

Abandoned Practices, Chicago 2011

A COMMONPLACE BOOK

By Daniel Sack

July 18, 2011

1.

*A LOVER'S DISCOURSE*

The necessity for this book is to be found in the following consideration: that the lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*. This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the 'unreal,' exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation*. That affirmation is, in short, the subject of the book which begins here...

-Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1978), 1.

*I would collect the entirety of Barthes' book in this archive, but I choose these opening lines as an invitation. The words that follow are nothing but a kind of affirmation severed from authority. Or perhaps I should have offered the lines that follow this passage under the heading 'How this book is constructed' to explain instead 'How this talk is constructed.' It seems best to start with a mistake, a feint, an apology. I quote: "What is proposed, then, is a portrait [...] the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak" (Barthes, 3).*

*Barthes' book describes a series of fragments or roles taken up by the lover in relation to an Other—the loved—for the most part silent and deaf to his entreaties. These roles are available as practices for the lover to undertake, masks to inhabit and games to play, perhaps as a means of imagining a meeting or some moment of shared acknowledgement. The table of contents offers us a sampling of such figures: absence, waiting, body, demons, embarrassment, informer, magic, clouds, waking, will-to-possess. Likewise, the texts I offer here are claims I stake out in glosses, each half of the dialogue spoken to an absent other (the quoted text put forth and my own text to follow). Since it seems that all commonplace books record a private dialogue, I should warn you that this veers at times hazardously close to the precipices of self-indulgence.*

*I ask you: isn't my attendance to the performance that always escapes my capture no less than that between the lover and loved who will not or can no longer speak? I confront the enormity of your silence in my own extreme solitude, you—the performer—who dance on in inscrutable arabesques, always further, because I am always confronting you. I had thought the word 'love' a kind of passkey, a thin word that fit any lock. As when taking up the word 'I', one takes up the whole of speech, finds a place for 'you' and for 'then' and for 'there', for 'right' and 'left' and 'wrong', for 'now'. I thought love that kind of promise, the basis for directions through all that followed. I would call you simply love but could not elaborate because all of language, all of meaning surrounded you. And so I realize now that you are also what I've been calling potentiality this whole time, because I needed another name. Secreted in the deepest recesses of discourse—as Barthes would say—"completely forsaken by other languages" such love means nothing more than the pure affirmation of an attachment, an attention to what you do.*

## 2.

What is the existence of a character on the stage, what kind of (grammatical) entity is this? We know several of its features:

- 1) A character is not, and cannot become aware of us. Darkened, indoor theaters dramatize the fact that the audience is invisible. A theater whose house lights were left on (a possibility suggested, for other reasons, by Brecht) might dramatize the equally significant fact that we are also inaudible to them, and immovable (that is, at a *fixed* distance from them). I will say: We are not in their presence.
- 2) They are in our presence. This means, again, not simply that we are seeing and hearing them, but that we are acknowledging them (or specifically failing to).

-Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 332.

*Cavell relates the anecdote of how a backcountry yokel attends a performance of Othello and, having never seen a play before, interprets the events depicted as 'real' events. The yokel rushes onstage to interrupt Othello at the moment when the noble moor is about to strangle Desdemona for her supposed adultery. As soon as he interrupts the action, the play ceases, its world collapses. If only we could return to the innocence of the uninitiated.*

*We may share a common space and time, a common presence, you and I, but we live in different worlds. If one of us were to address the other directly across that border dividing stage and spectator, the play would depart from its determined path and end. Thus we are freed from the responsibility of acknowledging each other's pain or need, the burden that everyday witnessing would ethically require of us. This is the strange form of acknowledgement that performance gives us: the acknowledgement that we will always, inevitably, fail to acknowledge each other.*

### 3.

Just because we're surrounded by four walls and a roof doesn't mean anything. It's still dangerous. The chances of something happening are just as great. Anything could happen. Any move is possible. I've seen it. You go outside. The world's quiet... Then you go inside. It's a shock. It's not like how you expected. You lose what you had outside. You forget that there even is an outside. The inside is all you know. You hunt for a way of being with everyone. A way of finding out how to behave. You find out what's expected of you. You act yourself out.

-Sam Shepard, "Action" in *Fool for Love and Other Plays* (Toronto: Dial Press, 1984), 178.

*Memory "skips" over events, threading one instance and another ten years before with the same colored strand, pulled taut the fabric folds over on itself. Shepard reminds us that this can happen in the present, too, that our habits, our unconscious actions, can suture two distant moments together right now.*

*Going into the kitchen, I forget why I'm there. Or I leave the house without my keys three times in a row. Here habit takes over and carries my body through rooms and doorways, though I cannot remember a thing I've been thinking. What happens between my moments of awareness is the habitual self that I do not know.*

*I play a part in order to provide some consistency to cover over those gaps; habit takes over when I forget how to act and I lose myself. There is a moment in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, when the aristocrat Pozzo desires to sit down on his stool, but discovers that he cannot begin the action on his own. He asks that Didi or Gogo ask him to take a seat. He finds out how to behave by fitting himself within a scripted scene, by responding to another.*

### 4.

You don't clear the ground to build unobstructed: you make a little clearing where the penumbra of an almost-given will be able to enter and modify its contour. [...] It is thought itself resolving to be irresolute, deciding to be patient, wanting not to want, wanting, precisely, not to produce a meaning in place of what *must* be signified."

-Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" from *the Inhuman*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 19.

*It is impossible to "build unobstructed." One can only take up a form from inside or within its shadow and "modify its contour." A creative destruction-an iconoclasm not aimed at destroying the image so much as freeing its constituent parts. This is akin to the way that the baroque expresses the forces contained within a figure by allowing them to disfigure what is almost-given. A distension of the body just below the skin, a tumorous growth. I think of the way that the exercises taking up abandoned practices decide not to restage the practice, but instead to patiently wait inside them, testing its boundaries*

*insistently, like tapping at an eggshell from within. The lover, too, projects him or herself into the loved and tries to enter the shadow of the same, patiently waiting, ever waiting.*

5.

And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wonderous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. And this thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his, when one morning turning away from surveying poor Queequeg—'Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!'

-Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1994), 480.

*Who is it that can read the history written upon our bodies? We spoke last week of the archive that gathers in the furrows of wrinkles or blossoms pink in scars—in Hannah Wilke's body rebelling against itself. These are the marked and placed subjects of our sentences, stars in a night sky. The story we read of our past elaborates on these direct marks and spirals them out into hieroglyphs, connecting those points of light and dark into constellations. They describe a line of life that orders the wound of an event into a consecutive history that explains who we are now. That is the past; but Queequeg's body theorizes (from the Greek for "sees") the future. And so I ask: who is that can read the future inscribed on our skins, its prophecies and damnations? Queequeg's tattoo artist is gone, departed, his promise a sealed letter lost in transit. He is the book that cannot be read, the book buried in the depths of Moby Dick that holds its future at bay.*

6.

...if the accomplishment of the act is arrested or thwarted by an obstacle, consciousness may reappear. [Consciousness] was there, but neutralized by the action which fulfilled and thereby filled the representation. The obstacle creates nothing positive; it simply makes a void, removes a stopper. This inadequacy of act to representation is precisely what we here call consciousness. [...] consciousness is the light that plays around the zone of possible actions or potential activity which surrounds the action really performed by the living being. It signifies hesitation or choice.

-Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 145-146.

*True consciousness forms an undifferentiated zone of futurity around the hesitating or still figure. Could we not also call it a halo, that crown of light that is different for each angel, for each of the elect or sacred? Each individual potentiality its own color and its own indescribable character, singular. As opposed to seeing the obstacle as the negation of a positive choice, it is the possible action that is here portrayed as a "stopper," which the obstacle removes in order to reveal a potentiality that beams out like a light from an*

*unshuttered lantern.*

7.

“But I am cold. It is dark. Let me come into the house.”

“There is a lamp on my table. And the house is in the book.”

“So I will live in the house after all.”

“You will follow the book, whose every page is an abyss where the wing shines with the name.”

-Edmond Jabès, “At the Threshold of the Book” in *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop (Wesleyan, 1991)

*Even when I was writing poetry it was the closed book that I circled endlessly. I wanted to write around the thing itself, as if the poem could have a book within it untouched. I wanted the poem to have the thing itself because I knew that I could never have it. And now, writing about performance, I find that I still cannot live in its house. I would that I could light the lamp of my attention, shining only on those outside covers, those external walls.*

*Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben relates the anecdote of the scholar Damascius who spends years laboring over a text on the origin of thought until he realizes that such an origin resides in the potentiality of the blank page. Thus, Jabès tells us that we are not allowed to live in the house of the book: we follow it. This carries two senses: one temporal, one spatial. We are always temporally after, always following, the blank page. But in the other sense, how to find a way to chase it through space, to follow it?*

8.

Imagine oneself snatched out of the normal course of life and set down one knows not where, in utter darkness. Eventually one risks a step forward, out of one's perfect nescience, and finds firm footing. Another step, and then another, add to one's tentative belief that the ground underfoot, whatever its nature, is supportive. Each step is progressively less likely to bring one to the edge; in fact, one comes to imagine that there may not be such an edge. Soon one is striding out confidently, towards the silently waiting precipice.

-Tim Robinson, *My Time in Space* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2001), 116.

*This is the promise you made me. That my every step would find support when it fell. After all, walking is a dialogue between departure and return, the firm footing giving way to the fall forward into another who will hold us just long enough for another stride. An embrace that is always leaving. And years of habit convinced me that we would keep meeting, that we would only stop our moving at death—that final footprint, tomb-like, the only one which does not promise another step, and which contains us both: the only*

*object at which this subject can arrive. But there is that other death—the eternal fall.*

**9.**

“As the bearer of the message, the messenger appears...but he must also disappear, or write himself out of the picture, in order that the recipient hears the words of the person who sent the message, not the messenger. When the messenger takes on too much importance, he ends up diverting the channel of transmission to his own ends.”

-Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, translated by Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 99.

*In Greek tragedy, for example, the messenger arrives upon the scene as a vessel delivering a description of the offstage event with the least diversion or inflection possible. He or she has no name, ideally, perhaps, no character apart from the content of the message; the messenger does not appear onstage prior to this moment, nor stay beyond its calling. The quintessential messenger or Messiah is a person of no importance with no ends, announcing his or her own mediality as message. The figure as a medium, as a passage.*

**10.**

The characteristic beauty of the dandy consists, above all, in his air of reserve, which in turn arises from his unshakeable resolve not to feel any emotion. It might be likened to a hidden fire whose presence can be guessed at; a fire that could blaze up, but does not wish to do so.

-Charles Baudelaire, “The Dandy” in *On Bohemia: the Code of the Self-Exiled*, edited by Cesar Graña and Marigay Graña (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 1990), 578.

*The dandy cultivates a stylistic extreme, the decorative surface, while retaining an impassive relationship to his own interior subjectivity. His energy is devoted entirely to becoming an object, a decorative wonder, which thereby frees him to possess his own selfhood untrammelled by the interpretation of an outside eye. His modus operandi is that of the feint, the thrust that only intends to mislead the opponent. Where the fencer would offer a feint in the instantaneous flash of a blade, the gleam of metal catching light, the dandy seeks to perform a long and constant feint; his whole being devoted to elaborate and easeful distraction. The dandy is related to, and yet the antithesis of, Don Juan, who keeps promising himself completely and utterly to one loved object after loved object. Both keep producing a rich surface of performances and avowals, but underneath all, the dandy keeps his love in reserve.*

**11.**

And we: onlookers, always, everywhere,  
always looking into, never out of, everything.  
It fills us. We arrange it. It collapses.  
We arrange it again, and collapse ourselves.

Who has turned us round like this, so that,  
Whatever we do, we always have the aspect  
Of one who leaves? Just as they  
Will turn, stop, linger, for one last time,  
On the last hill, that shows them all their valley-,  
So we live, and are always taking leave.

-Rainer Marie Rilke, *Duino Elegy 8*, translated by A.S. Kline, 2001 (available online)

*We go out onto the porch as the sun is doing its thing. We raise glasses to some great overture. The paths we will wander are marked in other tongues, directions we followed before, where it came upon us, creeping and hollow-like. We thought that we had circumscribed the woods many times over, had sketched in our maps with broad colored hatchings. But there are undergrounds and undergrowths. The woods are not the grounds it keeps, but the living and heaving below. The shadows cast as the sun sets lower and lower, licking at those distant counties and villages we will never reach. Those great velvet sighs, the underbelly of smooth, smooth sleep.*

**12.**

“Try to Ensure That Everything in Life Has a Consequence”

This is without doubt one of the most detestable of maxims, one that you would not expect to run across in Goethe. It is the imperative of progress in its most dubious form. It is not the case that the consequence leads to what is fruitful in right action, and even less that the consequence is its fruit. On the contrary, bearing fruit is the mark of evil acts. The acts of good people have no ‘consequence’ that could be ascribed (or ascribed exclusively) to them. The fruits of an act are, as is right and proper, internal to it. To enter into the interior of a mode of action is the way to test its fruitfulness. But how to do this?”

-Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 686.

*To make the fruits of labor internal to the act itself is to deny a conclusion or to find the end in the middle of the action. Not the kind of repetition with which we are familiar, where a strip of time flows from A to B and folds back again from A to B and so on. Perhaps there is a kind of repetition that lives in the middle of motion, finds its ends in its means or a means without end.*

**13.**

*This Room*

The room I entered was a dream of this room.  
Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine.  
The oval portrait  
of a dog was me at an early age.  
Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day  
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced  
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?  
You are not even here.

-John Ashbery, "This Room" in *Your Name Here* (New York: Farrar Straus  
Giroux, 2000), 1.

*Two further offerings as glosses:*

*The first from Lyn Hejinian's 2002 book-length poem Slowly:*

*Everyone knows that in the dream called "Will My Sprit  
Live On When I'm Dead" as in the dream called "Will I  
Be Fired" and the dream called "Do You Only Pretend To  
Love Me" there are no objects*

*In the dream called "One Who Is Poor Passes By Inch By  
Inch" there is no object*

*Subjectivity at night must last hours with nothing to  
judge but itself*

*And then Spinoza from the second Short Treatise II (16, 5):*

*"It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing; it is the thing itself that affirms  
or denies something of itself in us."*

**14.**

Every performance *explains* the composition but does not *exhaust* it. Every performance makes the work an actuality, but is itself only complementary to all possible other performances of the work. In short, we can say that every performance offers us a complete and satisfying version of the work, but at the same time makes it incomplete for us, because it cannot simultaneously give us all the other artistic solutions which the work may admit.

-Umberto Eco, *the Open Work*, translated by Ann Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 15.

*Those long summer months as a ten-year-old spent poring over pulp fiction at the public library where one section of the young adult shelves held particular interest. There must have been at least one hundred of the Choose Your Own Adventure books lined up in identical spines, each with a colorful illustration on the cover, depicting another world: historical fictions, fantasies, a sci-fi dystopia, or dinosaurs roaming in thick jungles. A kind of preliminary hypertext, offering several actions at the end of each page that I—the protagonist of this adventure—could select to "perform." Each choice directed the reader to another page and another step in the progress of the narrative. Each book contained a number of narrative paths, through a possible world not too unlike our own, but each had been clearly charted prior to my enactment as a reader. Impatient with this illusion of choice, I would flip pages ahead until my eye caught a particularly interesting juncture, then start or fall back from there, only to flip ahead again, suspending the moment of arrival indefinitely in a constant state of beginning. Of course, I would always arrive somewhere, even if only at the climax of this particular cliffhanger or the choice between page 34 and page 67 that marked the conclusion of this segment: all variants on endings, parts within the whole.*

**15.**

Don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well.

-Epictetus, *the Enchiridion*, translated by Elizabeth Carter, number 8 (available online)

*One explanation of Nietzsche's idea of the Eternal Return. Not that we wish to see the past repeat itself in all its horrible turns of phrase and suffering, but that we accept the course it takes in the moment that it comes to be. The "wish that things happen as they do happen" suggests that things can **not** happen as they happen (in fact they probably usually do). Our task should be to find the happening while it is happening. A difficult thing for those like me, who write after the fact.*

16.

"Emergence and, also, loss—  
This is Zhaowen playing his zither.  
Nothing emerging and nothing lost—  
This is Zhaowen not playing his zither.

As the commentator explains, no matter how talented the musician (or, for that matter, how many musicians are in the orchestra), from the moment he begins or they begin playing, some notes are lost as others are brought into existence, whereas 'if it is not manifest, the sound remains integral and complete.' In declining to play—that is, in refusing to participate in the play of individual beings, of separate entities, of 'for' and 'against'—Zhaowen maintains his position in the supreme state of musicality and of wisdom.

-Francois Julien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, translated by Paula M. Varsano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 73.

*A gloss on a gloss on a gloss. Perhaps it is better not to say another word.*

17.

Whether it is mythical or utopian, there is a place where everything that is or will be is preparing, at the same time, to be spoken.

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *the Prose of the World*, translated by John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

*Jorge Luis Borges' almost infinite library contained all the books that could ever be written, a collection far beyond the scope of any lifeline, but we must presume that its shelves end somewhere, where that last arrangement of letters could find its place. But Merleau-Ponty's eternal waiting room of the future must extend endlessly, for each statement that could be said changes with each situation of its stating. Even a single word would require limitless shelves: 'you' changing with every articulation.*

*Isn't the theatre a version of such a waiting room?*

**18.**

So what is a hand? It is not an organ, it is a faculty, a capacity for doing, for becoming claw or paw, weapon or compendium. It is a naked faculty. A faculty is not special, it is never specific, it is the possibility of doing something in general.

-Michel Serres, *Genesis*, translated by Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 34.

*The hand is the potentiality to do. To show one's body as a hand, to show one's viewing as a hand, to show the hand without reaching, without grasping. Love as the naked faculty.*

**19.**

“The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them. There are ways of not knowing—carelessness, inattention, forgetfulness—that least of clumsiness and ugliness, but there are others—the unselfconsciousness of Kleist’s young man, the enchanting *sprezzatura* of an infant—whose completeness we never tire of admiring. [...] It is possible, in fact, that the way in which we are able to be ignorant is precisely what defines the rank of what we are able to know and that the articulation of a zone of nonknowledge is the condition—and at the same time the touchstone—of all our knowledge. [...] And yet, while humans have reflected for centuries on how to preserve, improve, and ensure their knowledge, we lack even the elementary principles of an art of ignorance.”

-Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 113.

*What would such an art of ignorance entail? And how would we know it if we encountered it? Would it require another to tell us, show us our own ignorance? Or would it be an art of questions? A list of questions posed to an absent one? Or begged of the lover? Or is such ignorance only available to the one who is so whole that she does not ask a question? Or does not need an answer?*