



The rôle of things

Le parti pris des choses

Francis Ponge
translated by
Ian Brinton

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The French texts were written between 1924 and 1939 and were published in book form in 1942.

**The rôle
of things
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For J.H.Prynne

Rain

The rain that I am looking at out in the courtyard falls in very different styles. Towards its centre it presents a fine meshed curtain, a sporadic descent of implacable slow drops of no great weight but falling forever, desultory, shards of a dissolving world. A little further off, close to the walls on both right and left, heavier drops fall more noisily and with greater individual presence: a grain of corn, a garden pea, a child's marble. Horizontally along the window ledges, along the casement tops, the rain runs until it swells on the underside of these obstacles like boiled sweets. As I peep down on a little zinc roof the rain runs along the whole surface like a thin tablecloth shimmering in its tiny valleys created by the almost imperceptible unevenness of what it covers. As it runs towards the adjacent

gutter in the manner of a nearly level stream it then unravels instantly in perfect braids, cascades, tresses of explosion as they burst up from the ground.

All rain moves at its own speed and echoes with its own voice. It is all alive in the exactness of its own machinery, precise and temperamental as a clock sprung by the relative weight of liquid air.

Driving down in a delicate polyphony drops chime, gutters glug and the tinny gong gongs.

After the spring has uncoiled some cogs still move, more and more slowly, until the piece of machinery halts. If the sun comes out all vanishes, the shimmer evaporates. That's rain.

End of Term

The end of autumn is little more than a pot of tea gone cold. A smash of dead leaves, all sorts, steeped in rain. Here is no bubbling still of alcohol in process and you will have to wait until spring to notice any effect of a wet compress on a wooden stump.

The last scraps of paper are a jumble and the swing-doors of polling booths flap to and fro noisily. Bin them! Bin them! Nature rips up the manuscripts, pulls down the books, clatters down the last fruits of learning.

Then she stands up brusquely from her desk and her height grows immense, hair flying wildly, head lifted up into mists. With dangling arms she breathes in with delight the ice-cold, mind-clearing, air.

Days are short now; night drops fast;
good humour gone.

Earth strips down once more to its
distant formality among all other stars.
Her light is narrowed down, threaded
now with depths of shadow. Her
tramp's shoes squeal and squelch, filled
with water.

Submerged beneath this amphibious
landscape, this frog-scape, everything
starts to move, hopping from stone to
stone, shifting position: one stream
becomes a score.

This is what you could call a good clear-
out with no time left for politeness;
whether dressed or undressed it's "soak
to the bone".

And on and on it goes with no quick
drying-out. Three months of healthy

reflection like this without shifts in the blood-stream, dressing-gowns or surgical gloves. Her sturdy constitution can take it.

And so when the tiny buds start to reappear they know what they are made of and what it's all about. If they reveal themselves cautiously it's because, by now, they certainly know their ground.

And there the next chapter begins with a different scent, following on from the black marker I use to draw a line under this one.

Poor fishermen

On the haulers' strand two chains work
ceaselessly to pull in the net to a royal
welcome whilst the fishermen's brats
call out round the baskets:

'Poor fishermen!'

For here is the catch exposed by the
lanterns:

'Half a net of fish
expiring on the sand
and three quarters of
the crabs already
moving seawards'

Fern spirits

Lying beneath the ferns and seeing their row of miniatures am I glancing at a perspective of Brazil?

They are neither logs for building nor the solid stems for match-making but a type of heaped leaf piled high like soaking rum.

Short stalks sprout forth as individual virgins who require no support: an enormous drunken confusion of palms beyond all control and each one hides two levels of sky above it.

Blackberries

Inside the verbal complex that is a poem, set down on the line between 'mind' and 'thing', there are certain fruits made up of separate spheres and each containing a black drop within.

Appearing in khaki, a light red, and black, rather than giving the picker 'the come-on', they suggest the separate stages of a rambling family.

With so much more seed than pulp the birds don't much care for them since there's not a lot left as they travel between beak and anus.

But during the process of the poet's constitutional he addresses this seed in his mind as follows: a great number of the flowers' patient efforts find success, knotted, within the spikey brambles.

Amongst its few properties my poem is
buried in the berry.

The Crate

Halfway along the path between a coop and a cell the French language gives us a crate, a slatted spaced container for conveying those fruits in danger of being stifled by the least hint of suffocation.

Constructed for its purpose with delicacy it can be smashed up with ease and is used only once: it lasts less time than the fragile contents it holds.

On every street corner, round by the market, these boxes of balsa are stacked shining. Still so new, and a little stunned to find itself thrown off balance on its way to the tip, this object inspires a moment's sympathy without compelling us to dwell on its fate too long as we pass.

The candle

For Ian Friend

Occasionally the night brings back to life
a plant the singular glimmer of which
resolves the furnished room to a bank of
shadow.

Its golden tongue, serene on a deep-
black stem, speaks from its shallow basin
in an alabaster column.

Blind clothes- moths hover round it in
preference to a distant moon which
turns all woods to mist. Either shrivelled
on the instant or dead-beat in the brawl
they quiver frenzied, close to stupor.

Whilst the candle beckons to the reader
by dispersing the smoky origin of its
being it casts a swaying light upon the
book before bowing in its dish to sink
into the food that gave it life.

The cigarette

First of all let us conjure up an atmosphere both hazy and arid, tousled, in which the cigarette is laid down horizontally, self-perpetuating.

Next there is its personality: that small beacon giving off more odour than light from which a number of small sections of ash detach themselves in designated rhythms.

And lastly there is its life: the glowing stud flaking off into silver dust shaped by the muff of its most recent shell.

The Orange

As with the sponge, there rests within the orange a desire to save face after having been subjected to the expression of itself. However, whereas the sponge always succeeds the orange never can: its cells are fragmented, its tissues pulled apart. Although the skin retains its form thanks to elasticity an amber liquid spills out to provide the certainty of both a refreshing and fragrant scent –and yet it also hints of a bitter awareness: it has become a premature birth from its own seed.

Perhaps we should weigh up the differences here between these two methods of coming to terms with oppression? – the sponge is nothing more than a muscle which absorbs air along with both clean and filthy water: its antics are merely vulgar. The orange

has better taste although it lets itself go without fuss— the sacrifice is scented...it surrenders to its oppressor too easily.

But it is not sufficient to say of the orange that its distinction is to scent the air and give delight to its executioner. One must emphasise both the glorious colour of the secreted liquid and the manner in which it differs from the juice of the lemon by compelling the larynx to gape wide in order to even pronounce its very name as well as to swallow down its juice without either the puckering of lips or the spiking of taste buds.

And we are left without language with which to express our admiration for the casing of this fragile, tender, pink and oval balloon which sits in its thick moist blotting-paper, the skin of which is both highly pigmented and extremely thin,

caustically flavoursome and yet just sufficiently rough to catch the light on the perfect surface of the fruit.

However, to conclude this short study which has focused as roundly as possible – we are left at last with the pip. This seed, shaped like a tiny oval, presents from the outside the white-wood colour of the lemon-tree whist inside revealing the green of pea or tender sprout. After the sensational burst of that Venetian lantern of tastes, those colours and scents which constitute the fruity balloon – we reach the relative hardness and vitality (not entirely insipid) of the wood, the branch, the leaf: what may seem a very tiny centre is the heart of the whole fruit.

The Oyster

With about the thickness of a medium-sized pebble, the oyster is more rugged in appearance and less uniform in tone: it is brilliantly off-white. This is a world that is stubbornly shut tight. However, having said that one can prise it open: it must be grasped in the folds of a dishcloth so that with the chipped and unsharpened knife one can force an entry. Exploring fingers can cut themselves on its edges; fingernails are broken: rough work. Knocking on the shell's door leaves circles of white in the form of a halo.

Once inside one opens up a new world of food and drink: beneath what must be referred to as that pearl-like crust an upper heaven curves above skies below to clutch a pool, a green and viscous

sachet edged in darkened lace which ebbs and flows to both eye and nostril.

Upon some rare occasion this pearly mouth utters a formula which immediately becomes an ornament.

Doors

A door is never touched by the fingers of a king.

He can never know that pleasure of pushing before him, either gently or in peremptory fashion, one of those expansive well-known panels, before turning round to replace it in position: he can never hold a door within his grasp;

nor experience the pleasure of grasping for himself the porcelain bulb protruding from the belly of one of those barriers guarding a room; that real nearness that impedes one's progress for a moment before first the eye and then the body takes in the newness of another room;

nor the camaraderie of holding it a moment longer before decisively closing it behind one's progress—a friendliness emphasised by the firm click of the well-oiled latch shut.

Trees lose themselves within a world of mist

In mist that wreathes around the trees, leaves are stealthily concealed; already disconcerted through slow oxidation and rendered insensible by the shifting retreat of sap to feed first flowers then fruit they have, since the burning heat of August, kept little for themselves.

In the surface of the bark vertical runnels have appeared down which moisture is channelled to the earth, losing an interest in the living trunk.

The flowers have been long scattered and the fruit has been dropped. From youth onwards an unsealing loss of both living expression and production has become a familiar cycle for the tree.

Bread

for Gavin Selerie

Above all the surface of bread is wonderful as it offers a panoramic impression: it is as if you feel within your grasp the Alps, the Taurus or the Cordillera of the Andes.

An amorphous mass, on the point of belching out, was slid for our sake into a star-shaped oven in which, as it hardened out, there formed valleys, crests, both highs and lows...and from here the thin flagstones, those carefully laid-out plans upon which the light lays its heat to bed – with little regard for the vulgar flab beneath.

The cold slack subsoil, the loaf's soft crumb, possesses a tissue not dissimilar to a sponge: both leaf and flower are joined at all points like Siamese twins. As the bread stales the flowers wilt and

wither: they loosen themselves from each other and the mass crumbles...

Let's leave it there: a mouthful of bread is more to do with food than being a symbol of respect.

Fire

Fire is just in a class of its own: to begin with all its shoots seem to make headway for each other...

(You can't begin to compare the march of a fire with beasts on the move: they have to leave one place in order to arrive at another; fire shifts like an amoeba as well as like a giraffe, a leaping neck and creeping feet)...

And then, whilst the burnt masses collapse fire's fumes are let free like an explosion of butterflies.

The Seasonal Cycle

Fed up with being confined throughout the winter, trees all at once start to feel that they've been had. They cannot put up with it any longer and so now let their words out: a flood, a vomiting of greenness. They try to build up a complete foliation of language. As if! That will take place as it may and indeed does. There's nothing random about foliation...They release, well at least they think they do, loads of language and twigs too from which to hang words: our trunks, or so they imagine, are there to take over the world. They try to conceal themselves by hiding one behind the other. Although they think that they can say it all by covering the earth with a variety of different tongues, they actually only blurt out **"TREES"**. They can't even hang on to the birds which disappear out of them even as they are

clapping themselves for producing such an unusual array of flowers. Always the same leaf, always the same manner of unfurling; the same number, with each one looking the same as its neighbour, appearing in symmetrical suspense. Fancy another leaf? – It's the same! How about another? Same again! The only thing to make them pause might be the phrase "You can't see the wood for the trees." A moment of exhaustion, a shift of stance. "Let all of it turn yellow and then fall. Bring on some withering quiet: **AUTUMN**"

Mollusc

All most like a quality of being, like
paint inside a tube; no need for a
skeleton: the mound will do

Nature gave up sculpting protoplasm
here and just protects her fundamental
interest by banking it in a casket the
inside walls of which are beautiful

This is not some simple gob of spit but
Life itself

The mollusc is gifted with an incredible
strength of self-immurement. Indeed,
it's just a muscle really, just a hinge,
where porter and door are one and the
same: the one secretes the other. Two
gently concave enclosures are its whole
world, its alpha and omega within which
it remains even after its death.

It won't come out alive.

The smallest human cell clings, like this,
to language and language clings to it.

Upon occasion an invader raids the
mausoleum, if its walls still stand, to
replace the long-gone builder:

HERMIT CRAB

Snails

Unlike cinders which nestle in warm ashes, snails are at home in damp earth. They go for it, their full length gummed down. They drag it with them, eating it, excreting it. They voyage over it and it voyages through them: two-way traffic reflecting faultless economy and measured returns. The passive and the active merge as home and dinner are both taken on the hoof, as it were.

There is more to say about snails.

For instance, that self-possessed humidity; such 'sang-froid'; a real 'drawn-outness'.

You might also note that you cannot envisage a snail coming out of its shell without its getting moving. The moment it stops it withdraws into its own depths.

By way of contrast, its self-consciousness prompts it into movement the moment it reveals its soft nudity. The second it's out it's 'on the go'!

In the dry season they retreat into ditches where it seems they contribute to the atmosphere of dampness by their very presence. They become close neighbours there a-long-side frogs and toads, sharing a world of mutual cold-bloodedness. But taking leave of such company is quite another matter and they deserve the credit for boldly entering a world from which it becomes difficult to part.

It is worth noting that their affection is for dampness and that they do not care for water itself as in ponds or marshlands. Their preference is for terra firma of the slimy and rich variety.

They are very partial to vegetables and plants with moist green leaves. They know how to deal with them, cutting through the tender sections and leaving the veined skeleton: bane and scourge of salads!

What is their bottom line then? Creatures who appreciate the depths but who have every intention of moving on. Native to the ditch they are also travellers. And anyway whether they are fosse-bound or on the garden pathway their shell protects their aloofness.

Of course it is an occasional encumbrance to carry your home with you but they don't complain and, ultimately, are pleased to have it with them. Wherever you get to it is of great value to be able to shut the door in the face of intruders and that makes the burden worthwhile.

This all-purpose facility causes them to drool with self-worth: 'Look at me, so sensitive, so vulnerable, and yet so sheltered from unwelcome intrusions, so contented, so much at peace'. No wonder that they carry themselves with such distinction!

'I am so down to earth, so unhurried as I move on, and yet so adept at disassociating myself in order to shut the door. As they say *Après moi le déluge*. I know that a kick can send me rolling off in any direction but I'm perfectly capable of picking myself up and making myself at home on any piece of ground to which my fate may have lead me. Once there Mother Earth provides me with my sustenance.'

Oh such contentment, such happiness in being a snail! But that smug drool leaves its mark on everything they touch and a silvery furrow follows in their wake. Perhaps it is this trail that attracts the beak of the bird who likes to eat them. Ah, there's the rub, there's the question, there's the 'To be or not to be' of such vanity: it's a risk!

Solitary, self-evidently the snail is indeed alone. It has few friends but contentment is not dependent on them. It clings so closely to the natural world enjoying those pleasures intimately. As a friend of the earth it kisses her with its entire body whilst also proudly raising its head to the leaves, the sky; and its long-stalked eyes, so sensitive, so noble, so methodical; so wise, so arrogant, proud and vain.

Now let's not confuse the snail with swine. It hasn't got those silly little trotters trotting anxiously, that nervous need to do a runner all-in-one-go. It has a greater stoical resilience, more determination and more pride. It isn't so locked into gluttony, so much at the mercy of capriciousness; you won't find it dropping one morsel in order to jump on another. With an absence of desperation its steady consumption is not the gobbling from fear of losing out somehow.

There can be no finer sight than observing the snail in its slow progress, so deliberate, so discreet, such effort to glide along paying homage to the earth. Just like a long galleon leaving its silvery wake this manner of proceeding has majesty; especially true when you take into account the vulnerability of those sensitive eyes on long stalks.

Can one detect a snail's anger? Examples? Incapable of making gestures, its only expression perhaps is a slight increase in the speed and intensity of its secretions: that drool of pride. Indeed an expression of irritation is the same as an expression of pride and, reassured, they leave their silvery trail more purposefully upon the face of the world.

This expression of both anger and pride dries to flaky brilliance. It becomes their signature of presence as an advert to the predator. Short-lived statement that is washed away in the next shower.

And thus is the way with all those who express themselves with not a single regret for their subjective effusion, not a second thought for the need to shape and build what they have to say into something more solid, more lasting than themselves.

But presumably they don't see the point. Their heroic presence is a work of art in itself without their needing to act out the role of 'artist'. And this is the nub of the matter, central to all those who live inside a shell: that shell, extension of their being is a monument in itself, lasting long after they have vacated the premises.

And so this is the example they set for us: like saints they live their lives as Art, perfecting themselves in their actions. Their secretions are the expression of a single-mindedness. Nothing external to themselves interferes with this dedication: no obligations from outside, nothing out of proportion, no deemed necessities.

They reveal to us humans our duty: the greatest thoughts come from within. Be single-minded in your purposes and you

will compose beautiful poems.
Rhetorical effusion and moral insight are
combined within the aims and desires of
the anchorite.

But sanctified in what way?
In the way of pursuing their own path.

First step? Know thyself.
Next? Accept who you are.

Acknowledge your own weaknesses in
relation to your own being.

And what essentially constitutes man? A
trail of language and ethical value:
Humanism

Butterfly

As the sugar developed inside the flower stems surges upwards into bowls compelling them to appear like poorly washed-up cups, the earth strains and butterflies take flight.

As each caterpillar was marooned with blinded and blackened head, bodies drained by the veritable explosion out of which symmetrical wings flapped, the veering butterfly only alights, as seems, by chance.

A match drawing flame sets nothing else alight. And anyway it would be too late as the flowers have already burst forth. No problem: like the service-man it checks the oil of each flower one by one. In this manner resting on the flower's peak in its worn tattered gown it exults having risen from its amorphous

humiliation as a caterpillar at the
flower's foot.

A tiny vessel in the air blown by the
wind hither and thither like a
superfluous petal, it wanders around the
garden.

Moss

Vegetation on reconnaissance used to halt on block-still rock. Cudgels of velvet and silk ranked there cross-legged.

Since that time, since the twitching of those lancers camped on rock, there has been a universal loss of head by those trapped and stamped and stifled.

And then the hair started growing and the world grew darker.

Self-absorbed in this growth the hair grew longer to form thick-pile carpets that bow beneath you before rising again entangled: suffocating...drowning.

Stop! Slice the razor through this spongy tissue, this saturation, these soggy mats. Re-discover ancient rock bottom.

The Seashore

Right up to its very brim the sea is a simple idea repeating itself over and over again. But even Nature's simplest things do not unravel their hidden depths without putting on a range of expressions, airs and graces in which depths present themselves as shallows. This is why, bitterly opposed to overwhelming immensity, we steer ourselves towards the edges of things in order to recognise them. The rational mind, immersed in immensity, bobs around gasping for air; it seeks for mental footholds on which to construct a pattern of appearances.

Hounded by the ups and downs of temperature, or by the tragic need to stick its nose into matters, the air flutters through the dog-eared surface pages of this deep volume of the sea

whilst the earth, upon which we erect our edifices, plunges its gritty knife up to the hilt to rest in the depths. Occasionally driven up against a tough sinew this blade curves back towards the surface to form what we term a beach.

Left high and dry in the open air, propelled up from the deep which is its home, the shore stretches out. Thinned out to wildness and sterility it uncovers a treasure trove of relics vomited up and polished by the ever-voracious disgorger. An elementary concerto, threaded with reflection and enriched by discretion, has been played to an empty auditorium for ever. Ever since the wind formed them, on an orchestral platform with no boundary, the waves have speeded smoothly towards an audience. However, once reached, a single and brief word is lipped to pebbles and shells alike as each wave expires with its

utterance and all those others, following in its wake, queue up to die as they utter the same words, some more loudly than others. Clambering over each other to reach the front of the orchestra each wave lifts its head and doffs its hat to the audience by way of introduction. A thousand players are introduced each day, prolix and prolific, playing such lip-service to the shores.

No vulgar petition presented by a peasant figure from the Danube's banks is being made to you, O ranks of pebbled shore, but here instead Danube himself speaks with the tongues of all other great rivers of the world who have now lost their singular directions by retreating into the deep disillusion of bitterness only palpable to those who taste it. Indeed it is only after the anarchic individuality of rivers has sunk into the depth and body of Water's

Commune that the term SEA can be coined. And SHE invariably seeming to lie far distant from her own limits takes advantage of the miles from shore to shore to forbid communication between her outposts (except by the most tortuous detour) unless it has first been passed through her own BODY. Thus she encourages each shore in its belief that each one is chosen to be her special destination. However, if the truth were known, despite this courtesy, her palpable politeness presented in bow upon bow of passion, conveyed with conviction to each and every member of those audiences, she reserves her deepest source of currents at the bottom of her basin.

Rarely venturing far beyond her limits, she curtails and controls the energies she casts out to fishermen in tiny pictures, vignettes of her Medusa-Self, before

curtseying wide and grinning on her shorelines. This is Neptune's ancient vesture, sheet on sheet of living veils spread out evenly over the globe. The depths of this volume have never been plumbed by the blind stabbing of rocks nor the hurly-burly of the storm which rifles through so many pages nor by the acute concentration of man's eye which is hardly at home in a world closed against his other senses' channels: a world made more inscrutable by the stirring flailing of his arm.

About Water

Water, there it is. It's lower than me; always lower than where I am. I am always gazing downwards when I look over water. It's like the ground, like a section of the earth, like soil that keeps shifting.

Water shines white, cool and shapeless, obstinately surrendering to its single vice of gravity: using every means to gratify this vice: circumventing, invading, dissolving, filtering.

At its very centre this vice also adopts a tone of self-mockery: it shifts at every turn, surrenders its own form at every moment, offers nothing but self-abasement, lies stretched out flat upon the ground, a corpse, a monk belonging to a certain order. Always sink lower:

that would seem to be its slogan: the opposite of excelsior.

*

One could be tempted to assert that water is simply insane on account of this uncontrolled need to react to nothing but its own weight which obsessively possesses it.

Agreed, the whole world recognises a need which in all days and places must be satisfied. That wardrobe over there, for instance, obstinately insists upon sitting upright on the floor and if it wakes up one day to find itself losing its balance it would rather face destruction than resist. However, to be honest it also plays around with gravity to a certain extent; it defies it by not collapsing and by holding cornices and mouldings secure. Its very stubbornness

reflects both personality as well as appearance.

By its very nature LIQUID prefers to obey the laws of gravity rather than hang onto its own form: it surrenders its appearance. It won't keep still because of this *idée fixe*, this pathological obsession with obedience. This vice that drives it to gush or stagnate, passive or uncontrollable, *passive and uncontrollable*, uncontrollably boring; crafty, intrusive and winding; obedient to your wishes so that you may lead it through pipes before compelling it to spout vertically for the sheer delight of seeing it descend to earth as rain: it's a real servant.

...Meanwhile both sun and moon become envious of this exclusive control and attempt to exert their own influence when water is stretched out wide;

especially so when it is in the most vulnerable position: a shallow puddle. The sun then demands a higher tribute by compelling it to perform an ever-turning cycle like a caged squirrel.

*

Water escapes from me...running through my fingers. And something else! It isn't even that clean (unlike a lizard or a frog): it leaves tracks and traces on my hands which take a long time to dry or which have to be dried off. It escapes from me and whilst also leaving its mark about which I can do very little.

In principle this is all connected: water eludes my grasp, wriggles out of being defined, whilst leaving its loose traces on my mind and on this paper.

*

Water can't keep still: it reacts to the slightest alteration of angle. It leaps downstairs with both feet at once. It bubbles joyfully and is childishly obedient, coming back immediately when you re-call it by adjusting the incline this way.

The Piece of Meat

Every piece of meat is a type of manufacturing house with mills and presses run by blood.

Piping, smelting furnace, a neighbourhood of cistern and sledge-hammer cushioned by grease.

Boiling steam is released. A blush of dark or bright fire.

Gutters open to the skies run with a slag of gall.

And all this action slowly cools down overnight until death.

Immediately, as opposed to rusting, other chemical reactions spring to life to exude a foul stink.

The Gymnast

Just as if it is flashed up by the letter G, the gymnast sports his goatee beard and his moustache that almost meets his forelock in a low brow kiss-curl.

Enclosed in a leotard which forms two creases in the groin he droops his tail to the left as in his Y.

He sets all hearts racing but is a figure of purity whose only muttered oath is BASTA!

A little more pink than one might normally expect and a little less adroit than a monkey he leaps onto the apparatus with a focused determination. Then from his body's centre which is wrapped in rope knots he weaves questions in the air like a worm rising from a clod.

To conclude he chooses to form arches like a caterpillar before rebounding to his feet from which position the admired paragon of human pointlessness takes his bow.

The Young Mother

Some days after her lying-in the young mother seemed transformed.

The face which had so often hung down over her breasts now seemed to lengthen. The eyes lowered with concentration to focus on an object close by seemed a little distracted when raised. They reflected a look of composure and deeply-held confidence. The arms and hands were folded in an expression of strength. The legs, rather thin and unsteady, are relaxed with knees raised. The belly, both swollen and pallid, appeared still very sensitive; the stomach prepared for rest beneath the sheets.

...But before long on its feet this whole figure emerged from its confinement decked with a tower of

white linen which, with a free hand, it had taken hold of, shaken, arranged with knowing care in preparation for folding or keeping ready to hand.

**For business purposes:
R.C. Seine No**

It is via a wooden stair that has never been polished in thirty years, through the stench of fag-ends thrown out of the door, amidst a cluster of petty and unpleasant small employees in bowler hats with lunch-box to hand, that twice a day we are throttled.

A reluctant passage of time rules inside this ramshackle shell dominated by the atmosphere of beige-coloured wood. To the echo of flat heels made more wearisome by their constant moving to and fro, evocative of a creaking axle, we become aware of the scent of ground coffee permeating the noisy system.

Everyone knows that if he feels compelled to move to a different seat everything will be just the same: deep down it is the hand of misery which keeps the mill going.

*

To be honest, the result isn't so bad for us. The gate through which we must pass has only one keeper, a doorman who partially blocks the entrance: it's more of a tube than a turn-stile. Each of us, fly-sprayed, is squeezed through safe and sound into the electric light. Abruptly kept apart by long intervals we find ourselves in the clinical atmosphere of a long-stay hospital which will cost us all we have before we file quickly across a shining floor, reminiscent of a monastery, and pass the canal-like

passages which cut at right-angles – our uniform is a thread-bare sports-jacket.

*

Before long, accompanied by an appalling noise, in each department a curtain of iron is drawn back – out come the files like recognizable dinosaur birds awoken from their perches to land snorting on the desks. A macabre examination opens up. To the accompanying music of the sacred machinery the world of commercial illiteracy springs back into life.

Everything is printed in multiple copies with the words becoming increasingly faint as they fade from view in a world of bored disdain. The solid blue-block fortresses have a skylight hole to ensure that no page can disappear altogether.

Two or three times each day our place of worship is invaded by the multi-coloured arrival of post; like dazzling birds from faraway isles, fresh envelopes sealed with the postal kiss drop right in front of me.

Each new leaf of script is gathered up by one of our busy little doves who will see it to its proper home to be classified correctly.

Special little jewels are sometimes attached to these new arrivals: different shaped paper-clips and paper-fasteners are all waiting ready to spring into action.

*

As the hours tick by little by little the wastebaskets fill up. By the time they are full it is midday and a piercing ringing-sound invites you to vacate the premises without delay. Nobody needs to be told twice. There's a race for the stairs as both sexes barge into each other in their getaway in such a manner that was never permitted upon entry.

It is at this point that those in charge really show their class: "The mob rush or rushes"; with the steady gait of priests, ignoring the stampede of monks, they take a leisurely walk around their shrine, enclosed in frosted glass to protect the embalmed secrets of vulgarity and incrimination within – reaching the cloakroom to retrieve their gloves, canes and scarves of silk they miraculously adopt the pose of men of the world.

The Lemeunier Restaurant, (Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin)

Few things more stirring than the scene before you in the enormous restaurant in the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin: Lemeunier's where office-workers and shop-assistants take their lunch-time meal.

The magical world of bevelled mirrors and gilt ornament is dished up to the eye alongside the over-the-top lights and music. One enters this world via a dark passage, lined with pots of plants interspersed with a few early diners already in place, to emerge in a vast room with a wooden balcony running round and to be hit by a wave of warm air, the clattering clash of plates and utensils, the calls of the waitresses and the walls of hubbub.

In its enormous range of focus this is a canvas worthy of Veronese but completed in the style of Manet's famous *Bar*.

A little orchestra of musicians grouped on the balcony takes pride of place without any doubt; next come the cashiers hoisted up behind their counters with their bright blouses puffed out to full view; lastly the head-waiters, dapper little manikins, who move around slowly although they also, upon occasion, burst into action like the waitresses, not on account of any flash of impatience from the diners (more accustomed to being passive) but propelled by a sense of their own professional qualities which are kept up to the mark by the state of play in the job market.

O how the world of the vapid and trifling reaches its zenith here! Ranks of empty-headed young people impersonate on a daily basis the world that the genuine bourgeois allow themselves to indulge in, eight or ten times a year, on the occasion of a banker-father or a light-fingered mother catching an unexpected windfall and wishing to impress the neighbours.

Dolled up like the country cousins in Sunday best the young office-workers and their floozies throw themselves into this indulgence every day of the week. Each one clutches his plate like the hermit-crab his shell while wave upon wave of the Viennese waltz crashes over the clicking of plate, stimulating both heart and stomach.

Peeking into this grotto of enchantment I see the chatter and laughter without hearing the words. The young shop-floor salesman immersed in a crowd of lookalikes discloses the secret desires of his heart and confidently expects a return.

Brazen tiers of creamy desserts are served in long-stemmed acorn-cups fashioned in some metal; quickly rinsed out they almost invariably remain warm whilst still permitting those diners, who choose to have them placed before them, the fullest expression of feelings stirring inside them. For one it is his flamboyance that has attracted a magnificently curvaceous typist to his side and for her attentions he would not think twice about committing a thousand similar costly displays; for another it is as if to bring attention to the stylish manner in which he had ordered a light

first course so as to permit himself the indulgence of a sweet; for yet more it becomes a way of expressing upper-class disdain for all who are not prepared to partake of the magical show; and lastly there are those whose table-manners reveal the confident and well-bred style of being thoroughly habituated to such magnificence.

Meanwhile thousands of little white crumbs and larger red stains have been appearing on the taut and scattered tablecloths and napkins.

Before too long it is time for the cigarette lighters to make their appearance in roles defined for them by either their mechanisms or their manner of being manipulated. And at this time the ladies, lifting their arms to fiddle with their lipstick and pat their hairdos,

reveal in different ways their little cockades of perspiration.

Now the time has arrived, in a crashing of chairs pushed back, a whiplash of dishcloths and crusty remnants, for the final act in this extraordinary display. Each in turn, the waitresses, whose apron pockets hold a notepad and in whose hair nestles a pencil, puff out their tummies, held in by their apron strings, towards their customers and quickly tot up the damage. Now is the moment for extravagance to be penalised and modesty rewarded. With coins and notes on the table being swopped to and fro everyone seems to come out a winner.

During the final acts of the evening performance, and orchestrated by the waitresses, there begins a general lifting-up of all the furniture to be concluded

behind the now-closed doors. This is followed by a damp mop-up done with efficiency and brought to a smart conclusion.

It is only now that the workers, fingering the little coins deep in their pockets and thinking of a child left with the nurse in the country or staying with the neighbours, can leave the darkened premises behind without a backward glance. On the pavement opposite the men waiting for them can only see an enormous confusion of chairs and tables with their ears sticking up staring outwards in stupor at the now deserted street.

A Note addressed to SHELLS

Although a shell is a little thing I can emphasise its enormity by placing it back where I found it, settled, on the outstretch of sand. Observe me take a handful of this sand and see how little remains after I have allowed those grains to sift between my fingers; then I'll focus on a few of those grains which remain; then single ones; and of these not one will appear to be tiny; and after that each shell, oyster, mitre, razor, will appear as gigantic as a monument, a colossus of delicacy, comparable perhaps to the Temple of Angkor Wat, Saint-Maclou, a Pyramid but with a stranger aura of significance than those all too human constructions.

When it occurs to me that this shell can be submerged by any wave and yet is a creature's house, and I contemplate that

creature under a few centimetres of water, I am sure that you'll realise the way in which my thoughts intensify: this focus sets the shell apart from even the most remarkable of those monuments I listed above!

The monuments built by man appear like offcuts from his own skeleton: but they don't raise the spectre of a creature of comparative size. Compared to a shell, the portals of the greatest cathedrals open to release a crowd of ants and the most wealthy villas or chateaux, home to one man only, are more akin to a hive or an ants'-nest divided up into its separate rooms. When milord departs from his manor-house he certainly appears a lot less impressive than that gigantic claw of the hermit-crab swelling out of the mouth of that cornet shell which he calls home.

I find it pleasing to consider Rome, or Nîmes, as separate manifestations of the human skeleton with here the tibia and there the skull, ancient cities, representations of a once teeming world. However, to do this I have also to imagine an equivalent colossus of bone and flesh which in no way corresponds to anything we have learned from our history even when we use the group language of the singular such as the 'Roman People' or the 'Provençal Mob'.

I should be delighted one day to be shown that such a Titan really did exist, for my imagined abstract vision of it to take actual form, and that I could be made to touch its cheeks, feel the way its arm lies along the length of its body.

With the shell we have all that in the flesh without stepping outside the world of the natural: the mollusc or crustacean is there for real and with a type of frisson we enjoy the experience ten times more.

*

I don't know why but I would like man, as opposed to those gigantic monuments which just bear witness to the terrifying gap between his imagination and his own body (or witness even to his base desire for social recognition) and as opposed to the fashioning those statues, to scale yet rather larger(I think here of Michelangelo's David) but still direct copies done from life, to create niches, types of shell which are very different from his fleshy form but in proportion to it (the satisfying shape of African huts for instance) so that he can make it his

concern to conceive of a home not much larger than he is himself, suitable for his future generations, which may then contain both his intellect and his imagination and to use his creative powers to improve this house rather than constructing mansions: at least then his creativity would acknowledge the limits of the structure supporting it.

I do not have much time for that Pharaoh who made multitudes build a monument for ONE and should have preferred it if he had used the same people to create a work that was not significantly larger than himself or, to go even one step further, that he had revealed his superiority to others by making this home himself.

It is this attitude that makes me so admire certain writers and musicians, Bach, Rameau, Malherbe, Horace,

Mallarmé—particularly the writers since their monumental creations are formed from the mollusc-like secretions emanating from the individual, the best-proportioned and most appropriate secretions which are at the same time as different from his body as could be: WORDS. A true Louvre of language which may house, after the termination of our race, other guests (such as the odd monkey or a bird perhaps) or even some superior species in the way that the crustacean inherits the shell once home to the mollusc.

And when the age of the animals has finally closed then air, sand and tiny grains will slowly build up within that museum which lies on the ground, gleaming, eroding, shining in fragments, dry dust, residue of greatness, finely ground in the mill-wheel turned by air and sea until

AT THE END

There is no *thing* left to create some
thing from the sands, even glass, and

THAT IS THAT! THAT IS THAT!

Three shops

Near Place Maubert, the spot where I wait for my bus every morning, three shops sit next to each other: a jeweller, a wood and coal merchant and a butcher. As I gaze at each in turn I note the manner in which they confront my eyes: metals and precious stones, coal and firewood, chunks of meat.

Let's not dwell too much on the metals which are only the offshoots of human violence and divisions of the earth or certain conglomerates that are pieced together far distant from their origins; nor on the precious stones the rarity of which requires few words when perceived in the whole general world of things.

As for meat, a frisson in looking at it, a type of horror or of compassion obliges me to be very careful. Freshly cut up, apart from a curtain of stench, unique to itself, it exudes evidence of the internal mongrel: I shall have said all that needs to be said when I draw attention to its throbbing appearance.

But the contemplation of wood and coal is a source of joy which is both easy and safe and which I am happy to share. Doubtless I should need many more pages to explore these ideas and that is why I propose to you the following brief thoughts: 1) Time measured in vectors laughs last by way of death 2) Brown, because it lies between Green and Black on the footpath to carbonisation, the tale of wood is, however little, a story of movement, of mistakes and of mishaps.

More Flora than Fauna

(for Elaine Rose)

Whereas fauna is restless flora unfolds
itself before our eyes.

A range of being stretches itself out over
the ground.

These beings have their own place in the
world with their length of service
honoured in their decorations.

Unlike their vagrant brothers they
haven't just been tacked on as world
intruders. They don't just drift around
seeking a place to die since the earth
takes such care to absorb their remains.

They are not anxious about either roof
or dinner and they do not devour each
other: no nightmares, no mad escapades,
no cruelty, cries of anguish or even

words. They do not tremble in fear of fever or assassination.

From the moment of their appearance they earn respect on street or roadway. Without the slightest concern for their neighbours they neither mingle to absorb nor nudge to conceive.

They expire by drying out and falling to the ground or, rather, sinking to their end; rarely do they expire through corruption. No part of their body is so exquisitely vulnerable that when broken it causes the death of the whole self. They are somewhat touchy about the weather, the general state of global affairs.

They are not...They are not...

Hell for them is another matter altogether.

They have no voice. They exist in stillness. It is the way they pose that draws attention. They give no sense of recognising anguish at questions of self-justified being. And anyway they could not seek to escape from any such haunting awareness nor believe that in speed of movement they could eliminate such thoughts. Their only movement is extension. Their every gesture, thought, desire or intention, is witnessed in their corporal expansion, their bodies growing out of their bodies.

Or, to make it worse, there is nothing of the monster here: despite every effort at self-expression they can achieve nothing beyond the million of repetitions of the same expression, the same leaf. As spring arrives, no longer able to hold themselves in, they release a stream, a gushing out of green, a burst of polyphonic canticles rising to their

throats to embrace the natural world;
and yet their success is in reproducing
copy after copy of the same note, the
same *mot*, the same leaf.

*One cannot escape from being a tree by being
a tree.*

*

“Their only self-expression is their
pose.”

Their only gesture is to multiply arms,
hands and fingers – in the manner of a
buddha. Behaving like the idle they
voyage no further than the length their
thoughts can take them. They are no
more than repetitive expression.
Nothing is kept for themselves, hidden;
they couldn't for one moment keep a
secret; in all honesty they make an entire
confession holding nothing back.

Patiently idle they spend their days fleshing out their own forms to achieve the most complex expression of their own identity. Wherever they are born, in whatever secret byway, they are simply preoccupied with that expression: they get themselves ready and dress themselves up before waiting for someone to drop by to read them.

Their only way of attracting attention rests in the poses they adopt, the lines, and, upon occasion, an extraordinary call to our eyes and our sense of smell prompted by both phials of light and explosions of scent: flowers which are also wounds.

This development of the unceasing leaf must have some significance.

*

In vegetable time they seem to remain fixed and immobile. Turn your back for a few days, for one week, and their self-expression has become more defined and their limbs have multiplied. Their identity is never in doubt but the exactness of the contours becomes increasingly clear.

*

The beauty of fading flowers: petals contort as if confronted by flame: and by the way it is just like that: dehydration. Writhing as they release their seeds to sight they decide to offer them a new chance, the open field.

Nature confronts the flower face to face, compels it to open with mouth spread: it squirms and twists to seek retreat as it

releases the victorious seed it has nurtured.

*

Vegetable time is linked to the space it needs, a space invaded piece by piece, occupying a canvas that always waits for it. At the end of the campaign vegetation sinks with weariness and the next season's drama opens up.

Like the steady expansion of crystals: a formative push followed by an inevitable conclusion.

*

In the world of living beings we can recognise the difference between those which, apart from their natural movement of growth, can prompt an action, a force through which they can propel all or at least part of their bodies

shifting themselves in an individual manner through their world – and then those whose only possibility of movement is extension.

The first group, once liberated from their built-in obligation to expand, express themselves in a range of ways in response to a range of concerns: home, food, self-protection, and even, if any time remains left over games.

Although the second group does not recognise these pressing needs, even though we cannot say for certain that they do not contain an intention or desire to move beyond basic growth, any desire for self-expression is impotent apart from a continuing extension of their body as if each new desire was a compulsion to give new life to new limb. Every fresh thought would require a hellish multiplication of new limbs and

each compulsion to move would be accompanied by a newly-forged link in a chain!

*

Vegetation is an analysis of movement, a new dialectic in space. It proceeds by multiplying its previous advances. Animals express themselves both orally and by gestures all of which keep replacing each other. The expression of the vegetable is written down once and for all. They can't go back and regret is out of the question: any correction to be made can only be done through addition. The text which has been both written and then published can only be corrected by an appendix. That said we must add that they can't keep multiplying for ever. Each vegetable has its limit.

Every gesture vegetation makes leaves not only its mark, as with human beings and their writings, but also its trail, its birthmark *to which it remains attached*.

*

Their poses, or gestures of *still-life*: a silent sense of the now, a plea, noble quiet, a triumph.

*

It is said of the disabled, those who have lost a limb, that their other faculties develop in compensation: this is the same with flora: stasis is beauty, exactness and beautiful presentation achieves their rich fruit.

*

No expression of vegetal movement has an effect beyond its boundary.

*

A wide range of feeling prompted by desire imprisoned within stasis blossoms in their infinite field of forms.

*

A volume of extremely complex laws, that is to say pure chance, governs both the birth and the dissemination of flora on the earth.

This is the law of *indeterminate determinants*.

*

Flora at night.

The breath of carbon dioxide in photosynthesis is like a satisfied sigh that lasts for hours, like the deepest chord of a stringed instrument left loosely vibrating on the furthest horizon of music: purity of sound on the frontier of silence.

*

ALTHOUGH FLORA'S BEING MIGHT WISH TO BE DEFINED ABOVE ALL BY ITS FORMS AND EDGES I SHOULD WISH WITH ALL RESPECT TO HIGHLIGHT ITS SUBSTANTIALITY: ITS QUALITY OF ACHIEVING SYNTHESIS WHILST BEING ENTIRELY DEPENDENT UPON THE INORGANIC NATURE

OF ITS ENVIRONMENT. THE SURROUNDING WORLD OF VEGETATION IS LIKE A MINE FROM WHICH THE INVALUABLE GREEN SEAM TAKES ALL THAT IS NEEDED FOR THE CONTINUAL EXPANSION OF ITS PROTOPLASM PROMPTING THE CHLOROPHYLLIC EXTENSION OF ITS LEAVES FROM THE AIR AND THE ABSORPTION OF MINERAL SALTS FOR ITS ROOTS FROM THE SOIL. FREED FROM THE DEPENDENCE UPON THE ALIMENTARY AND THE RESIDENTIAL THE DISTINCTIVE PERSONALITY OF THE VEGETAL IS ITS BEING LINKED TO A SURROUNDING AND UNFAILING RESERVOIR OF NUTRIENTS LEADING TO:

IMMOBILITY.

The Shrimp

A merging of qualities and circumstance form the make-up of one of the shyest of the world's beings, perhaps the most timid prey to have become the object of contemplation, a little creature less important to be named than to be cautiously brought to mind, to be permitted entry into the channels of circumlocution through its own movement, where our own words reach out to the dialectical point of the object's own form and milieu, its condition of silence and its focus upon its own reason for being.

First of all let us acknowledge that sometimes a man whose sense of sight has been shaken by fever, by hunger or even simply by fatigue may upon occasion experience hallucinations, quickly passing and doubtless benign: in

brisk, spasmodic and continuing to-and-fro jerks he sees movement from one spot to another, a range of almost translucent little signs: little sticks, commas, punctuation marks which don't conceal his world from him and yet somehow seem to make it disappear by scrabbling on its surface before prompting a rubbing of the eyes in order to restore sharper vision.

Well, in the objective world sometimes a similar phenomenon takes place: the shrimp, immersed in its own waves, moves about in a similar manner and, like the shifting flecks I referred to earlier as being a reflection of troubled sight, this little creature seems to symbolize confusion within the sea. And yet its greatest confusion appears most frequently in a world of calm weather: in rock pools, where undulating liquid sways around and where the eye in

dense purity, ink-like, can point to nothing certain. Translucent in its leaping, even when motionless it defies a continuity of presence.

We find ourselves exactly at the point here where we must not permit this mirage to lead us down a path of memory that might persuade us that we are gazing at a shadowy swimmer whose more enduring representatives are to be discovered in the lower reaches: lobsters, langoustines or the crayfish of the cold depths. No these are as fully alive as those armoured vehicles and are as aware of the thwarts and anguishes interwoven with existence...Let us not be deflected from giving honour to their form by their being compulsively driven by inner complexities; their ideogram of individual being provokes our universal sympathy for life: a just comprehension

of the world around us comes at this price.

How could form inspire any greater interest than by the recognition of its dissemination in numberless examples at an identical moment in the fresh and bountiful waters of all ranges of weather? What numbers of individuals suffer from this form in particular straits prompting us to see them with greater precision? Shoulder to shoulder shy objects seem to wish to raise the possibility of doubt as to the seeing of them for any period of time rather than a reluctance to believe in their reality: indeed their very tails would seem to urge a shutting off of conversation in a manner more cinematic than architectural . . . The art of living must be the focus: we must rise to that one.

Vegetation

Rain is not the only thread linking earth and sky: there is another strand, less intermittent and much more closely woven so that strong winds shake it without removing the fabric altogether. If the wind succeeds at certain points in the year in pulling away strands, which it attempts to crush in its whirling, we recognise in the end that little has been lost.

Studying vegetation with a more focused eye one finds oneself at one of the thousands of doors opening on an elaborate laboratory bristling with hydraulic machinery each part of which is much more complex than the simple columns of rain and sporting an exact profusion of retorts, filters, siphons and stills.

The rain drops on these pieces of machinery before descending to the soil. They catch it in a range of little bowls which are congregated at different levels of greater or lesser depth spilling over from one to the other on the downward journey until at last the earth is directly moistened.

In their own manner they slow the downpour and retain the liquid benefits in the ground after the shower has passed by. They alone possess the ability of making the raindrops glisten in the sunshine or in other words of creating the sacred perception of either joy or sadness: odd job, enigmatic script.

Their growth is a measured response to the falling rain, regular, discreet and with a conserved power which continues after the rain has ceased. As time passes one discovers the water in certain bulb-

like shapes that have been formed and which shine with a ruddy expression as they are now called fruits.

Such, it would seem, is the physical function of this three-dimensional decoration which has earned the name 'vegetation' also on account of its other characteristics including the life-force behind it...Above all, however, I wish to make the following point: in addition to their ability of taking charge of their own synthesis and making uncalled-for appearances (as can be seen between the paving slabs outside the Sorbonne) they are like vagabond animals despite the fact that in many places they become permanent residents appearing as a form of carpet spreading over the strata of the world.

Pebble

It's not easy to define a pebble.

If you're prepared to put up with the simplest description then you could start by saying that it is a shape or quality of stone that sits somewhere between rock and gravel.

However, this already requires that one defines 'stone'. So don't be upset here if I start further back than the Flood.

*

The ancestry of all rocks is the splitting of one cell into two. Of this fantastic body one can say but a single thing: on its emergence from limbo it doesn't hold up.

It can only be thought of as amorphous, stretched out upon the kneaded platforms of its pain. These provide the font for a universal hero's baptism, a frightful trough to hold death.

The reader shouldn't skate over the surface of these words but should pause to admire not the dense and funerary expressions of language but the glory and the grandeur of a truth removed from obscurity through becoming translucent.

And so, on a lifeless and cold planet the sun shines. We are no longer deceived by any satellite of flames. All life and all wonder, everything that enables us both to live and to see, the source of all objective appearance is centred in the sun. The mythical heroes who orbited around it have now gone. But so that the truth, the glory of which they have

abdicated, retains an audience and a catalogue of dead or dying stories they continue to do their rounds in the role of spectators.

It is conceivable that such a sacrifice, the removal of life from such ardent and glorious figures, won't have taken place without some dramatic inner turmoil. And that is the origin of this grey chaos, Earth, our magnificent but humble home.

In this way, after a time of feverishness similar to that of a restless sleeper beneath the covers, our hero, contained (by conscience) in a gigantic strait-jacket experienced fewer and fewer convulsions shaking the cold and heavy container.

Nowadays the dead hero and the chaotic container are as one.

*

When this body lost its ability not only to move once and for all but also to recast itself, its history throughout the catastrophe of cooling has become one of inevitable disintegration. It was at this time that other things started to take place: with the obliteration of grandeur, life asserts that it has nothing in common with that. Lots of other possibilities emerge.

That's how the world appears today. The dismembered sections of this former glory provide the backdrop to the millions of things which are both tinier and more ephemeral than it is. In some areas the enormous number of such things completely masks the sacred skeleton of their foundation. And it is the numberless agglomeration of these sections, with their inheritance of the

consistency of stone, which becomes what we term as topsoil which in turn produces new worlds independent of rock.

In addition, the world of liquid which goes back perhaps as far as stone covers everything to a greater or lesser degree, rubbing against it and eroding it with unending friction.

I shall now describe some of the forms taken by stone as it appears in scattered humiliation before our gaze.

*

The most substantial fragments, those almost invisible slabs beneath the knitted vegetation which covers them almost for religious reasons as much as any other, constitute the globe's structure.

These are the true temples: certainly not constructions lifted by chance above the ground but the inert remains of that hero of antique times whose former presence had filled the world.

Enmeshed in thoughts of grandeur in the scented darkness of the forest cloaking these blocks of mystery, man's imagination weaves their underlying continuity.

Close by, unnumbered smaller blocks attract his gaze. Thrown down by time beneath the trees, lumps of stone dough lie kneaded by those unwashed hands of god.

Ever since the explosion of that ancient figure and since their scattered hurling through the skies, all rocks, inert, have remained silent.

Invaded and split apart by germination, like a man who has given up shaving, hollowed out and crammed with loose earth, each lump is incapable of reaction and remains silent.

Both corpse and face are split. Into the worn lines of experience naïveté approaches and makes a nest. Roses loll on their grey knees against which they wave their naïve diatribes. The rocks permit this. Those whose disastrous hail decimated the forests sit in patient stupor and resignation.

They laugh with scorn to see those generations of flowers nourished and cut down, their pink complexion scarcely brighter than their own grey. They think (in silence like statues) that these pink tints are on loan from the shades of skies at sunset, colours borrowed by themselves every evening to recall that

great cataclysm which gave them an hour of astonishing liberty in which they were exploded into the atmosphere before falling into earth. At no great distance, the sea-wife beats on the rocky knees of the giant watchers of the shore tearing blocks away and holding the fragments to her body, clutching and caressing, polishing and kneading before placing a morsel, like an almond-drop, in some watery corner of her mouth and then spitting it out on a sloping beach to be later picked up and sucked again anew.

And the wind blows. It stirs sand into the air. And if one of these grains, the tiniest and last of the shavings taken from the object of our contemplation, lands up in the corner of our eye it is as if stone has discovered a way of punishing our enquiry and bringing to a close our peering glance.

Our windows have been closed and the time has arrived to assess the accumulation of our remembered vision in order to see if it has not led to some more general conclusions.

*

To a mind searching for ideas and latching onto appearances of this kind stone seems, and perhaps this is an oversimplification, rather like a watch set in motion by wheels which revolve at different speeds although activated by a single drive.

Plants and animals, vapours and liquids, revolve between death and rebirth quite speedily. The enormous wheel of stone seems almost inert and even in theory we have no real conception of its profoundly slow disintegration.

In this way as opposed to the commonly-held opinion that it represents the unchangeable it is in fact the only thing that is constantly dying at a slow pace.

Therefore when life, in the words of those whose experience of it is ongoing for a very short time, seems to be impressed by the stillness of stone's being it is actually the witness of its destruction by miniscule degrees. Life conceives the unity of stone as tragic and thinks that its very foundation will one day shatter whilst its own qualities will keep springing up again. Faced with the appearance of emotionless stillness life can only nervously fiddle with transience.

It is true that stone may upon occasion appear to become agitated such as at its rims where it becomes pebble or gravel, sand or dust, where it can no longer act

as the cradle for living things. Ripped away from its fundamental block it rolls or flies to lay claim to a new berth and all life retreats from those barren outlands on which it disperses and then gathers in a frenzy of hopelessness.

I reach a conclusion of principal importance: all shapes of stone, representative examples of its development, exist at the same time throughout the world. There's no evolution from vanished races and the Temples, Demi-gods, Wonders, Mammoths, Ancient Heroes and Ancestors all exist side-by-side with their off-spring. Each person may touch the flesh-and-bone of stone in his own garden. No ideological concepts here: everything simply exists or, to put it another way, as with Paradise, all is ideological concept.

*

If I now wished to take a closer look at a particular type of stone I would choose the pebble for the perfection of its form and because I can pick it up to revolve it in my grasp.

A pebble is also at the precise age at which its personality may be seen developing and individuality is expressed in its language.

In comparison with the bed of rock from which it takes its being it is stone which has been broken away and polished into a large number of individual beings. Rather different from bits of gravel we might call it wild and undomesticated as a piece of stone which man has not generally put to practical usage.

Let us make the very most of its qualities as it rests there unused for some time longer.

*

Deposited here one day by one of the uncountable cart-waves of the sea which have forever it seems unloaded their cargoes to our ears, each pebble rests banked up on a heap of forms gazing both to the past and to the future.

Not far from the beds of topsoil which cover its gigantic ancestors, at the foot of the rocky couch on which its immediate parents coupled, it takes its seat upon a ground prepared by their seed where the waves loosen it to lose it.

However, the places to which it is most regularly consigned are really the most temporary. Its populous accumulation is known only to the wide open spaces.

Each individual pebble regards itself as lost, unnumbered and at the mercy of blind chance.

In reality where such crowds lie they almost pave the ground and their backs constitute a floor uncomfortable for both our feet and our imaginations.

There are no birds. Blades of grass sometimes force themselves up between them. Lizards skitter over or around them. The bounding leap of the grasshopper is a measure of itself not the pebbles. With an air of distraction men occasionally cast them away into the distance.

These humble objects scattered randomly throughout a solitude broken only by dry grass, kelp, old corks and human detritus remain unmoved by the world's turbulence, silent witnesses to

the unseeing compulsion that prompts everything to rush breathlessly after everything.

Belonging nowhere they remain in place on the wide levels. The blasts of wind strong enough to uproot a tree or tear down a building do not dislodge a pebble. Hurricane winds do sometimes stir up the surrounding dust occasionally exposing to view these random milestones which have lain for hundreds of years hidden beneath an opaque and temporal mask of sand.

*

However, water which cloaks with slippery fluid everything it touches is upon occasion able to seduce a pebble from its ground and transport it elsewhere. Perhaps the pebble calls to mind that its own birth came about as a

result of this shapeless monster's connection with the other shapeless monster, stone. And since its own personal development is dependent upon repeated liquid ministrations it remains docile within her hands.

Like a day can be dull when compared with night the pebble rests dull on the ground until that moment when the wave grasps it back to make it gleam. Without any deep intrusion and scarcely penetrating the densely fine substance of its being the shallow but active grasp of the liquid has a perceptible effect on the pebble's surface. She seems to polish it and hence dress those wounds caused by their amours of long ago. For a moment the external surface of the pebble mirrors its inside body and the whole thing is suffused with a sense of youth.

The pebble's form is perfectly at ease in both places. It rests imperturbable within the sea's confusion. It comes out smaller but intact, itself, since the qualities it possesses are not dependent upon volume.

Out of the wet, it immediately dries. One notes that despite the trauma inflicted upon it no trace of damp is left upon its surface: with no effort it removes all trace.

In conclusion, although getting smaller as each day passes it retains its form, blind, solid and completely dry on the inside: it hasn't become merged with the water but reduced by it. When finally it has been defeated it becomes sand and dust unpenetrated by the water. It retains all traces of itself and not of the water which has worn it away; it permits the grandeur of the sea to run through it

and away into the depths without itself being reduced to mud.

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I rest my case since the removal of all traces brings to my mind the faults of too much loquacity.

I am pleased to have begun with a pebble and a sharp-witted reader will find some amusement before probably jumping to the conclusion that “He wanted to write about stone but got weighed down.”



RUNAMOK