

Syllabus II

THE OPPOSITE OF NOW

I.

For months now, I have been repeating this phrase to myself. Or what I had *thought* to be this phrase, which turned out, in fact, to be its opposite. What I had been saying to myself, in my head and out loud, was: *the opposite of the future*. Imagine my consternation, sitting down to write and realising I had fundamentally misunderstood the task to the extent that I had mentally supplanted the subject of the sentence with its antonym. Though to be fair, I thought, staring at the page, blank but for its title, the sentence is not quite complete. There is no predicate or modifier. It is just a phrase; a dependent clause. One could then perhaps forgive the words for acting upon themselves: *opposite*, a noun, verbs *now*, the subject, into the future, and back, and beyond. For it is always the opposite shore that beckons; the fragment that frustrates and asks to be completed.

And of course opposites come in degrees. Now could also be later, eventually, or even — the past. Though the latter, the later — the furthest back — seems too finite for something that ribbons and unfolds in such curious eddies.

2.

In *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle says, and I don't believe him, *at the deepest level of being you are one with all that is*. My mother gave me this book for Christmas, having forgotten she already gifted a copy of it to me years ago; the power of now being so powerful that it occludes memory. I have not read this book, though it sits next to my bed, sandwiched between Emily Witt's *Future Sex: A New Kind of Free Love*, which I like but cannot identify with, and William Finnegan's *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*. I try to read democratically, but each night find myself in the wake of Finnegan's waves, whose preface reads: *He had become so caught up in building sentences that he had almost forgotten the barbaric days when thinking was like a splash of colour landing on a page.*¹

Live in the moment, my mother is always saying. But writerly subjectivity is a difficult beast: it demands that one be present, while also at a distance, in order to glean meaningful critical insights from one's own life and behaviours. Writing eschews the now so as to understand it more wholly, and to preserve it in full for all the future nows that will inevitably arrive, time marching on as it does. Language is an elegy for all the nows that pass me by as I sit here trying to give word to these thoughts.

3.

I have a loud neighbour. She lives upstairs. I can hear her as she walks across the floor. No, I can hear her as she *pounds* across the floor. She bangs; she tramps, stamps, careers. I have seen her in person and I have observed that for such a slight and slender woman, she carries herself with inordinate heaviness, heels beating patterns fast and erratic across the wooden boards. Each time — sitting at my desk, lost in words and thought — the noise jolts me out of the present. My mind ricochets uncontrollably into the future and runs through all the things I have not done, have yet to do, and might never, and my skin starts to crawl.

In these moments I sometimes hear a loud humming noise. Although it passes, after a time; it has passed. I curse her, my upstairs neighbour, silently, sometimes a low muttering, damn damn *damn* — I've lost it now — the focus — the crucial thought that is yet to arrive — as the windows in my flat rattle in their casings in time with her footfalls. I could die tomorrow, I sometimes want to say to my neighbour upstairs. The

¹ Edward St. Aubyn, *Mother's Milk*.

opposite of *tableau vivant* is *nature morte*. So would you stop banging around, already? Would you stop ticking and tocking knocking and keeping track of every — single — second — minute — hour — day? I know, I *know* — I want to say — *oh believe me I know* — that it is not finished — that there is so much more to do. This incessant scraping and banging and clanging and pounding, it is oppressive, it is deafening. I feel like you are, I want to say, holding a gun to my head, do see?

I must admit, if pressed, I would agree that this statement about the gun makes little sense within the context. I would also concede that I have lost nothing at all. And on a good day, I might allow that I am responsible to enact changes in my life should I wish to no longer feel this way; so rattled and barrel-skulled. Instead, I put in ear plugs and I say to myself: *I'm sure everything will be fine. It's okay. You're okay. We're okay. I'm — just keep — putting pen to paper —*

4.

Most of this — none of this — some of all of part of this — is about time as fear as fear as time as a mechanism for avoidance. It is also about writing, which is sometimes synonymous with confusion and misunderstanding, and how even the simplest statement — title, phrase — can be about something else entirely. It is about how thinking this way for too long might very well lead a person to say something along the lines of:

*You do not do, you do not do*²

OR

The stars are not hereditary—³

OR

*We are, I know not how, double within ourselves.*⁴

OR

*I have wasted my life*⁵

OR

*Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars.*⁶

OR

*I crossed the ocean for a heart of gold*⁷

OR

*He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.*⁸

² Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy', *Ariel*.

³ Emily Dickinson, Letter to Charles H. Clark, 1883.

⁴ Michel de Montaigne, 'On the inconstancy of our actions', *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*.

⁵ James Wright, 'Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota', *Above the River: The Complete Poems and Selected Prose*.

⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2011), p.146.

⁷ Neil Young, 'Heart of Gold'.

⁸ Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Man-Moth', *The Complete Poems 1926-79*.

OR

*That night it rained on the boxcars, explaining
The thought of the pensive cabbage roses near the boxcars.*⁹

OR

*The minor fall, the major lift*¹⁰

OR

EVEN

How now brown cow, what's new with you?

BECAUSE

*Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being from genus to species, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy.*¹¹

AND

*Words do not look like the things they designate.*¹²

AND FINALLY

*You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.*¹³

⁹ John Ashbery, 'A Boy', *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*.

¹⁰ Leonard Cohen, 'Hallelujah'.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt', *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*.

¹³ Anne Carson, *Plainwater* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.29.