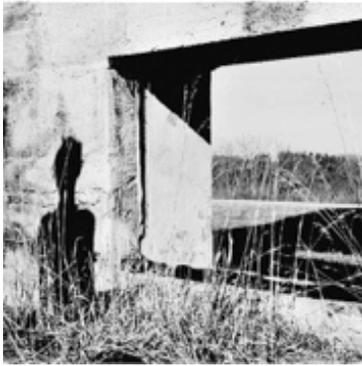


Coincidence? I Think Not



Maria Jimena Guzman. Photograph taken in central Pennsylvania, ca. 2014.

When I used to meet with some friends to talk about critical theory over coffee, the subject drifted to coincidence. Remembering a silly, possibly unverifiable claim made in some statistics book, I pushed the limits of the moment to say that, in the coffee shop we were in with about thirty other people, the chance of two of them having the same birthday was not so small. The friend thought about the bad odds, 30 to 365, and disagreed. So, I asked her, what is your birthday. It turned out to be the same as mine.

Conclusive victories such as that are infrequent, and when they come you feel a bit embarrassed about over-kill, but in this case the coincidence was the start of a different form of friendship, based on the irony of birth dates, a friendship of love you have that is there not out of any attraction or will but there outside of the time it finds itself in.

Meeting people while traveling abroad, calling someone at the same time they are calling you, thinking of a tune then turning on the radio to hear the same tune ... everyone has their list of “impossible coincidences.” For us they are the exceptions in a world smoothed over by the regular flow of causality, time, and intentionality. They stand out like a rock in an otherwise smooth stream, the one rock that will knock a hole in our kayak, you bet your money. But, it doesn’t take much reading to realize there have been historical periods when the exception not only proved the rule, it made the rule. Divination was the official basis of “findings” that led not just to local decisions but to non-local laws, enforced as if there were no possible questioning of the legitimacy of the oracle. In the modern world this seems ridiculous, and Jorge Luis Borges’ story, “The Babylonian Lottery,” wryly combined the ancient and modern mentality to extrapolate (a modern idea) the principle of chance (the ancient idea) to the point where there were lotteries about the lotteries about the lotteries — a *lot* of lotteries.

So, what is our “lot,” our “lot in life.” It’s the given, the fate, the thing we were put on earth to do or, more often, the cross we are made to bear. It is something that comes “up front,” which we must follow to the “bitter end.” Unlike Borges, we forget that if the lot was chance in the beginning, enforced to the end of time, it is a principle that doesn’t give way to necessity just because the trap is sprung. Yes, the soul passes through the planetary spheres in *just this way* or *that way*, but that’s our “lot,” Chance doesn’t disappear after it does this preliminary fix. It’s only limited by the idea that we are born once and for all, that we don’t have rebirths. We don’t shed our skins like snakes. We don’t die each time a lover says goodbye, we see a friend in a coffin, or the wine bottle is empty at last.

Mirrors die and are reborn because they have given up wanting to look like anything. They reflect a party and enjoy it, when the lights go out they go to sleep. This is why, perhaps, so many cultures cover mirrors when someone in the house has died. The mirrors have to die in sympathy. Their lack of will at such moments becomes intolerable, they must be *made* to mourn. They would easily laugh with a passing girl’s silly smile, or take a hand’s accidental wave to be a dancer’s *port-de-bras*. It’s the mirror’s willingness to give in to accident that can’t be allowed during such periods of mourning. The tone of despair must be maintained, which shows it to be a ruse to fool the gaze of God, who would let the soul turn around and rejoin the living if He thought life held any attractions. The black says don’t turn back. Apotrope.

In novels and films were the dead return, the “be careful what you wish for” advice of Chinese fortune cookies is made unbearably real when, wishing to see the dead again, they actually do. It’s then you rely on keeping time’s arrow pointing forward. You have to *want* it to stay steady because seeing the dead again is not what you really want. You have to *want it*, because it’s only will that holds it in place, the will, which God monitors closely. Reverse predication: this is a “proof of the existence of God,” otherwise God doesn’t exist. God is That from which you must *hide your real intentions*, your *will*. Will is both the future and the intention to reach a future in one piece, so to say. It is, at its language roots, the contronym √WEL, whose other pole means turning (“volute”), completing a circuit (*volver*) — the death drive! — and *voluntas*, the will, the freedom to will. It’s the wine you drink once you’ve decided to do something (vine, vinyard). It’s the thread that’s *winding* around Fate’s spindle. “Desire” wants to stray from the fate written in the stars, *de sideris*, so we start to see the web of connections. We are given an accidental life sentence by a randomizing judge (Kafka) and then we try to wiggle out of it, *de sideris*, and ... that’s God. In a nutshell. We wouldn’t have a Him without that wiggle, which is desire. This is the meaning of singularity: the will to break free must come out of nowhere, it must be will–pure–and–simple, and in this loss of all “reasons” for its actions, it is the one time we know God, the god we invite to exist in this one, pure, blue and out-of-the-blue instance, must incorporate Himself to serve, like a judge hastily putting on robes or actor putting on a costume seconds before going on stage, to make will real — or rather Real. (Of all proper nouns, it is the *most* proper!) After this moment He vanishes. This was the ancient’s view of the gods, that they were nothing without epiphanies; it’s an idea that still works. When did you say your birthday was?

The contronym theory ... that’s a bit speculative. Freud happened across a 16-year-old book by Carl Abel and got excited about the idea that language begins with an oversupply of words that mean both one thing and their opposite. Ancient language, he hoped to find, had found it “impossible to say no.” Or, like the proverbial *belle dame sans merci*, it says no to mean yes and yes to mean no, but it doesn’t say when the spinning stops. Round and round she goes, where She stops, Nobody knows. Reverse the logical order of that to see: “the Nobody, such as Odysseus in the story of the Cyclops, is the one who knows how to stop the wheel of Fortune’s reversabilities.” When Carl Abel was discredited by the linguistics community, Freud’s hopes for consummating the idea of the autoerotic around the union of childhood and antiquity were dashed.

But, the idea was not so bad. The unconscious is not simply a petulant yes-for-no girl. It is an “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn” Rhett Butler, accepting the good with the bad, the yes with the no, the now for the then, the effect for the cause — in other words, everything that magic wants to be on the best of days, when it can *be what it wants to be*. The will will desire itself into existence. If √WEL is not a contronym by birth, it becomes a contronym as a result of the braiding of its strands of separate origins, “spooky meaning at a distance.” This is best captured in the helix of twinned snakes that wind up the rod of Asklepius (the caduceus) and Hermes (his herald’s passport, for “crossing the impossible”). Getting across boundaries and going between the living and the dead, the latter the contronym *idea* of finding home in remote places or feeling out of place in your own home, the latter being the historically verified meaning and function of the *pharmakon*. Well, will, and vol! So, coincidence is not just willing God into being in epiphany, it’s the magnetic attraction of opposites into a spiral braid, the DNA double volute, key to all life. If it’s not a “theory of everything” (TOE), it’s a “theory of damned well everything.”

So there are twins who come out of the same womb and twins who meet later in life, thanks to a coincidence that binds them so tightly into a controlled spin that they can't even use death to get out of it. Just such a case kept Caster and Pollux together at the expense of being perpetually apart. The deal whereby one twin was allowed to live while the other "died" and did time in Hades was not unconnected to their birth. Same womb, different fathers. Cats and mythic women can do this if modern humans can't. The twins "found" their twinship in their love for each other; otherwise their common pre-natal co-residency was not enough for a legally binding relationship. This coincidental twinship "happened by accident" so to speak, just as the death of Castor came as a surprise. But, coincidence having a bit of magic to it, the chance of the one was "rectified" (made orthogonal) thanks to the chance of finding one in the same womb as another. Gods respect such coincidences, and the deal was struck by which their mutual rotation at 180° of separation would "set matters straight" at the expense of perpetual distance.

Perpetual? Some see an escape clause in this contract ... a small opening that permits a palindromic exchange. The deal is that you can be together in the unifying contrary motion of the palindrome, the crisscross, the chiasmus, the double-cross. You can be together in the mirror as long as you can pass through into the reflection at the same moment the reflection passes through to you.¹ This is what a mathematician would call an *Eigenform*, or an *Eigenvector* — something that contains its own negative, and by virtue of this *belongs to itself*. This "itself" is serious business. When Vico said that the truth was convertible with the things we made in ignorance of the truth, *verum ipsum factum*, it was the "itself" part of the slogan that was loaded with all the serious ammunition. *Ipsum*, "itself," means that what we make has truth in it, not because it represents anything or is the consequence of any occultation of some strange causality, but because the truth *belongs to it*. The act embeds truth not as authenticity but as the love of one twin for another, the desire of the thing for its reflection, the will to will what will.

I invite epiphany if I desire to have what is mine, and also to know it. This is not knowledge of anything, this is a knowledge that will *know me* in a reverse predication of the desire to know: *kenosis*, "knowing without knowing." This is not "local knowledge," knowing things in their contingent orders, their genealogies or causal frameworks, but "non-local knowledge" in the way quantum physics uses the term "non-local" to indicate "spooky action at a distance" — i. e. coincidence. The spookiness of spooky action at a distance is the distance, and the question for us, since we are not in the habit of giving a damn about galaxies millions of light years away, is *how does the structure of distance change in the "instances" of epiphany*. By structure, we must mean in talking about instances, that time and space are not going to be *metaphors* for each other but twins, together at last, crossing that radial divide, that meridian, to split the difference. To say "metonymy" at this point would require some diversionary chapters explaining that metonymy is about the frame and how the frame is made to be violated, and that would take too long. We can get off the hook, possibly, by saying that metalepsis, the "metonymy of metonymy," is like the will to escape yet return to fate, put so nicely by Stephane Mallarmé's title, *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hazard*. A roll of the dice will never banish Chance. We are born within the stars but then we desire again. We invite chance to the party where everything is up for grabs: epiphany. With its internal rhymes, *dès/*

¹ "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," comments the Queen to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Quoted from James Gleick, "When They Came from Another World," *The New York Review of Books* 64, 1 (January 19, 2017): 28. Another of Gleick's notable quotes is from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "So, in the future, the sister of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be." — A notable version of Freud's motto, *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*. "Where the 'it' that dresses over my Id with desire was, there shall my Ego be."

jamais and *abolira/hazard*, we have the mirror reflection we need to get things rolling, and in its waves of words crashing on the shore of the page, it is the *clinamen*, the turbulence that rocks the boat as well as the cradle. The palindrome allows the impossible meeting, the chiasmus, the 1234 and the 4321 (present magically in the numbers 9 and 11).

Who are those twins? In non-local terms, they are indistinguishable from the distance/non-distance that separates them. Separation is convertible with reunion. Exile is not just presence, it's over-presence. "You are in my heart, more me than me." —As long as I renounce you, which Neruda puts best:

Well, now,
if little by little you stop loving me
I shall stop loving you little by little.

If suddenly
you forget me
do not look for me,
for I shall already have forgotten you. ...

But
if each day,
each hour,
you feel that you are destined for me
with implacable sweetness,
if each day a flower
climbs up to your lips to seek me,
ah my love, ah my own,
in me all that fire is repeated,
in me nothing is extinguished or forgotten,
my love feeds on your love, beloved,
and as long as you live it will be in your arms
without leaving mine.

—Pablo Neruda, "If You Forget Me" [selected lines]

The first seven lines might as well be credited to a mirror. The last 13 document the double-annihilation of two vampires. The loss is convertible with the eternal co-presence, of what *is mine, my negative (loss) with my complete possession. Verum ipsum factum*. What I do will have the meridian along which fate revisits me, bringing back all that I thought I had lost in making the choice, the this instead of the that. When the aged General Lorenz Lowenhielm (*Babette's Feast*) returns to dine with the sisters, one of whom he had wooed in his youth but lost in his career climb, he realizes that love has not been lost, or rather, in being lost it has become a self of itself. His speech at dinner combines Biblical texts with a bit of hermeneutical realization:

Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness believes he must make choices in this life. He trembles at the risks he takes. We do know fear. But no. Our choice is of no importance. There comes a time when our eyes are opened and we come to realize that mercy is infinite. We need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude. Mercy imposes no conditions. And lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us. And everything we rejected has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.

So, we meet again, dear serpent? Let's drink some wine to the belief that all is and will be well.