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The Beach (A Fantasy)

Michael Taussig

Thus live waves—thus live we who will—more I shall not say.
—NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*

Prologue

The ultimate fantasy would be to write about a fantasy because as soon as you realize it's fantasy, it changes. But where does it go? What happens to it? Freud suggested fantasy was a montage of sight and sound drawn from prior experience so as to disguise that experience and repress memory of it. But if the fantasy increased in intensity beyond a certain point, it too would be repressed, and a physical symptom would take its place.¹ Might writing be just such a symptom, particularly in the form of the cut-up that meets Freud's montage head-on? "Cut ups? but of course. I have been a cut up for years. . . . I think of words as being alive like animals. They don't like to be kept in pages. Cut the pages and let the words out."²

This essay was written for the conference "Fantasy Spaces: The Power of Images in a Globalizing World," organized by the Research Center for Religion and Society of the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 27 August 1998.

1. See Sigmund Freud, letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 2 May 1897, in *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 239.

2. William Burroughs, "The Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith," *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Aug. 1964, p. 682.

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The History of the World

The history of the world, says the American poet Charles Olson in his little book on Moby-Dick, *Call Me Ishmael*, published in 1947, could be summed up by three oceans; the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and now the Pacific. (Homer, Dante, and now Melville.)³

The Disappearance of the Sea & Its Fantasmatic Recovery

Yet how unthinkable Olson's proposition has become. Not because of the ordering but because of its substance. For now so few of us have any direct experience of ships or the sea. Today we relate to the ocean and its histories through the commodities brought in the hulls of ships. Joseph Conrad's writing is not a reflection of the sea and a worldwide experience of it so much as an anxious premonition of its disappearance as a key element of nature from human experience. Conrad retired from the sea shortly after receiving his master's certificate, just when sail gave way to steam, which is when radical experiments in modernism were born. This displacement of everyday experience by commodities caught Karl Marx's eye, too, in his notion of fetishism. The point of this concept was not, as many writers on this concept seem to think, that a more significant reality (for example, the process of material production) is occluded and people (other than intellectuals and party leaders) become blinded to reality. Rather, that reality is displaced and thereby, as with the labor of the negative underlying fantasy, propels strange flights of imagination and even stranger ways of juxtaposing time and place.

Today the old ports have gone. Concrete container terminals have replaced them, and the wharves have moved to industrial sites far from the people who go as tourists to the gentrified old ports where sailing ships are resurrected as museums. Yet as never before, so we are told, is the whole world unified into the One Big Market, which must mean immense amount of shipping and human dependence on sea-borne freight: the iron ore from Australia and Canada, the apples we eat from Tasma-

3. See Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (San Francisco, 1947).

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nia, the cheap steel from China, sun-ripened tomatoes from Israel, transistor radios and teevees from Taiwan, cars and computers from the U.S. and Japan, the blue jeans from Medellin, oil from Venezuela and Kuwait, and so on. The conduct of life today is completely and utterly dependent on the sea and the ships it bears, yet nothing is more invisible.⁴ How different it must have been until well into the twentieth century when ships and sailors filled the horizon of Western experience from Ulysses onward! Is this what Joyce sensed would happen when he backtracked on Melville and demythologized Ulysses, forgot the great white male and instead had his Ulysses be a fumbling everyman, a Dublin Jew named Bloom, barely making it through life, masturbating on the beach? “She is our great sweet mother,” declares “stately, plump Buck Mulligan,” “the snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea.” And he turns abruptly to Stephen Dedalus. “‘The aunt thinks you killed your mother.’” “‘Someone killed her,’ Stephen said gloomily.”⁵

Sea provides the medium of travel for Homer in his starkly out-of-body travelogue, while for Joyce it establishes the setting for inner travel as inner speech. The first section of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a seascape of mind flowing in and out of Western history in which the movement of the sea onto the shore, immense, restless, and mesmerizing, is the movement of the unconscious mind sifting images, just as the author sifts styles in the mad inheritance we call a language, a language on the edge of empire. We overhear young Stephen Dedalus talking to himself as he walks the beach. It could just as well be language talking to itself, “shellcocoacoloored.” Forgive my playing with his playing with its playing as we are all swept up for the “flood is following me. . . . These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here. And there, the stoneheaps of dead builders. . . . A school of turlehide whales stranded in hot noon, spouting, hobbling in the shallows. Then from the starving cagework city a horde of jerkined dwarfs, my people, with flayer’s knives, running, scaling, hacking in green blubbery whalemeat. . . . Do you see the tide flowing quickly in on all sides, sheeting the lows of sands quickly, shellcocoacoloured?” (*U*, pp. 55, 56, 57).

Young Dedalus’s eye wanders to a dog playing at the water’s edge. (Such a site for play, this edge.) Now we see the dog. Through Stephen.

4. This theme is evoked and explored with originality and great insight by Allan Sekula in his *Fish Story*, a catalogue of 204 pages of text and photographs to accompany a travelling exhibit (Dusseldorf, 1995). Reminiscent of John Berger’s work with photographs by Jean Mohr, Sekula writes a terse, telegraphic, echoing prose alongside his photographs that, through a wide-ranging Marxist sensibility, knits together political with art historical interests concerning the awesome mix of business and romance that is the sea and the ships that cross it. (Thanks to Tom Mitchell and Antony Gormley for reminding me of this work, and Michael Watts for giving me a copy of it as the deluge descended over San Francisco.)

5. James Joyce, *Ulysses: Annotated Student’s Edition*, ed. Declan Kiberd (Harmondsworth, 1992), pp. 3, 1, 4; hereafter abbreviated *U*.

We no longer listen to Stephen talking to himself via the sea, but to the dog via Stephen. The animal's consciousness has displaced the historical consciousness, just as the historical was displaced by the primeval, which is to say by a dying sea and a mother's green bile torn from a rotting liver. The dog is "looking for something lost in a past life" (*U*, p. 57). Sniffing at the sand. "His snout lifted barked at the wavenoise, herds of seamorse. They serpented towards his feet, curling, unfurling many crests, every ninth breaking, plashing, from far, from farther out, waves and waves" (*U*, p. 58). This is language moving into the sea as our very bodies might, ending up newly buoyant and happy somewhere between its watery moving energy and the human facility with mimesis. "Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeis, oos. . . . In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels" (*U*, p. 62). Beyond representation. Bounded in barrels. And at the very end of this first section of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the end before we meet Bloom bustling in his kitchen frying kidneys for his ladylove upstairs, young Dedalus sees Joseph Conrad's ship disappearing into the slipstream of time behind our very backs. "He turned his face over a shoulder, rere regardant. Moving through the air high spars of a threemaster, her sails brailed up on the crosstrees, homing, upstream, silently moving, a silent ship" (*U*, p. 64). Joyce has suddenly changed tack here at the end "rere regardant" with this fulsomely self-conscious lyrical moment coming out of nowhere, going home, this all too silent ship.

As the ships sailed home into oblivion across the "snotgreen sea" sometime after World War Two, so the beach became increasingly popular in the affluent West, and the sea underwent a phantasmatic recovery by virtue of a new structure of feeling: Billy Butlin's camps by the sea; topless Swedes and Germans basking by the water's edge, leaving the Spaniards on the *costa del sol* aghast, tightening their kerchiefs; Greek peasants in the Peloponnese selling off their coastal plots to the floods of Germans as the peasants never built on the exposed seaside of the slopes on account of pirates. But all this has changed. That sort of piracy belongs to the past, and the beach is where just about everyone wants to be.

In Sydney, where I was born in 1940 and grew up, the coastal beaches and harbor waterfront were with few exceptions where the working class lived or where they would go on Sundays to surf or, in the case of the harbor, drink Toohey's lager and gamble on the sixteen- and eighteen-footers—beamy racing dinghies with huge amounts of sail and crew. The ferries hired to follow the race would heel over almost as much as the racing dinghies as the inebriated followers would anxiously cram the rail. There were corrugated iron shacks in the deep bays like Mosman and Castlecrag in which poor people lived close to the oysters clinging to the orange-faced sandstone that like a curtain hung at the water's edge. Soft she-oaks whispered sad tunes to the receding tide, and their delicate

needles felt soft underfoot. Today they are not called she-oaks but casuarinas. The name change says it all, a certain critical distancing has occurred, a more precise, even scientific nomenclature contains the nature we love, and such suburbs, like the previously working-class, waterside area of Balmain, for example, are among the wealthiest in Australia. Famous city beaches such as Bondi and Coogee, with their hideous brick homes and squat apartment buildings, which were solidly working-class areas, are now battlegrounds for people with money fighting for their place in the sun. They will do anything just short of murder to get their "harbor view" or be by the beach. Twenty years ago they wouldn't have given a shit.

Today it's the strangest thing to watch the ferries from the city disgorge their well-heeled passengers off the wharf at Long Nose Point at Balmain, for instance, as they come home from a tiring day in the law firm or stockbroker's office. Each passenger forms a quiet monument to the self, set into a noble tranquility by the gentle harbor crossing, God's newfound gift to the mentally spent. As they spring invigorated onto the shore of their new, if not quite yet natural, habitat, a waterside working-class suburb converted into luxury housing, there is a curious anachronism, a slight shuffling of the cards of world history as impoverished Vietnamese families, taking advantage of the public space offered by the wharf, pull in their fishing lines to make way for the ferry. Nobody speaks. The Vietnamese seem not to be aware they really shouldn't be there even though it's perfectly legal. Indeed they seem far more naturally part of the scene than the tired white professionals stepping ashore. The Vietnamese are an unknown entity. They come in the early evening from remote slums in battered cars for which it is difficult to find parking space around here. Now and again it is reported in the media they eat dogs. They are quintessentially foreign and out of place. Yet they blend intimately with it and fish just about all night long, it seems, with their flashlights and thermoses, and they fish with the same mix of pleasure and boredom as did the white Australian watersiders before them who have, it seems, around this harbor at least, become quite extinct, other than in their reincarnation in these refugees from Southeast Asia.

To me the oddest thing is the stillness of the encounter between those coming off the ferry and these fishermen and women. It is as if the latter didn't really exist, as if they are invisible and are seen straight through. Yet they're the ones actually using the water as something other than real estate or what Marx called exchange-value. Perhaps with time they will pass into the spectacle as part of the flora and fauna, the flora having been carefully selected and planted as Australian Wild.

Benjamin cites Adorno's letter to him, 5 August 1935, ruminating on the mysteries of the "dialectical image" that was so dear to Benjamin's practice as a writer in search of a form by which words and things could be juxtaposed in terms appropriate to the reality of capitalist modernity.

At one point Adorno speculates that as the world becomes increasingly subject to commodification and “things lose their use value, they are hollowed out in their alienation and, as ciphers, draw meanings in.”⁶ Benjamin agrees that such “‘hollowed out’ things” are increasing at a rate previously unknown in world history and that in their very hollowed-outness, torn between death and meaning, they naturalize subjective intention, one’s hopes and one’s anxieties (“N,” p. 12). In this regard I wonder if these strange silhouettes of “hollowed out” businessmen and women stepping off the ferry, no less than the quiet people fishing on the wharf, more nature than culture, have absorbed into themselves the dead past of these waterfront suburbs, their dead boat-building industriousness and once busy social life? In which case, that moment when the boat hits the wharf to unload its passengers, that moment in the dusk after work, that is the dialectical image. You feel the shudder radiating along the creaking wooden wharf. It goes way down the piles into the ocean floor. Softly.

With his love of children’s literature, Benjamin would surely be among the first to acknowledge the role of the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination in the constitution of the dialectical image and its claims on prehistory. And it is with the confidence born of this self-nourishing circuit that I can claim that the renaturalization of the harbor as archaic second nature was foreseen by a book I read as a child aged about ten in 1950. It was called *Mates of the Kurlalong*, in which a group of animals escape from the Sydney zoo, located on a steep, rocky, hillside plunging into the harbor, and take over a ferry, the giraffe, of all things, becoming the engineer and having to find room for its neck somehow down in the engine room.

The adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination is markedly accentuated, I believe, by rights to remembrance granted expatriates, such as myself, for whom the childhood past across the seas lies petrified as a dead object preserved under glass awaiting a hand to shake it into life. Adorno puts it like this, summing up what for him was important in Benjamin’s method: “He is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, ‘ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance.”⁷

Down in the bay from where I lived as a kid, there was a wharf with slips and a large boatshed. Its owner, who lived on this beautiful site at the head of the bay (Sailor’s Bay was its name), repaired boats and before

6. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, “N [Theoretic of Knowledge; Theory of Progress],” *The Philosophical Forum* 15 (Fall–Winter 1983–84): 12; hereafter abbreviated “N.”

7. Theodor W. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 233.

that had been a champion cyclist, in those pre-yuppie days a very working-class sport. Fishing off the wharf for leatherjackets, my eye would idle over the yachts at anchor. There were about ten. That's all. But today you can hardly see the water there are so many. What's more, when I was a kid many of those yachts had been built by their owners. Years it would take. Hard to imagine today. Later, aged fourteen or so, I joined a sailing club on the other side of the bay at Seaforth, racing eleven-foot-long boats called Moths with one enormous sail and a nineteen-foot mast. The club consisted of men, all of whom who worked at a trade, like carpentering or plumbing.

It was an unusual place where I grew up, a peninsula jutting into the Middle Harbour. I am told that in the 1920s or 1930s the easiest way to get there was to row from the Spit, a narrow tract of land, to where trams ran from the inner city. Mainly oddballs lived there, communists, refugees like my parents, from central Europe, and artists. By and large, respectable people shied away even though it was in a sense middle class and professional, culturally, if not economically. It was covered with she-oaks and soaring white-skinned eucalyptus trees, and in summer the cicadas would sing. All around was water, salt water from the Pacific. But very few people had boats or were in any sense, I think, oriented to the sea. The only person that comes to mind was Ern Claridge who had worked his way up in a small company selling hot water systems. He was a kind, overweight man with a great laugh, who lived with his wife and daughter in a stone house fifteen-minutes' walk from the water's edge that had been built for an actor with a star-shaped living room that could serve as a theater, and just about every afternoon, I think, he would go down to the harbor and out in a clinker-built rowing boat and fish until nightfall. He smoked huge Havana cigars and loved white wine, both of these habits being distinctly unusual for a real Australian, but his credentials were assured by his sitting in the bath for hours of a morning and going carefully through the racing guide, then calling his bookie, before departing for work. I seem to remember he caught a lot of fish. What is my point? Of all the people I knew in my "middle-class" peninsula suburb laid out in the beautiful bay of the beautiful harbor, he was one of the very few adults I can remember who made use of the sea, only minutes by foot from our homes. I find this remarkable.

Down the steep hillside from where I lived, squeezed in a narrow space between the water's edge and large rocks, almost a mile from the roadway, were four or five houses built of wood and corrugated iron, illegal building materials, dating from another era, probably the Great Depression. Who lived there? I never knew. Whoever they were, they were like a foreign element. They must have come and gone in boats or surreptitiously up and down the zig-zag paths only they and we children knew about. I do remember however that the doctor who looked after me, as I was often sick, told me he once had to run all the way down there to

attend to what was called a New Australian, a Yugoslav, I think, who being “new” had failed to heed warnings about sharks and was in the habit of swimming back and forth across the bay of a morning. An unthinkable event and totally shocking. He had been bitten in half, so it was said, by a shark, no doubt inspired by the same attitudes towards migrants as held by Old Australians, and when my dear doctor, who was once a football star, and still pretty fleet of foot, got there it was too late. Now yuppies and latter-day hippies have pushed the previous dwellers out and elbowed their way into that hidden colony on the water’s edge by the mangroves, the sharks, and the ghosts of their victims. And doctors no longer sprint down craggy hillsides or consider house calls as part of their job.

Perhaps nothing more dramatically captures the world change in the orientation to the water than the fate of the shark. When I was a kid you couldn’t put your toe in the water for fear of sharks. When the tiny sailing boats three of us had (we were among the vanguard of the new dispensation) heeled under the impact of a squall, you were exquisitely careful to retract your feet, and you never ever waded or heaven forbid! went swimming outside of a shark-proofed area, of which there were pitifully few. Apart from the New Australian bit in two, there was the woman school-teacher we all heard about who, merely wading, had been yanked into the water and lost her leg. When we were older and started surfing at the ocean, we sometimes saw a trawler inching its way between the beaches, hauling in nets. It was Nick Gorshenin, as I remember the name and spelling, attending to the shark nets laid in front of all Sydney beaches. I never actually saw a shark, but I could easily imagine their torpedo-long bodies writhing in his cruel nets as they were joyfully hoisted aboard and given the treatment they deserved. You can imagine my surprise, therefore, when upon my return in 1995 I found kids gleefully jumping into the harbor (did they do it to spite me?) and people swimming outside the net at Nielsen Park where as teenagers we use to carouse, drink beer, sing, make love till the early hours and transgress in many ways but never, ever, swim outside the net. Yet now it’s as if the shark no longer exists. A new era has dawned. The sea has come to mean something else, and its demons have been laid to rest. Or instead the demonic has been displaced onto the panic of skin cancer and pollution in the water caused by raw sewage and lead.

Across the bay from where I grew up, there was of all things a liver-red brick, working-class suburban bungalow. Absolutely, stereotypically, typical. But, also, totally incongruous because it was so isolated in the bush. Nothing else for miles around. It belonged, as I remember, to one H. C. Press, and from its heights elaborate wooden steps and bush paths zig-zagged down to a jetty and a fenced in shark-proof swimming pool where, as a twelve-year-old child, I used to sneak in with friends on hot weekday afternoons, rowing across the bay, and skinny dip. Press had been an eighteen-foot dinghy sailing champion and on retirement from

his real job had built this little park by the harbor to rent out for weekend excursions from the city. Hence the butchers', the bakers', and the candlestick makers' unions would hire ferries and spend the day picnicking, while the middle class and the wealthy were nowhere to be seen. They chose to live and raise children on the leafy "north shore," which, despite its name, was inland with no trace of the ocean. As I said before, they didn't give a shit.

A mile or so through the bush along from H. C. Press was an extraordinary thing, a castle, exacerbating the wonderful working-class fantasy that the Press picnic grounds brought to life. A castle! In Australia! We kids called it Dr. Willis's castle, for some reason, but I myself suspected it really belonged to one John Mystery, who wrote rather unpopular scary books and whose face I seem to remember seeing as a tiny drawing the size of a postage stamp in the frontispiece of one of those books, where details of the publisher are printed, together with the outline of that same little castle. Once or twice we nerved ourselves to row across the bay, haul the boat up under the overhanging trees, and creep up a wide, smooth, path in the forest to peer at the beautiful garden. We never dared get closer, and we never once saw a person. That entire stretch of headland was deserted, except for these two idiosyncratic phenomena, H. C. Press's liver-brick working-class bungalow, at one end, and John Mystery's stone castle, at the other. The bay lay still and empty, shimmering in the beauty of its translucent green water irradiated by shafts of blue and gold sunlight. I can still touch them as I write. Today the land has been developed by one L. J. Hooker and is covered by huge and ugly houses, while on weekends the bay is littered with yachts and motorboats, often tied one to the other so as to make more of a party or perhaps squeeze as many vessels into what has become, in reality, not a natural waterway but a parking lot.

This reconfiguration of money and the sea began and has been completed in my lifetime, this total reversal of value and forced exodus of the economically weaker from the seaside. It is by no means as dramatic or as consequential as the appropriation of the land from the Aboriginals that was begun in the late eighteenth century, the land having been legally defined by the British government as without owners, much the same as was done to the Palestinians by the Israelis this century, but was achieved freely by the anonymous force of the market instead, the market of fantasy.

The Archaic

I think of this revaluation of the sea as testimony to the force of the archaic in modernity, a coming into fullness of a "second nature" in which objects and landscapes, along with indigenous people, acquire radically intensified meaning as the physical melts into virtual reality.

“The beginning of man was salt sea, and the perpetual reverberation of that great ancient fact, constantly renewed in the unfolding of life in every human individual, is the important single fact about Melville. Pelagic.” This is Olson toward the end of *Call Me Ishmael*.⁸ And what does “pelagic” mean? “Of or pertaining to the open or high sea.”⁹

But the current turn to the sea I am describing would seem to be quite different, not something to be *inhabited* but something to be *contemplated* as an expensive backdrop or as a yachting playground for Republican millionaires like William F. Buckley, Jr., testing their manhood against the elements on weekends and in continuous radio and radar contact with the coast guard. Down market there is the one-week getaway to the Caribbean with black waiters in tuxedos standing in the blue sea with martinis on a tray, or the two-week cruise on a tarted-up ocean liner that once plowed the seven seas on a regular passenger route. It is hard to imagine the sailors Melville describes in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, or Conrad’s, at the end of the century, having the advantage of the “second nature” that such alienation from the sea and physical nature provides. For it is by virtue of the separation and loss that the sea acquires a new magnificence, as when Benjamin, sensing the demise of storytelling in European cultures, notes that at that point it is “possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.”¹⁰

This rupture into modernity of the archaic as “second nature” gives quite a different sense of historical progression to that of Olson’s chronological sequence through the three oceans: Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Pacific. For with the surfacing of the archaic, we become aware that different orders of time may coexist with a past precisely because that past is both real and fictional, nature and “second nature,” reminiscent of Freud’s depiction of fantasy as a play with memories involving montage and overlays. As a site of such fantasy production, the beach’s job is not to conceal but reveal and revel in revealing just such play, announcing itself as playground and transgressive space par excellence, displacing by far all previous rituals of reversal and pleasure. The beach, then, is the ultimate fantasy space where nature and carnival blend as prehistory in the dialectical image of modernity.

Dialectical Image

As a presence surfacing (in montages and overlays) in modernity, the archaic provides both the power and the texture for what Benjamin

8. Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 13.

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “pelagic.”

10. Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 87.

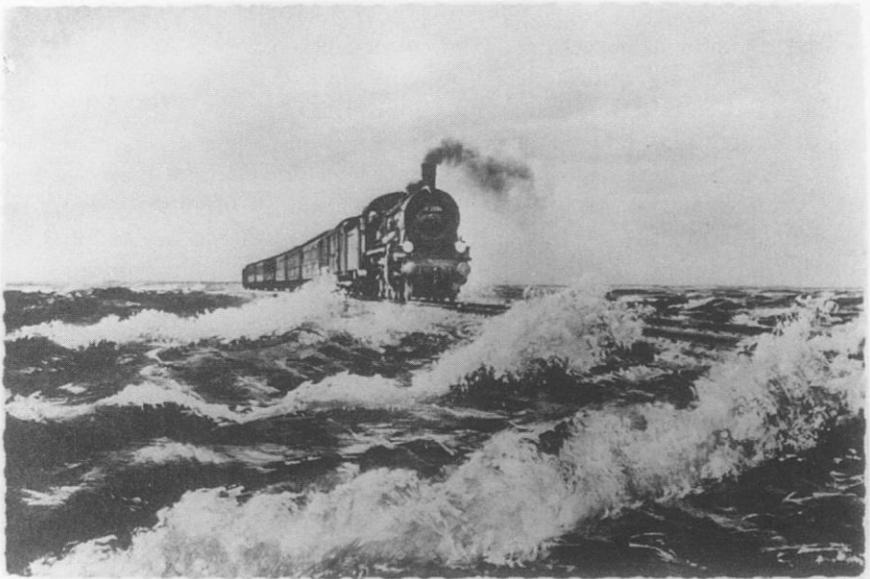
called the dialectical image. The vital nerve here lay with what was seen as the dynamic architecture of the commodity, a surreal object of such cultural influence and such self-transformative, shape-changing, magnificence that, far from demanding oppositional practice, it invoked mimetic strategies to take advantage of its futuristic powers. It may be that Lukács's essay on reification was the decisive transfer point here, with its Hegelian notion of "second nature" (what today is often referred to as social construction). To this one should add the related notion of commodity fetishism, creating out of capitalist culture a "phantom objectivity."¹¹ Hence Benjamin can be seen as retooling his notion of allegory, worked out in his early 1920s study of the baroque, so as to assimilate it to Lukács's formulation of the commodity. If allegory made much of the complexity between the graphic form of words and their meaning, image and text, it also made much of history as tragedy passing into the depiction of a petrified nature. What is so novel with the retooled version of allegory, namely, the dialectical image, is its being an invitation to rework "second nature" into history as prehistory in the modern era of commodity fetishism—as in this note Benjamin wrote to himself: "In the dialectical image, the past of a particular epoch is also 'the past from time immemorial'" ("N," p. 10). Such an image contains time within itself, the cinema compressed into a still, and this is the messianic moment of stillness in the flow of time, arresting thought and allowing reality to collide and roll over it in search of another and until then unacknowledged history in what often seems to be a political fight over the past and its meanings. The sea must be a paramount instance in the West of "'the past from time immemorial,'" and I can think of no better example of a dialectical image than the postcard that serves as frontispiece, here reproduced, to the English edition of Klaus Theweleit's book, *Male Fantasies*. He found this card in his mother's photo album, as she lay "unconscious from a stroke and on a journey that is no journey. When people die," he adds, "we look at their photo albums and hear the voices that belonged to the images" (fig. 2).¹²

Pacific

It is this I yearn for and fantasize, the "southern sea," as it was first called by Europeans, writing here in a dark room in New York. It is winter, perfect time and situation for fantasies about the beach. But my

11. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1971), p. 83.

12. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter, and Chris Turner, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1987), 1:xviii–xix.



From Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter, and Chris Turner, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1987), 1:xviii.

history reverses Olson's history of the three oceans. I trace the movement of my life in reverse order to world history, back through history, as is the way of fantasy, back through oceans of time from the Pacific to England, then across the Atlantic to Colombia, and now I live on a coast, the East Coast as they call it, of the Atlantic, a coast I find ugly and cannot, will not, understand because every time I approach it I am reminded of something infinitely more splendid, bobbing in a line beyond the breaking waves waiting for the big one. We sung to strange gods like Huey, to send us one of these Big Ones, and he would oblige. Above the sound of the waves I could hear cicadas in the eucalyptus trees in the midday heat on the headland. It was magical escape, beyond words, the fate well known to the surfer trying to convey the sensation of waves. This bears a direct relation to the fragile freedom, always already lost, of what Hakim Bey calls the "temporary autonomous zone," such as pirate utopias.¹³ Truly nothing remains but green twilight and green lightning in this sea of sadness at the unrecuperable loss that memory registers. All or nothing, I say. The real beach or the urban sublime with its rat poison and iron rails rusting into oblivion, home to the homeless. "I have blown a hole in

13. See Hakim Bey, *T. A. Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York, 1985). See also Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegades* (New York, 1995).

time with a firecracker," says William Burroughs, the Survivor, at the end of *Cities of the Red Night*, a book dedicated to pirate utopias in the Caribbean and Madagascar. "A few may get through the gate in time. Like Spain, I am bound to the past."¹⁴ However, "this does not imply," wrote Benjamin in reference to history as a state of seige, "that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."¹⁵

Atlantic

Living in the antipodes on the edge of the great southern sea did little to prepare me for what the south, let alone the beach, meant, once I went to live on the rainy island of England on the edge of the Atlantic at the age of twenty-seven. Never had I seen such desolate, ugly, uninspiring beaches as there. More than a cruel joke, a betrayal.

Years later I read of the same despair with that depressing English coast by Sylvia Plath in her exquisite memoir, "Ocean-1212W," written for the BBC in 1962 towards the end of her life, which a sailor from Baltimore, named Alicia Rabins, also a poet, brought me. The title refers to the telephone number of Plath's Austrian grandparents whom, living on the seaside, she would as a little girl call via the operator from her own house, on the bayside of a Boston headland of the Massachusetts coast, until the age of nine when her father died and her mother took the children to live away from the sea. It was gone. Utterly and forever. Along with the loss of childhood and the loss of the father.¹⁶

Much has been made of the death of the father, not least by her late poet-laureate husband, Ted Hughes, who seems at times anxious to find her death in that death, killing herself at the age of thirty-one in 1963, a few months after their marriage broke up.

As if you descended in each night's sleep
 Into your father's grave
 You seemed afraid to look, or to remember next morning
 What you had seen. When you did remember
 Your dreams were of a sea clogged with corpses,
 Death-camp atrocities, mass amputations.¹⁷

Ted had in mind poems like "Daddy," the most infamous of her *Ariel* poems written at fever pitch, sometimes two to three a day, in the months

14. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (New York, 1981), p. 332.

15. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, p. 264.

16. Her father was German, born in Grabow, in the Polish Corridor, and a professor of entomology. See Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston, 1989), pp. 4–5.

17. Ted Hughes, "Dream Life," *Birthday Letters* (New York, 1998), p. 141.

before she took her own life. The second and third stanzas:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
 You died before I had time—
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
 Ghastly statue with one grey toe
 Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
 Where it pours bean green over blue
 In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
 I used to pray to recover you.
 Ach, du.¹⁸

“Ach, du” ties the sea to language as tied to paternal power and memory, the next stanza implanting the German tongue in Polish towns scraped flat by incessant war. His is a phantom presence (“I could never tell where you/Put your foot, your root”) such that she could never talk to him (“the tongue stuck in my jaw”):

It stuck in a barb in a wire snare.
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,
 I could hardly speak.
 I thought every German was you.
 And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.¹⁹

“In the waters off beautiful Nauset.” A place for a prayer. “A head in the freakish Atlantic.” His head? A headland? The same thing? “I began to talk like a Jew.” Off to Auschwitz. “Where it pours bean green over blue.” In any case, language going, going, gone, this Atlantic that, in Peter Linebaugh’s recovery of William Blake’s recovery of mythical Atlantis, in an article entitled “‘All the Atlantic Mountains Shook,’” is seen in its African, European, and New World immensity as a crisscrossed multicultural history of the present.²⁰ More than a passageway to the New World, so the argument runs, this busy busy ocean provoked a New Way of thinking about the World, most especially about idiosyncrasy replacing the

18. Sylvia Plath, “Daddy,” *Ariel* (New York, 1966), p. 49.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

20. See Peter Linebaugh, “‘All the Atlantic Mountains Shook,’” *Journal of Canadian Labour Studies* 10 (Autumn 1982): 87–121.

norm, what Paul Gilroy, following Linebaugh's extraordinarily suggestive essay, called "the black Atlantic," anarchic mix of sailors and slaves and riff-raff plying the waves, planting the plantations, loading the ships both sides, all sides, of that ocean, humming with creolized languages and music and preindustrial visions of the Rights of Man that were, given the ways of ships and the sea, by no means rigidly bound to the categories of the nation-state. It was a new deal, a volatile and heterogeneous mass drawn from wherever the Atlantic washed ashore.²¹ More a subaqueous influence and a utopic vision, a piratical antiauthoritarian potential *something*, waiting to be sprung, this reemergent Atlantis cannot displace the dystopia of African slavery or the fact that the life of the sailor was nasty, brutish, and short. Instead the two realities, slavery *and* the Rights of Man, have to be recognized as two sides of the one coin, and this is why the Atlantic mountains shook. It could have been different. It still could!

Mediterranean

Now, at last, I have seen the sea with my own eyes and walked upon the beautiful threshing floor of the sand which it leaves behind when it ebbs. How I wished the children could have been with me! They would so have loved the shells. Like a child, I picked up a good many because I have a special use for them.

—GOETHE, *Italian Journey, 1786–1788*

A "black" Atlantic directs us to the unwritten history that would alter the terms of historical reckoning as presently constituted, beginning with the search for an alternative to the father's signifying authority bound to the power of loss, which I see as Plath's endeavor, too. The transformation of language into play and the body may well have its liberatory side, notes Jacqueline Rose, but for her it also demonstrates "the high price, at the level of fantasy, that such a psychic process entails."²² The most conspicuous and contentious historical referent in this poem is the holocaust

21. "I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point" (Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [Cambridge, Mass., 1993], p. 4). This helps him get away from nationalistic and ethnically rooted analyses, in favor of the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic" (*ibid.*).

22. Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p. 227. Rose has suggested that the poem "Daddy" outlines "the conditions under which that celebrated loss of the symbolic function takes place." She goes on to point out that if identity and language thus lose themselves in the place of the father (and the Lacanian reference is resonant here), his absence nevertheless gives him unlimited powers. In fact she regards this poem as addressing the "production of fantasy as such," "a poem about its own conditions of linguistic and phantasmic production" (*ibid.*, pp. 227, 230). See also pp. 235–38.

perpetrated by the Nazis and the vivid fantasies that that terror has created in its wake, a Holocaust that now, forty years after Plath's poem, has been extended to the trade in Africans as slaves to the New World. The "price" to which Rose refers us—and the term speaks for itself as testimony to the foreclosures enacted by Freud's restricted economy—demands I think more, not less fantasy, understanding thereby Atlantis and the Rights of Man as gifts we have been granted by the very horror of slavery, the Holocaust, and yes! by the enormity of Plath's death no less than by her poetic gifts. And by gift I mean something that can both recognize and cancel the debt in such a way as to extricate itself from that sad economy where the deck is always stacked.

As I understand it, Atlantis asks us here to examine how a freakish Atlantic exists retrospectively as montage and overlays on a long-sustained European—especially German—love affair with its exotic, even "black" or "African," south and with the antiquity it came to represent around the Mediterranean. However we might respond to this love affair, to the claims made for the body, beauty and sensuousness, light and sun, I feel we must include the image of truth, an image of layering into surface and depth, as well as secrecy and revelation. For is not the south, which is to say "the beach," the radical Other to truth as northern virtue? And is this dichotomy not built into the world's dominant languages and habits of perception?

Freud's thoughts, for instance, constantly turn south, as with his extended essay "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gravida*" (1907), analyzing a Danish author's tale of love and repression in the north, mimetically encased in the hardened lava of Pompeii as a result of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. Finding this one of Freud's most charming writings, and noting Freud's enthusiasm for antiquities from the ancient Middle East, Greece, and Rome, Ernest Jones sees the essay as equating "the ancient time of two thousand years ago when the pair [of lovers] were supposed to have known each other . . . with the forgotten period of their actual childhood. The repression that blotted this out corresponds with the interment of Pompeii under ashes, but in neither case is there destruction, only burial."²³ The south is thus prehistory whose ruins, hardened in stone, are hidden stories for the analyst to excavate. To top it off, current childhood is antiquity—down "south," that is. Freud "had in him the dichotomy, not rare," relates Jones, "between the call of the North and that of the South. The high ideals of duty spoke for the North. There was Berlin, for instance, with its restless activity and unceasing impulse for achievement. But for pleasure, happiness, and pure interest the South was preeminent." He showed Freud some poems from Browning express-

23. Ernest Jones, *Years of Maturity: 1901–1919*, vol. 2 of *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1955), p. 341. See Freud, "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gravida*," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 9:7–93.

ing his love for Italy, at which, Jones recalls, Freud smiled, saying, "I have no need for that; we have our own enthusiasts."

O Woman country
Woo'd, not won,
Loved all the more by earth's male lands
Laid to their hearts instead.²⁴

Recall also Nietzsche's attachment, memorably expressed in his use of Italian (*La gaya scienza*) for the title of his most suggestive work, *The Gay Science* (1882), and a century before that, Goethe's *Italian Journey, 1786–1788*, and far from being something peculiar to past centuries, the South remains still an unselfconsciously sexualized site, as we witness in the work of W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer, translators of Goethe's *Italian Journey*, and who, in 1962, assert Italy to be Goethe's sexual awakening and do so based on the evidence of portraits painted of him before and after his return. The latter show a "masculine, self-assured face," they claim, "that of man who has known sexual satisfaction."²⁵ Surely such endearingly brazen use of physiognomy says more about attitudes to Italy and habits of reading faces than it does about Goethe's sexual experience? But that is not the real point. As a pervasive instrument for navigating social space, the art of reading the secrets of the soul from the exteriority of the face bears an intimate relationship to the face of the South, overly expressive, overly endowed with the mimetic faculty.

In his justly famous section on "primitive accumulation" of modern capitalism, Marx evokes this issue of secrecy and "decadence" in the South, where he writes that the "villainies of the Venetian thieving system formed one of the secret bases of the capital-wealth of Holland to whom Venice in her decadence lent large sums of money."²⁶ This early modern history of capital's dependence on the (secret of the) South is, moreover, a relation among trading ports, the Venetian empire, in decline, and the burgeoning port city of Amsterdam, the former representing the history of the Mediterranean, the second the history of the Atlantic and the Dutch East Indies. Not only are these maritime cities but both are built on canals along whose turbid waters came the spices and silks from the East. Indeed the canals not only *are* the city but remind us that these

24. Jones, *The Formative Years and the Great Discoveries, 1856–1900*, vol. 1 of *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1953), p. 331. Freud's letters to Fliess are a gold mine for such Italian references.

25. W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer, introduction to J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786–1788*, trans. Auden and Mayer (San Francisco, 1962), p. xvii.

26. Karl Marx, "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation," *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels, 3 vols. (New York, 1967), 1:755–56.

cities are in essence continuously operating salvage operations squatting on swamps and mud precariously rescued from the ravages of the sea. The huge defenses of Venice were described by Goethe in 1786 as built of “uncemented stone blocks” protecting the city from storms and high tides, a city built on protuberances poking out of the muddy swamp that had been formed by “the interaction of tides and earth” as the “primeval ocean” gradually fell.²⁷ These prehistoric places of entry and exit where the coast breaks into neither one thing nor the other, anastomoses of islets, lagoons, and peninsulas—natural canals, we could say—seem to have been selected out by a historically informed nature as the generically fertile zones for generating money and trade, just as the prehistoric space-substance that is neither water nor land is where life began, and to which it will return. It took a seafaring nation operating out of an island with the largest navy in the world, namely England, to complete this process by adding, from the late-eighteenth century on (when the Venetian sea-borne empire finally died), the factory system to the African American plantation system.

What specific secret Marx had in mind in this financial relationship between Amsterdam and Venice, I cannot say. Certainly Venice had long been associated with sexual license. Its reputation for “decadence” brings to mind Richard Sennet’s observation that “sensuality was a crucial element in the image of Venice in Europe, and in the Venetians’ sense of themselves.” Around the sixteenth century, this included high- and low-class prostitution, “a flourishing homosexual subculture devoted to cross-dressing, young men lounging in gondolas on the canals wearing nothing but women’s jewels,” and, also, the sensuous body of the ghettoized Jew, as the incarnation of attraction and repulsion.²⁸ The first ghetto in history was in Venice. Both Jews (from 1397) and prostitutes (from 1416) were forced by the city to wear yellow as their distinguishing color, the prostitute displaying a yellow scarf, the Jew a yellow star of David (or a hat). The public executioner was always a Jew. Always likely to be thought of by Christians as the quintessential depository of leprosy, syphilis (at first said not to be brought by Columbus but by Jews), other venereal diseases, and mysterious powers of pollution, these same Jews were the moneylenders, without whom the long-distance trade in spices underlying Venetian naval power would be brought to a halt. Hence *The Merchant of Venice* and, of course, his pound of flesh.²⁹

Thus when Marx collapses “the villainies” and “decadence” of the Venetian “thieving system” into one of the secrets of capital, and specifically does so in relation to moneylending from south to north, it is hard

27. Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786–1788*, p. 82.

28. Richard Sennet, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York, 1994), p. 223.

29. See *ibid.*, and Jan Morris, *The Venetian Empire: A Sea Voyage* (New York, 1980), p. 148.

to escape the feeling that this secret is grotesquely overdetermined by many centuries of intricate cultural practice fusing money, sex, magical pollution, ethnic division, and transgression. Not so much a secret as a public secret, it cannot but be a formidable player in the games of truth to which both Nietzsche and Freud spent their life's work alerting us. As with Marx's idea of the fetish of commodities, their idea was not that the secret conceals truth like a blanket. Rather, the secret enters into the truth it conceals, making it impossible to separate the two, at least in the human, the social, world. Yet, at the same time, it seems impossible for human beings to accept such a gray-on-gray view of truth. Or, if they can accept such a view, they carve it up into distinct regions of truth, as for instance along the north-south axis—as when Julian Pitt-Rivers observes, in his skillful ethnography of secrecy in a small town in Andalusia around 1950, that by virtue of their skill at lying Andalusians put a higher value on truth than the naive and honest English.³⁰ This wonderful paradox not only makes the point that deception and truth can be conveniently plotted geopolitically, but that in fact they lie hand in glove and that knowing what not to know is what it takes to be a social being. Along with Nietzsche continually calling our attention to the positive social need for active forgetting and endorsement of illusion, thus raising the stakes of truth and writing truth to infinite heights, I think of such active not-knowing as a well-guarded public secret. In my opinion this type of knowledge is the most ubiquitous, the most powerful, and the most complex type of social knowledge there is. Ideology, discourse, and habitus pale into insignificance compared with this social art of knowing what not to know—and knowing when and how to reveal it, what Brecht called showing showing (“Showing Has to Be Shown”), the crucial component of his work as playwright, director, and poet.³¹

By linking such a public secret with the genesis of modern capitalism—its “*primitive* accumulation,” no less—Marx can be read as picking at a theme in his general economic theory that I see as worth our while to think about. This theme, at least as I choose to identify it, concerns the argument that control over the trick of truth lies as much at the heart of business as it does over the way by which “labor,” meaning human beings at work, is flip-flopped between its market-value and its use-value so as to create profit. This idea is reinforced when we read Marx's chapter in *Capital* on labor power in which, as in a stage play, we follow Moneybags going to market to hire a laborer but, at the point where he and his newly hired man pass into the factory, we are stopped from following them. “No admittance except on business,” says Mr. Marx primly, drawing the line between the openness of the market, on the one hand, and the alchemy

30. See Julian A. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1971), pp. xvi–xvii.

31. See Bertolt Brecht, “Five Theatre Poems,” *Bertolt Brecht Poems: 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett, Ralph Manheim, and Erich Fried (London, 1976), pp. 340–43.

of the labor process, on the other. But then he relents, as we knew he would, the whole point about secrets being the love we share in revealing them. “Here we shall see,” writes the great exposé, taking us into the dark depths of the factory, “not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making.”³² What he intends to reveal is how labor is the unique use-value that can produce more market-value than it itself was bought for. This is given in labor itself, we might say, but only if we stack up the vast philosophical edifice writ into the reifying function of the market and the Hegelian concern with the logic of matter versus the matter of logic, which is to say use-value versus exchange-value, two sorts of value that, thanks to the market and the function of abstract equivalence provided by money, can be constantly articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated once again.

If the Enlightenment was ruthless in exposing secrets as its claim to power, as in the heroic trope of demystification, other engagements with power, such as Nietzsche’s notion of *la gaya scienza*, do recognize the truth game as tougher than this and have settled on the strategy of the ruse in the never-ending struggle with the Nervous System of social reality.³³ And although Marx most certainly can be cast in the heroic mold of the demystifier, stealer of Promethean fire, and so on, the secret of profit making to which he points us demands a completely different aesthetic of revelation—not so much exposure of the secret, as Benjamin once put it, but a revelation that does justice to it.³⁴

For if it wasn’t for this spiral-like transformation back and forth between its use- and exchange-value, between the logic of matter and the matter of logic, there could be no expansion in value and no capitalism. Everything hinges on what Marx early on refers to as the articulation of the *substance* with the *magnitude* of value, the concrete particular with the abstract universal, the flesh-and-blood sensuous mimetic with the system of relationships of difference that is the semiotic—which is how Benjamin would have us understand the exploitation of the archive of nonsensuous correspondences by the labor involved in writing and reading, too.³⁵ This suggests we might look for an understanding of the secret of profit in just that flashlike recognition which Benjamin repeatedly singles out in essays spanning his life’s work on language, history, and the image.

“The mimetic element in language, can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer,” he wrote in 1933 in his astonishing essay on the mimetic faculty. “This bearer is the semiotic element.” The “secret”

32. Marx, *Capital*, 1:176.

33. See Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York, 1992), esp. the introduction.

34. See Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, 1977), p. 31.

35. See Benjamin, “On The Mimetic Faculty,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), p. 335.

in this labor for Benjamin is manifested, not revealed, by his curious figure of the momentary “flash” of recognition with which the mimetic connection is ignited between signifier and its signified. “Thus the coherence of words or sentences,” he explains, “is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears.”³⁶ In an earlier version of this essay, “Doctrine of the Similar,” this “flash” is presented as follows: “The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.”³⁷

This mysterious flash of recognition, emerging then disappearing, is the same exquisite moment he postulates for the role of memory in his famous commentary on Marxist historiography, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the fifth thesis of which begins like this: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which *flashes up at an instant* when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” In the following thesis we encounter the well-known dramatic lines, “To articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it *flashes up at a moment of danger*.”³⁸ And it is this same emergence and equally sudden disappearance of recognition that he recruits for the *dialectical image*, which he once referred to as “the primal phenomenon of history.” “It is like lightning,” he jotted down in the “*Konvolut N*,” together with the other notes he carefully kept for his never-finished Paris arcades project. “The past must be held like an image flashing in the moment of recognition. A rescue thus—and only thus—achieved, can only be effected on that which, in the next moment, is already irretrievably lost” (“N,” p. 21). To which he added that “what matters for the dialectician is having the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking for him means: to set sail. It is the way they are set that matters. Words are his sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts” (“N,” p. 21).

Given this abrupt motion of recognition as disappearance, we may well ask, Is not this dialectical ship of Benjamin’s the same three-master Joyce showed us so suddenly coming out of nowhere behind Stephen Dedalus’s back, “*rere regardant*”? One thing is for sure, and that is the function here of the beach on which young Dedalus stands, then, and all the more so, now. If, as I have stated, the beach is the ultimate fantasy space where nature and carnival blend as prehistory in the dialectical image of modernity, the beach in the Western tradition has achieved this status on account of its propensity for play and childhood (witness Goethe and his

36. Ibid.

37. Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979): 66.

38. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, p. 255; emphasis added.

shells). The point is, however, that this is precisely the setting for the boosting of the mimetic faculty, binding in a flash of disappearing recognition nature to artifice, a speaker to a language, and sensuousness to sense. “Rere regardant.”

There are many themes that course through this “flash” articulating the logic of matter with the matter of logic, such as Benjamin’s abiding passion for montage as epistemology as well as style, thus appropriating Freud’s notion of fantasy as montage and overlays and converting it into a veritable technique, not so much of psychoanalysis as of cultural analysis. A crucial difference with Freud, of course, lies with the surrealist flair in Benjamin’s method, the montage being the essential component of analytic expression and not something to be translated into the logic of narrative. This, after all, paralleled Benjamin’s efforts to outshock the shock effects wrought by modernity on memory and hence on the capacity for experiencing reality. But there is little doubt in my mind that the most significant theme in this mysterious flash of recognition is the eruption of a prehistoricity into the present and the impact this carries as waking from a dream to see, in that instant of awakening, the surrealist face of things.

“The *correspondances*,” wrote Benjamin, in reference to Baudelaire’s forest of symbols, “are the data of remembrance—not historical data, but data of prehistory.” And he cites Baudelaire’s sonnet “La Vie antérieure” with “its images of caves and vegetation, of clouds and waves” arising from the “warm vapor of tears, tears of homesickness.” “There did I live.”³⁹ This is another home or *heim*, both homely and secret, and for Benjamin it is also Kafka’s uncanny *heim* where in time and through time the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European city installs a Venetian swamp world of prelinguistic, gesturally vivid animals, spirits, and curious intermediary persons in transformative flux as collected in “Amerika” by the Nature Theater of Oklahoma.⁴⁰ “The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do not laugh,” demands the hunter Gracchus, the centuries-long dead hunter brought into port by an author living in one of the most landlocked regions of the world, hence stimulating the title of a recent and strikingly original study of Czech history by Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*.⁴¹ “I am always in motion,” insists the hunter Gracchus, who envisions a shining gate before him in his supreme exertions, while all the time lying on a wooden pallet wearing a filthy winding sheet, his hair and beard, black tinged with gray, grown together, his limbs covered with

39. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, p. 182.

40. See Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” in *Illuminations*, pp. 111–41.

41. Franz Kafka, “The Hunter Gracchus,” *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1971), p. 228. See Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, N.J., 1998).

a great flower-patterned woman's shawl with long fringes. "A sacramental candle stands at my head and lights me," he says. "On the wall opposite me is a little picture, evidently of a bushman who is aiming his spear at me and taking cover as best he can behind a beautifully painted shield." It is a dead man speaking, adrift on the high seas winding around him like hair, time flowing as images come and go. For the moment he has come into our landlocked port. Through a hole in the side of the boat the warm air of the southern night enters, and he hears the slapping of the water on the old hull.⁴² Back to Joyce. Back to the beginning. This is language moving into the sea as our very bodies might, buoyed up by its watery, moving energy and the human facility with mimesis. "Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeis, oos. . . . In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels."

The secret of capital's capacity for self-expansion thus begins to look even more intriguing than what Marx himself elaborated as the interplay of use- with exchange-value within that unique commodity, the commodity of labor. And it certainly looks a lot more fascinating than the arithmetical forms to which capital's self-reflection translates and reduces the mystery of value as price, the outcome of "supply" and "demand" beholden to the logic of profit maximization by individuals in rational pursuit of self-interest. For what I am arguing is that the secret of the expansion in value is a consequence of an artistically contrived revelation around the axis of prehistory. The trick, for the modern capitalist magic to function, is to deface the commodity of labor, allowing its mimetic or use-value component to surge forth, flashlike, only to disappear once again as an expanded semiotic or exchange-value. Hence fetishism is not a consequence but the magical precondition for the commodity, and hence for mature capitalism, to function. We should not be overly surprised, therefore, at the spectacular "return" of the archaic within modernity.

I am arguing that the prehistoric, as "second nature," tied to the history of the world as the economic history of three oceans, is subject by the conditions of modernity to a specific aesthetic of revelation, expanding value. I have also argued that this revelation is not of a secret so much as of a public secret, of knowing what not to know, the very basis of being social, and that the manipulation of this labor of negation, as involved by its revelation, implies a specific mix of repression and of expression, what Georges Bataille called nonprofitable "expenditure."⁴³ The chronicle of this mix and its extraordinary tensions is displayed in

42. Kafka, "The Hunter Gracchus," p. 229.

43. See Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr., ed. Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985), pp. 116-29.

yet another tale of Venice and its all too southern secrets, namely, the history of the plague in relation to the love that dare not speak its name in Thomas Mann's 1912 novella, "Death in Venice."⁴⁴

Here the secret of cholera, seeping from the south into the soft underbelly of Europe, is spliced to the private fantasy of Gustav von Aschenbach, an uptight, middle-aged, mentally spent German writer on holiday, smitten by a beautiful boy aged fourteen, also holidaying by the beach in Venice. State authorities stoutly deny the existence of cholera, while busily spraying the canals with carbolic, and the local serving class, waiters and barbers for instance, take pleasure in emitting obscure signals as to death in Venice. It is a city ruled by a secret, a public secret, a secret about secrecy. Its inhabitants know what not to know. It is the intimation of this that haunts von Aschenbach. Finally it is a tweed-clad Englishman who tells him the truth. He is a clerk in a British travel agency, "still young," writes Mann, "with his hair parted in the middle, his eyes close set, and having that sober, honest demeanor which makes so unusual and striking an impression amid the glib knaveries of the south" ("DV," p. 252).

For the secret is overdeterminedly southern. But, at the risk of enormous and enormously forgotten banality, note there can be no south without a north. The secret then is "Asiatic cholera," and its lair is the innermost recess of the Third World—originating in the "sultry morasses of the Ganges delta, rising with the mephitic exhalations of that wilderness of rank useless luxuriance, that primitive island jungle shunned by man, where tigers crouch in the bamboo thickets" ("DV," pp. 252–53).

The secret is not only southern but of the sun—of the sun that Bataille, in the opening pages of *The Accursed Share*, wrote of as emblematic of the principle of exuberant expenditure, which unlike other gifts with their demand to be paid back, *it gives without receiving*.⁴⁵ This is the same principle expressed in Mann's "sultry morass of the Ganges delta" and is even more explicit in the figure of the secret as rising with the exhalations of "that wilderness of rank useless luxuriance." Indeed the dizzying interaction of sun and plantlife is central to Bataille's picture, too; as prelude to his exposition of *general economy* he wrote, "The living organism ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g. an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically."⁴⁶

44. See Mann, "Death in Venice" (1912), *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. David Luke (New York, 1988); hereafter abbreviated "DV."

45. See Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. in 2 (New York, 1988), 1:28.

46. *Ibid.*, 1:21.

Compare with von Aschenbach at the beginning of *Death in Venice* when, caught off balance by the sight of a strange person in the portico of a mortuary chapel in Munich, he is spun into the following fantasy in the form of an hallucinatory seizure.

His imagination, still not at rest from the morning's hours of work, shaped for itself . . . a tropical swampland under a cloud-swollen sky, moist and lush and monstrous, a kind of primeval wilderness of islands, morasses and muddy alluvial channels; far and wide around him he saw hairy palm-trunks thrusting upward from rank jungles of fern, from among thick fleshy plants in exuberant flower; saw strangely misshapen trees with roots that arched through the air before sinking into the ground or into stagnant shadowy-green glassy waters where milk-white blossoms floated as big as plates, and among them exotic birds with grotesque beaks stood hunched in the shallows, their heads tilted motionlessly sideways; saw between the knotted stems of the bamboo thicket the glinting eyes of a crouching tiger; and his heart throbbed with terror and mysterious longing. ["DV," p. 197]

In other words, Bataille's "principle of expenditure," of the universal necessity of humankind to spend without profit, "gloriously or catastrophically," guides this fantasy of fusing the wilderness of rank luxuriance with the compressed figure of concealment of the tiger, wild and magnificent and of course glinty-eyed, crouching in the bamboo thickets. We can almost see one of the *douanier* Henri Rousseau's tigers, vintage 1910, winking at us, its sad wandering eye the most human thing in this swampland of waves and stripes like a prisoner's, blending with the bamboo stalks pressed tight under a silver moon. This is also Elias Canetti's zoomorphic figure of the secret as a wild animal, epitome of a violence made all the more horrible on account of its infinite patience, stalking its prey.⁴⁷

And why the Ganges and the "tropical swampland" with its "primeval wilderness of islands, morasses and muddy alluvial channels"? Conrad has his heart of darkness begin as a mysterious serpentine river emerging from central Africa on a map he saw as a boy in Poland, and Mann in Germany not too many years later has his river, too, in India, as if these waterways are predestined to flow into the northern imagination. After all, it has been largely by virtue of their mighty rivers that Africa, Asia, and the Americas were laid open to the European, who in many places, conducted business right there on the ship's deck and not a step further.

Indeed it is flow and the liquid force of a metamorphosing animality,

47. See Elias Canetti, "Secrecy," *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London, 1962), pp. 290–96.

preestablished by the mysterious force of the Ganges with its sun and wild luxuriance, that comes to inflame von Aschenbach's dreaming that fateful night, when he decides against telling the boy's family of the plague in the hope that in their ignorance they will stay a few more days by the beach. In making the momentous decision not to tell the secret of the plague, so as to conserve his secret fantasy of a troubled love, his nocturnal mind wanders feverishly through a Dionysian fantasy of lust and transformation at the primordial beginning of time itself. When day breaks, the sky clears, and there stands not the tropical swampland with the glinting eye of the tiger, but the beach.

The south would not be what it has to be in this scheme of things concerning secrecies and transgression were it not for its glorious sun and, better still, its beach, where children play building sandcastles and adults play at becoming children, where bright awnings flap in the sultry breeze, bodies are partially stripped of their clothes, and colors leap in the reflections of the sun playing on the water's moving surface. Here the margin between land and sea is where the repression sustaining civilization takes a transgressive dive and where, moreover, it is to be seen doing so. And beyond the beach, the sea, to what in this tale is the empty eternal, the great nothingness into which von Aschenbach's gaze escapes from the rigor his life as a writer demands.

Von Aschenbach's own body, if only he knew it, is to serve as Mann's beachhead, a playground of passion let loose, like line from an angler's reel, only to be jerked into place by dying forces of artistic creativity dependent upon repression. This is the ultimate and terrible cruelty, this image of creativity as the sublimated product of repression. Here on this body as beachhead, Bataille sets a course diametrically opposed to the restricted economy of Freud for whom the north travels south to the beach to stoke the primitive fires of the flesh and then returns to the north to advance the spirit. An age-old pattern, it seems. An eternal return. A geography of the human soul. But what if we one day got stuck and didn't come back? Death in Venice. That's what.

"You see," said a friend in Munich, "Aschenbach has always only lived like *this*," and he closed his fist tightly. "Never like *this*'—and he let his open hand hang" ("DV," p. 201).

As he sinks into the transgressive realm, von Aschenbach tries to make his face younger with lipstick, facial creams, and a cute haircut. At least his face shall grant some physical reality to the fantasy consuming him. This is where his life will now for the first time meet and transcend his art, where life and art will change places, and it must needs be that this fatal encounter will occur on the beach and on the artwork that is the surface of his awakening body, notably on his fake face, window and mask to the soul. Now he is on the beach, where life forms began, but from which people now flee on account of death. He is watching the boy playing his last game in the sand before leaving Venice. A playmate

wrestles the boy to the ground, buries his face in the sand, suffocating him with the cruel force of his knee. “His attempts to shake off the weight of his tormentor were convulsive; they stopped altogether for moments on end and became a mere repeated twitching” (“DV,” p. 262). When finally released the boy walked away, ignoring the calls of his playmate, laughing at first, then anxious, who was brushed aside. This boy is locked in Aschenbach’s gaze. He is walking now into the water, wading to the sand bar. He is slowly pacing back and forth on this narrow strip of un-submerged land divided from the shore by a width of water, an apparition walking as if on water with his floating hair “out there in the sea, in the wind, in front of a nebulous vastness” (“DV,” p. 263). On impulse he turns towards Aschenbach, his eyes seeming to call and beckon to the horizon. He is still. The beach is still. Just them. Everything is frozen. And as Aschenbach struggles to clamber out of his deck chair and project his body into the flight path of his eyes, Mann kills him—and thus contains his writerly fantasy of forbidden love wrought from the water’s edge.

“Will and Wave”

“Will and Wave” is the title Nietzsche gives to a passage in *The Gay Science*, surging with the rhythm and disorder inherent to what I call the Nervous System, always one step ahead of one’s grasp. This of course is writing, dissembling itself in anticipation of its exposure, so as to all the more effectively come to grips with the chameleon we call truth.

So? You mistrust me? You are angry with me, you beautiful monsters? Are you afraid that I might give away your whole secret? Well, be angry with me, arch your dangerous green bodies as high as you can, raise a wall between me and the sun—as you are doing now! Truly, even now nothing remains of the world but green twilight and green lightning. Carry on as you like, roaring with overweening pleasure and malice—or dive again, pouring your emeralds down into the deepest depths, and throw your infinite white mane of foam and spray over them.⁴⁸

The Dionysian impulse for Nietzsche involved mimicry as a form of immersion into the substance of the Other, the notion of mimicry later adopted by Benjamin and Adorno with regards to the aesthetic force and media of representation released by modern life. The sea as it breaks on the shore provides an apt figure for such a mimesis, the profound transformation no less than the chaos of an eternal becoming. By talking to nature, the writer indulges a necessary fantasy in which the waves,

48. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1974), pp. 247–48.

both broken and about to break, have become humanlike, yet distinct from him, so that, within the fusion of self with Other, the writer and the waves maintain the distance of discourse. This involves the fantasy of a secret compact with nature about secrecy, precisely what is necessary to reconfigure the way capitalism has recruited the mimetic faculty as the nature culture uses to create second nature, home of the archaic. “How could I think of betraying you? For—mark my word!—I know you and your secret, I know your kind! You and I—are we not of one kind? You and I—do we not have *one secret*?”⁴⁹

And while the sun is of great importance in his scheme, as it was for Bataille and his pineal eye, the sea is what I remember, my home, my secret (*Heim und Geheimnis*), as much for what it is as for the fluency with which Nietzsche draws upon it for poetic and philosophic inspiration concerning explanation and Being as liquid force. A chance, a chance to make a difference. Walter Kaufmann sees “Will and Wave” as a deliberately purposeless piece of writing, a Dionysian moment in which childish play is allowed a space, as on the beach, just prior to Nietzsche’s first formulation of the eternal return as the sign of meaninglessness and lack of purpose in the apparent design that is world history.⁵⁰ Yet surely the point of such Dionysian “moments” is that they transgress time as well as custom, so as to seem anything but “moments” fixed to a cordoned-off site licensing disconformity? For the beach is precisely the scene where prehistory became human history, as when Nietzsche, citing the enormity of the break with what went before the invention of guilt and instinctual repression, “turning man against himself,” compares it with the fate of sea animals forced to become land animals or perish. “I do not think there has ever been such a feeling of misery on earth, such a leaden discomfort.” Here there is certainly no “lack of design” in human history, and the Dionysian play of will and wave acquires premeditated political force. For the whole point of Nietzsche’s work was to try for “the reverse experiment,” undoing the repression that turned man against himself. It should be possible, “*in principle*—but who has sufficient strength?”⁵¹ No accident, then, that the reverse experiment has to be down there at the water’s edge, edge of history, edge of repression, “turning man against himself,” the most fateful mimetic act of all. Prehistory, as Benjamin kept emphasizing for his cherished “dialectical image,” returns in the form of “second nature,” ensuring that as fantasy overextends itself, turning memories into bodily symptoms and corporeal signs, so a newly buoyant language moves us into the sea as our very bodies might. Returning to Winthrop on the Massachusetts coast in the winter of 1958, Sylvia Plath

49. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

50. Kaufmann, footnote 38, *The Gay Science*, p. 248.

51. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 61, 70.

found it “shrunk, dulled, wrinkled its dense hide: all those rainbow extensions of dreams lost luster, shells out of water, color blanching out.”⁵² Goethe rediscovered the imagination of the child when, at Venice, for the first time in his life he saw the sea and strode along the beach at low tide and found shells. The surf was breaking on the beach in high waves. He loved what he called “the beautiful threshing floor of the sand” left when the waves went out to sea again. “Like a child, I picked up a good many,” these same shells that make Plath despair and ask whether “our minds colored the streets and children then and do so no longer.” She could have been echoing Nietzsche as to the fate of sea animals forced to become land animals or perish. “I do not think there has ever been such a feeling of misery on earth, such a leaden discomfort.” “We must fight,” she went on in her journal; “we must fight to return to that early mind. . . . We must recreate it, even while we measure baking powder for a hurry-up cake and calculate next month’s expenses. A god inbreathes himself in everything. Practice. *Be* a chair, a toothbrush, a jar of coffee from the inside out: *know* by feeling in.”⁵³ Like the poems, the journal highlights fantasy and montage. Burroughs: “I think of words as being alive like animals. . . . Cut the pages and let the words out.” The beach. Something we enjoy, an eternal childhood we continuously lose to green twilight and green lightning, afterimage of waves arching themselves between myself and my sun. Practice.

52. Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York, 1982), p. 182.

53. *Ibid.*

