

Imagining

Language

An

Anthology

edited by

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Clinamen

At a key moment in De rerum natura Lucretius draws the analogy between atoms and letters. In Book One he explains: "basic bodies take a certain structure, / And have defined positions, and exchange / Their blows in certain ways. The same bodies, / With only a slight change in their structure, / Are capable of forming wood or fire. / Like letters in the words for these same things, / Ignes and lignum: with slight transpositions, / They can be nominated 'flames,' or 'beams' [or, in another translation, 'fires' and 'firs']. Atoms then are to bodies what letters are to words: heterogeneous, deviant, and combinatory.

The cause of these minor transpositions Lucretius ascribes to the atomic law of the clinamen (called parenklisis by Epicurus in his Letter to Herodotus). The clinamen refers to the minimal swerve of an atom in laminar flow. In contrast to Democritus's earlier deterministic model of an invariant vertical fall, Lucretius's theory installs the random declination of the atoms as its basic law. As he explains in Book Two, the descending atoms suddenly and randomly swerve, and without this clinamen nature would never have created anything. Atomic collision then is both inevitable and unpredictable, occurring in "a time smaller than the minimum of thinkable time," and "differ[ing] from nothingness by the smallest possible margin." As the being-of-movement, the clinamen becomes apparent to itself only in the disappearance of stabilities. Like a slip of the tongue, the clinamen is less a performance than a happening.¹

The implications of Lucretius's analogy precipitate a major rethinking of the stability of the verbal sign. Conceived as atoms, letters are events strictly defined by their dynamics, and being perpetually volatile they introduce deviance as the basic rule of all grammata. Julia Kristeva (who has elaborated a need for "semanalyse" as the analysis of microparticles of linguistic fallout) describes such graphic manifestations as "assemblages of signifying, phonic, and scriptural atoms, flying from word to word, creating in this way unsuspected and unconscious connections among the elements of discourse." The unpredictable swerve of the letter from the syntactic and grammatical flow not only invalidates the notion of a fixed, "inert" meaning but also fulfills, in the domain of language, that philosophic desire of Novalis for a systemlessness within all systems.²

Lucretius commemorates sequentiation and dispersion—"a sum, but not a whole" according to Gilles Deleuze. "Nature is not attributive, but rather conjunctive: it expresses itself through 'and,' and not through 'is'. . . . Nature, to be precise, is power. In the name of this power things exist one by one, without any possibility of their being gathered together all at once." It is a question of particulate drift leading to moebian complexities, which Jean-François Lyotard insists are "not a matter of separation, but on the contrary, of movement, of displaceability on the spot." Daniel Defoe consolidates this at the

alphabetic level as proof of divine providence, "so the capital sounds of 24 Letters are capable of innumerable reflux [solely] by Divine Inspiration."

The Lucretian equation has an important historical modification in Giordano Bruno's claim that atoms are to bodies what strokes and dots are to letters. Bruno effectively reduces the minimal vector of the clinamen from a swerve in primary articulation (i.e., a deviation and difference among letters) to a gestural declination of the preletteristic mark. Bruno's graphic atom organizes semantic states by a simple, subletteristic stroke that would, for instance, transform the letter I into the letter T. A comparable minimum, the rotation of a dot around the letter in Francis Lodwick's *New Writing* (in "Transpositions," p. 220 above), serves to indicate verb tense, but the impracticality of this elegant solution is in the detail. A period marking the end of a sentence is visible in part because it affirms what the syntax provides; but a similarly minuscule indicator circulating around letters is harder to see to the degree that it must signify exclusively on its own. The particularities in Lodwick's system verge on the microscopic.

Before the advent of the microscope it was not easily imagined that the constitutive particles of things were so animated. Is it possible to entertain a link between the development of microscopic awareness and the frenzy of etymological speculation that, in the wake of the demise of universal language schemes, became a predominant feature of linguistics in the nineteenth century? Where the word had been conceived as the minimal thinkable unit, words now gave way to animation in a letteristic micro-pedic prodigality, and the atomistic panorama of etymology eventually impinged on poetry. Paul Valéry, confronting Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*, saw the words as "atoms of time that serve as the germs of infinite consequences lasting through psychological centuries." The spaciousness evoked here is a reminder that, in Epicurean cosmology, the contextual prerequisite of atoms is a void. We might say by analogy that void is to atoms what space and difference are to letters. Mallarmé's spacing in *Un coup de dés* solicits—as integral to the experience and the eventual dice-throw of the poem—the backing of that void (the ground of emergent figures) through which the letteristic swerves disseminate.

In twentieth-century vanguard poetry, Russian *zaum* or "beyonsense" is an extension of the principle of clinamen, dislodging the crust of social sediment to uncover fossil poetry in the rudiments, like Thoreau's return to the furnace of creation on the railway sand bank thawing in Walden, or Pound's vision (by way of Fenollosa) of Chinese hieroglyphs as primal signatures. Corollary is Jean Cocteau's claim that a literary masterpiece is no more than the alphabet in disorder. The Futurist poet Kruchenykh's practice of "shifology" extends the clinamen to his native Russian, a language rich in affixes and polysyllabic words. Vladimir Markov provides as example the phrase "gromy lomayut" (thunders break), where the italicized phonemes combine in the word *mylo* or "soap."³ Such letteristic dislocations and recombinations are also integral to the Kabbalistic practice of *Temurah*, and Lucretius himself writes of hooked atomic structures. As we discuss in the preface to "Cosmology" (p. 328), Kabbalah is the tradition most emphatic in preserving the ancient linkage of cosmological speculation with a theory of language, and it is not surprising to find one of the most influential of modern critical rhapsodists

(Harold Bloom) deriving an interpretive system from a gnostic kabbalism that reserves a place for the Epicurean law of the atom.

The ancient art of rhetoric tacitly envisioned language as an inertia from which words need to be nudged, jolted out of their accustomed signifying plummet, inducing a salutary perturbation. That the clinamen falls into the general category of tropes is obvious. Bloom calls the trope "a willing error, a turn from literal meaning in which a word or phrase is used in an improper sense wandering from its rightful place." A trope is a turn (taking a turn, entering the dance); tropology is atomic swerveature; and the clinamen specifically is "an initial error because nothing can be in its proper place." It is just such a minute interpolation that provoked a riot in Paris in 1895, inspiring W. B. Yeats to proclaim the appearance of "the savage god" as he watched the eruption consequent upon Alfred Jarry's Père Ubu, in which Ubu steps on stage and proclaims "merdre." It is hard to tell whether it was the near-appearance of the word "shit" in public that scandalized, or the clinamen that introduced an extra τ , a gratuitous but portentous supplement to an already offensive signifier. In any case, Jarry's attraction to the clinamen is clear, for as a law governing the exception rather than the rule, the Lucretian swerve is a 'pataphysical phenomenon par excellence. Jarry, in fact, installs the clinamen along with syzygy (an astronomical term referring to a temporary planetary conjunction or opposition) as the two governing concepts in 'pataphysical method.⁴

The Lucretian legacy begets a sense of the letter as both "precise" and "inexact"; the atom-letter is libido without organ, both slave and master, compliant component and maverick particle in one. In such a system writing functions in general like Thoreau's figure of the saunterer, "sans terre" in his speculative etymology, wandering afield not astray, like Walt Whitman's casual persona loafing at ease in the opening of "Song of Myself," declaring that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The psychological profile appropriate to such a prospect is what Freud calls a "wandering signification," Bedeutungswandel. The importance of flexibility in the system is paramount. Georges Perec, although compliant with Oulipo's compositional procedures, argues that "the system of constraints—and this is important—must be destroyed. It must not be rigid; there must be some play in it; it must, as they say, 'creak' a bit; it must not be completely coherent; there must be a clinamen—it's from Epicurean atomic theory. 'The world functions because from the outset there is a lack of balance.' According to Paul Klee, 'Genius is the error in the system'."

Nathaniel Mackey interprets the noise of the Dogon shuttle that produces speech (see Griaule in "Cosmology," p. 372 above) as "the noise upon which the word is based, the discrepant foundation of all coherence and articulation, of the purchase upon the world fabrication affords." A "refractive obliquity," the creaking of the word testifies to the "fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world"; its dissonance is "an opening, an opportune alarm sounded against presumed equivalence, presumed assurances of unequivocal fit." To return to a Lucretian vocabulary, by its creak the word announces its creative impairment, the paradoxical endowment of a disfiguration or

swerve, the enabling clinamen of its deviation from the norm, from semantic destiny. "We may come, touch and go, from atoms and ifs but we're presurely destined to be odd's without ends."

The atomic descent of atoms transposed to the moral metaphysics of the Bible results in a fall—an itinerary of dejection reinscribed by Freud's practice of the analytic case (der Fall in German) in his preoccupation with the indispensable if repressed detail. But the detail need not always mark a negation; its descent is not necessarily an expulsion. The serendipitous duplication of phonemes within a language, and from one language to another, affords a deviant parasitic ingenuity. It is in the character of the letter—in its subordinate role as a kind of geological sediment within the word—to be overlooked, a condition allegorized by Jacques Lacan in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" (epistolary in Poe's tale). Derrida characterizes Lacan's version as an "atomistic topology of the signifier" and, after remarking the detective Dupin's mention of Epicurean atomism, Derrida addresses the letter in the errancy of its transit: "The divisibility of the letter . . . is what chances and sets off course, without guarantee of return, the remaining [restance] of anything whatsoever: a letter does not always arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting." Derrida's own analytic method is to drift or wander from topos to topos, citation to citation, by means of the errant conduits provided in homonyms and puns that collapse meanings—a method notably aligned with the clinamen in "My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies."

"A lapsus is revealing in the sense that it gives another truth its chance." The paradigmatic lapse or slip for Jacques Derrida is the graphic mark, the exemplary duplicity of the letter. A mark is a singularity, but one that can be re-marked in stereotypic reallocation to another position, another role: "the identity of a mark is also its difference and its differential relation, varying each time according to context, to the network of other marks. The ideal iterability that forms the structure of all marks is that which undoubtedly allows them to be released from any context"—and this "essential insignificance" is what enables each mark "to divide itself and to give rise to the proliferation of other ideal identities. Iterability is what allows a mark to be used more than once. It is more than one. It multiplies and divides itself internally. This imprints the capacity for diversion within its very movement. In the destination . . . there is thus a principle of indetermination, chance, luck, or of destinerring." Derrida's well-known concept of "différance" names the narrow margin by which one meaning is differentiated from another in generative swerve or "atomistique." The clinamen is also basic to any event of citation, for any sign when placed between quotation marks "can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion." The action of the clinamen is covert but central in Derrida's detection of the generalized equivocation of a writing in Finnegans Wake which, "no longer translating one language into another on the basis of their common cores of sense, circulates throughout all languages at once, accumulates their energies, actualizes their most secret consonances,

discloses their furthest common horizon, cultivates their associative syntheses instead of avoiding them, and rediscovers the poetic value of passivity."

Liotard clarifies what it is in the passive declination of the swerve that is pertinent to writing, exhorting us "to love inscription not because it communicates and contains, but through what its production necessitates, not because it channels, but because it drifts." Lyotard illuminates the riverrun commencement of *Finnegans Wake*, emphasizing the stream within atomic drift. "Derivatio [diverting] is not simply leaving a shore, but diverting a rivus [stream], a course, a fluidity. Where it goes we were not going. . . . What joy if ripa [shore] were derived from rivus, if this were the streaming which determined the shore! The shore of the stream, of the ocean, displaces itself along with it." For Lyotard, drifting enacts not only the supreme Odyssean condition but "by itself is the end of all critique."

This drifting of the *clinamen* also manifests itself in the quotidian and performative, finding expression in the everyday practices of both the Surrealists and the Situationist International (SI). The atomic motion of the *clinamen* informs the latter's method of *dérive* (literally "drifting"), employed in the urban interventions and manifestations of the SI throughout the 1960s. Guy Debord, a founding theorist of the SI, describes the *dérive* as "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances." The *dérive* is a "psychogeographical method" in which "one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." The Situationist *dérive* is clearly inspired by the ambulatory automatism of the Surrealists who in turn were indebted to Baudelaire's *flâneur*, a figure itself inspired by Poe's story "A Man of the Crowd." (This chain of indebtedness is salutary evidence of the *clinamen's* initiatory power.) André Breton described the street, "with its disturbances and its glances [as] my own true element. There I partook, as nowhere else . . . of the wind of circumstance." In Sadie Plant's words, "Surrealism had invoked a world of floating encounters through which the hunter of marvels drifts according to whim and desire."

For Andrew Lang, the *clinamen* underlies the structure of the great mythical theme that he calls the "separable force," that partial object which, detached and appropriated, bestows power on the thief (the lock of Samson's hair, for instance); a "revolution of voluptuousness, the physics of Venus chosen over that of Mars," according to Michel Serres. "The minimal angle of turbulence produces the first spirals here and there. It is literally revolution. Or it is the first evolution toward something else other than the same. Turbulence perturbs the chain, troubling the flow of the identical as Venus has troubled Mars." Such a turn to pleasure is a turning aside or deflection of the martial, rectilinear free-fall of atoms in unalleviated void. This charged space summons a sensual manifold and a disturbing static, which Michel Pierssens depicts as an insect proliferation: "Words form swarms which a mysterious Eros reassembles and destroys." An erotic distraction is punctuated by the downbeat and the blue note, the contaminating stutter with its weird eloquence: *duende* in flamenco, deep blues of the Mississippi Delta. Catherine Clément calls it "syncope":

The queen of rhythm, syncope is also the mother of *dissonance*; it is the source, in short, of a harmonious and productive discord. The process allows some limping before the harmony, however: it is sometimes said that syncope "attacks" the weak beat, like an enzyme, a wild-cat, or a virus; and yet the last beat is the saving one. Attack and haven, collision; a fragment of the beat disappears, and of this disappearance, rhythm is born.

A disturbing but informing particularity, the clinamen is swerve as inclination, initiating the body's erotic profundity. Roland Barthes makes a distinction in his Epicurean summa, The Pleasure of the Text, that clarifies this rapture of the swerve: "The word can be erotic on two opposing conditions, both excessive: if it is extravagantly repeated, or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness." Like the plummeting atom, the word pronounces its eros (the secret pattern of its inherence)⁵ in its tropisms. The written consignment of the word is an erotic envelope inviting habitation. To despatch a letter (in the epistolary sense) is to provoke an opening, a release and unfolding. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, recalling the staging of desire in the story of Eros and Psyche, sees that "the word is a Psyche. The living word does not signify an object, but freely chooses, as though for a dwelling place, this or that objective significance, materiality, some beloved body. And around the thing the word hovers freely, like a soul around a body that has been abandoned but not forgotten."

J. J. G. Wilkinson, the Swedenborgian homeopathist of Victorian London, is also an expositor of the Lucretian swerve as amative synthesis of human relations: "We come [by clinamen] to mind, to inclination, desire, love, in the atoms, to a mutual recognition and appreciation; very near to a cosmical heart and intellect as their sum. Atoms with such a sidling and slope and attraction and final adhesion to their fellows, are clearly prophecies of wills and understandings, of men and women, in fact of Darby and Joan who are their ultimate outcome." Joan and Darby are names of amatory attractors as well; and suitably, Lucretius's poem is dedicated to Venus Procreatrix. The clinamen atomorum is also the clinamen amatorum, and voluntas is voluptas ("That will [voluntas] we wrest from the fates/Enables us to follow our pleasure [voluptas]"): swerve as inclination and precipitous ("catastrophic") attraction. Lucretius calls Venus alma ("nourishing," "giving increase"), connoting an organic cycle of birth and growth to maturity, attributing this procreative power to the material atoms themselves (which he calls "seeds" and "engendering bodies"), in effect gendering and eroticizing Epicurean atomic theory. Venus alma is even installed in wordplay (that clinamen par excellence) when Lucretius puns upon matter (materies) and mother (mater): "If each thing hadn't its own matter, how could a mother be the same as her issue?"

Michel Pierssens writes of language as "a chaos of atoms in which the clinamen-desire brings forth the figures of the World, the meaning of a universe for a Subject. This reveals the infinity of meaning, which desire will henceforth pursue, like an enticement which it has created for itself, throughout an interminable text which it invents in order to effect the reunion with itself which it will forever be

denied." *The path of the subject through the validating field of the other is a dialectic familiar to Freud, and theorized as a letter ("insistent" in the unconscious) by Lacan. But by linking desire and love to the clinamen, Pierssens restores the deviant individual to a pleroma of errancy; and as Roland Barthes says, "errantry does not align—it produces iridescence: what results is the nuance."*

1 "God created the world not by the logos but by a slip of the tongue. . . . To create the world it needed six slips of the tongue." In this bold revisioning of Genesis, Geoffrey Hartman underscores the creative potential within parapraxis, which in itself is indicative of an aberrant potential in the letter.

2 Novalis argued for a true philosophical insight that would introduce systemlessness (*Systemlosigkeit*) into a system. Only such a system, whose literary expression is irony and whose generic manifestation is the fragment, "can avoid the mistakes of the system and be related neither to injustice nor to anarchy." Emmanuel Levinas offers a more memorable variant when citing the Portuguese proverb "God writes straight by crooked lines."

3 Russian Futurists were not alone in exploiting the humorous potential of the clinamen. As we see in Jarry (or in Charlie Chaplin for that matter), the slippage of the clinamen is a source of hilarity. Tobias Smollett also exploits the fictive and humorous potential of this atomistic model in *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769), where an adventurous atom speaks from within the brain of Nathaniel Peacock, haberdasher in St. Giles, who not surprisingly "began to think [him]self insane" on first discovering the fact of the solitary atomus loquens. Smollett exploits the incipient host-parasite relation of constituent atom and Cartesian cogito to produce a Rabelaisian fiction of contemporary social and political satire.

4 Syzygy is adopted by Jarry as the basic rule for writing. A "word must transfix a momentary conjunction or opposition of meanings"; but it also can suggest a "crystalline form . . . emerg[ing] at intervals out of the random movements of the cosmos"—a concept more familiar to us now as fractal. We might mention in passing that Bloom credits Jarry as his source for the term clinamen.

5 And the word *eros* would be anagrammatized as *rose* and *sore* were English the language of Kabbalistic *Temurah*.

Lucretius
From *De Rerum Natura*

For the *same* Seeds compose both Earth and Seas,
The Sun, and Moon, Fruits, Animals, and Trees,
But their *contexture*, or their *motion* disagrees.
So in my Verse are Letters *common* found
To many *words* unlike in sense and sound;
Such great variety bare change affords
Of order ith' few Elements of Words.

*

And hence, as We discours'd before, we find
It matters much with what first Seeds are joynd,
Or how, or what position they maintain,
What motion give, and what receive again:
And that the Seeds remaining still the same,
Their order chang'd, of wood are turn'd to flame.
Just as the *letters* little change affords
Ignis and *Lignum*, two quite different words.

*

But now my *Muse*, how proper *Objects* please
The other *Senses*, sing; tis told with ease:
First then, we *sounds*, and voice, and noises hear;
When *Seeds* of sound come in, and *strike* the Ear:
All *Sound* is *Body*, for with painful force
It moves the sense, when with an eager course
It scrapes the jaws, and makes the Speaker hoarse:
The *crowding* Seeds of Sound, that strive to goe
Thro narrow Nerves, do grate in passing thro:
Tis certain then that *Voice*, that thus can wound,
Is all *material*; *Body* every *sound*.

Besides tis known, to talk a tedious day,
How much it weakens, what it takes away
From all the Nerves, how all the powers decay;

But chiefly if tis loud, and spoke with noise,
And therefore little Bodies frame the voice:
Because the Speaker looseth of his own;
His weakness tells him many parts are gone:
But more; the *Harshness* in a voice proceeds
From *Rough*, the *Sweetness* from the *Smoother* Seeds,
Nor are the *Figures* of the Seeds *alike*,
Which from the *grave* and murmuring *Trumpet* strike,
To *those* of *dying Swans*, whose latest breath
In mournful strains laments approaching Death:

This *voice* when rising from the Lungs, it breaks
Thro jaws and lips, and all the *passion* speaks,
The *Tongue* forms into *words*, with curious Art,
The *Tongue*, and *Lips* do fashion every part,
And therefore if the *Speaker* be but *near*,
If distance *fit*, you may distinctly hear
Each Word, each Air, because it keeps the *frame*
It first receiv'd, its *figure* still the same:

But if the Space be *great*, thro all the Air
The sound must fly diffus'd, and perish there:
And therefore tho we hear a murmuring noise;
No words, the Air confounds, and breaks the Voice,

Besides, *one* sentence when pronounc'd aloud
By strong lung'd *Cryers* fills the listning Croud,
Breaks into *many*, for it strikes them all,
To every *single* Ear it tels the Tale;

But some parts of the Voice, that miss the Ear,
Fly thro the Air *diffus'd* and perish there:
Parts strike on *solid* buildings, and restor'd
Bring back again the *Image* of the Word.

*

But now since *Organs* fit, since *Voice*, and *Tongue*,
By *Nature's* gift bestow'd, to *Man* belong,
What wonder is it then, that *man* should frame,
And give each *different Thing* a *different Name*?
Since *Beasts* themselves do make a *different noise*,
Opprest by pains and fear, or *brisk* with joys.

*

Well then, since *Beasts* and *Birds*, tho *dumb*,
commence
As various *voices*, as their various *sense*;
How easie was it then for *men* to frame,
And give each *different Thing* a *different Name*.

Translated by Thomas Creech