

Arriving on the Continent that Needs to be Named Again

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Abstract: In which the author meditates on the ways in which he has been lucky enough to arrive, again and again, in experiences of Europe that did not belong to anyone in particular, did not cement any determinate history, emerged from improbable encounters, expressed ancient conflicts in a comic mode, and yet now refuse to be turned into complete allegories that might illuminate the destiny of any continent, and which nevertheless suggest a few things to be done, by the author, in his attempt to continue to live in Europe.

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A Portuguese friend, Vanessa, who studied at Paris VIII and now teaches in a School of Fine Arts in Marseille once gave me the best present that anyone outside the family has ever given me, the Pleiade edition of Descartes, which I happened to be reading on the train last Tuesday, on the way home, an exercise that was causing me a good deal of pain working out the function of the circle in Descartes' diagrams of a tennis serve in the 'Second Discourse' of his *Optics*, and I tell you it is damn odd for an Australian to have to allow that the French not invented liberty and equality and fraternity all joined together but also invented tennis when at least in Sydney we have tennis courts, some in real clay, some in real grass, that you can climb into for free in every single suburb and we have Rod Laver, and in my earlier life as an English boy I learnt to play on the grass practice courts of Wimbledon, so how dare the French claim to – when thankfully my fellow passenger rescued me by asking me what I was reading and he was surprised to hear that it was Descartes since he had thought, upon viewing the red leather and gold lines of the Pleiade cover, that I was reading the bible, and I supposed that he had anticipated sharing his views of certain biblical passages in the interpretation of which, no doubt, he would have had much to offer, but as fortune had it, I was not reading the bible, but struggling with my own secular faith in the comprehensibility of mathematics, and so we told each other what we did for a living – he an entrepreneur in transport and mining, myself a professor – and where we came from – he from France and the Ivory Coast, myself from Australia and England – and neither of us blinked twice at the improbability of the encounter, he because, as he said (after not very long) he liked to share his experience of Jesus with people he met, and myself because Descartes' diagrams were unravelling my mind and if I could not talk to a fellow passenger in a train about Jesus in his life because I was anxious about lesson preparation then what kind of goddamn life was I leading, certainly not one dignified of philosophy itself, and so when he asked me to pull up youtube on my phone so that he could show me his sermons on his youtube channel and my browser would have a record of that web address, well I was, to be honest, happy that the battery in my phone had died – it had died, I didn't fake it – but I still wished to find an

honest way to have a conversation with a believer without faking interest nor dismissing his faith as an insult to my, say, liberal views on the mere probability of any metaphysics and the importance of debate in the public sphere rather than appeals to the emotions, or my Marxist views on Christ as a bedtime story that stopped the revolution in its tracks, and so, not being insulted, I looked at the list of his sermons that he pulled up on his phone and was surprised to see, as he scrolled down, a sermon devoted solely to the laying on of hands, which I had thought had little to do with Jesus as a moral force, and he told me of some group he had in Versailles and invited me to stay in contact but I demurred telling him that I held Jesus to be a philosopher and activist without peer nor parallel from whom I had still a great deal to learn and understand yet I did not believe him to be the Christ – for as Hobbes says in the part that no-one reads in the back of the *Leviathan*, that is all Christianity comes down to in the moment of conversion ‘Jesus is the Christ’, which is also how Mel Gibson titled his film which had disturbed me greatly, especially the flagellation scene, before I went on that school trip to Ireland, a Catholic country, where one of my cruellest ancestors had lived, a judge by the surname of Lynch who had been so rigorous that he had condemned his own son to death when the son was on trial for the right reasons, all of which was a little much to find out after having seen that film and having just left Italy, another Catholic country – indeed I held that Jesus was not the Christ but from Nazareth and one mortal man amongst many and that was enough for me and being honest, since honesty is important in these matters, I could not say that I was interested in becoming a Christian and being converted, not today, and not tomorrow, and ‘try it, you might like it’ was not going to work this time. He smiled and told me little matter what I thought I believed right now, I should know that it was quite simply the case, and this was something he knew in his heart of hearts, something that he had never doubted since he found the way, Jesus loved me – Jesus loved me at 6:15pm on Tuesday on my way to pick up the kids – a conclusion that I thought it would be churlish and dogmatic to deny, a conclusion that had certain echoes from my youth – as in when my schoolteacher told me the story of Jesus walking on the water and I thought I can do that and pulled my inflatable armbands around my ankles and took a few steps across the surface of the municipal swimming pool before flipping upside down with my legs held above the water by the armbands and drowning in a panic until a tall blond woman dived in doing her job as lifesaver and playing her role in the city and pulled me out of the water and as I always say, my wife is tall, blond and a lifesaver, though, I should point out, she is not the same person – and so I did not deny this conclusion about Jesus and his oddly-directed love and wished him the best of luck with his investment in his brother’s mining business in the Ivory Coast, a business I could barely imagine, and I got off the train at my station, where I bumped into Eugenie, the mother of a child who had been at the childcare centre with our second child and told her the whole story, which was unusual since I am not so

talkative with acquaintances and I was unsure of whether she herself was a believer or not, which was always likely, since we had ended up, after ten years in a north-eastern arrondissement, in the Catholic south-western hinterland of Paris, and thankfully she was most amused, and in a most secular fashion.

I regret not remembering his name, my fellow passenger. Perhaps that would have saved him from figuring as a character in some silly allegory. But hey all fates are only half-fates because shit happens, as the Australians say.

Back when I was so easily burnt by the sun and surprised by our family’s foam surfboard snapping in two on the roofrack in the airstream on the highway from St Malo in the summer of ‘79, not having yet understood the aggregate force of an apparently flimsy body like air against an apparently solid body like the surfboard, my parents took us on a camping holiday to Soulac-sur-Mer where the trickling golden spills and heaves of the sand-dunes were only matched by the endless wavy engraved ripples of sand sliding down into long wide tranquil beach pools where one could swim and paddle and row an inflatable dinghy without fear of waves, one pool interrupted by a rift of sand falling down into another long pool, pools whose wonder and ease were only matched by the fizzy cool taste of orangina and the brown skin of the girls and boys at play on the beach and the taut mauve nipples and aureola and curving flesh of the golden women sunbathing just up the beach which was only matched by the long walk in trepidation on my own across the camping ground repeating under my breath *je voudrais, je voudrais, je voudrais une glace s’il vous plaît* so as to bring a block of ice back to our tent to keep our esky cold, which was only matched by my father eating a pig’s foot and then the following dinner a pig’s tail, and the following year a cow’s foot dripping in some green sauce which he had over his moustache when he yelled ‘hold your mother down whilst I kiss her’ and she giggled as we grabbed her arms and his face came in close which was only matched by running in between the tents and our neighbour’s tents chasing children between the pine trees over the pine needles who then chased me yelling instructions I never understood to which I gave back my own orders in English as I chased them, which was only matched by the kiss of salt in my mouth when I licked my arm warmed by the sun in the late afternoon at Soulac-sur-mer.

My grandparents, Dawn and Jerry, before they had children, before the war, used to go on holiday from Maidstone not to France but to Germany for they loved the Black Forest and the mountains and the Rhine and I wonder just how tone deaf to politics they must have been when my grandfather recalled having seen Hitler youth marching down a high-street. I thought he must have changed his mind quick about holiday destinations when the Blitz began and he took up his wartime duties in which, after all, he could still manifest some kind of care for those parts of Germany that he had loved, being tasked with staring through

a magnifying glass at reconnaissance photographs developed from film taken a few nights before over Hamburg, since he was one of those tasked with deciphering and distinguishing between warehouse and arms depot, goods trains and military trains, barracks from hospital, arms factories from food factories, so as to recommend where to bomb the following night with as much precision as was possible back in those days – not that precision-bombing mattered when it came to Dresden, as Kurt Vonnegut remembered for us. And how is that for being on the outside of Europe and looking in so as to make sense of it – an approach some philosophers recommend – deciphering reconnaissance photos of towns from across the channel so as to recommend tomorrow night's targeting? How many outsides to Europe can we find so as to look in and try to pinpoint it? The first time I entered Germany, on a cheap coach trip from Paris to Denmark, I shivered and savoured the misty air and the watery coffee at the autobahn truckstop, and thought about the might of that country, and now I am learning German and my daughter, entering junior high, has also just begun, and to jumpstart the acquisition of as-yet foreign sounds and to kickstart our attributions of meanings to those sounds – the bridging of vocabularies – we went on a trip to Berlin to visit museums and old friends and monuments, and in a rooftop bar that was also a garden and a stage, an art gallery, a community, somewhere south of Kreuzberg I looked at my daughter chatting with Bruno across from his partner Eileen who had been so very ill but had astonishingly recovered, it not being fair for her to be struck down since she is a gifted doctor who prefers the public over the private sector, and doctors in my book should never get ill, and I looked at my daughter sipping on her first alcohol-free cocktail and reflected that if it hadn't been for Bruno peering over my shoulder in 2002 in Salle G of the French National Library asking me what I was doing studying Alain Badiou's *L'être et l'événement* given that it was the only copy in the library and he also needed to work on it, and I responded that I was turning it into a future book to be called *Being and Event*, by the same author, and he laughed and said come to the café at 5, that's when the Italians here take a break, and so I did. When I sat down across from him with my espresso straight away I noticed an angular blond with green eyes – and that, as you've guessed, was the *Event* – with whom I got into a conversation – that was the *and* – a conversation about praxis and it turned out Barbara was not only doing a PhD in philosophy but went out dancing and knew all about contemporary art, well, if it hadn't been for Bruno, the *Being* of Alma would not have been, and now sipping her Mojito *senza* rum Alma was old enough to appreciate the wry circuits of fortune – *je voudrais un ÊTRE et un ÉVÉNEMENT s'il vous plaît* – not least amongst which was a circuitous bike ride through the North of Berlin, past fragments of *die Mauer* where ancient escape tunnels were marked by paving stones amidst the grass, in which I followed Alma following Benjy son of Gernot, Benjy following Gernot whom I had met and become friends in commiseration then comradeship, he having also turned *L'être et l'événement* into another book

by the same author, this one called *Das sein und das ereignis*, and after table tennis and football in the *Tiergarten* Gernot made sure outside the University of Berlin that we got our summer selfie in front of the statue of Hegel, whose works – in the original – I am learning German so as to read, despite Frank, another Berlin friend, who is said to have taken Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* around in his backpack wherever he went for ten years, I am learning German despite Frank having insisted that Hegel was easier in English, Frank who found a good job in Dundee, beyond Hadrian's wall.

The first time that anyone could be bothered to wind their way through my attempts at a conversation in French was late Autumn in 1995 in Paris before the mass protests and transport strike and somehow we were up in her apartment, and it was late, although I knew it was not an official date, and an unfortunate accident which was not my fault but the fault of French plumbers had ruined any possible pretention to nuancing this non-date into a date, somehow this Czech student Magda, with a downcut black bob and a sardonic smile, still had the patience to decipher and guess words for me as I tried to speak about what was special about literature from a philosophical standpoint and it was tough for her because English was not her first nor second language; to my chagrin English was her sixth language, languishing far behind Slovakian, Polish, Russian, German and French, French in fourth or fifth place, yet her French was far superior to my own for I had not yet completed that first crucial Sorbonne course in French language and civilization which, at two hours every day for fifteen weeks, launched me into the crucial intermediate phase of being able to exchange not so random sentences with anyone if they didn't speak as fast as a jackhammer or make too many allusions or use too much slang, caveats which were overly restrictive. I remember when this sophisticated activist, Lulu, Melinda's girlfriend, asked me 'qu'est-ce que tu racontes?' and I thought she wanted me to tell her, to 'recount', a story, which seemed odd, but perhaps appropriate, given that we had bumped into each other outside a bookshop near Bastille and perhaps she hadn't been content with the stories on sale in the shop when all she was asking, as Melinda explained, and Melinda had perfect French through working at a French bakery for years in Five Ways in Sydney before coming to do her doctoral thesis in Paris with Antonio Negri on time and anxiety in Lacan and Deleuze – and all doctoral theses at base are about time and anxiety – as Melinda explained, what her girlfriend was simply asking was 'wassup?', by which time her girlfriend was no longer interested in what was up but had lit a cigarette and sidled down the street to chat to another friend, which is also what she did a month later when she said 'à un de ces quatres' and I asked 'quatre quoi?' wondering what had been enumerated in this phrase 'one of these four' and Melinda, always the benevolent linguist, explained that it meant 'see you round' by which time it was too late to say 'oh, bye', or even 'à bientôt', since the moment was lost, like that moment in the Autumn thanks to the French plumbing, though at least I did manage to explain to Magda what I liked in 'Literature and

the Right to Death”, that essay by Blanchot, to Magda, for whom English was not important, Magda who was Czech, and spoke six languages, with a sardonic smile and a tipped up bob, who thus resided in a higher realm than myself, and who had probably deliberately forgotten about me, and Blanchot, as soon as the plumber left.

I thank that chance encounter of atoms and blood that happened a while ago for the fact that I was born on land and with certificates that gave me some legally stipulated right to apply for and secure a British passport which up until now, at least, did secure entrance into Europe, the right to work and live in a European country. I chose France and emigrated to it, not from Britain though, for anyone, even a hamster, would understand such a choice, but from Sydney, a completely bewildering and almost offensive choice for just about every French person I have introduced myself to over the last twenty years – *mais pourquoi!*? – and I tell bad stories about Sydney and good stories about Paris, neither of which any French person believes since they go all Gauguin about Australia, and it is only when I admit that I came on a pilgrimage to study philosophy that they get it. What I now know is that coming on a pilgrimage is not a solid foundation for emigrating: such an enterprise does not in any way guarantee that one will ever actually arrive in the land of choice – and this is still my present question, not having become French, no longer really English, nor Australian, the question of whether I actually did arrive in Europe: am I not still circling between the broken pieces of a fantasy composed of distance and solitude and sex and formal gardens and labyrinths and stone busts of Greek gods and goddesses and dark scarlet velvet curtains framing tall windows looking over a boulevard with a narrow round table and a chair drawn up and a book and a pen, and yet, you know, I have joined some of those items together over the years in Paris, making scarlet curtains once, and I wrote a book and it was like going through a labyrinth, and yet the places that I walk by on weekdays, the streets I ride down or park on by chance, even the scabbiest alleyway with closed shutters and some phone repair shop and a deserted laundromat and that metal bollard which has been bent here, you see, struck perhaps by a heavy vehicle a year ago, and the dark smears of chewing gum that dot the pavement; each of these places too, concrete opposites to my fantasy, concrete that already broke the fantasy into pieces, you know each of these places has its own song to be sung that will capture its precise angles and details and mood as generative of spirit, a unique mood that will otherwise, if the song is lost, never be found, never be recovered but fall away into the depths of the earth’s crust to dissolve in the magma at the planet’s core, and the neglected place will join up into yet another chain of indifference weighing down the sodden city-dwellers in their travels between a sixth-floor walk-up, a hospital, a social security office and the metro entrance or a piece of cardboard under the overhead metro line. The day-by-day here has made me think, not just after twenty years but even after the first few weeks when I asked, in a panic, that French student to return my deposit

for a flatshare in the 16th arrondissement cause I had lost my nerve and made the wrong choice and wasn’t going to be able to make it on my own with no structure to my days and only a friend of a friend of a friend’s address, even back then I used to think it is way too facile to invoke the muse and sing a song of the slate-grey rooves, of the sun-dappled sky, of the Seine’s turbulence, of the lit boulevard in the ninth at aperitif hour, of the demi-monde opening up beyond midnight, yet who will be brave and open and patient enough to find the words, the tone, the rhythm to not redeem but simply capture the earliest promise of an ordinary street and its nondescript buildings, the street behind the street, a promise it has been making since the day its first stone was laid until yesterday evening when the garbage-truck trundled down it, and if I could join in this vast project of singing all places outside or despite judgement and prejudice, I thought, along with all my neighbouring immigrants who chose this city and fought their way to come here, and light it up each day with noise and fried food and smells in the stairwell, and insults in foreign languages, and the sound and the fury – thanks Jacques Chirac! – then maybe we would actually arrive here, and here we would find a chosen land, unlike the surface-dwellers, always sufficient to themselves.

When I heard the result of the Brexit vote I was sick in my guts and had one thought ringing through my mind and it was not ‘I need to become French’ since I am and have been living and working here thanks to my British not my Australian passport – no, my first thought, stupidly messianic and so typical for a professor who didn’t just read continental philosophy but actually lived on the continent in a continental manner whilst continuing to do philosophy, that one thought ringing through my mind was we need a new internationalism, a new way of joining up peoples and their organizations, beyond the idiocy of national sovereignty, avoiding the zombie of empire, no longer focused on the sole ideal of facilitating trade via regulatory and financial and monetary unity. Back then I didn’t know what form that ‘we’ could take, and still don’t, and there is research to be done on regionalism and federalism and alliances. But then, quite apart from unfinished projects, I thought, let’s say a new form of internationalism was happily found, then surely it would not apply to this continent alone but could start to take effect between any country whatsoever and a neighbour: but then, again, is not this non-specificity true of any diagnosis and remedy proposed by a political philosopher? What is wrong with this continent? Nothing that a little more democracy, transparency, accountability, participation cannot cure, nothing that a stronger federal state cannot cure, nothing that a unified financial direction cannot cure, nothing that an enforced rule of law cannot cure, nothing that a cannier strategy in world affairs cannot cure, nothing that a true leader, an all-powerful ephorate of experts, a reinvented party cannot cure...can you believe that some philosophers have sold books making such arguments, running very fast through doors that have been open for centuries if not decades, and to think they are interviewed on the radio to explain these

ideas, it makes me even sicker to the stomach this passion for running round a corner and down an old dead-end! None of these solutions, in the universality and predictability of their concepts, are tailored to any country or continent – to state the bleedingly obvious – however, if, in reaction to the slipperiness of the universal the philosopher were to try to capture particular properties or factors or conjunctures that were unique to this continent and happen to characterize all lands and peoples fallen under its legal name, would that not be to fall into the culturalist trap of trying to fill in the void behind a master-word, the name 'Europe', by chaining it to a whole lot of subordinate words – heck, what's in a name, after all, as someone once said, someone who came from this continent, yet politics, also, let me point out, is all about names and the charge of passions attached to those names – as Lazarus said, what a name, 'Lazarus'! – anyway, so a new internationalism has to treat, no that is a Frenchism, it has to *make up* names, names from lands and peoples, in a particular way, and it is question of choosing the right names, and perhaps some will be very old forgotten names that someone else apart from you and me has just remembered and perhaps some will be new names on the lips of those that struggle to even reach the southern beaches with a breath of life inside their lungs because that blood-steeped idea of sovereignty is parasiting the minds of politicians in power who intentionally smash into fragments the fundamental fantasy of untold numbers would-be migrants – what fantasy? –well the all-too human fantasy of a better life, a job, social security, schools, hospitals, even metro entrances for a public transport system that works.

A new internationalism will not hold out the mirage of peace nor consensus nor agreed upon conditions of argument towards consensus nor a finite list of fundamental laws but will rather open up an as yet incomplete inventory of ways of treating conflict that do not seek to dissolve it immediately but rather dis-intensify and de-escalate it by complicating and triangulating and quadrangling it via overlapping disputes and differences, some of which have already been sailed through, proving themselves to be not quite the much announced and catastrophized Scylla and Charybidis, a safe trip proof indeed of peoples' capacity to move beyond one conflict, and yes, perhaps only to hit another one but that is like breathing for these neighbouring peoples, for neighbours everywhere given the smell and the sound and the fury – stop kicking the ball in front of the neighbour's flat, you'll break a window I tell my son for the 6th time this weekend but as he points the window is actually open, a window through which a, I think she is Moldavian, woman, who does not speak a word of French, and whom I have never seen outside the building, offered him an intricately carved wooden horse that he still keeps in his bedside drawer – and this is an idea I found in an essay by Balibar, who I call the Father Christmas of philosophers, not because I found his book in a stocking but because of his benevolence in supervising Justine's master's thesis on Nietzsche that year in Paris when she fell in love with

a doomed youth in Paris, doomed because she had to go back to Sydney, ironically in the end to discover that philosophy and its institutionalized antagonisms to the disappointment of her mentor were not for her, but nevertheless Balibar had helped her beyond any of his own institutional designs and in this essay he says that in this continent, which is nothing special by the way, and cannot be totalized, but anyway nevertheless one can at the very least say of this continent that there are overlapping conflicts that can be triangulated and treated or recomposed. Well, there you go, that is the base idea, but I differ from Balibar because I do not think a double-layered idea of both incompleteness of a whole and potential yet also historical triangulations of conflict, I do not think such an idea can be properly presented in a philosophical argument or a conceptual analysis but only approached, a little like one makes a boat approach a jetty by cutting the motors early and drifting a little, like we tried that time on holiday on Myall lake with the family, laughing and hoping we'd get deposit on the rental boat back however misshapen it was upon return and actually I stopped laughing for a second and tried a new trick of giving a small burst of the throttle in the other direction so as to slow down and not smash or bash or meld the boat into the jetty and it worked! That one time a slow approach worked, the non-date became a date, and the boat arrived gently, a slow approach like those tangents to a circle found in Descartes' diagrams of light rays hitting and refracting through a curved glass body like these lenses between my ill-shaped eyes and the computer screen that, thank God, thanks to the good social security reimbursement of glasses in this country, focus converging rays from the screen back to the back of my spherical eyes where the delicate flesh of the optical nerve branches out into a thousand little pathways as Descartes explains what you see if you cut open an oxen's eye, a dissection a little too direct for my liking since I prefer, as I said before, the slow lingering approach by way of neighbouring thoughts, neighbouring memories, not quite allegories since not pretending to be whole and also a little too foreign to the actual subject at hand and so apparently way-off topic but nevertheless neighbouring thoughts that are already not so anecdotal and not so personal since they are caught up in neighbours' and friends' and friends of friends' lives and thus caught up in the life and death conflicts that after all make up the very matter of what we all end up calling this life down here below, and what we call death – remember those visits to the hospital, translating the hallway signs in trepidation back into one's mother-tongue – stories making up the matter of death – but whose death? Can I just ask, at the end, here, now, who shall speak, who dares to speak not of but for the dead? If no-one then how shall the dead speak through us? Through us, on this continent whose present and future names are yet to be found and renewed.

But then, hey, let's not get so messianic! Shit happens, as the Australians say, and nothing is the Christ, no longer – look, that person over there, your accidental neighbour, she might have found some names for this continent already: go on, ask her.