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## A Walking Tour of Light

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# The *Word Hoard*

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## A Walking Tour of Light by Leif Schenstead-Harris

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand,” said Alice.

“It gets easier further on,” Humpty Dumpty replied.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, 81

### I

I often become confused when faced with a text that asks me in to think about language and about structure—neither an especially easy topic—and I find it helpful to walk when I’m confused, mindful of the duplicitous nature of confusion itself. Jacques Derrida, unhelpfully, offers a forked-tongue observation about the subject—or, at least, about confusion (that may be the subject of this tour): the “significance of ‘confusion’ is confused, at least double” (“Des Tours” 105). Two signifiers under one sign: the contending thoughts here are, at least, the confusion of tongues and the confusion of structures and communities, constructs Derrida later observes are themselves fluid. Since “no natural stability is ever given...there is only stabilization in process” (*Given Time* 95). Process, movement, walking: on the subject of the Aran islanders, cartographer and writer Tim Robinson comments that his writing “will lead in their footsteps, not at their penitential trudge but at an inquiring, digressive, and wondering pace” (25). In similar fashion I walk and perversely do not think of

how the name of confusion and the name of God are woven throughout the story of Babel.<sup>1</sup> Rooney’s thoughtful Genesis raises questions of light, and I’ll follow those, or, at least, I’ll walk after them. Even though there is nothing spectacular about the present meandering of thought and feet, Derrida refuses to give me leave or peace: “Everything is done and everything happens while walking” (*Given Time* 133).<sup>2</sup> The worst of friends, as in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*: we go everywhere together, Derrida and I, since the beginning of my wandering career as a graduate student three years ago. (“And that is why John Divney and I became inseparable friends and why I never allowed him to leave my sight for three years,” O’Brien, 18.)

### II

Beginning to walk, initial terms seem clear. Community and dissent are predicated on the premises of speech itself—this is a thesis of “1984: Genesis Upside Down.” And yet in a dissenting spirit, following Rooney’s linguistic comments, we may be tempted to ask: what of forbidden, naive single-speak? And what of Babellian glossolalia? Are there differences between the Adamic language of naming and the glossolalia Roman Jakobson terms the “apex of babble”—what Daniel Heller-Roazen deems the limitless “phonic powers of the prattling child” (9)? Such prattling confusion, such non-speaking is uncannily close to the deconstructionist’s “unthin-

king,” to appropriate a significant term Rooney situates in “univocal traditional interpretations and equivocal deconstructionist interpretations.” Unthinking is perhaps unspeaking and so produces words that “would be only an echo, of another speech and of something other than speech: an echolalia, which guarded the memory of the indistinct and immemorial babble [Babel] that, in being lost, allowed all languages to be” (Heller-Roazen 12). (Unspeaking itself may mean becoming mute in the face of a bright sun.) Walking into this alleyway we hear echoes of Brian Rotman, who writes that “acting mute is becoming infant, and as such is understandable as part of a willed accession to the state of pre-speech... what is involved in such a move is not a ‘return’ or any kind of regression, but a reconfiguration of the present by alte-ring its genesis” (49). Ultimately, this preambulatory (or is it perambulatory?) movement has given us a familiar observation: community is renegotiated by speechless, silent dissent, even at the beginningend when genesis looks to be untouchably far away. Some arguments can be won by Sphinx-mimicry, the posing of a riddle couched in terms of silence and which, if answered, may only open to further troubles. Other riddles, however, find themselves solved like the Gordian knot.

Walking on, Rooney ends his beginning by asking us to look toward the sun, “the temporal ordering of worldly light and the illumination of God’s universal chronological structure” (90). If we continue to search for the “further on” Humpty Dumpty carelessly promises (we hunt dissent but negotiate the usual processes of illumination, reason’s light), we could pass by the countryside which Derek Mahon, an Irish poet of the later twentieth century, describes in a walking poem of his own, “Four Walks in the Country Near Saint-Brieux.” That this errant Irishman spends time in Brittany is enough of a mys-

tery at present (unless the Saint-Brieux in question is that of central Saskatchewan near Lake Lenore—beautiful, rugged country, if I recall correctly), but Mahon’s lines pose further questions to Orwell’s dystopic English ruins that are so fascinating and generative:

Morning

No doubt the creation was something like this  
A cold day breaking on silent stones,  
Slower than time, spectacular only in size.  
First there is darkness, then somehow light;  
We call this day, and the other night,  
And watch in vain for the second of sunrise.  
(1-6)

Coming dangerously close to the transcendental banality of equating time’s passing with endless circular repetition (substitute “second sunrise” for “second of sunrise”), Mahon’s mannered quietude in the face of everyday genesis calls us from the darkness of night to look for that specific moment when light strikes, when a distorted repetition of “the creation” brings with it that sudden vision of the things that are, the cold day, our still, “silent stones.” A sudden revelation of light—is this how creation was?

Let’s pass from Brittany’s cold stones to the Caribbean’s warmth, for it is pleasant to be in warm places. Here the light becomes confusing, however: Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* suggests that vision is distortion, and that language, or at least a translucent language faithful to representation, could only be possible to the subject of light. Perhaps this possibility happens in the moment of everyday creation Mahon has identified? (Yet we should note that moving from Mahon’s old world of Brittany to Walcott’s new world Caribbean seeks the Adamic time before Babel’s destruction.) As Walcott has it, the sun

is the only site of pure vision, and all else is metaphor, wounded signs haunted by their absent signified. “Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow” Walcott asks, “swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone, / as fresh as the sea wind?” (*Omeros* 271). Paul Breslin, a temporary walking companion, glosses these lines: “from the sun’s perspective, you would need no shadow, for the shadow would be covered by the object itself, fully bathed in light” (20). Such a perspective would ask that time stands still in one beautiful, translucent moment—Mahon’s “second of sunrise”—as our eyes reach towards a language of the sun’s radiant blindness, as Helen’s sandals swing.

We unfortunately have no time to linger with wonders or even the sea wind on this walking tour, for the darkness is coming. Something odd happens to metaphor itself, in fact, as we watch it closely: the tables turn. In David Punter’s words, “[a]s we observe the metaphor, it swings around like a coin revealing its obverse side; we see that the metaphor is itself a cover story for the processes of history” (123). A sunny perspective holds beneath it the umbral discourses Rooney describes as the temporal foundations of “imposed psycho-spatial boundaries” that form the spectacular eternal present of *1984* (100). What moves between this light from above and the darkness below? We could walk further with Walcott and ask for the blindness when visible lines of community blur and the perceptual distortions are absent. Posing his work’s name as a question and a wound, Walcott’s narrator asks, “*Omeros*, when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?” (271). As well to ask for the music of silence, the bliss of an unavowable community. Eyes closed! Fingers crossed!

### III

Rooney closes his article by invoking the equivocal, antithetical word as a discourse of censorship turned against itself, the coin of echoing language rightly proved duplicitous at the boundary line which forms its core (103). At this point of the tour, having entered a bit of a haze myself, I remember a line from one of South African J.M. Coetzee’s essays on censorship and the darkness of an apartheid state: “It has been one of the linguistic practices of totalitarianism to send out coded messages whose meaning is known to all parties, and then to use the censors to enforce a literal interpretation of them, at least in the public arena” (217). These coded messages change as easily as do the faces of a coin. Even equivocal language carries volatile force when community is enforced over the brittle protestations of ambiguity. Yet this closely held dialectic between slaves and revolutionaries moves away from what is easily forgotten—the unnamed peoples of *1984* not part of Winston and Julia’s influential if persecuted class, excluded from language and from language’s ambiguous nature. Walter Benjamin—an excellent walking companion, incidentally—calls these the “unforgettable” who live in abstract singularity:

without memorial and memory, and perhaps even without witness, [but whose life] must remain unforgotten. It cannot be forgotten. This life remains, at the same time, the abiding, without container and form. And “unforgettable,” by its meaning, says more than that we cannot forget it; it points to something in the essence of the unforgettable itself, by which it is unforgettable. (239-40.)

Here is a dilemma facing the community built of dissent—those censors Rooney boldly diagnoses as schizophrenic sign-cyphers—mounted from the easily forgotten unforgettables, the unwitnessed lives whose darkness cannot be deconstructed because it has already been torn from the warp and weft of the world, the text. Even here we tour light, though it might be hidden or in a shifting state—texts, after all, are unstable constellations, and we do not have to buy into reader response theory to understand that readers help to shape and reinvigorate the dead text to life. Benjamin's essay on Kafka reminds us that

Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products. Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible, intermediate world in Kafka's stories presses toward the light. (131)

These uncertain compounds, perhaps confusions, lead us through oblivion, become "actual by virtue of this very oblivion" (130). Through what forms, and against what censors, would this community of the forgotten emerge into the light?<sup>3</sup> But in this walking tour I would return to, or at least continue to pause with, the silent, unforgotten actors who must also be imagined in the *1984* of what is blithely called contemporary affairs of a present Gayatri Chakravory Spivak calls "vanishing" (1999). We might again pass by the static Orwellian censors whose manic vacillation around their absent hearts produces the spectacular furor of *1984*'s last pages: a "trumpet-call [that] had let loose an enormous volume of noise" and "an excited voice . . . gabbling from the telescreen" which is itself "almost drowned by a roar of cheering outside. . . victory—greatest vic-

tory in human history—victory, victory, victory!" (310). Amid such babble who has time for thought?

From this frenetic volume we could easily miss the unforgettable, but—and here I must insist we walk on—they speak the waiting silence. It's easy to confuse the missing voices in histrionic celebration for lost subjectivities, but equally as important to remember that, though we cannot see them, they're still there: presence and visibility do not transform into power or survival. "To be visible is also to be vulnerable," Peter Schwenger observes, "to surveillance, voyeurism, commodification, fetishism, oppression" (120). Dissent that survives takes place in what Benjamin calls "the abiding, without container and form," what Maurice Blanchot, a somewhat taciturn, aphoristic walking companion, would call the silent language of awaiting:

The language of awaiting—perhaps it is silent, but it does not separate speaking and silence; it makes of silence already a kind of speaking; already it says in silence the speaking that silence is. For mortal silence does not keep still. (59)

A mute gesture of survival, but unforgettable nonetheless—a gesture that "can be counterpoised to speech as a form of principled silence offering different ways of saying nothing" (Rotman 48). Sometimes one must walk in companionable silence.

#### IV

Excuse the circumlocutions. If only a pleasantry, an invitation to a walk is one of the small decencies, a light generated neither from O'Brien's hellish friendships nor from the economies predicated on the exchange of words, those coins of Derridean thought

which “nevertheless oblige you to wonder again, at least, what is going on and if there is money [or thought]—true money, counterfeit money, counterfeit true money and truly counterfeit money” (*Given Time* 98). True thought, counterfeit thought, counterfeit true thought and truly counterfeit thought? In language these are difficult questions, and under the present light the questions become dim—the light is passing, Babel has fallen, and clamorous questions are being raised.

Perhaps the sun is not gone quite yet, however. These words I offer up as counterfeit: walk towards the light; head into the darkness. Fear no censors. Their doublespeak cannot regulate silence. But watch, with Cavafy’s carefully ironic Watchman at the turn of modernity, for the Atreids’ return:

The light is good; good are those en route;  
 and all they say and do is also good.  
 So let us pray things turn out well. And yet  
 Argos is capable of making do without  
 Atreids. Royal houses aren’t everlasting.  
 People, certainly, will be saying all sorts of  
 things.  
 As for us, let’s listen. But we won’t be taken in  
 by ‘the Indispensable,’ by ‘the One and Only,’  
 by ‘the Great.’  
 They always find another straightaway  
 who’s indispensable, the one and only, the  
 great. (307)

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<sup>1</sup> A walking digression: “Babel means not only confusion in the double sense of the word, but also the name of the father, more precisely and more commonly, the name of God as name of the father. The city would bear the name of God the father and of the father of the city that is called confusion” (“*Des Tours*” 105); “And the proper name of God (given by God) is divided enough in the tongue, already, to signify also, confusedly, ‘confusion.’ And the war that he declares has first raged within his name: divided, bifid, ambivalent, polysemic: God deconstructing” (“*Des Tours*” 108). Confusion becomes metaphor itself, the wrongful association with unlike and unlike to arrive at a startlingly uncanny likeness; or, perhaps more suggestively, perhaps confusion reaches instead for the metamorphosis that is metaphor’s antithesis (Deleuze and Guattari 22). Confusion is also a process of community building. Daniel Heller-Roazen, following Philo Judaeus’s *De confusione linguarum*, describes as a process in which things “are transformed into both more and less than themselves. Once they are ‘confused,’ the elements give way in their unity to ‘a new substance’ in which ‘it is no longer possible to distinguish the various properties’ of any one of them. The erstwhile components now subsist at a point where creation and destruction, addition and subtraction, cannot be told apart: the point, that is, of their common ‘con-fusion’” (222). On one hand Babel’s is a story of community inevitably riven by linguistic dissent. On the other hand it is of a metaphor that gives itself over in metaphor of metaphor, quite like derivative speculations, in fact.

<sup>2</sup> Before I am too narcissistic, I should note that Derrida has out-walked the legs of others as well. Sigmund Freud, for example, perhaps finds the French philosopher a strenuous walking partner, always seeking what Freud is perhaps unwilling to give up. “Legs de Freud” [“Freud’s Legacy”] for instance, finds Derrida examining how Freud’s reluctance “to reach any decisive conclusion with respect to the existence of the death drive is enacted by the guileful rhetorical procedures of an argument that mimes walking without advancing, repeatedly pretending to move a step forward without gaining an inch of ground” (Ricciardi 34).

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee remains cautious of narratives that suggest bringing that which is dark into the light of reason or at least visibility, a caution Orpheus’ tale with lost Eurydice also embodies. In an essay on torture’s fascination for writers, Coetzee writes that the “dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fiction per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation” (364). Obscenity, like some rat-grey fungus, replicates itself, however, and Coetzee goes on to remind us “there is something tawdry about *following* the state in this way, making its vile mysteries the occasion of fantasy” (364). Here representation *as such* rightly comes under question.

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