

Life is Bad

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Abstract

Life is bad and it is not obvious what to do about this. For lack of discussion in academic philosophy, my research took me elsewhere, to texts lost along the way. Jean-François Lyotard provides orientation in this peripheral intellectual *Zone*, which I understand as an original space colluded against by philosophers to avoid painful questions. I try to develop a method for philosophy beyond walls and without collusion called *Witness*. After considering some *philosophers of the Zone*, who all agree life is bad, I settle on Carlo Michelstaedter as the most promising aid in using philosophy to make life better. His key concepts, *Rhetoric* and *Persuasion*, trace general sets of reactions to the badness of life that eerily echo the reaction of philosophers to painful questions on the peripheries. *Rhetoric* ignores, disguises and flees where *Persuasion* accepts, and I combine mine and Michelstaedter's philosophies in an account of *persuaded witness* that works to improve both philosophy and life.

For everyone I had to let go.

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Preface

I look at my life and it is bad, and now I do not know what to say. There are too many ways to articulate it. Perhaps the politics is bad, or life is bad inherently, or consciousness makes it bad. Or maybe there is no way of articulating it properly, which is why so many options present themselves. And I know I am not supposed to say life is bad, or at the very least not write a thesis on it, but I do not know *why*.

Something has gone horribly wrong. There is misery here rarely spoken of. No one stops to explain the silence – questions are shunned, there is work to be done. But if Albert Camus is taken seriously and all questioning begins with ‘*is my life worth living?*’ then this intuition should be pursued.¹ As far as any questions can be justified, ‘is life bad?’, ‘why is it bad?’ and ‘can it get better?’ demand answers. The rest get ahead of themselves. But so far as philosophy is concerned, these questions are habitually and even structurally ignored.

Approaching a question, any serious question, is too much like approaching a wall. There is a point one is not supposed to cross. A child repeats ‘why?’ to her mother until the inevitable stamping of the boot: ‘*because!*’ And the ‘rational man’ speaks: ‘well surely we *must* assume some things in order to communicate, and what we assume only what is most reasonable: the meaning of language, the form of argument, the means of critique, that life is worth living...’ Bar particular circumstances, which are increasingly outside philosophy in artistic, humanities and non-academic circles, questions quickly become out of the question.

¹ Camus, 1955

In this way, the question ‘is life worth living?’ invites another: ‘why is this not asked more often?’

I use the first chapter to approach ‘the wall’ and try to make sense of why the question ‘is life worth living?’ hides behind it. This leads me to Jean-François Lyotard, who describes an encroaching space called ‘the Zone,’ in which boundaries collapse and such questions – all questions – are open.² By moving the opposite direction, where the permitted existence of a thesis titled ‘Life is Bad’ suggests the Zone is *already here*, I try to make sense of how walls are constructed in the Zone to once again hide questions. This includes a study of ghettos (walled spaces), their construction and the experience of those moved into them, after which I suggest such questions are hidden to avoid the anxiety and fear of doubt.

Beyond specific examples, ghetto walls (also boxes, surfaces) proliferate in most of my spaces. Philosophy is not safe – it also tends to turn away from important/ painful questions: to assume and enforce form (essay), style (dry), methods of critique (logic), justification (life is worth living, these questions are important) *without doubt*. To somehow continue questioning without questioning too much. This makes moving beyond the walls and engaging in meta-philosophy indistinguishable. A philosophy that engages in questions beyond the walled borders of philosophy might not be considered philosophy within the walls. It is done differently, it is undominated, and for this I turn to *witness* as a model for philosophy beyond walls or between ghettos.

Each chapter concludes with ‘Notes for the Philosophical Witness’ to develop a guide for this practice.

Questioning begins, and the second chapter collects some figures who went before me, writing on life’s worth and, tellingly, shunned in the ghetto for their efforts. Almost forgotten within philosophy, Cioran, Zapffe and Michelstaedter have a growing following outside it. I outline the approaches of these outsider philosophers (philosophers of the Zone) before settling on

² Lyotard, 1999

Michelstaedter as the most promising. Writing as a student to be judged by those he expects to reject him, Michelstaedter grapples with ‘is life worth living?’, methods of avoidance, a deterioration of philosophy to habitual avoidance, and inevitable rejection. Most importantly, however, he envisages a way out – both for the ghetto and the miserable Zone. He calls this *persuasion*, and I include a brief introduction to persuasion and the attitude that blocks its way.

The third chapter discusses Michelstaedter’s text *Persuasion and Rhetoric* in detail,³ focussing specifically on *rhetoric*, which is taken as the set of all strategies to avoid acknowledging the conditions of life. For Michelstaedter, as well as for myself, the avoidance of the question ‘is life worth living?’ or ‘is life good or bad?’ betrays an expectation that, if the questions were faced directly, the answers would probably be ‘no’ and ‘bad.’ Michelstaedter believes they do not have to be, but avoidance cannot realise this. Examining the mechanisms and extent of avoidance is then helpful for turning to persuasion. I cast Michelstaedter as a witness from the Zone to the ghettos, exposing the pain they so desperately try to ignore and the miserable life they fail to escape.

I develop Michelstaedter’s account of rhetoric with technological rhetoric. This extends to writing and its effect on our engagement with life. I use this to develop the concept of *breaks*: experiences and strategies to contradict the logic of ghettos or the Zone and lead the way out.

Finally, I reach the limit of the Zone, and the task becomes practical: how can I escape this miserable life? The final chapter traces two breaks and two styles of witness. The first, exemplified by Michelstaedter, is an act of witness from the Zone to a ghetto. It is a partially dominated practice that attempts to force a break to the Zone. The second is not so much a communicative act from one place to another but a state of being: to witness the world as it is and not turn away from the pain. Witness becomes a state of persuasion that is not dominated by anticipated consequences (like the fear of death), enabling philosophical witness to transcend

³ Michelstaedter, 2004

the rhetoric of *claiming* but rarely *doing*. I end with an act of witness, describing the path to persuasion and its experience: how to improve life and why it is better.

Approaching the Question ‘Is Life Bad?’

Introducing the Box as Ground for Philosophy

Where am I? What does philosophy do here? What is philosophy capable of? How can philosophy help me? What do I want it to do? How is it done? How can it be done? What will it look like?

Many questions, too many questions to answer, a torrent of questions pouring from each other, each bursting before it fully forms. There is a box to trap and avoid the questions. Pandora’s, or the Ark, Mercury in a bottle – the last box left⁴ – to hide this infinite potential for doubt and maintain sense. ‘Thou shalt not open the box.’ The downward spiral of questioning and meta-questioning this would unleash can only be inconclusive, useless. Come back quickly, close the lid, move on and forget.

How can it be done? What will it look like? What can I expect to find?

There is no end to a meta- series for philosophy. Meta-philosophy, meta-meta-philosophy, meta-N+1-forever-philosophy. One swims deeper into questions and then they drown. When should they return? It is impossible to be sure, because the next level of ‘meta-’ may always show something fundamentally wrong with any work on a level before. Opening up to this series of doubt is disorienting, anxiety-producing, and one finally understands Kierkegaard’s vision of suspense above an endless sea.⁵ Hence the advice, based on some deep understanding of the pain of doubt: do not open the box.

⁴ Lyotard, 1984

⁵ Kierkegaard, 1992

1: Everything inside is groundless. The box, as the division between inside and outside, unquestioned and discussed, becomes the ground.

Acknowledged or not, unquestioned assumptions form the board on which we play our argument games, and this foundation cannot be questioned because without a board we cannot play together. This is known intuitively: a chess rulebook does not need to tell me it is wrong to abandon the board or introduce new pieces. In this manner, grounds are created in infinite doubt: collusion to put questions to one side.

2: Philosophical methodology, as communication from inside to outside or below to above, appears as groundless and unjustified statements because it breaks from collusion.

Yet, who has not entertained the possibility that the framework or world or surface we inhabit is not copied from any necessary, structural truths of the universe but is instead formed by chance, convention and politics? That the ground is imposed from above, regardless of what is below? If the box represents a limit to our questioning, which creates a foundation of assumptions and therefore a space and scale for inquiry, then the position and nature of the limit would also be the work of chance, convention and politics.

What happens if I open the box?

There is a benefit to going beyond the normal limit and delving into these questions, even at the cost of anxiety or despair, which is to disrupt the world. Ridiculous if the world is good, but what if it is unbearable? The suicide has nothing to lose – he takes a hammer to the foundations that keep him in this place. He would be lost to the doubtful ocean if it meant escape from daily horror.

“When people let go of life and accomplish their own death, this is not because they do not desire life and instead desire death. Rather, it is because they do not approve of living in these circumstances.”⁶

And besides, nihilism is already here: god is dead, and man too. The inside is already leaking out, let us all get it over with. This is the long overdue death of the world.⁷

Why open the box?

Because life is bad.

Exploring the Surface of the Box

“At last you’re tired of this elderly world

...

You are walking in Paris alone inside a crowd

Herds of buses bellow and come too close

Love-anguish clutches your throat

You must never again be loved

In the Dark Ages you would have entered a monastery

You are ashamed to overhear yourself praying

You laugh at yourself and the laughter crackles like hellfire

The sparks gild the ground and background of your life

Your life is a painting in a dark museum

And sometimes you examine it closely’⁸

Where am I? In what place do I philosophise? Who is the I that philosophises?

⁶ Xunzi, 2014, p116

⁷ See Culp, 2016

⁸ Apollinaire, 1913

The box-symbol describes a relation to the world whose mythological and theological roots run deep in Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage.⁹ It expresses the idea that there are certain untouchable questions, hidden from sight, contained in a vessel that becomes the limit and ground for our world. Opening the box is forbidden not only because it produces anxiety for the opener and others by disrupting the world, but because it undermines the obvious political potential for would-be messiahs claiming special access to its contents. Imagine what would have become of Mormonism if everyone peered into Joseph Smith's hat and found it empty.

As long as we live this relation – where collusion forms boundaries in infinite doubt – we live on a surface and philosophise on this surface. If a philosopher goes beyond the limits, and if philosophy is to remain communicative, he/she must still communicate to this reality. So, as quickly as possible:

where am I and what can philosophy do here?

Lyotard, The Zone and its Philosophers

*"Philosophy asked what dwelling is, while the city multiplies the attempts at answering this question, made and unmade its layout, came and went between its history and its concept, redid the tracing of the edge between inside and outside."*¹⁰

Lyotard catches the world in perpetual doubt, whose undoing and re-making of boundaries has collapsed and spilled out to a bland homogeneity: the megalopolis, endless suburbs, a nihilistic dystopia, the Zone.

Here the absolute is lost, experienced as a lack: "has the philosopher today... gone mad when he/she insists on lending an ear to the lack of the absolute whose muffled death rattle he/she

⁹ Lyotard, 1984

¹⁰ Lyotard, 1999, p.23-4.

thinks can be heard...?”¹¹ There is not much else for the philosopher to do, because Lyotard supposed that the end of the world has already happened. There is no inside/outside, so no defined concepts and no point of the philosopher as master of concepts. There is also nowhere else left to go.

What Lyotard means by *the missing absolute* is unclear. The absolute is the name for what exceeds every putting into form without being anywhere else but within them. Some aura, then, lost in a fog of disappointment.

Lyotard’s despair seeps like tar from the pages. His Zone a swamp between form and formlessness, the essay’s half-finished style never committing, half-submerged: “is it true that...? Or else...?”,¹² never answered. This is a Zone to wallow. All that is left for the philosopher is “to insist on bearing witness to the fact there is something left behind,”¹³ which would be an “irremediable lack.”¹⁴

In Lyotard’s Zone, the force that carried him down to the surface to pierce through a decade before is experienced in reverse. Feet held in place, he turns around and is hit by nihilism as gravity pummeling down new forms. All is swept away in destructive criticism. Then this force becomes violent as he braces against the tide, unable to let go of the lack. This lack itself speaks of a surface, the space of the thing that is lacking, hence the extreme heaviness of the Zone – the weight of a lack.

A younger Lyotard had written: “Psychoanalysis has carried out a critique of domination... from within a space that is still a space of Lutheran, Hebrew, auditory, sober domination. What is needed is... a practice that is not dominated, without domain, without domus, without the

¹¹ Ibid, p.31

¹² Ibid, p.31

¹³ Ibid, p.32

¹⁴ Ibid, p.31

cupola of the Duomo of Florence in Brunelleschi's little box, but also the vessel of the Ark of the Covenant that contains the stone tablets.”¹⁵

The younger Lyotard can tell the old: the end of the world has not happened yet. This is still the space of whatever is lacking and, in trying to hold on to what has already left, the lacking thing still dominates. The Zone is not the end of the world, but a world desperate not to end, pressing into oil between the despair at surfaces and the surface of a lack.

To turn Lyotard back around: where his philosopher is an echo of times past and witness to less troubling surfaces before the dream of renewal rung hollow, I want a philosopher who speaks of escape. Lyotard's ideal is Walter Benjamin, who came too late and left too early, and could only watch as life got even worse.¹⁶ I am more ambitious. The task is still to create difference in the Zone and cast light on its despair, but also to show the way out.

Ghettos of the Zone

Within the Zone, a multitude of surfaces congeal against their destruction with the force of immense violence. The Zone's longing for past surfaces exploited by Nazism, liberal capitalism, nationalisms and more alike,¹⁷ turning against others as if they alone are responsible for the lack.¹⁸ Rules are imposed, violence unleashed, walls set up and – ironically – a surface created only for these others in the ghettos of the Zone.

The horrific results of this doomed flight are well known, but worth repeating to underline what is at stake in failing to escape the Zone.

¹⁵ Lyotard, 1984, pp.107-8

¹⁶ Arendt, 1968

¹⁷ Lyotard, 1999; for later nationalisms, Gilroy, 2004

¹⁸ See Berry, 2000

“That the German slaughter could be set off – and after that fed on itself – out of a desire for servitude and smallness of soul, thanks to the concurrence of a number of factors... These factors can occur again and are already reoccurring in various parts of the world.”¹⁹

Pol Pot’s Cambodia is mentioned, but why not add everyone trapped between misery and walls – in Mexico, the fringes of Europe, or elsewhere. In short, everyone facing violence for the sake of another’s attempt to secure their reality.

For example, James Baldwin’s observation that the white American identity requires being above/ violent toward black Americans.²⁰ Or the direct link between human sacrifice and the security of the world in Aztec culture.²¹

The irony collapses if people choose their own subjugation, preferring oppression to gnawing lack. Perhaps the horror of violence was not properly anticipated; perhaps it has only been known aesthetically in the suburbs of the Zone; but this is the metallic embrace and the genius of totalitarianism: the awareness of a lack is hidden behind a stamping boot.

“...willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death and that close by the train is waiting.”²²

“The reality of the camp triumphed effortlessly over death and over the entire complex of so-called ultimate questions... to reach out beyond concrete reality with words became before our very eyes a game that was not only worthless and an impermissible luxury but also mocking and evil.”²³

These ghettos, willing or unwilling, respond to the Zone’s lack by creating new surfaces. Aura and the absolute, known as felt distance,²⁴ are maintained by violently opposing any possible approach. The witness of Levi, Amery and countless others speaks of the cost: attempts to fill the lack are even more horrible than the surface of the Zone. To the extent this witness is taken seriously, the only way out that should be considered – if there is a way – is destroying the lack.

¹⁹ Levi, 1988, p.66

²⁰ Baldwin, 1962

²¹ Maffie, 2014

²² Levi, 1988, p.51

²³ Amery, 2009, p.18-9

²⁴ Benjamin, 1968

“As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world.”²⁵

Philosophy as Bearing Witness

I have invoked several types of witness. Lyotard proposed a vision of philosophy as witness to the absolute lost from the Zone. From the witness of Levi and Amery, however, the cost of searching for what has been lost is clear, and perhaps the violence it reflects is not a recent rupture but an original spring, with aura the reification of violently enforced distance producing surfaces of such sacred irreproachability: the ‘absolute’ safe on the far side of this distance.

I propose to get rid of the need for aura or absolutes. In leaving the space where new surfaces are sought, which means leaving the Zone – the nihilistic surface of a lack that lies threatening beneath other surfaces – the box is finally open. Total doubt is set free. But beside this, the witnesses who travel before us, promising a life no longer bad.

Witness is important for three key reasons. First, I am not primarily interested in life on this surface. As important as the workings of the Zone might be for planning escape, there must be something to escape to. Levi and Amery witness the reality of other surfaces, and the philosopher could attempt to witness life without them to others. Philosophy becomes communication back to inhabitants of the Zone and its ghettos. Second, the shifting half-boundaries of the Zone undermine a philosopher’s claim to mastery of concepts, because the architecture of concepts I might structure is constantly critiqued, dismantled and partially reconstructed in new forms. Realising this futility, the philosopher must step back to the role of witness. Third, witness might fulfil the condition of practice beyond surfaces: “not dominated,

²⁵ Shantideva, 2009, p.399

without domain.”²⁶ Fulfilling the younger Lyotard’s dream, refusing the offer of collusion, breaking open the box and leaving the Zone.

Notes for the Philosophical Witness

Witness is an address from a person to others about something the others have not experienced. The other reality can be so alien and even horrifying that they do not want to believe it, as Levi and other holocaust witnesses have found.²⁷ In the space of such uncertainty, the witness can be believed or dismissed – both acts of faith, because there is no witness for the witness, “testimony has no meta-level”²⁸ in a hyper-critical Zone. The testimony of a philosopher-as-witness, like the new methodologies of meta-philosophers journeying beyond the limits, will therefore appear groundless and unjustified by normal standards of the Zone.

²⁶ Lyotard, 1984, p.107

²⁷ Levi, 1988

²⁸ Derrida, 2000

Life is Bad

Introducing the Philosophers of the Zone

So far the issue has been discussed symbolically (box) and spatially (surface, ghetto, Zone). These different aspects should be taken to refer to the same thing, which, as something of more than linguistic existence, permeates all metaphorical approaches: life is bad. The badness of life is not learned only in philosophy but encountered in social, economic and personal realities. It is as real as moral duties, visa rejections, wire fences and the ambient misery of commuter towns. In other words, life is lived in a place, and this is bad; or, the life that I live is bad. Philosophers like Lyotard can only try to articulate this complete experience in a certain symbolic language.

In moving to other philosophers, similar articulations in different symbolic languages are not contradictory if they seem to struggle with the same encounters. After Lyotard, there are three more actors I want to introduce, all agreeing that life is bad, whose language and methods reflect their backgrounds and personal experiences.

Lyotard begins his analysis by tracing the evolution of space. The lack he articulates is historical, something once had and left behind, and irreversible without seismic disruption. It is encountered in the physical structure of habitats. The philosopher becomes a witness from spaces past, doomed to fade away with them. The Zone articulates the full spatial presence and gigantic inevitability of this historic move, as well as the demise of any resistance.²⁹

²⁹ Lyotard, 1999

Meanwhile, Emil Cioran's *On the Heights of Despair* reflects the insomniac nights in which it was written.³⁰ Out of sync, neither this nor that, arrhythmic, fragmented between separate moments of lucidity, Cioran writes as an isolated figure cut off from the normal flow of life. There is no space and no history. In thinking from this non-place and non-time, he feels as if he has lost something and must do something extra-ordinary to get it back. Cioran accepts his perspective as privileged, yet dreams of lost innocence like he dreams of sleep: distant and impossible.

So, 1: Life is bad rhythmically and individually. It is witnessed by those out of sync.

Peter Zapffe encounters the problem through evolutionary history. The human has evolved to survive, so to be aware of life as bad can only be taken as a great evolutionary mistake. Like an elk whose great antlers evolved too large to bear, the rational consciousness grown over thousands of generations weighs her to the ground, no longer suitable for life.³¹ The immediate task is to reduce or subvert this consciousness with distractions and deceit – stupefying herself with media, work and drugs.

Eventually we will be faced with the question of whether to stop the charade altogether. The last messiah will come to preach what we already know but cannot bare to face – that life is bad, and living only spreads this suffering – and we will kill him for it.³²

Therefore, 2: Life is bad biologically and historically. It is bad for our species.

Carlo Michelstaedter unravels intellectual history to the pre-Socratics to trace a millennia-old agreement on the badness of life and an equally old project to make it better. Improvements have been found, but their communication fails because, in panicked flight from the matter at hand, people refuse or are not able to listen. Life is then approached through language and other

³⁰ Cioran, 1992

³¹ Zapffe, 2004

³² Zapffe, 2004

methods of communication. Improvement becomes *persuasion*; avoidance becomes *rhetoric*. Both as a state (being persuaded) and action (persuading).

3: Life is bad inherently. It is avoided and this is reflected in language. It can be improved.

Of this list, Michelstaedter in particular interests me. Part of my reason for is this is practical: he alone sets off a path to how life might be better, which promises a greater reward for focussing on him. Other philosophers are yet to convince of the worth of reading their texts if all they can offer is more despair.

However, Michelstaedter's study of communication is also one of philosophy itself. If philosophy is a practice, and this practice is inherently communicative, then a philosopher is invested in communication. The philosopher would be bad at doing philosophy if they fail to communicate their ideas. And if the ideas become difficult to communicate, then the philosopher would be interested in finding out why – a kind of meta-philosophy, philosophising about the practice of philosophy, which becomes necessary when philosophy stops working. Michelstaedter enters at the point where communication is almost impossible and philosophy next to useless. It is not only that life is bad, but it is so difficult to start a conversation about it – his task is to make life better and to create the possibility of communicating this in the same move. To redeem philosophy and life at the same time.

How to Read Michelstaedter; How to Read This Thesis

Or, the attempt to begin a conversation.

As the space of philosophy changes, philosophy enters a period of transition. Old philosophies lose their place – the Zone has no use for them, because it is always changing. Boundaries break down and start reforming somewhere else, technical terms lose their meaning, concepts move in

and out of use for reasons of style. Philosophy has a choice. Either it seeks a dominant surface to re-establish the old terms of communication – despite the fact that nihilism learned in the Zone undermines any surface’s claim of being *the* reality and so containing *the* truth – or it learns to communicate without sharing a surface.

Michelstaedter introduces *Persuasion and Rhetoric* by admitting defeat. He expects to be read by philosophers who took the first option: to re-establish a dominant surface. They will expect him to appeal to the surface’s authority, but Michelstaedter does not accept the surface and so does not appeal to its authority. He cannot call on ‘reason’ or ‘Hegel’ or ‘common sense’ or ‘God’ or any other such justification, which means the inhabitants of this surface are not inclined to listen. His is a work of witness, communication across surfaces, and they only accept the one surface...

Michelstaedter’s single page preface serves to introduce his style, intention, theme and position in his thesis. Two sections follow: the first on persuasion, false persuasion and the path toward persuasion, the second on rhetoric, its construction and experience in life.

“I know I am talking because I am talking, but I also know I shall not persuade anyone, and this is dishonesty; but rhetoric ‘forcibly compels me to do things’; in other words, “if you bite into a crabapple, you’ve got to spit it out.””³³

From this first sentence, we learn (1) the goal is persuasion, (2) the communicative method of a thesis is inadequate to transmit this, (3) something forces him to try and (4) there is some medicinal quality in writing it. Rhetoric can be understood as the logic of surfaces or the societal-wide collusion to hide from infinite doubt. Michelstaedter positions himself under the firm, forceful influence of rhetoric, a way of thinking he hopes to escape – to spit out. The thesis itself is more rhetoric and he knows this. As such, I am careful in my approach. To copy Michelstaedter perfectly would be to perfectly copy his failure if I also wish to escape rhetoric to a better life, although I am not convinced he fails as spectacularly as he claims.

³³ Michelstaedter, 2004, p4

This is, again, to do with surfaces. Michelstaedter writes of rhetorical surfaces from the perspective of the Zone and is correct to see them as part of the same structure. The Zone is lack, and the ghettos of the Zone attempt to avoid this (rhetoric). Engagement in philosophical education forces him to interact with the professional surface of academic philosophy, meaning *he is forced to write for this surface*. The thesis becomes communication from the Zone to a ghetto, to be judged by the standards of the ghetto. Because he recognises a characteristic of surfaces to treat themselves as total – *the reality/ world* – and so to refuse other ghettos/ realities/ worlds and even the greater nihilistic surface to which they react, he expects to fail. The ghetto court, in this case an examining board, denies witness from outside. What part of his words contain the reality of the Zone will be avoided for the same reason the Zone itself is avoided, to hide from lack.

Whether his thesis fails depends on who is reading it. I am of the Zone as far as I am not convinced of boundaries, and the Zone itself does not deny witness, but invites it as it invites any hope of a way out. Michelstaedter tells me of the place I am in and so I do not doubt him. To those within ghettos with the disposition to listen, when some ghetto mechanism has failed and the Zone begins to seep through its walls, Michelstaedter can lead the way to Zone by engaging in rhetoric and at the same time stressing its insufficiency. But if the outside is too scary and too obscured by rhetoric, his words will be rejected in the panicked act of sealing the cracks.

The important note for this section is that *if Michelstaedter wants to show the way out, he does not have to fail*. And by attempting the same thing, *neither do I*. But only so long as the reader is not so submerged in rhetoric that they do not listen and are not even aware of their not listening.

Example 1: 'this is not what philosophy is (in this place - 'analytic' etc.), so your thesis is bad.'

Example 2: on the particular blindness of academic philosophers – "the experience I have of my everyday work environment is of a conformist, claustrophobic, and repressive verbal universe, a penitential domain of reason-mongering in which hyperactivity in detail— the endlessly repeated shouts of "why," the

*rebuttals, calls for “evidence,” qualifications, and quibbles— stands in stark contrast to the immobility and self-referentiality of the structure as a whole.”*³⁴

‘The communicative method of a thesis is inadequate to transmit this.’ The more a work resembles a typical thesis, the more likely it is to fail. For now, if a form and style has developed for the needs of a ghetto, which first and foremost is denying the lack of the Zone, then it is not suited for talking about the Zone. Michelstaedter tries to push the style as much as he thinks will be permitted by the people he must write for, and I am trying to do the same, to be received in the ghetto at the same time as creating dissonance within it. Something is also needed from the reader: they must recognise this dissonance as more than a mistake. And instead of assuming the absolute authority of the place’s standards as *the* standard, trust that the one who writes is – like all inhabitants of the Zone – all too conscious of what they do. From here, as Nietzsche writes, acceptance is a question of taste.³⁵

If Life is Bad, Why Don’t You Agree?

To follow the first question: is life good or bad?

It is not expected to believe life is bad. This thesis provokes different responses. Sometimes others agree, as if the observation that life is bad is as mundane as commenting on the floor we stand on. Other times I receive pity: the thesis is taken to signal a stage of depression or some uniquely personal turmoil. Alternatively, I am waved away, because life is good and to think otherwise is, at best, a sign of bad character, but more commonly an insult. *My life is good, who are you to say otherwise?’*

³⁴ Geuss, 2014, p232

³⁵ Nietzsche, 2001

If someone is convinced life is bad, they will eventually confront others who disagree, and might feel the need either to convince them or at least understand their mistake. Such people respond in various ways. After summarising some different approaches, I will sketch mine.

Three answers:

Zapffe approaches the badness of life through consciousness. Life is discovered to be bad inherently, but I am not aware or convinced of that until I reach a level of reflection that affords witness. This consciousness locks me out of life, replacing a blind urge for self-preservation with a traumatic realisation of “the brotherhood of suffering between all things.”³⁶ I come to realise that in ‘surviving’ I must add to the suffering – I am torn between consciousness and life, where the more conscious I become, the less suited and less willing I am to live. The only recourse is to trick, distract and stupefy myself so that such consciousness is never realised again and is forgotten as soon as possible.

Explaining disagreement to whether life is bad is made easy. Those who claim life is good are successful in distracting themselves or otherwise too stupid to witness the scene in front of them. For Zapffe it is a kind of desirable failure to forget the violence that keeps us warm and fed, and an evolutionary mistake for me to be able to witness it in the first place.

Zapffe’s answer: we try not to look.

On the topic of disintegration, Cioran writes “not everybody loses his innocence, therefore not everyone is unhappy.”³⁷ The essay echoes Zapffe by blaming knowledge for making life bad. But unlike Zapffe, it is not bad inherently and discovered as such. Instead, knowledge is a force that cuts us off from a life that was good. Once this point is reached, there is no return, “innocence is no longer an option.”³⁸ And those with knowledge are doomed to tragic heroism which is “both

³⁶ Zapffe, 2004

³⁷ Cioran, 1992, p48

³⁸ Ibid, p48

a privilege and a curse for those severed from life, incapable of fulfilment and happiness”³⁹ because it frees them for great things at the cost of killing them.

To think life is good is not to be stupid – Cioran is clear on this – but it suggests a blissful naivety. However, this rare state of innocence does not cover all those who insist life is good. Cioran does not write about those locked out of life and not able to admit it. But he does write on the proper attitude towards the innocent: to leave them be. It would be unfathomably cruel to disintegrate a life still good. “Nothing would induce me, even if I were to become a leper, to condemn another’s joy.”⁴⁰ Those other, non-innocents who claim their life is good are unmentioned, I think, only because they are the audience who stand to be convinced: to come to terms with something they already know.

Cioran’s answer: they are innocent or pretending to be.

Michelstaedter holds the whole of existence as bad while allowing for the possibility of transcendent escape. Most of his thesis attempts to understand the ways people avoid acknowledging their life is bad, but one part shines in particular. This is a conversation Michelstaedter creates between himself and a man of the world – a “man of his time.”⁴¹ The man is convinced of his success and the goodness of life, but there is a failure of communication, because his ‘life’ is his possessions, insurance and position in society, which results in his misinterpreting the question. This reaches absurdity when his interlocutor asks about death – “‘But then death. We all die!’ ‘Not at all. I’m insured in case of death.’”⁴² Taking the conversation as a game, the man of the world cannot see ground he stands on, imagining all possibilities as things he can secure himself against. He has turned away from living to take “life as if it had value... ‘as if there were’ the absolute.”⁴³ And as such, he is only willing to misinterpret and

³⁹ Ibid, p48

⁴⁰ Ibid, p81

⁴¹ Michelstaedter, 2004, p107

⁴² Ibid, p106

⁴³ Ibid, p110

approach life as a distant idea. Perhaps at some point he witnessed the lack in life, but has not stopped running from it since.

Michelstaedter's answer: it is a question of what is taken as 'life.'

Three more answers:

The question takes place in abstract terms, which suggests an answer – *there is no abstract life*. Each life is lived, and to talk of 'life' mistakes experiences and perspectives with something that is neither an experience nor much of a perspective. 'Life' is barely even a set of experiences, but something else: something vague and empty enough to carry the ideologies and intentions of conversations in which it appears. Life is good because I want you to put aside your troubles now and get back to work. Life is bad because saying so fits a desirable aesthetic and I want you to sleep with me.

Answer: it is a question of intent – what I want from the other.

I have put words into other mouths. Zapffe, Cioran and Michelstaedter do not respond to the question of whether life is bad. They write of experiences. They say their life is bad, which means so are the lives of those like them. It then becomes a matter of how alike one has to be. A philosopher, or a human, or a desiring thing? And will it help to find out? Is it worth the effort?

Life is good or bad in a place – that much will prompt agreement. Someone asks if they are in the same place. The answer is increasingly *yes* as globalisation takes hold and transport and communication technologies weave spaces together into the megalopolis. If I am aware of the space I inhabit as interconnected, it betrays a distinct lack of compassion to claim this place is good. 'My life is good,' someone might say, but a life shared with others? Or did they stop existing when we built a wall?

Answer: it is a question of compassion – 'whose life?'

“It is a question of satisfaction.”⁴⁴ I cannot face a life that ends, or I am so happy to be alive in the first place. To say life is bad infers a set of standards by which it is bad. When I say life is bad, it is inherently a judgement, and to get offended is to correctly notice this judgement applies not only to their life but to the standards by which they measure it. Someone says life is good, I say it is bad. This causes offense – fair enough! Because I judge their taste as well. It lacks ambition. I say life is bad because I want it to be better.

Answer: it is a question of satisfaction.

Michelstaedter: Life is Bad and Persuasion is Good

Now it is settled that life is bad: What makes life bad? How can it be good?

Two aspects of Michelstaedter’s analysis for now: a metaphysical story and corresponding experience. First, Michelstaedter reaches beyond his world of letters to a kind of panpsycism, where to exist as a thing is to be in want of something else. A metaphysical lack of space below is what makes a weight a weight, which desires and pulls toward the space in its weight-ness, with consciousness only for the space. If it ever possessed the space, it would cease to be a weight, and Michelstaedter expands the example through chemistry and animal behaviour to sketch the cosmos in its cosmic lack, existing only as far as it lacks.⁴⁵ In the midst of this, humans and their Zone are only a slither of the infinite universe of despair. Life is bad and, to be life at all, it must be.

More immediately, I experience the lack. “I know I want” and “I do not have what I want.”⁴⁶ I cannot possess the mountain by climbing it, and if I try to be one with the sea by diving into it,

⁴⁴ Ibid, p134

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid, p8

the water parts, and it is always where I am not. Since the lack of my life is fulfilled only at the point of death, I only experience it as something on the horizon, never *here*. This basic structure drives my life, as I cannot help seeking satisfaction – “rhetoric forcibly compels me to do things”⁴⁷ – and the desired thing is always the most real to me: made to shine amidst indifferent grey.

All desire is the desire to continue living, because it involves projecting myself towards a promise of future fulfilment, which requires me to still be alive. *If all desire is the desire to keep on living, desire promotes a fear of death*. Without the desire to keep on living (fear of death), a kind of future-obsessed paranoia, I am free from desire – rhetoric no longer forces me to do anything.

Persuasion, persuadedness, *leaving rhetoric*, is an achievable escape or an impossible limit state, depending on the interpreter.⁴⁸ It is *self-possession*, a state of *non-desiring*: “he who is for himself has no need of what would be for him in a future time but instead possesses all within himself.”⁴⁹ “Persuaded is he who has life within himself, a soul naked amongst the islands of the blessed.”⁵⁰ Persuasion stands on the horizon as the ultimate goal where lack is vanquished and life is no longer bad.

It is somewhat ironic that persuasion is more likely to be reached when close to death, so that escape comes just before it is too late. A collection of near-death experiences describes, with regularity, the life-changing experience of drowning.⁵¹ After panic, often close to death, comes a moment of calm. The panicked desperation to keep on living and the fear of death subside together. If the person is resuscitated, they may re-evaluate their life and what they think is important: facing existence with calm until desire resettles. “I felt peace and no fear of death.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid, p4

⁴⁸ Bini, 1992

⁴⁹ Michelstaedter, 2004, p10

⁵⁰ Plato, 2006a, 523a-524a

⁵¹ Holden & Avramidis, 2015

⁵² Ibid

In a certain perspective, persuasion is cheating. Life is supposed to be bad for everything from chemical elements to weights, but there are moments in which it is no longer. Somehow something is overcome, or something goes wrong, and the lack that constitutes existence is bypassed. The drowning man is not yet dead, but he is not completely alive, because to live is to want and he has given up wants. Michelstaedter's original ontology fails to orient us because I am now faced with an impossible thing: the persuaded person who, possessing themselves, moves from one ontology to another, like a Parmenidian hero spared a moment of mortal seeming to share in eternal being. A space is found where life is no longer bad. It may even be good! And in this move, everything changes.

Michelstaedter articulates a metaphysical change: a grand seismic shift that could release me from the Zone and my need for ghettos. With near-death experiences, I want to show that this shift is more common than most would admit – and that even though it can be difficult to achieve, it is *right there, achievable*. The task of this thesis, which Michelstaedter also attempts, is to explore the greater potential for this shift outside of circumstantial experience. *A moment of peace before death is not enough*.

Notes for the Philosophical Witness

I would be overwhelmed by doubt had I not experienced a break from the Zone, to a place where life is good. I would also not be writing this thesis and so engaging with rhetoric if I was still there. I return knowing life to be bad and trusting the possibility of making it better. Lyotard, Cioran, Zapffe and Michelstaedter are witnesses from the Zone to its ghettos, and they are ignored because *the ghetto does not want to know*. The desire to keep on living (the fear of death)

traps the inhabitants of the Zone and supports their flight to its ghettos. These witnesses, however, seem to have passed a point of no return in which they can no longer avoid the reality of this sub-surface lack. They would leave if only someone could show the way.

Like everything in the Zone, philosophy becomes neurotic and habitual. Reproducing old forms perpetuates this position. The shift that would take us beyond the Zone is metaphysical – total – so includes a shift in philosophy. I have proposed witness for this role, because it describes communication between surfaces, and I have implored trust in receiving witness.

Jacques Derrida claims “all responsible witnessing involves a poetic experience of language.”⁵³

This confers a standard of originality and irreproducibility on testimony, which avoids reproducing the aesthetic of the Zone and stresses the witness is really of another place and really speaking from experience. Rather than, for example, regurgitating words from a fictional character whose aesthetic they admire.

Now it is more vital for the philosophical witness to inspire trust. In places with well-worn conversational codes and strict standards for what counts as an acceptable statement, their poetic (unusual) language and ‘voice from elsewhere’ risk judgement. Trust functions to mute these standards if they prevent an audience. Or perhaps, even for a moment, alleviating the pretence of a ghetto’s grander justifications.

With the act of witnessing in mind, and in the hope that these words are accepted, a double movement follows. First rhetoric must be taught about itself, exposing the ghettos as ghettos rather than individual totalities of ‘the world.’ This refamiliarizes their inhabitants with the Zone pressing at the borders. Through expanding the study of ghettos to the Zone in its totality, the next step is to explore possible strategies of escape and the conditions in which escape becomes possible.

⁵³ Derrida, 2000, p181

Avoiding the Badness of Life: Rhetoric

*“Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
Have always known, know that we can’t escape,
Yet can’t accept. One side will have to go.
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.”⁵⁴*

What is Rhetoric?

“Rhetoric, as contrasted with persuasion, refers to all methods by which humans conceal their true condition from themselves and each other.”⁵⁵

Rhetoric is a reaction to the badness of life, both in responding to it and doing so instinctively, without thinking. It is by becoming conscious of this reaction that it can be judged and undone if necessary. For Michelstaedter, reactive rhetoric *does not work* because it fails to make life better. Instead, despair at lack transforms to an ambient but no less potent dread. Granting possible ways of addressing the badness of life without avoiding it, rhetoric is something to leave behind.

⁵⁴ Larkin, 2001

⁵⁵ Valentino, Blum & Depew, 2004, p61

Remember that for Michelstaedter to exist is to desire and to obtain the object of desire is to cease to exist. A weight is a weight so long as it *weighs* towards a central gravitational point, but if it reaches this point it no longer weighs anything, so dies as a weight. My consciousness is for the things I desire, which are made to shine amongst indifferent, undesired greys, so that food, for instance, exists more to me when I am hungry. My body can be thought of as an assemblage of desiring organs that pull towards multiple objects. If I eat food the stomach dies but the body prevails to desire more things. Even if I do not desire anything, “the world is a large ensemble of grays that are I don’t know what but that certainly are not made to cheer me up.”⁵⁶

Stripping back to the experience of desire, I am never satisfied, even at the point of having no desires, and when desire arrives it is experienced as the lack of a thing I do not have.

Remember also that desire is inherently the desire to keep on living, because desire promises future fulfilment that will only be possible if I am still alive, and to desire to keep on living is the same as fearing death because *I feel I must keep on going*.

These two things – the miserable lack that constitutes desiring existence and the desire to continue this existence – create the ground for rhetoric. This is the Zone: a world aware of its misery but still desperate not to end. Rhetoric describes the collection of attempts to deny this existence rather than facing it, because it is too painful to acknowledge and too difficult to resolve. Then, what is easier – to turn away from acknowledging life as it is or to turn away from desire?

The illusion begins that life is something else. I play at being a student, some definite thing – a *persona* – “sensing uncertainty, and, intimidated, they abandon themselves to whatever brutish exertion presents itself... each path forged is a new mine, each banner a mantel covering the

⁵⁶ Michelstaedter, 2004, p89

insufficiency of the wretched, conceding to them a *persona* and a right: *thus does rhetoric flourish irresistibly.*⁵⁷

*“But the dull voice of obscure pain still is not quiet, and again and again it rules, alone and terrible, in the fearful hearts of men.”*⁵⁸

*“Life takes charge of the stupefying: being alive becomes a habit... The fearful hours are reduced to the full, continuous, measured pain trickling beneath all things.”*⁵⁹

The First Stage of Rhetoric: Creating the Absolute and the Objective

“Such heaviness. The world has come and lies between us.

Such distances. Ungraspable.

Ash and its disappearance –

*Unbearable absence of being, Tonto...”*⁶⁰

Avoidance begins with a great schism. A traumatic strategy that will later inspire the many dualisms of philosophy (and, only slightly later, the never-ending pleasure of critiquing them) – mind-body, consciousness-matter, reducible to one, reducible to the other, the same all along etc.

There is the world I structure and know and then there is me. It is determined and I am “free: *absolute.*”⁶¹ Like the ultimate voyeur, I do not really exist – I am an impossible presence that takes up no space. I am two: “a body, matter, or phenomenon, I don’t know, and a soul, form, or idea.”⁶² And “the soul lives free in the absolute.”⁶³

⁵⁷ Michelstaedter, 2004, p95

⁵⁸ Ibid, p26

⁵⁹ Ibid, p27

⁶⁰ Wright, 2004

⁶¹ Michelstaedter, 2003, p64

⁶² Ibid, p65

⁶³ Ibid, p65

The absolute is really a spasm: pure fantastic flight in reaction to something I cannot bear. It is an impossible non-existent existence that would magically avoid the lacking life while continuing to live it – *from an infinite distance*. Like the man who forgets he exists in front of a computer screen, the absolute experience lacks reflection entirely. When I turn to look at it, I cannot grasp it, precisely because it is a space created by manic desperation – an impossible object for impossible desire: “the absolute – I’ve never known it, but I know it in the way the man suffering from insomnia knows sleep.”⁶⁴

On the other side of the schism we get *things in themselves*, and from the things in themselves comes *objectivity*. Michelstaedter advances the common critique – to *see* objectivity makes no sense because to *see* requires a subject – to considering that the consciousness required for objectivity would have to be “*one with things... all things in himself*: “one, indivisible,” the persuaded: god.”⁶⁵

Rhetoric is characterised by a neurotic accumulation of knowledge, as if cultivating and stabilising such an objective world would secure me within it, *as if the objective could teach me of the absolute*; where in fact I experience the opposite: the more I learn, the more distant I feel. Knowledge becomes another strategy to avoid life, an attempt to inhabit the absolute. “Man *“knows,”* which is why he is always two: his *life* and his *knowing*.”⁶⁶

How I Replace My Life with a Persona and Enlist Others to Help Me

“There is hope for me – I am sufficient – something is – something is for me – There is hope for me...”

“This is the exitless circle of illusionary individuality, which affirms a persona, an end, a reason: inadequate persuasion, in that it is adequate only to the world it creates for itself.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid, p65

⁶⁵ Ibid, p89

⁶⁶ Ibid, p66

⁶⁷ Ibid, p23

Coming at the *persona* from Michelstaedter alone is difficult. As much of a central concept as it becomes in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, it is never approached simply because Michelstaedter's language of desire, pleasure and knowledge makes an intuitive concept obscure. Here are various ways it might be described in different symbolic articulations:

1. The persona is the surface I inhabit in the Zone and the place I have within it.
2. The persona is a certain way of making sense of experience and the understanding this affords of myself.

Or, in my best Michelstaedter-ian:

3. The persona is the felt continuity of future-directed desire, each moment of reaching towards the point of fulfilment giving me "the flattery "*You are.*"⁶⁸, and distracting from the discontinuity and unfulfillment of present experience.

Or in short, but incomprehensible without the rest:

4. "*persona*, his own reality."⁶⁹

Support for the alternatives (1) and (2) is explicit. In general, the persona is an attempt to mask doubt and life as it is: "for a semblance of a persona, men willingly sacrifice their determinate demand, sensing uncertainty, and, intimidated... They need to see a stretch of road before their eyes... which certainly *defers* open *pain*, and, in continuing, flees from the abyss of cessation."⁷⁰

This persona, which is both life and the world in which the life is lived, becomes *the* world in the same manner as the ghettos discussed earlier, but it is not yet a ghetto because it is insufficient on its own.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p22

⁶⁹ Ibid, p66

⁷⁰ Ibid, p95

This insufficiency is a consequence of the absolute-objective split. Simply affirming the persona by saying “this is” is not enough, I also feel the need to *reaffirm* by *knowing* this is and making it objective, especially if I want to justify myself to others. But treating the persona as objective only makes the absolute-objective tension more obvious. Both sides require the other and both crumble on reflection. “He wants “to constitute a *persona*” for himself with the affirmation of the absolute *persona* he does not have.”⁷¹

The persona stops working in front of others, their personas and their worlds – doubt creeps in and I panic. An individual persona becomes inadequate to calm the doubt and pain of life, and something more substantial is sought.

It is this point that I am most vulnerable. Unable to maintain my own reality and faced with increasing doubt I have already decided to flee, I am desperate.

Collusion

“Amidst the obscurity they do not have the courage to endure, but each seeks his companion’s hand and says “I am, you are, we are,” so that the other might act the mirror... *Thus do they stupefy one another.*”⁷² This marks the beginning of a continuous process in which I will hand over more to others for the sake of maintaining an identity. I cannot secure my reality, but *they* can. *They* become an authority, *keepers of the object and absolute*, so long as I do not reflect too much.

Any danger becomes a question of who this other is and what they require of me to maintain a *persona* in this shared reality. Do I have to go to war? Because I will do it, and people have done worse. Will others exploit this position? Definitely. I am “a “thing” like a tree that the master

⁷¹ Ibid, p68

⁷² Ibid, p68

grafts and prunes in order to harvest its fruit.”⁷³ I will be a good worker for your benefit if it affords me a persona. I will kill and torture and rape if that is who you say I am. For I am an unconscious instrument “in the development of the ‘community of the wicked,’ by which men, though unable to understand one another, will certainly manage to come to an understanding.”⁷⁴

For collusion to work it is necessary that I do not understand others. Collusion is also the creation of an obscure other to collude with. If I became aware that the *objective* and the *absolute* do not reside in them, this shared reality will be filled with the stench of the Zone. Uncertainty and doubt. They must be rulers or elders, later aristocrats or sovereigns, then cultures, systems, machines, or just gods... and I will stupefy myself beneath them for the sake of never again having to witness the badness of life.

Case study 1: Language

“Having nothing and able to give nothing, they let themselves sink into words that feign communication, because none of them can make his world be the world of others; they feign words containing the absolute world... Each word contains mystery, and they entrust themselves to words, weaving with them thereby a new, tacitly agreed-upon veil over the obscurity: ‘ornaments of the darkness’: “God help me” – because I haven’t the courage to help myself.”⁷⁵

I am told language can be understood by its use,⁷⁶ but not that this is a problem, or that the *use* in question can be first and foremost to continue this reality/ collusion/ surface. That through ingesting and regurgitating phrases that are not my own and I do not attempt to understand – signs “on a keyboard prepared like a note on a piano”⁷⁷ – I am again chasing objectivity, absolute and persona to avoid doubt and lack: the badness of life. That each word warms the Cave. That the person who repeats articles from the internet as if it is their own position is the model for an

⁷³ Ibid, p114

⁷⁴ Ibid, p100

⁷⁵ Ibid, pp68-9

⁷⁶ Wittgenstein, 1958

⁷⁷ Michelstaedter, 2004, p130

entire relationship to language: “repeating, without understanding, what others in such circumstances say.”⁷⁸ Enter comment sections, twitter – *it gets worse*.

“Getting used to a word is like acquiring a vice.”⁷⁹

Case study 2: Philosophy

According to Michelstaedter, philosophy began deteriorating to rhetoric as soon as Plato started answering for Socrates, picking up pace with Aristotle.⁸⁰ As something of which I and my examiners are familiar, philosophy is an excellent case study for collusive rhetoric at work.

““You must make a study of Plato or the Gospel,” they will tell him. “That’s how you make a name for yourself. But be careful not to act in the manner of the Gospel...”⁸¹ In precisely the same manner, I make a study here of Michelstaedter and do not yet act or write as I should if I were really to take his words *seriously*. Philosophical theory is one thing, but philosophical practice another.

As for the practice, I am told to philosophise in a certain way, but I do not understand why this is the way I must do it. There is a pre-given reality that it will not do to interrupt. Michelstaedter cannot have expected his words for a Hegelian to fit so well to the mouth of philosophy’s future dominant school: ““Whereas philosophy has raved through metaphysical exaltation, we have placed it once more on positive grounds; and here, maintaining our contact with reality, we have a secure means of conquering truth.””⁸² So through rhetoric, philosophy finds a use for a particular reality: shuffling concepts, building knowledge, questioning only where appropriate. Entirely domesticated, defanged, neutered, permitted to play inside the garden walls.

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp134-5

⁷⁹ Ibid, p70

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid, p151

⁸² Ibid, p86

Case study 3: Modes of Questioning and the Use of Answers

Collusion is something like a pact with the dark. It builds a wall that makes the dark *dark*. It is the reason there are some things I feel I cannot understand. And my rhetorical persona melts away in the light of my understanding (and in front of others), which means I must put the source of my persona out of reach for the sake of its survival. If questioning is too much like approaching a wall, and the wall is a collusive ground, then the evidence of this collusion should be just beyond the wall.

Which it is: see *Persuasion and Rhetoric*;⁸³ see this thesis.

But the structure of light and dark, understood and not understood, known and assumed, makes the mode of questioning what it is: moving something from the dark to the light. And so, it appears, answers might become attempts to expand the ghetto, extend the reach of its logic, and insulate against breaks.

On the other side, critiques may be of two kinds. A critique may be an answer for another ghetto, which seeks security and ‘proof’ of its being *the* world by undermining another, as the light of reason advances on the light of God. Alternatively, a critique may come from the dark: a purely destructive force for the rhetorical ghetto because it does not attempt to replace it with another (even if it does not necessarily stop it being replaced with *something else*, as Socrates’ critique wipes the slate for Platonic and Aristotelean philosophy, and Jesus becomes the Catholic Church).

Case study 4: the antagonistic ‘other’

⁸³ Ibid

The unknowable 'dark' other does not have to be a God-like authority. Sometimes it is an enemy that makes me who I am (who offers me a secure persona), so that I collude with such an other in mutual violence or simply take them to collude with me and do not give them a chance to object, or worse, explain themselves. This is the existential reaction to, and need of, immigrants, Jews, Roma, the West, etc.

Late-Rhetoric: Security and Ease

*"Systematically organised rhetoric, however, nourished by constant effort, flourishes in the sunlight, brings forth fruit, and profits its faithful. And it shall bring forth still more in the future."*⁸⁴

Rhetoric tends towards two things: security and ease. The end goal for the person participating in rhetoric is a life without pain, discordance and any more consciousness than a plant: a life of lying in bed at the edge of sleep forever. Security provides continuity - in a secure ghetto I forget the outside exists and this reality becomes *the* reality. Ease makes this reality sleepy.

Security comes in many forms. To move from an individual persona to a collusive reality is already for the sake of security, because the old persona was inadequate. To structure this reality on some *unknown other* and *never to look at it* – which is to bestow an aura on the thing – is to realise that my attention undermines the security of this world, and to avoid it as a result.

Security begins with violence, at first for nature and then for others. For an individual persona, I labour to secure its continuation: hunting for food, defending myself with shelter and clothes, manipulating and destroying plants, habitats, objects etc. for the sake of this. For others I have social contracts, understandings and divisions: property that is *not theirs* or labourers – others

⁸⁴ Ibid, p136

turned to resources for my security. Or maybe I labour for them, but am promised the means to survive in return.

Further on, I make a pact with a society that promises security if I accept a role within it. That if I keep my place, do what I am told, pay taxes etc. I will be looked after. I trust society to secure my reality at the price of a sense of responsibility. But this is exactly the point of rhetoric, because without ever having to worry or understand my reality to the level required to secure it personally, it is all the easier to mistake it for the only reality. I can busy myself in the ghetto in complete ignorance of the Zone.

Ease is closely related. It takes over from security at the point of handing over my sense of responsibility, because now my sense of security is related to my trust in society, and this trust relates to my need to doubt. If my life is easy and never forces me to 'step back,' re-evaluate or doubt, then I never have reason to feel insecure. For this end, it is better that strenuous things are done for me, decisions taken in my place and, in general, my persona to be planned and predictable.

"No man is born naked any longer: everyone comes with a coat, rich in all that the centuries have provided to make life easy... woven from all the things of societal life: (1) the professions; (2) commerce; (3) law; (4) morality, (5) convention; (6) science; and (7) history."⁸⁵ "Each man:

- (1) ...procedures himself a title
- (2) Knows how to earn his livelihood by means of this
- (3) Knows to what extent he may earn it before others...
- (4) Knows what kind of feeling and what manner of respect he should have before others
- (5) Knows how he must behave...

⁸⁵ Ibid, p138

(6) Knows the way... to prevent or redress troubles...

(7) Possesses a foundation of views and prejudices..."⁸⁶

But through ease, two things happen. First, I slide entirely into habit. Life becomes an unconscious repetition of procedures that distract from doubt. Through habit, everything is judged by ease, as hard or soft, and nothing further or substantial is sought. "What does he know about the things he brushes in passing, the things on which he supports himself in order to go forward?... This alone he knows... making use of things and people only... 'insofar as they are useful to his going.'"⁸⁷ Other people can, after all, be quite difficult, but if we fit into pre-packaged roles (personas) and interact only for the sake of these, then people can be avoided. In their place, shades, obstacles, repositories of use, NPCs...

*"I believe, the man who glanced into the mind of the average man would find there a truly strange and deformed image of the world and of men and himself."*⁸⁸

Second, I become weak, specialised and increasingly vulnerable outside rhetoric: unable to live without it.

The Reduction of the World & The Reduction of Myself

As I give up more and more to avoid my condition – effectively fashioning blinkers to hide the frame or walls of this reality and all evidence of its construction – the world reduces.

Michelstaedter writes that rhetorical language tends towards silence because it works to take the place of actual communication.⁸⁹ Once communication is forgotten, the need to replace it fades

⁸⁶ Ibid, p139 [formatting changed]

⁸⁷ Ibid, p126

⁸⁸ Ibid, p127

⁸⁹ Ibid

away and there is no need to speak any longer; pictures of myself will suffice in communication's place. In the same way, the rhetorical world fades to nothing. Once life and the Zone are obscured completely so that it is as if they never existed, my eyes start to close, and through my eyelashes I see shades and colours in their haste of passing. I stop paying attention. I cannot remember what videos I was watching an hour ago. I met someone last night, I liked them, but I cannot remember their name. And their face, I think they had blond hair, or maybe brown, and did they have glasses? Their voice, too, maybe Balkan, but... someone is making noise outside, and I have a thesis to think about. 'My focus wavers, the adverts call, a train sounds promising in the distance.'

Note melancholic boredom: "to see once more the traces of *one's own life*, which once was rich with infinite hop and then, through convenience, cowardice, adjustment, is now reduced, abandoned, sold out: traces of a life whose future was at any rate richer in time than at any point since."⁹⁰

But what can I do now? I have been sleeping too long. "I am weak in body and soul."⁹¹ Trained for the needs of rhetorical society and my persona within it, I am entirely unsuited to taking care of my own security. And as much as I like to forget this, I have trusted my security to others, which, in my vulnerability, leaves me at their mercy. I must do what I am told to survive.

Those forced to face strain, if it is not too much, might feel through the process that they have 'grown' or become 'stronger.' This articulates the reverse of rhetorical reduction, where the dozing person has *woken up* for the sake of something. A loud noise, the ground shaking, the death of their parents etc.

As person and world are stupefied by rhetoric and the long sleep draws in, persuasion becomes more and more distant. In one sense it does not seem necessary, because in the failure to reflect

⁹⁰ Ibid, p30 [footnote]

⁹¹ Ibid, p116

or to recognise my experience as evidence of running away, I do not think life is bad or worth changing in any serious way. Alternatively, I might have an inkling of a will to persuasion, but feel too trapped by others or my own weakness to try. Queue impotent despair, the infinite horror, suicide.

Breaks and the Failure of Rhetoric: Death, Dreams and Orpheus

Breaks: experiences and strategies that contradict the logic of rhetoric/ ghettos/ surfaces

“When the light dims, the image of dear things – the screen veiling external obscurity – becomes more tenuous, and the invisible grows visible; when the weave of illusion thins, disintegrates tears asunder, then men, made impotent, feel themselves in the sway of what is outside their power, of what they do not know: they fear without knowing what they fear.”⁹²

Here I want to discuss *breaks* from rhetoric. This begins an understanding of how rhetoric progresses over time, how rhetoric defends itself from breaks and how I still might escape it.

One break has already been discussed: near-death experiences. Having lived through death, knowing themselves as fully capable of dying (the disintegration of the absolute) and ridiculing rhetoric’s apparent security, a near-death experience can cause a person’s break from rhetoric.

The outside perspective this affords of rhetorical living suggests the need for its rejection, and a more fulfilling, less reduced life is sought.

Consider the regrets of the dying: “I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me... I wish I hadn’t worked so hard... I wish I had the courage to express my feelings... I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends... I wish that I had let myself be happier.”⁹³ Death, encroaching or experienced, ‘snaps us out of it.’ Commonly ignored by the

⁹² Ibid, p26

⁹³ Ware, 2011

self-help literature that surrounds this well-worn observation is what I am then snapped in to: the Zone, lack, despair, the absence of such fulfilment, unregulated desire in its place.

Michelstaedter adds dreams. In dreams, collusion is undermined – the unknown/unknowable other is not there to tell me I exist. “Man finds himself once more without first name and last, wife or loved ones, things to do, clothes. He is alone, naked, with eyes open to the darkness.”⁹⁴

‘But it was just a dream, don’t take it so seriously.’ The experience is ignored or explained away, it ‘does not count’ for understanding my life. Here rhetoric abuses its false continuity to accuse dreams of non-existence and their confusion as a mistake: ‘wrong’ or ‘false’ like an examination. This distracts from the supposed justification of ‘real’ reality, which itself decays if I become aware of it: “the reality of men is the shape of a dream, and they talk about it as if narrating a tangle of dreams.”⁹⁵

Yet dreams become continuations of waking life. They no longer interest me. I dream of being promoted at work and of walking through the city to get food. They no longer oppose the logic of rhetoric because the dreams have become rhetorical. And there is no need to explain them away because I am so well integrated into rhetoric that the cracks are disappearing. The blinkers shrink tighter, the walls are painted sky-blue.

These are the two ways in which rhetoric counters breaks. First it attempts to explain it away: to demand justification that it cannot meet itself. This is experienced by outsiders everywhere, so that the woman or queer or deviant must justify their alternate experiences to men who never had to justify theirs. The more insidious second tactic is to undermine, corrupt or infect whatever might cause a break so that it ultimately furthers rhetoric. This means everything that might break me away from rhetoric also has the potential to reaffirm it. It also means many of the things I might directly associate with rhetoric may also become ground for breaks.

⁹⁴ Michelstaedter, 2004, p28

⁹⁵ Ibid, p128

Breaks can be common. For Lyotard to describe the Zone as a space discovered rather than returned to suggests that rhetoric is currently break-ing for people in his position. From a break, *Lyotard witnesses the failure of rhetoric*. His philosopher bears witness to the Zone's lack of the absolute, which is the melancholic realisation that *the absolute was never there, even if we acted like it was*. The absolute was only known by the walls placed around it, the violence they suggest, and the collusion between people not to look. But through progressive doubt, inhabitants of the Zone have discovered the illusion of rhetoric and arrived back at the original point of a desiring, lacking life that still desires not to end.⁹⁶ But Lyotard is not everyone: there are plenty who go through breaks rarely and are well-used to explaining them away.

For the ghettos:

The Zone dwellers themselves can trigger breaks, if only the ghetto pays attention. If rhetoric works by collusion, so that I need others to tell me I exist, and I have not slipped so far to assume they will always tell me, and I do not have the means to force them, then I will notice the stream of their affirmation run dry. I will be on my own again. And as much as I turn to others, the dweller of the Zone will always be on the periphery as a non-existent presence – something I do not think should exist. (But if I made a different ghetto for them then...)

I do not know of a ghetto so secure that breaks do not occur. Doubt finds a way to break in like mosquitoes, and I turn in my sleep, trying to shake them off. For this I might shut the curtains – wilfully but semi-consciously ignoring what does not fit – I might build walls, lash out in frustration, become increasingly angry, but still the breaks will not go away.

⁹⁶ Lyotard, 1999

For the Zone:

It is hard to stay in the Zone. Ghettos are built for a reason, because the Zone is almost unbearable. Of the figures mentioned in this essay, only Cioran dwells there for long. Everyone else learns what it is to be Orpheus. “What is certain is that at the point where one *turns to look at one’s profile in the shadow, one destroys it.*”⁹⁷ As Orpheus we are not ready to accept our promised fulfilment is illusionary; and with Zapffe’s premonition of doom, we *try not to look.*⁹⁸

Techno-Rhetoric

Why technology?

Technologies allow for ever thicker forms of rhetoric that further obscure life as it is (bad) and prevent us from facing or improving it.

The technology of writing has a radical effect on life. Text can be understood as possessing magical qualities,⁹⁹ but a more familiar response is distrust: the change it brings construed as deterioration. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato-Socrates argues that writing pretends to establish outside the mind what can only be in the mind, reduces memory, cannot respond to criticism and undermines dialogue.¹⁰⁰

Walter Ong records some ways oral cultures tend to differ from literary ones.¹⁰¹ Oral cultures are:

- (1) Close to the human lifeworld.
- (2) Agonistically toned.

⁹⁷ Michelstaedter, 2004, p74

⁹⁸ Zapffe, 2004

⁹⁹ Ong, 2012

¹⁰⁰ Plato, 2006b

¹⁰¹ Ong, 2012

(3) Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced.

(4) Homeostatic.

This describes a creation of *distance*, which can be used by rhetoric for its first stage: creating the absolute and objective, separated by infinite space. Ong is clear that the introduction of distance is not necessarily bad, as the abstraction it affords allows for analytic content, lists, ‘neutral’ analysis etc. Knowledge, for Michelstaedter.

Rhetoric can take hold or it cannot. The distance introduced by language only becomes rhetorical once its influence is obscured as influence: becoming ‘natural,’ ‘life,’ in the same way that language and other people are replaced. As soon as I am aware that writing has introduced some distance, then I can work to mitigate this distance. I can re-contextualise words or interact with them in a way that does not replace communication. In this way writing tends towards rhetorical use but does not necessitate it.

In any case, (4) suggests the potential of writing to work against rhetoric directly. If rhetoric tends towards security and ease, which suggests a degree of stability, then literary cultures’ converse lack of homeostasis works against it. Ong writes that oral cultures inhabit an eternal present of lived experience where “memories which no longer have present relevance” are “sloughed off.”¹⁰² In this way the sense of continuity required by the persona – which again can be delusional rather than actual – is preserved in an ever-shifting homogenous present that forgets it has changed. The record of change in writing prevents this. If I read the written record of history, I can learn that reality/rhetoric was not always as it is now: that my world is not *the* world but one contingent on chance, technologies, convention and politics (*history*). If I take this seriously, I will be back in the Zone, the space of lack and doubt, because I will have lost the

¹⁰² Ong, 2012, p46

security of my world. Hence the importance rhetorical society affords to discrediting the written record of alternative worlds, censorship and book burning.

Other technologies exhibit the same potential for rhetoric or non-rhetoric use. Cinema is one of the most powerful realisations of an absolute-objective split. On one side sits the audience in sensory-deprivation: comfortable chairs, soundproofed walls, barely lit. On the other, the film: a bright, continuous world of separate existence. These are divided by a screen that is infinite space. As the focus of attention, the film is the objective; in front of a screen, the cinema melts away, I stop noticing my body and *the film becomes my world*. In this way I try to inhabit the absolute in the cinema. I become the ultimate voyeur, who can exist and experience a life without believing I am involved in it.

Yet some filmmakers encourage breaking with rhetoric, developing forms of *discontinuity editing* to undermine the coherence and reality of a film world. Examples are Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*,¹⁰³ with awkward cuts and separation of sound from image that remind me I am watching a film – waking me up – as well as the endlessly self-reflexive work of Chris Marker.

*“In 1940 Simone Weil wrote ‘our movie houses are not unlike [Plato’s] Cave.’ It was not meant as a compliment. How could she accept that this inferior artform should find within the cave the power to negate the cave, to disarm the Gorgon...?”*¹⁰⁴

Similarly, with drugs: the woman who learns the world is not as secure as she thought on one side, the addict on the other. So with Michelstaedter's claim that “getting used to a word is like acquiring a vice”¹⁰⁵ the boundary between technologies fades and a division of use emerges. An emancipatory use that breaks the world, versus a rhetorical one that encourages our addiction to it.

¹⁰³ Minh-ha, 1982

¹⁰⁴ Marker, 1989

¹⁰⁵ Michelstaedter, 2004, p70

Notes for the Philosophical Witness

One “must make a study,”¹⁰⁶ and this section has done that, but this is no longer enough. Or it only works for philosophers of the ghetto (rhetorical philosophers), and only has the effect of strengthening the walls (furthering rhetoric) if it is not turned to some other use. The philosopher as witness attempts the opposite, so must put this knowledge to work.

This expands the witness’ guide to the following:

- (1) In communicating from one surface to another, or from a surfaceless space to a surface, there is no meta-testimony: no authority to appeal to (from chapter 1).
- (2) Language must be used poetically (from chapter 2). Chapter 3 explains poetic language as the use of language in a non-rhetorical way: that is, to not repeat words for the sake of singing along, but to communicate an experience.
- (3) To be received, the witness must inspire trust (from chapter 2). This requires *playing along* with rhetoric to an extent. For instance, using established essay form in a thesis.
- (4) (2) must be balanced with (3) for witness to be effective.
- (5) Rhetoric, which undermines or replaces communication (required for witness), can be broken (from chapter 3).
- (6) The witness can disrupt rhetoric by refusing to affirm others’ personas (from chapter 3).
- (7) The witness must avoid and disrupt the rhetorical use of technologies, particularly in communication technologies that carry their witness, like writing (from chapter 3).

¹⁰⁶ Michelstaedter, 2004, p151

Moreover, for the witness to avoid rhetoric themselves, the absolute and objective must be avoided. As a result, knowledge cannot distance them into an impossible absolute – it is not *inert*, it is *practiced*.

Escape

“To argue with a dead man is embarrassing and not very loyal.”¹⁰⁷ But here it is required.

“Rhetoric forcibly compels me to do things”¹⁰⁸ – I “must make a study,”¹⁰⁹ and a study is a kind of dissection: messy, cruel and rather one sided. Yet, I have already taken Michelstaedter in a way that is not particularly loyal. The style of my second and third chapters includes heavy use of quotations but also a restructuring and re-contextualising that takes Michelstaedter out of *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and into the Zone. I have used Michelstaedter to speak for me and I have spoken for Michelstaedter. At some point, I imagined us the same. Same age, vocation, part of the world, reaction of disgust...

This chapter ends on persuasion: what it is, how to get there and why it makes a better life. It begins in noting the change of rhetoric over time and how this contributes to the experience of life.

Lyotard articulates some of this change. In the rhetoric of the early 20th century, Michelstaedter directs his work at an institutional society whose arrogant rhetoric stumbles towards two continental wars. Lyotard, at the end of the century, catches rhetoric faltering and sputtering: obviously *not working* yet still sought after, hence the never-ending dismantling and reconstruction of the Zone led by a feeling of *lack*. Lyotard directs this lack at *the absolute*, but Michelstaedter reveals the absolute as a doomed construction and already an attempt to run away from the badness of life. Unknowingly or not, Lyotard mourns the ability to hide.

¹⁰⁷ Levi, 1988, p110

¹⁰⁸ Michelstaedter, 2004, p4

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p151

A few decades later (now), the Zone grows from the dark. Rhetoric fragmented by decentralisation and geo-political counter-narratives in which ‘the’ truth/world/surface/persona is overwhelmed by the proliferation of ‘fake’s, the desperation for security increases. This manifests in various new-nationalisms, walls, military posturing, Brexit and the like – for which the justification is a scream of existential anguish and for which all violence is ‘right.’

The Zone, Ghettos and Rhetoric: Violence and Intensities

An unproblematic slip in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*: rhetoric is used to refer both to the entire structure of the Zone and to the ghettos specifically. Introducing the terms *Zone* and *ghetto* outlines a distinction between *seeking rhetoric* and *established rhetoric* that Michelstaedter navigates but does not address specifically. The difference can also be understood through desire: the Zone as a space for free, unfulfilled desire and the ghettos as a space for regulated, unfulfilled desire masquerading as fulfillable. Conflation under a single term, rhetoric, is understandable because the spaces are so similar. Unfulfillable desire – inherent lack – circulates both in slightly different forms. In one the lack is more obvious, in the other it is disguised.

The Zone and its ghettos come together. An inhabitant of the Zone has not broken free so long as the desire/lack pulls them. Michelstaedter confesses that “rhetoric forcibly compels me to do things”¹¹⁰ despite positioning himself outside the ghetto and systematic rhetoric because he is not yet out. Being ‘out’ is called persuasion, free from the lack.

A claim made in the first chapter: *‘within the Zone, a multitude of surfaces congeal against their destruction with the force of immense violence.’*

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p4

Much of the violence of rhetoric occurs in what I have referred to as ‘early rhetoric’ – that is, as an immediate reaction to the Zone. The initial panic to create a secure persona and disguise the badness of life does not suggest restraint. When the rhetorical system is more secure, such violence is reserved for the deviants that might threaten this security. Non-threatening deviants are ignored. For the rest, ‘the long sleep.’

It is the Zone’s yearning for fulfilment and “rage against the dying of the light”¹¹¹ that create the greatest ‘need’ (desire) for violence. At first for self-creation (for absolute > persona > knowledge > collusion) and then self-preservation. Unthinking, blind fury at the conditions of existence taken out on whatever would keep me aware of them. Because the Zone is unbearable, and apart from brief moments of stubborn courage the inhabitant of the Zone will find themselves drifting towards a ghetto. And within the ghetto, it is not only ‘life’ that is fled but the violence and intensity of reactions to it.

So, the Zone entails ghettos, and is in the ghettos always. Rhetoric results in a ghetto but calls throughout the Zone.

Notes for the witness: if perceived as a threat to rhetoric, expect to be killed. If not, expect to be ignored.¹¹² For if Jesus were to return, he would not be killed but greeted with the curious indifference of a bourgeois crowd.¹¹³

Locating Michelstaedter, Lyotard and Myself

Lyotard writes about the call of the Zone. For him, it encroaches: rhetoric is breaking apart. He is ignored. Michelstaedter and I write at points in which rhetoric is threatened, although neither

¹¹¹ Thomas, 1952

¹¹² Zapffe, 2004

¹¹³ Michelstaedter, 2004

of us are threats. He is ignored. But writing cannot help echo this intensity when the violence of rhetoric bubbles up.

The Zone is not homogenous. Its intensity varies both temporally and spatially. Some of the difference between Lyotard and I/Michelstaedter is reflected in the spaces we inhabit. Lyotard writes at the end of his career, deeply imbedded in the philosophy ghetto. I/Michelstaedter is at the edge, in-training, vulnerable and exposed to the outside. We talk about the same thing at different intensities and scales of violence because I/Michelstaedter understands it better. Living/having lived it, understanding just how far it goes, “nothing but horror all night long.”¹¹⁴

Two Persuasions, Two Metaphysics, Two Breaks

Persuasion is self-possession. It means existing in a space without lack, which means without rhetoric characterised by lack. But there are two ways of understanding a life without rhetoric. The first is to consider persuasion without ghetto-rhetoric. This is suitable in some respects. For instance, the ghetto is something I must leave to be persuaded, and the separation of theory and practice or absolute and objective or the many divisions of the ghetto are nonsensical to the persuaded person.

But persuasion is more: it also requires leaving the Zone. If the Zone is a lacking space that invites the presence of rhetoric, then inhabiting the Zone is no escape. Considering the younger Lyotard seriously - “psychoanalysis has carried out a critique of domination... from within a space that is still a space of Lutheran, Hebrew, auditory, sober domination. What is needed is... a practice that is not dominated, without domain, without domus...”¹¹⁵ – then the Zone is still

¹¹⁴ Keroac, 1986, p73

¹¹⁵ Lyotard, 1984, pp.107-8

within the space of rhetoric, or in other words *under its influence*. Persuasion is a new space, a new metaphysics, a new life that does not slope into a ghetto and does not need to run from itself.

Read the depressing end to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, where romanticised artistic creation takes the place of escape. The protagonist's recognition of persona-emptiness channels through a jazz record into fantasy of its authentic creation, drawing tension between the absolute and objective.¹¹⁶ Minimal reflection on his own empty, absolute position invites comparison to the life he witnesses, which seems so real and untroubled: full, in objective exteriority. He imagines swapping places to find fulfilment in artistic creation, which would require another to fantasise about his life as comparatively real and full from *their* absolute alienation. Persuasion or authenticity is taken rhetorically because it still requires collusion with some mysterious other – *it is escape to a position within the space of rhetoric*.

Better is Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, who suggests what it could be like to dwell in a different space. Through faith, the Knight does not doubt: s/he is not swayed by the agony of existence despite knowing where to find it and, rather than avoiding pain, bearing it.¹¹⁷ Kierkegaard articulates this in witnessing non-collusion: of not being able to reduce or understand the Knight, who by faith has moved to a life that is better. Somehow the Knight does not seem to fit. S/he is unmoved by the current of the Zone.

I think of the difference through three Orpheuses. The first Orpheus is the most familiar: he travels to find his desire object that is affective so long as he does not look at it. As soon as he forgets not to look, he turns around and it no longer functions because he sees nothing. This is the rhetorical Orpheus who does not reflect on his search for desire and only discovers the insufficiency of its object by chance. The Zone Orpheus knows the trick and turns around to confirm his disbelief, yet cannot help repeating the journey: he is stuck in a loop of disbelief and

¹¹⁶ Sartre, 1969

¹¹⁷ Kierkegaard, 1983

lapse, so that as soon as he turns around to see the absence of fulfilment, the presence of another promise looms once more behind him. But the persuaded Orpheus does not need to turn around. He understands already.

The third Orpheus differs from the Knight of Faith in two key respects. First, he is not Christian and not described as religious. Second, his non-collusion does not alienate others. Rather, it frees them. If rhetoric has the effect of distancing us from each other in a reduced life, and the persuaded acts as a break in rhetoric, then the persuaded will “respect in them that which they do not respect in themselves; so that, attracted by his love, they should take on the *persona* he loves in them: then will the blind see.”¹¹⁸

Despite the distinction between Zone and ghetto uniting under the banner of rhetoric, it remains helpful for understanding breaks. On the ghetto side, breaks can be understood as an experience that undermines the logic of rhetoric or otherwise reveals the attempt of running away from the badness of life as futile, unnecessarily violent or otherwise unwanted. Michelstaedter discusses such a break in writing about dreams: in dreams collusion is undermined since there is no longer an unknowable other to secure my existence¹¹⁹ – my *persona* is torn and I am left out in the cold without rhetoric to promise comfort.

This is the effect of Michelstaedter and all Zone-witnesses like him (including myself). They cannot lead the way out if they have not gone themselves. At most, they create disturbances in the ghetto, so that its inhabitants will rediscover the Zone and hopefully make their own way from there. But there is little point in creating such breaks in spaces where rhetoric is already break-ing and I am already familiar with the Zone. Here the break only confirms what I already suspect (but do not yet fully understand).

¹¹⁸ Michelstaedter, 2004, p53

¹¹⁹ Ibid

A break from the Zone is more difficult. This break must go further: it must also reveal a life no longer bad: something worth pursuing and not running from. Such breaks can result from near-death experiences, after which life can be lived without lack. Not for attaining anything like the absolute, but in no longer needing it.

The Way to Persuasion

The path to persuasion is difficult but not obscure. It begins by facing death and the effect of my fear of death/ desire to keep living (rhetoric). From here, I can start to accept death into my world. Michelstaedter suggests taking every moment as my last.¹²⁰ This breaks apart the persona, which is formed for the sake of continuity, along with its future directionality through which every present is a grey, reduced means to keep on going. Then the “needs and necessities of life are not necessities”¹²¹ anymore: my fear of death no longer enslaves me to the means of survival I am offered – wage slavery, traditional slavery, violence. But for all the weary feeling that would stop me struggling like the drowning man who accepts he will not survive this life, facing such a fear as death does not come easy to me. The courage and vigilance required to trace the path are monumental.

An archetypal narrative: someone goes up a mountain and comes back. Through the hardship of the path, they come to a new understanding. Facing the fear of death is knowing the journey, accepting death is starting out on the path, but the path is long...

It is not Abraham’s obedience to God in going up the mountain to sacrifice Isaac that fascinates Kierkegaard, but the journey.¹²² Three days of silent vigilance without so much as a doubt. No

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid, p40

¹²² Kierkegaard, 1983

less effort is called for here. If rhetoric breaks in with even a whisper, all is lost, because desire and fear snag me back into the current of the Zone. Yet Abraham perseveres to become the Knight of Faith, and is free from a world that would call him to its control.

If we begin the story of Orpheus halfway, where desire has already been given in the depths and he is left with walking back, not turning around, vigilance, then the path is his own mountain. As long as he is pulled by desire, he will turn around and run down, past the absence this creates, to a new desire, and Orpheus will never get out. But if we imagine a vigilant Orpheus not pulled by desire and who does not turn around, he would escape and keep going: desire overcome, no more need of it.

Is it possible?

“Certainly: impossible! For the *possible* is what is given.”¹²³ And precisely the given options are what trap us, and underwritten of each gift is a promise of continuation, so that to give up life frees me for life. Abraham gave up his son, Michelstaedter asks me to give up myself (persona, future): these are the same. In giving up everything I also give up the panic and reductions that go along with this life. I open up, I accept the world.

So yes, it is certainly possible if I am ready and able to die. I will not necessarily die immediately, but I accept that I will. That is, *I accept my condition without running from it*, which is to give up on the desperation to pretend life is something else (rhetoric) and to brace against the call of the Zone in its panic not to end.

Caveats:

- (1) I might not be able to die.
- (2) This does not reveal the extent of what must be given up in accepting death.
- (3) As such, it also disguises the true nature of acceptance.

¹²³ Michelstaedter, 2004, p50

(4) It is not immediately clear how this is supposed to make life better.

Michelstaedter does not consider the first caveat. It concerns a situation in which my responsibility and power is taken away by force. Dramatised in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*,¹²⁴ where a man is mutated and engineered so as not to be able to die, but known more immediately when a person is kept alive against their will by a state that prohibits suicide or a captor who will not allow their prisoners the 'easy way out...' This is a condition too horrifying for me to address. I cannot say anything.

It is easy to get stuck on vigilance alone, which would turn persuasion into stoic perseverance in the awareness of pain. Vigilance is important: it is the defining difference between the nihilistic inhabitants of the Zone and those who work or have worked to escape it, because the inhabitants of the Zone remain open to rhetoric's influence despite an escape from its ghettos. However, Michelstaedter's persuaded also finds peace,¹²⁵ where Kierkegaard's vigilant Knights of Faith follow the same path for peace-less faith. Kierkegaard's imagined example is a bank clerk, for instance, still exposed to the ugly troubles of day to day life without the panic of a hyper-critical Zone.¹²⁶ Considering the final three caveats will offer a more complete understanding of what makes persuasion more than vigilant understanding.

The second caveat is ethical: not considered by Michelstaedter but handled directly by Kierkegaard. If giving up my life is giving up everything to finally have it (giving up desire to possess myself), then I must give up even those I consider closest. Abraham is asked to kill the son for which he prayed for decades: his teleological suspension of the ethical.¹²⁷ It is not my intention to tackle Kierkegaard head on, but *Persuasion and Rhetoric* is absent of concrete others.

¹²⁴ Ellison, 1984

¹²⁵ Michelstaedter, 2004

¹²⁶ Kierkegaard, 1983

¹²⁷ Ibid

This is a serious absence in the light of Michelstaedter's suicide shortly after an argument with his mother.

As persuaded I will understand myself to be alone. "There is no bread for him, no water, bed, family, country, or god – *he is alone in the desert* and must create everything for himself."¹²⁸ And "he must have the *courage to feel alone*, to look his own pain in the face, bearing the *entire* weight of it."¹²⁹ But if I think of my family, my vigilance falters: not for fear of leaving some familial world or ghetto, but the pain I would cause them. Is it not enough to witness the pain? Must I add to it for the sake of my own escape? *Giving them up* is either a cruel or delicate thing.

Understanding comes in the step to (3). Giving up is the same as acceptance, which is persuasion. To give up something I must not demand anything of it because I do not expect it to save me. *Giving up* is specifically *giving up on using something for my own continuation* or *giving up for the sake of rhetoric*. In effect, it is giving up on rhetoric and taking things rhetorically. And if rhetoric reduces the world and myself, to give up something is to give up on its reduction. To accept as it is. So that my family becomes more than security – I do not demand care and warmth from them – and it is not their use for my persona that I encounter but a greater *them*.

The persuaded inhabits a persona but understands it is insufficient. Their world does not become *the* world because the need for security, known immediately through an experience of lack, is resisted. Their persona is a fragment experienced in its passing, and a new fragment comes in its place. The world is their world, and in recognition it is accepted, and in accepting it is finally possessed. "React against the need of affirming illusionary individuality; have the honesty to deny your own violence, the courage to live the whole pain of your insufficiency at any point... and be *wholly persuaded, you and the world*."¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Michelstaedter, 2004, p40

¹²⁹ Ibid, p52

¹³⁰ Ibid, p53

I will not turn away from the world. I will accept it. I will witness the pain of others that they flee yet cannot escape. “Speaking in the voice of his own pain, he will speak to them *the distant voice of their own pain*.”¹³¹ I will be a break in their world and I will hold the break open for them to witness the dark beyond the walls and the pain caused in the desperation to reject life for the sake of holding on. But I will not demand anything of them. “They will taste the joy of a fuller present in the impossible, the unbearable... for at one point they will have been made participants in a vaster and deeper life.”¹³²

“I am alone and distinct,”¹³³ but I am beside others. If I refuse to engage with other rhetorically then they are neither useful aids or wholly mysterious ‘outsiders.’ And I will not be able to ignore their pain that is comparable to my own. And if I am “alone in the desert,”¹³⁴ I will come across others nevertheless. And I will not hide from them. And when a few hours shared by the fire side stretch into centuries, and we have shared what we can, I will watch them leave into the night without holding on, and carry on my way.

*“That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature’s give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one’s irresolute clay.*

*I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,*

¹³¹ Ibid, p54

¹³² Ibid, p54

¹³³ Ibid, p10

¹³⁴ Ibid, p56

Notes for the Philosophical Witness

Witness was introduced to philosophise about more than ghetto-troubles: about the Zone or beyond. It was an act of communication between at least two persons who did not share the same space or surface. Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric* is an example of philosophical witness from the Zone to the Ghetto: he addresses an audience in a different world of his own, one of systematic and dogmatic Hegelian philosophy. My thesis is similar: its content is not suited to its form, which betrays a tension between the rhetorical audience space that only accepts precise *forms* of communication, and the "mute lament of the Zone"¹³⁶ that originates outside of and resists this form. Such witness if forced to compromise between being heard and being effective. If I do not give enough concessions to rhetoric I will not be listened to. If I give too many, I will not create a break. It may be that enough is already too many. There are some tricks to prize open the gap – inspiring trust, poetic language – but these may also fail. Such witness can be impossible.

See: Michelstaedter's preface.¹³⁷

So far, I have directed my notes for the philosophical witness to witnessing within a ghetto. This describes a witness still under the ghetto's influence and therefore, as I have argued, in the Zone: on the periphery of rhetoric but not yet outside it. These witnesses update but echo Lyotard's *philosophers of the Zone* in speaking of/from elsewhere yet not being able to show the way out.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Day-Lewis, 1956

¹³⁶ Lyotard, 1999

¹³⁷ Michelstaedter, 2004

¹³⁸ Lyotard, 1999

They might point to someone who can, as Plato does with Socrates and the apostles with Jesus, but they are not yet sure themselves.

In the case of persuaded witness, the situation changes completely. Such witness cannot be said to be *within* anything. It is an undominated practice. The Zone-witness is dominated because rhetoric is not yet escaped, which means they are pulled by the ‘needs’ and ‘necessities’ of rhetoric – to be acknowledged and received. But the persuaded witness does not require collusion: there is no need of reciprocity. And if the ghetto does not listen, so be it.

Then witness loses its tension. Communication no longer stretches between opposed spaces because there is no self-censorship or timidity in front of the other. They are not ‘needed’ so communication just *happens* regardless of its anticipated reception. I still communicate from one thing to another – that is why it is communication – but the places are not *opposed* or *connected* in any specific way. They are just *beside*. And as such, an act of witness is not directed at (dominated by) another, but an act of the witness alone. I witness my life and the space I live in. I stop turning away and take in the pain. Witness becomes not only a philosophical/theoretical practice but the first step on a path to persuasion.

In this way the witness might lead the way out. If witness is successful, the audience breaks: the workings and failure of rhetoric become clear through the lenses of lack, fear and pain. And now both sides witness the world together – witness *spreads* as an emancipatory step. This would mark the end of false security. The end of collusion. Of ghettos, walls, panic and violence. The apocalypse. The death of the world. If only they are able to bear the pain.

But it does not have to be successful. Nothing about the witness forces an audience to listen.

They can only be sure of saving themselves, as Michelstaedter and Cioran claim of Jesus.¹³⁹ Yet

¹³⁹ Michelstaedter, 2004; Cioran, 1992

there is something for them to offer: “the joy of a fuller present in the impossible, the unbearable.”¹⁴⁰

“Let slaves to senseless work... avenge themselves on the mediocrity of a sterile and insignificant life, on the tremendous waste that never permitted spiritual transfiguration. At that moment, when all faith and resignation are lost, let the trappings of ordinary life burst once and for all. Let those who suffer silently, not even uttering a sigh of complaint, yell with all their might... Let ideals be declared void; beliefs, trifles; art, a lie; and philosophy, a joke.”¹⁴¹

Witnessing Summer, 2016

I have not yet approached (4): it is not obvious that persuasion makes life better. So far, a persuaded life has been characterised as *fuller* but also directly *painful*, which does not immediately suggest *better*. And I have tried to undermine the logic of ghettos which could appeal to their authorities for simple, if obviously useless, answers: a life is better if it is close to God/ more rational/ measurably happier etc. Further, I have also undermined myself: placing myself with Michelstaedter as a philosopher of the Zone and then describing the influence of Zone-witness as destructive. An inhabitant of the Zone is not yet persuaded so cannot witness a world they do not understand, so can only hope to disrupt rhetoric.

This section is a work-around and should be taken as such. I am not persuaded – this thesis is proof of that – but I have been, briefly. I believe this is quite common: near death experiences and similar transformative experiences (breaks) often lead to persuasion despite lapses of vigilance that allow the moment to fade and rhetoric to creep back. The small difference I might be able to provide anyone interested in a path to persuasion is that one of these moments came about deliberately. I was not thrust into it immediately by circumstance, although circumstance helped, but worked towards it over a period of some months. And opposed to my key sources –

¹⁴⁰ Michelstaedter, 2004, p54

¹⁴¹ Cioran, 1992, p52

Michelstaedter, Lyotard, Kierkegaard, Cioran, Zapffe – this roots emancipatory philosophy in practice rather than accounts of the long-dead (Jesus, Socrates) or imaginary figures (the Knight of Faith, Michelstaedter's fantasies). In other words, this is an attempt at persuaded witness.

It was the end of my undergraduate degree. I was left for a summer in a city emptying of friends as they returned to families or went on to new places. Events in the wake of a friend's death were causing what relationships I had left to fray, and with them the security I had inhabited for some years. At the same time, my parents' divorce was reconfiguring the position I had in my family and I broke with this more distant promise of security. Initial attempts at new collusions failed. I was homeless, sleeping on what sofas I could find until eventually being invited to more permanent accommodation, with days structured only by part-time menial labour. The pain I felt was indescribable. I remember delaying sleep in anticipating the despair of waking up.

I chose to face it: quit drink, cigarettes, drugs and caffeine for most of the summer, and spent as much time as I could meditating or reading, often alone. I wrote furiously as an organisational and memory aid, to inspire vigilance in this written record and to try to understand this situation. I wanted to accept this life and do the best I could (to live as best I could).

Slowly, but not so slowly, I accepted everything. I learned to love without the demand of being loved in return. I gave up all that I had previous enjoyed and all its rhetoric. And I saw that the pain I felt was in others too, as clear as drug addictions, alcohol abuse, workplace frustrations and the blank gaze of horror as they looked around, having broken out for a second. And I had never felt such love for people, and was never so moved when the charade would drop, their faces transfiguring so quickly in weary honesty. And when I chose to leave, I learned what it meant to cry in departure of a place and people to which I could not return or hold on to. I accepted the impossible sadness of a world that is always leaving.

Persuasion did not survive the move. I do not know if anything in particular can be blamed, as satisfying as blaming the demands of graduate education would be, and it does not matter. But to

experience such a reduction from persuasion to rhetoric all over again leaves no doubt of the violence of this transition. Where *deterioration*, *frustration* and *pettiness* fit equally. Whatever pain or sadness I can forget with rhetoric is not remotely comparable to the life I had tasted before.

I cannot understand because I am no longer there, but I trust my own witness. Persuasion lost for lack of vigilance. Still, the path is clear enough. A series of events contributed to breaks from rhetoric, which forced me into the Zone: the death of a friend, which runs counter to the logic of persona continuation and security; the reformulation of social relations, which suspended my ability to unconsciously make demands of my friends; the failure of new relationships that did not allow me back into the ghetto so quickly; and a heightened instability through homelessness. Beyond this, my choice to accept rather than flee this world – manifesting in a non-rhetorical use of technology – left only vigilance, and it was perseverance that led me to persuasion: a life no longer bad.

Glossary

Zone A nihilistic between-space commonly set between the city centre and countryside as a suburb. The critical deconstruction of historical, theoretical and physical ‘centres,’ accelerated by transport and communication technologies, has allowed the Zone to expand. The Zone is characterised by *lack* of old, central authority and aura:¹⁴² constantly reattempting and failing to find it again. In this essay, I treat the Zone as an original space that exists until a method is found to overcome it.

Associated with: fantasy, weariness, irony, hypocrisy, hopelessness, self-awareness

Ghetto As a reaction to the Zone, the ghetto re-establishes walls, boundaries and rules to create a new inhabitable ‘centre’ and hold back the Zone’s agony at its periphery. This is achieved through collusion and violence.

Associated with: censorship, violence, distinctions, dismissal, deceit, domination

Box In this essay, the box is a bounded space like a **Ghetto**. However, the box is presented in reverse: it responds to the lack and insecurity of life by trapping these unknowns out of sight or somewhere beyond approach. This is achieved through collusion and violence.

¹⁴² Lyotard, 1999

Surface	The world on the outside of a box, experienced as Walls when questioned. Ghettos are surfaces, as is the Zone beneath them
Rhetoric	If life is originally bad and characterised by lack, ‘rhetoric’ refers to all attempts to disguise this lack, avoid it, or generally treat life as something other than it is without addressing its lack. <i>Associated with: deception, fantasy, unconsciousness, desiring, false-security, ease</i>
Persuasion	A state of self-possession that transcends life’s lack. <i>Associated with: vigilance, acceptance, non-desiring, witness</i>
Absolute	Part of rhetoric: I use ‘the absolute’ as Carlo Michelstaedter does: an impossible non-existent space corresponding to the desire to <i>live</i> but not <i>live this life</i> . ¹⁴³ <i>Associated with: alienation, abstraction, ‘mind,’ voyeurism</i>
Objective	Part of rhetoric: an infinite distance from the absolute, the objective (and knowledge) would be a world without us that we could experience in absolute safety. It is the other side of the screen.
Persona	A person’s reality, orientation within and understanding of this reality. Mistaken as sufficient and permanent in rhetoric, but can be recognised as insufficient. Different articulations are discussed in the text.

¹⁴³ Michelstaedter, 2004

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