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“Literally Everything I Utter Is a Metaphor”: Thought Unhinged in *The Water Cure* and *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell, by Percival Everett

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“Literally Everything I Utter Is a Metaphor”: Thought Unhinged in *The Water Cure* and *Percival Everett* by *Virgil Russell*, by Percival Everett

Sylvie Bauer

- 1 Concentrating on American literature and the philosophical entails not so much the questioning of a dialogical / dialectic relation between two categories or modes of thinking as an exploration, that of a gesture, suggested by the use of the substantive “philosophical.” If “American literature” seems easily definable (one can always try to draw temporal, geographic or generic boundaries, inscribe fiction, prose or poetry within the field of a certain production), the “philosophical” is a much more fleeting notion, relating perhaps more to an affect or a genre, a practice likely not so much to shape American philosophy and literature as to weave itself into the fabric of thought. It seems to underline the inextricable links that exist between (American) literature and theory, not from the perspective of otherness, but rather as two sometimes indistinguishable modes of becoming whose common ground might be to create “worlds within the word,” to (mis)use the title of a collection of essays by William Gass. What is at stake here is the process of writing: a movement, a flux, a praxis maybe. The conjunction relating American literature *and* the philosophical might suggest an assemblage likely to blur the boundaries between the literary and the philosophical, not so much seen as two different types of discourses, two separate fields of thought, but rather as inseparable in the experimentation of thought—the place, Deleuze would say, where “concepts, sensations, functions become undecidable when philosophy, art and science are indiscernible, as if they shared the same shadow that spreads across their different natures and keeps moving along with them” (Deleuze 206). For if the conjunction does distinguish two different objects, it also draws attention to a relation devoid of hierarchy, more akin, perhaps, to Deleuze’s “stuttering of language” than to any form of opposition whatsoever, a collective assemblage of enunciation likely to provoke a number of collisions.

- 2 The interaction between the literary and the philosophical is most obvious when philosophers like Deleuze keep coming back to literature, going as far as to claim the superiority of English-American literature or when American writers keep coming back to philosophy, endlessly re-enacting the very gesture they claim to have given up. Percival Everett's novels, especially the latest, blatantly challenge the traditional conventions of fiction and overtly and more covertly refer to philosophers and their writings, as if their fictional universes were inseparable from philosophical wanderings. If only for the sake of convenience (and because the covers of the books invite us to do so), we will refer to the texts as "novels." Yet, they are more liminal spaces that deconstruct and challenge pre-conceived categories such as fiction and philosophy. Or, to put it in the words of Anthony Stewart, "Everett's novels (as we might as well call them, if only for conventional recognizability) occupy and draw our attention to the spaces in between conventional notions of literary fiction and equally conventional notions of literary theory" (Stewart 218-19).
- 3 *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell, published in 2013, displays in its very title the inextricable entanglement between literature and philosophy, transforming in one gesture the father of analytical thought, Dante's guide and the author himself into writing, mere words in which referentiality is both asserted and negated. For if indeed the novel brims with allusions (structural, semantic or conceptual) to *The Divine Comedy*, analytical philosophy and Frege's theories of naming, it is the better to dismantle them and to erase any form of reference. If the name "Percival Everett" appears in the title, no character with such a name is to be found, almost no character with a name at all for that matter, leaving the reader with traces of those names, transforming them into a reminiscence of collective memory. In short, those traces prevent any form of identification to familiar frames of thought that would provide some sort of meaning understood here as likely to offer a reassuring interpretation of sorts.
- 4 Here and in *The Water Cure* (2007), the questions of being, truth and beauty resonate in the conjunction of the philosophical and the literary, in texts that fail to make sense, whereas the question of sense is at their core. In both cases, the novels are sprinkled with references to philosophy and philosophers. The pre-Socratics pervade the pages of *The Water Cure*, giving it in part its fragmentary structure and allowing for a questioning of the birth of Western philosophy. Similarly, *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell is peppered with allusions to Husserl, Frege, Wittgenstein, as a way to interrogate the empirical relation of language to the world. What seems to be raised here is the question of writing, in the literal sense of the term, that is, the gesture of moving pen on paper. From that perspective, writing is perhaps not to be understood as a means to an end (to put it briefly and almost as a caricature: in order to tell a story or to reveal truth, beauty or transcendence), but as the very "essence"—to use a questionable term—of thought. What this paper wishes to explore is not so much the philosophically referential or intertextual network that pervades Everett's novels as the way these two novels experiment with the infinite powers and limits of language in the advent of thought and meaning. This takes place through fragmentary writing and diffracted voices that while exhibiting nonsense display thought as chaos more than as order.

"Fragments Are the Only Forms I Trust"

- 5 The two novels are made of fragments that not only refer directly and indirectly to the fragmented form of the pre-Socratic legacy but also keep at bay any idea whatsoever of harmonious, coherent, well-enclosed thought or plot. They both present the readers with collages, assemblages, patchworks that resist beginning-to-end patterns, made as they are of bits and pieces that will not fit into a satisfactory puzzle in the end. Any attempt at summarizing them will leave out much of the novel in both cases. Saying that *The Water Cure* is the confession of a grieving father who has perhaps abducted the man who raped and killed his eleven-year-old daughter and tortures him in his basement does as little justice to this novel as saying that *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell might be about a dying father writing *something* for his son or a dying son writing to his father. In both cases, the reader will never get a clear vision of the actual positions of the characters, partaking of what Anthony Stewart calls the "bothness" of Everett's work, which Stewart aptly describes as "not the simple mixing of two elements, but as the potential mixing of elements in infinitely variable amounts." "Then," he adds, "everything else becomes possible" (Stewart 222-223). While being possibly true, summaries of the novels tend to rationalize plots that are everywhere challenged by a fundamental sense of instability and mutability. Descriptions such as those I have just proposed are attempts to shape two texts that refuse frames, sometimes in spite of an avowed structure.
- 6 Indeed, if *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell offers a ternary structure, three parts entitled respectively "Hesperus," "Phosphorus" and "Venus," themselves sub-divided, what those three parts do is anything but give a structure to sketchy narratives, disparate considerations on art, philosophy, politics, and language that never cohere into a theory but rather collide in sometimes logorrheic fashion. Whereas the fragmented bits and pieces trigger in the reader an eagerness to work out some kind of Aristotelian arrangement, the somewhat raving monologues voiced by a disembodied first person create disorientation more than meaning-construction. Readers are at a loss to make sense of long paragraphs lacking punctuation and that seem to make fun of their perplexity, as when, for example, they are addressed by the text:

And then there was you, me, us, red and black in the evening light lost to the wearing of hats and eager to return to stories that used to make some sense eager to recall easily demarcated boundaries of identity and designation and eager to resketchn the likenesses of faces that were either familiar or desired wanting in the darkness of the wee hours which were no smaller than the rest to smell cooking that promised to free all of us from the chains of understanding [...] (158).

The "monologue" runs over a page, the three commas the only signs of punctuation, which not only increase paradoxically the effects of fragmentation but also make those different fragments collide with no other form of link than that of free association, leading to "that perplexing jungle that deep root-riddled tangle of wilderness that was myself" (158). These are the last words of a "paragraph" which, to boot, lacks a full stop. They not only mirror the reader's experience of being lost in a "perplexing jungle," they also point to the fact that the whole novel is crisscrossed by "roots" that act like as many obstacles that fail to cohere into a vertical, hierarchical, metaphysical structure, but that instead "riddle" the text, transformed by an effect of contamination into a riddle, perplexing and puzzling the unstable narrative voice and the reader alike. In other words, what is at stake here is the whole process of "understanding" and

"[making] some sense." All the framings of sense disappear here, blown to smithereens by a grammar that refuses any form of linear, segmented and ordered teleological thought. Just as grammatical categories seem, if not to disappear entirely, at least to become highly porous, the categories of "identity and designation" escape the frames of logic and assignation, as suggested by the succession of pronouns ("you, me, us,"), because if the commas seem to single each of them out, the fluctuating, when not altogether absent, referents deny identity and diffract designation. All forms of "boundaries" vanish, transforming the pronouns into sheer language and poetry, as suggested by the iambic rhythm that fleetingly passes through the text ("you, me, us, red and black in the evening light").

- 7 As for *The Water Cure*, the disjointed construction is clearly affirmed from beginning to end (if anything is to be taken for granted in a novel in which language keeps annihilating itself), going as far as to deny any systematic sense of closure or unit. No parts here, but sections that are separated (or sutured) by asterisks in a dynamic of disconnection. It is at once presented as fragmentary: "This work is not fragmented; it is fragments" (16). Saying that "it is fragments" suggests that there are no invisible seams binding the fragments together and creating a fabric of meaning, no leading thread likely to structure interpretation. On the contrary, those fragments that keep colliding into one another create movement, a chaotic movement for sure, but a movement that has several consequences. First, the usual categories that provide landmarks collapse from the first pages of the novel because the language itself is made of fragments, cut and sliced or perhaps re-shuffled into a foreign, illegible tongue ("Fragments. Frag-ments. Frags. Fr. m ents," 16), drawing attention to the semiotic nature of language, its irreducible written trace, but also its disconnection from meaning and the resistance it opposes to "the tightening of screws and the sketching of schema" (7).
- 8 Similarly, on a narrative level, the beginning of the story seems forever delayed, even suspended, as if the narrative itself were just one fragment among others, as if "the story, that ever-thickening center" (17), was growing from the middle. The first page contains a darker sheet of paper acting as a frame for a stroke of black paint or pencil. Underneath, three words, preceded by three dots: "...so we induce," while the next two pages contain only one word each: "and" and "find" and the following page seems to end with the three words "the arduous nowhere," what would appear to be an incomplete sentence. Fragments of speech are dispersed on the surface of four different pages, thereby isolating words or phrases that, although they reach a final full stop, leave induction in suspension. The initial conjunction, "so," is preceded by nothing and leads to nothing, "the arduous nowhere" that apparently invalidates any logic at work. What remains is a series of fragments which the reader articulates into a maimed sentence but which, perhaps, are nothing but contingent. The novel is based on a tension between disconnection and a will to articulate, the mastery of language and the indifference of the world to anything it contains.
- 9 As a result—and this is the second consequence of the movement induced by the collision of non-sequiturs—fragments create confusion and a sense of chaos for the reader, leading to literal nonsense, just as it does in *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell. This is achieved by the ambivalent nature of fragments, considered either as shreds of an original unit or as fragments *qua* fragments. In "See the Moon?" by Donald Barthelme, the narrative voice claims twice: "fragments are the only forms I trust." Such a

statement, jocular as it may be and a commentary on Barthelme's body of work as a whole, nonetheless echoes the assertion of Ishmael Kidder, the narrator of *The Water Cure*, that "the fragments of Heraclitus, just over a hundred, are important, if I may make that claim, in a way, simply because they are fragments" (20). In both cases, it underlines a predilection for the multiple over the singular, refusing to subsume under oneness the plurality of the fragments, therefore refusing any definite meaning, just as the voice in *The Water Cure* denies it any story: "The words on these pages are not the story. The words on these pages are not this story. The words on these pages are the words on these pages, no more no less, simply the words on these pages, one after another, one at the beginning and one at the end, bearing possibly some but probably no relation to each other" (48). If the "connective tissue" of the page brings those words together, it seems to do so literally, as signs that happen to be together on the page and only point to themselves as silent signs, as suggested by the tautological structure of the utterance. Thus, fragments are "forms," moving, indeterminate, scattered. They partake more of asymmetry and unpredictability than of harmony and balance. Saying "fragments are the only forms I trust" means also that all other forms are to be distrusted. Therefore, by contrast, totalities as well as organized discourses of any sort bringing together fragments of thoughts or *telling* a story are to be regarded with suspicion since they enclose and fix meaning.

The Tip of Sense

- 10 This entails a certain number of things. To start with, if truth there is, it is not to be found as an absolute, given as a whole. It does not partake of a metaphysical transcendence, but of an ever-changing flux of relations, encounters, affects that counter any idea of Truth or stable conception of Being. Or, to put it differently, Truth as absolute is a construction, a rationalization, as the narrator of the novel says, that provides an answer to a problem, solves it by finding a reason and a cause, a certain way to loop the loop, dot the i's and cross the t's so as to restore order when there is none. It is a careful putting together of fragments in order to produce truth or meaning, truth or meaning coming thereby to equate the coherence of a body whose limbs are all in their right places. To sum it up with French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, "Plato wants discourse to have the well-constituted body of a big animal, with head, stomach and tail. So all of us, good Platonists of long-standing, know, and don't know what a discourse *lacking a head and tail* would be, acephalic and aphallic. We know it's nonsense, but we don't know what to make of this 'non-sense'; we don't see past the tip of sense" (Nancy 14-15). In other words, discourse is seen here as an organic body whose limbs are adjusted to provide sense. But what happens when head or tail, fragments of the body, stay away from each other? What is there beyond what Nancy calls "the tip of sense"? Speaking of the "tip of sense" raises the question of limits, as if sense were some sort of horizon, a line delineating thought. It seems to be an ever-expanding limit, growing as it attempts to account for reality, striving, always, to aim at a unified, coherent vision. As opposed to that, claiming that fragments are the only forms to be trusted suggests that fragments have a life of their own, and that, gathering them into a coherent shape or discourse is a form of manipulation, a transformation bound to corrupt them and create something not trustworthy. Their very incoherence—in the sense both that they do not cohere and that they escape sense—might therefore be the warrant of their truth. In *The Water Cure*, truth is said to be "a matter

of believable narrative" (60), again a mere construction which does not hinge on an absolute or a form of transcendence, but on a manipulation of language, on a grammar likely, for example, to legitimize the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or torture at Guantanamo, two central references in Everett's novel.

- 11 Such a grammar not only constrains and frames, it also ascribes meaning, forcing sense into belief, equating sense with belief:

and how is it that humans will never abandon religion? It is because the meaning is in the grammar of it all, because the grammar seduces, the grammar lies, the grammar makes you think that sense is there, the grammar sleeps with Grampa and Grampa is the cat's bowwow, the slithy sounds of a walrus, an earwig, a Hardly Comfortable Earwig. Late in the backseat of camel night a ywlbqx is turned and breath is made flux and you are made audv. Ysuwu dwu pn ywlbqx lp vlbylnp. Final impson flingalnix pumpdinkle foist malrump of tricks. Cdh jeheun o najsb iii ooo eee djnkfl (99).

Grammar feeds on the logical ordering of syntax, of a body with head and tail, beginning and end. It appears as a simulacrum: "it makes you think that sense is there"; the word "trick" is the last readable one in the final sentence, which the reader cannot help but relate to Ishmael Kidder, a trickster in his own right perhaps. It is a form dictating content and category, a lure whose aim is to deceive (it seduces and lies). The whole passage points to the violence inherent in language, its tendency to impose (to "foist," to force by stealth or deceit maybe) meaning through grammar and syntax, as a means to establish power-relations or the absoluteness of institutions like religion.

- 12 But it also suggests that if sense there is it is elsewhere, not *there*. And it does so in two ways. First, by, in its turn, imposing a certain violence on language in obvious and more subtle ways. Subtlety is precisely and ironically provided by the grammar of the first sentence: by systematically using the definite article *the* before the noun *grammar*, the text insists on its grammatical nature as a common noun, whereas, if not followed by a possessive phrase, it generally goes without an article, a token that it is a notion, a category whose designation likens it to a name. By deciding to use the article here, the text undermines the all-powerful status of grammar, it becoming just a mere word as absurd as Grampa being the cat's bowwow. The second part of the extract (un)reads like a string of unpronounceable letters, which nonetheless retain a somewhat recognizable structure ("Sentences beg for structure," the text announces page 22) and oddly familiar unfamiliar sequences: capital letters begin what looks like sentences which in turn end with a full stop. Similarly, "words" like *pumpdinkle* might evoke pumpkins or nursery rhymes in their semantic or rhythmic patterns. Had not the recognizable words (camel, flux, night, final) been caught in a delirious assemblage, then the reader could have imagined that the final sentences were written in a language other than English. The other "words," if they signify, signify outside of the grammar of English, as if they were a foreign language literally inserting itself in the mother tongue. By offering an unreadable text, the words on the page achieve the disconnection between signs and meaning, the "butchering of language" the narrator reproaches the political powers of his country with, when language makes no sense because it is used as a tool for power. But they also enact the disconnection between signs and meaning in a more positive way, by transforming clusters of letters into signs "indifferent to the world [they] designate," bringing the letters back to their materiality on the page, a materiality that paradoxically evades any grasp since the letters escape the control of a unifying voice and remain silent on the page, "clear of

symbols, free of meaning" (69), of anything imposing meaning through the dubious faith in the transparency of words. The letters become then akin to the flycatcher recurrently mentioned in the novel, a mere presence which represents nothing:

In the garden the lovely flycatcher perches, watching as I deadhead the roses, plucking wilted petals in fistfuls and letting them float like messages to the dirt. The little bird casually studies my hand as it folds into a ball then fan-fingers out in some kind of idea perhaps. All the airish signic of her dipandump helpabit, and I have finally accepted her seat there on that spindly branch, her assiduous presence. She stretches out her wings, letting the sun bathe them, so that I can see her breast, see that her chest is clean of graffiti, clear of symbols, free of meaning. (68-69)

What takes place here is a physical reconnection with the world through a meaningless moment in which language does not seem to interfere. Sure, something happens within language—it is, after all, the only connection the reader has with the book—: analogy is used to compare petals to messages and to account for the narrator's gesture, as if the real was forever inaccessible without the mediation of images, of metaphors able alone to translate the world into something that can be shared. But here again, what prevails is the instability of signifiers, transformed as they are into something familiar and yet utterly alien when, for example, words are concatenated to form new graphic units based, perhaps, on the rhythms of sounds. "Airish," "signic" but even more "dipandump" and "helpabit" appear like variations on language, which, by blurring signifiers and signified, introduce movement again, but also a sense of place, of being there, an "assiduous presence" which resonates like a counterpoint to the "arduous nowhere" of the beginning of the novel.

- 13 What happens here is also a variation on sense. The whole novel questions meaning, especially in a world where the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the murder of the narrator's daughter have shattered to pieces the reassuring frames of a reality constructed by language. The world, designated several times as "topsyturvydom" no longer makes sense and the lies allowed by language do all but permit the advent of meaning, if meaning is understood as a "believable narrative" (60). Not only does the novel not provide a believable narrative because of all the incoherences and contradictions it contains, and also because the voice that inhabits it is polymorphous, multiple, ever-diffracting; it also defamiliarizes language to the point of excluding any definite interpretation. Gibberish and limericks abound, proposing either complete nonsense, or what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls "the plasticity of meaning, the impossibility to limit it, to fix it" (Lecercle 67), that is nonsense, "the contradiction between semantic void and hypercorrect syntax" (Lecercle 67-68). Whether syntax remains, as we have seen in the passage about grammar, or disappears to the benefit of disjointed strings of words ("[n]o I text am contains here in to it torture its this own man context" 198), what takes place is the birth of a foreign language that demands from the reader some kind of imagination to make sense, that in any case encapsulates contradictions and is never imposed or given. In the end, there is no deciding what is the true meaning of the narrator's rambling, and the reader is in the position of Ishmael Kidder who repeatedly says "I don't know" as a sign not only of his fundamental indecision but also more importantly as a clue to the fragmentation of the world, the impossibility to relate to the wholeness of being and of the world. Knowing and not knowing form the tension that keeps the characters in the two novels and the readers of those novels in a perplexed relation with the materiality of language. But it also appears as a form of thought, always in the making, never reaching any form of

certainty, balance or stability whatsoever. As one of the narrative voices of *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell puts it:

I guess it's the nature of human beings. People need something to explain the big bad world out there. Not knowing is not acceptable. Now, I'm going to say something profound. Just giving you a bit of warning. I don't want it to be missed. It's only when we can accept our cluelessness about the world that we can approach the manifestation of the inexhaustibility of ignorance and that is art. Did you write this down? Don't bother. If it turns out to be true then I will only negate what I'm trying to say.

No doubt.

Listen, I've spent my whole life trying to make something I don't understand. Now I'm just trying to make a good coma. And *coma* spelled backward is *amoc*, which doesn't mean a damn thing. (210)

In a novel in which everything runs on the surface, the "profound" words of the dying man sound all the more ironic since they keep turning upon themselves, spelling themselves backward and therefore not only annihilating themselves but also opening up to an always diffracted meaning. Spelling *coma* backward, as if seen in a mirror, results in "sense that sounds like nonsense" (209) but also in sense running amok, whose meaning demands from the reader that they accept not knowing. It is perhaps indeed in this not-knowing that meaning resides, in convulsive thought that resists confinement within the boundaries of knowledge, in what Jean-Luc Nancy calls "not-knowing, nothing less than the whole experience of thought" (Nancy 32). This is also the way Henri Meschonnic defines thought, "as an adventure, entirely different from what we call knowledge." He adds, "it is easily understandable that thought is unbearable to knowledge. Thought is untimely or it isn't. And this is why it is an adventure" (69-70).

- 14 Thought is here indeed an adventure, a collision of fragments that are as many utterances that refuse to form a well-proportioned all-enclosing body. It is unhinged in the sense that it refuses fixed forms and it keeps re-configuring itself along lines of flight that while refusing any definite interpretation allow for experimentation. By inviting the reader to step—or not—into a world in which conjunction and articulation are disrupted all along, the text favors a plan of immanence, in a gesture that dismantles categories and transcendent imperatives. And yet, I would like to come back to conjunction. Perhaps it is this very defiance for categories that links together American literature *and* the philosophical, this idea that they were always not two sides of a coin, but two fragments, albeit monumental, likely to give birth to thought or to contribute to American thought under its varied and fluctuating forms, far from walled-in alternative truths or facts.

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ABSTRACTS

The Water Cure and *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* are two of Percival Everett's novels that most overtly intertwine literature and the philosophical. They do so not so much by promoting philosophical theories as by putting to the fore that the literary text is a mode of becoming, a gesture of thought. By experimenting with language and form, these two novels participate in the advent of thought and meaning.

The Water Cure et *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* sont deux romans de Percival Everett dans lesquels littérature et philosophie ne forment qu'un corps écrit qui se dessine non tant dans l'exposition et l'exploitation de théories philosophiques que dans l'exhibition du texte littéraire comme mode de devenir et geste de pensée. En expérimentant avec le langage et les formes narratives, ces deux romans font advenir la pensée et le sens.

INDEX

Keywords: Everett (Percival), American literature, philosophical gesture, fragments, meaning

Mots-clés: Everett (Percival), littérature américaine, geste philosophique, fragments, sens

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