Thank you for that generous introduction; and thank you for inviting me to contemplate, interrogate, or just divagate around this conference’s wonderfully loaded title phrase, “The Novel in or against World Literature.” It is, of course, a deliberately provocative formulation whose terms demand unpacking—and I’ve already been privileged to witness some expert unpacking today as I listened to some of the best minds in their respective fields advance and upgrade a set of critical practices that for some decades now have tracked the literary manifestations of empire and diaspora; championed the logic of hybridity and creolism over that of “natural” language or expression; plotted territory in terms of islands, archipelagos, dependencies, and zones of emergent autonomy. This work is important, indeed vital—politically, conceptually, and aesthetically—for any understanding of what literature is, has been, or might become. But it’s not what I’ve been invited here to do. I’ve been kindly and indulgently given license to go a little off-road—and perhaps even to get a little lost. Which suits me fine. If I’m good for anything at all, it’s getting lost. This, perhaps, is the prerogative of the novelist. It struck me recently that the relationship between the writer and the academic community is a bit like that between a Malaysian aeroplane and air traffic control: We get lost, you look for us, bringing an increasingly sophisticated array of hard- and software to bear in an attempt to get a lock, to pinpoint some location or event, even if what’s ultimately revealed turns out to be not the finely crafted apogee of skill or techné but rather the chance movements of debris round global flows. So let me use the next forty minutes to send out, in the form of anecdotal summaries of a couple of projects I’ve been involved with over the last few years, a set of pings, or (if you like) distress signals—not, I hope, although vanity will be my subject, as a narcissistic demand to be gazed at and interpreted, but rather in the hope that, just as an object—any object, no matter how dull—over which a radar beam slides has the effect of illuminating the surrounding screen-surface, drawing latent vectors and terrains to visibility, so something of flow-space, of the grid itself, might glow and fizz, for a short while at least, while I speak.

Because, you see, it seems to me that this is where it all begins: with maps. For some time now I’ve been obsessed with the opening sequence of Aeschylus’s *Aigamemnon*. This play (which, we should note in passing, comes to us from a civilization that modern Western culture has placed at the top of its own genealogical tree but that, since geographically speaking it was spread around the entire Mediterranean basin, could equally be considered Middle Eastern or African)—this play begins with an elaborate act of mapping. The Argive watchman having spied the distant signal beacon announcing the fall of Troy, Clytemnestra appears before the palace and delivers a lengthy speech in which the message (Troy is finally ours) assumes

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only secondary importance to the network across which it has traveled. The vis-
ible signal beacon being merely the last in a long chain running between Troy and
Argos, Clytemnestra names each other one, each post and its coordinates: Ida’s
summit, then the crag of Lemnos, then Mount Athos, then Macistus, onwards to
the Plain of Aesopus, the Saronic Gulf, and so on. In her 1999 production at Lon-
don’s National Theatre, Katie Mitchell had the actress pull down a giant roller blind
and give a PowerPoint presentation sketching the signal’s route across an atlas
page. It was an astute piece of directing, since not only this scene but also the entire
Oresteian trilogy that grows from it follows a cartographic logic: measuring the
relative positions of, distances between, and communication relays linking gods
and humans, public and domestic space, divine justice and its corresponding fora
in the civic realm—so much so that by the end of The Eumenides, democracy itself is
born out of topography, an exercise in land division or ground demarcation: Athens
will be where citizen-led, goddess-sanctioned law holds sway; the Furies’ grotto
tucked into its hillside the repository of older, cthonic orders.

The whole Hellenic corpus could be understood this way: the Greeks, seafarers,
are always and foremost mapping, drawing charts up: marking off sanctioned and
unsanctioned ground in Antigone; tracing the layout of the phone wires descending
from Olympus to the Delphic switchboard and then on to Thebes and Corinth—
plus, of course, the convergence of roads—in Oedipus; plotting the universe out as
pure geometry in Timmaeus. And not just the Greeks. Isn’t Dante’s Divine Comedy
also an epic work of cosmic mapping, a laying-out of metaphysics, history, and
inner psychic space according to the geometry of spheres and circles? Doesn’t
Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice cast modernity itself along the latitudes and
longitudes of the commercial orb, the far-flung geography—Tripoli, Mexico, the
Indies, England—of which the urb of Venice is both the mirror and the market-
place? Isn’t the Dublin of Joyce’s novels also a kind of shadow globe, a surface on
which all other places, epochs, currencies, and languages, incessantly migrating,
scrawl their trajectories? So strong and so insistent is this mapping tendency that
in the last decade of the twentieth century Thomas Pynchon is able to spin an
eight-hundred-page novel around the simple act of two men, Mason and Dixon,
drawing a line through space: the act, that is, of geo-graphy.

How do you put the world on paper? This is the basic cartographic question and
the basic question of literature, of the novel. It’s so basic that I think it’s worth
addressing at a basic level. Open any high school textbook on maps, and the first
chapter will make the obvious but essential point that the earth is spherical but
paper is flat. To quote J. A. Steers’s 1927 primer An Introduction to the Study of Map
Projections: “As it is impossible to make a sheet of paper rest smoothly on a sphere,
so it is impossible to make a correct map on a sheet of paper.” All maps deploy, like
Mitchell’s Clytemncestra, projections—and projections, being drafters’ conventions,
are both arbitrary and flawed. You can use zenithal, gnomonic, stereographic,
orthographic, globular, conical, cylindrical, or sinusoidal projections—but you’ll
never get it right. In world maps drawn using Mercator’s projection, the one that
served as the standard in atlases for centuries, the equatorial areas pan out fine,
but the map starts to distend as it nears the polar regions, stretching Greenland out
until it looks bigger than Africa. The poles themselves cannot be represented at all: to depict these, you must rotate the image round through ninety degrees—the Transverse Mercator projection does this—only to find that another pair of points, on the equator, undergo infinite distortion and become invisible. And if you try to sidestep this by replacing Mercator’s projection with a polar gnomonic one, the rest of the world just slips off the horizon.

Nor is this anamorphosis simply a formal problem. As [Hans] Holbein famously emphasized in 1553, cartography goes hand in hand with conquest and dominion; maps are not just navigational tools but also mirrors in which nations regard themselves, confirm and ratify their presumed status in the world. That’s why the cartographic paraphernalia in his Ambassadors—globes, a torquetum, a quadrant—serve as props for the two statesmen, whose haughty demeanor is in turn undermined by the anamorphous blur between them, which in its turn, of course, resolves itself, when viewed from the painting’s own border zone or unhallowed ground, into a vanitas, a skull. There’s a direct genealogical line, I’d argue, between Holbein’s subversive cartographic intervention and those of the twentieth-century vanguards—the Surrealists’ 1929 one I’m showing you now, for example, which realloths to each country a size concomitant with its importance to the overall Surrealist project (you can see that both my country and yours—with the exception of Alaska—completely disappear, while Mexico, Peru, and Easter Island assume giant proportions); or the Situationists’ maps throughout the 1950s and 1960s, which replace Parisian place names with those drawn from France’s colonies or replot the city in line with the blueprint for Constant Nieuwenhuy’s anticapitalist New Babylon; or as an assemblage of discrete yet co-reactive experiences and desires.

It was this history of interventionist cartography and the close relation with the skull that both mapmaking and the avant-garde maintain (“Time and space,” Filippo Tommaso Marinetti tells us in the twentieth-century avant-garde’s most gloriously bombastic statement, “died yesterday”) that led me to found, in 1999—here’s my first ping—the International Necronautical Society. After launching with a manifesto packed with stolen or recycled statements (our way of acknowledging that a contemporary avant-garde can only be, to borrow the critic Inke Arns’s formulation, “post-historical”), the central one of which announced an intention to map the space of death, and after assembling a committee and a network of affiliates (one of whom, a coder at the BBC, would later help us hack the broadcaster’s website, inserting into its source code INS statements and propaganda), the INS took up a residency in the Office of Antimatter in London’s Austrian Cultural Institute, where over two weeks we interrogated some of London’s leading novelists, philosophers, and artists. The depositions were transcribed and analyzed, and this in turn led to the general secretary’s First Report to the First Committee, delivered in the Council Room of the Royal Geographical Society in 2001.

The Report revolved around three literary touchpoints, the first of which was Queequeg. Melville’s Polynesian harpoonist, you’ll recall, contracting a fever and convinced of his own imminent death, commissions from the ship’s carpenter a coffin. But, making a complete recovery, Queequeg finds himself burdened with
Queequeg is a book, a “volume”; he is also a map, “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth.” Yet being three-dimensional and thus unable to read himself on or as a parchment, a flat surface, he, too, must project himself—towards, again, the skull, or rather its correlative, the coffin. Why does this so shock Ahab the surveyor? Because he sees in Queequeg’s enterprise, at some level or other, a distorting mirror of his own great mission: for isn’t he, too, not only endlessly scrutinizing charts but also trying to form the whole book’s universe into a mirror-map of his own design, projecting himself onto the white screen of the whale, a surface on which he hopes to behold his image and his destiny as vengeful hero? The whale, of course, has other ideas. We could understand its final smashing of the Pequod as a form of radical and catastrophic anamorphosis. But what the INS Report emphasized was the material, rather than simply visual, aspect of this catastrophe. Like some Hegelian factory, the Pequod’s work consists in turning all the world’s cetacean matter, all the wide oceans’ fat and sperm and bones, into quantified, exchangeable units, that is, into value, into signs, into abstracted, Aufgehobene meaning. As such, it stands as a symbol for the idealist version of all literature and art: consume the world, process it into truth. The catastrophe that Moby-Dick enacts, then, is precisely the catastrophe of idealism, its ruination on the rock of sheer material excess. If you continue all the way round to the side of The Ambassadors, you stop seeing even the skull; you just see mounds of oil and pleated canvas—like a Josef Beuys piece. Moby-Dick, in similar fashion, leads us to a limit beyond which the screen turns into blubber. At this point, this limit, one version of techné—that of skill or craft as global command vehicle—gives over to another, as Ishmael, sole survivor, clings to the same coffin we met earlier, and drifts, current-borne, until picked up. This degraded death-craft, this dented black box, thus becomes, quite literally, a narrative vehicle: in conveying the book’s narrator back to safety, it carries Moby-Dick’s content to us. No longer volume-as-map but rather book-as-debris.

The Report’s second touchpoint was The Hunting of the Snark. Lewis Carroll’s “Agony in Eight Fits” also involves an epic sea voyage, as a motley crew set out to hunt a vague, uncanny quarry (the snark). The fact that one of them is a banker, another a barrister invites us, just as Moby-Dick does, to tune into the commercial
and juridical allegories pulsing through the drama. And here, too, is pure, dazzling whiteness. The ship’s captain (“the Bellman”) dismisses out of hand conventional cartographic tools:

“What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and Equators, Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?”
So the Bellman would cry; and the crew would reply,
“They are merely conventional signs!”

Carroll continues:

“Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes! But we’ve got our brave captain to thank”
(So the crew would protest) “that he’s bought us the best—A perfect and absolute blank!”

Henry Holiday’s illustrations, accompanying the first, 1876, edition of the poem, reproduce this map: bordered by directional signage (Zenith, North, Meridian, Nadir, Torrid Zone), it’s an unwritten page. Could we see it, still bearing Melville in mind, as a Bartlebean gesture, an act of writerly refusal (for Agamben, Bartleby, in not writing, becomes the writer par excellence, embodiment of the Arabic Qualam or Pen, angel of unfathomable potentiality)? Perhaps, so long as we don’t lose sight, once more, of the materiality which overtakes Carroll’s poem. As the ship, like the Pequod, becomes “snarked,” its bowsprit getting mixed up with its rudder, one of the crew complains that “my heart is like nothing so much as a bowl / Brimming over with quivering curds!”

The heart, symbol of man’s higher aspirations (courage, love), becomes a repository of what’s lowliest and disgusting. Admittedly, these thoughts may well have been colored by the fact that the walls of the Royal Geographical Society’s Council Room (in which this report was delivered) were hung with pictures of Ernest Shackleton’s ill-fated Endurance mission. As the polar ice froze, Shackleton’s boat, too, crumpled in on itself; he and his crew were reduced to eating first their dogs and then (according to some accounts) parts of their own frostbitten flesh, which they’d shave off and throw into the pot. [Gilles] Deleuze, contemplating the figure of the Eskimo in snow, sees the collapse not only of perspective but of an entire Western ideology of spatial domination, of the masterful gaze towards the horizon that furnishes (for example) Caspar David Friedrich’s figures with their experience of the sublime; this idealist order’s replacement by a haptic one in which space presses in, grows close-up, tactile. This, perhaps, best names the whiteness by which both Carroll’s and Shackleton’s figures find themselves surrounded: an expanse which is no longer blank and pliant but material, resistant, overwhelming in its excess.

Which leads to the Report’s third touchpoint: Francis Ponge, whose 1942 prose poem “The Orange” perfectly illustrates what I’m getting at here. “As in the sponge,” he writes, “there is in the orange an aspiration to gather itself together again after having undergone the ordeal of expression”—l’épreuve de l’expression, expression having in French, as in English, the dual sense of squeezing and representing.
Literature, once more, as pure cartography: how do you squeeze or flatten—express—a globe? “While the sponge always succeeds,” he continues, “the orange never does, because its cells have burst, its tissues torn.” But it still leaves a husk, une écorce—and, on the part of the “oppressor,” the bitter awareness of a premature ejaculation of seeds. Derrida, in his reading of Ponge, picks up on the importance of the comparator sponge, five of whose six letters spell the name of Ponge himself. “The sponge,” he writes, “expunges the proper name, puts it outside of itself, effaces it and loses it, soils it in order to make it into a common noun; it contaminates the proper name on contact with the most pitiful, the most unqualifiable object, which is made to retain every sort of dirt.” At the same time, the sponge, in its absorbency (of both the name and dirt), its inexhaustible capacity to carry and re-excrete both, acts as a guarantor of the possibility of poetry. L'éponge éponge: sponge sponges, the sponge expunges, the sponge is Ponge. What Derrida’s so brilliantly amplifying in Ponge is a vision of writing not as abstraction and refinement or distillation nor as any “authentic” form of self- or world-articulation, but rather as a messy, always incomplete engagement with material surplus, dirty spillage. As such, for me and my collaborators at the INS, Ponge, even more than Bartleby, stands as the writer of all writers.

If it seems my talk’s been hovering round a certain scene of violence, deformation, and disintegration, that’s because it has. The ping I want to put next on your screens is a project, an art installation, that I made in collaboration with Rod Dickinson—and showed in 2012 here in Pittsburgh, at Wood Street Galleries, before it traveled on to London’s Hayward. Greenwich Degree Zero took its cue from an attempt, in 1894, on the part of Martial Bourdin, a French anarchist, to blow up the Royal Observatory in Greenwich—an attempt that failed when the bomb he was carrying detonated in his pocket yards from the building, scattering his flesh across the Prime Meridian. The episode was kept in the public consciousness for much of the twentieth century by Joseph Conrad’s fictionalization of it in The Secret Agent; it was also revisited in the wake of 9/11 by historians who cited it as the first modern incident of terrorism against a symbolic rather than strategic target. The observatory served no military or judicial function: what it did was mark the world’s main time line, in other words its central longitudinal axis, zero degrees, from and around which the globe was measured and partitioned in accordance with the demands of the British Empire. I grew up in Greenwich; what’s most striking when you visit the observatory itself is that the line is actually inscribed into the ground: space itself, its arrangement, is already a result of writing—is already (we could almost say) a fiction. Like Rilke’s Orpheus, what Bourdin was transgressing or trespassing against was a boundary; and, like Orpheus, or the Pequod, he ended up undergoing total anamorphosis. But Dickinson and I wanted to carry the event beyond this limit, to the absolute zero or negative zone at which the nonevent of the building’s intended destruction actually happens. We decided to do this not by attacking the observatory all over again but rather by accessing, in the National Archives, the extensive 1894 newspaper reports of the event; modifying these; changing a word or phrase here and there, such that conditional became transitive and “attempted” became “successful”; then reprinting them in exactly the same format as that in which they first appeared. We also, on discovering that the
Lumière Brothers unveiled their own device for reorganizing time and space the same year as Bourdin’s death, found an early, hand-cranked camera on which to film the building’s immolation, complete with (this is what you’re watching here) period-costumed policeman racing past a frantically gesticulating top-hatted gentleman up the hill towards it.

Conrad’s Bourdin is a simpleton, Stevie, who sits to the side of anarchist meetings drawing, like an autistic Dante or Timmaeus, “circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric, a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable.” Conrad deliberately daubs Stevie’s activities with shades of the cultural avant-garde, for the good reason that a whole swath of vanguard artists and writers of the 1890s, from Georges Seurat to Félix Fénéon to Alfred Jarry, were also card-carrying political anarchists (L’Avant Garde was even the title of a journal advocating “propaganda by deed”—in other words, bomb throwing). Within a wider allegorical framework, if the Meridian line stands for the established way of surveying and inscribing or writing the world, then Stevie’s intervention could be said to stand for an attack not just on global space, imperial cartography, but also on novelistic form. Stevie’s attempt may fail, and Conrad may give the last word to his crazed nihilist The Professor, who mutters “Madness and Despair! Give me that for a lever, and I’ll move the world,” but in fact a consequential formal displacement of sorts does see itself through towards the end of The Secret Agent, as Conrad turns his attention (and this is where Dickinson and I took our cue from) to newspaper headlines, which his text, in a move that seems groundbreaking for its era, begins to sample, loop, and collage. The real Archimedian lever turns out to be not madness but media.

Effectively, Conrad is pioneering cut-ups, laying the ground for the experiments William Burroughs will conduct half a century later, first also with newspaper and then with other media forms. What’s interesting about Burroughs’s cut-ups in this context is that he understands what he’s doing not simply as literary experimentation but also as a way of folding global space together, splicing Malmo into the Midwest, Tangier into Texas, crumpling all these far-flung scenes and their coordinates into a giant collaged “Interzone.” And that he understands this—and here more direct bloodlines from Conrad could be traced—as a type of revolutionary sabotage or even terrorism. Media cut-ups, he tells us in “The Electronic Revolution,” should be used “as a front-line weapon to produce and escalate riots. . . . So stir in news stories, TV plays, stock market quotations, adverts and put the altered mutter line out in the streets . . . Mexico City will do for a riot in Saigon and vice versa. For a riot in Santiago, Chile you can use the Londonderry pictures. Nobody knows the difference. Fires, earthquakes, plane crashes can be moved around.” In his film Towers Open Fire, we see him doing just this from the back seat of a requisitioned limo: cutting, folding, sampling and remixing, sabotaging, commandeering the earth’s signal beacon towers, turning the network and space against themselves. For all its multimedia supermodernity, this film vests enormous potential in the decidedly old-media format of the book: after the board meeting of the all-powerful controllers of the earth is invaded, its members liquidized and ledgers seized,
pages covered in hieroglyphic writing are shown dancing on the breeze, as though they themselves had somehow brought about this whole turn of events. In this respect, it’s interesting to note that the 1986 Paladin edition of The Naked Lunch carries on its front cover the blurb “The book that blew ‘literature’ apart.”

Of course, there’s also a deeply conservative aspect to Burroughs, whose reckless vanguard globe-trotting comfortably fits an older, khaki-clad colonial pattern. Even his prodigious drug taking could be seen in these terms. (Doesn’t opium’s trajectory perfectly follow that of a certain all-conquering idealism: you squeeze a poppy, like an orange, to extract its essence, which, once shipped around the vectors of the world, you then consume, thus altering your perception of the world? Is it a coincidence that Thomas De Quincey’s opium visions, like Coleridge’s, are so intensely spatial?) But that’s a whole lecture in itself that someone else could do much better. What I want to home in on for the last few minutes here, in order to generate my final ping, is the subject Burroughs used his GI Bill funding to study, namely anthropology. The novel I published last year, Satin Island, has a corporate anthropologist as its narrator—an anthropology graduate, that is, who (like more than half of his contemporaries over the last two decades) puts his ethnographic wisdom in the service of consultancies, brand analysts, and governmental think tanks. I’m showing you the Knopf cover, with its gridded archipelagic look, here not just to advertise the book, but because Peter Mendelsund’s inspired design perfectly illustrates Claude Lévi-Strauss’s affirmation that the fundamental goal of anthropology should be to create a universal “grid” that, covering all the world, enables us “to establish a pattern of equivalences between the ways in which each society uses analogous human types to perform different social functions.”

What so appeals to me, as a novelist, about Lévi-Strauss is the way he places writing at the center of his entire project—and, conversely (or not quite conversely), the way that writing, turning on its would-be master, twists the warp and weft of the very grid it should be helping sketch, its tropisms turning the tropics melancholic, triste. Not only are the problems Lévi-Strauss encounters in his charting of world culture—problems of misaligned temporality, of “lateness” and “too-soon-ness” or of perception’s overcoding by culture’s own archive—essentially identical to those that form the subject matter of Proust’s Recherche, but the very mechanisms and technology of writing continually threaten to unravel the writing project itself. Triste Tropique’s central episode, in this respect, is the one in which Lévi-Strauss meets a tribe who don’t know what writing is and witnesses the tribe’s chief, wanting to maintain his elevated status, take up his, Lévi-Strauss’s, pen and start to scribble on a sheet of paper, so as to trick his subjects into thinking that he’s versed in this activity. Lévi-Strauss, aghast, sees himself mirrored in this dupery: isn’t that just what he’s doing with his “subjects,” his readers? This episode is half-reflected in a later one, in which Lévi-Strauss, finding himself disappointed both by tribes whose rituals, too easily decoded, lose all their mystique and by ones so strange they remain quite illegible, fantasizes about perfectly “ambiguous instances” in which the balance of legibility and mystique would be just right. Yet, he continues, wouldn’t these instances, too, be cons? Who’s the real dupe, he wonders, of observations which are carried to the borderline of the intelligible, only to be stopped there? “Is it the reader who believes in us,” he asks, “or we ourselves
who have no right to be satisfied until we have succeeded in dissipating a residue which serves as a pretext for our vanity?

The first commandment of [Bronislaw] Malinowski, the father of anthropology, was simply: “Write everything down.” The smallest, most insignificant detail might turn out to hold the key to a whole culture as much as the most elaborate ritual, so capture it all, turn it all into data. By the time Michel de Certeau writes *The Practice of Everyday Life* half a century later, this commandment has both reached its end point and, in so doing, become redundant. Why? Because everything is already written down. With a nod to François Furet, Certeau claims that “[m]odernization, modernity itself, is writing.” And with more than a nod to Kafka’s Penal Colony, he envisages capitalism as a giant “scriptural enterprise,” or writing machine, that both writes across and reads or scans all surfaces, not least human ones, such that all objects, subjects, spaces, or events “will thus be transformed into texts in conformity with the Western desire to read its products.” This machine is not in the service of any operator; rather, “by an inversion that indicates that a threshold has been crossed, the scriptural system moves us forward on its own . . . it transforms the subjects that controlled it into operators of the writing machine that orders and uses them.” If that was true in 1980, how much more so is it in the Google era? With iPhones archiving all our spatial transits, Facebook and Amazon mapping our structures of kinship and networks of exchange, the world-script writes itself and allots to human experience and “agency” roles no more significant than those of minor actions and commands in larger keychains.

Are all black boxes narrative vehicles? Yes and no. Who can read this one (the rectangular black building in the photo you’re seeing is the NSA’s headquarters, as captured from a helicopter by the artist Trevor Paglen)? Not even the NSA can decode—parse, trace back into the world, transform into a one-to-one efficient navigational tool with no glitches and blind spots—the hieroglyphics contained in its crypt. Has the role of the artist, or novelist, become simply to demonstrate the black box’s existence, bring it to visibility, as Paglen does in this image (he too had to trespass, enter proscribed airspace, in order to reach the beyond-limit point from which he snapped it)? Or is this what writers—Melville, Conrad, Sophocles—were always doing anyway? Or is the artist-writer’s role, as Burroughs might maintain, to open up the crypt and hack its source code? McKenzie Wark, in his *Hacker’s Manifesto*, defines hacking as any cultural activity which breaches previously sealed or separated bodies of knowledge and crossbreeds their contents, producing “the plane upon which different things may enter into relation.” But then Wark also points out that it isn’t hackers who bring networks of surveillance or global finance or aviation crashing down, any more than it’s terrorists who blow up nuclear power plants: they do this on their own. For Certeau, total revolution would be “a scriptural project at the level of an entire society seeking to constitute itself as a blank page with respect to the past, to write itself by itself”—the world redrawn, that is, as Carroll’s map. Yet he too understands that nothing escapes the overall scriptural enterprise of power—not even bodies, since all bodies are, as he’s already told us, seized hold of and written, transformed into code. But, he continues in a fascinating and poetic turn, when bodies grow obscene—that is another matter; then, bodily “reminiscences” become “lodged in ordinary language . . . incised into the prose of
the passage from day to day, without any possible commentary or translation.” These reminiscences, in turn, generate counterscriptural resonances . . . cries breaking open the text that they make proliferate around them, enunciative gaps in a syntagmatic organization of statements . . . the linguistic analogues of an erection, or of a nameless pain, or of tears: voices without language, enunciations flowing from the remembering and opaque body . . . an aphasic enunciation of what appears without one’s knowing where it came from (from what obscure debt or writing of the body), without one’s knowing how it could be said except through the other’s voice.

The final section of *The Practice of Everyday Life* is titled, after Beckett, “The Unnameable”; and it takes as its subject the figure of someone—anyone—who is dying. “Set aside in one of the technical and secret zones (hospitals, prisons, refuse dumps) which relieve the living of everything that might hinder the chain of production and consumption, and which, in the darkness where no one wants to penetrate, repair and select what can be sent back up to the surface of progress,” the dying figure finds their body transformed from a palimpsest on which the scriptural enterprise has stamped its law into a liminal, disgusting, and yet almost miraculous new space in which the binaries of life and death break down. And if the dying one “speaks” this death, their own, it is “to open within the language of interlocution a resurrection that does not restore to life.”

Despite his borrowed title, Certeau does eventually give this dying figure a name: the writer, “a dying man who tries to speak.” To write would be “to march through enemy territory . . . within the space of death,” to inscribe death itself with footsteps on a page that Certeau, flipping Carroll’s negative into yet another negative (which doesn’t make a positive), calls “black, not blank.” In what, for me, is the most astonishing and seductive formulation of all, he describes writing—the work—as the “waste product” borne out of this situation. Space’s own excess, if you like; its toxic overflow. That’s where I want to end. If the novel, through its many deaths, can somehow manage to embody that embodied space, to speak it—obscenely,opaquely, resonantly—that is indeed, each time, miraculous.

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