

Transmission Annual

Hospitality

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Friend

- 174 Introduction
DAMON and
PYTHIAS REDUX
Michael Corris

I

- 176 **Friendship**
Charlie Gere
- 178 **Seventeen Messages**
Thomson & Craighead
- 180 **The Friend of the Friend**
Kris Cohen
- 182 **Friendship Now**
Nina Wakeford
- 184 **Untitled**
Laura Heit

II

- 186 **Little Eileen**
Nancy Hwang
with Eileen Costa
- 188 **Untitled**
Meritxell Duran
- 190 **Untitled**
Javier Santos
- 192 **Untitled**
Antonio Santos
- 194 **Untitled**
Rodrigo Villas

- 196 Introduction
O PHILOI,
OUDEIS PHILOS
Jaspar Joseph-Lester

I

- 198 **More than Consent**
Amanda Beech
- 200 **Showdown at Mantalini's**
Robin Mackay
- 202 **Pandorean Ethics (or kill
Nicomachus and free us all)**
Reza Negarestani
- 204 **Us and Them**
Kristen Alvanson
- 206 **A Friend...
As heard by E. Elias Merhige**
E. Elias Merhige

II

- 208 **Dividing Division**
Yve Lomax
- 210 **Untitled**
Vit Hopley
- 212 **I you both we all**
Hayley Newman
- 214 **Swan Song**
Judith Goddard
- 216 **First Time Last Time**
Marcia Farquhar

- 218 Introduction
MES BONSAMIS
Sharon Kivland

I

- 220 **Untitled**
Forbes Morlock
- 222 **Untitled**
Sarah Wood
- 224 **Dreamhole**
Graham Allen
- 226 **Cuts and Corrosives.
The Airy Ways of Friendship**
John W. P. Phillips
- 228 **A Dangerous Perhaps.
Peer Review as Friendship**
Roy Sellars

II

- 230 **A Translation of El Reloj
(The Clock) by Pio Baroja**
Juan Cruz
- 232 **Friendship and failing/falling**
Clare Connors
- 234 **How to Friend**
Esther Leslie
- 236 **My Dead Friend**
Jeanne Randolph
- 238 **Friendship**
Naomi Segal

- 240 Notes on Contributors
- 248 Index
- 254 Acknowledgements
- 255 Coming Next

- 257 **Dialogue 2009**
Tim Etchells & Penny McCarthy

Cuts and Corrosives.

The Airy Ways of Friendship

John W. P. Phillips

1. Writing Through 'Holes'

If Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play' were taken as a manifesto for poetry, 'it would perhaps', writes Graham Allen, 'encourage the idea of the most simplistic of structures' (an instance of the dangerous perhaps).¹ A line a day produced in an untiring formal adventure cuts a way through an almost exhausted field. Allen's 'Holes' begins on 23 December 2006, marking the birthday of narrator and poem. The version I am reading rests provisionally on 2 November 2009 with the line: 'You won't have to poke him to get a squeal.'

The fragment below illustrates a method for reading 'Holes': writing through (a diastic or diagraphic way), reading the 'holes' not as simple additions to an always almost saturated field but as systematic subtractions leaving something, the remainder, in relief. This leftover, the hole, marks 'something missing' from a now evidently absent field.

a ghost
my friend
and play
rather
it means
a schism always the chance of
clarity
talking
desertification of the
friend

The diastic method merges the operations of subtraction with the chiasmic logic of inversion or opposition, suggested by the relief etching of William Blake, a method of corroding the copper surface away to reveal the poetry and design sealed in it.

2. Cutting the Airy Way

The structure of friendship (as I have discovered elsewhere) gives itself to every structure, in tireless operations of subtraction: friendship 'gives itself to the very structurality of exemplification by each time removing itself from the structure'.² The subtraction gives way to the addition of the friend, perhaps, but a law of inversion implies a simultaneous removal of friends: 'the essential and irreducible moment of friendship is marked by the removal of friends, of potential friends in a holocaust of at least millions, the already dead, the dying and the not yet alive' (p.162). The lapse of friendship (a bad infinity) nevertheless suggests a model for a hitherto unheard-of rule. Let's follow this.

Dwelling on another figure of the dangerous perhaps, Roy Sellars duly identifies the current state of professional criticism under the uncomprehending look of the academic (Angelic) blind review. As the narrator of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* notes in the first of the Memorable Fancies, 'the enjoyments of Genius [...] to Angels look like torment and insanity' (plate 6). Having collected some Proverbs from Hell, the narrator returns home and encounters a Devil:

When I came home; on the abyss of the five senses, where
a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty
Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock,
with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived
by the minds of men, & read by them on earth.

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?³

The Devil's question implies a break in the passage between what can and cannot be perceived, like a caesura in the metrics or the music of the line, instituting a dangerous border. The sentence written in 'corroding fires' and perceived by whomever reads it, once printed from Blake's corroded copper, identifies an analogue for what it is itself ('ev'ry Bird'), as if it is the sentence that 'cuts the airy way'. The inscription perhaps suggests a dissonant alternative to a review mechanism that can see only what it already has an eye for.

1. Graham Allen, '365 Holes', *Theory and Event*, 12.1, 2009.

2. John W. P. Phillips, 'Loving Love or Ethics as Natural Philosophy', in Jacques Derrida's *Politiques de l'amitié*, *Angelaki*, 12.3, 2007, 155–70, p.156.

3. William Blake's *Writings*, ed. by Gerald E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, I, 80.

**A Dangerous Perhaps.
Peer Review as Friendship**

Roy Sellars

A review session has been convened. Let us audit the proceedings:

An Angel came to me and said 'O pitiable foolish young man!
O horrible! O dreadful state! consider the hot burning dungeon
thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art
going in such career.'

I said, 'perhaps you will be willing to shew me my eternal
lot & we will contemplate together upon it and see whether your
lot or mine is most desirable.'¹

The first word of the narrator's response, 'perhaps', is dangerous. It could be negatively assessed as being evasive in attitude, vague in informational content and altogether unprofessional; or, perhaps, it could be read as an invitation that is also a trap awaiting an assessor. The assessing Angel promptly leaps in. The trailer for the Gothic horror film with which he then threatens his interlocutor features various monsters including a sea serpent, Leviathan, but it will star the narrator himself. The Angel knows the script, and, on the basis of this knowledge, chastises the narrator for conforming to it. Presumably God is the director. For the Angel, all too willing to engage in this kind of peer review, the narrator is set on a devilish 'career' that will end badly. As the *OED* points out, a career is etymologically a carriage-road, and the prevalent modern sense, 'a course of professional life or employment' (sense 5b), is first instanced in 1803, a decade after the creation of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. We find ourselves moving in a personalised trajectory. As Microsoft asked in 1994 in its first global advertising campaign, 'Where do you want to go today?'.² How about going to your tomorrow, reducing time to a property and the future to a career, and, thanks to professionalised peer review, seeing the resultant teleology dramatised as a film or PowerPoint presentation? Blake's 'A Memorable Fancy' is a prophecy of this development that leads from bumpy carriage-road to our world of managed human resources and information technology. The development itself looks like a road, but its road-like inevitability vanishes with a shift of perspective.

Blake's narrator does not counter-attack the Angel directly; instead he moves, by virtue of a line of flight, such that the Angel's assessment indicators suddenly become irrelevant. The narrator's gory counter-vision is more parody than review, and he concludes: 'we impose on one another, & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics' (plate 20). That would seem to be the end of it, and if we analyse the review session, it would seem to have been a failure. But there is more than 'Analytics' at stake. There is a kind of postscript, namely: '[Opposition is True Friendship]' (plate 20). This sentence, one of Blake's most famous maxims, is more or less illegible (hence the square brackets) in the surviving finished copies, drowned by colouring for the design of Leviathan at the bottom of the plate. Perhaps Leviathan will triumph, perhaps '[Friendship]' will re-emerge from under the waves; in the meantime, the rigours of perhaps are imposed on the reader.

To cut a long fancy short, I propose this almost obliterated maxim as a guide to peer review, as an exercise of friendship necessarily entwined with opposition, instead of the familiar techno-bureaucratic chore that presents judgement as if it has always already been professionalised, outsourced,³ automated, and decontaminated by virtue of its supposed blindness or double-blindness (and why not triple-blindness for good measure?). Reviewing—which, as Bill Readings emphasises, is nothing less than the business of the university as such⁴—must remain contaminated by the contingency and performativity of 'the dangerous perhaps'.⁵ This performativity, whereby even an Angelic assessor may in time, perhaps, become a reader, is precisely why a reviewing process is not reducible to the application of so-called performance indicators.

1. *William Blake's Writings*, ed. by Gerald E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, I, 90, plate 17.
2. See Stuart Elliott, 'Microsoft Takes a User-friendly Approach to Selling Its Image in a New Global Campaign', *New York Times*, 11 November 1994, section D, p. 17, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/11/business/media-business-advertising-microsoft-takes-user-friendly-approach-selling-its.html>> [accessed 23 November 2009]
3. See Lindsay Waters, *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004, pp. 54–9.
4. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 130.
5. I borrow this phrase from my friend Friedrich Nietzsche, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, VI, 2, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968, section 1, 2. On perhaps as modality, see Rodolphe Gasché, *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 173–91, and Jacques Derrida (1994), *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins, London: Verso, 1997, pp. 26–48.

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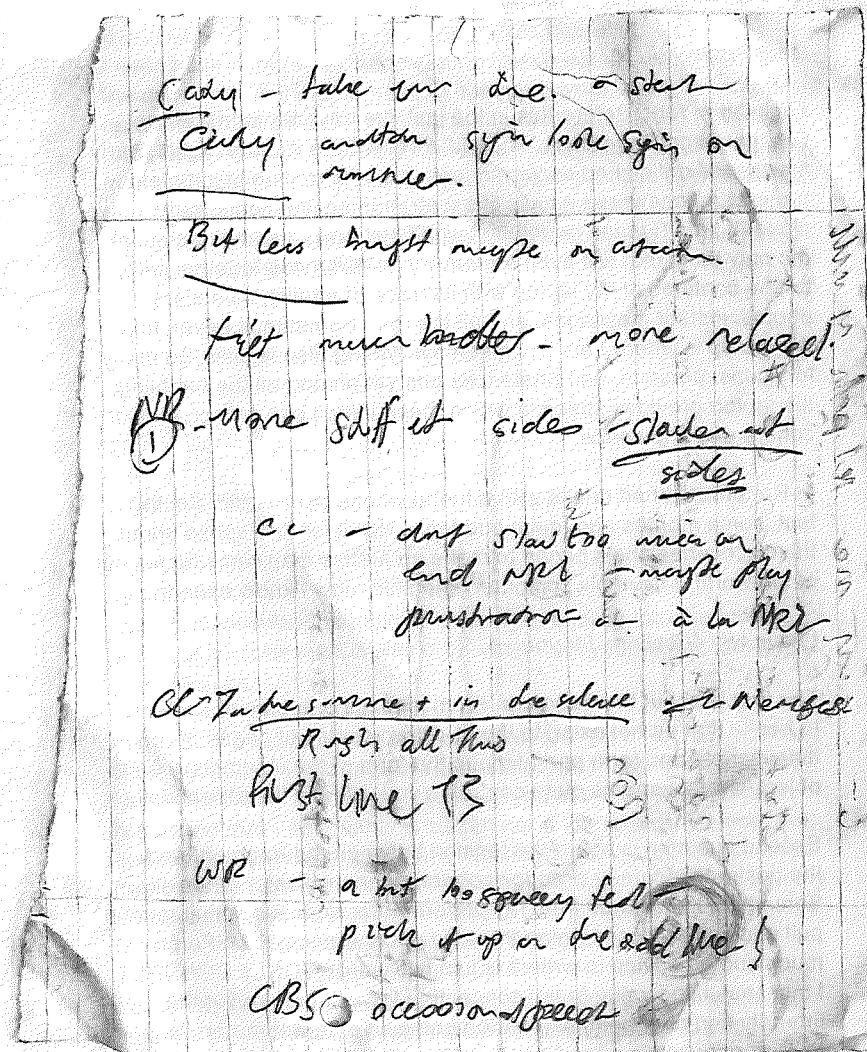
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Dialogue 2009

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