
II. POSTMODERN THOUGHT

Reticence

Alphonso Lingis
(*Pennsylvania State University*)

Abstract

Words put us in contact not with our own mental images but with persons and things themselves. Yet we do experience the drive to break up and break out of language. Words condense encounters and events; they solidify, encrust the things upon which they are attached. Words empty of their meaning simply by being repeated. They also lose their edge, their force, their tone, their solemnity or their lilt and brightness. Conversation assimilates and generalizes, accumulates commonplaces, comforts and anesthetizes. When thought that discovers ignorance in itself assents to this ignorance, it can know an ecstatic plunge into darkness.

Keywords: Language; words; communication; voice; laughter; other minds; conversation; entropy; repetition; interpretation; ecstasy.

I resolved long ago not to seek knowledge, as others do, but to seek its contrary, which is unknowing. I no longer anticipated the moment when I would be rewarded for my effort, *when I would know at last*, but rather the moment when *I would no longer know, when my initial anticipation would dissolve into NOTHING* [...]. [T]his way of going in the wrong direction on the paths of knowledge — to get off them, not to derive a result that others anticipate — leads to the principle of *sovereignty* of being and of thought, which from the standpoint where I am placed at the moment has this meaning: that thought, subordinated to some anticipated result, completely enslaved, ceases to be in being *sovereign*, that only unknowing is *sovereign*. [...] The thought that comes to a halt in the face of what is sovereign rightfully pursues its operation to the point where its object dissolves into NOTHING, because, ceasing to be useful, or subordinate, it becomes *sovereign* in ceasing to be. — Bataille¹

¹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vols. II

1. The Voice that Makes Contact

What an extraordinary power, this power of the voice to put us in contact, not with our own mental images but with persons and things themselves! To enter into contact with someone whose physical body we see is not to conceptually grasp his or her identity and respect his or her boundaries and inner space. Greeting someone with “Hey man!,” the cocky tone of those words hail in that individual a man, not a student, a waiter, or a stranger. It is first by the tone of voice that we make contact and communicate. We catch on to the urgent, frantic, panicky, exultant, or astonished tone of the one who addresses us; her voice resounds in our own. To answer the frenetic tone of a young person who bursts into our office with the stentorian tone of settled and regulated officious life is, before we refuse to understand really what she will tell us, to refuse her tone — to refuse her.

We catch on to the purring of the kitten, the frantic cries of the bird, the snorting of the distrustful horse, the complaint of the caged puma. We pick up the tone of the blackbird marsh, the hamlet meditating in the Himalayan mountainscape, the shifting dunes under twilight skies. As our words form, the tone of these things and events resounds in our voice. The pacing and accents of our phrases express the muffled calm or the frenetic movement, the rhythm and periodicity or jerks and explosions of the things and events. Our words articulate the agitated tone of a column of ants, the syncopation of the workers unloading a ship, the purple majesty of the Pacific Ocean under dawning Madagascar skies. Our words articulate the tone of a cave, a cathedral, a dance, the pacing, the rhythms, the expanse, the silence.

Words put us in touch with things. “Come, I’ll take you out to meet the great whites!” the old fisherman tells us. As he speaks to us, our attention is drawn neither to images in his mind nor to images in ours, but to the sharks themselves. When we go out to the ocean with him, he shouts: “There they are!” and his words make us see them, shadows deep in the turbulent waters. He recognizes individual sharks whose bodies, whose ways he knows; he identifies a shark he has not seen before. We descend into the ocean with him and meet these very sharks that his words on the boat have introduced us to and presented to us. And when, now, we speak

of them, it is neither concepts nor images in our minds, but those very sharks that our words make present again to us.

The one who says with conviction “I am a dancer!” “I am a doctor!” has the conviction that the words that put forth what the dance hall floor and lighting are or what the surgical instruments are, are words that can be counted on about things that can be counted on. The properties and behaviors of things are retained in words. With words we stay in touch with things.

Words do not simply label things we see and touch; they invoke and reveal things. They bring out traits in the complexity of a thing, map out relations in the density of the setting, they focus our attention, lead us to see contexts, sequences, and interactions. They slow down and intensify the contact our bodies are making with things and events or accelerate them, turn them in new directions, focus the eyes and the hearing or let them drift. Chanting, intoning, blessing things, words enhance things, bring forth their glory. Insulting people, cursing events, words unleash forceful blows against them, mortifying them, wounding them.

Words work an artistry on things, that of metaphor and metonymy. They reflect qualities, halos, colors from other things onto this thing. They endow things and events with names, titles, nicknames.

2. The Urge to Silence the Overflow of Words

Philosophers, those free, that is idle, citizens in the merchant ports of ancient Greece, who spent their time conversing with one another and with foreigners, came to esteem this activity as noble. Language came to appear to them as the instrument for establishing the truth of nature, society, values, and to be distinctly human. Yet there has also been a succession of devoted and serious people who have run up against language as against a wall standing between them and reality. We have not been able to dismiss Zen Buddhists or Western mystics from the canonical figures of our culture, though we know less than ever what to do with them. Yet have not each of us, at different times, felt language, all of language, as an obstacle in our way?

We have recourse to the geology books that instruct us about the seven continents and the continental plates and drift, about the mountain ranges, glaciers and polar ice-caps, forests and rivers and the oceans that cover 70% of earth’s surface. We have recourse to the chemistry, physics, and biology books that inform us about the constitution and behav-

ior of inanimate matter and the 400,000 species of plants, 28,400 species of fish, 9,500 species of ants. But at a certain moment we feel such an urge to go see the tropical rain forest and see some of those 350,000 species of beetles. And once there, we feel an irresistible compulsion to stand silent in the misty forest, to snuff out the babble of names and explanations that buzz in our heads, to tune in to the cacophony of unnamable twangs and cries.

Because being the sole witness of but one mind, our own, being unable to perceive the invisible sensations and thought processes of another mind, is intolerable, we avidly listen to the words with which others express their intentions, ideas about things, feelings, and desires. There is a whole literature devoted to the conscious and unconscious psychic states, inhibitions, censorships that are revealed through words and slips of the tongue. There is a whole profession of counselors and therapists who urge us to be up front about sex with our dates, to talk with our lovers and spouses about our relationship, to explain our hurt feelings and frustrations with friends. But which of us have not felt a vehement need to stop all this talk, to just shut up about it all! To go for a ride and just look at the traffic and the crowds, to spend an evening just eating dinner and listening to some music.

Conversation assimilates and generalizes, accumulates commonplaces, comforts and anesthetizes. People who talk all the time strike us as shallow. Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke with exasperation of thought and feeling slipping away while making conversation at a social gathering: "Its progress, more rapid than my ideas, forcing me almost always to speak before thinking, has often suggested to me stupidities and ineptitudes that my reason disapproved and my heart disavowed at the moment they escaped from my mouth, but which, preceding my own judgement, could not be reformed by its censure."² Launched into conversation, the words, sequences, anecdotes, repartees, and the civilized, witty but polite, and entertaining, rhetoric that governs them scuttle on, and pull us from any real thoughts we may have and from the uneasiness, attractions, desires, lusts, anxiety, mounting pleasure of our bodies. When someone in flesh and blood confronts us, we immediately feel uneasy, anxious, some stirrings of lust rise up at the sight of this flesh, this

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes. Tome 1: Les Confessions: Autres textes autobiographiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 1033.

skin warm and sensitive; we at once start talking, uttering conventional greetings, make commonplace remarks about the weather and the traffic, ask a question that leads to a neutral line of conversation. And in doing so we feel ourselves taking a distance, starting a ping pong game of language across that distance, keeping the individual flesh and blood reality of the other at a distance.

“Know thyself!” Socrates instructed. “The unexamined life is not worth living!” he warned. There are whole sections on self-analysis and character management in bookstores. Which of us has not taken up some of the books of psychoanalysis and set out to apply it to ourselves, analyzing our childhood, our states of depression, our frustrations, our relationships, our goals? I have a good friend, a very intelligent, very successful lawyer, handsome, charming, likeable, who, during a bout of depression after his wife suddenly dropped him for an unemployed Greek she met in Greenwich Village, went to a psychotherapist for help. Seven years later he was still going, six times a week. I finally asked him why, since he is so intelligent and successful and surrounded by devoted friends and available women, he felt the need for so much medical help. He said that he had found psychoanalysis itself fascinating, the unending dredging up, inspecting, interpreting of dreams, fantasies, long-forgotten incidents from childhood. Do not most of us not only get bored by this exorbitant attention to minute events in our own little ego, but find the verbalization of the stream of consciousness positively exasperating? We feel a compulsion to silence it all, to just look at things and engage in activities without this inner commentary.

We have known what it is like to live in the complete absence of words. As infants we reached out to make contact with what was being offered to us or what we saw at a distance, reached out to kiss our mother or to suckle her breast; we covered our face, pushed our hand back from something being offered to us. Then we came to use sounds to refer to things, first to joyously acknowledge, or to demand, their being given or to joyously acknowledge, or to demand, their being gone, then to acknowledge or demand individuals and details. The sounds came to designate meanings detached from things, in the absence of things. This at first global, and then increasingly articulated system of signs and their meanings extended a grid between us and the whole of our environment.

3. Words that Level Things

You glance about the room; it would take the rest of the day to put in words all that was visible in that one glance. Words condense encounters and events. They delimit patterns, cut out, divide, oppose. What we possess with words are the skeletons of things in chains. To retain for ourselves and for others the lilting melody of a blackbird, the charm of the Indian village in the High Andes, we assemble words that designate features, that isolate relationships, that contrast and negate. In bringing out connections between things, words overlook the force with which things are concentrated in themselves. However completely a building or a person has been described to us, the moment we face that building or are face to face with that person, there is shock, astonishment, and discovery.

Words which condense the complex colors of a pheasant or an evening cloud, which drag over upon situations names and classifications from other situations only the general lines of which are remembered, enable us to pass over things and situations. Once an animal we came upon is labeled and classified, what it is doing identified, the animal seems summed up, encapsulated, its nature and behavior made transparent in a concept. Once a person gets categorized, once a situation gets defined in some words, we withdraw from all the strands that we felt pulling on us in different directions; our mind moves on to somebody else or back to our own business.

In each of us the streaming of tones, the patterns, the sounds, the density, resistance, and resilience of things, are folded in with expectations and fears, thoughts, fantasies, and feelings; each of us is an organism and locus of a process of integration. When we formulate pieces or segments of our experience in words, the words are common words, formulating recurrent patterns accessible to anyone. "Each word exchanged, each line printed, establish a communication between two interlocutors, leveling what until then was a divergence in information," Claude Lévi-Strauss says.³ Formulating the pieces or segments of our experience in words is a process of disintegration, reduction to inertia, entropy.

For a sound to count as a word, abstraction is made of its material qualities — the tone and pitch of voice, the pacing, resonance, and tim-

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London: Penguin, 2012), 413.

bre with which it is uttered, as abstraction is made from vertical or Palmer-slanted when it is written and from the Courier 10 or 12 typeface when it is recorded on a computer screen. It is as a repeatable form that a sound or visual pattern can function as a word. It can then be taken to signify a meaning which is taken to be the same whenever, wherever it is invoked by that word.

There is really no first occurrence of a word in a language: from the first it was formed as repeatable. And a word does not really die out; if its use becomes obsolete, it can always be understood by scholars and can be revived by writers who put it back into use.

Every name survives its owner: Elsbeth's husband Julius Benway is dead, but his name is still there, intact, functioning as it did when he was alive. Indeed, when he was alive, his name functioned as it will when he is dead. The name is situated in a sphere of deathlessness and designates its bearer as though he were not at the present moment of his lifetime. Each statement survives its object: nothing changes in the meaning or the truth of the statement "Elsbeth went to Reno and got a face-lift" after Elsbeth returned to the Hamptons, nor after she died.

Words thus solidify, encrust the things upon which they are attached. Once something is named a "porcupine fish," a "mongrel dog," a "rogue lion," a "shack," a "professor," or a "wife," it, he, or she is barnacled, plasticized by that name. Words are immortal, Hegel said, but they kill the things they take hold of. They are pyramids, he said, markers which stand solid and still over things, but what they enclose are corpses. Even as the voice fixes its word "weed" on a plant, the plant is pushing its roots afar, preparing to open its buds, to give birth to offspring. The word orders the eyes so that they do not see all that. The word "slum" is a funnel put over the eyes so that they do not see the old woman exhausted by labor preparing to die surrounded by her disconsolate husband, the child being born as full of as unpredictable visions and talents as any child in the most opulent of gated communities, the birth-days being celebrated, the living room walls covered with photographs as precious as the most exalted of memories.

4. The Weakening of Words

Sounds uttered as words are repeatable. Words are indefinitely repeatable, but words empty of their meaning simply by being repeated. They lose their edge, their force, their tone, their solemnity or their lilt and

brightness, and their meaning. We got stuck in a foreign airport for ten hours, with nothing whatever to do to while away the time, and so sat down to reread the novel that so gripped us reading it on the plane, and found it already so flat we could not get through the first chapter. The most universally accepted principles, judgments, and values are the most empty of meaning. “Thoughts thought too much no longer think anything,” Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote.⁴ What is emptier than the watchwords “freedom,” “democracy,” “justice,” “virtue”? The things and events encrusted with words lose their sheen and edge and become empty of meaning. As Emil Cioran writes,

Words too much repeated weaken and die. The mind would need an infinite dictionary, but its means are limited to a few words trivialized by use. Thus what is new requires strange combinations, requires words put to unexpected functions: originality reduces to the torture of the adjective and the suggestive inappropriateness of metaphors [...]. A word foreseen is a dead word; only its artificial use breathes into it a new vigor, and then people adopt it, use it, and soil it. The mind has to be precious if it is to exist at all. [...] What we call our life by contrast with life itself is an incessant creation of fashions with the help of speech used artificially; it is a proliferation of futilities, without which we would expire in a yawn. [...] If man invents new physics, it is not so much to reach an explanation of nature as to escape the boredom of a universe understood, habitual, vulgarly unreduceable, to which he arbitrarily attributes many dimensions, like the adjectives we project on an inert thing which we are tired of seeing and putting up with as it was seen and endured by the stupidity of our ancestors or our immediate forebearers.⁵

In order to maintain interest in ourselves, we had to concoct new metaphors — spirit, soul, child of God made in the image and likeness of God, consciousness, *Dasein*, being-in-the-world, nihilation, now the brain as a biological computer. These strange new words jolt the mind and make it see itself as new and astonishing. But all these metaphors undergo the fatality of all words that get used too much; they become dead metaphors, trivialized and sterile. In the nineteenth century, the Romantics used the

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. & trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 119.

⁵ Emil M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade, 2012), 89-90.

moon and consumption (tuberculosis) to make the poet appear mystical and governed by fate. Now use these words in a poem and you make yourself ridiculous. Cioran foresees the time when we will have exhausted the possibilities of the dictionary, and we will no longer see ourselves as something new and astonishing in the material universe; and be confronted with our life as commonplace, trivial, and boring.

5. Servile Words

The word that designates an entity or event continues to do so when that event has passed or that entity transformed or destroyed. The word is a safeguard against loss. Discourse is a continual operation of appropriation, of possession. Appropriation, possession is not an innocent activity of keeping things near us, protected and flourishing under our care.

People who live by words — academics, novelists, television anchormen and talk show hosts, comedians — call what they do “work.” A derisible attribution, when one compares what they do with what telephone linemen, road construction workers, plumbers, factory workers in Haiti, and peasants in China do. Yet though just talking is withdrawal from real work and writing, as we say, requires leisure, there is something in the nature of discourse that makes it akin to work.

Work begins when we detach something — a stick, a chipped stone — from the continuity of our environment and envision how it could be put in another place, foresee how its solidity could convey our force so as to detach something further. The passage of time is a constant reminder of irrevocable loss. The future is grasped as a compensation for decay and disintegration of things in the environment.

The worker detaches himself from the continuity of his environment, and makes of himself a tool. He isolates his eyes, his hands and arms from the whole of his body that rests in itself and uses them as causes to produce effects, implements to reach ends. His senses cease to be disinterested; his consciousness is directed by an anticipation of the future.

His mind is made to serve; it is driven by a movement that turns it to the beyond, the absent, the future. It experiences its present and presence as wanting, failing. His mind makes itself a means for an end that incessantly moves further. The state of mind in which its present and presence are subordinate to future results is a state of servility.

To begin to speak is to launch a trajectory of time. To utter a noun is to anticipate the verb and the verbal complement that will make up a

statement. A statement calls for a sequel, another sentence that qualifies it, that builds upon it, draws out a consequence, that evokes an objection to it, justifies it or supplies evidence for it. As the task or goal gives its sense to a tool, so the verb and verbal complement gives its sense to the noun and the clarification or justification gives its sense to the statement. And as the tool and the manipulation have to be continuously lined up with the task, so grammatical rules have to regulate the progression of words in the statement and logical rules the progression of its clarification or justification.

Words subordinate each thing and event that presents itself to something further, to something absent, to utility, to a goal. To put words on things and events is already to make them serve.

Each of the words has its sense and its use by contrast with other words. One can be satisfied with a statement, one can be satisfied, for practical purposes, with a clarification or justification. But one remains aware that to require that one's statement be taken as true commits one to clarifications of justifications to which there is no end. Discourse is a cadence of projects, initiatives and of the advance representations of initiatives.

There is no last word, there is no System, no Absolute Knowledge, no Unified Theory of Everything; nowadays theorists, but already Socrates, praise and prize this situation, this unquenchable restlessness of the spirit. Each of its states become vulnerable and dependent. But is it not an inmost experience of servility, the mind driven by a force that makes every present and every presence serve, makes them subordinate to future, absent states that when they are reached will be subordinated to further absent, future states?

6. In the Labyrinth of Language

Pursuing statements as they open upon more statements, questions, objections, may lead us further afield in the outlying world. But words and statements can also keep us within language. To specify the meaning of a word we name the words with which it contrasts, and to specify the meaning of those words we would have to name the constellations of other words with which they contrast. To really pin down the meaning of a word, we have to determine the meanings of other words, and to determine their meaning we have to pin down still other words. The question "what does that mean?" leads us on and on until all meanings hover before us and vacillate.

This woman I met and danced with in a bar in Cairo came to bed with me. I spent the day asking myself if she will come again. The next night she again agreed to come to my room and to spend the night with me. The next day I am bothered by the question what does this mean? Is she really drawn to me? Is she faking orgasm? Is she playing some sort of game with me? Does she expect presents, money, does she want to tie me to her so that I will bring her to America? Is she aiming for some kind of triumph in seducing a white man, an American? And what about me? Is this a serious affair, which I will have to explain to my wife when I get back? Infidelity means violating my marriage vows to my wife. But what does marriage really mean? And what does having a wife, what does saying "my wife" mean? I seem to have arrived at a point where every question about the meaning of words leads to just asking about the meaning of other words, a place where there are no facts, just interpretations of interpretations. The way the question "What did this semester I took off from school and hitch-hiked across the country mean to me?" leads to "What is the meaning of my staying in school?" "What is the meaning of the life I am leading here?" And, finally, "What is the meaning of life?" which now hovers over me as vaguely menacing and unanswerable demand.

In Witold Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, the narrator comes back to his lodging to find a sparrow hung by the neck on a length of wire in the garden. Somebody did this. What does it mean? Is he being spied on? Followed? With what intent? Then inside he notices what looks like an arrow vaguely marked on the ceiling. Before long, he sees or thinks he sees signs everywhere. August Strindberg's *Inferno* invokes an individual haunted by the specter of meaning which is everywhere, equivocal and requiring interpretation. The existence of this floating, unfixable, realm of meaning obsesses him, makes unanswerable demands on him, besieges him, until he can no longer leave his room.

7. The Cruelty of Words

Demanding words, oppressive words. Abrasive words, stinging words, biting words, cutting words. Words constrict us, lacerate us, humiliate us, sicken us, mortify us.

Words order, organize the landscape about us, and orient, direct, order our thoughts, our reveries, our plans, our decisions. Are not order-words verdicts, death sentences? When a father orders his son "You will

do this,” “You will not do that,” he is cutting off a trajectory of life. The son who obeys will cut others down in turn (when the new employee zealously attends to the regulations and orders, the other employees feel he is restricting their space for manoeuvre). Death is not only a limit, an end, in time; it is also a limit in space. One ceases to move across space. And every order-word limits the space in which we live. The father orders his son: “Don’t touch that.” “You keep out of there.” The cue that orders the talk of the group, pack, gang, milieu, “society,” or rational community, scientific discipline or technological team and orders one’s entry into a practicable space threatens exclusion and effacement from it. The one who is ordered to speak in his own name is being isolated, cut apart, cut down.

And while the words someone utters hardly disturb the air and vanish from it without leaving a trace, they do not depart from the one who puts them out. They crystallize inside the fibers of the brain, gagging the youthful surges of wonder and awe which first discovered the epiphany of the sparkling and ephemeral unlabeled things in the world. “Thoughts thought too much no longer think anything.” A philosopher’s words, no doubt because they are the most abstract, extending over the broadest sweep of things, are the least troubled by emergences, births, mutations, etiologies, and small deaths among those things. At the end of his life a philosopher’s soul has nothing but principles, convictions, deep inner cuts that have long solidified, his mental life constricted and enfeebled by so many self-inflicted scars.

8. At the Limits of What Words Say

We can feel a nostalgia for the time before the network of signs elicited our initiations and the advance representations of our initiatives. But the practice of discourse itself eventually reaches an understanding of the transitional character of its component entities and arrangements, and the abstract character of the most exacting and detailed verbal representations. The understanding that represents, appropriates, possesses things with words discovers how it has lost contact with them, senses how beyond all its explanations and systems there is an unknown universe out there, discovers ignorance in itself. It is language itself that leads us to the depths and to the frontiers beyond which its words no longer take hold, where our mind finds itself empty, open upon nothing words can grasp.

In moments of austere lucidity, the thought that discovers ignorance in itself assents to this ignorance, plunges into it, sacrifices itself. It lets go in an ecstatic plunge into darkness. No longer subordinate to some anticipated result, its ecstasy is the ecstasy of being an utterly self-propelled and sovereign movement.

9. Black Holes in Language

“Language as a whole,” Georges Bataille writes, “is ended only by the word God, — or by words with a *sacred* meaning, ultimately devoid of intelligible meaning (hence of any meaning), or by the prohibition of their use.”⁶ Sacred words are black holes in language. But in the Judeo-Christian West today the word “God” is very much in use. The term “God” no longer designates the ineffable, but, in theology, an absolutely substantial reality and, in the practice of believers, an indestructible reality invoked in times of death, natural calamities, and war. American money, the now global means of exchange in the world of work and economy is stamped with the words “In God we trust.” The name of God has become commonplace and has lost its transgressive power, because God, like any other object, has come to represent a substantial reality that we can attain and use.

The words then that are “sacred” — separate and separating — words which function as black holes where meaning comes to an end, words whose use is prohibited — are the words we call “profane.” The word “shit” designates waste cast out; the word “fuck” when used as a profanity designates not the reproductive and pleasurable sexual act but a nonreproductive release of energies that humiliate the one who is penetrated and violated in his or her integrity. We use these words to reject explanations and justifications. These words are not only aggressions against the machinery of the working world and against the self-determination of persons but verbal aggressions against language.

Discursive language requires the domestication of the violent elements that threaten meaning. The preeminent instance of violence is death. In order to contain its transgressive potential, death must be given a meaning; it is taken to signify sleep or passage to another life. But the bald word “dead” erupts in this talk as an utterance signifying nothingness.

⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vols. II & III, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1991), 382.

But there are also forms of language that are noninstrumental, not efficacious factors in projects and work, not themselves forms of work, and not instruments of communication.

There is, there has been from the beginning, poetry. Poetry is not the construction of extremely refined and precise accounts of things, events, and mental states. Poetry is allusive and elliptical; its most subtle and precise phrasings put one in the presence of reality in its material singularity by making one feel not how much there is still to be said about the most familiar things, events, and mental states, but how all that has already been said and what is here being said reveals the presence of the most familiar things, events, and mental states as abysses of the unappropriated and unrepresentable. Poetry retains a sacred character which the language of religiosity has lost. There is an unavowed kinship between poetry and profanity. Poets recognize the poetic character of inner-city street talk. Though the world of work and power maintains writers to produce hymns of religious and military glory and songs of everlasting love for the longings of youth, the poets write their seductive contemplations of the outcast and the abject.

In fact, does not something like an opacity, a black hole lurk in all words? At the kitchen window, we see and say: A spider is spinning its web. There is no question but that these are the right words. But at the core of those words — spinning, web — is there not an opacity, where the words are not simple windows upon the spider out there and its web, where the words do not simply diagram the inner structure of those things, but where the words themselves take form like opaque things? *L'araignée file sa toile*. There is something inexpressive in the words as brief and passing things.

10. The Writer and His Written Words

As we distinguish hymn-writers for churches, armies, and political campaigns and successful song-writers from poets, so we distinguish the producers of texts and of information from those identified with the barren word “writers.”

To be sure, writers write meaningful words, and do so with a meticulous care and rigor that spoken conversation never has. But writers write of things unknown and unseen by their readers, things their readers will never encounter. The words only point to things and events in their irremediable absence.

Though the writer is the sole concrete reality upon which they are suspended, the writer himself disappears in his writing. One forgets oneself, one even loses sight of one's intention in starting to write; one becomes attentive only to the way the explanation has to be developed, the way the description has to be completed, the way the story has to be told. Kafka said he became a writer when he no longer wrote "I." There is a specific sober euphoria in the writer who thus divests himself of his identity. As the writer writes, he exists as the source of these words that leave him and which he can never recuperate, not even in reading them himself. Writers do not read their own books. They will indeed go over the manuscript, ruthlessly striking out phrases that were put in willfully, then attentive for the words that the language and the thought of the text themselves require. When the book is published, the writer cannot really read it for its sense.

The writer is not indulging in "self-expression"; it is the reader who speaks in the writer, who maintains in the writer the course of the discourse intended for him. Without the reader awaiting the words of the writer, the reader who thus loves the written text and will forget the author, without the presence and insistence of the reader the writer could write nothing. For a reader, the writer is just someone he or she has not met and most likely never will. The writer's name, identity, and personal history do not change anything of what the reader reads. As the reader reads, he or she loses sight of his or her room, his or her wants and practicable projects, his or her own emotional and vocational history. The writer and the reader are but two voices in the dark, the writer's voice reaching his reader perhaps after years, what the reader has to say, how he responds to the writer's voice never reaching him.

11. Ecstasies

We can experience this empty state of mind, gaping open upon nothing words can grasp, as a state of confusion and anxiety. But when thought that discovers ignorance in itself assents to this ignorance, plunges into it, and sacrifices itself, it can know an ecstatic plunge into darkness. There are many moments, and many forms of such ecstasy.

Thought is not only a succession of initiatives relating, connecting, elaborating concepts, elaborating phrases. There is a phase of raw exposure to things and events, a phase of hesitation, finding oneself disconcerted, bewildered, when thought is in suspense, immobile.

Thought weighs down on the things, and the weight of things weighs down on thought. This pondering is not an intentionality, and not a reflexive movement. It is a letting oneself undergo the impact of this thing or event.

There is in the heart of a thing a concentration, there where it is. But at the same time to be there is to be exposed. A stone is there, posited, in position, posed, positive. A tree, rising from the ground, is exposed to the sun and to the winds and the storms and chainsaws. Its roots in the ground are exposed to the moisture, funguses, moles, rocks that shift, the spade that cuts. An orchid flower blossoming in a crotch of that tree is at the disposal of the orchid plant, of its inclination to nourish that blossom, its inclination to propagate itself. The blossom is inclined toward the light. It spreads its throat and frilled petals. Something that takes place, that comes to pass, diagrams a certain direction. There is innocence, youth, and adventure in things.

The thought pondering things and events, exposed to the impact of their weight, is lifted off them by the movement of discourse positing terms, relating, connecting, elaborating them, elaborating phrases. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry cherished the rare moments of maximum focusing, centering, and integration. He knew them as a pilot in night-flying: then he found himself wholly given over to his task, no distractions, no marginal preoccupations, all his sensibilities alert, his thoughts one with his body. Saint-Exupéry described these times not only as times of maximum intensity, but also times of supreme exhilaration. And a sense of really existing — he felt himself really existing in a sense everyday life does not give. This focused and integral mobilization of all his powers did not put him in possession of a segment of reality immobilized in its presence, but instead to the rush of the wind, the flickering and streaming terrestrial and celestial lights, the flow of the night. The maximum focusing, centering, and integration of our sensibility and perception reveals how illusory is appropriation.

When an anticipated conclusion of an explanation or a narrative breaks into nonsense, when a painstaking construction or operation abruptly self-destructs, one is left with the naked things, condensed in themselves. Before the breakdown of meaning into absurdity, the collapse of efficacious work efforts, one can be left with a wretched sense of impotence. But one's forces now cut off from work, free, can sense their powers to dance intoxicated over the naked things with peals of

laughter. Laughter is sovereign pleasure, pleasure of a gratuitous release of energies.

Tears and grieving disconnect the future and recognize that the force and meaning of the past has come to an end. The forces of life hold on with strength and will to the present in all its irrevocable loss, inconsolable with words and projects. Tragic art holds humans in thrall to losses that they themselves have not known.

It is not first in speaking informatively to another that we cease to deal with him or her as an instrument or obstacle, and recognize his or her subjectivity. It is in laughter and tears that we have the feeling of being there for the others. We do not laugh alone and for ourselves alone. In a foreign airport, the language of passengers we do not understand makes them strangers to us. Then a designer-dressed matron comes stalking about giving orders, then whap! suddenly slips on the polished floor and her voice stops in the thump of her ass. Our laughter rebounds in the laughter of the others about us and theirs in us, and we understand their laughter and understand them and understand they are people of our kind. Laughter breaks out as a current of intense communication between oneself and someone on the sidewalk you pass who is looking at a kitten trying to catch hold of a ball and tumbling over itself. We do not weep alone and for ourselves alone. Weeping opens the heights and the depths that enable us to see the pain and death of all that lives. If we can weep over what we have done it is because we can weep with others who weep over us.

Music and dance, that movement that is not going anywhere, that relaunches itself of its own rhythms, break completely with the purposiveness of work. Comedy celebrates the reversal of hierarchies, and intoxication makes all utterances absurd and all activities farce. Feasting breaks with the eating for the sake of nourishment and consumes gratuitously the resources gathered by work. Combat, contests, and play discharge our forces without achieving results. The ecstasy in them is the reverse of the appropriative movement in work and in discourse; their inner movements are expropriative and exhilarating, disconnections of the present from the directives of the past and concerns for the future. Eroticism — individual or disindividuating, spiritual or sensual, delicate or corrupt, cerebral or violent — issues in orgasm, that generalized laughter of the organism.