What is seen is this absence, the materiality of an avisual form or body” (Lippit 2005, 32). The Army Medical Museum could capture the absence of body parts in photographs or, alternatively, by showing what had been absented *from* the body: the bones of the amputated legs and arms themselves. But it failed to figure out the avisual formlessness of the loss that amputees perceived and had to cope with in their daily lives.

⁶² Interestingly, Lincoln had likened the South to a diseased limb, and did not completely rule out “dismemberment.” In 1864, he comments: “I have sometimes used the illustration ... of a man with a diseased limb, and his surgeon. So long as there is a chance of the patient’s restoration, the surgeon is solemnly bound to try to save both life and limb; but when the crisis comes, and the limb must be sacrificed as the only chance of saving the life, no honest man will hesitate” (Carpenter 1866, 76-77, quoted in Mac Kilgore 2012, 538-539).



Fig. 10. Right lower leg bones of Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles showing comminuted fractures, shown with the type of cannonball that caused the injury. Photo: National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Phantom Limbs

‘UNITED STATES ARMY MEDICAL MUSEUM,
Nos. 3486, 3487.’—‘Good gracious!’ said I, they are
MY LEGS—MY LEGS!’

In 1866, just after the Civil War had ended, a strange case appeared in an issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, a periodical that combined articles, literature, and (pseudo-)scientific reports that were deemed of general interest. The case gave a firsthand account of a Union officer and physician named George Dedlow, who, as a consequence of injuries and infection during the war, has become a quadruple amputee. “The Case of George Dedlow” provides a description of his physical and psychological experiences, as he is hospitalized at Turner Lane’s Hospital in Philadelphia – also known to readers of its time as “The Stump Hospital,” for the many amputated soldiers who were treated there.

Though presented as a medical case, George Dedlow describes his medical history in story-like fashion. From his account we get to know that his first injury is of a gunshot wound, when he was taken captive as a prisoner of war by rebel soldiers. Due to his medical background, Dedlow is able to switch between a doctor and a patient perspective. Here he clinically describes his injury: “A ball had passed from left to right through left biceps and directly through the right arm just below the shoulder, emerging behind. The right hand and forearm were cold and perfectly insensible. I pinched them as well as I could (presumably with the left arm and hand which had relatively early on regained some function) to test the amount of sensation remaining; but the right hand might as well have been that of a dead man. I began to understand that the nerves had been wounded, and that the part was utterly powerless.” This nerve injury eventually leads to the amputation of his right arm. The actual amputation (which, as had been the case often during the Civil War, was performed without ether) is told from a patient perspective:

The pain felt was severe; but it was insignificant as compared to that of any other minute of the past six weeks. The limb was removed very near to the shoulder-joint. As the second incision was made, I felt a strange lightning of pain play through the limb, defining every minutest fibril of nerve. This was followed by instant, unspeakable relief, and before the flaps were brought together I was sound asleep. I have only a recollection that I said, pointing to the arm which lay on the floor: “There is the pain, and here am I. How queer!” Then I slept – slept the sleep of the just, or, better, of the painless.

Recovered and back from furlough, at the battle of Chickamauga, however, Dedlow is injured again, this time in both of his thighs, requiring the amputation of his legs. In the

hospital in Nashville – “where I filled one of the ten thousand beds of that vast metropolis of hospitals” – he finally loses his remaining arm, due to an outbreak of gangrene infection on the crowded hospital wards. Having survived the loss of all four of his limbs, Dedlow finds himself “a useless torso, more like some strange larval creature than anything of human shape.” Transferred to the so-called Stump Hospital in Philadelphia, he lives hospitalized among hundreds of others with lost legs and arms (but none like himself, missing all of his limbs). Here, he focalizes alternately from his medical background, observing his perceptions and sensations with clinical interest, and from his new life as a patient, giving words to his existential suffering. As David J. Kline and others have pointed out, this part of the “case” includes descriptions of nervous injury that were accurate and were only named and described in later medical articles – most notably related to “causalgic pain” and phantom limb sensations (Kline 2016, 6). The appearance of these phantom limbs without name is particularly interesting given the plot turn towards the end of the case report: dissatisfied with his life, which he considers literally diminished by the loss of so much of his body, George Dedlow describes a visit to a séance where he is brought into reunion with his legs. The legs, we are told, have been preserved in alcohol and are stored in a museum that collects specimen of amputated limbs and other human remains: The Army Medical Museum. Not believing his own senses, Dedlow finds himself “staggering a little,” walking “across the room on limbs invisible to [the others] or me,” before “sinking slowly (...) resting feebly on my two stumps upon the floor.” Concluding his report, Dedlow confides he is “not a happy fraction of a man” and that he is “eager for the day when I shall rejoin the lost members of my corporeal family in another and a happier world.”

To the surprise of its anonymous author, the case was misunderstood by many of its readers as an authentic case: there are records of people having tried to make donations to the hospital where Dedlow was believed to stay. It took another five years for the writer of “The Case of George Dedlow” – the Philadelphian physician Silas Weir Mitchell – to publish a professional medical report in which the earlier descriptions by the fictitious quadruple amputee George Dedlow are named with the newly coined term phantom limb. This 1871 article, titled “Phantom Limbs,” published in *Lippincot’s Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, thus postulated the phenomenon as a pathological condition for the first time. This discursive formation of the phantom limb, as effected by a work of fiction, can serve here as a case to further analyze the notion of the thought-form or becoming-object as discussed before.

Phantom limbs are described by the medical dictionary as “the sensation, after amputation of a limb, that the absent part is still present.”⁶³ Since its first documented “apparition” in 1551, when military surgeon Ambroise Paré made mention of painful sensations in missing body parts reported by patients after amputation, phantom limbs have roamed the medical field and haunted human imagination.⁶⁴ They emerged occasionally in

⁶³ <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/phantom+limbs>.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Price and Twombly’s *The Phantom Limb Phenomenon. A Medical, Folkloric and Historical Study: Texts and Translations of 10th and 20th Century Accounts of the Miraculous Restoration of*

folk tales, legends, and literature (most notably in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*); in philosophy and biology (Descartes' writings; Darwin's *Zoonomia, or The Laws of Organic Life*); and in the eighteenth-century, first-hand account by Scottish physician William Porterfield, who missed a leg. These marvelous limbs were the proto-phantoms of this neurological condition: accounted for, but still unnamed and undefined, they made brief apparitions without ever truly inhabiting these writings. As a consequence, they remained adrift, restless, in search of discursive incorporation in the medical body of knowledge, through proper "diagnosis," i.e. naming. Their occurrence as a phenomenon perceived only first-hand, invisible and impalpable to others, hindered medical verification and, with it, credibility.

Like my missing arm, the phantom limb provokes a thinking that cannot be thought into definite form, an object of research that stays in its place. This was of interest to Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he comments on its ambiguous quality: "[From a physiological point of view...] the phantom limb is the presence of part of the representation of the body which should not be given, since the corresponding limb is not there. If one now gives a psychological account of the [phenomenon], the phantom limb becomes a memory, a positive judgment or a perception (...) In the first case the phantom limb is the actual presence of a representation (...) In the second case the phantom limb is the representation of an actual absence. In both cases we are imprisoned in the categories of the objective world, in which there is no middle term between presence and absence" (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 93).

An eye that looks for visible verification of what is produces a world in which phantom limbs do not exist. Merleau-Ponty's theorizing points out that objectivity falls short in acknowledging subjectively perceived phenomena that have an effect in the so-called objective world. I argue that it is because of its appearance in and as fiction that the idea of phantom limbs finally took hold.

Before the war, Silas Weir Mitchell and William Hammond had collaborated on a study on snake venom. When, in 1862, Hammond, in his function as Surgeon General of the Union Army, established Turner's Lane Military Hospital for Nervous Diseases in Philadelphia, he appointed Mitchell as its director, on the latter's request. It was here that Mitchell did the groundwork for his post-war study *Injuries to Nerves and their Consequences* (1872) and gave daily treatment to patients with post-amputation nerve injuries, many of which reported sensations or pain in their lost body parts. George Dedlow, in "The Case of George Dedlow," describes this as follows:

I amused myself, at this time, by noting in my mind all that I could learn from other limbless folk, and from myself, as to the peculiar feelings which were noticed in regard to lost members. I found that the great mass of men who had undergone amputations, for many months

Lost Body Parts (1978) and Finger and Gronski's "Five Early Accounts of Phantom Limb in Context: Paré, Descartes, Lemos, Bell, and Mitchell" (2003).

felt the usual consciousness that they still had the lost limb. It itched or pained, or was cramped, but never felt hot or cold. If they had painful sensations referred to it, the conviction of its existence continued unaltered for long periods; but where no pain was felt in it, then, by degrees, the sense of having that limb faded away entirely.

From his training and former practice as a medic, Dedlow then gives a possible explanation for this:

... in some cases, such as mine proved at last to my sorrow, the ends of the nerves undergo a curious alteration, and get to be enlarged and altered. This change, as I have seen in my practice of medicine, passes up the nerves towards the centres, and occasions a more or less constant irritation of the nerve-fibres, producing neuralgia, which is usually referred to that part of the lost limb to which the affected nerve belongs. This pain keeps the brain ever mindful of the missing part, and, imperfectly at least, preserves to the man a consciousness of possessing that which he has not.

In 1851, another character in fiction had already proposed to consider the strange matter of the sensations in his missing lower leg. When, in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Ahab has his "leg" fitted by the carpenter on the Pequod vessel – to replace the leg that was taken by the great whale Moby Dick, Ahab wears a whalebone peg leg in its stead. He says to the carpenter:

Look ye, carpenter, I dare say thou callest thyself a right good workmanlike workman, eh? Well, then, will it speak thoroughly well for thy work, if, when I come mount this leg thou makest, I shall nevertheless feel another leg in the same identical place with it; that is, carpenter, my old lost leg; the flesh and blood one, I mean. (...) Look, put thy live leg here in the place where mine was; so, now, here is only one distinct leg to the eye, yet two to the soul. Where thou feelest tingling life; there, exactly there, there to a hair, do I. Is't a riddle? (Melville 2003, 513).

"The Case of George Dedlow" gives a possible explanation, also offered by a fictional character. It's almost as if these characters collaborate in an intertextual play across time, thinking alongside each other.

In his memoirs, Silas Weir Mitchell explains that "The Case of George Dedlow" was published unintentionally: a friend who had read it had sent it anonymously to the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Mitchell was astonished by his readers' misjudgment of the case as authentic, even though it is framed as such and refers to existing facts and places. Additionally, it employs a style that is very close to, if not imitative of the stories by Edgar

Allan Poe, known for his hoax writings. There is, at the least, reason to believe that Mitchell had read Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," published in 1845, before he took on the writing of his own fictitious case story: Mitchell's father, who also combined his career as physician with writing, had held literary salons at their home, where Poe had been present at least once. "The Case of George Dedlow" can be read as a companion piece to Poe's "The Strange Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," where the dead living man of the latter case has transformed into the living dead man Dedlow, who informs his readers that his monthly pension checks are received by him as a reminder that he is still alive. (Here I hear the echo of Valdemar's voice from death: *For God's sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—waken me!—quick!—I say to you that I am dead!*). "The Case of George Dedlow" follows an almost identical structure to that of "The Facts in the Case of Valdemar." Both narrators give first-hand accounts of inexplicable incredulous events that they themselves find hard to believe. The morbid descriptions of Valdemar's rotting corpse reverberate in Dedlow's graphic, grim existentialist humor about his own dismembered and disintegrated body. Finally, where Poe's story plot concludes with a sudden, rapid dissolution of Valdemar's body/corpse, Mitchell gives us the restored, "re-individualized" body of Dedlow reunited with his spirit limbs.⁶⁵

It is remarkable, but not a coincidence, I believe, that this work of fiction preceded the medical study that would posit phantom limb as a condition. I would like to argue here that the fiction was instrumental in the formulation of the medical term – phantom limb – still in use today. The reception of Mitchell's fictitious case demonstrates that fiction has the capacity to make an effect in and on the real world: it can imagine a world in which sensations in lost limbs exist without question. More importantly, it can produce this imagination in the bodies and minds of readers who have no other way of accessing this subjective phenomenon, and they can do so because the story prompts them to focalize with its narrator, who experiences this phenomenon, once again, without question.

Even if the publication of the story was unintentional, as Mitchell claimed, he did create an intentional space for an image thinking of the riddle of the phantom limb, giving it a provisional – and only provisional – form in the manner of a ghost. "The Case of George Dedlow" employs the spectral avisuality of the ghost to turn the objective-invisible of the phantom limb into a subjective-invisible that is perceived virtually by the reader. Fiction, with its virtual sensations and real-life real-time reader responses; with its readers who willingly suspends disbelief to immerse themselves in the world proposed by the story; and with its creative ability to set its own terms of conditions, allows for this emerging of form to happen, without judgment. More so, fiction builds on the premise, not of what is, but on the question, what if? What if the persisting feeling of having a limb where there is no longer one, is true?

The thought-form proposed by "The Case of George Dedlow" is, literally, a ghost: two ghosts, the legs of George Dedlow, which make their visitation during a spiritualist séance. Only Dedlow recognizes the numbers the medium is communicating: Nos. 3486, 3487. They are his amputated legs, housed in the Army Medical Museum. Then, to his own

⁶⁵ Paraphrased from Goosen (2009, 46-49).

shock, Dedlow rises on legs “invisible” to him and others, and walks on them around the room. It prompts the reader to produce the impossible image of invisible legs walking, a visible action of something invisible, which can only exist only as a mental image. But a mental “image with legs,” to refer back to W.J.T. Mitchell’s *What Do Pictures Want?* With the help of the reader’s imagination, the ghost legs are lured into virtual existence. In their *hauntology* they make sense.

It is as if the story prepares the reader for this visual conundrum. Earlier in the story we have seen and visualized Dedlow’s dismembered arm on the floor, through his eyes: “There is the pain, and here am I. How queer!” When, back on the battlefield, he wakes up after injury with both his legs amputated, we are made to see the riddle of post-amputation sensation, focalized again through Dedlow’s own disbelief and, finally, with his own eyes:

“Just rub my left calf,” said I, “if you please.”

“Calf?” said he, “you ain’t none, pardner. It’s took off.”

“I know better,” said I. “I have pain in both legs.”

“Wall, I never!” said he. “You ain’t got nary leg.”

As I did not believe him, he threw off the covers, and, to my horror, showed me that I had suffered amputation of both thighs, very high up.

When, finally, Dedlow rises on his invisible legs, we as readers have already imagined it, *before* we can decide to believe it or not: the thought-form is there, momentarily, to disappear again shortly: “I felt myself sinking slowly. My legs were going, and in a moment I was resting feebly on my two stumps upon the floor.” But these legs have already made a lasting impression, in such a way that in its time and initial reception, their story produced a readership open to the idea – the possibility or even, likelihood – of amputees sensing body parts in a ghostlike manner. This impression is not supported by objective proof or evidence but, on the contrary, an idea backed up by the fantastical event of a spiritualist medium channeling a person’s lost legs.

As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have pointed out, objectivity “scruples to filter out the noise that undermines certainty” (2007, 17). But with “The Case of George Dedlow” we are made to realize that there is more to epistemology, even ontology, than the objective outcome of research – the having-thought, having filtered out the noise, having made up one’s mind. In an article that analyzes constructions of the body in Descartes’ *Meditations*, Judith Butler reminds their readers that the verb to feign takes its root in the Latin *effingo*, which can mean “to form an image,” (to imagine) but also “to make a fact” (2015, 29). It is in the feigning of fiction that we see these two entangled, still con-fused in a truly creative thinking.

These texts confuse me.

The Return of the Body

It is in the spirit of this confusion, in the feigning of fiction, that I want to return briefly to the idea of body writing as proposed earlier in this thesis. *I would like to learn to live*. To live: to inhabit a point of view from which to narrate, read, and interpret the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, the body is “that which causes [things] to begin to exist as things under our hands and eyes” (2008, 169). The body is our first and foremost point of view, or better, our primal means to focalize the narratives we produce in order to live. Changing constellations of seeing, touching, feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, and emoting deliver the subject into the world it perceives: as subjects we are constituted and re-constituted in the reciprocal (but not necessarily symmetrical) intra-actions of sensing and being made sense of. I started this research with a ghost. Before I could analyze it to death, events occurring in my “private” life began haunting the research I was doing, altering its course and destination. For me, there is no split between my private body and the body that does the thinking in this research. This is and isn’t a research on ghosts. For what I ended up with, continuing writing, seeking out form, was a body retrieved from scholarship. In his last published essay, “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty says it unambiguously: “the world is made of the very stuff of the body” (2007, 354). Dedlow, too, is made of that very stuff, even if he only exists in and as fiction. Maybe my own body writing here, which at times moves away from academic structures and models, is my way out of philosophy, a way to expel this style of thinking from my body; or maybe it is a way to live with its ghosts. In what has become one of the fundamental inquiries in the practice of cultural analysis, Mieke Bal famously asks, “Who speaks?” In this writing, *I* want to speak philosophy, no longer cutting myself from the picture I imagine for you, which is a product of who I am and how I give meaning to life. In other words: body writing is personal, it always gets personal, and therefore I take philosophy personally – at heart.

No history of the physiology of stumps would be complete without some account of the sensorial delusions to which persons are subject in connection with their lost limbs. These hallucinations are so vivid, so strange, and so little dwelt upon by authors, as to be well worthy of study, while some of them seem to me especially valuable, owing to the light which they cast upon the subject of the long-disputed muscular sense.

Nearly every man who loses a limb carries about with him a constant or inconstant phantom of the missing member, a sensory ghost of that much of himself, and sometimes a most inconvenient presence, faintly felt at times, but ready to be called up to his perception by a blow, a touch, or a change of wind.

—Silas Weir Mitchell, introducing phantom limbs in his article, “Phantom Limbs,” 1871. *Lippincott Magazine for Popular Literature and Science*.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Silas Weir Mitchell, the “father of neurology” as he is sometimes named, is much better known for his controversial rest cure, prescribed to women with severe nervous symptoms. It consisted of a regimen of forced bed rest and a restricted high-fat diet (based on his observation that women who suffered nervous breakdowns were often thin and anemic). This treatment, criticized by feminists, produced its own exemplary piece of body writing from bed by Mitchell’s one-time patient, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a classic feminist work of fiction, it is this supposed cure for the narrator’s nerves that turns her mad and causes her to hallucinate shifting forms in the patterns of the room’s wallpaper. I realize that the reading of this story by Perkins Gilman produces another Mitchell (and with the wallpaper hallucinations, a different thought-form to consider). Mitchell, too, is a provisional form in this research, which will and has acquired different forms in different intra-actions.

4

Alive. Alive!

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am
—Sylvia Plath

When Death Turns to Self (June, 2019)⁶⁷

Like “someone” at the beginning of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, “I would like to learn to live.” I would like to learn this condition that I wake to each day, and each day anew; this strangely familiar body of motions, acts and commands I inhabit, even unconsciously and when asleep. Life is repetition and continuous change; repetition and continuous change. Each day: same difference that I have to embody in order to constitute life, to live and see another day. I want to learn to live, again and again and again, but never finally.

“I am dead,” Valdemar says in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.” He did so in 1845; he still does in 2019. “I am dead” is a proposition that cannot make itself at home in a body. Its contents maintain a restlessness, a dis-ease to which the body ultimately has no defences. I am dead but not to language. Language confuses with me; confuses me with what I am not. “I am dead,” does that make sense, do I make sense? If not now then ever, right? And ever is already here today, with you and me and between you and me. This, Derrida wrote, “is not an extraordinary tale by Poe but the ordinary story of language” (1973, 97)).

A hundred years ago, a psychoanalyst turned to text – to dictionaries and to stories – in order to translate, transpose himself to a body that impresses itself with uncanny feelings; a body from where, Freud supposes, this feeling will at once be recognised. For the uncanny, he writes, “is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1971, 220). At odds with oneself but recognisable: the body to which Freud transposes himself is itself an uncanny body, not entirely foreign but not exactly his, or him, either.

From the onset, Freud is more than one, and double-bodied he seems divided about his course of action. Two courses are open to us at the outset... Etymology/aetiology. Language/experience. Dictionary/fantasy. *Heimlich/Unheimlich*. Fiction/life. And so on – for the uncanny is a double plotting to begin with: this/that. Freud admits that “there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life,” but – and only after giving ample discussion and analysis to Hoffmann’s fantasy tale of the Sand-man – he also argues that it merits a separate discussion (1971, 249). But separate from what? From life and common reality, from textbook dictionary language where death means death and we do not believe in ghosts? Fiction cannot substitute life, he argues.

Two hundred years ago, a fictional creature, restless, not quite human, turned to literature – to Goethe, Plutarch, and Milton – to learn to live by the book. “As I read,” he tells his maker, doctor Victor Frankenstein, “I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversations I was a listener” (Shelley 2003, 131). If only he could become these bodies! Finally, it is by reading Victor Frankenstein’s journal that the creature learns about himself, and how he came into existence. It is alive! It was in 1818;

⁶⁷ This text was presented at the conference, “We Ourselves Speak a Language that is Foreign”: One Hundred Years of Freud’s Uncanny, organized by Nicholas Royle at Sussex University, 21 June, 2019. The texts presented that day were published in *Oxford Literary Review*. See Goosen (2020).

it still is in 2019. This is not an extraordinary tale by Mary Shelley but the ordinary story of life.

Two years ago, a leap in time, a switch of bodies, a different story:

I open my eyes. There is someone at my bedside. The bed is high—it's raised, I mean, up to its maximum height. The blanket I'm under is blue: it's the hospital's signature synthetic blue blanket, lightweight and pale-washed. I'm still here. Blue-blanketed beds on wards: these beds hold the sick, the hopeful, the broken bones. The new moms with their newborns in their arms. Also: the dying. The blankets pass from bed to bed, from life to death, from night to day, soiled laundered folded distributed and spread out again, over numerous beds and bodies, ten floors up and down the concrete building. Right now I'm neither warm nor cold. I don't know on which floor I am. It's as if I have just emerged from elsewhere, somewhere right under the surface, not that deep but dark and instantly forgotten. Something is breathing. I feel a pressure at my chest. Is it air? Gravity? The bed is high. Did I mention that already?

In 2017, after a long period of illness, I received a bilateral lung transplant that saved my life. Without these lungs, I was, no longer structurally speaking but actually and physically dead: a dead woman. Someone who died prevented this from happening. Something, someone, was reanimated within me, or was it me?

I was,
I am,
alive.

As I came to from surgery, I gradually saw the world re-establish itself before my eyes. I re-awakened to flashes of life as I fell in and out of consciousness. A hand on my shoulder. Beep beep – a machine. Cold. Shiver. Stitches. Pain, not a dream. Life. I had to learn everything anew. And this learning was something I recognised from elsewhere, from a different body.

When *Frankenstein* was first published in 1818, transplanting tissue from one human body to another – grafting life on death, or is it death on life? – was a matter of speculative fiction, a pure fantasy that had come to Shelley in a dreamlike vision. A cautionary tale of scientific progress, it reminded readers of what belongs to the “home” of the human, the self and life itself. That I, one day, right here, right now, would come to embody this speculative body; that this body would be-come me, transposed from fiction to life, is an uncanny reminder of what reading entails: a *hineinsetzen* or transposition, to paraphrase Freud, so as to awaken in oneself the possibility of a shared experience (Freud 1971, 220). It is with language and reading that *Frankenstein*'s creature pieces together his existence, and it is through his piecing together that I sense sparks of my own being alive, anew.

Now, what is uncanny about the creature of Frankenstein: that I was already there, back then, a future trace; or that he is still here, a trace of fiction that I carry inside me and recognise to be an existential part of me? Can I still separate the fact of my transplant from Shelley's speculative fiction? Does it merit a separate discussion, really?

To give an analysis of the uncanny, Freud felt "he must start by translating himself into that state of feeling" (1971, 220). Translation, transposition, transplantation from the start – to the foreign but ordinary language of fictional bodies that we have cognised, before we recognise ourselves, and whose eyes we steal and who steal our eyes so that we see and sense the world with difference.

The ordinary life story is a ghost story, of the uncanny already at home within us. On this extraordinarily ordinary day I'd like to conclude this line of thought with the words of someone whose writing helped me learn to live—but never finally.

"Now... now... now (...) here, now, yes, believe me,
I believe in ghosts."
– Jacques Derrida

This is a collection of texts about the spectres of Derrida.

Onwards

In *L'Intrus*, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes about his post-transplant condition, after having received a heart transplant (the first in France) in the early 1990s. His life, he writes, is “closed open” (Nancy 2000, 10) and permanently intruded upon – if not by the foreign element beating in his chest, then by its continuous administering. To prevent chronic or acute organ rejection, as well as infection, the post-transplant body requires close monitoring and pharmacological immunosuppression. But he also considers his “new” life a “metaphysical adventure” (3) – and what else can it be but an exploration into the unknown territory of one’s own body in its renewed relation to the world; a wild and incredulous tale of two lives in one, two lives at once; an afterlife, extended life, death in life and life in death; of “you” who are no longer “you,” but two, and you and you who cannot ever go back to being the same old two.

It is also a metaphysical challenge, a thought experiment proposed by an experimental body. In 2017, after a four-year period of grave illness, I had a bilateral lung transplant. (I can’t repeat it enough.) Doctor Victor Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus, is now a lifesaver in blue scrubs. He introduced himself as I lay prepped up on the narrow steel operation table. “Take good care of me,” I had managed to say to him, although this sounded foolish, as if borrowed from the script of a hospital soap opera. I already felt a little less myself. I was about to go under. Death bringing life, human assemblage, life bypassing death, it was then – and still is – difficult to process: this is no longer a fantasy, it’s me. I am a creature of non-fiction.

Havi Carel, a phenomenologist who suffers from LAM, a rare and progressive lung condition, uses the concept of “transformative experience” as proposed by philosopher Laurie Paul, in addressing the difficulties she encounters in considering a lung transplant. She writes: “a transformative experience changes you epistemically – it gives you knowledge, insight, and understanding you could not have gained otherwise” (Carel 2019, 155–156). It is true that, when you sign up to be on the organ donor waiting list, you sign up for the as-yet-unknowable, uncertain existence from which there is no turning back, and which indeed requires new frameworks of thinking. Before, during, after: each stage of this process of transplantation brings new unknowns, uncommons, but always of an existential nature. Sometimes profound, as in insightful, sometimes also profoundly disturbing. Jean-Luc Nancy refers to this in terms of life/death—not a life after death or a living death, but a life always on the cusp, on the limits: liminal. I am reminded of a phrase from Jacques Derrida: *le plus d’un*. More than one, no more one.

In her considerations about a lung transplant, Havi Carel distinguishes between acquiring information, becoming “anthropologically informed” about lung transplantation, and learning by oneself, by experience, what it means to undergo such procedure. It’s only the first kind of knowledge that she has access to while she seems to suggest that it would require an intimate knowing of the second kind for her to make a rational decision. But it may be that

the rational cannot make the best judgments in what is certainly also an epistemological adventure: a way of figuring out, both the questions and answers, through different means.

When I first read Jean-Luc Nancy's text about his heart transplant, *L'Intrus*, I was still ill, and waiting for the moment that a transplant would become inevitable. Having read his text I concluded with optimism that, more than eight years after his heart transplant, he was still alive – I could tell by dating his having-written his text. And three decades after, he was *still alive* (until he died in 2021, aged 81). This, for me as someone who would eventually be facing a transplant myself, turned out to be the vital and only message I took from his writing, right then. Only after my own transplant can I appreciate Nancy's writing about his transplant for different reasons. What I seem to want to say, despite my "love for wisdom" – *philosophia* – what I needed was the imagination to believe in survival, in a ghost that was going to come from the future. If I were to have waited for reason to come with the right, rational answers I would by now be literally out of breath.

Without the medical intervention of a lung transplant I would be dead. Someone who has died has prevented this from happening. This constitutes my being on an existential level: I live each day with, and in gratitude of, this dead person, unknown and unknowable to me. I consider our lives a co-existence. This is not a theoretical or lyrical observation. Recently, I was reading an interview with a woman I had worked with before, and I caught myself thinking – no, *saying* to myself – rather Gollum-like, "We don't like her, do we?"

Trying to communicate about these experiences where I cannot always draw on common experience and knowledge; when it is difficult to give words to sensations and emotions, simply because there is no common vocabulary for it, I myself have to learn to write again, anew, in order to speak and narrate this new "truth."

One of the things that strike me now in reading Jean-Luc Nancy's writing about his donor heart is our difference in attitude towards our donor organ and -giver. Where he draws an analogy between his own estrangement (to his body, and to his donor heart) and the foreignness of an intruder, I'm personally fascinated by the way one can establish a meaningful sense of relation with an abstraction of life, a non-identity and non-entity that accompanies me everywhere in that "metaphysical adventure" that constitutes this new "me." Even though from a physiological perspective I wholeheartedly agree with the strangeness of a donor organ that is to remain unnoticed by my immune system, my experience of living and breathing with someone else's lungs is one of intimacy, rather than estrangement. Hence that "we" that sometimes speaks to me, or as me, which may sound morbid and fantastical (if not delusional) to others, but is sensible and self-affirming to me.

I am consciousness of a literal "other" in me, which demands, in different ways, to remain unknown. Unknown to my immune system, but also unknown in its origin: the anonymity of my lung donor opens up to a connection with unknown others in my life, to whom I must remain open, despite our differences: it provides me with an ethical stance to welcome this difference of strangers, to not expel this difference but to attend and listen to it.

How do I give voice to this plural voice, or, this voice of plurality coming from within? How to give language to this aspect of my post-transplant life, this transformative experience of mine, in a way that it doesn't just exist for me but for others, too? If not for others to know then at least for them to acknowledge, to imagine?

To imagine, to let others *figure out* this abstract non-form for themselves. To let readers imagine the non-figure of the dead donor living inside me, as inside *them*. Here, Mary Shelley's creature is a helpful interlocutor. I'm deliberately phrasing it this way – Shelley's, not Frankenstein's creature – because in the questions and themes that her novel pose about Creation and the implications of taking life in one's own hand, it's easy to overlook that the supernatural or science-fictional creature in her novel is of *her* literary making. It is writing, not science or galvanism, that gives the creature its spark of life. This is an effect of writing, the effect of writing on bodies that read. Scholarly writing is so used to appeal to my mind that it tends to forget to include the body of the reader, the writer, the subject of writing; to add that spark of life. In the nonfiction objective writing mode of scholarship, I can talk *about* life, as if I were not partaking in it, I can give witness to it. But in fiction I can *give* life, bring into virtual being a character of my own liking, my interest and curiosity, for the reader to identify with – or, precisely not. Fiction, then, may be an alternative to the either/or of anthropological information on the one hand, and lived experience on the other. It can propose a virtual existence to immerse yourself in, to embody yourself as, to figure in or as yourself.

This is how, during this trajectory constituted by my PhD research, I came to writing a work of fiction, which was also my learning to live anew with this unknown other of flesh and blood, breathing in and as me.

On Wards (Introduction)

A woman lies in an IC hospital bed marking time with thoughts about life and death. Talking to someone that is and isn't herself, she produces a dialogue of her own, in a room where voices are both sound and unsound, inside and out. *On Wards* "records" the mental self-address of someone having lived with grave illness, having received a pair of donor lungs, and adjusting to the extraordinary fact of survival, the commonly taken-for-granted continuation of life.

On Wards is a body of text fragments that produce a narrative, but is also an archive of thoughts and sensations, a form of body-writing that effects a donor into being by reading. From its archive, shorter versions have been used in text installations at different art spaces: Daily Practice in Rotterdam (March 29 – June 14, 2020), Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam (April 9, 2021 – November 5, 2023); and Bureaucracy Studies in Lausanne, Switzerland (November 11 – December 19, 2021) The full "body" of *On Wards*, as well as documentation of its exhibition installations, are attached as appendices.

For the full text of *On Wards*, an integral part of this research, see Appendix A.

These texts are waiting for an encounter with a reader.

After Wards (An Afterword)

1.

There are stories that “must be told by not telling,” M. Nourbese Philip writes about the history of the slave ship *Zong*, and the anti-narrative poems she wrote to give its silenced passengers a voice (2020, 192). A voice. Not some 150 voices in the plural, of African men, women, and children murdered by drowning so that the ship’s owners could collect their worth in insurance money.⁶⁸ These individual voices cannot be re-called nor reclaimed from the silencing, from the “cargo” tossed overboard once these bodies became a burden. This must not be smoothed over with words, with an added vocabulary. *Zong* is the ship’s name: it is misspelled; it was mis-painted over on the vessel. The name of the ship was *Zorg*, a Dutch word, meaning care.

Zorgggg, with that guttural, throat-rasp sound that is typical of the Dutch language. The sound is formed at the back of the mouth, and comes from a deep place. Not everyone can utter with the gut and pronounce the word properly, carefully, *zorgvuldig*. A Dutch voice – in my case, mine – makes itself apparent through Philip’s text that also gives a sound (a gut, a body) to the silencing of these African men, women, and children. *Zorg*. To take care. *Uw zorgen wegnemen*. To take away your concerns; to unburden. Burden: a load, typically a heavy one. Burden, shipload, cargo, care.

I am thinking about what it means to care with language, to take care of words, and about words. I am writing this in English. *On Wards*, a text that is based on personal history, is also written in English. I could say that this is a practical matter, I’ve been trained to write in English. I could also say that I do not care about writing in Dutch, but it is more probable that I care too much. The language in which I make everyday sense (*van opstaan tot slapengaan*), which rolls most naturally off my tongue, took away the Indonesian tongue of my grandmother who did not pass it on to her children growing up in the Netherlands. She did not pass on her tongue, the way language rolls from one generation to another. All that remains of Bahasa Indonesia in our family is a song to lull the child to sleep: *Nina bobo, oh nina bobo / Kalau tidak bobo di gigit nyamuk...* Nina bobo, baby child, go to sleep or else the mosquito will sting you. (Another way to turn a history into silence.)

⁶⁸ As quoted from Nourbese Philip’s “Notanda”: “Upon the ship’s return to Liverpool, the ship’s owners, Messrs Gregson, make a claim under maritime insurance law for the destroyed cargo, which the insurers, the Messrs Gilbert, refuse to pay. The ship’s owners begin legal action against their insurers to recover their losses—their murdered slaves. The insurers, in turn, appeal the jury’s decisions to the Court of King’s Bench, where Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice of England, presides (...). The three justices, Willes, Buller, and Mansfield, agree that a new trial should be held. The report of that decision, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the formal name of the case colloquially known as the *Zong* case, is the text I rely on to create the poems of *Zong*! To not tell the story that must be told” (Philip 2020, 189).

Zorg. Of course I do not hate my mother tongue, my mother's tongue (and not my mother's mother). I would have to hate it with the Dutch word that names it: *haat*. So I take a perhaps cowardly stance, supposedly not caring too much about the Dutch language while at the same time making a point by writing in another language. Saying something by not saying something.

I'm seized by the encounter with the word *zorg* in *Zong*! I care about the word, and the encounter. To care about words and be careful with the words chosen, while also caring for the ones unspoken. What kind of care do words need or ask for? Who cares? Words are indifferent to their outcome in the world. *Zorg*; *haat*. Although language is our means to make meaning, words have no meaning to themselves. *Zong* does not care about having lost its meaning.

M. Nourbese Philip writes: "I fight the desire to impose meaning on the words—it is so instinctive, this need to impose meaning; this is the generating impulse of, and towards language, isn't it—to make and, therefore, to communicate meaning?" (2020, 194) Our tendency is to add with words, though words can equally take away. Language can add value and take away common sense. This is a human being / this is cargo. This is this is this isn't.

Other Dutch words that appear in *Zong*!

bel: bell
bens: thing
geld is op: money is spent
hand: hand
ik houd van u: I love you
op en neer: up and down
tak: arm
tong: tongue

I don't know what a bens is: apparently it is a thing, but what kind of thing? I need to look it up in the Dutch dictionary. More than a thing, I read, it is *someone's* thing: one's property, owned goods. The economy of a thing. Dutch, it is said, is an economic language, not a word too many. But also, efficient, pragmatic, and capable of doing business, turning people into business. Ik ben/jij bens.

Een tak is a branch, the metaphorical arm of a tree. Or, a branch of knowledge. *Een tak van wetenschap*. In *de wetenschap van de Nederlandse lezer*. A body does not have two *taks*, or, *takken*: it has arms. The *tong* of *Zong*.

The tongue of *Zong* is no longer silenced; it produces an anti-narrative that can only be told by not telling, as Philip tells her reader. But how must one care for what is not told, without turning it into something that it is not?

This is a tak
This is not a tak

2.

I will use *Zong!*'s not-telling as an occasion to say something about silence. Or, what I try to say is that silence can be telling, and that, in its un-written-ness, it can tell/not-tell various stories, and even non-stories. When silence emerges from reading it can be sensed; it is charged, *loaded*. (It cannot be off-loaded.) Not in or as a presence but as a form of haunting.

~~This is silence.~~ It is possible to speak about silence, on behalf of the silenced, and it is possible to describe its effects. Someone can notice silence and say: "this is it, this is what silence is like." But that also always points at language's inabilities, in its precise abilities. Karen Barad uses the analogy of light to measure darkness in her essay, "What is the Measure of Nothingness. Infinity, Virtuality, Justice" (2012). An impossible task: "How can anything be said about nothing without violating its very nature, perhaps even its conditions of possibility? Isn't any utterance about nothingness always already a performative breach of that which one means to address? Have we not already said too much simply in pronouncing its name?" (Barad 2010, 4). If darkness is the word for a situation that lacks the quality of light – even if it is with the word "darkness" that we engage in and relate to this situation – it (language) also inevitably takes away something. Darkness (that word for it) acts like a flashlight shining upon it, making darkness disappear. Say "silence" and it is there no longer. This is where language brings something into being that, in its doing, stops being. How to live in this knowledge of a certain not-knowing, of nondescript silences and darkness, and stories that can only be told by not-telling? How to learn to live with ghosts? This is, as Derrida suggests, always a matter of learning, listening – never of knowing.

Onwetendheid. (Ignorance)

Kennis. (Knowledge)

Niet-weten. (Not-knowing)

Niet horen. (Not hearing).

Onbekend. (Unknown).

Ongekend. (Unheard of)

After I had read the essay by Karen Barad, I encountered another story about darkness and light: a man who has lost his keys is searching for them on the front porch of his house. Someone walks by, sees the man searching, and offers his help. "Where did you last see your keys?" the stranger asks. "Inside the house," the man responds. "Then why are you searching here outside, on your porch?"

"Because this is where the light is."

Because this is where the light is. We know about the fate of some 150 drowned African men, women, and children, only because there is a report of a legal case adjudicating whether these drowned bodies should be, could be, considered “cargo” in this case; whether it is lawful in this case to have thrown these human beings/bens overboard.⁶⁹ That is where the light is, and it is from this legal text, these words, that Philip sets out to write the darkness of the drowned people without voice: “My intent is to use the text of the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect the insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. In the many silences within the Silence of the text” (Philip 2010, 191). Philip does not fill the gaps of silence with a pretension of knowing. Her “unlocking” of the story that can only be told by not telling, moves away from the need or desire to find keys – even the need or desire for the home itself.

By all means do NOT name these drowned human beings whose names were violently taken from them.

Gregson v. Gilbert is Gregson’s and Gilbert’s text; it reinstates their legal position. For Gregson and Gilbert to occupy this text, other people’s lives must be relegated to the margins – more explicitly, thrown overboard. In effect, the drowned bodies of African slaves do not and will never truly inhabit its text. But in their silence, they do their haunting. This haunting silence, as Avital Ronell formulates it in *Dictations*, “allows for visitations without making itself at home” (1993, xviii), hence, without claiming a territory or place, which also gives it a disorderly quality and power to disturb.

Let’s make no illusions: as bodies and as drowned corpses these people remain forever without power. We honor their lives by acknowledging this injustice. It is only in their spectral mode of haunting that they acquire agency, and the power to overturn official writings. Ronell writes: “...a relation has been opened to another text which manifests itself without presence yet with infinite nearness” (Ronell 1993, xviii). There are no 150 people speaking from the depths of the ocean into which they have been drowned. In our reading we can reclaim our *relation* to these people, not these people.

Haunting, then, is not a matter of discrete entities but of relations, and relating to others whom we cannot know. Can we learn from a being-with silence, listening for it, as a form of ethics, listening without naming, without knowing who is the silent other? In *Gregson v Gilbert*, what haunts makes itself apparent indirectly, emerging *from* the relation Gregson versus Gilbert, and in the interaction of reader with text.

Where, where, where does the ghost reside: in the depths, in the debt, in the text, drowned, buried, cremated, in a name, in the empty seat at the table, inside the coat no longer

⁶⁹ We know even less about the “sixty negroes [who] died for want of water... and forty others [whom] ... through thirst and frenzy threw themselves in the sea” because they were not the case.

worn, in the flowers thrown into the water after the ashes have been spread? Could this willingness to learn to live with ghosts be understood as a form of care, a caring without object?

A text is written, addressed without knowledge of its receiver. A text is read and intimately received, commonly in the absence of the author. Reading & writing are occasions for spectral encounters. And so when I read *Zong!* I partake in its haunting, in the agency of lives and deaths that cannot be told, as well as in their silencing. Whose ghost is this, where, and how? I don't know, but it speaks in my mother's tongue – not my mother's mother.

Philip's collection of poems is a tale that cannot be told, in which the writer does not bring back the dead, but creates occasions – silence, white space, non-meaning, a repetition of an existing vocabulary – for them to haunt, in our present mourning of them. We cannot retrieve the past as is (as it was) and let these bodies speak the facts. Therefore, they speak in tongues. In many foreign and familiar tongues: English, Arabic, Fon, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, Shona, Twi, West African Patois, Yoruba. And Dutch.

3.

Language is everything. Language is nothing. I, too, was taken care of by the powers of language.

What is named by naming something non-specific?
Non-specific Interstitial Pneumonitis.

What is qualified by qualifying something undifferentiated?
Undifferentiated Connective Tissue Disease.

These, I was told, were the diagnoses of my ill-being. It did not make sense, to me or to others. NSIP and UCTD did not matter in the world, did not have an effect. So I mostly kept these terms to myself, keeping them pocketed, from missing their point. Beyond their function to pulmonologists and medical treatment plans, they had little to say about the lived condition they referred to, a condition that was life-threatening, a matter of life and death.

But these non-meaning terms without effect were also, therefore, life-saving: tell people you are terminally ill and they will have given up on you already. Say it and you are expelled from the kingdom of the well, as Susan Sontag named the world of those in health. To live with those insignificant terms for my ill-being turned out to be brutal *and* liberating. There wasn't a sense of belonging anywhere, I walked my own walk in no-man's land where I wasn't always protected by the grip of language, and remained open to life.

Sick with thirst, the people on the slave ship *Zong* are thrown overboard. It is in the captain's interest to read this situation by the letter and rid the ship of its rotting cargo. These

human beings whose lives are owned and are the owner's responsibility, are shrouded in economic language (*geld is op*); they were dead & drowned the moment they were listed by their insurance value: 30 pounds sterling a piece. Saidiya Hartman writes, as quoted in *Vistas of Modernity* by Rolando Vázquez, "On the slave ship, captive women [men and children] were accounted for as quantities of greater and lesser mass, and the language of units and complete cargo eclipsed that of the subject, the person, or individual" (Hartman 2016, 167, quoted in Vazquez 2020, 16). A shipload, a burden, cargo, care,

I will take away your worries.
Ik zal uw zorgen wegnemen,

(de zorg ont-laden.)
(off-load your worries)

"Sixty negroes died for want of water... and forty others ... through thirst and frenzy ... threw themselves into the sea and were drowned; and the master and mariners ... were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes" – as quoted by Philip from *Gregson v. Gilbert* (2020, 189).

Let me be clear: I am not likening the fate of enslaved human beings to that of the sick. As it turns out, slavery and sickness do not go together. When ill health turns to slave, slave is off-loaded, unburdened, thrown overboard as damaged goods. Sickness belongs to human beings. So I am not going to draw comparisons between cargo and the sick.

4.

Where the light is: in the naming. In the identifying. The signifier. In the native tong.

ziekte: illness
ziek zijn: ill-being
ziek voelen: feeling sick
longziekte: pulmonary disease
ik ben ziek: I am ill

English makes a distinction between illness, sickness, disease; between illness and ill-being. Ill-being is a state of being, illness its name. Disease is epistemology, the illness as it is known. To be sick is to experience the state of being ill, which cannot be known by anyone but the one that is ill. Illness, sickness, and disease jump from first person to third, from patient to doctor, subject to object, from way of life to objective physical dysfunction. In Dutch, there is no difference between the pulmonary disease and its lived experience of breathlessness, not being able to walk and talk at the same time, having to consider transplantation, adjusting your future plans. In Dutch, NSIP and I are one and the same.

What was happening to me, inside me, in and with my life? A diagnosis should have clarified my condition. NSIP. UCTD. Two acronyms to take home with me and express to the world, in order to re-incorporate myself back into it. Back in the kingdom of whatever. That indifferent precision of specifying the non-specific, the undifferentiated, to wear on the body like medals of language: both too exact and too absurd. Wittgenstein famously said, the meaning of the word is its use. These words had no use; they meant nothing. They only further alienated language from my body, which I felt now, were not one and the same.

Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay, *On Being Ill*, "...let a sufferer try to describe pain in his head to a doctor and language runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out" (2012, 7). Language runs dry while something unspeakable saturates in the body, as embodiment, as experience. This is also a symptom of being ill. How to give form, an outside form, to the life-altering experience of being ill? How to figure it out and live illness in the world where language is our common ground, how to reflect on the disturbing experience of having-no-words, by means of words?

So as not to suffer nonsense when crushing pain and sound together, I initially set out to report the facts, my facts of life, and to confirm them by writing. The Facts in the Case of My Being Ill. Word for word, beginning with the phone call from the doctor's assistant, the day before; the doctor's visit, the next morning; the news; the disbelief; the inability to process; the escape to the movie theater that afternoon. Onwards, chronologically, one day at the time. But as it were, that which occurred was not perceived one day at the time, or in real-time for that matter. I could not write coherently in the moment, from a bewildered state. So I wrote lagging behind events, or as we say in Dutch, *achter de feiten aanlopend* – not onwards but afterwards, retrieving from the confused experience of things not happening one after another, the dislocated bits and pieces that had stayed with me and returned to me in present form.

I did not know whom I was writing this for.

Why replace the lump of pure sound with meaning; why not listen and by listening, turn this non-meaning into something meaningful, an onomatopoesis of pain and suffering, infinitely near language but never entirely so? Why not honor those instances in which language fails. Philip, by locking herself into the existing language of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal case, by repeating its words, produces something out of the silencing (which isn't nothing): "In *Zong!*, the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human, Through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant, and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not tell the story..." (which isn't meaningless) (Philip 2020, 196).

When someone says aaauuu or FFFFFFF-F-FUK! or makes the sound of sobbing it isn't without meaning.

(Ongehoord, ongekend.)

5.

Philip writes, "The disorder, illogic, and irrationality of the *Zong!* poems can no more tell the story than the legal report of *Gregson v. Gilbert* masquerading as order, logic, and rationality" (2002, 197). The disorder of one text vs. the order of another both tell a story that cannot be told – but in distinct ways.

One doesn't acknowledge the failure of language, logic, and rationality by saying nothing at all. Nor by reasoning silence into significance. The silence of language has to come from elsewhere.

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

What is the measure of nothingness?

I reply with a phrase from *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf:

"If I could measure things with compasses I would, but since my only measure is a phrase, I make phrases" (2015, 166).

6.

All of this is to prepare myself to say something about "nothing" that concerns me.

"A void suddenly opened in my chest or my soul – it's the same thing – when it was said to me" 'You must have a heart transplant....' Here the mind runs into a non-existent object [*un object nul*] – there is nothing to know; nothing to understand, nothing to feel: the intrusion on thought of a body foreign to thought. This blank will stay with me, at the same time like thought itself and its contrary" (Nancy 2002, 4). This is what Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, reflecting on his heart transplant. Something utterly strange is already "there" and "there" are no words, no rational thoughts to give it shape. This is the ongoing condition of the pre-grafted and the graftee. The enigma isn't solved or dissolved with the graft; it only intensifies. Having survived my own imminent dying *because of someone else's death*, being host to his/her lungs, am I continuing someone else's existence, or my own? Since I received transplant surgery, I am a living koan, expressing with my physiology, with each and every breath I take, this paradox, unsettling and irresolvable:

I am/dead.

Death is/alive!

Not just “I” but, following it, this basic expression of life, “I am,” each time opens up to a philosophical inquiry without conclusion. In the meantime I survive, I maintain life, I *realize* or *actualize*; I give matter to this philosophical conundrum with my body. Jean-Luc Nancy exchanges the nothingness, the *objet-nul*, for a name. *L'intrus* or, intruder, he calls it, so that it begins to have a life parallel to the experience: not so much the mind running into a non-existing object but taking “nothing” on one’s mind, observing it scrutinizing it. It is almost as if, with the endeavor – the generous and near impossible endeavor of sharing – thought itself becomes an intruder upon the experience of unspeakability. Nancy is aware (and wary) of it. “This matter,” he states, “is [...] what requires thought and, consequently practice—otherwise the strangeness of the stranger is absorbed before he has crossed the threshold, and strangeness is no longer at stake” (Nancy 2002, 2).

Another koan.

How to think strangeness?

Does it need an argument?

7.

My organ transplant enabled the impossible: for me to recover from a degenerative and fatal disease. No more NSIP or UCTD. (Of course, it is exchanged for another chronic condition: my medical dossier diagnoses this as “the presence of a graft.”) In the utmost lived sense, I have been opened up, and am opened to all possibilities. What I do not know about my donor: build, gender, sex, class, age, race, nationality, religion, political affiliation, cause of death, (and so on).

For us to live, not as a koan but as a co-existence, I have to keep an open mind. I have to remain open to receiving this other, this literal, lived decision of the other in me, to borrow Derrida’s words. The other, someone else, both real and abstract, who once made a conscious decision to agree to organ donation, thus signing up unconditionally to the possibility of an “us,” without the prospect of this us ever getting to know each other. Or even like each other. “I” mean nothing to myself, without the care of others, having already implicated themselves in my existence, sometimes without knowing. This, I find the most incredible philosophical deed, the kind of decision that, as Nancy suggests, “requires thought and, consequently practice” (2002, 2). But a kind of thought that requires some practice before the event. Learning to live is always necessarily a learning to live in co-existence with others.

Even where language fails; when it has nothing to say but says something – *anything* – it is committed to this idea of co-existence with strangers, of reader and writer intruding

upon another. In *The Nothing That Is*, Johanna Skibsrud writes, “Even the simplest language event presupposes a ‘facing you’ that creates both the possibility of and an object for language. Although the speaker’s language necessarily remains at a distance and/or ‘foreign’ to the ‘other’ of address and is not guaranteed a response, every address depends upon the possibility of its being heard” (2019, 96). What is being written is always headed towards that already implied reader on the other side, someone across time and space, who will have received, one day or another, its address with its listening. Language may not care but writing has the potential of caring, and being cared for: one writes towards the possibility of someone listening, the possibility of a relation. This intrusion of writing is also a form of preliminary care.

The heart/lung donor produces a paradox, appearing in its disappearance. As these vital organs can only be donated when the person is on life support, a person only becomes a heart/lung donor when they themselves are no longer. They are therefore both abstract and very real. Literally, in the flesh, they become *le plus d’un* (Derrida 2006, xx). No more one and more than one, their organs dispersed across the surviving bodies of others: up to eight people can receive a transplant from a single donor. In a strict sense, then, the heart/lung donor cannot “exist”; it exists only spectrally in the life of its survivors. Not just those who survived with one of their organs, but also their family and friends who outlived the deceased and often find a certain solace in the knowledge that “something” of their beloved persists in the life of others.

In the Netherlands, the donor remains anonymous, and so does the person who the organ is donated to. The family of the donor knows more about me than I do about the donor: they have been told that I was a woman in the age-group 35-45 when I received these lungs. I only know that we are matching blood types. Of course, I also know everything there is to know about the donor’s lungs, I have seen them inside out on X-rays, CT-scans, and even, on a photo made during the surgery. (There it was, on a table, in a stainless-steel bowl in ice water: a pink lung drained of its former owner’s blood. Next to it, in one of these crescent-shaped bowls, lay a shrunken lung, a lump of organ matter, smaller than my hand: it was my left lung, which had just been removed.)

My donor is intimately not there with me everyday, implicated in my continued existence. No life without these lungs. No breathing without this life. How to begin to explain this relation that is based on unfamiliarity? This donor has no tongue, no mother tongue: my lung donor, brought into existence by an act of language, having said “yes” once (a once that maintains itself unto and beyond death), by ticking a box on a form, has now, in my life, no speech of its own. No name, no identity, no body when addressing my thoughts to him/her/they/it. Skibsrud writes, language presupposes a “facing you,” and yet it is in the sharing-in-absence of writing and reading, in text as an interface between strangers, that I recognize something of my own lived condition. The other on the other side of the text does not have to come to light, they don’t have to be among the living, in the present. There’s

nothing eerie or otherworldly about such ghosts: we live/not-live with them a-contemporaneously, everyday.

I want to write about the donor as an *actual, real* abstraction – not an idea but a lived experience of the abstract. Hence, in its precise unknowability, and in spite of the impossibility of a facing you or it, acknowledging that the donor has no speech of its own, not a face to face; that he/she/they is no body, nobody any longer. But nobody with an immense effect in this world I make from our co-existence. I want to tell this story of a donor that cannot be told, and which can only be told by telling it to *him, her, them*.

8.

A woman who has had lung transplant surgery lies in an IC hospital bed marking time with thoughts about life and death. Talking to someone that is and isn't herself, she produces a dialogue of her own, in a room where voices are both sound and unsound, inside and out. *On Wards* "records" the mental self-address of someone having survived grave illness, adjusting to the extraordinary fact of survival, the commonly taken-for-granted continuation of life.

I outlived my death. I also literally carry the death of someone in me. This death is part of me, it constitutes part of who I am today. Six years into this condition, there is still no coming to rational terms with this extraordinary matter of fact: I can only live the consequences.

"I have – Who? – this 'I' is precisely the question, the old question: what is this enunciating subject? Always foreign to the subject of its own utterance; necessarily intruding upon it, yet ineluctably its motor, shifter, or heart – I, therefore, received the heart of another, now nearly ten years ago," Jean-Luc Nancy writes in *L'Intrus* (2). In biological terms, a transplant organ always remains an intruder, whose foreignness requires a regime of immunosuppression and caution for infections. But to define the transplant condition in terms of intrusion does not, in my experience, do justice to the very lived awareness of co-existence that it also gives rise to.

In writing *On Wards*, I have made an attempt to use language, not as a form of communication but as a communion. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines communion as "the state of sharing or exchanging thoughts and feelings; the feeling of being part of something." In communion, even silence is relational. In spite of an absence (a death, the death of Jesus) one devotes oneself to an intimate relation, realizing this absence in the realm of the living. Could it be so that, in sharing my thoughts, my feelings, my sensing, I have imagined – implicated – the other into being? Simply by a belief in its potential listening? In "Who is Speaking?" the poet Lynn Hejinian suggests that each act "activates a world in which the act makes sense" (2000, 35). Writing can be seen as producing a text that in itself does not yet need to make sense, but that creates the reader who will have made sense of it. *On Wards*

is written to and for the anonymous unknowable donor who, in the act of my telling, is activated spectrally as implied listener and embodied temporarily by the reader's body. More than what is told, it is the telling itself that constitutes his/her/their being, in the act of sharing.

Derrida writes, in *Specters of Marx*: "As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter" (2006, 11). Speak, without knowing to whom, but with the belief that some time or another, some place – one doesn't know when or where – there will be someone listening on the other end. I was incapable of doing so in theoretical writing with its flashlight focus, its urge to enlighten. In order to give account of this strange new "I" – to encounter this "I" that has since also been a you, someone else – I sought out fiction writing with its implicit readers and their willing suspensions of disbelief; its hospitality to intimate and experimental forms of narration; its flexibility of form and style, and general acceptance of the strange. Even though this text springs from real-life autobiographic events, it is therefore with fiction that I make sense of myself.

But also in order to give a real dimension to the abstract. Fiction asks of its readers to make room for someone else, within themselves. *On Wards* is like all forms of prose and poetry, an intrusion. The reader gets lost in reading, loses herself, practices and prepares to die... The poet Mary Ruefle writes, "Every time I read a poem I am willing to die, insofar as I am surrendering myself to the mercy of someone's speech" (2012, 74). I surrender my body in reading, become host to non-existent strangers. *On Wards* is thus also an attempt to give flesh to "no body." In its direct address the reader enacts the role of the addressee, embodying the spectral presence of the donor. While, objectively speaking, the text gives an account of the inner life of a patient in the ICU, enduring pains and discomfort, dreams and hallucinations, it is on a most elementary level a pre-text for making what is readable, real; to give volume and substance to a transplant donor and to give back to him/her a body made of writing.

No, I have really nothing to say
(*geen woord*)

But I am saying it to you.

These texts will outlive me.

These texts are composed of words that won't have the last word.

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Small portions of “A Ghost Story,” “Exordium (After Specters),” and “The Death of Derrida and the Death of the Death of the Author, by the Death of the Author’s Mother” are published here:

Goosen, Moosje M. 2022. “Learning to Live with Ghosts.” In *Map Magazine* #66.
<https://mapmagazine.co.uk/learning-to-live-with-ghosts-part-1>
<https://mapmagazine.co.uk/learning-to-live-with-ghosts-part-2>

An earlier version of “Body Writing” is published here in Dutch:

Goosen, Moosje M. 2022. “De schrijver als lichaam en het lichaam als schrijver. Hoe opnieuw te leren schrijven met ziekte.” In *Mr. Motley*. <https://www.misttermotley.nl/de-schrijver-als-lichaam-en-het-lichaam-als-schrijver-hoe-opnieuw-te-leren-leven-en-schrijven-met-ziekte/>

“When Death Turns to Self” is published here:

Goosen, Moosje M. 2020. “When Death Turns to Self.” *The Oxford Literary Review* 42, No. 2: 193-196

Shorter versions of *On Wards* have been exhibited as text pieces/installations at the following art venues:

On Wards. (Dispatches from a hospital bed.) Solo presentation. Daily Practice, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. March 29 – June 14, 2020.

On Wards. Solo presentation. Bureaucracy Studies, Lausanne, Switzerland. November 11 – December 19, 2021.

On Wards Inwards. In collaboration with Suzanne Weenink/Daily Practice. Part of the group exhibition “84 STEPS” curated by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy and Rosa de Graaf. Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. April 5, 2021 – November 5, 2023.

APPENDIX A
ON WARDS
(Separate publication in print)

APPENDIX B:
DOCUMENTATION ON WARDS

ON WARDS DOCUMENTATION

On Wards (Dispatches from a hospital bed).

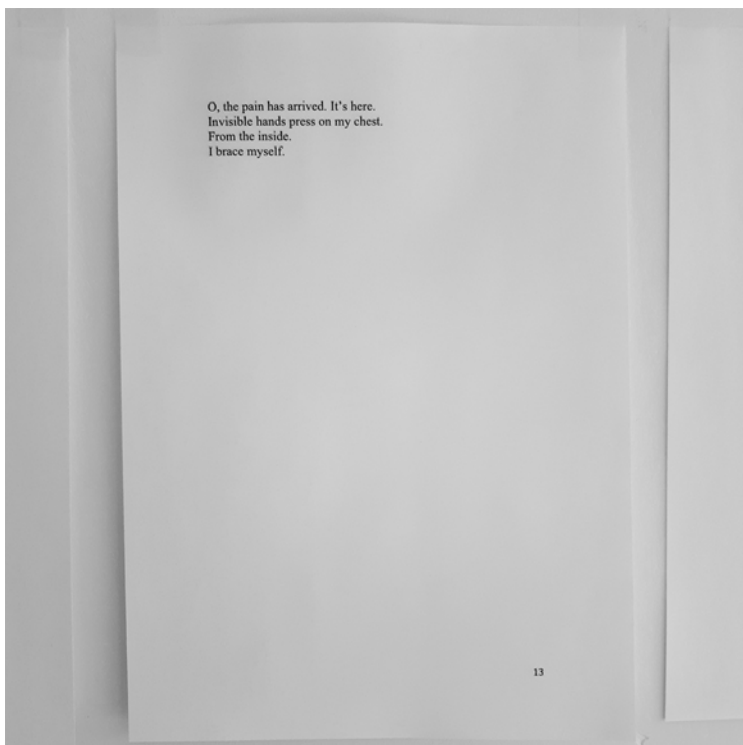
Daily Practice, Rotterdam

Installed by Suzanne Weenink

March 29 – June 14, 2020



1.



2.



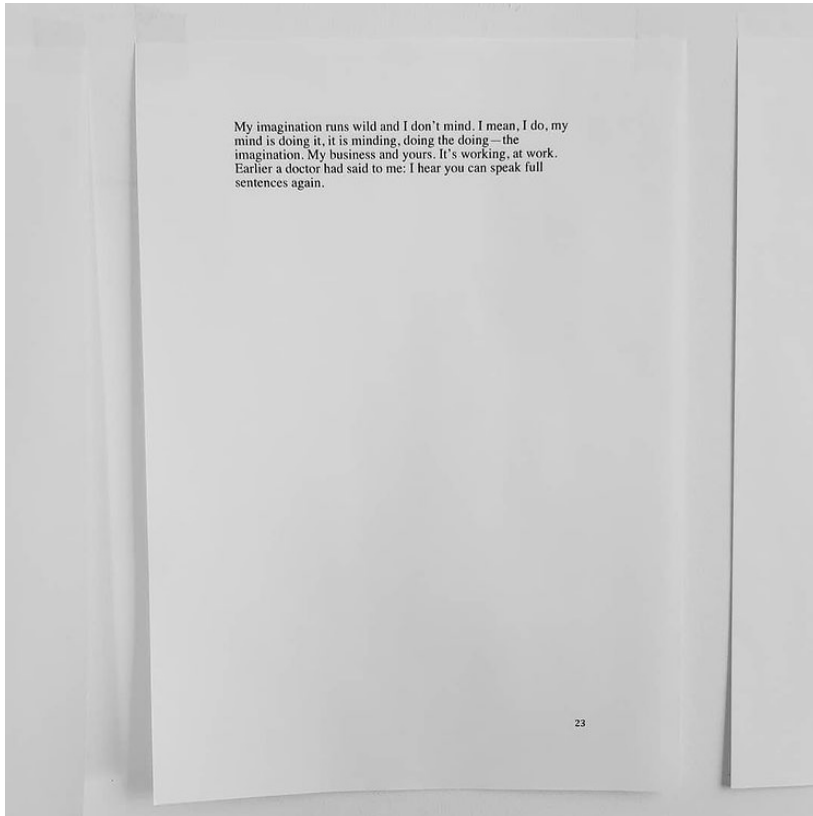
3.

This exhibition came about on invitation by Suzanne Weenink (founding director of Daily Practice). Suzannw was visiting me at the hospital when I received news of a donor match, in March 2017. Our lives are deeply connected by the shared remembrance and intimacy of this exceptional moment.

My donor lungs have given me new breath, a renewed health, and the awareness of a profound connection of beings through breathing, in the exchange of air with people we know and those we don't know: with the living and with the dead. At Daily Practice we wanted to give space to this intimacy with (un-) known others, through reading and breathing.

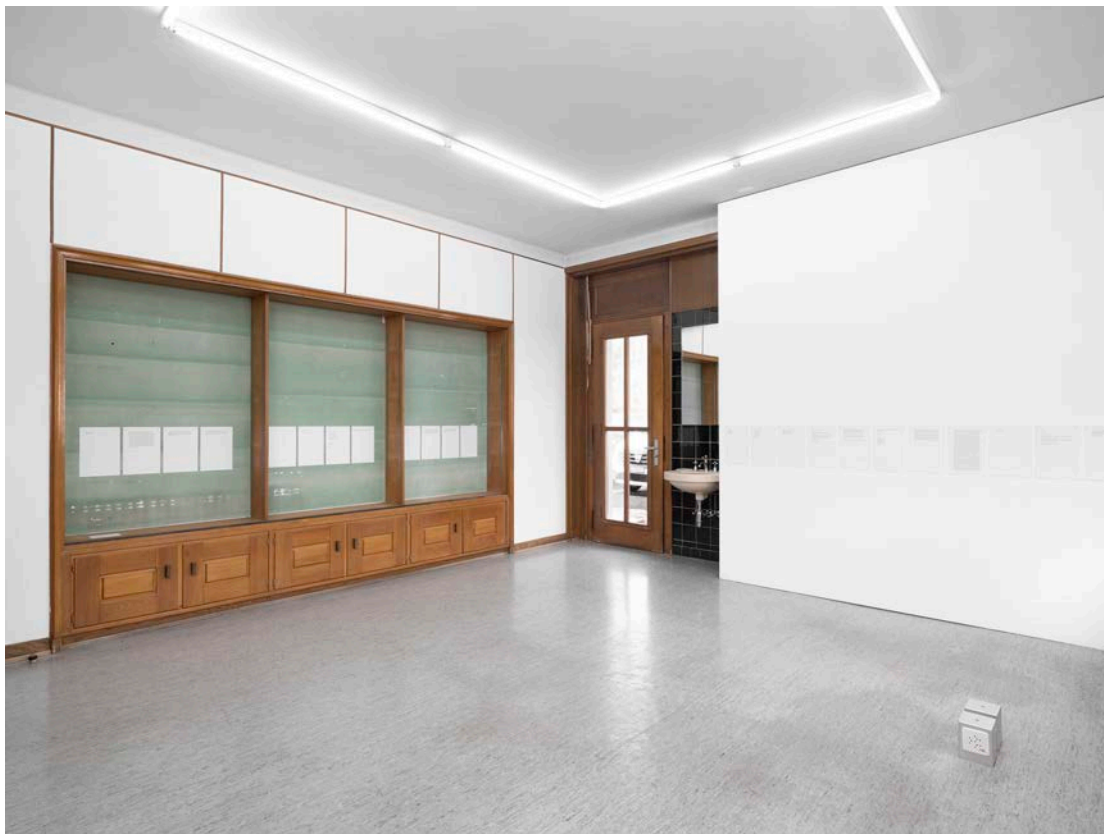
Though *On Wards* is a work of fiction, it is important to me that it does not separate itself from life, which is also its source. I added as little as possible to the layout and presentation of the text, making use of standardized forms and styles.

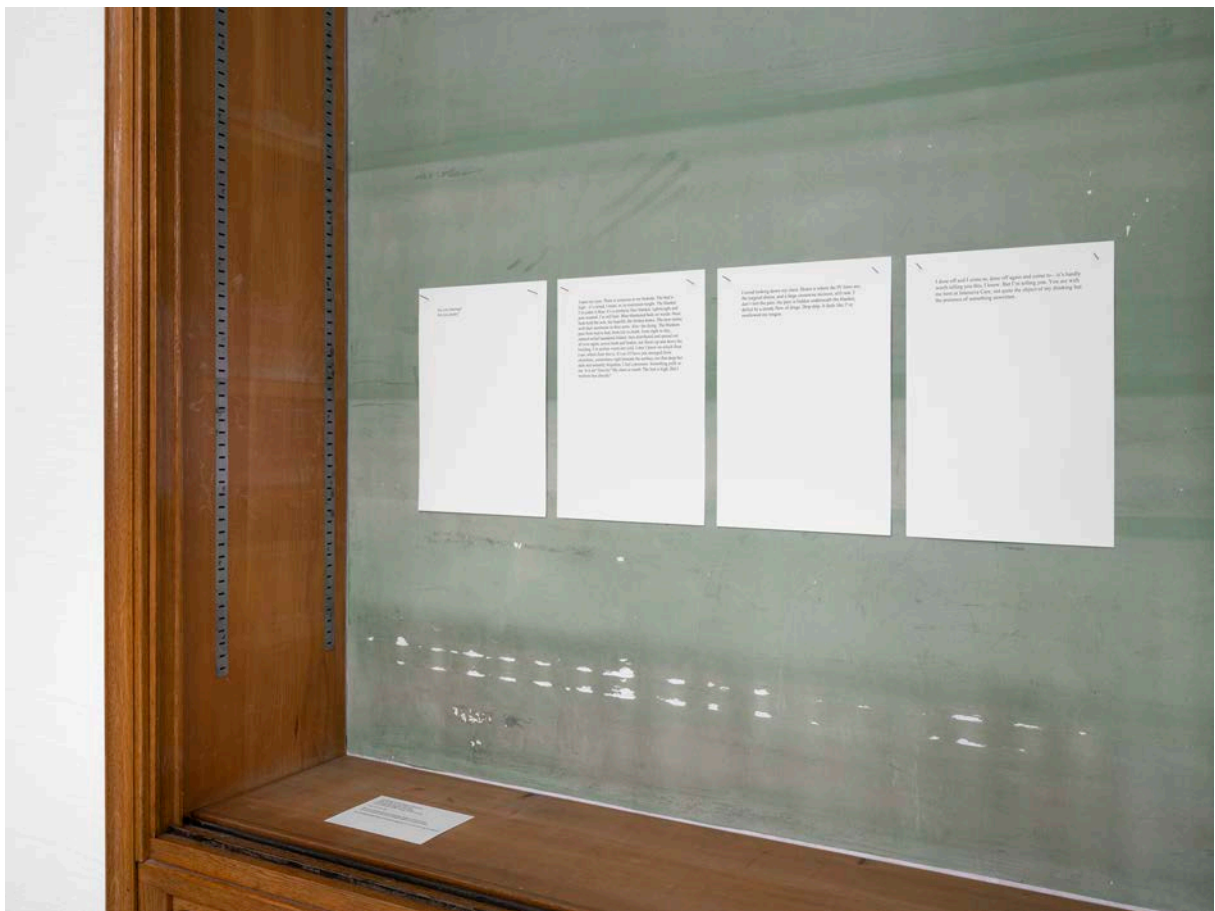
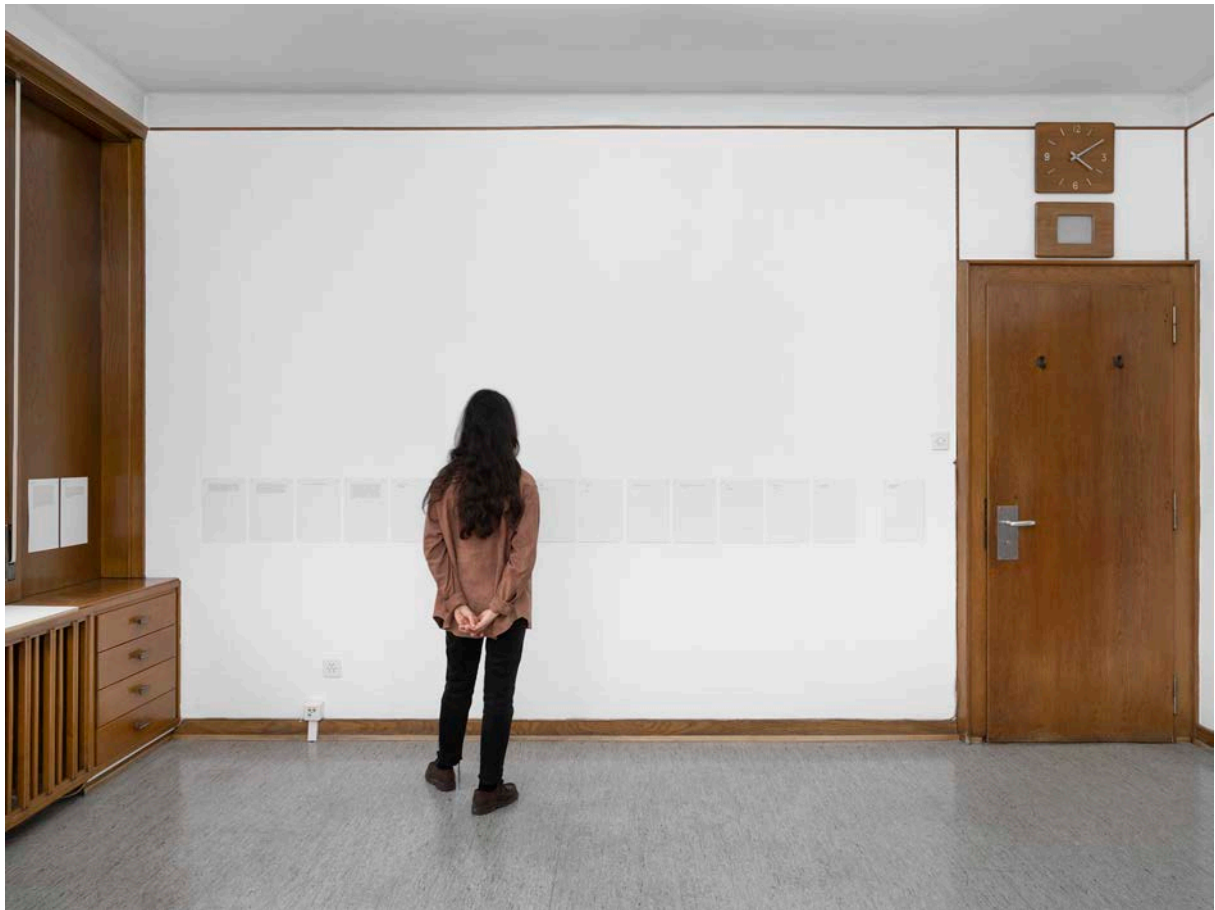
The text is set in Times New Roman and printed with an inkjet desktop printer on white 80 grams A4 paper. It is hung on white-painted walls with transparent adhesive tape that was available at Daily Practice at the time of installation. This was an aesthetic decision as much as a practical solution: due to the (first) COVID lockdown that had come into effect whilst preparing for the exhibition, I couldn't install the text myself. I then decided that this work should have as minimal artistic interference as possible, so that it could be made any time on any location by anyone.



4.

On Wards
Bureaucracy Studies, Lausanne
Installed by Matthias Sohr
March 29 – June 14, 2020.





photos by Julien Gremaud

On Wards, 43 A4 pages, 180 grams
hung at 122 cm from the floor
the projected height of the lungs
inside a body of 157 cm in length:

26.8 cm less than the average height of Dutch men
13,4 cm less than the average height of Dutch women

The height of a normal adult lung is 27 cm at total lung capacity.
In the range of normal breathing it is approximately 24 cm in height.

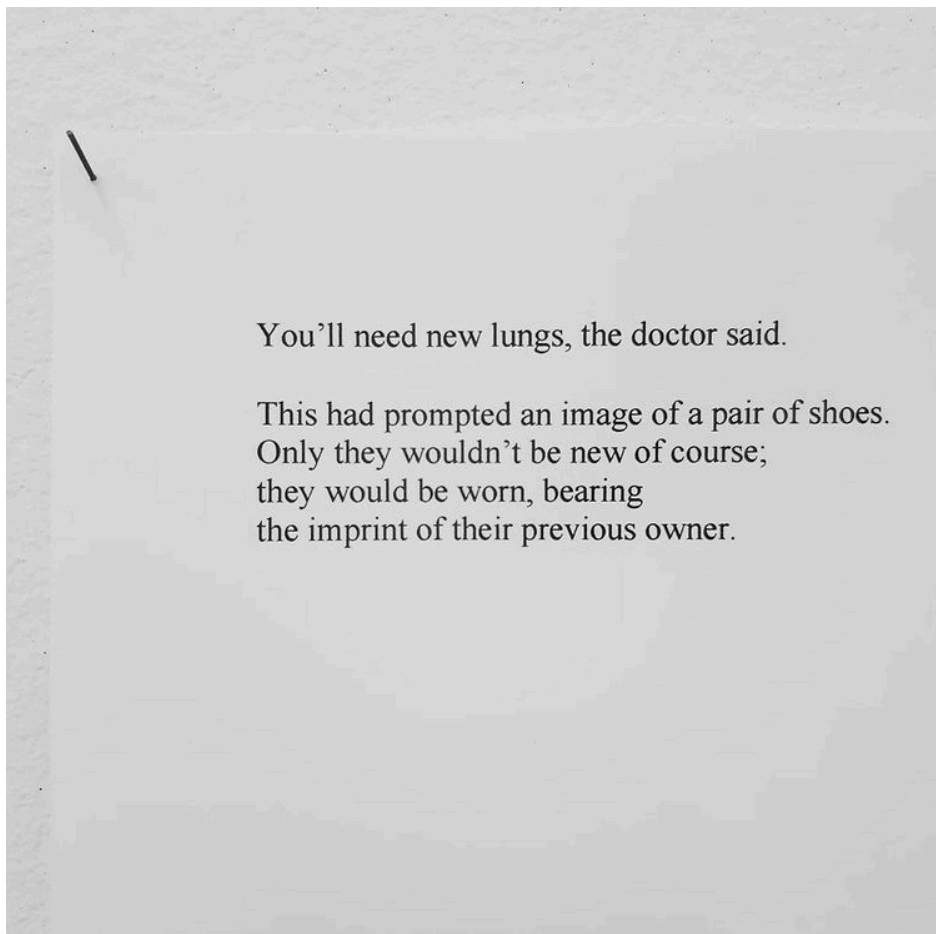
text label, 2021
created for Bureaucracy Studies

A pair of lungs is about the size of an A4 page. For the text installation at Bureaucracy Studies, which was done by its director, Matthias Sohr, I decided to have the pages hung at the projected height of my lungs. Due to my relatively short length, the pages were installed at a low height, making visitors aware of their own body in the space. Information was provided on a cardboard text label inspired by the work of Stanley Brouwn.

In addition to the text installation, fragments of On Wards were translated to French by Cl  a Chopard. A bilingual reading and conversation about translation, with Moosje M. Goosen, Cl  a Chopard, and Kate Briggs, and moderated by Matthias Sohr, took place online on December 14, 2021.

On Wards Inwards
in collaboration with Daily Practice / Suzanne Weenink
with meditation cushions by Nienke Terpsma
84 STEPS, group exhibition & education programme
Curated by Sofía Hernández Chong-Cuy & Rosa de Graaf
April 9, 2021 - August 30, 2023





For the group exhibition 84 STEPS, Suzanne Weenink and I developed a room for the text On Wards, which also serves as a space dedicated to the awareness of breath. In addition to the text, Suzanne designed a minimalist floor that is used for regularly held meditations in collective silence, and seasonal day-long silence retreats. These meditations form an extension of the ongoing weekly meditations online, provided by Daily Practice since the start of the exhibition On Wards by Moosje, in March 2020.

The cushions provided for meditation are made of linen tote bags from art spaces, museums and manifestations. They are customized and handmade by artist and designer Nienke Terpsma.

Within the context of the exhibition, this floor is also given to others, who can use the space for workshops, trainings, and other educational initiatives.





4.



5.

photos: Moosje M. Goosen (1), Suzanne Weenink (2, 3, 5), Luuk Smits (4)

APPENDIX C
Dear Reader, referenced

Dear Reader,

Whenever Zen Master Gutei was asked about his teachings, he simply stuck up one finger.¹ “What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?” riddled the Sphinx.² Captain Ahab said to the carpenter who prepared his peg leg: “Look, put thy live leg here in the place where mine once was ... Where thou feelest tingling life; there, exactly there, there to a hair, do I.”³ But when Gutei’s disciple stuck up *his* finger, Master Gutei cut it off.⁴

Marx stood Hegel on his head.⁵ A nurse asks, “How many fingers am I holding up?” Roland Barthes had a piece of rib removed.⁶ Look: Saint Agatha holds her severed breasts on a silver platter.⁷ René Descartes once asked himself: “How can I deny that these hands and this body are mine?”⁸ Then Marx turned it over and placed philosophy back on its feet.

“Philosophy limps,” said Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁹ Lord Krishna has six arms.¹⁰ Scylla has twelve dangling legs and six long necks with a gruesome head on each. “Where’s your arm?”¹¹ A child asked the woman at the grocery store. “You mean leg,” the woman replied. “Where’s your arm?” the child persisted. “You mean leg,” the

¹ See “Gutei’s One Finger” (Yamada 2004, 23-26).

² Known in Greek mythology to be the daughter of Orthus, and either Echidna or Chimera. A hybrid creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion, she posed her riddle to travelers, whom she devoured when they couldn’t produce the right answer. Oedipus succeeded in solving the riddle. The man, he replied, who crawls on all fours as a baby, walks on two as an adult, and needs a walking cane when old.

³ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or, The Whale* (Melville 2003, 512).

⁴ Yamada (2004, 23-26).

⁵ In *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx argued that Hegel’s dialectics “is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.” (Marx 1995).

⁶ “At Leysin, in 1945, in order to perform an extrapleural pneumothorax operation, a piece of one of my ribs was removed...” (Barthes 1994, 61).

⁷ Saint Agatha of Sicily (c. 231 – 251 AD), Christian patron of breast cancer patients, (virgin) martyrs, wet nurses, and rape victims, among others; she’s invoked against fire and eruptions of Mount Etna. Having made a vow of virginity, Agatha was brutally punished, tortured, and imprisoned after having refused the Roman prefect Quintianus’ marriage proposal. Quintianus did not get what he desired. It cost Agatha her breasts.

⁸ “...there are many [...] beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?” Descartes, *First Meditation* (2017, 16).

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “In Praise of Philosophy” (Fisher 1969, 25).

¹⁰ “Sri Sadbhuja is the six-armed form of the Supreme Lord. In two of His hands He holds a bow and arrow, the symbols of Lord Ramachandra; in two hands He holds a flute, the symbol of Lord Krishna. And in two of His hands He hold a stick and waterpot, the symbol of Lord Chaitanya,” <https://sastracaksu.nlitn.in/sri-sadbhuja-six-armed-form-supreme-lord/>.

¹¹ As told by Circe to Odysseus in “Book 12. Difficult Choices” of *The Odyssey* by Homer, paraphrased here from the English translation by Emily Wilson (Homer 2018).

woman said again. “My leg got sick. I had to take it to the hospital.”¹² At the field hospital, Walt Whitman noticed “a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart.”¹³ In a seminar lecture on anxiety, Jacques Lacan says he sometimes dreads forgetting his arm in the metro – “like a vulgar umbrella.”¹⁴ On screen, a young Hollywood actor by the name of Ronald Reagan wakes from surgery, looks at the empty space where his legs used to be, and screams, in agony, his scripted lines: “WHERE IS THE REST OF ME???”¹⁵ “Oh Jesus I have to work with that arm why did you cut it off? Why did you cut my arm off answer me why did you cut my arm off? Why did you why did you why did you?” says Johnny.¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln described the American South as a diseased limb.¹⁷ “And this limping,” Merleau-Ponty proceeded, “is its virtue.”¹⁸

Wilhelm Röntgen took an x-ray of his wife’s left hand, with the wedding band still on her skeletal finger.¹⁹ Alice tells the Cheshire Cat: “I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly.” And the cat said “All right,” and vanished quite slowly this time, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.²⁰ “Three.” the patient tells the nurse. “You are holding up three fingers.” Villanayur Ramachandran notes that some people continue to feel a ring on their phantom finger, or a watchband on their wrist. He says that a girl who was born without forearms used her phantom fingers to solve arithmetic problems.²¹ Later in the *Meditations*, Descartes writes: “... I have learned from some persons whose arms or legs have been cut off, that they sometimes seemed to feel pain in the part which had been amputated.”²²

¹² As described by Vivian Sobchack, film theorist and phenomenologist, who had a leg amputation in treatment of cancer (Sobchack 2010).

¹³ Walt Whitman, “Down at the Front” (Whitman 1887, 41-42).

¹⁴ From Lacan’s seminar of Wednesday 8 May 1963 (Seminar 17). See Lacan unpublished.

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan in the role of Drake McHugh, in *Kings Row*, directed by Sam Wood (Wood 1942).

¹⁶ Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun* (1989, 27).

¹⁷ In 1864, Lincoln comments: “I have sometimes used the illustration ... of a man with a diseased limb, and his surgeon. So long as there is a chance of the patient’s restoration, the surgeon is solemnly bound to try to save both life and limb; but when the crisis comes, and the limb must be sacrificed as the only chance of saving the life, no honest man will hesitate” (Carpenter 1866, 76-77).

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “In Praise of Philosophy” (Fisher 1969, 25).

¹⁹ “One of the earliest photographic plates from Röntgen’s experiments was a film of his wife, Bertha’s hand with a ring, produced on Friday, November 8, 1895.” Quoted from APS News, *Advanced Physics* (Volume 10, Number 10, November 2001). Accessible at <https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200111>.

²⁰ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865).

²¹ See V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind* (1999, 57).

²² “For what can be more internal than pain? And yet I had heard that those who had had a leg or an arm amputated sometimes still seemed to feel pain intermittently in the missing part of the body.” Descartes, *Sixth Meditation* (2017, 60-61).

Paul Wittgenstein played piano with his phantom right hand.²³ Charity Tillemann-Dick, a soprano, sang opera with her donor lungs.²⁴ The piece of rib, wrapped in medical gauze, was kindly returned to Monsieur Barthes: Voilà.²⁵ How many fingers? “No fingers.”

The first human-to-human heart transplant was performed in 1967.²⁶ In 1925, the Russian novelist Mikhael Bulgakov imagines a dog with the brainstem of a man. Is it a dog who thinks like a man, or a man who walks like a dog?²⁷ Grandmother Eva may or may not have let a train run over her leg, so she could collect the insurance money.²⁸ Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian miraculously transplanted a leg: the leg was robbed from the grave of an Ethiopian slave.²⁹ “I haven’t got any arms Kareen. My arms are gone. Both of my arms are gone Kareen both of them. They’re gone. Kareen Kareen Kareen,” said Johnny, despairingly.³⁰

Gilles Deleuze had a lung removed, in 1969.³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy was the recipient of a donor heart, the first successful transplant of a heart in France.³² The first lung transplant was performed in 1963, on a Mississippi prisoner, named John Richard Russell. He died eighteen days later.³³ In Jewish and Christian paintings of the Late Antique and Early Medieval period, God is often no more than a depiction of a hand, appearing from a corner or a cloud. In the Congo, a rubber plantation worker looks at his daughter’s hand and foot. They have been severed by members of the Anglo-

²³ François Boller and Julien Bogousslavsky, “Paul Wittgenstein’s Right Arm and His Phantom: The Saga of a Famous Concert Pianist and His Amputation” (2015, 293-303).

²⁴ More about her life and career as soprano can be read in Tillemann-Dick’s autobiography, *The Encore: A Memoir in Three Acts* (2017).

²⁵ “... a piece of one of my ribs was removed, and subsequently given back to me, quite formally, wrapped up in a piece of medical gauze (the physicians, who were Swiss, as it happened, thereby professed that *my body belongs to me*, in whatever dismembered state they restored it to me: I am the owner of my bones, in life as in death)” (Barthes 1994, 61).

²⁶ “1967 saw the first successful human heart transplant anywhere in the world. That patient, Louis Washkansky, 53, was terminally ill with heart failure. His surgeon at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa was Christiaan Barnard. The donor, Denise Darvall, was just 25. She suffered a fatal brain injury after a car accident in which her mother also died. Her father, Edward, who knew his daughter loved to help others, took the generous decision to donate her organs (one of Denise’s kidneys also saved the life of a 10-year-old boy),” “A History of UK Heart Transplant,” *Heart Matters*, The British Heart Foundation. <https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/medical/history-of-uk-heart-transplant#:~:text=1967%20saw%20the%20first%20successful,Denise%20Darvall%2C%20was%20just%2025.>

²⁷ Mikhail Bulgakov, *A Dog’s Heart* (2016).

²⁸ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1998).

²⁹ Jong Seok Soh, “Religious Myths and their Historical Heritage: How did Saints Cosmas and Damian become Patron Saints of Surgery? From the Miracle of the Black Legs to 21st Century Transplant Medicine” (2020).

³⁰ Trumbo (1998, 38).

³¹ See Wikipedia entry on Gilles Deleuze.

³² Jean-Luc Nancy, “*L’Intrus*” (2002).

³³ Jack Mazurak, “UMMC marks 50th anniversary of world’s first lung transplant” (2013).

Belgian India Rubber Company militia.³⁴ “We do not even know what a body is capable of . . .” Spinoza said.³⁵ Somewhere in the world, someone steps on a landmine. We do not know where exactly, we do not know when.³⁶

An Army General visits the museum that exhibits his amputated lower leg bone.³⁷ Others follow his example, looking for their own conserved limbs. “3486, 3487,” the spirit medium says. “They are my legs, my legs!” the amputee cries out. They are in the museum!³⁸ Judith with the head of Holofernes.³⁹ Cancer, gangrene, diabetes. Cicero’s severed hands and head.⁴⁰ The severed heads of Cosmas and of Damian.⁴¹ Einstein’s brain, cut into pieces.⁴²

“In many the hand seems to be at rest,” the Philadelphian physician notes, in his reports at the hospital for injured nerves, also known as the Stump Hospital. “Others carry with them a hand in a state of more or less violent flexion, and possess but slight control over it,” he adds.⁴³ How many hands? “No legs. No more running walking crawling if you have no legs. No more working. No legs you see. Never again to wiggle your toes. What a hell of a thing what a wonderful beautiful thing to wiggle your toes.” It’s Johnny again, without his legs.⁴⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy lived to old age with his transplant heart.⁴⁵ Audre Lorde had a mastectomy, but died, too young, of cancer.⁴⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick had a mastectomy.⁴⁷ Susan Sontag had a mastectomy.⁴⁸ Jo

³⁴ From a photo made by missionary Alice Seeley Harris, “Father stares at the hand and foot of his five-year-old, severed as a punishment for failing to make the daily rubber quota, Belgian Congo,” 1904. The man’s name is Nsala. Harris’s account of it can be read in her biography, Judy Pollard Smith’s *Don’t Call Me Lady: The Journey of Lady Alice Seeley Harris* (2014).

³⁵ Quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1992, 226).

³⁶ See, for instance, “Deaths from landmines are on the rise – and clearing them all will take decades” published November 15, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/deaths-from-landmines-are-on-the-rise-and-clearing-them-all-will-take-decades-171848>.

³⁷ Major General Daniel E. Sickles, whose lower leg bone is still in the National Museum of Health and Medicine (U.S.), formerly known as the Army Medical Museum in Washington D.C.

³⁸ Silas Weir Mitchell, “The Case of George Dedlow” (1866, 1-11).

³⁹ See *Book of Judith* of The Old Testament.

⁴⁰ In 43 B.C., Mark Antony murdered Cicero and ushered in the beginnings of the Roman Empire.

⁴¹ “Imprisoned during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Diocletian, they were tortured and finally beheaded, their bodies being taken to Syria for burial” (Encyclopedia Britannica). The scene of their beheading is the subject of Fra Angelico’s San Marco altar piece (1438-1440), “Beheading of Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian,” in the collections of the Louvre, Paris.

⁴² About the incredible faith of Einstein’s brain, see, for instance, Michael Paterniti, “Driving Mr. Albert. A Trip Across America with Einstein” in *Harper’s Bazaar* (1997).

⁴³ Silas Weir Mitchell, “Phantom Limbs” (1871).

⁴⁴ Trumbo (1998, 60).

⁴⁵ He died on August 23, 2021, at the age of 81.

⁴⁶ She wrote an account of her illness and treatment in *The Cancer Journals* (2020).

⁴⁷ In *A Dialogue on Love*, Sedgwick writes about her personal struggles with cancer, treatment, and metastasis. Lesser known is that from 1998-2003 she wrote a column called “Off My Chest” for the women’s cancer magazine *MAMM* (see, for instance, Lana Lin’s chapter “Object-Love in the Later Writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick” in *Freud’s Jaw and Other Lost Objects: Fractured Subjectivity in the Face of Cancer* (2017, 82-114).

⁴⁸ See her *Journals*, and (indirectly) *Illness as Metaphor* (1979).

Spence had a mastectomy.⁴⁹ My friend had a mastectomy. Phantom breasts are the lesser-known sisters of the infamous phantom limbs.

Bruce Lee tells his apprentice: “Do not mistake the finger pointing to the Moon for the Moon itself.”⁵⁰ “Without fingers I point, without arms I stretch, without feet I run. What am I?”⁵¹ What am I? Blaise Cendrars wrote: “... the mind strays, trying to follow, to situate, to identify, to localize the existence of a severed hand, which makes itself painfully felt ... somewhere outside of the body, a hand, hands which multiply and fan out, the fingers virtually crushed...”⁵² What is the sound of one hand clapping?

My leg is in the hospital. My leg is in the museum. My lung, removed, lay in a crescent-shaped stainless-steel dish. It breathed no longer. Prior to *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott wrote stories about the scramble for arms and legs of soldiers who would come out of their graves on Judgment Day.⁵³ Silas Wegg does not want his body “dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there.”⁵⁴ I want my leg back, I want it back. Whitman sees, in 1855, “the beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms.”⁵⁵ But writing, Wilhelm Flusser wrote, will always persist, “like a useless appendix.”⁵⁶ Marie Curie’s handwritten notes are radioactive: in order to read her notebooks one must cover oneself with lead.⁵⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley kept the heart of Percy in her drawer, where it was discovered after her death.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Jo Spence was a British photographer, a writer, cultural worker, and a photo therapist. She documented her living with illness and treatment of cancer in photographs, art works, and artists books. She died of cancer on June 24, 1992, aged 58.

⁵⁰ *Enter the Dragon*, directed by Robert Clouse (1973).

⁵¹ A clock.

⁵² Full quote “...the mind strays, trying to follow, to situate, to identify, to localise the existence of a severed hand, which makes itself painfully felt; not at the end of the stump or in the radial axis or at the centre of consciousness, but as an aura, somewhere outside of the body, a hand, hands which multiply and grow and fan out, the fingers virtually crushed, the nerves ultra sensitive, leaving an imprint on the mind of the image of the dancing Shiva revolving under a circular blade, severing off each arm, one by one.” Blaise Cendrars, *Sky: Memoirs* as quoted in L. Tatu, “The Missing Hands of Blaise Cendrars” (2010, 150).

⁵³ Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (1993, 31).

⁵⁴ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend 1864-1865* (1997, 97).

⁵⁵ From Walt Whitman’s Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, The First 1855 Edition (2005, 8).

⁵⁶ Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* (2011, 122).

⁵⁷ “... after more than 100 years, much of Curie’s personal effects including her clothes, furniture, cookbooks, and laboratory notes are still radioactive, author Bill Bryson writes in his book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Regarded as national and scientific treasures, Curie’s laboratory notebooks are stored in lead-lined boxes at France’s Bibliothèque National in Paris. While the library grants access to visitors to view Curie’s manuscripts, all guests are expected to sign a liability waiver and wear protective gear as the items are contaminated with radium 226, which has a half life of about 1,600 years,” quoted from Barbara Tasch, “Marie Curie’s Belongings Will Be Radioactive for Another 1,500 Years” (2015).

⁵⁸ “In 1852, a year after she died, Percy’s heart was found in her desk. It was wrapped in the pages of one of his last poems, *Adonais*. The heart was eventually buried in the family vault

Roland Barthes threw his “rib chop” from his balcony. It was time for him to part with it.⁵⁹ When the bodily remains of Descartes were exhumed from its grave in Stockholm, the French ambassador took as a souvenir a bone of the philosopher’s right index finger. He said “it had served as an instrument in the immortal writings of the deceased.”⁶⁰ How many fingers? Just one. Jacques Derrida once said, “Everything comes down to the ear you are able to hear me with.”⁶¹ Van Gogh’s ear lobe. Freud’s ear – “the most famous ears in history,” Michel Foucault said once.⁶² On Foucault’s deathbed, according to his friend Hervé Guibert, he spoke only in cryptic sentences: “I am afraid the potlatch won’t come out in your favor,” or, “I hope Russia turns White once more.”⁶³

Friedrich Nietzsche said that his genius was in his nostrils.⁶⁴ A woman says: “Stop staring at my breasts.” Johnny lost nearly everything: his limbs, his hearing, his speech, his sight. Barthes insisted: the author is dead.⁶⁵ He is, he is, he is. But then, Dr. Frankenstein screamed, “ALIVE! IT IS ALIVE!”⁶⁶

“Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt,” said Jane Eyre.

with their son, Percy Florence Shelley, when he died in 1889.” Stacy Conratt, “Mary Shelley’s Favorite Keepsake: Her Dead Husband’s Heart” (2015).

⁵⁹ “And then, one day, realizing that the function of any drawer is to ease (...) but not going so far as to dare cast this bit of myself into the common refuse bin of my building, I flung the rib chop and its gauze from my balcony, as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes, into the rue Servandoni, where some dog would come and sniff them out” (Barthes 1994, 61).

⁶⁰ See Russel Shorto, *Descartes’ Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason* (2008).

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Metzschke and the Politics of the Proper Name” in *The Ear of the Other* (Derrida 1985, 4).

⁶² As read in Adam Phillips’ Introduction to H.D.’s *Tribute to Freud* (2012, xi).

⁶³ Hervé Guibert, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1991, 94).

⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. How to Become What You Are* (2007, 88).

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image Music Text* (1995).

⁶⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (2015, Chapter 27, 462).

SUMMARY

Learning to Live With Ghosts: The Practice of Research.

“I am myself the matter of this book,” Michel de Montaigne wrote, prefacing his *Essays*. It was first published in 1580, and was written and revised by him over the period of approximately 1570 to 1592. With the book (which was also his own matter), Michel de Montaigne used his writing as an experimental tool of sorts to put philosophy to the test and take its words at heart, measuring it to life, with his own experiences. Can one learn to live, using human reason? What is the significance of experience to the philosophical tradition? At the end of his life, he writes: “Oh what a soft and delightful pillow, and what a sane one on which to rest a well-schooled head, are ignorance and unconcern. I would rather be an expert on me than on Cicero.” His essays, or tests; attempts, therefore should be seen as a *practice* – indeed, an ongoing try-out of life, in life, as life – rather than a project with the purpose of acquiring knowledge (and keeping it). More than a philosophy, the *Essays* read as an expression of the exploratory drift of human beings and their desire for insight into their own nature.

What constitutes philosophy: the knowing, or the trying – the everyday trial and error? Arrival at knowledge, or the will to? People of all times have used life-writing to try to understand the nature of beings and things. In this research I build on this multiple-voiced tradition, with its various (re-)iterations in feminism, black-, queer-, and disability studies, phenomenology, existentialism, autotheory, essayism, and so on. This study is twofold. On the one hand I have tried to penetrate philosophy without becoming a philosopher and in the writerly act of making it “sound” differently, perhaps creating a “call” that is heard by readers beyond philosophy. I have tried to do so, adding to research the repressed element of a voice that is speaking, from life. This voice *narrates* a different style of thinking that borrows from poetry, literature, and other forms of prose writing such as memoir. It has scholarly as well as literary interlocutors and intentions. It believes in philosophy as an active imagining; a practice rather than a theory, in which, in Toni Morrison’s words, “the thrust is towards the creation of members of a society who can make human decisions” (2019, 42) – something, I have come to realize throughout these years of study and illness, that cannot rely on rational decisions per se. On the other hand, or perhaps by consequence, this writing is also phenomenology and memoir of “doing” philosophy while becoming ill, when life is at its most unsteady.

I started this research, there where I could not keep my promises any longer; where, in Nietzschean terms, I could no longer promise to love philosophy unconditionally (nor could I vow to hate it). In this collection of texts I look at the intimacy of illness and the body as sabotaging the practice of scholarship. Parallel to this research, I was diagnosed with an incurable auto-immune disorder, which required me to prepare for death, or a lung transplant, the latter of which I received in 2017. From the supposed outside of my private time and life; from my sick leave; out of office, I have tried to deconstruct the style of knowledge formed by philosophical scholarship, conducted according to the unspoken rules and limits set by academic traditions, while at the same time doing the necessary, practical research about life and death myself.

Engaging with the age-old existential questions that have occupied philosophy from its beginning – How to live? How to die? – and in dialogue with, first and foremost, the work of Jacques Derrida, I have attempted to describe the tension that arises when, becoming ill,

these general questions become particular and come to *matter* personally. No longer just in theory. How am *I* to live? How am *I* to die? How to continue practicing philosophical inquiry while ill, when the body is foregrounded by continuous practical concerns? Illness is commonly understood as a disability. But it also opens the ability to observe aspects of life that in good health function transparently and thus remain absent from conscious experience.

This work contains some ghosts. Although the figure of the ghost in popular culture is commonly imagined as without body, in this research I argue through my writing that it is the body that haunts scholarly writing, like a ghost, in its repression. Here, the ill body effects a palpability of something, some *body*, that so often remains out of the picture in the practice of research. As a ghostlike force, it is able to raise questions about authority, narration, subject-object dynamics, objectivity and subjectivity that are disregarded in academic writing, for convenience's sake. Combining elements of prose and fiction writing, describing experience in a phenomenological tradition, I deviate from the norms and conventions of philosophical discourse, and make a hauntological intervention into philosophy, from its spectral margins, from my sick-bed. As such, this research looks at what thinking as a practice and experience embodies, and under what conditions it is made possible. It argues for the presence of literature and poetry in and as philosophical thinking – as an alternative method to engage in the questions of life (and death), always as lived experiences, instead of object(s) of knowledge.

In an attempt to *perform* this argument and let the writing do the work, this research is also a collection of texts that refuse to be reduced to summary. Nevertheless, here I will try to offer some guidance in the reading of it. This first introductory part of the writing consists of a tentative feeling out of the field in question – establishing its parameters by means of open questioning. Part 1, Learning to Live, looks further into a fundamental question in the practice of cultural analysis, directed, here, at philosophy: Who speaks, when philosophy is spoken? Who can speak the truth, or voice their opinion? Whose voices are heard, and whose are unheard of? In Part 2, Learning to Die, I try to distinguish between death in life and death in theory, analyzing both phenomena and their effects in texts by Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Edgar Allan Poe. Part 3, There Is No Is, returns to where I started this research project, with a reverse phantom arm, my subsequent fascination with phantom limbs, and fiction as a speculative exploration and experimental tool for medical concerns, as exemplified in a short story by an American Civil War-era neurologist from Philadelphia, Silas Weir Mitchell (“The Case of George Dedlow,” 1866). Finally, in Part 4, I have employed my own experimental writing to test and manifest a formless abstraction – a ghost – that concerns me in my life: my lung transplant donor who “exists” because someone, some body, has died. This aporia, I hope to demonstrate, can only be addressed by fiction, as a form of writing that imagines rather than defines, and opens up to life, rather than narrowing it down. Thus, my conclusion, if there is any, is fiction, as an invitation to an alternative style of thinking: I end with *On Wards*, an experimental work of autobiographical fiction about the experience of *having survived*, thanks to organ donation.

SAMENVATTING

Leren leven met geesten: de praktijk van onderzoek.

“Ik zelf vorm de stof van mijn boek,” schreef Michel de Montaigne in het voorwoord van zijn *Essays*. Deze werden voor het eerst gepubliceerd in 1580, en geschreven, aangevuld, en herzien van 1570 tot 1592. Met het boek (dat ook zijn eigen stof is) schreef Michel de Montaigne als ware het schrijven een experimenteel instrument, om de filosofie mee op de proef te stellen, en diens woorden te toetsen aan het leven, aan de hand van beschrijvingen van zijn eigen ervaringen. Kan men leren leven met behulp van de menselijke rede? Wat kan de ervaring betekenen voor de filosofische traditie? Tegen het einde van zijn leven schrijft Montaigne, “Oh, wat een zacht en plezierig kussen vormen de onwetendheid en onbezorgdheid, en hoe gezond is het om een goedgeschoold hoofd hierop te laten rusten. Ik zou liever een expert in mijzelf zijn dan in Cicero.” Zijn essays of “probeersels” kunnen dan ook het best begrepen worden als praktische oefeningen – inderdaad, als een voortdurende proeve tot leven, in het leven, als leven. Dit in plaats van het verwerven (en behouden) van kennis tot doel. Meer dan een filosofie kunnen de *Essays* gelezen worden als een uitdrukking van de menselijke drift tot kennis en het verlangen van de mens naar inzicht in de eigen natuur.

Wat is filosofie: het weten of het proberen – het vallen en opstaan van alledag? Het tot kennis komen, of de wil ertoe? Ten alle tijden hebben mensen hun leven beschreven, in de hoop daarmee de aard van het zijn en de dingen beter te begrijpen. In dit onderzoek bouw ik voort op deze meerstemmige traditie, met diens verscheidene versies en herzieningen in het feminisme, in *black-*, *queer-* en *disability studies*, in de fenomenologie, het existentialisme, in autotheorie, essayisme, enzovoorts. Dit onderzoek is tweeledig. Enerzijds heb ik geprobeerd om in de filosofie door te dringen, zonder daarbij zelf filosoof te worden. Als schrijver heb ik gepoogd om de filosofie anders te doen laten “klinken”; er een ander geluid aan te geven dat wellicht ook gehoord wordt door lezers buiten de filosofie. Ik heb dit gedaan door in dit onderzoek het binnen de filosofie doorgaans onderdrukt element van de stem hoorbaar te maken: een stem die spreekt, vanuit het leven. Deze stem vormt de verteller van een andere denkstijl die haar klank aan de poëzie, de literatuur en andere prozavormen zoals de *memoire* ontleent. Deze stem heeft zowel wetenschappelijke als literaire gesprekspartners en intenties. Het gelooft in filosofie als een actieve verbeelding; eerder als een praktijk dan een theorie waarin, in de woorden van Toni Morrison, “de drang bestaat tot het creëren van een samenleving bestaande uit mensen die menselijke beslissingen kunnen nemen” (2019, 42) – iets dat, zo ben ik me in de loop van de jaren van deze studie en ziekte bewust geworden, niet per se en niet alleen kan steunen op rationele beslissingen. Anderzijds, en misschien wel als gevolg hiervan, is dit schrijven ook een fenomenologie en *memoire* geworden van het “doen” van filosofie tijdens ziekte, wanneer het leven uiterst onstabiel is.

Ik begon dit onderzoek, daar waar ik mijn beloften niet langer kon nakomen; waar ik, in Nietzscheaanse termen, niet langer kon beloven om onvoorwaardelijk van de filosofie te blijven houden (noch om haar te zullen haten). In deze verzameling teksten kijk ik naar de intimiteit van ziekte en het lichaam als saboterende factoren voor de beoefening van wetenschap. Parallel aan dit onderzoek werd bij mij een zeldzame ongeneeslijke auto-immuunziekte vastgesteld, die mij dwong mij op overlijden voor te bereiden, of op een longtransplantatie. Dat laatste gebeurde in 2017. Vanuit de veronderstelde buitenwereld van mijn vrije tijd en privéleven; gedurende mijn ziekteverlof; weg van mijn kantoor, heb ik geprobeerd om de stijl van het filosofische denken te deconstrueren – een discours dat zich,

binnen de onuitgesproken regels en grenzen van de academische tradities, als een wetenschap gedraagt. Dit terwijl ik tegelijkertijd een noodzakelijk, praktisch onderzoek naar mijn eigen leven en dood aanging.

Stilstaand bij de eeuwenoude existentiële vragen binnen de filosofie – Hoe te leven? Hoe te sterven? – en in dialoog met, in de eerste plaats, het werk van Jacques Derrida, heb ik gepoogd om de spanning te beschrijven die ontstaat wanneer deze algemene universele vragen, door ziekte specifiek worden en er persoonlijk toe gaan doen. Deze vragen zijn niet langer puur theoretisch van aard. Hoe moet *ik* leven? Hoe moet *ik* sterven? Hoe kan ik filosofisch onderzoek blijven doen terwijl ik ziek ben, wanneer het lichaam op de voorgrond treedt en vraagt om voortdurende praktische zorg? Ziekte wordt meestal gezien als een beperking. Maar het opent ook het vermogen tot observatie van aspecten die bij goede gezondheid transparant functioneren en als zodanig afwezig blijven binnen de bewuste ervaring.

Dit werk bevat een aantal geesten of spoken. Hoewel het spook in de populaire cultuur meestal wordt voorgesteld als een figuur zonder lichaam, betoog ik in dit onderzoek en door middel van mijn schrijven, dat juist het lichaam, in diens repressie, als een spook in het academisch schrijven rondwaart. Het zieke lichaam maakt dit voelbaar, het maakt lichamelijk en wezenlijk wat normaliter buiten beeld blijft binnen de praktijk van het wetenschappelijk onderzoek. Als een spectrale kracht weet het vragen op te roepen over autoriteit en auteurschap, narrativiteit en vertelling, subject-object dynamiek, en de relatie tussen objectiviteit en subjectiviteit – zaken die in het academisch schrijven doorgaans gemakshalve worden genegeerd. Door het combineren van elementen uit proza en fictie met beschrijvingen in de fenomenologische traditie, wijk ik af van de normen en conventies van het filosofische discours en maak ik een spookachtige interventie in de filosofie, vanuit haar spectrale marges, vanuit mijn ziekbed. Als zodanig bevraag ik met dit onderzoek wat denken als praktijk en ervaring belichaamt, en onder welke voorwaarden het mogelijk wordt gemaakt. Dit onderzoek pleit voor de aanwezigheid van literatuur en poëzie in en als filosofisch denken – als een alternatieve methode om ons met vragen over het leven (en de dood) bezig te houden, maar altijd vanuit de geleefde ervaring in plaats van als object(en) van kennis.

In een poging om dit argument performatief tot uitdrukking te doen brengen en het schrijven het werk te laten doen, vormt dit onderzoek ook een verzameling van teksten die weigeren gereduceerd te worden tot een samenvatting. Toch zal ik hier proberen enige houvast te bieden. Het eerste inleidende deel van deze tekst bestaat uit een voorzichtig aftasten van het veld in kwestie – het vaststellen van de parameters door middel van de open vraagstelling. Deel 1, *Learning to Live (Leren leven)*, gaat dieper in op een fundamentele vraag in de praktijk van de culturele analyse, hier toegespitst op de filosofie: Wie spreekt er als er over filosofie gesproken wordt? Wie is geoorloofd deze “waarheid” te spreken, of diens mening te geven? Wiens stemmen worden gehoord en wiens stemmen blijven ongehoord? In Deel 2, *Learning to Die (Leren sterven)*, probeer ik onderscheid te maken tussen de dood in het leven en de dood in theorie, door beide fenomenen en de effecten ervan te analyseren in teksten van Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes en Edgar Allan Poe. Deel 3, *There is no is (Er is geen is)*, keert terug naar het aanvankelijke onderwerp van dit onderzoeksproject: een omgekeerde fantoomarm; mijn daaropvolgende fascinatie voor fantoomledematen; en fictie als een speculatieve verkenning en experimenteel hulpmiddel bij het onderzoeken van medische kwesties en condities, zoals geïllustreerd in en door een kort verhaal van Silas Weir Mitchell, een neuroloog uit Philadelphia uit de tijd van de Amerikaanse Burgeroorlog, (“The Case of George Dedlow,” 1866). Tenslotte heb ik in Deel 4 mijn eigen vorm van experimenteel

schrijven toegepast om een vormloze abstractie te laten verschijnen, een spook waarmee ik dagelijks leef; mijn longdonor die “bestaat” omdat iemand – een lichaam, een persoon – er niet meer is. Deze aporie, zo hoop ik aan te tonen, kan alleen worden beschreven in en door middel van fictie, als een vorm van schrijven die doet verbeelden in plaats van definiëren, en die zich openstelt voor het leven in plaats van deze in concepten probeert te vatten, en daarmee te begrenzen. Mijn conclusie, als die er al is, is dan ook fictie, als een uitnodiging tot een alternatieve denkstijl. Ik eindig dus met *On Wards*, een experimenteel werk van autobiografische fictie over de ervaring van overleving en overleven, dankzij orgaandonatie.