

# Poetry and Philosophy as Handlung



# Poetry and Philosophy as Handlung:

*A Tactical Sequence*

By

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By Frederic Will

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	1
<i>An Introduction to Poetry and Philosophy as Handlung: A Tactical Sequence</i>	
Chapter Two.....	19
Poem-Things and Poem-Thing Commentaries	
Chapter Three.....	85
Thinking about Poem-Things	
Chapter Four.....	91
A Trip with Mr. Tactical	
Chapter Five.....	103
A Final Essay	



## CHAPTER ONE

### AN INTRODUCTION TO *A TACTICAL SEQUENCE*: *POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY AS HANDLUNG*

On the surface *A Tactical Sequence: Poetry and Philosophy as Handlung* is both a book of philosophical commentary and a ‘book of poems’—that is, in this case language that has been fixed, not language like you speak, but language that challenges itself to be pieces of the reality we are as we fix up that language. Thus there isn’t really a *story* in the following commentary and book of poems, which are assets of one another working toward regional short-term goals, mining what in them seems to belong to the presence and goodness of the moment. On the other hand, there isn’t, like, *no-story* here, isn’t like an arbitrary juxtaposition of letters and sounds—the kind of absence of language jell that in fact off and on provides the world-base for the character of a guy like Tactical—you’ll be meeting him. There is, rather, the story of a non-story which finds a ready-made characterization, if it is lucky, in what yours truly heard the novelist Philip Roth say the other day about how he constructed a novel, one sentence after another, so that he would say each new sentence is a revelation. More or less the case in the following text. Each line of *A Tactical Sequence* *requests* the line that follows it. (In a more hidden sense, the line that follows also requests the line that precedes it. In that sense, if we follow the argument to its limits, the end of the novel or poem is already its beginning, and defines the whole preceding work, starting with its conclusion.) It is those ‘requests’ of course—and not the reversal of sequence creation—that make this writer get all fussy. (I like the reversal of sequence which, parsed down to its grammatical level, replicates the model of a cosmology which places God at both the beginning and the end of time: Kazantzakis; Samuel Alexander, in *Space, Time, and Deity*.) ‘Requests’ is not quite the right word, and it certainly doesn’t fit the case of novel construction that Roth is talking about. It’s, like, *too* fussy for Roth’s instance. You’re not, like, making a request in a novel, when you put one line right up to the next—you’re *authorizing* the next line, either the line before or the line following. Sound better? Doesn’t that kind of account spare you the need to talk about revelations,

while hanging on to the drift of that talk, that talk's wishing to be about how the parts of a sentence yearn for one another? *Yearning* truly suggests the *passion* the writer conducts within himself, a staging ground for the drama in language. *A Tactical Sequence* is a series of doing-its in which there is significant complicity between sentences, but plenty of dissonance to slip in the spices that define the peculiar aroma of the era, the smell of the world the poem or fiction is about. For that reason, that *A Tactical Sequence* is according space for time and place to herald themselves, for the temporal feel, history on its feet, to be prominent in a text like the present—all that is required in the transcurrence of a text's language is to be open and not prejudiced, even the immediate future.

The notion of the tactical has beleaguered the author since first he let the following disquisition take his place. Language like this about the tactical wants to replace the language of the imagination. What is imagination in language—*Biographia Literaria*, guys!—except intentionality, stories from feeling, proclamations from the Lake District, and hints at the ways Pope doesn't address the contours of being-here, while Wordsworth does, sinuously placing the lines of the Preface at points from which growth simply speaks for itself. (And it is true, if you go back into your English Lit anthologies, that Pope feels like he's carrying out exercises, wonderfully, teaching himself how to follow his rules, rather than speaking, or being, along the contours of the heart. The values of Pope's sensibility in language structures don't seduce or even induce the author.) The poem-things in *A Tactical Sequence* want to jettison Pope's kind of intentionality. That's the point, to jettison, and to do so in the crawlspaces where the kinds of request or according, just described above, become ongoing segues, as *laissez-faire* as the breeze in the garden, yet at the same time, once having been their according, become that than which they could have been nothing else. The language marshalled, in this kind of verbal behavior, is not imaginative but sequential, part of an extended mechanical rogation.

What, then, will be sayable for making poem-things like the ones that will follow in this book? Where will what they are intersect with the kinds of yearning around which they are constructed? In an earlier book I wrote about what I called 'being-here,' and I did so inside an effort to achieve a deadly serious insouciance. I think that was what I wanted to do with—or in? or about?—myself. I know there was an ethic flickering there—long overdue in a personal life privileging the aesthetic, as though portals were not leading on all sides from the aesthetic into the ethical—and that from the time of *Being Here* (2012) I started to learn how much was at stake in making good choices even where chance reigned and you devised the ground rules as you went along. (As you do in making a poem.) Little poem-



things were places where both choice and chance deployed themselves. The notion of practice became operative at places like those poem-things. And it was practice of a kind I could understand. I had always been hypnotized by minutiae—the particular lay of a slope of land, the gravitas of a chipmunk occupying its regal post at the top of a drain pipe, the kinds of precisely different difficulty our front door had in locking, under different weather conditions. Little intersections kept catching my attention. It was as if the surrounding world were claiming me with a waggly finger, saying over here, over here, over here where the tool shed meets the alley, and opens from itself a vista cross hatched with shadow.

In other words, the messing around with the inter-textures of sequence in life—both aesthetic and moral—seemed to pair with the intricacies of how sentences succeed—or is speak to—one another. Was the consideration of such sequences not also a model for thinking out the textures of ethical sequence? Let's say I have a behavioral choice to make. It's everyday. We have a hackberry tree in our back yard. The tree is on our property line. Our neighbors are afraid that the tree, which has a fissure in it, may split in half, one half falling onto the roof of their house. They want us to share with them the cost either of cutting down the tree or of trimming off the section that lies in the direction of their roof. Let's simplify and reduce my own response: I have lived with this tree for thirty years, a vision of growth and now shapeliness out my kitchen window, and I cannot bring my machinery of calculation down to the level of making distinctions between two competing ways of bringing death to this tree. Let's just say and repeat that I (and my neighbors) have a behavioral choice to make. To cut down or not to cut down. There are pusher factors in every direction: if I refuse any modification to the tree, and in a storm it lands on John's roof, I will, at the least, be responsible for the repair job; if I yield to having the tree removed, and the source of contention banished, I risk abandoning a beautiful tree I own, and letting it be sliced down before my eyes, as a meaningful part of my own history. (How could we ever quantify the subfactors built into that *one*?) The decision asking itself from me, in the present instance, will have to assume the form of a result, like a result of calculation, although the calculation in question may already have been anticipated by some instant trial runs in thought. Is not the dilemma of choice, confronting this tree-owner, related to those confronting the maker of, say, a tactical-poetic sequence in which one thought unit requests its sequence, and vice versa, though after a choice has been made there will seem to have been no choice? After completing the first five lines of the first poem below, one hits a period after 'bush'; and maybe what we can say about that bush will illustrate the relevance of aesthetic to moral intersections.

1  
 I know you, old gum,  
 Finger stickers  
 I glue here, world bound

Untape my sweater  
 From the red bush.  
 I'm a guy in here.

Huge dwarf fight-ready.  
 Rope-twisted, tongue-tied,  
 Thickened to glue.

Harden me.  
 Pour me.  
 I'll adapt shapes with fist.

Just don't drool  
 Over my doll.  
 She's pert, fluent.

We stick together.  
 Her, me, the friar.  
 Oremus, mud canticle,

Stray clouds.  
 Window, fair window,  
 Channel, please, prospects!

The sentence preceding the 'bush' period has laid out the materials through which the prosecutor of the whole argument—the poem, the decision—will have had to have advanced, in preparing (or becoming) itself stage by stage. That laying out of materials will have highlighted diverse senses of stuckness, stickiness, cognizance; a mood and sense bolus will have been established, from within which only certain strains of continuation can derive—continuations about the gym, in here, and what makes him both tick and be free—each importing with it its own credentials for some overarching construction, which at this point of choice is purely imaginary. I am at such a point of divergence and choice in my deciding about the backyard tree, and I will only move to a tree-cutting decision through a maneuvering with factors in the preceding being-sentences without

excluding the future. I will, in other words, perforce act out both as a poet of the moral and as a dealer in the ethical of the poem of life. In both poem and life there will be a juncture, a choice, and a continuation.

The ethical of the poem, then, will be its dimension of desiring choices, choices of itself as continuation. The notion of *tactical* will assert itself, here, in the implication of arraying—*tasso*, in Greek, *to organize*, to arrange as in a military battalion—arraying of the futures of a statement, as in the work mind does in chess, where (to pick yet another formula for the kind of scrupled advanced motion the poem is) as comprehensive as possible a survey of eventualities takes place. Will the poem-thing as we work it out below—please take a look again at the first example, ‘I know you, old gum...’—end up as an ethical statement, given what we said above, about choice in language and in decisions about tree-cutting? The first sentence is reprobatory; it uses the ‘I know you’ which can boil down to ‘o you’re the one,’ and which in this case fits with the imputation of being ‘sticky-fingered, a crook stealing me,’ and with the irritable assertion that that crook is constricting me, binding me stickily to the world. (‘I’m a guy in here,’ adds the narrator, anxious to justify his reprobatory tone.) Further pried from its colloquial offhand, that sentence develops with which the poem opens onto a frankly ethical proposition: world-stickiness is impeding, yucky, *against the grain*. The remainder of this first poem-thing rings changes on the threats of world-stickiness, while opening windows onto the implications that ‘window, fair window’ is where the ‘prospects’ are. This poem-thing is an ethical riff on the dangers and beauties of the ‘mud canticle’; the slogged humus of stifled cries.

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How do you read a book of stuff like the following selection of poem-things, which sets before it considerations of the sort outlined above, considerations both minute and situation-tailored? You cannot read it the way you might read *a book of poems*. This is not a *book of poems*. A book of poems does not typically devote its attention to talking about what it is or how it’s put together. A book of poems does what it is, aligning one after another the arrangements of tended lines and supervised pitches that make up the format we call *the poem*. An edited book of poems is one in which the author and his friends track wavelengths of narrative valence and trend, and work in terms of constructing your understanding, as Blake does in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, where he creates his own work-region for syntheses. The following is a book of *poem-things* which does all it can to *remove* song, canto, and uplift from its textures while striving to ‘deserve

attention,' to establish sequence. To do so, the poem-things tolerate much inner conversation about themselves, and sponsor any amount of personal muttering—the author as philosopher—designed to milk or employ the original text—and to do more; to establish around and outside the aligned poem-things themselves a structure of commentary inherent to the original markings. And *what kind of thing* is this selection of poem-things with their commentaria waywardly reaching to document the time, place, and genre of the poem-things? We are building a house of doctrines, a ply of thought and feeling worlds with affiliations at every point in the empire called scholarship. Why should the author *write* these poem-things? In order that he will have something to write about, as though the poem-things were pretexts, and then, he imagines, as though those pretexts were themselves pretexts for a wider and more aerated populace of perceptions? Why does the author hope, in this widening process, to be doing all he can to free himself from enlisting this final volume, of *Inside Freedom and History*, under a genre column? A column which by its mere existence seems to imply more pre-definition than the present operation in language can tolerate?

The author acknowledges, for sure, that he is no poet, no prose writer, no anything but one who has senses of how to step in, through and beyond poem-things, into places where what we might want to say about our deaths becomes apropos. He feels he is able to establish states of awareness, and then to pretend-act in terms of them. Is it then crazy to introduce death into a text about knowledge and scholarly creativity? Not sure. Scholarship and death are both about limits. Each is a marker limiting the field of intelligibility and grace. Each is the byproduct of some Faustian launch none of us is unconscious of. Death vaunts, for sure. It says *I put a stop to intelligibility; I seal the lid of the box*. Is intelligibility convinced? The soul, in the old days, was our way of saying we are *not* convinced. *It was our way of saying there is no box and no lid, and that we run straight into death and beyond through knowing*. It—*soul*—was the term we raised as a banner, held high as we walked through the dark portals, however many times we needed to. We are less sure, now, of how to use this old word *soul*. We do still realize, however, that to be known is to be in some way superseded, and thus that practice in death, which acquaints us with the wiles of the denier, is practice in passing to the increasingly intelligible. Plato has to have meant something like this, this being superseded by the intelligible, with his concept of *nous*, mind, which is the principle of intelligibility we *live in*. That was a preceding principle of the present text, there before the formulae we later assemble to explain the text.. One has to imagine, on the sill of the launched intelligibility of Plato's universe, something like that

charonic battle, that battle with death, of which oral tradition glows across the globe. (For the Maniote Greek it was the text of ‘ton haro ton antamosa,’ the fiercest of salutes; for Bergman it was *The Seventh Seal*, death as the wounded garment of retribution, challenged by beauty and art).

An open text, then, will follow here, one which proposes to itself the simple goal of widening, in the way that life, widening, proposes to itself the goal of being equal to what it is. Our ten-volume book-ends, *Freedom* and *History*, are the parameters of what keeps discovering us, as we let it. (Believe me I know; each of us has his/her way of being discovered by the book writing us. I stick with the froggy example that fate has made of me.) Free we are, then, to go to the limits of the intelligible—and beyond—yet to do so inside temporality, history. And language? The vehicle on which we ride into the whirlwind of personal destiny? Is it we who accord language its special privilege of naming us, of being security for our investment in it? Or is it accorded to us, as are other works of the breath, that we may be its consciousness? Full of hot air is too often the description life gives us in our condition, but full as the air, *you boundless and meaningful*, we should try to be. And that, thinks Tactical, whom you will soon know, once more freshly, is just where what we want to call scholarship enters. He knows he has been there, is there now. He is himself a scholar, a street-corner Faust if you like, for whom no riddle seems closer than the bewildering relation of knowing to salvation. We die where we are, equalized to what we know. Will my postmortem meet me at the point where what I know and understand is what I am? Will ignorance not underserve me, when it comes to squeezing through the pearly gates?

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The aesthetic exists as more than the aesthetic, the experience of beauty as more than the pleasure in organization, synchrony, and the rubbing of words against things. Poem-things are doing things and impact others, as well as oneself. Imagination, with its sleeves rolled up, can regulate relations among people and states. Right on, Shelley. Poets *are* the unacknowledged legislators of the world! To see this we may need to understand the legislation with a slant. The poetic seeps through the social fabric, tinges itself to the normative. *Alles vergaengliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*, says Goethe, figuring out, for us, just how evanescent is the world-whole we affirm. Well, things move things before them and we are all poets by virtue of being here, all moving things.

The thing is, though, that in this potent outreach of directed tactility, we are always also still close to the Neolithic *handlung*, this object here,

this there, this dealing with those two objects. (The Neolithic man is a realist, makes as few speculative jumps as possible, never thinks back from the future to the present.) We are of course always reaching beyond the neolith, but doing it in our way, playing chess, projecting into where this will go, then that, but usually doing so without long-term insight into the upcoming moves of ourselves and our partners. That's because we too lived ourselves, long ago, as simple *nisus*, the establishers of this then that. We just did that with ourselves, as Stone Age guy and gal. We all live, from inside, over that layered relation to ourselves as history. Sequence with its implications was, in ourselves as a yielding to our Neolithic, always also the praxis of weaving this shawl or collecting that basket of twigs. Not that the *nisus* did not cover, even from the start but under the shawl of the daily, a shudder at the whole, an intuition of the *figurae* behind the thunder, a sense that the present contained an awesome all, but that we were forever short on organization and anticipation. It's just that many moves, internal to our simple striving, have through the centuries played into the exercise of far-sightedness. Here's the kind of picture of ourselves we were creating.

We learned to count on the annual flooding of the Nile or to design useful song line geographies for ourselves, on the floor of the Australian Outback. We learned that this plant or that would stop urinary infections, or promote sexual desire. Useful things hooked onto our memories and onto our anticipations. They configured the value of sequence, and among the expressions of that value they—the memories and the *handlung*—people who were disposed to figure out how to use them—began to treasure patterns like art. They were finding their ways to places in which the sequences of art could merge with the sequences of behavior and effective husbandry in the widest sense. The practical aesthetic was on its way to merging with more than the aesthetic, with what, when we came down to thinking about good and effective choices, began to look like the ethical.

Tactical sequences, of which we have below written out fingery-touchy examples, our poem-things, are steps toward value, even toward goodness. In everyday life we forever interrogate value and choice with minute steps forward. I did just that this morning in the kitchen. I went to the silverware drawer and organized it. What was that? Organized? It was real down-to-earth *handlung*. I had noticed, recently, that in my early morning wake-up moves, in the kitchen, I tend both to leave some granulated coffee flecks on the spoon I use, and to put the dried flecks into my cup. This carelessness—or habit-shaped valence of doing—is always subject to revision. I knew, as I made this little mistake, that it was a little mistake. That was enough, that knowing. I decided to rinse off the coffee flecks. I did so, then for good

measure put the spoon in the dishwasher for a water cleaning. That was overkill, which was a way of opening a small portal into a habit-change.

I have another illustrative habit which is bad and small in the kitchen in the morning. I nearly finish my first cup of coffee, then leave it on the granite sink, where my wife or I are likely to knock it over and spill the contents. This carelessness too is changeable. Is it not like the Neolithic *handlung that needs correcting, that is there to overcome*, a minute participant in the fall? And is not the guiding energy of my summer in prospect something similar? My intention—that word intention is all about *handlung*—is to straighten my papers, throw out books that are clutter, arrange books on shelves in some ‘rational manner,’ put all financial papers in order. I recount these projects, calling them to order one by one. (Memory and will join in that enterprise. I remember successful forays into organization; and that memory is itself compact with the action it will not permit to retard it.) I have already completed the *handlung*, in mind, and it will be easier to complete it in deed, after I have completed it in mind. (Remember the trick of learning to score baskets through virtual training, watching Michael Jordan from the stands? Training the mind to swoosh in the basket? Is not learning to read literature, and to follow the curve of another’s imagination, a kind of learning basket shooting from the sidelines?) What I will have completed will be acts with and against things, and mutually reinforcing forms of shaping work in time. The aesthetic and the moral will be collaborating in this action. They will be modest co-workers.

This is not to speak of the high moral, the mysterious will of the prophet Elijah, to further the act of generation, or of the courage of Abraham faced with the demand to sacrifice his son. This is to speak of the basic moral, the quest for doing essential daily things well enough, so that the mark they have left lasts, and it is this kind of regional frontier pushing, locally consequential, but unknown in the larger buzz-feed that underlies the doing of things well in the aesthetic sphere. We do not want to claim too much for this kind of local doing-it-well. Does the care for making the pot as attractive as you can include other kinds of responsibility, and if so, to whom? Arguably, the pot-maker knows something from the inside, here, which is also the secret of the *poème bien fait*, or of the revivifying wholism of a Clive Bell or Roger Fry, as they take their stands for the good and beautiful in an ending nineteenth century that was itself sensitized to the down-to-earth demands of art. What that pot-maker knows, and knew already at Mohenjo Daro, is that the art thing does not emerge from nothing into a vacuum, but establishes claims, on all sides of itself, which the art-user’s service implicates and renders ever more dependently complex. In

this emerging condition, which resembles the self-implicating gestures of the process of organic evolution, end production strategies justify themselves—in an age, perhaps, where the polish Pope sought in an elite *ars poetica* has given way to Gertrude Stein's *Why We Write or No More Masterpieces*—local goals are continually forming, and local responsibilities settling onto the goal-makers, whose intention, with poets, is non-stop movement into form.

Do we surmise, ahead of this graph of intentions, aesthetic conditions under which the social can be envisaged? Is the artist socially responsible, in whatever form he or she chooses to display himself to the people? We are leaning to a yes which will sidestep the more muscular versions of art-society accounts to which we have become familiar in the past few centuries of increasing social self-consciousness. Sir Francis Bacon, Winckelmann, Herder, Mallarmé, Roger Fry: all these thinkers, but all of them obliquely, worked around the notion that significant art is socially significant. Tolstoy and Lenin work the same significance in questions already deeply into the texture of social existence, while the ardent instructor of art education in a public school in the Bronx works his or her butt off to make the life-importance of art evident to people whose lives unnecessary ignorance threatens to abort. These illustrious examples we sidestep, because we go here for an implicit ethic, in the aesthetic, which is only caricatured by underlining the differences between the moral and the aesthetic while seeking for their common energy. We try thus to insulate ourselves from the toxic arguments associated with the historical bad behavior of the artist, who would so often seem to have exemplified the conclusion that art of value springs from sources far from the moral imagination.

If it is not too too Bloomsbury, the author would like permission to remember, here, an exhibit which opened his eyes, one afternoon in an art gallery at Yale. It was an exhibit of Japanese belt buckles, *netsuke*, treasures of the Imperial Court. The work was exquisite, gilded, fine, landmarked each by inner references to styles of previous workers in the same craft, spirits hovering inside the workman's consciousness, no doubt, with every decisional weld or incision he undertook. One sees this and thinks toward all those examples of pre-industrial craft which his small life has crowded: in the desert near Monterrey, in Northern Mexico, a small factory of weavers working on hand looms, and turning out brilliant striped-wool ponchos, for active consumption—one warms my lap this October morning—or essentially the same weavers, in Aizawl, India, or in the Greek Peloponnesus, where essentially the same seems to mean, built from the same sense of the tactile for us, that very sense, by the way, that the author of the present has tried to make into the making things of a tactile sequence.



One's mind can go anthropological, yes, or can simply wake from the couch and recommence that *parcours* of his own domain, from which examples almost too daily to have been noticed suddenly seem to abound.

As often the case, the closest to home examples are the most telling. The house I live in was built in 1914, among a line of (at that time) fairly similar homes in the leafiest and stillest part of this distantly Victorian Midwest American village. (The architectural style is Painted Ladies, reference to the pastel gaudiness of these surprising one time farm houses.) The model is two stories, four to five bedrooms, front porch, visit-from-the-parson-sitting-room with pocket doors, and (in the author's case) back or widow's porch, where Madame could sit almost unseen, but still outside, after Monsieur's demise. If these fairly regularized domestic features seem signs of care and even punctilio, our painter friend Dan and our house-cognoscento Darryl can add chapters of elaboration. Dan goes up the outsides of this structure, scraping old paint, eyeballing wood structure and condition, inspecting medallions for cracking or blurring, tinkering with the interfaces between roof edge and drain pipe, and like a country doctor of yore comes up with, *just as tight as when she was built, painted lady and made with pride*. Darryl, working the basement he knows so well, for he has plumbed us out for decades, corroborates Dan's view from the summit outside. The pipes may clog, but that's for what we put in them; they're as robust, untarnished, interlocked as a nuclear sub, though they were first put in the house at the beginning of WW1 by journeymen helping to construct this community on what was then the fringes of Indian territory. One hundred and four years ago.

Is the artisan constructing our durable painted lady, and taking his time with every joist and bracket, not working the attention zone he shares with the maker of *netsuke*, or the would-be hewer of tactile sequence poems from the thin air of the brain pan? And is that attention zone not integral to acting in the political or social sphere, to the way we become our presence to our society? Voting, let's say, is an ergonomic artistic activity with a practice behind it which is as designating as a golf swing. We like to say that manual voting is an act in the mind, yet it is even more clearly an act in the hand; you mark a sheet of paper, you carry the paper to the ballot machine, you shove the paper down the slot. Watson could have written *Behaviorism* by the simple efforts to characterize the fundamentals of our being-here; we are prone to minimize a certain priority of the physical to the enactment of the mental, so that many of our commitments are mischaracterized, quickly attributed to categories of mind-commitment, such as desire, hope, or intention, when in fact they are ergonomic moves in matter. The result is

that we lose the chances to exercise, or even factor in, the tactical pragmatism of the body.

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Our examples of the aesthetic-pragmatic crossover —making *netsuke*, weaving woolen fabrics, molding a pot, tactfully interacting with an old house in order to respect its will—notably have not yet included writing. The origins of writing, in the ancient Near East, appear to be contemporary—fourth or third millennium B.C.E.—with the earliest cultures of pottery and weaving, dwelling construction, or developed attention to food preparation. Those writing origins, of course, were far more tactile than are most of our writing systems today, adapted as they are to semantic more than to scriptural purposes. We live in an era of the transparency of the written symbol. In an age when Western kids are separated from cursive—the archaic sweep of the wrist that includes a world but leaves its physical print—and even Chinese kids turn away from the classical toward *pinyin*—we find that the written symbol is being drained of all resistance, thickness, artistic density. (Nothing, we have to suppose, will ever degrade the Japanese respect for the perfectly blocked out signature, linking, we suppose, to that name-care which anchors all of us in the texture of the IDs of our human makers, ancestors.) Is it proper, then, to include writing, as in fact we will do throughout the following book—which is a book of writings there to illustrate the tactility of writing—in our catalogue of ways we stand forth sensually into our-being here? Writing thickens, draws up the thingliness of the world, as it makes its earth-parting way across that world. Is that writing the script in which we write or the mine-work excavation we are when we write? Or is it both?

As script users foremost, we exercise the practices that come to be called *writing*. The pictorial instinct drives its wedge into undefined actions of hand and arm, while at the same time the pursuit of a formative closes around the telling powers of the written and attaches them to what we become as *history*. Much of the capacity called on from us, in this historicizing process, has to do with reading, a distinctive human consumption form with marked differences from the activities the painter exercises brush in hand, the musician with her oboe, the sculptor with the marble veneer he is working. I have logged in the requisite tears, over the draining of color and life from contemporary script, but the action fields of verbal memory provoke no longings to drain. Reading is still a robust pastime full of the brouhaha of the world, if you are willing to become the density of your world-experience. What passive action better than reading distinguishes our

repertoire of learnings from the glassier end-products of breath, depiction or the visually tactile—the sculptor’s replica of a world, not the poet’s chunkier fare of life lived on the inside.

To read *A Tactile Sequence*, *on voudrait croire*, one should have to be able to expatiate, above all, as Dickens expatiates in *A Tale of Two Cities*, when he takes us to the smelly interior of Mr. Lorry’s coach, after a fog-shrouded packet ride to Dover, with three breathing souls crammed into seventy sentences. One should need to be able to chew into the uses Sophocles makes of three bitterly inter-trafficking characters in *Philoktetes*, the playground of hard memories and lost childhoods. There should be no holds barred, in the wrestling match of flagrant syntax with the energy of moving materials, the Bactrian of plodding but fiery sands outlaid across the reader’s consciousness. Accordingly, *A Tactile Sequence* fits itself out with lateral steam valves, which enable the author’s voice, when and if it seems invited, to accept the invitation to expatiate, to take the reader across the borders of the meaty into the land of ratio.

The plan would be first to present, as to make a scenario, and then to reflect on the presentation. This simple strategy of self-analysis is a way of extending language, out from within the places interior to it. It is a way of treating language as dinner, in which successive courses surpass the initial soup and fish, but only because one has already consumed the soup and fish.

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*A Tactical Sequence*, then, fancies itself a doing and telling sermon. Widening is the horizon in which language structures parse themselves. That’s where we started. We go with our words’ meanings until they accept an end institutionally prescribed for them. Could we not, though, just stop our writing arbitrarily, cut it off at any point, and say to those around us, *that thing there, that wriggling shape in language, that’s the epic I wrote with the first twenty-seven and a half years of my life? Can’t we just show and tell in the brain? Or the first seventy-two? Words are wrap around, before all, and if one bit is what I yell to my wife as I’m pissing, and the next bit is what I write to my insurance agent telling him to go to hell, they will fit together in the end both with each other, all I said, opera omnia linguistica* freed by circumstance from a voice box, and ultimately defined by a book-end birthdate and death certificate.

May we think of what we assemble for purpose in language, say the one-thing-at-a-time hewings that the present ‘poem-book’ is, that it has a special cachet in the large swimming sphere of language let free upon the earth? Private property of the spirit is what we are talking, and it knows

itself. Such property hails us from the sense we own this or that, as when we say nowadays that we want to own our statements. (To own your own words means to stand behind them.) Private property in language can bear my seal, yet be others' at the same time. The multi-sphere of human-naming properties is as extensive as the anthology of wounds or hidden pleasures by which we build ourselves as sensitive humans.

To own our language is to have made it from so close to the personal bone that only *we* can air or exercise it. No matter how closely we hold or own it then, we own it as language, as out there, and in that spirit it would be only fair to conclude this introduction with more than the sneak preview that we have to this moment given, of the *corpus delicti* lying just below us on this screen, or over there between the snugly historical covers of a book.

We have already been inside 'I know you, old gum,' when tracking the geographies that align between sentences, in particular at the point where we wanted to show the intersection between the aesthetic and the moral. It will be appropriate to conclude with another, and more comprehensive, preview of the way the following text will evolve. From the viewpoint of the borders of language, we will trace *two sets of entries*, from what will be the following units of *Tactical Sequence*. We will pry the two entries apart, with an eye to determining the places they inherit in the forthgoing body of language. (What kind of boundaries does each of the entries define itself by?) The entries in question are from section 5 (parts 5 and 5a) and from section 6 (parts 6 and 6a).

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5

I elaborated a hare.

Do you not regret forcing

Dear opposites to the new,

A meaning? Thought's remotest lair?

I said hare is far

Before, a boil on its name.

Catch me, it flies hand-

Upper inner zoom, bar-

None quicker.

While tortoise crawls.

Crawls its sense stealthily.

Race watchers snicker.

At last speed's lure  
Stings runner hare,  
Slices a can on a leg.  
Tortoises ponder, were

Losers, now prevail.  
Oleant whiffs rise.  
Victors applaud.  
Banners declare, wise snail!

5a The small rises on all sides of us. Fat mites greet my morning with disintegrative toxins. My foot is dissolving already, inside my shoe. The mere thought of decomposition filters through my breakfast sandwich, here in the columnar West, beside an antacid ad. Yield to me again, springtime? Follow me up that pine-coney wood path through the botanical gardens, fall crackly to Leal, my high? Hadn't I a day of sharing, ahead, the society of my peers and betters, a family behind me, for whom order framed the least of our actions, destitute flyers though we were through the bustling cosmos? Yet even then I could feel the dripping, wax skirting my leggings, some Pleistocene ripple through my nails. Have I not a chance, in this bicameral legend, to establish a narrative that none can attack? Can I not run straight up the hill, into that garden wilderness?

6  
If you are alone dog  
Write, fur side upside;  
The timber creaks, the pen  
Trembles. If your road

Stamped the mentioned!  
He drifts onward, his tale  
Ramified by stages. Rain  
Takes him across winter dog.

Fire all his. He's spent.  
You spent, you know,  
Fortunes in breath.  
He takes a brush, paints,

Dog, children woven together  
He plaits birdshair to...

Inside the red ship though  
He churns and it could be...

There is a winding onseam  
It regulates forests, a termination  
Come with me to the end of the station  
No toll, no tithes, remain o payment...

Figuration, tipping.  
There, he is going on spindly legs  
And mainframe darkness winds him.  
He'll stall, mind you, framing it.

6a

This is a textbook about a textbook. The poem-things are text-books, in themselves, little textures made out of sense of place, sense of things that fill a place, and—this is the ‘about a textbook’ part of it—play games adhering to the meaning surface of the original text. We pass through a vivid blend of trademarks, which ready the present text for use as pointers: plenty of dog, the SEE ME par excellence of cozy house self-displays; plenty of drifting onward, winding onseams, just plain winding, even a churning; writing, painting, figuration. Much is noted—as by these games of pointing, directed from a surface tale—and the noting is itself the text it is about.

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Five (both a and b) deal with pace, slowness—‘the small rises on all sides of us,’ ‘While tortoise crawls./Crawls its sense stealthily’—though five itself deals with the triumph of slowness—‘Banners declare/wise snail!’—while 5a deals with time slowness as downdrag and entropy, preludes to dissolution. The two ‘units,’ in each case, interact over the issue of forward motion and its restraints, almost a humanistic commentary on issues in physics, but that leaves open an essential issue, even before we reach the theme of ‘borders of language,’ which we are targeting. The essential issue is, what does it mean to say that either of these entries ‘deals with’ pace, slowness, etc.? Is that shorthand for saying that pace or slowness is a *theme* in each of these entries? Or do we intend stressing the I that does the dealing out of meaning? Philosophy basics, if we allow ourselves to take that path.

It seems that, if we can understand the idea of ‘dealing with,’ here, we will be ‘stepping toward understanding ‘boundaries of words.’ ‘Dealing’ with might best be described as ‘acting as though,’ or ‘acting on the

assumption that,' for what else than that is either 5 or 5a doing, when it generates our concern with the peculiarities of setting a pace and does so in a language of pace? Both 5 and 5a draw to a point, inside them, our interest in whether this or that takes longer or less time to 'get to a certain place.' It will be easy to say, in consequence, that each of these entries is out to generate a border at the point where its assertion of 'what it is dealing with' is completed. Boundary is going to mean point of completion. No point of completion lacks a yet wider boundary that circumscribes it, yet no boundary is less a presence than is needed to define what circumscribes it as 'what circumscribes it.'

Both 5 and 5a set themselves boundaries, completions of the breath of 'thought' on which they have moved material to a wholeness of theme. Yet thanks to their difference in how and where they move their material, their distinctive takes on the meaning of time, they ride shotgun on one another, living evaluations of one another. 6a is a textbook about 6, which is itself a textbook of ways 'he' can write, and right, himself, as he fumbles through life stages and mixture of 'fortunes in breadth' and an onseam along the course of which he continues to 'photograph the neighborhood.' 6 is a textbook about 6a, a kind of table of contents *raisonné*, which tracks the assertions of 6. 6a ends where 6 does, because 6, being its prototype, allows it to rest, its inventory completed. As with 5 and its attachment, the two phases of 6 moon each other, rise from the calendar of anticipations and subside at more or less the same instant.

And so will it go, brother and sister texts walking side by side, through the following volume of poem-things, each life-spanning it as seems mandated by the breath-life within it, each telling a tale of the other. As we will say again at the end, having consumed the pudding of proof, no completion need be justified, in a world where onseam has left its potent mark of continuity.

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The envisaged geography of language, assumed by the considerable attention, here, to endings and completions of word units, prompts at least a final introductory word on the boundaries of language. We have, up to now, been doing all we could to find limits tolerated by language, ellipses just permitted by the speech of the street. Can we think from here back to Alexandre Koyré's *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, and track the search for language boundaries along the profile of Koyré's historical thinking in that book? Quantitatively viewed, in global world use, we will doubtless agree that the meaning sound, both in speech—more

people, more talk, than ever—and in scripted form—devastating upgrade in means of written communication—has flooded our biosphere. First it was the Gutenberg Galaxy, then the Internet, and might it next be some kind of intra-planetary *sème* extension? That's for quantity of meaning signs. High-tech explorations have proven equally prolific, out into the boundaries of verbal quality. Take the language boundary formative of formal usages, to keep the issue clean-edged. The letter? When was the first English epistle written? Was it some version of Pound's 'Gongula' papyrus, ragged at the edges, made of nostalgia? And what refining process was required to bring some imagined Indo-European Gongula to the writing desk of Cicero or Mary Wortley Montagu, or Lyndon Johnson, for whom the hewn, of the letter, was *entirely* about boundaries—how to get into the piece before you, how and above all where to exit the piece, and what to segue to after the piece's final period? The genres expand and shrink with the climates and messages promoted by rises and falls of expressive need—the epic returns in the novel, *War and Peace* returns in Ken Burns' sequences on Vietnam or the Civil War, and the history of television simply as language expands into the words spoken by all the inhabitants of the globe since the beginning of human consciousness. From the boundaries proposed to itself by the Anacreontic epigram to the infinitely expanding boundaries of the logosphere we run panting beside the multiple form acts available to language, once it is placed inside the dynamo of human presence.



## CHAPTER TWO

### POEM-THINGS AND POEM-THING COMMENTARIES

1

I know you, old gum,  
Finger stickers  
I glue here, world bound.

Untape my sweater  
From the red bush.  
I'm a guy in here.

Huge dwarf fight-ready.  
Rope-twisted, tongue-tied,  
Thickened to glue.

Harden me.  
Pour me.  
I'll adapt shapes with fist.

Just don't drool  
Over my doll.  
She's pert, fluent.

We stick together.  
Her, me, the friar.  
Oremus, mud canticle,

Stray clouds.  
Window, fair window,  
Channel, please, prospects!

1a

So we're on the bottom. OK, it's muddy, we're drooling around, are we babies or just baby-doll holders? Are we neoliths crawling from Sterkfontein Cavern? Sure I'll pray with you, the mud canticle. I'll sleeve the mud from my glottis that I may blurt a great amen. And yet I know I am attached. I keep catching on things, arrested by omens. My shoe caught on a thought and you pulled it off, like a briar. My thoughts are briars. They have invisible suckers, and adhere. Did you hear me say hear? Did my voice rise so high? Did you hear the word heaven buried in a bank of clay? An ageless tune turned to glue, night-fostering, hardening?

2

A dwarf,  
 The nwi dwarfs  
 Rode into the side of the mountain.  
 Stiff resistance only made them fight harder.  
 That night they housed among flat strata, Permian,  
 Compact as they.  
 They had little room left for their dark plans.  
 In the morning light I extracted them  
 From my thick warring pail of a brain.

2a There are secrets in our knees, ankles, elbows, wherever the body runs into itself in pockets. We know that to the ancients there were gods in corners and where cracks ran along the edges of the daubing. Seeping in, gods fill where they can, charging the felt, lighting the nap, regionalizing the original burn.

After his trip to Russia he would often explode in a song, a troika of memories. Hallelujah! he would roar, from the depths of the kitchen, as he supped on elevenses and sank his eyes in scripture. In death he was with us more than in life, instructing us from the corners, causal around the thought of the knee, when the family prayed. Was he a murderer or a bewitcher, this product of what rose then hid, assaulted then charmed? The old Roman way, the campana, the idols, the set walks through the arbor at twilight, all these were the simple factors, the wax to be set. He was glowing throughout it, more alive than in the pulpit. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*? What was that he dogged them with? What was Kant when it came down to living? Can Kant remove a bottle top with his teeth?

3

If there was room for a forest  
 I had no idea where.  
 I'd removed beer cans, rotted vegetables, patches of dust,  
 In an effort to clean an adaptable entry ground,  
 And yet when it came to stuffing, or even injecting,  
 The forest into the arable land,  
 It got stuck in the entryway.  
 There I was stuffing and pulling and tugging  
 And yet branches and roots kept catching on the way down  
 And my hunger for green nature pure and cool  
 Was like wasted somewhere around my hips.  
 Was I never to become Michelangelo's *uomo perfetto*,  
 Slim proportioned limbs, stance worshipped in the copse?  
 Eventually I allowed a landfill back in.  
 Folks came by to leave their trash.  
 I gave up on the forest for the moment,  
 In grace and silence we were reduced to majesty.

3a

In the ballet of textures, which tracks the guiding ethos here, there is tireless testimony to the senses: of stickiness, compaction, slicing, suffocation, hardening, beautiful thinning. If the ethos driving this language catches on sense, it aspires to guide that sense toward, always toward but always just short of, concept. It is in fact the *almost* that marks the fine point of these poem-things. To make perfect sense, to be clear, is the work of mathematics, while the work of poem-things is to reintroduce human eyes to the mesh of being here. We are of course not making perfect sense, as we advance through the present argument display case. We are making sense, in the sense of letting the senses make our argument, but we are not making something a *précis* or summary would be able to frame. Are we then simply finding fresh ways of re-entering the questions raised by the thinking together of poetry and knowing?

4

Was there a stable?  
 Or did it not work?  
 Did it not quite fit?  
 Here, you worked at this corner.  
 You put putty around it, nailed too  
 Still loose.

Could the problem have been with the word *stable*?  
 Did *it* not fit?  
 Had you maybe wanted to say *angle*?  
 Had you wanted to say *angle*, in French,  
 Sharpening thereby the point for insertion?  
 Whatever, you said *stable*.  
 You had to just go on working with that.  
 The thing-*stable* had to be left behind  
 In favor of the word *stable*  
 And yet even the word was loose  
 When it came to fitting it in.  
 There was *mou*, slack, around the edges of the word;  
 Was the word *unstable*?  
 Was it as if there was an opposite, to *stable*,  
 In which the true peg-in was simply missing?  
 In which you fiddled with that peg?

4a

Fitting things in, in language, the covert intention of 4. Language can be *made* to fit. You can take a new word and stuff it between molars and walk around saying it. It will have mattered to place it. It will have given you a face, from which you could be an utterance in language. Fittingly, words congregate around the roots of your teeth, and in the anxieties of your upper palate. There goes a *friend*, he says, touching a word that passes over his palate, that wobbles like spinach for a minute at a cross tooth. The word is gone in an instant. What it had to say has made a transit, his mouth, into one more oracle. Turtle bones may briefly have shuffled in the offshore temple, but the homegrown prophet will know nothing of it but *leafage*, and hurry upstairs to brush the vision.

5

I elaborated a hare.  
 Do you not regret forcing  
 Dear opposites to the new;  
 A meaning? Thought's remotest lair?

I said hare is far  
 Before, a boil on its name.  
 Catch me, it flies hand-  
 Upper inner zoom, bar-

None quicker.  
 While tortoise crawls.  
 Crawls its sense stealthily.  
 Race watchers snicker.

At last speed's lure  
 Stings runner hare,  
 Slices a can on a leg,  
 Tortoises ponder; were

Losers, now prevail.  
 Oleant whiffs rise.  
 Banners declare, wise snail!  
 The tortoise prevails!

5a The small rise on all sides of us. Fat mites greet my morning with disintegrative toxins. I am dissolving already, inside my shoe. The mere thought of decomposition filters through my breakfast sandwich, beside an antacid ad. Yield to me again, springtime? Follow me up that pine-coney wood path through the botanical gardens, fall crackly to Leal, my high? Hadn't I a day of starring ahead, the society of my peers and betters, a family behind me, for whom order framed the least of our actions, destitute flyers though we were, through the bustling cosmos? Yet even then I could feel the dripping, wax skirting my leggings, some Pleistocene ripple through my nails. Have I not a chance, in this bicameral legend, to establish a narrative that none can attack? Can I not run straight up the hill, into that garden wilderness?

6  
 If you are alone dog  
 Write, fur-side upside,  
 The timber creaks, the pen  
 Trembles. If your road

Stamped the mentioned?  
 He drifts onward, his tale  
 Ramified by stages. Rain  
 Takes him across winter dog.

Fire all his. He's spent.  
 You spent, you know,

Fortunes in breath.  
He takes a brush, paints,

Dog, children woven together  
He plaits birdshair to...  
Inside the red ship though  
He churns and it could be...

There is a winding onseam  
It regulates forests, a termination;  
Come with me to the end of the station  
No toll, no tithes, remain of payment...

Figuration, tipping.  
There, he is going on spindly legs  
And mainframe darkness.  
He'll stall, mind you, framín'.

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This is a textbook about a textbook. The poem things are text-books, in themselves, little textures made out of sense of place, sense of things that fill a place, and—this is the ‘about a textbook’ part of it—play-games adhering to the meaning surface of the original text. We pass through a vivid blend of trademarks, which ready the present text for use as pointers: plenty of dog, the SEE ME par excellence of cozy house self-displays; plenty of drifting onward, winding onseams, just plain winding, even a churning; writing, painting, figuration.

7

Roarer, and I with you roaring.  
Coming at you in little chunks.  
I too...there is a symphonic pause...  
Ropes let down...the curtain...  
Stall, Act Five, my roar cut.

Flame throwers, then roarers...  
The trend is to radicalization;  
One frontier opens; comes dread.  
We Polish are easily divided.