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Harbors of Resonance

The Peripatetic Scholar At-Home

Erschienen in: Wohnen | Dwelling

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Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,
die da träumen fort und fort
und die Welt hebt an zu singen,
triffst du nur das Zauberwort.

— Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff,
“Wünschelrute”

Doch uns ist gegeben,
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,
Es schwinden, es fallen
Die leidenden Menschen
Blindlings von einer
Stunde zur andern,
Wie Wasser von Klippe
Zu Klippe geworfen,
fahrlang ins Ungewisse hinab.

— Friedrich Hölderlin,
“Hyperions Schicksalslied”

A soft deconstructive paradox rests at the heart of the self-conception and being of the peripatetic scholar who is at peace with their lot in life: they call no institution home yet whatever institution where they work, where they teach, write, read, and forge relationships, becomes an institutional home. Who is this peripatetic scholar? They are the expat in Asia who has taught as a lecturer at three universities in ten years; they are the adjunct who works at a business school in one city and the local community college in another; they are the early career scholar on their second visiting assistant professorship.

This kind of at-home peripatetic scholar – not exactly synonymous with the academic precariat (a subset, perhaps) – performs an admittedly perverse inversion of Jacques Derrida’s “classic” deconstruction. As elaborated in works from the 1960s and early 1970s – most programmatically *De la grammatologie* (1967)¹ – Derrida’s intellectual project: (1) identified the Western-ethnocentric privileging of presence, of immediacy, centeredness, and sameness; (2) demonstrated how such presupposed presence was in fact predicated on absence, on deferral, disjointedness, and difference. For Derrida, presence ipso facto did not exist. It was an illusion, the flickering interplay between a (falsely) presumed presence and an actual absence, a textual *fort/da* that Derrida, in addition to “deconstruction,” also called *trace*, *différance*, *supplément* and a host of other neologisms.

Derrida would have rejected the view that a peripatetic scholar (or anyone) could be at-home. In fact, he made it clear over the course of his storied career that, for him, we are *always-already not-at-home*. Alienness, for Derrida, incessantly haunts, or rather, lies, waiting to be unearthed via deconstruction, behind claims of presence, of being-at-home. At the core of Derridean existence, therefore, our manner of living and thinking is never strictly “domestic” or restricted to a specific locality, but occupied by foreignness; an economy between externality and internality disrupts (“deconstructs”) both sides of the ethnocentric opposition. At this point – that is, in the early third millennium – and in the place where I write – central Europe – the ethical and political ramifications of this Derridean deconstructive interpretive strategy should be obvious, familiar to any Western academic and/or intellectual: “to deconstruct,” à la Derrida, is to attend, listen, to the “Other” and “Otherness” that is (often violently) repressed or effaced by the Western ethnocentric favoring of (the in-fact illusion of) presence.

In the face of Derrida’s formidable deconstructive formulations, is it really defensible to maintain that peripatetic scholars are at-home in whatever institution they dwell? Is the typical (and worn-out) academico-political deconstruction of presence wholly applicable to this situation? Unlike refugees or migrant workers, who face extremely precarious and often dangerous situations, this class of academic, in my experience and of my “generation,” indeed lives in a kind of permanent state of crisis, but, occasionally, experiences a reprieve from the distress of precarity, moments of resonance, when dwelling at institutions.

Now, contending that peripatetic scholars can be, however briefly, at-home at an institution-that-they-only-pass through may not be a wholly defensible position, philosophically or otherwise. Such a contention (hope?) might very well be a fantasy generated by a certain type of privilege; it also might be purely a condition of survival,

which alone could validate the feeling of being at-home. Perhaps a useful lens for this all is one Lauren Berlant formulated while exploring other individuals and groups more than a decade ago: peripatetic scholars likely harbor(ed) “cruel optimism,” “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility,” with the object of our desire – a good life in the academy – helping fashion a fantasy that is, thanks to capitalism’s brutal assault on higher education, no longer possible.² Peripatetic scholars’ cruel optimism is/was thus likely self-destructive: that tenure-track position is never coming their way, and holding out, hope against hope, for it is “an obstacle to...flourishing,” hindering the very thing that motivated the initial quest – the good (academic) life.³

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To be sure, awareness of such a loss may be psychically catastrophic, destroying any reason for pursuing “The Life of the Mind.” Nonetheless, what if the very letting go of such optimism is what has helped the peripatetic scholar nurture their being-at-home? This “letting go” would be similar to practicing the ancient Chinese concept *Wu wei* (無為), usually translated into English as “effortless action” or “doing nothing,” though maybe it’s better understood as “inexertion.”⁴ Or, for those Occidental-minded readers, maybe it’s like practicing Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, a “releasement” beyond the “domain of the will.”⁵ Go with the flow; lose yourself in focused intensity; become like the bending of a reed in the wind. Perhaps while modulating their being-in-the-world in these ways is exactly how the peripatetic scholar “makes” themselves at-home. Here, Heidegger is, again, helpful: dwelling, he suggests, is to be positioned in a specific relationship with existence that is characterized by having an arrangement of perspicuity and being at peace with what surrounds, enabling the world *to be* as it *is*.⁶ Rather than projecting themselves into an imagined future, the peripatetic scholar-at-home dwells, however temporarily, at institutions. Such acts of overcoming Derridean deconstruction seem to involve nurturing a presence-to-self, cultivating a centeredness through “releasement” (or *Wu wei*). Does giving up hope for a permanent scholarly home, a professional future, thus ironically allow for a scholar to be-at-home?

If the answer is yes, well, that’s a tall order for the average academic, especially so for one committed to their scholarly identity. Why? Practicing *Gelassenheit*, a “doing without doing,” runs counter to most of the virtues and skills scholars are trained to value and hone: advancing knowledge by intervening into debates and positions, increasing the fabrication and ingestion of as well as options and opportunities for professional connections, fighting for and accumulating (scarce) funds, etc. In addition, the scholarly persona exemplifies aspects of what Hartmut Rosa describes as the modern experience of social acceleration, which rewards the *amassing of resources* and maintenance of an *antagonistic confrontation with the world*.⁷ The result, as Rosa writes: “Modernity’s escalatory imperatives...make their presence felt...as imperatives of reification.”⁸ The peripatetic scholar’s current or former cruel optimism, that hope for a good life in the academy and need to amass intellectual goods, might be but a very modern experience indeed. Perpetual dissatisfaction, incessant churning out of publications, treatment of colleagues as a means to a professional end – all leads to further alienation.

And all of this unsettles the self-conception and being-at-home of the scholar at peace with their present, sundering the “vibrating wire” around which the scholar as well as the persons, places, undertakings, things, and instruments intermingle and transform one another. Here, I’m reminded of Roland Barthes’ reading, in *L’empire des signes* (1970), of how the Japanese use chopsticks:

Dans tous ces usages, dans tous les gestes qu’elle implique, la baguette s’oppose à notre couteau... elle est l’instrument alimentaire qui refuse de couper, d’agripper, de mutiler, de percer... par la baguette, la nourriture n’est plus une proie, à quoi l’on fait violence, (viandes sur lesquelles on s’acharne), mais une substance harmonieusement transférée; elle transforme la matière préalablement divisée en nourriture d’oiseau et le riz en flot de lait.⁹

Chopsticks, for Barthes, don’t “deconstruct” objects/targets; they nourish harbors of resonance and the transformations they permit and prompt.

It is moments of resonance between peripatetic scholar and institution that helps the scholar – fleetingly – escape burdensome commitments imposed by social acceleration, such as the demand for feverish intellectual growth and innovative scholarship. When, here and there, dogged by neither the normal professional longings nor the common fears of precarity, a tranquility, one that outmaneuvers assassins of resonance, transpires beyond the debilitating effects caused by pursuing the fantasy of the academic good life. This harbor of resonance between peripatetic scholar and institution seems to orient the scholar toward an “un-deconstructed” notion of “home,” one that cultivates presence-to-self in a suitable physical structure – that is, continuity, privacy, self-expression and individuality, social relationships, and warmth. I call to mind now, how, when writing, reading, or building intellectual friendships at the *Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen*, a vibrating wire materialized between myself and the *KWI*. Letting – instead of forcing – events and interactions to occur cultivates this resonance, and this resonance allows for more opportunities to cultivate an “at-homeness”: whether a chance conversation in the hall, in which an unexpected common interest or parallels projects emerge or getting in the zone and lost in intense bouts of reading and writing – these moments are co-created and co-alter us.

And yet, another question emerges: might it be that the peripatetic scholar’s “normal” state of alienation from the academic good life – that is, stressors that “thingify” teaching and research and dismantle permanent institutional homes – is a *prerequisite* for the development of harbors of resonance that cultivate being-at-homeness?¹⁰ For, it seems that without estrangement, without the familiarity of foreignness, the peripatetic scholar cannot experience its obverse: the adaptive transformations that resonance nurtures. Not exclusively “deconstruction,” but a negotiation – a generative *fort/da* – between poles of existence, between “real presence” and absence, that helps adjust the peripatetic scholar to a self-conception and being-at-home. The academic good life may never arrive, but we may briefly dwell in harbors of resonance at institutions like the *KWI*.

References

1. See Jacques Derrida (1967): *De la grammatologie*, Les Éditions de Minuit.
2. Lauren Berlant (2011): *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 24.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
4. Edward Slingerland (2000): *Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wuwei*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:2, p. 293-327, particularly 294-298.
5. See B. W. Davis (2007): *Heidegger and the will: On the way to Gelassenheit*, Northwestern University Press.
6. See Martin Heidegger, (1993): *Building Dwelling Thinking*, trans. by A. Hofstadter, in D. F. Krell (ed.) *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, London: Routledge, p. 217 – 65.
7. Hartmut Rosa, 2013 [2005]: *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. and introduced by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, New York: Columbia University Press.
8. Hartmut Rosa (2019): *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. James C. Wagner, Cambridge: Polity Press.
9. Roland Barthes (1984): *L'empire des signes*, Albert Skira: Flammarion, p. 27.
10. Rosa, *Resonance*, p. 247.

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