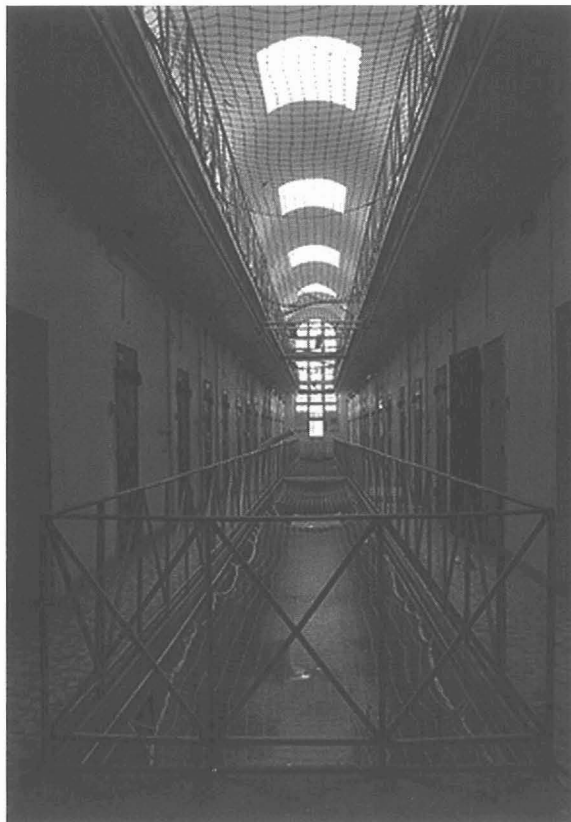


Philosophising by Accident

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My becoming-a-philosopher through acting [*en acte*], if it has taken place, and *I believe* indeed it has taken place, was the effect of an *anamnesis* produced by an objective situation in the accidental course of my existence. The accident consisted in five years of incarceration which I spent in the Saint-Michel prison in Toulouse, then in the Muret detention centre, between 1978 and 1983—years obviously preceded by a passage to the act, that is, by a transgression.

So, these were five years spent in philosophical *practice*, in *experimental* phenomenology, and in passage to the limits of phenomenology, following this “passage to the act” which itself had absolutely nothing to do with philosophy.

One must always be ready to philosophise *to the death*, as did Socrates, and to philosophise *in that dying* which a life is—but “a life” means here an existence and a facticity, an accidentality. For example, Socrates’s being condemned to death is an accident which is *necessary* [*qu’il faut*]: Socrates will *make sure* [*faire en sorte*] that it is necessary, he will make a *mistake* [*un défaut*] *that he will have had to make*. The philosophical vocation, if there is one, gives itself, as in Proust, in the future anterior of an *après-coup*, as endurance of the *après-coup*.

The *après-coup* traverses and structures what those five years in prison were for me—but also the following twenty years, which have led me today before you as *before the law*, years I have consecrated to consolidating this “necessity” [*il faut*], this mistake which will have had to happen.

But, at the same time, this question of vocation is that of a vocation by default [*par défaut*], or by accident, because this vocation is *always that of everyone* [*celle de tous*], with “everyone” forming the *we* that the philosopher through acting represents in individuating—by default.

Like a flying fish

My incarceration in Saint Michel prison, result of a passage to the act, will have been the suspension of my acts and the interruption of my actions: such is the function of prison. But *interruption* and *suspension*, which are also the beginning of philosophy (Socrates’s *daimon* is thus the one who interrupts), were for myself the *occasion* of a reflection on what is *the passage to the act in general*—and a recollection of *all the acts which brought me there*.

Twenty years after my liberation it seems to me, moreover, that my journey will never cease to be a circuit between “action” [*action*] and its suspension by “philosophy in action” [*philosophie en acte*], between writing and highly social activity.

It would be necessary here to examine the ambiguities of the relation between these words, *act* and *action* [*acte et action*], with all the problems posed by the translation into Latin *actus* of the Greek *energeia*.

It is Aristotle who forms this couple of *act* and *potential* with which I have tried on this very day to think my own life—but which I discovered almost twenty-five years ago, in Hegel’s *History of Philosophy*, where he reformulates, in

his commentary on *On the Soul*, the Aristotelian question of *dunamis* and *energeia* as the question of the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*.

In that treatise Aristotle poses three types of souls, according to three modes of animation, three kinds of living *movement*: the vegetative, sensory, and intellectual souls, which form three relations to the “immovable prime mover,” to God as the desirable *par excellence*, as the *motive* [motif] and in that sense the *reason* of everything that moves. Aristotle explains that a *sensory* soul, for example, is most of the time sensory in potential, and not in acting [*en acte*]. It is only sensory through acting when it *reproduces itself*. The rest of the time, it remains in the *inferior* mode of the vegetative soul, which Aristotle also calls *nutritive*. The same applies to the intellectual or noetic soul: it is only rarely in action [*en acte*] and remains most of the time in the sensory mode. It is in action [*en acte*] only when, participating in the divine, it *re-produces* the *truth*. This is what leads Hegel to say that the sensory soul is the *in-itself* of the intellectual soul and, in a way, its material. The intellectual soul is most of the time only in potentiality, and not in action [*en acte*], meaning that it comports itself sensitively rather than intellectually.

This account [*constat*], and the lesson it names, will have guided all my solitary work. Since the time of my imprisonment—the question becoming that of the *conditions* of the passage from potential to act, *what Aristotle names participation in the divine*. In this regard, the reading in *On the Soul* was decisive for thinking movement, motion, and what one might call emotion as desire, that is, the relation to the immovable prime mover, insofar as, for such a *passage from potential to act*, the consideration of *milieu* appeared to me to be decisive.

Studying the senses, Aristotle underlines in effect that one does not see that, in the case of touching, it is the body which forms the milieu, whereas, for example, in the case of sight, the milieu is what he calls the *diaphane* [the transparent]. And he specifies that this milieu, because it is *that which is most close*, is that which is *structurally forgotten* just as water is for a fish. The milieu is *forgotten*, because it effaces itself before that to which it *gives place*. There is always already a milieu, but this fact escapes us in the same way that “aquatic animals,” as Aristotle says, “do not notice that one wet body touches another wet body” (423ab): water is that which the fish *always* sees; it is that which it *never* sees. Or, as Plato too says in the *Timaeus*, if the world was made of gold, gold would be the sole being that would never be seen—it would not be a being, but the inapparent *being of that being*, appearing only in the *occurrence* of a being, *by default* [par défaut].

Aristotle does not examine in this treatise the *noetic milieu* (the intellectual milieu), giving place to *logos* (he does this, on the other hand, in the *Analytics*: such is his *logic*). Reading Aristotle, it is this same possibility of the existence of such a noetic milieu, as the *element* of the everyday life of the intellectual soul, on which I meditated a great deal in my cell, where I was *like a fish out of water*. There ought to be a milieu of the intellectual soul, I thought, just as the senses of the sensory soul have their milieus.

Now, it appeared to me that this milieu was that of language. I set myself to reading Saussure and Wittgenstein. Later the milieu became for me that of the artifact, of the supplement in general, of which language (where it produces the very quotidian experience of *logos*) would be one dimension, but of which technical artifacts (consisting of *things*) would form another dimension.

From then on, philosophy consisted of considering the milieu while being able to extract oneself from it, in the same way as a flying fish can leave the water: intermittently. In this extraction, or abstraction, the milieu is brought into view in its absence [*par défaut*], that is, *here, grabbed hold of* [toucher du doigt] *like a wall*, as the condition of passage from the potential of the intellective soul to its act, to its *for itself*. From then on, I could not claim that I was in my cell like a fish in water, but, *in that cell*, where I had been rendered radically deficient in the *vital milieu of the intellective soul*, the *world*, as the *framework of artifacts forming relations sustaining* [supportant] *social relations*, I had perhaps a chance to consider this world as does a fish flying above its element—an elementary milieu totally constituted by supplements, where the element, in other words, is *always lacking* [faire toujours défaut].

So, I discovered—and I say this in Platonic terms, but from a point of view that opposes me to Plato—that this element was the *hypomnesis*, as that which *gives place to anamnesis*.

Hypomnesis and mortality

Regarding *anamnesis*, let us recall a scene from *Meno*. Socrates meets Meno, who is on his way to the house of Protagoras to be taught virtue. Socrates proposes to him that he first of all ask what virtue is *for himself*, in order to know if it is truly possible to teach it. To this question of knowing what virtue *is*, Meno responds by proposing *examples of various virtues*. Socrates tells him this is not answering the question of knowing what virtue is *as such*: not through *such and such* particular virtue, but virtue as forming the *unity* of all possible virtues, or the *reason* of the *series* of cases which form the examples, the unity of this series, thus the essence of virtue, that is, the *origin* of virtue (that through which it commences). It is then that Meno responds with his famous *aporia*, whereby Socrates cannot find what he is looking for, because either he *does not know it* [*connaît pas*], and so he will not *recognise* [*re-connaître pas*] it if he finds it, or because he *already* knows it, in which case he is only *pretending* to search for it. Socrates responds that in effect he already knew what he was looking for: he knew it at “another time,” then he *forgot* it. From then on, cognition is recognition [*la connaissance est une reconnaissance*], a remembering: an *anamnesis*.

Phaedrus, as a dogmatic reprise of *Meno*, and a simplification of the meaning of the survival of Socrates in death, on the one hand founds the discourse on the immortality of the soul, in *condemning the body* as a *fall from the origin*, a prison of

the soul, site of passion and *cause of forgetting* by the soul of its knowledge of the origin, and, on the other hand, *opposes anamnesis* to *hypomnesis*: the latter, as a *technics of memory* (and he is concerned here essentially with the writing of books), with the same flaws [*défauts*] as the body, and in the same way a prison, is for Plato what renders the soul *forgetful*, replacing *true* memory with *artificial* memory, and accentuates *the forgetting of the origin* into which the soul has fallen in its descent into the body.

Hypomnesis is here, very generally, the figure of artifice, of technics as the dead simulacrum of life-as-immortality. Now, in a much earlier dialogue, Plato had Protagoras undertake a discourse on prostheticity in general and on the flaws [*au défaut*] of the body, and, through it, of mortals and of *mortality* properly speaking—of which Protagoras (in the dialogue which bears his name) proposes a genesis, which is also that of the *fundamentally accidental* character of mortals, fruits of a mistake by the Titans, an accident proceeding precisely from a *forgetting*: Zeus, having asked Prometheus to bring into the day the living beings which are not immortals, handed him all the qualities, the *dunameis*, to distribute to the living. Epimetheus, who is charged with this distribution, *forgets* to save a quality for man, for which Prometheus tries to compensate by *stealing* fire, that is, technics—a theft which is a passage to the act, an attempt, *in vain*, to *make up for* the lack [*défaut*] of a quality, in other words the *default of origin*, which from then on afflicts we mortals.

This accidental forgetting, generator of prostheses and artifices making up for a lack of origin, is equally the origin of *hypomnesis*, to which Plato will later oppose the *anamnesis* of the origin. In opposition to the metaphysics arising in the *Phaedrus*, the myth of the fault of Epimetheus says that *at the origin there is only an originary default of origin*, and *man, without qualities, only exists by default: he becomes*.

The extra-ordinary in the absence of world

A passage to the act plunged me accidentally into a profoundly philosophical situation, which was in its turn a passage from the potential to the act—a reminiscence through interruption of the action and suspension of the conditions of ordinary life. This was the beginning of an experience of the *extra-ordinary*. I believe the experience of the extra-ordinary is essential to philosophy: it is the meaning of Socrates's shamanism, of his famous *daimon*. It is also the reversal of the natural attitude in Husserl's phenomenology. For five years I had this experience of the extra-ordinary because I was confronted with the *limits* of the conditions of intellectual life, being held above the ordinary social surface of those conditions. I almost grabbed hold of the extra-ordinary, as an ordinarily invisible milieu suddenly considered as such—but in the night of my ignorance, groping, it appeared to me to constitute those conditions of experience that cannot be found in experience, because they condition it.¹

Deprived of an “exterior milieu,” my “interior milieu” takes on that incommensurable depth and weight sought after by mystics and, more generally, by ascetics. But it is also and just as much *in its absence*, and in the most intimate and secret hollow [*creux*] of the “interior milieu,” that the “exterior milieu” is constituted as *irreducible*—and thus I was testing a Husserlian lesson² but, as we will see, a *contrario*.³ Absent, the world *reigned* in my cloister like “the absence of all bouquets.”⁴ After a few months of incarceration I had written, above the small table where I worked and ate, this verse by Mallarmé:

On no fruits here does my hunger feast,
But finds in their learned lack the self-same taste.⁵

As the days passed, I was discovering there is no interior milieu, but only, remaining here, in my cell, the remains, the defaults, the artifices of which the world consists, and through which it finds its consistency. I no longer lived in the world, but in the absence of a world, which presented itself here not only as a default, but as that which is *always* in default, and as a *necessary default* [*un défaut qu'il faut*]*—rather than as a lack* [*manque*].

And, inversely, *for want of these remains producing a default*, there had been nothing else: I was woven only out of these *remains*.

Because, finally, the exterior milieu being interrupted and suspended, being in default, in reality there was for me no interior milieu, but rather *its reduction to an exterior milieu itself reduced to an absolute minimum* of that which remained of it in my memory, constituting my interminable recollection via the fabric of my memories—what Husserl called secondary retentions—and which would become for me not only the material of a desperate recollection, but also of an *anamnesis*, of a work of reminiscence, in the properly philosophical sense of the word.

My freedom, hypomneses and the necessity of the world

From these remains of the world, I gathered material for a reminiscence of the *necessity* of the world—and, in fact, of its properly *irreducible* character. This was certainly a reminiscence, or a reactivation from out of those remains, *but*, somewhat like Husserl’s analysis of the origin of geometry, this reactivation of the world was not possible other than *via the intermediary of that which would permit me in a way to represent* [*figurer*] *this world ideally*, as for example Meno’s slave represents the geometric ideal in the sand: by relying *on the hypomneses of books read and words written*.

Because the world in which the exterior milieu consisted had not completely disappeared *in its very exteriority* (or I would have gone mad): *I reconstituted it, each day*, through what I would much later name *tertiary retentions*,⁶ that is, through hypomnesic traces.

This exteriority was irreducible, which means I could not reach (myself in) it [*je ne pouvais pas m'en passer*] (the interior is nothing without the exterior, the difference between the two being an illusion—obviously necessary, and even insurmountable), but it was within my power to reconstitute it. Such were my freedom, my intimacy, and my secret.

Very quickly, I had the presence of spirit to begin to read and write, secreted around me an *intimate* hypomnesic milieu (which was nevertheless already on the way to becoming *public*), at once *secret*, cryptic, and yet already *publishable*: I constituted a *world* which would become, over the years, and beyond the period of my incarceration, my philosophy.

If this had not happened, I would have become insane or totally asocial. Because if we are constituted by retentions which remain within us in the absence of the world, these retentions produce *protections* which are the desires for actions, *actual* forms of being-in-the-world. I had found the way to suspend these protections, because I had transferred them to my unceasing effort to consider the element while being myself maintained outside of it—through fabricating that other element which was in the process of becoming “my philosophy,” a pure fabric of hypomneses, of which I daily deposited traces on paper, like a snail sliming along a wall.

The fragility of freedom

Prison is asceticism *without end* [*sans arrêt*]—with the exception of micro-interruptions such as visits and, when the time comes, day-release. I ended up being afraid of (while also desiring) these micro-interruptions to the *silence* of which asceticism consists. I avoided even, as much as possible, the “promenades” which broke the silence I had learned to love. When one begins to systematically practice the experience of one’s pre-individual lived milieu (having become accessible to oneself beyond the context of the world), as an almost palpable milieu (a little like the way in which a hand placed outside the window during high-speed driving causes air to be perceived as a liquid), having thus totally suspended all relation to a meaningful milieu other than that which one carries and reactivates within oneself, or other than that towards which one deliberately heads (such as the book one reads, or rather devours, or the book one writes)—now then, if one is all of a sudden confronted with micro-interruptions to this asceticism, then, paradoxically, one suffers terribly: one discovers that, in fact, to be “free” is a suffering. It is suffering because, most of the time, it is produced not as liberty but, precisely, as alienation. One perceives with astonishment that, in that cell, one is much more free, or at least that liberty is much more *accessible* there, much purer, appearing then essentially as *fragility*, as what is *intrinsically* fragile, that which must be made the object of the whole of one’s care, of a veritable cult, of a culture. This culture, which I have named, after Epictetus, my *melete*.

The silence out of which a voice arises

My *melete* was in reality an ensemble of disciplines.

I would, for example, throughout those five years, begin each day by reading Mallarmé—I arose as soon as I awoke, to avoid those uncontrollable protentions which would occur as the waking reveries of the morning. Reading a poem, or reading and re-reading a prose text, usually for half an hour, not so as to learn it by heart, but to *understand* it.

More generally, my *melete* came from readings leading to prolonged writing exercises in different modes, which came to form veritable reading-methods, which consisted in a process in which the texts read were catalogued, then transformed into commentaries, and finally consisted of writing, in which these remains of the world were reassembled: thus was *produced* reminiscence.

In the evening, I read novels.

I lived only in language, and uniquely in written language. I spoke only very rarely. I did not like it; I didn't like it anymore. I had learnt to love the silence through which I could listen to what always arose so long as I knew how to wait: an other voice, a soliloquy in which it was not myself who was speaking, but the other me, which I called *myself-an-other* [moi-l'autre], the other *of* myself, the other which I *carried* in me, which I became, as if I had been weighed down with what Socrates had ascribed as the task of the maieutician.

Language, in abandoning its communicative function, opened itself fully to its significance, or rather *as* significance, as if it turned itself over to its vocation of signifying, suddenly proliferating. It *made signs*, literally, sometimes to the point of madness. I listened and tried to take note of everything I heard or read. It happened with an absolute necessity. It signified, almost as if it spoke by itself, and, from that point of view, I am obviously tempted to speak of "vocation": it resembled that which the tradition considers to be that of which a vocation consists. It was a matter of a voice (*vocare*).

This impersonal voice, which was not the language of communication, was the language of pure significance of which Blanchot spoke regarding Char in *The Beast of Lascaux*.

When that language began to "speak," to signify, I had the feeling of entering into a state of extra-lucidity. It was a kind of passion, and it was in these exceptional conditions that I encountered the Greek passion for language and the question of *logos* which arises there, a passion and a question which were also a state of exception and an origin: ours, insofar as we philosophise today, in potential or in act. But I came to the position that this originary Greek passion was, as well, a default of origin—as Husserl glimpsed at the end of his life, it was hypomnesically constituted by default, by this default which the hypomnesic technique of writing is.

Much later, I compared my position with Husserl's thoughts on soliloquy in *Logical Investigations*. But I did this on the basis of frequent preparatory readings of

Plato and his discourse on *dianoia*, dialectic as the dialogue of the soul with itself, in a context where, for me—rigorously experimenting with *dianoia*, understanding it in order to criticise dialectic as Plato wanted to establish it—it was *first of all a matter of fighting* against the *bad soliloquy*: the hell lived by those who, as one says, talk to themselves, those whom one sees everywhere these days in the streets, those who have lost their spirit, overcome by the harshness of life.

This was, then, how I undertook to practice philosophy, as the experience of a silence in which a voice arose, as a soliloquy sustained by the hypomneses of writing, anamnesically reconstituting language as that which does not allow itself to be understood except through the trial of a cloistered asceticism and an absolute solitude, language which is rarely produced in the dialogue between two, in the social dialectic, which unfortunately almost always becomes, today pure chatter, if not a system of cretinisation.

In that soliloquy of extremities, on the verge of talking to myself, but just before that point, on the edge of that quasi-madness of extreme thoughts, of final ends and profound roots, the *hypomnesis* was my *safeguard* [*garde-fou*].

Excerpt from an unpublished translation of Stiegler's book *Passer à l'acte* (Galilée, 2003). Translation by David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan.

NOTES

1 They are not found in experience, but rather in *extraordinary experiences* and *at the limit of the social*—as that which delimits the social, practices which *suspend the ordinary*—whether these are experiences of religious life, of thought, of painting (such is the extra-ordinariness of Mount Saint-Victoire), of listening, of dance, of writing, music, literature, etc.—each forming as many modalities of flight beyond the element.

2 The lesson in question concerns Husserl's claim that the possibility of the world is constituted by the Transcendental Ego.

3 My counter argument is that the hypomnesic supplementarity of the world is constitutive, and that this world, as accidental facticity, is therefore irreducible.

4 Stephane Mallarmé, *Coup de Dés, Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor & G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 368.

5 Stephane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 84; Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 76.

6 I developed this concept, in relation to the Husserlian concepts of primary and secondary retention, in *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), part 2, ch. 3; *La Technique et le Temps 2. Les désorientation* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), ch. 4; and *La Technique et le Temps 3*, chs. 1–2.