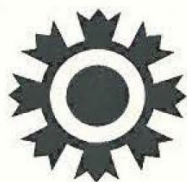


LISA ROBERTSON
NILLING

PROSE ESSAYS

ON NOISE, PORNOGRAPHY,
THE CODEX, MELANCHOLY,
LUCRETIUS, FOLDS, CITIES
AND RELATED APORIAS



BOOKTHUG

MMXII

Form means we keep changing our minds, at every velocity, due to life;
poetry is that fact's lucidity.

- Stacy Doris, *Knot*

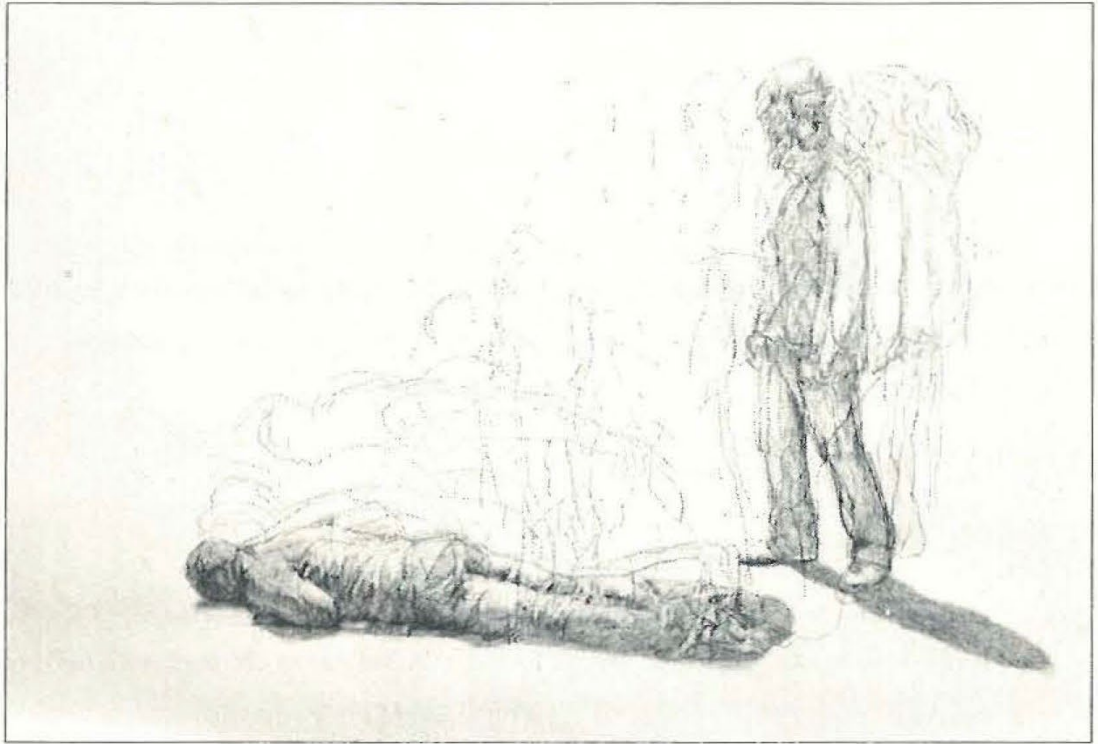


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Time in the Codex

The problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity. It is not only because the fold affects all materials that it thus becomes expressive matter, with different scales, speeds, and different vectors (mountains and waters, papers, fabrics, living tissues, the brain), but especially because it determines and materializes Form. It produces a form of expression, a *Gestaltung*, the genetic element or infinite line of inflection, the curve with a unique variable.

– Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*

1 I open the codex; with a skirty murmur, commodiousness arrives. It figures¹ in a sequence that addresses me as its potential. And so I like to

1 Erich Auerbach, in his 1938 essay "Figura," traces a history of this word. Etymologically, it is related to the same Latin stem that connotes "plastic form," and it is important for the long story of *figura* as a concept, that the word, as he says, points to "the notion of new manifestation, the *changing* aspect, of the permanent" (my emphasis). In Lucretius, Auerbach saw the transposition, in *figura's* general precept of "outward shape," towards a non-visual traversing, such as the movement from the plastic to the auditory, or the ideational transition from model to copy, or the relation between things and their sometimes invisible simulacra or ghosts. This supple transference embodied by a figure, which is also a simultaneity, gives occasion to the desire to interpret. I'll propose that the codex is a figure for the material history of thinking. And the particular liveliness, the gesture, the codex brings to thinking is the turn, or the fold – the inflection whose agency never does complete itself.

Auerbach describes the different tasks carried out by a symbol and a figure: Where the signifying matter of the symbol typically completes a static idea of nature in a corresponding object – a flower, say, or a planet – by fulfilling nature's identity in this object, in a manner magical or mythic, the figure tends towards a shaping or a human crafting that includes temporal change. The figural faces a not entirely determined field of meaning. "The object itself overflows its frame in order to enter into a cycle or series," as Deleuze writes. The figural shape is already social, already part of a willed production of meaning. What makes an object figurative, besides this productive origin, is its capacity to overflow intention. The figure's agency is its historicity – it finds its dynamics in the inherent incompleteness of history. As Auerbach proposes, "what actually makes the two forms [figure and symbol] completely different is that figural prophecy relates to an interpretation of history – indeed it is by nature a textual interpretation – while the symbol is a direct interpretation of life and originally no doubt for the most part, of nature." Interpretive incompleteness is the figure's access to potential change. Or in other terms, an object or an image figures when it receives more of our imaginative projection than its social or mythic function would require. This margin of excess (an excess of potential interpretability inherent to a shapeliness) can be differently inflected through time. Conceptual and historical fluctuation exceeds the bounded or perceptible limits of a thing. At any time, a book may receive its reader differently. The figure's ambivalent stance *vis à vis* signification grants it the potent capacity of dissimulation, whether persuasive or ludic. The opacity, the inconspicuousness of its folds permit the interpretive differential.

face this device. Its structural modesty and discretion conceal a formally generous aptitude for proliferation, complexity and differentiation.

- 2 Mostly I seek the promiscuous feeling of being alive. Across a topography of tonalities, the codex amplifies an access. Within its discrete shelter, I move freely among new sensation.
- 3 By *commodious* I mean: This object furnishes hospitable conditions for entering and tarrying; it shelters without fastening; it conditions without determining. With a minimal gesture the commodious form shows us complexity's amplitude.
- 4 I submit to ink. I go into the elsewhere of chiaroscuro. The lack of transparency, the elaboration of shadow as a medium, makes the codex a soft bomb of potential. The sociality of reading does not always or only pertain to the present; it implicates the multi-temporal generosity of politics. Within this folded time, the person and an impersonal speech test and inflect and mix into one another. The book's darkly confected scene is a speculative, temporally striated polis.

Figura was also appropriated by architects into the technical description of potential space. Auerbach makes a further distinction in his conceptual history of this word by stressing *figura*'s material plasticity (as distinct from its potential for interpretive dissimulation among the poets and rhetoricians) in Vitruvius' texts: "*figura* is architectural and plastic form, or in any case the reproduction of such form, the architect's plan; here there is no trace of deception or transformation; in his language *figurata similitudine* does not mean 'by dissimulation,' but 'by creating a likeness.' Often *figura* means 'ground plan' (*modice picta operis futuri figura*, slightly tinted, a plan of the future work), and *universae figurae species*, or *summa figuratio*, signifies the general form of a building or a man (he often compares the two from the standpoint of symmetry). Despite his occasional mathematical use of the word, *figura* (as well as *ingere*) has a definitely plastic significance for him and for other technical writers of the period...."

This plasticity – this propensity of the figure to actively fold within itself an agency, an inflection that modulates perception – is the trait that permits the ongoing activity of the figure in time.

- 5 Chiaroscuro is also the technique of the uncanny. I am etched with unknowing as I continue. I have crossed into a material reserve that permits a maximum of intuition, the “as if” of a speculative thinking, which is outside of knowledge. Reading shows the wrongness of the habitual reification of “the social” and “the personal” in a binary system of values. It submits this binary to a ruinous foundering. And so, an erotics.
- 6 Multiplying, dividing and interchanging, the uncanny opens up the indeterminacy of identity. It provides an affective convention for the shadowed interchange among strangers, a relation that is not constrained to a unified time.
- 7 The inchoate state I crave dissolves and reshapes itself in the codex; reading feels like a discontinuous yet infinite rhythmic dispersal that generates singularities. It isn’t knowledge at all. It’s a timely dallying and surge among a cluster of minute identifications. I prefer to become foreign and unknowable to myself in accordance with reading’s audacity.
- 8 It is the most commodious sensation I can imagine, this being lost. I don’t want to leave this charitable structure that permits my detailed dissipation. Its excess of surface is available only ever in measured increments. I might define thinking this way: The partial access, in a sequence, to an infinite and inconspicuous surface complexity which is not my own.²

2 When constructing a description of thinking in *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt asks *where* it is that we go when we think, rather than asking what thinking *is* – the customary philosophical inquiry. She shifts the emphasis of the ancient question from ontological query to spatial trajectory. For Arendt, thinking resembles tracking, a kind of place “beaten by the activity of thought,” which turns to ploddingly follow a course towards a pause. It is “the small, inconspicuous track of non-time ... beaten between an infinite past and an infinite future by accepting past and future as directed, aimed, as it were, at themselves – as *their* predecessors and successors, *their* past and *their* future – thus establishing a present for themselves,” a space that is neither inherited

- 9 The substitution of personae for self, of a series for an origin, of a rhythm for a state: Here is love's tension, love's politics. Here is form. The reader loves without knowing. I read *for* the book, simply because the book is there to be read. Sometimes my fidelity is for materiality.
- 10 I inhabit its joinery. Because of the orderly continuity of structural traits, the architectural metaphor is easily assumed. But what the book subtracts from architecture is the originating connotation of the *arche*. Here origins must be differentiated from beginnings, and from historicity. Each reading begins a movement among a multiple and open series, where memory is impersonal. The tectonics of the book frame chance and its twisting trajectories, not an origin.³ A reader is a beginner.

nor received from tradition, but which is made from what is touched in passing: "the ruin of historical and biographical time." In this argument thinking acquires a direction only when situated, and it is the modest, even ruined, situatedness of an invisibility, an inconspicuousness, the necessary (and resistant) turning away of the thinking body from appearing. I can recognize my own activities in this ruinous turning.

To follow Arendt's description inflects thinking with a utopian ungroundedness. It feels true to me to claim a utopian status for thought. But such a claim can also seem to obfuscate the historical contingency of the thinker's milieu – after all, this activity is conditioned by historical pressures and protocols, the failures, delights and movements of materials and social and economic relationships. But thinking also veers freely. Both. The unresolved, often frictive, relationship between conditioning environments and the desiring mind is itself thinking's energetic resource.

- 3 If we can speak of the architecture of the book, it is because the book with its folds infinitely figures: Its conceptual plasticity plays forth an engendering within a lineage. But whatever conceptual, figurative connotations we read into the book are contingent on a material history: The history of the transformation of a support – wood and wax tablet, papyrus, parchment, paper; an alphabetical or diagrammatic inscribing – manual, mechanical or electronic; a structuring – wound scroll to unfurl on ivory wand, folded sheets, sewn signatures bound with boards, a digital space with its numerical architecture.... Also this material and technical transformation of the object is aligned with the history of the book's institutional frames – ritual, spiritual, ecclesiastical, secular or aesthetic – in their various combinations. But this material figuration, this semantic

- 11 I read garbage, chance and accident. I can't fix what materiality is. Reading, I enter a relational contract with *whatever* material, accepting its fluency and swerve. I happen to be the one reading.
- 12 I can't fix what materiality is. I act into happenstance. A codex accompanies what is otherwise an interpretive surplus suffered or enjoyed in my body. With this complicity arrives a world, and timeliness: form.
- 13 I read to sense the doubling of time: The time of the book's form, which pertains to the enclosure and topology of rooms, allegories, houses, bodies, surfaces; and the time of my perceiving, which feels directional, melodic, lyric, inflectional. Then, because of the book's time overlaying my own, reading opens a proposition. It receives in me the rhythm I didn't know I missed.
- 14 I face something delicate and fragile that could span a great distance and then it closes. One time cancels the other, exercises its authority upon the other. I am suspended between form and perception, inflected with an outside temporality. Attention becomes impersonal.
- 15 I'll be lost then, if reading is dark. In the forest, in the hotel or wherever.
- 16 In heavy and worthy houses, I feel a violent dismay. It gets harder and harder to be female in one's life in such a house. What has commodiousness become? I abandon the house for the forbidden book.
- 17 Something can change. The dispersed rhythm of a wandering – musical and conceptual – is what its folds conduct. Rhythm is a figured, embodied improvisation, not a measure.

plenitude – book as nature, memory, Rome, God, word, history, church, love – finds its inconspicuous site only in relation to the embodied mentalities of its readers.

- 18 In the pleasant displacement of identity, another time keeps shaping what I will be. This banal and minimal object plays me, plays what living in thinking might be, given luck and commodiousness. Time's just luck.
- 19 The codex acts out an inaccessibility, the failure of transparency, and it figures this inaccessibility not only as a generative aesthetics, but also as the motive agency of perception, where perception disperses identity in a movement towards unknowing. I want to notice and memorize the non-semiotic meanings the codex inaugurates in my body.
- 20 Reading in the dark: Here is the acutely sought ruin of identity. Reading begins in me an elaborate abandonment. Desire and identity are not the same. At times it feels like desire displaces, or replaces, identity. Perception retreats or rather turns towards this dark interiority that isn't my own.⁴ The codex continuously transforms desire and this has become a life.
- 21 I feel astonished that any institution could have placed such an object in my hands, then left me alone with it. Reading misuses privileges, abuses authorities, demands interference. Its commodity is political, not economic; it insists on the distinction between economics and politics. The dimension of thinking articulates itself only in political time. In order to continue, reading resists. I witness the displacement of the political into the codex.

4 In his discussion of the material history of textuality, in *In the Vineyard of the Text*, the medievalist Ivan Illich describes the 12th-century reader's relation to the codex in the developing practice of silent reading. Here, the newly private readerly experience is expressed as an interior pilgrimage finding its spiritual and conceptual field within the folds of the codex. Such a figurative movement mirrored the pilgrimages then unfolding across the European continent, whether to Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela, or Rome, or to the new northern cathedrals. That the spiritual journey, with its physical hardships and teleology could transfer itself to the intimacy of the book as a space inflected by all the potentiality of such a struggle, suggests the degree to which the codex had instituted itself within the spatial imaginary of the era.

- 22 Encouraged by such material conviviality, thinking's rhythm paradoxically opens: It undoes itself from identity, there having been little habits or measures binding them. The potential relationships between identities and desires loosen and multiply. The undoing poses an extraordinary and pleasing relief. Fear is not absent either.
- 23 Perhaps the effect of inwardness of the codex inheres as a serial multiplication of access and surface, rather than as a correlative to the trope of psychological depth. Time is in the codex as simultaneity. When we think, we go into a confected time.
- 24 With minimal gestures, the time of my sensing is repeatedly annexed, confounded by the codex, which now lends its folds to thought. What reader emerges from her study simplified? She has exchanged the propriety of an assigned identity for these charitably promiscuous folds.
- 25 Sensual perception, and hence cognition, is supplemented, not compromised, by indetermination. Although the book is a screen for certain intentions – institutional, authorial and readerly – intention can't be contained or enforced. Thinking's impersonality moves across the shadowed commons of the codex to be politicized by chance, where chance is a stranger.
- 26 Thus the interdiction against reading – it was Rousseau who said that any girl who reads is already a lost girl. The codex has lent her its secrecy. She will read in spite of any law.
- 27 As the girl leans into chiaroscuro, commodiousness⁵ unpleats itself in

5 The trope of the readerly pilgrimage further complicates itself in the 18th-century secular humanist practice of the Grand Tour, where the journey to Rome can be mirrored, supplemented or substituted by the private perusal of bound print albums such as

the interstices of her gestural history and in the time of reading, which becomes a rhythmic infinity. She embodies an unknowable politics by deepening the shadows in places, tarrying with the anarchy of impersonal memory. Her autonomy undoes itself and disperses into a devotedly plural materiality. Her identifications are small revolutions and also the potent failures of revolutions. She is free to not appear.

those of Piranesi. Where the 12th-century reader is on a road towards spiritual light, knowledge of the divine as embodied in the book and the word, the young man on his Grand Tour moves towards shadow, ruins. The self has become not what is lit by divine truth, but what garners an obscurity in the partiality and ambivalence of origins, which are always perceived as lost, broken, in ruin. In Piranesi's albums, the Roman dark etched by the scribbling burin is the new dark of the unconscious, the new divinity.