

## Epistemic Flow

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I like to think about those rivers coursing underground, swift currents hidden under the surface of the earth, like veins beneath the skin, I suppose, save when the river surges up it is not a wound but a spring—a spring like the one beside which young Pindar fell asleep, tired from the hunt, and woke to find some bees had built a hive inside his mouth. But who knows if such rivers exist. I don't. I've only encountered them in books, in poems, in ideas: a geography on loan. There's the Alph, Coleridge's opiate stream,

. . . the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea . . .

whose name alone evokes the Hebrew letter *aleph*, initiatory vowel of the alphabet entire but which carries no sound of its own. Or so some say. Other scholars claim *aleph* is the sound of the throat opening to speak, making a fountain of that other hidden river, speech. There's also the river Styx, on whose agitated waters the gods themselves swear their oaths. And Acheron, across whose waters Charon rows—if they've remembered to carry with them a coin—the newly dead souls. That river of lamentation, Cocytus. And among the others, perhaps my favorite, the river Lethe, that river that undoes the mind, turns memory into oblivion, and quenches the thirst for truth, or the difficulty of knowledge, with forgetfulness, once you bend down at the bank, and take a sip of its waters.

There is another river, too, not exactly underground, river that is every river and so is also no river at all. Heraclitus describes it: "You cannot step in the same river twice."

Sometimes I call that river Memory; sometimes I call that river Mind. When thought teases us out into helpless waters and threatens the life it promised to explain, when beloved faces have no features but a blur and one must add the detail back in, we find we have stepped into that river, that river inside us. And then there is the river I call Light, which fills the nightly emptied channels, those arroyos some call self, and through the eyes pours in another day.

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The etymology of *influence* comes from the Latin, and means “a flowing in.” That flowing in is both an astrological term speaking of that spiritual flow of ethereal forms into human life, and the flow of water. As a principle, *influence* speaks to a radical relation between us and all we exist among, material realities but also the forces that inform those realities. But “realities” feels like a word not exactly right. I mean those gathered moments of intensity that seem, along with us, to endure for a time Time itself (that river Time), before the flow that forms them joins them wholly to its larger motion, and what was, flows away. Bodies, ideas, books; memories, love, children; the gifts of days, the gifts of night; the sun and the Milky Way, all have coursing within them the river Lethe, a river coursing also through *Alethia*, Greek word for Truth, whose subterranean influence reminds the mind that oblivion flows inside all that once became obvious.

As a poet born in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, and writing across the millennium into this new one, I worry that our sense of influence has diminished, and the flow of those mighty rivers has grown weaker. Ezra Pound’s dictum, “Make it new,” in echo still urges certain assumptions of what marks poetic validity: eases of experiment, cleverness as innovation. But Heraclitus might view that Modernist advice in his ancient light, and remind us that what is new isn’t what is without precedent, isn’t what hasn’t been encountered before—he would point at a river, any river would do, and remind us that what always has been and still is, is what is new. There is no work that must be done to “make it new,” save to step in, to open eyes, to open mouth, by which I also mean, to open mind—to find some way to let what flows, flow in.

Socrates, in the *Cratylus*—the dialog in which he considers the origins of language—seeks out what rivers flow beneath the surface of words. For a time, his interest lingers in the various words for knowledge itself:

Hermogenes: What is the word?

Socrates: Wisdom (φρονησις); for it is perception (νοησις) and flowing (ρου); or it might be understood as benefit (ονησις) of motion (φορας); in either case it has to do with motion.... And επιστημη (knowledge) indicates that the soul which is of any account accompanies (επειται) things in their motion, neither falling behind them nor running in front of them; therefore we ought to enter an epsilon and call it επειστημη... Certainly σοφια (wisdom) denotes the touching of motion. This word is very obscure and of foreign origin; but we must remember that the poets often say of something which begins to advance rapidly εσυθη (it rushed). There was a famous Laconian whose name was Σους (Rush), for this is the Laconian word for rapid motion. Now σοφια signifies the touching (επαφη) of this rapid motion, the assumption being that things are in motion (Plato 99).

A subtle strain of irony: Socrates is here explaining the occult etymologies of the words for wisdom and knowing to Hermogenes whose name means “born of Hermes,” trickster god who gave to humans the alphabet and so the language that from those letters followed. But beneath the irony, and under the playful teasing out of words the hidden springs of their meanings, a poetic realization meanders to the surface. It is, Socrates claims, an understanding to which poets might come first, and though it sounds simple, it is not: that all is in motion.

Wisdom touches that motion, and knowledge—at least, that knowledge I might hazard to call poetic—joins things in their motion, not falling behind, not getting ahead. The first implication involves the work of reading. Rather than the effort to pull from a text some knowledge that then becomes one’s own—a possession of a sort, one to add to the accumulated treasure as a miser adds another coin to the glimmering pile, a selfish economy that reflects back to oneself the illusion of expertise—the reader who reads wisely enters into a poem to catch up to the speed of its current, joins the flow of the thought coursing just below the words, and rather than place herself as net or sieve within the rush, hoping to catch what lives in the flow, becomes the flow, and so is herself the life carried along in the larger motion. To emerge is, so strangely, so wondrously, not to think alone—but the river that flowed through the poem has also dug its channel into you, and in that bewildering canyonlands that might serve as image of the self entire, another fold for thought and perception to flow through has been etched. The self, seen as in a

map, or from a height, is but that landscape such influences have carved—and when the storm comes, be it thunderclap of inspiration, or flash flood of sudden vision, that moment's force fills the self that influence formed.

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So it is the poets I care most for, and the poet I would most want to be, possess an unexpected anxiety when it comes to influence—not the anxiety that leads to drawing away from those voices that might overwhelm and subsume one's own, but the anxiety to enter into those voices as fully as one can, and to sing within another poet's song.

I'm not speaking of imitation, though perhaps there is no finer story to illustrate my point than Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." In the tale, the speaker in guise of literary scholar of (and friend to) Pierre Menard, offers a complete list of all the author wrote—a number of monographs on philosophers and poets, including those on Leibniz and Valery, a translation of Quevedo, and a number of poems, symbolist in nature, sonnet in form. The speaker goes on:

This is the full extent (save for a few vague sonnets of occasion destined for Mme. Henri Bachelier's hospitable, or greedy, *album des souvenirs*) of the *visible* lifework of Pierre Menard, in proper chronological order. I shall turn now to the other, the subterranean, the interminably heroic production—the *oeuvre nonpareil*, the *oeuvre* that must remain—for such are our human limitations!—unfinished. This work, perhaps the most significant writing of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part I of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII. I know that such a claim is on the face of it absurd; justifying that "absurdity" shall be the primary object of this note (Borges 38).

Let me join in with this anonymous scholar in seeking to justify the absurdity of his claim by further clarifying the hopes of Pierre Menard himself:

Those who have insinuated that Menard devoted his life to writing a contemporary *Quixote* besmirch his illustrious memory. Pierre Menard did not want to compose *another* Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose *the* Quixote. Nor, surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. (39).

This ambition, which at first blush seems laughable, later seems a sober miracle. Genius is pulled from the intimate confines of a single personality and is revealed instead as a common source, available to all—or to any of that all willing to do the subterranean work of digging down beneath the surface to seek the source. There it is one finds the coursing

river not yet named, the river Influence. To enter it is to lose oneself, to lose one's voice, or to learn to listen differently, so that one's own words are but the echo of what other mouths are saying, as in the Greek Chorus of old, where *I* is a word that says *All*.

None of these ideas are new, nor are they meant to be. I am not a poet, or a thinker, who wants to "Make it new." To tell the truth, I don't know what that imperative means. As Plutarch claimed of Socrates, that he could hear the voices articulate in the air, a vision by which I've come to suspect that every utterance from a human life still speaks itself above us, and the gathering clouds on any given day are a conversation, and the atmosphere is just an opportunity to eavesdrop. But there is a counter-side to the same fact, an influential articulation deep in the chthonic rivers that shape within each of us whatever it is intelligence and perception come to be in a given life. If it is so, and if one can dig down within oneself (Paul Celan: "There was earth in them and they dug.") deep enough, one can find that necessity of thinking that urged the great works of literature to become what they became, and only an arrogant fool would think that, once the book or poem is written, the source within it is gone. How could it be so? Then like a tree whose root taps down into empty aquifer in a land of drought the life would wither and offer no fruit. But this tree of knowledge, rooted in influence, so awfully and full-of-awe blooms.

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I know there were rivers running through Eden, and though I've forgotten their names, I have my suspicions that those waters still flow. If so, they carry something still of Adam's mythic act of naming—no arbitrary effort, but cleverness or act of will, but so simply a seeing the deep signature in all things and saying for them the name they cannot speak themselves. Perhaps it is what is too easily forgotten, and whose consequences become selfishly lamentable, that no one needs to make their own language—it is already there, speaking.

How to speak with it is the influential question. For John Keats, it required the realization that the poet's self was no self at all:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character . . . what shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than

from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of Saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children...(Keats 195).

The end of such annihilation isn't death, but a poem. It is one composed not of one's identical self—though the vestiges of the helpless fact of living one's own life cannot help but inform the work that springs out up within it—but of those realities which have so pressed up within the writer that make his mouth their own. Such is the effort influence might require of us whose dearest wish is to write what already has been written (and, I admit, I'm one of that number): to let the unchangeable attributes of what is not us give to us their shape. The poet's open mouth, that invocatory O, is also the mouth of the cave deep within which Influence flows. One way to write is to walk straight into the poet's mouth.

And so I try—

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### *Ode to a—*<sup>1</sup>

1.

I wake. Sometimes it's that simple. Numb  
In the morning's dumb cloud-muted light  
I hear the rain fall drop by drop into the plum  
Tree growing purple rocks, bruises that delight  
The eye, high on the highest branch, but leave  
The mind empty as the empty mouth. O—  
For a mouthful of that—. Almost all of it is out of reach.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ode to a—" first appeared in the literary journal, *Interim*.

Little alarm bell of the thrush's throat, leave  
Your song alone. Learn as I've learned. Let it go.  
Beauty thinks in fevers. Sings an ache it likes to teach.

2.

From deep within the tree the lesson starts.  
At the student's approach, the teacher  
Departs. It's how I learned to tighten my heart  
Into a book with a clasp no key opens, fair  
Warning to anyone who fears each page  
Must be blank. It works if it beats. It works  
If between its covers it keeps its heat.  
To ask it your question requires the lost age  
Return new. That can't happen. I've tried to jerk  
The centuries back with a word or two, to cheat

3.

Time with sweet rhymes, to make a bird a chime  
That in the gloom behind the eye rings true.  
Here I've sat somehow inside myself, time  
Beginning to turn a few hairs gray, youth  
No longer young. There's a simple thing I want  
To say, but the words don't work right,  
Don't ease this maze of mind back into a bower,  
But sorrow thought more intricate, taint  
The bright eye with lead. Even the sunlight  
Mocks what it brightens, murmuring *tomorrow*,

4.

Darkens the moment's shine as shade gathers  
Deep within the leaves—where thrush, you sing—  
Long before dusk rushes the shadows in, long before  
A feather from a hectic breast goes missing  
In the uncut, full-of-night, grass. Love too is lost.  
Love walks in the dark on a palsied foot  
Reciting lines memorized long ago about the toil  
Of old heroes who died, ocean-tossed,  
After crushing ancient towers into dust, not  
Not knowing what else to do, but die—.

5.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet.  
I wouldn't know their names if I could.

Memory litters the dark with words grown sweet  
In the mouth. To say one out loud  
Forms in the dark a little cloud that rains  
Down sense. White eglantine. Musk rose.  
They hum in the ear like the flies that haunt  
The honey they sip. It takes so much pain  
To see what is not there to see. To breathe deep in  
The missing scent. So you sing, I suppose.

6.

And I listen. I try to sing along. To quiet  
Death into a child's game a child fears  
But not for long, where death dies and quits  
The charade, stands up, wipes away tears  
And says, *it's okay*. You choose your gloom.  
Emperors have heard this same song;  
So has my mother, Ruth, teaching her students  
Division in public school classrooms,  
Speaking softly to the dim child, *the answer's wrong*,  
*Try again*. Getting it right comes by accident.

7.

I'm trying again. The same thing I always try.  
To hear the thrush sing abroad its soul  
In such an ecstasy—. Not an irony.  
Melody that deep in the blood tolls  
Now as always it's tolled, heart-bell  
That breaks the mind with ringing, ringing—  
Thrush, I hear you, you sing it out as always  
It's been sung, to fathers as to sons, to tell  
All what we would rather not know. Singing  
Removes you from the song, it finds a way

8.

To be sung again, by another mouth, by other  
Wings than yours. Forlorn. The word  
Weighs down my tongue as years before  
It brooded down another's. Fate has one cure:  
To repeat the music even as it flees, or is fled  
Already, always, perfect seed of the ever-past  
Tense. For just a moment, just a song sung deep  
Within these fading leaves, I think I lived.  
I think so. I'm not sure. It didn't last—  
my fraction of day sung in dreamless sleep.



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