

**SOME VERSIONS
OF THE ICE**

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The only way—they argued—to explain that there is nothing to explain is to give explanations.

GIORGIO AGAMBEN

BRIEFLY CONSIDERED: SUB-PLOTS

Then there were the sub-plots, being pleasant things, which dreamt below four of the six gardens of the parish. Mr. Tyros and the elders, however, preached against the plots with such effect that their manufacture was abandoned.

THE WHITE ROSE OF CHAYLEIGH

1

Before constructing the garden, the sub-plot is considered. It is never spaded, dug or trenched, but caved using dynamite, or any such potassium *lumen*. The charge is laced along the bare ground and exploded downward until the correct depth is confronted. Thus the process is also called *lumination*: from Latin, “light,” but also “opening.” When installing a new garden, the boom indicates that the process has begun—the boom, the first language of the garden space, its *pneumaphon*: breath + sound. This is a holy sound:

Again a dart, the Wind-God's own,
 Upon his string he laid,
 And all the demons were o'erthrown,
 The saints no more afraid.

THE RAMAYANA

2

In his treatise on lumination, Viollet-le-Duc notes that the sub-plot “is the artificial foundation on which the garden will rest” (*C'est sur ce roc-factice que repose l'immense cathédrale*). In his original French, *factice* (“artificial,” but also “dummy”) plays on both the creation of an a-physical space—a hollow upon which the garden rests—and its dumb-ness, or silence. The insistence on the garden as *cathédrale* suggests the sub-plot as crypt. Yet here is an empty crypt, loss without origin:

What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles
 which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable
 inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities
 gnaw upon all Faith.

ISHMAEL

Its *phon*, the primordial sound, is an impossibility: a body that never was, which simultaneously calls from within the coffin, “But I am here.” It is a silence (*σιγάω*) that lusters.

3

For every six shovels-full of dirt, exploded by lumination and collected in a barrow, one shovel-full of ripe manure or humus is

mixed in. Water is added until the resulting mash is the consistency of heavy mortar, and enough mortar is pasted along the newly plumbed walls until they are completely resurfaced, preventing them from crumbling. A light raft of branches or sticks is braided over the dig, and then shoveled over with dirt.

In his *Commentaries on Lumination*, Ovid indicates that the branches for the roof of the sub-plot should be those of the palm tree, “instead of branches cut from the trees or stubble brought from the fields and strewed on the road.” In the Greek, Ovid uses the word *poi* (*φοι*), denoting branches from the date palm (*φοῖν*), which also suggests the particular color of the branches: purple or crimson. Ovid also plays on the etymology of *Phoenix* (*Φοίνιξ*):

When this bird completes a full five centuries of life straightway with talons and with shining beak he builds a nest among palm branches, where they join to form the palm tree's waving top. As soon as he has strewn in this new nest the cassia bark and ears of sweet spikenard, and some bruised cinnamon with yellow myrrh, he lies down on it and refuses life among those dreamful odors.

Poi is both the Phoenix' feathers, and the color of its death. It is the nest it builds in the top of the tree, *poim*, and also the Phoenix itself. *Poi* is a tapestry of contradictory notions, which both affirm and deny that the Phoenix did, or will ever exist. When one points to the bird at any particular moment, one has only a slur of colors, states of being, textures, ontologies, and irregular spaces. It is fitting, then, that *poi* seals the sub-plot. This is the perplexing beauty of the non-space, the hidden heart that refuses to be defined. Once its roof is broken open, for instance.

The history of gardens is a history of order. Consider the Persian *chahār bāgh*, which is divided into four quadrangles to represent the four corners of the earth. Here the garden's order is an analogue to pure, universal geometry. Or the Japanese *kaiyū-shiki-teien*, which uses *miegakure* to guide the visitor along a carefully chosen path. And finally the Victorian garden, whose special order is that of imperialism and conquest.

The garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

The sub-plot, on the other hand, refuses order. Once the space is constructed, it signs an impossible ontology. Thus the sub-plot is marked with the image of the *obolus* (*ὀβολός*), which carries a double meaning. On the one hand, the *obolus* is the shell of a clam. Although the lines of the shell are drawn in radiating concentric circles, they end at the crustacean's lip. Yet here begins the clam's double, its second half, where the radiating turns back towards its source, from the largest circle to its most minute at the hinge—and again, and again. It is fitting, then, that the *obol* is also the coin given over to *Charon*. We cross the river Styx clutching empty space, a shape that mirrors itself in hollows of calcite. We return to the place from which we perpetually depart.

But *obolus* is also *oubliette* (in Latin, *obliviscī*): absolute interiority. Closed and locked, it is a room without language. One cannot speak of the sub-plot, but only its skin. Once it is covered with palm leaves, laid with fresh soil for seeding and planting, and then grown thick with vegetation, the sub-plot is dream, and the dream is always already obliterated the moment it is enacted.

Instead, we may lie down in some garden and close our eyes and test the space by thinking upon it.

5

The sub-plot, then, reminds us that the garden never draws to a conclusion. It is the perpetual question, *When?* Whereas the garden will proceed chronologically, the sub-plot may exist *kairologically*; that is, it has always already existed, and in doing so, it is always already forgotten.

6

At the end of the season, say, in late summer, when the kale begins to yellow, the tomatoes are touched with frost, or the broccoli has been cleared of its crowns, we pull the stalks and rupture the soft soil. When the pulled roots are especially deep, one might get down closer to the soil and peer at the earth as it is carried away in bits, both clinging to the excavated roots, and also as it piles concentrically around the new lack. From the fissure arises static, an aggregate noise (Latin, *nausea*; Greek, *ναυσίη*). But one realizes that the static is unsourced—it seems as if it was already there, somewhere in the color of the excavated plants, the garden itself, maybe the space around the garden.

Soon snows begin to fall. The ground is covered in a fine white sheen. When the first deep freeze comes, the grubs and nymphs bury themselves deeper in the soil, protected by the blanket of snow. It is the season when all things kneel before Boreas, who dwells in the cave of Mount Haemus in Thrace. He is god of the north winds, bringer of winter. “By force and violence I chiefly live,” says Boreas.

By then the lowering storm tempests drive,
 In foaming billows raise the hoary deep,
 Writhe knotted oaks, and sandy deserts sweep,
 Congeal the falling flakes of fleecy snow,
 And bruise with rattling hail the plain below.
 I, and my brother winds, when join'd above,
 Through the waste champaign of the skies we rove,
 With such a boisterous full career engage,
 That heaven's whole concave thunders at our rage.

OVID

* * *

In spring the garden is reseeded. We plant spinach and kale, collards, turnips, carrots, parsnips, lettuce, radishes, and peas. Sometimes the nights dip to freezing, and in the morning the seedlings are a deeper and more fragile green. But if the day is warm, the plants recover, and by late afternoon it is as if the night never was. Soon the fruit trees bloom, the apricot a thousand buds of white. And then, when the promise of frost is forgotten, the tomatoes and peppers and eggplants and squash are sown. Sunflowers are already a foot high. Scapes are clipped from the garlic and onions. Soon summer will be upon us. The cycle is replenished.

And yet: there is always a lurking space, neurosis of the *terra*. It is there in the night. In Aeschylus, the seven warriors sacrifice a bull, and “shedding the bull’s blood into a black-bound shield, and touching with their hands the victim’s gore,” they swear an oath to “Ares, by Enyo, and by bloodthirsty Rout.” But their promise is false. Gore will not undo gore. Tautologies, which are intractable cannot be undone.

Gaia, earth and mother, daughter of primal Chaos, has her secrets. When we draw the space below the garden, so do we pay tribute to the silence from which all life springs.

The sub-plot is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.

JUDAH MOSCATO

The sub-plot is the song of our bodies. Always already lost, it refuses us. And we embrace it in discomfort.

