

A Propos de Marseille - a Walking Letter for the Bureau des Guides.

Week 3:[Letter – walk 3.Bureau des Guides .pdf](#)

“Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship... [and] sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.... Yet it is hardly possible to take up one’s residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped. It is toward an elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them, that I dedicate this inquiry.” (Susan Sontag 2002: 3)



I start with the proviso; that as artist [Brian Lobel](#) pointed out to me so candidly the night before London lockdown (UK March 23) one cannot begin to make art, good art, anything significant in a time of change; art in a crisis (too hysterical), artworks with upheaval (too literal), theatrical performance (too excruciating and miss directed). One must wait until the dust settles before it is prudent or even aesthetic to respond. As the author of the recently published Cancer and Theatre, I am grateful to Brian for waylaying me and pointing me in other directions, just as the Bureau des Guides have been my spirit guide, while forging the inspirallondon trail back in London.

But I am impatient and I cannot wait for this distance of time. In this state of exception – with our dual citizenship – I think of you in Marseille and all the pathways taken there by you; making your other ways in that slice piece of the world. When it comes to swimming upstream, against received opinion, I(we) am not one to wait patiently. Was patience always such a virtue? We may well walk it off, impatiently, together, this spell: as “Citizens of that

other place.” So, not to be too foolhardy – headlong in joining the twittering cognoscenti – I have this confession to start with: that in these so-called strange locked-down days, I haven’t felt more lucky to be alive, and more in tune with life, even as the other real world/s seems to suffer (but that is another detour for another tale).

This walk I take for you now, is a riddle then - a spell - one filled with charm and the beauty of paradox, with no rhyme or reason but the desire to walk, to speak, to experience, breath. So too, I hope it is not a falsehood to say, that it is written with the fever of life, in all its fluid and contradictory pathways – for lockdown has meant enforced reflection – micro-experiences and attention to those details of life we so easily and casually pass by in our rushing, breathless urge for productivity. It is walked, and signed, with a poet’s urgency, signifying something and nothing, plunging into others places, in fragmentary dream like form. For:

“One of the greatest events of 20th C literature has been the evolution of a particular kind of prose: impatient, ardent, elliptical prose, often in the first person, often using discontinuous or broken forms...” (19)

The dream self or poetic self that emerges in the reverie of night walking, daydreaming, wandering and in unexpected raptures, wondering, that way lays – that asks you insistently to listen, sing, speak. ‘A poet’s prose is the autobiography of ardour. All of Tsvetayeva’s work is an argument for rapture... as [she] Tsvetayeva points out, ‘no one has ever stepped twice into the same river. But did anyone ever step twice into the same book?’ (Susan Sontag from Introduction to Collected Writings of Marina Tsvetayeva 1983: 19-21):



Bearly Trading - ceased trading since we last passed here. (Segment 20 Inspirallondon Trail)



Following well signed routes – the lost rivers of lost London:

I start here on segment 20 of the inspirallondon trail. Some of you will know of the places I speak, will have heard tell of them, perhaps even lived with them, but never experienced them in the light of lockdown.

Honor Oak, Crofton Park, Ladywell Fields, Catford Bridge, along Ravensbourne toward Lewisham and Deptford Creek, turning back along Brookmill Park to Brockley Cross and over the hill to Nunhead.

So, with an urgency and obsessiveness I go out at night and at dusk, to walk those parts of the inspirallondon trail that I can join together, finding signed routes to suture the deserted streets; to weave in and out and across, threading ways through that sensory city that is always reignited, infused with Spring. It is a realisation too, that the [Ravensbourne](#) river

flows down toward the Thames at Deptford Creek joining Segment 34 to 22 to 11 (skirting Segment 6), combining a looped walk with my current artistic research for HydraCity¹.

This so-called lost river rises at Caesar's Well in Keston just shy of Downe (near Charles Darwin's House), four miles south of Bromley town centre and then flows through Lewisham and Greenwich to the River Thames at Deptford “where its 1/2 mile muddy tidal reach is known as Deptford Creek.” ([Paul Talling](#)). The first part of this pathway I will follow at night in the cold air, the second at dusk, in the crepuscular Northern light which lingers, the third part is but a dreamscape – nightday feverishly Half Human/Half Bike – made from hours of daylight wanderings retraced. This [WaterLink Way](#) walk – bound by watery names – buried, the river beneath as concealed excess effluent chutes, now that the mills have rotted away or been dismantled for luxury apartments.

You have a feeling, a buried topography under foot, that the river delta still exists somewhere beneath us and is still shifting, leaking and oozing, liquefying the sediments on which the Shard and Gherkin and the Canary Wharf float. Now out in Doggerland, the gravelly swirling mounds spits and spurs, that lie beneath the Thames’ muddy estuary, and as it stretches out into the North Sea, making up the channels and trenches that now crisscross the submerged land bridge to Europe. Flowing out I will follow the Waterlink Way, near the source of the river by Ravensbourne Station and up to Lewisham – with detours along the [River Pool](#); to follow this well-trodden path, but at night – a pathway undermined and underpinned by these **subterranean** tributaries, Pool, Quaggy, Mill Brook, Ravensbourne, Creek, Beck and Stream.



The River Ravensbourne running towards Lewisham University Hospital. (5.04.2020)

“In June 2009, London Mayor [Boris Johnson](#) fell into the River Pool whilst promoting volunteering to clean up the waterway”.

This part of the Waterlink Way is pure Johnson, a semi-manicured curving stream laid out as a vista – serving a functionless spectacle - as you step out from the exit of Ladywell Station, a fantasy stream. The curve only serves as a long water pool when the rain comes, as the hemmed in concealed concrete culvert that carries the old river still runs along and outside of the Park. Buried in shade and concealed beneath mature trees it runs up from University Hospital Lewisham. It is very peaceful here in the hospital, I look into the curtained windows and can detect no movement behind the windows.



Now in a less well-kept part of the Parkway you reach a metal spiral staircase – a squat double helix stretched apart, one part looms over you, the other descends back across the void. It serves not cross the river but to straddle a main railway line. I cross as two train pass underneath. The pathway opens out into Ladywell Fields. For an instant, you can imagine you are really out in the countryside, meadow land. I stop, taking out the recording device I have in my coat pocket. It is without its spongy wind baffle. I improvise by placing my coronavirus dust mask over the mesh mic. It rustles on the microphone, registering maximum input, remote, moving. There is a kind of silence in the peace surrounding me: the river, a gently tinkling, is fringed with scrubby trees and small bushy shrubs, an unkempt undergrowth rustling with songbirds and invertebrates.

But it is the noisy garish parakeets* that prompts me to press record – dusk chorus – a cinema for the ear “cinema pour L’oreille”. The squawking of these large parrot-like birds, foreign heralds for a native London chorus – space and time concentrated in an evocation of a certain crepuscular atmosphere: with a few precise sounds – the cooing of a pigeon from under the

railway arch – foreground, two blackbirds preparing together Spring rituals, the shuddering of wings, the branches flexing, in the distance, coots and ducks, their splashing calls. A bucolic spring evening, and not an aeroplane in the sky.

*‘...parakeets can be a reservoir of pathogens. They carry some diseases found in livestock, although there is no evidence that they pass on to them... pet parakeets do sometimes transmit a flu-like infection called psittacosis to people; an outbreak in France in 1930 apparently caused some owners to release their birds into the wild, which has been proposed as the origin of the European population.’ (Graham Lawton, *New Scientist* 11 April 2020: 44)

In the GR2013 TopoGuide [Julie de Muer](#) invites us to listen to soundscape, to walk blind, to fish for sound (166-167). It is an invitation to all, to find their own landscapes, through another sense other than through over-dominant sight. What pleasure do we hear in the soundscape we are making – what makes this soundscape unique – that each one of us with a different ear, varying acuteness, constructing our own score; what makes it also participatory, a shared experience, that all of us are made aware of our ability to listen and recreate. It allows us to see and perform the world we thought we knew, in a new light. As if surfacing and resurfacing in and out of the subterranean flow we enter different registers of experience.



Like a delicate liverwort fern, growing out of the underground passage at New Beckenham Station. (10.04.2020)

Subterranean mapping:

The web of rivers that make up the tributaries of the Thames lie almost forgotten in the grand spectacle of London – its emblematic image, a serpentine buckling – but what feeds its insatiable thirst, its milky surge but this web of waterways. Often, they are only a rushing of water heard through hidden grates or manhole covers, dislodged sound, water running beneath our feet from drains, and pipes, and culverts, sewage overflows and flood ducts. And

then it appears out of the darkness, cool and fresh. Squatting by the river I plunge my hands into the cool water, what kind of organism clings to my skin now, overwhelming my defences:

‘The military metaphor in medicine first came into wide use in the 1880s, with the identification of bacteria as agents of disease. Bacteria were said to ‘invade’ or ‘infiltrate’. But talk of siege and war to describe disease now has, with cancer, a striking literalness and authority... In cancer, non-intelligent (‘primitive,’ ‘embryonic,’ ‘atavistic’) cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the nonyou. Immunologists class the body’s cancer cells as ‘nonself’... As Tuberculosis was the disease of the sick self, cancer is the disease of the Other. Cancer proceeds by a science-fiction scenario: an invasion of ‘alien’ or ‘mutant’ cells, stronger than normal cells (invasion of the Body Snatchers, The incredible Shrinking Man, The blob, The Thing). ...And Reich’s image of death in the air – of deadly’ (SS 67-68)

In lockdown, we have been asked to confront our fear of death, and lethewards the rivers flows into this underworld where everyone is suspect, everyone contagious. And yet we can slip below the surface, in a fluid wandering, and reappear somewhere entirely new – beside the Quaggy? The bubbling brook, the frothing stream, the tinkling beck, sweet waters – river ways cleaned up as pleasure ways, to be rebranded. But what of their utility for the other city dwellers, our mammalian compatriots, for the amphibians and invisible invertebrates? Being waylaid unexpectedly by this correspondence of streams and flows - hydraphonics, hydreography (A blend of water choreography, social interactions, and sound searching) - sometime soothing, sometime stinging, sometime corrosive, as water laced with acidic mineral. In the background, the intermittent wail of sirens.

I swivel on my hips holding the microphone, a woman who had earlier passed me without a side-glance, returning from her circuit exercise, smiling, asks what are you doing? You recording this?” A gesture – a silent reply. I cannot speak, to interrupt the soundscape, sacrilege.



Miniature gardens on the passageway, growing from the concrete.

In a city like Marseille, where everything seems more exaggerated, more subject to the fierce weather – either drought or torrent – perhaps everything appears less muffled. but that is only one flow, for there is a variety of climate and micro-climates there too, that belies the heat, the long summer drought, the burning wind. Hidden pockets of flashing green and of lush cool foliage – think of La source at Fontaine de Vaucluse – springs and water courses that hide beneath the tarmac and concrete. All these sounds and marvels have their own invaluable magic, spells as therapeutic effect, their irresistible charms.

Foraging Sound, Secret Remedies:

I am browsing through – Secrets & Remedies of the Herbs of Provence - Text by Claude Gardet, illustrations by Dominique Mansion (Editions Ouest-France 2009) and come unexpectedly upon this passage:

“With other labiate, rosemary was a component of the “Four thieves’ vinegar” which was very fashionable from the 17th century as an antiseptic. It was said to have been concocted by four highwaymen from Toulouse, or Marseilles, to protect themselves from the miasma of the plague so that they could rob the dying during epidemics. In the 18th century, the botanist Roques declared: “the infusion reanimates the action of the stomach... It can be recommended in cases of fatigue, palpitations, dizziness, sparse menstruation and at puberty.” (Entry on *Rosmarinus officinallis* – sea rose, troubadours’ herb, incense, Romania 22-23)



Allium triquetrum or three cornered leak flowering by the banks of the river. (10.04.2020)

Concoctions to soothe, conviviality – becomes real unexpected hospitality – that transforms generosity into the compost of community: fermenting, decomposing, concentrating nutrients for a new fertility and new growth; composed from the unheard, the forgotten, the overlooked, the repressed. All composted, to reanimate new genii and new hybrids.

Along the WaterLink I think of opportunities for collecting and foraging: chickweed, goosegrass, fat hen, achillea millefolium (Yarrow), nettle, thistle stems, sweet woodruff and this wonderful plant, *alium triquetum* (three Cornered leak), growing on the river bank like snowdrops.



Cankering protuberance - is this the legacy of Dutch Elm Disease?

I am returning along the tree-lined river, no longer recording the dusk chorus, I stop to look at an information plaque – ‘the unique Elm of Lewisham’ – this rare ‘Klemmer’ cultivar, stands leafless, a survival from the ravages of Dutch Elm disease. It is almost dark, surrounded only by shadows, I take a quick photograph of this rotting protuberance. What secret remedy allows it to flourish, surrounded by these casualties of City life: the cans, ampoules and syringes, the funghi and rot, the fatigue and infertility?



Whereby Water:

I am on the back hills of Beckenham Place Park. No grand entrance here just slipping off the main road into the unkempt wood fringe: the notice board announces *Naked City*. I stop at the crest of the hill to survey the wild meadow, now brown and dusty with trampling of winter mud, spines of yellow flowers interspersed with electric blue cornflower drift toward the horizon. It is dusk already, almost dark, I stand still, watching, listening:

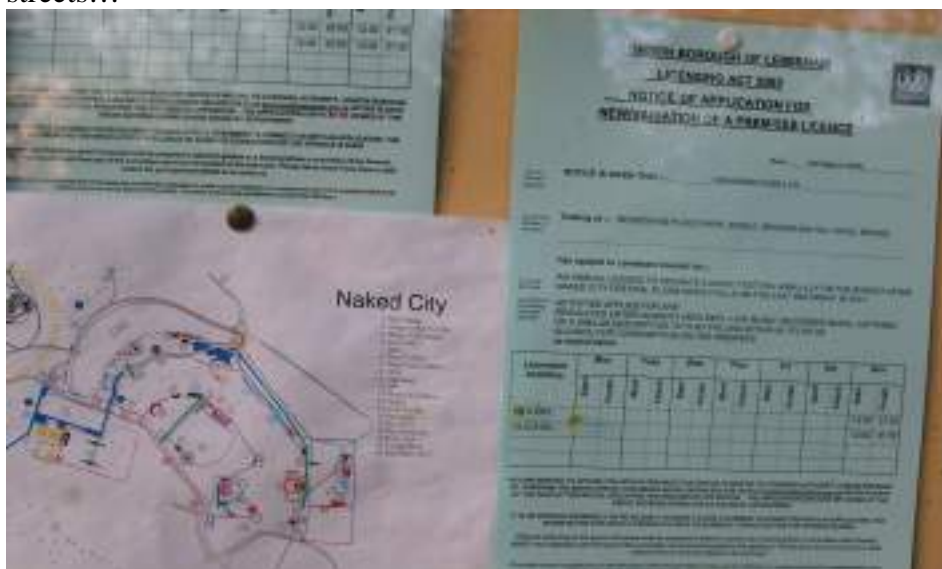
Ear-drums stretch their sensitive sail,
The widening gaze empties,
an unsinging choir of midnight birds
Swims across the silence.

I am as poor as nature,
As naked as the sky,
And my freedom is spectral
Like the voice of the midnight birds.

I see the unbreathing moon
And a sky whiter than a sheet;
Your strange and morbid world
I welcome, emptiness!
(Mandelstam: 1910)

Such an apt rendering of rapture, Mandelstam in James Greene's free translations are often close to reverie, capturing more of the lyrical than the hard concrete stone of the poet's Acmeism. These unusual English versions nevertheless transport us. We too have experienced these moments of mysterious inhalation, arrested by this *whereby* life. The beating of wings overhead, a silhouette of ravens borne across the sky, a moonlit walk sparkling with ice, these fragments of life, that arrest us in our tracks. We are pausing, our gaze reduced to spectral emptiness – we will have to listen, and sense in different ways if we are to swim out of the darkness....

And now that night has come we/I enter a realm of the phantasy – “whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic” (Butler, Judith: 200). Perhaps now, we, I, they dissolve into the dark streets...



‘...to locate strategies of subversive repetition [enabled by those constructions], to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.’(ibid. 201)

le facteur est un vrai marcheur de l’utopie/ the postie is a true utopian walker...

...the question becomes “...not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat...”(ibid. 202)

The city postie is a true urban explorer – they trace a similar path day in, day out – refining their routes in endless repetition. At this particular time, as in other periods of stress, they have become ‘essential’ workers, heroic messengers lubricating the many hidden transactions between citizen and state, passing from individual to individual *documents that never lie*, all the while binding us together through a sense of society, through civility and exchange. But how they **are**, a presence now? Perhaps the only human contact for many souls, however fleeting.

They didn’t bring me a letter today:
He forgot, or went on one of his trips;
Spring’s the trill of silver laughter on the lips,
I see the boats in the harbour sway.
They didn’t bring me a letter today...

(A. Ahkmatova 1911: 9)

Society locked down in ‘self-isolation’, the postie freely roams the streets delivering their parcels of happiness, angst and excess. They know the other ways, the back routes and cut-throughs, yet nothing is quite as it appears. For there are always exceptional circumstances, not least in negotiating the exasperated “etc.” – non-human others: guard dogs on chains, the occasional peacock, caged birds – canaries and reptiles, a bolshy cat, anything that is semi-domesticated, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting, ah the bouc emissaire:

Le facteur from *Figures de marcheurs periurbains* –une collection de Julie de Muer (Cercle des Marcheurs; 82-3)

<< Le facteur est un grand connoisseur de l’habitat periurbain...[elle/il] reve de cette ligne ligne qui nous relierait les uns aux autres dans la tres grande ville, car le facteur est un vrai marcheur de l’utopie.>>

And then there are the ballads and the tall-tales of the Bureaux Guides, Massilian troubadours (slightly rougher than the classical troubadour/guide, they bring with them a menace of black humour, sprigs of absurdity, the possible from the impossible). Before the rot set in... how they could sing and mesmerise an audience.



On the first, second and third nights I have to return on the last leg of the walk by the same back road, along Rokeby Road toward Brockley Cross, each time passing this strange spectacle, repeated colourings, from blue, mauve, green to a vivid blood red orange. Without the soothing presence of the *facteur*, how the mansion bleeds, now in the deserted silent street.

A band apart (part 2) - a Propos de Nice

It would be difficult to relate the exuberance of their youthful companionship. How these three were creative mentors, co-conspirators, collaborators, a *band a part* – these young lyric poets – full of the ecstasy of their youth: Anna Ahkmatova and Marina Tsvetayeva, Osip Mandelstam, swopping their cities with one another in the brevity of a Russian Spring - St Petersburg for Moscow, Petrograd for Paris, Berlin for Florence, Yerevan for Voronezh, then left out, entirely marginalised, officially forgotten. And now this viral shock, reminds me of them and how I am missing Marseille – barely known but through the brevity of osmosis, of

correspondences and practices, through offerings of a shared sensibility, I feel close to you all. In that perseverance to principle, to ways of seeing, doing and thinking together, that are enriching and that nourish one for a life time, even in the hardest of times.

Later, on returning home I stumble upon [Coeur fidele](#) – to remain faithful to principles and reject the straight, easy pathway. This early Poetic Realist film was not a success with the public.

Its initial run in Paris in 1923 was terminated after three days (because of disputes among the audience). A re-release in the following year saw a steady decline in the size of its audience. Among critics and other film-makers however, *Cœur fidèle* attracted considerable attention continues to do so. [Georges Sadoul](#) said that the film "was a sensation, and was to remain [Epstein's] best film"; "it touches us still by its fidelity to everyday life". [René Clair](#) wrote enthusiastically about it: " *Cœur fidèle* must be seen if you want to understand the resources of the cinema today. ...For a film to be worthy of the cinema, that's already a very welcome miracle! *Cœur fidèle* is worthy of it on more than one account." (Wikipedia)

Musing and amusing associations, enjoying the sheer multiplicity of sensations that the eye conjures: They/we are walking in the afternoon heat to escape the breathless mal/a(i)ria that overwhelms Marseille (that long extended scene on the fairground rides, pure Vertov, reminders of Vigo's *a Propos de Nice*) - among the concentrated odours, inscribed with fidelity, on the chosen pathway.

Voronezh (to O.M)

The town stands completely icebound.
 Trees, walls, snow as though under glass.
 Timidly I walk over the crystals.
 Uncertain run of the patterned sledge.
 Crows over St Peter's in Voronezh,
 And poplars and the bright green vault of sky,
 Eroded, turbid in the sunny dust,
 And the slopes wave with Kulikovo battle
 The powerful victorious earth.
 The poplars like clashing glasses
 Suddenly ring out over us more powerfully,
 Like one thousand guests drinking
 To our triumph at a wedding feast.

Under the roof of the exiled poet
 Fear and the Muse stand duty, each in turn.
 And the night moves quickly
 That knows not of the coming dawn.
 (Anna Ahkmatova - 1936/trans. Richard McKane: 17)

Hear the line echoing - in life - we are all in a way only guests. In the ancient woods, as I climb back toward the pathway, looking upwards a dead tree silhouetted against the moonlit sun-night rears up. Blasted but intricate. I stop and take its beautiful portrait.



Komarovo Jottings (O, Muse of Crying... M. Tsvetayeva)

And here I retired from everything,
from every earthly blessing.
The forest tree snag root
Became the spirit - the preserver of this place

In life, we are all in a way guests,
Living is only a habit,
And I hear on the aerial roads

Two voices calling each other.

Two? And still by an Eastern wall,
in the undergrowth of the raspberries,
the dark fresh branch of an elderberry tree...
This is a letter from Marina.*

Anna Ahkmatova - 1961 November in Gavan' Leningrad (in delirium)

*Marina Tsvetayeva, wrote a poem dated 11th September 1931 – 21st May 1935 titled
“Buzina”: Elderberry.

Elderberry fills the scene! /Elderberry, green and green. /Greener than mould on the vat!
/Summer's birth, greener than that! /Elderberry, till the light dies! /Elderberry, green as my
eyes. Buzina, Buzina, the concreteness of the sounds, so different from the English elder
berry, French sureau, but so redolent of something beautiful and ominous, in its repeated
musicality. Each one is different, each is able to see differently, each is unique...but how
they sing, speaking to one another in an instantaneous – universal secret language – habits
torn asunder. They walk cloaked in novel apparel... across time, a duration of patience,
where we are all only guests.



Invited to the Mad Hatter's Tea Party in the shop window A234 Penge, with the sign - 'We Are all Mad!' (10.04.2020)

Poetic Realism

Everything goes against the grain or perhaps more aptly finds the true grain - as in a sheet of handmade paper with its hidden fibres long ways - that allows a perfect fold this way but not

along the other orientation. Folding in and folding out, focusing in and out, internalising and externalising, in the city, walking, there is this constant choreography of movement – between apperception and being intensely engaged in the interior – in the intensity of the overlooked we stop to observe, to smell, to touch something that mutual stare of recognition – synesthesia overtakes us. And because this is a metaphoric text, guided by the poetic principle - I allow that *recognition* that Mandelstam claims as revelation even, in recognition, as if the scales on ones' eyes were finally peeled back to reveal our sensing bodies, that concealed interior:

“Everything happened a long time ago, everything will repeat itself, again,

And only the moment of recognition for us is sweet.”

(Mandelstam - End third canto of *Tristia* 1918: 68)

A form of sensing – a poetic realism – why not? Steal and repurpose this, as a re-cognition of the realistic. Being realistic about what is, and what things might be, behind the surface. Using the metaphoric, the atmospheric, the esoteric as guiding principles.

Last Autumn, we stood at this spot, right here, and imagined returning together to swim outside in the newly constructed swimming lake. Was it icy then? The fashionably free – the pleasures of swimming at night, skinny dipping, or in those stolen moments dipping your feet into water as clear and electric as mountain torrents. But this is not an image worth painting now. The artificial pond fringed with long swaying grasses, now fenced off with an eight feet high metal barrier, is no longer so enticing. Quel damage. Instead I hold my head up and look beyond with this prescription of synesthesia:

With its extremely subtle acidic reactions, *the eye, an organ possessed of hearing*, which intensifies the value of the image, which multiplies its accomplishments by its sensual insults (which it fusses over like a child with a new toy), raises the picture to its own level; for painting is much more a matter of internal secretion than of apperception, that is, of external perceiving. (Mandelstam from *Journey to Armenia*, 1988: 211-13)

I hear something hidden here, in my attempt to paint this scene with a camera lens – Beckenham Place Park bandstand – and the memory is all sound, not young David Bowie; but the cawing of magpies, ravens and crows rustling in the branches and always in the distance, like a long hot summer evening, the cooing of wood pigeons as we gently swim out into the dark centre of the lake; the rocky beach recedes, people sunbathing beside their children playing, their chatter dissolving into the froth and splash, limpid watery resistance. Now revealed a ring of soft blue trees tumbling back down to the dark water – surrounding you – you hear only the sound of your own breathing and arms gently turning, oscillating, held up by a strange wilful buoyancy, we float.



Homeopathic doses – sympathetic magic... for reading aloud -“Recipes for hospitality”

Récits d'hospitalité – the radical hospitality of the Hotel du Nord – no longer just a place to stay but recipes for participating in the creation of alternative sustainable structures following the principles of The Faro Convention – with its **productions locales de fabriques, d’artisans, de créateurs** - The Faro Convention Network is made up of a growing number of “heritage communities” participating in a dynamic pan-European network, offering extensive knowledge, expertise and tools, within a framework for constructive dialogue and cooperation.

OCTETS (Canto 6-9)

6.

The notched paw of maple
 Bathes in round corners,
 And one can paint pictures on walls
 From the colour flecks of butterflies.
 There are mosques that are alive,
 And now I have guessed it,
 Perhaps we are in Haghia Sophia
 With a numberless multitude of eyes.

7.

Schubert on the water and Mozart in the birds’ song,
 And Goethe, whistling on a twisting path,
 And Hamlet, thinking in hurried footsteps,
 Took the pulse of the crowd and trusted in the crowd.
 Perhaps the whisper was born before the lips,
 And leaves circled and fell when there was no wood,
 And those to whom we dedicate our experience
 Had acquired their features before that experience.

8.

In needle sharp plague goblets
 We drink the delusion of causes,
 we touch with hooks magnitudes
 Small as an easy death,
 Even where the spillikins had coupled together
 A child conserves his silence –
 The great universe sleeps in the cradle
 Of a little eternity. (May 1932-July 1935: 74-75)

Oh Osip, you gossiping Joseph – you admit it then – what a right Charlie! Not Numenism but nominative determinism?! Julie – ‘youthful, downy’ – of *Muer*, [oiseau, mammifère] to moult (British English), to molt (USA English) [of a serpent] to slough its skin, but also for a young boy, voice breaking. But I say *muet* – speechless/dumb – for all your sonorous dexterity, a cane in the hand to plant into the stony ground, listening to (La Canne a Sons: Le Cercle des Marcheurs: 167) *Me/main*; not then by my hand but with a slight Provencal accent - *me magne* – perhaps to get a move on, schnell, spinning like a city DJ; joined to Loic logically as *Magnant/Magent*, that is again to get a move on and cross the *Field* – with light steps - to that very core of generosity and hospitality - towards Christine Breton, [communal](#) thinking - to rest your head for a night only in a Hotel du Nord (dear lord not a Breton Hotel). There, on the north-west coast where they speak, and they are, an/other language.

Finally - I know now - it was all just Alexandrine, that caravan of thought fields but it sounds feelingly if read out loud.

Octet 9.
 And I walk out from space
 Into the overgrown garden of magnitudes,
 And pluck fleeting constancy
 And self-consciousness of causes.
 Infinity, I alone read
 Your herbal without anybody else,
 A wild, leafless book of healing,
 A huge-rooted book of riddles. (May 1932-July 1935: 74-75)



Sound – the first music in poetry – then the incantation of meanings rolls off the tongue urgently. Water from a spring, a perfect natural rustling tympanum, as a waterfall pours from a hidden earthy orifice - *sous la Cascade des Aygalades*. I was always thinking of the sea, not just to swim in it, to cool off but the strange sea grasses, the algae fronds that dance in the gentle tide and sometimes dancing in the wave whipped spume.

But evocation of beauty – other beauty – a proposition of taste, gout, without smell, a blind landscape – without touch, a still deadpan smile, feeling, the eros of walking – that is to love it, sometimes avidly, overwhelmed, otherwise tenderly, with careful pleasure, and sometimes forensically, as envious of the exquisite unique moment/place in the overlapping of senses that cannot be undone, as those rare but inspirational fragments of re-cognition. I rest my case... (that is a ridiculous Mandelstamism, too many verses, too many numbers, too much spirit) with concrete intoxication, do I care?

Himalayan Rose: the intoxication of place.

There is an extraordinary rambling rose in the back garden. It climbs the shed and trees with an alarming vigorousness – a hybrid cultivated from the [Rosa brunonii](#) – in early spring it is covered with clusters of fragrant white flowers that give off an intoxicating musky scent, more concentrated at dawn and dusk. This vigorous specimen is not only impressively scented, but also incredibly vicious, with its slender shoots armed with the most tenacious of barbs that tear at your flesh or clothes. In the last week, I have watched it unfurl and is now in full bloom, seated over five metres away, and it still sheds its sweet fragrance onto my skin. This display, brief and wild, over in less than three weeks, this grappling and mountaineering rose, a neo-native dog rose on acid, enrapturing intoxication:

Le **rosier musqué de l'Himalaya** (*Rosa brunonii*) est une espèce de [rosier](#), proche de [Rosa moschata](#), classée dans la [section des Synstylae](#), originaire d'[Afghanistan](#), du [Bhoutan](#), de [Chine](#) ([Sichuan](#), [Tibet](#), [Yunnan](#)), du [Myanmar](#), du [Népal](#), du nord de l'[Inde](#) et du [Pakistan](#). (Wikipedia)

It is said that no true wild precursor of the musk rose or climbing tea-rose have ever been found, “though it is recorded in cultivation as least as far back as the 16th Century, indeed being mentioned in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (1595/96). It is important in cultivation as a parent to several groups of cultivated roses, notably the [damask rose](#) and the [noisette group](#), and is valued for its scent’ (sic Wikipedia 14/04/2020)

Such specimens and woody shrubs, collected by colonial plant hunters now infiltrate our collective consciousness as part of that quintessentially English garden popularised by Vita Sackville-West, in a studied balance between a wild unkempt and the carefully propagated; roses intertwined with fruit trees, clambering amongst the branches, blossom, twig and flower interleaved as if in the wild.

It is probably true, not just a myth, that it was in the wood, in the packing-crates, and on the humid rootstock that other uninvited life was transported into the heart of Europe². Lifeforms like the insatiable *Serpula lacrymans* and its tendril mycelium that so infected the landed aristocracy of North Europe at the end of the 19th Century. But is that just a dream alibi for the collapse of thousands of English stately homes, some foreign invasion, blinding obvious visions, “dry rot”:

Titania: “Oberon what visions have I seen I think I was enamoured of an ass. How come these things came to pass?” (Le Songe d'une nuit d'été -Midsummer Night's Dream from libretto of Benjamin Britten's opera).



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This dangerous metaphor of dry rot, the disease that ravaged stately homes? How The Cherry Orchard transposed from the rich Russian steppe takes hold of the English Gentleman's imagination: 'Dry rot (*Serpula lacrymans*) is a wood-destroying fungus that is found in most parts of the world. Although it affects forest timbers, dry rot is best known for its ability to destroy timbers in ships and buildings.'³

From this popular garden university, filled with rot, I share this composted found poetry:

Of white, fluffy 'cottonwool' mycelium here under humid conditions –
 Tristes tropiques - 'Teardrops' develop on the growth,
 they glow with fruiting bodies that are soft, fleshy crepes,
 brackets with an orangey-ochrey surface,
 This surface that has wide open pores.

Silky grey mushroom, a coloured skin
 frequently tinged with patches of iridescent lilac and burnt yellow
 proliferating under less humid conditions.
 This 'skin' peeled like a mushroom, reveals
 additional remedies & measures, this masonry sterilisation,
 secret European societies... that contaminate the body
 infiltrates the mind and infects the senses.

(adapted from <https://www.safeguardeurope.com/applications/dry-rot>)

If these were only fluid conclusions, tinged with *on the ground* research into London's waterways then waylaid by outdoor thoughts – they herald the emergence/emergency of a truly European Open University⁴.



Extracted from Control of the Dry Rot Fungus in the Built Environment

‘Conclusions: *S.lacrymans* remains a fascinating and enigmatic organism. Its origins are still obscure: for example was it once widely distributed around the world with current climatic changes forcing it to survive only in very restricted areas, or was its ‘natural’ distribution always limited, and have man’s activities resulted in its introduction to the built environment within Europe? In addition, why is the organism so successful in the built environment? Is this due to lack of natural competitors or simply that a damp, badly maintained building in, for example, northern Europe offers a substitute environment for the forest floor in the Himalayan foothills. As more isolates of *S.lacrymans* become available, and more sophisticated techniques are applied to the study of their genomes, the answers to these questions should become available. Current evidence supports an emergence of the organism from its Himalayan home via the timber trade between India and the UK/ Europe, but the case is by no means proven as yet.’

(From *The Domestic Dry Rot Fungus, Serpula lacrymans, its natural origins and biological control.* John W. Palfreyman Dry Rot Research Group, University of Abertay, Scotland)

Fluid Conclusions:

There is no use admitting much of what I saw and mused upon, as I wandered along the Ravensbourne River is flawed: fluid conclusions, detours, playful decentering and a/musing. Nevertheless, *we* work against the broad narrative... for the indescribable, the fleeting and the unreproducible moment – so brief in its coming and going – life proceeds without interpretation, leaves little trace – but what memories?

In Paris (Spring, Autumn, Winter)

Starlit houses, and sky below,
Earth dazed in the nearness.

The same secret longing though
In Paris, so vast and joyous.

The evening boulevards noisy,
The last ray of light dies,
Couples, paired round me,
Fierce lips, insolent eyes.

I'm alone. It's sweet to rest
My head on a chestnut tree.
As in far Moscow, my breast
Throbs to Rostand's poetry.

Paris at night, painful strangeness,
Dear the heart's ancient folly!
I'm going back to violets, sadness,
A portrait of someone kind to me.

There that gaze, pensive, a brother,
There that mild profile, on the wall.
Rostand, L'Aiglon that martyr,
And Sarah – in dream I find them all!

In Paris, so vast and joyous,
I dream of clouds and grass,
Laughter, shadows, ominous,
And the pain that will not pass. Marina Tsvetayeva - Paris, June 1909.

It is passing, we must cherish our sense, and most of all our senses:
'And it is in this light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.
What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.

...In place of a hermeneutics we need an *erotics* of art. (Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*: 13-14)





Postscript:

‘...hidden passions are now considered a source of illness. ‘He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence,’ Blake wrote in: one of his defiant Proverbs of Hell.’ (Susan Sontag, 2002: 46)

Repetition is not just rehearsal for an *other* future – it is performing the future – experimenting until it bursts forth with all its force and contingent truth. Revealing something of my passions is not to overflow unnecessarily but to act from the interior, out into the world, where nothing inside is not profoundly and consistently affected by, or overruled by that world: “There is only a taking up of tools where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there.” (Butler, Judith: 199). Tools of gesture, performativity, of the other lyric world of poetic realism – all these I share with you: gestures of attention and rediscovery that lead to renewal in other ways of doing/thinking apart, but together.

An enthusiasm or forensic attention to life between buildings – perhaps more between the life between occupants – less abstract and more experiential, outside. And not just in thinking how it is done – observing – but how should it, or could it be done by experimenting. In this

the politics and the aesthetics is less artistic and more theatrical – but that comes down to a struggle with everyday beauty – what is valued for its intrinsic beauty and what for its extraneous values of communion, discussion, in genuine attempts to share and make together. The sealed end-product of visual art is prised open in an exposition of process and by a love of open-ended performance.



This alarming image on a poster publicising 'outstanding primary school' in New Beckenham. (10.04.2020)

The theatrical – that suspect 'diminished' art form – somewhere between playing and pretending offers the best opportunity to work together, prepare, rehearse, perform and in so acting, improvise life from the opportunities, resources, materials and emotions present. And it is always emotion that wins out, in the affect machine of theatre. Collapsing these categories, and making the artificial just become *the real* is not an entirely predictable art but it has the advantage of offering an experiment that allows for fluidity and emotional flaws.

“Life between buildings offers an opportunity to be with others in a relaxed and understanding way... One is not necessarily with a specific person, but one is, nevertheless, with others... As opposed to be a passive observer of other people’s experiences ... in public space the individual himself is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating.

Low-intensity contact is also a situation from which other forms of contact can grow. It is a medium for the unpredictable, the spontaneous, the unplanned.” (Van Gehl: 17-19)

Encouraging the unpredictable, being aware of the unintended, the interruptive, the transformative... So as not to succumb to sloppy sentimental thinking, or reach out for fear as response, but to fight and resist, building from the experiences, the scars and the deep transformations, to re-engage with a world out of step with itself, I made this walk with you, Guides des Bureaux. The river now a steady stream, can rage and surge with stormy outbursts, overflowing boundaries and creating new gulleys and other pathways or it might

almost disappear to nothing, without rain to feed the flow. Yet walking to 'gether' we are changed for ever. I am sick of this diseased virtual, only the cantankerous real will do:

I know the truth! Renounce all others!
There's no need for anyone to fight.
For what? – Poets, generals, lovers?

Look: it's evening, look: almost night.
Ah, the wind drops, earth is wet with dew,
Ah, the snow will freeze the stars that move.

And soon, under the earth, we'll sleep too,
Who never would let each other sleep above.

3rd October 1915 (Marina Tsvetayeva)



Charlie Fox © images & text 17.04.2020

Susan Sontag Quotes:

‘Needless to say, the hypothesis that distress can affect immunological responsiveness is hardly the same as – or constitutes evidence for – the view that emotions cause diseases, much less for the belief that specific emotions can produce specific diseases...’ I’m mentally ill, the disease of the lungs is nothing but an overflowing of my mental disease,” Kafka wrote to Milena in 1920. (SS 55)

‘The notion that a disease can be explained only by a variety of causes is precisely characteristic of thinking about diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong.’ (SS 67)

¹ It rises at Caesar's Well in Keston just shy of Downe (near Darwin House), 4 miles south of Bromley town centre and then flows through Lewisham and Greenwich to the River Thames at Deptford “where its 1/2 mile muddy tidal reach is known as Deptford Creek.”

² ‘Sifting the truth from mythology becomes easier if we remember that dry rot is produced by a fungus that originated in logs on the forest floor – in the Himalayas, the Rocky Mountains or perhaps in central Europe... [they thrive on] because building materials provide a good source of calcium and iron.’ (In materials and skills for building conservation – ed Michael Forsyth 2008, Wiley and sons)

³ ‘It is important to identify whether timber decay has been caused by dry rot or another wood-destroying fungus such as one of the wet rots. This is because dry rot has the ability to travel through building materials other than timber, giving outbreaks the potential to spread quickly through a building. For this reason, additional measures (e.g. masonry sterilisation) often have to be taken when treating dry rot outbreaks over and above those necessary when dealing with outbreaks of other wood-rotting fungi.’

(<https://www.safeguardeurope.com/applications/dry-rot>)

⁴ « **Les chemins de l’eau** » par **Paul-Hervé Lavessière** - Sur le GR2013, des marches mensuelles seront ainsi proposées par [Nicolas Mémain](#) et le [collectif SAFI](#), et dans la métropole toulonnaise, par [Paul-Hervé Lavessière](#), en vue de la construction d’un Sentier Métropolitain du Grand Toulon. Pendant 5 ans, ces trois guides, vont élaborer, une petite université populaire d’écologie métropolitaine – une « mission de service public pour penser, marcher, transmettre ». **Les monographies des rivières** - Fleuves côtiers, canaux, bassins... les infrastructures bleues sont la base des infrastructures vertes, et donc des éléments structurants de la métropole. Elles permettent d’approfondir des milieux spécifiques, dans plusieurs communes et également d’apprécier divers modes d’aménagement et de gestion. Conférences sauvages - Écouter les histoires d’un ruisseau- **Série de points de vue pour entendre parler du territoire de l’eau**. *Voix d’eau est un cycle de conférences sous la Cascade des Aygalades. Au fil des rencontres, il propose une série de points de vue pour entendre parler du territoire de l’eau et plus particulièrement du devenir du* [Ruisseau des Aygalades](#).

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From V. The French (Journey to Armenia)

Now I stretched out my vision and sank my eye into the wide goblet of the sea, so that every mote and tear should come to the surface.

I stretched out my vision like a kid glove, stretched it onto a shoe tree, onto the blue neighbourhood of the sea...

Quickly, rapaciously, with feudal fury, I inspected the domains of my view.

One puts the eye like that into a wide goblet full to the brim so the mote will come out.

And I began to understand what the obligator nature of colour is – the excitement of sky blue and orange football shirts – and that colour is nothing other than a sense of the start of a race, a sense tinged by distance and locked into its size...

With its extremely subtle acidic reactions, the eye, an organ possessed of hearing, which intensifies the value of the image, which multiplies its accomplishments by its sensual insults (which it fusses over like a child with a new toy), raises the picture to its own level; for painting is much more a matter of internal secretion than of apperception, that is, of external perceiving. (Mandelstam 1988: 211-13)