Of Learned Ignorance

Idea of a Treatise in Philosophy

Michael Munro

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dead letter office

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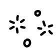

to s.o.

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[1] It reads in full:

> PROBLEMATIC (*problématique*). A word or concept cannot be considered in isolation; it only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used: its problematic. A related concept can clearly be seen at work in Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (but see Althusser's *Letter to the Translator*). It should be stressed that the problematic is *not* a world-view. It is

> not the essence of the thought of an individual or epoch which can be deduced from a body of texts by an empirical, generalizing reading; it is centred on the *absence* of problems and concepts within the problematic as much as their presence; it can therefore only be reached by a symptomatic reading (*lecture symptomale* q.v.) on the model of the Freudian analyst's reading of his patient's utterances.

Ben Brewster, "Glossary," in Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso Books, 2005), 253–254 [249–259].

[2] On the question of the "unity" of the problematic, see Althusser, *For Marx*, 32.

[3] Althusser, *For Marx*, 67n30, 80n45.

[4] Althusser, *For Marx*, 257–258.

[5] On problematics, "the point of problemization and the specific work of thought," see Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations," trans. Lydia Davis, in *The*

Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 381–390. See also, Michel Foucault, "Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II," trans. William Smock, in Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, 333–339.

[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 177: "By 'problematic' we mean the ensemble of the problem and its conditions."

[7] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 168–222.

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), A3 [B7]. See also, among

others and for example, A647 [B675], and cf. A669 [B697], as well as A482 [B510].

[9] "For Kant, problems are

> (1) transcendent to experience (they are not themselves derived from empirical or a posteriori experience) while having only an immanent employment, such that they are (2) organizational principles, which (3) do not disappear with their solutions, rendering them (4) fictions in that they make no claim to knowledge (in their correct or immanent usage) yet are nonetheless employed to arrive at knowledge, which thus (5) have a true (immanent) and false (transcendent) usage, and (6) such that they do not resemble their solutions.

Levi Bryant, *Difference and Givenness: Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism and the Ontology of Immanence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 165. "It is clear that all six of these properties are precisely what Deleuze seeks in the concept of a problem" (Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 165).

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[10] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 267: "Problems thus defined do not designate any ignorance on the part of a thinking subject, any more than they express a conflict, but rather objectively characterize the nature of Ideas as such."

[11] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B310–311; cf. A462 [B490].

[12] "The real object of Ideas, in other words," as Daniel W. Smith has observed, "is problems." "In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze identifies three components of Kant's concept of the Idea. First,

> Ideas are *indeterminate* with regard to their object. Since their object lies outside of any possible experience, it can neither be given nor known, but only represented as a problem. The real object of Ideas, in other words, is problems (the concept of problematics is the only component of Kant's theory of Ideas that Deleuze will adopt without question). Second, Ideas are nonetheless *determinable* by analogy with the objects of experience (with regard to the content of phenomena). Third, Ideas imply a regulative ideal of infinite deter-

mination in relation to the concepts of the understanding (or the form of phenomena), since my concepts are capable of comprehending more and more differences on the basis of a properly infinite field of continuity.

Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze, Kant, and the Theory of Immanent Ideas," *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 47.
[13] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 171.
[14] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 170–176.
[15] Smith, "Deleuze, Kant, and Ideas," 47–48: "In an important passage, Deleuze defines an Idea as 'an

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internal problematic objective unity of the undetermined, the determinable, and determination'. But, he continues, 'perhaps this does not appear sufficiently clearly in Kant'. Why not? Because in Kant:

> Two of the three moments [in the concept of the Idea] remain as extrinsic characteristics (if Ideas are themselves undetermined [or problematic], they are determinable only in relation to objects of experience, and bear the ideal of determination only in relation to the concepts of the understanding).

Hence, he concludes, 'the "critical" point, the horizon or focal point at which difference *qua* difference serves to unite, has not yet been assigned' (Deleuze 1994: 170). In other words, we have not yet reached a purely immanent conception of Ideas, since it is only a principle of difference that can determine, in a precise manner, the problematic nature of Ideas as such, thereby uniting the three aspects of the Idea (as undetermined, determinable and reciprocally determined). What Deleuze derives from his reading of the theory of Ideas in the *Critique of Pure*

Reason is essentially a programme of his own: to develop a purely immanent theory of Ideas, pushing Kant's own trajectory to its immanent conclusions. Put simply, whereas Kantian Ideas are unifying, totalising and conditioning (transcendent Ideas), for Deleuze they will become multiple, differential, and genetic (immanent Ideas).

[16] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xxi; cf., for example, 170–185.

[17] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 192–193.

[18] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 188.

[19] Smith, "Deleuze, Kant, and Ideas," 50: "When Deleuze attempts to develop his own theory of Ideas in *Difference and Repetition*, he turns, not to Kant—who only gets a couple of pages at the beginning of the chapter on Ideas—but to Leibniz. In this, he takes his cue from Maimon himself." See Salomon Maimon, *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. Nick Midgley, Henry Somers-Hall, Alistair Welchman, and Merten Reglitz (London: Continuum, 2010). See also Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 168–170.

[20] As Alistair Welchman points out, however, Deleuze and Maimon differ with respect to the "status" to be assigned to the differential: Alistair Welchman, "Deleuze's Post-Critical Metaphysics," *Symposium* 13 (2009): 35–36; http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1047&context=symposium. See Daniela Voss, "Maimon and Deleuze: The Viewpoint of Internal Genesis and the Concept of Differentials,"

Parrhesia 11 (2011): http://parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia11/parrhesia11_voss.pdf.

[21] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 173–174.

[22] Smith, "Deleuze, Kant, and Ideas," 51: "This might seem somewhat surprising:

> Deleuze, the self-proclaimed empiricist, deriving his most important concepts

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> from Leibniz, the arch-rationalist (and who himself never actually proposes a theory of Ideas, in this Kantian sense). But it is not entirely difficult to see why Deleuze turns to Leibniz. There are two ways of overcoming the concept-intuition duality in Kant: either concepts are sensible things, as in Locke; or sensibility itself is intelligible, as in Leibniz (there are Ideas in sensibility itself). In effect, Deleuze takes this latter path.

Bryant agrees, arguing from the first page of the preface to *Difference and Givenness* for the importance of understanding Deleuze as a "hyper-rationalist" (ix). See also, Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 9.

[23] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 177: "Already Leibniz had shown that the calculus was the instrument of a combinatory—in other words, that it expressed problems which could not hitherto be solved or, indeed, even posed."

[24] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 213.

[25] Daniel Heller-Roazen has written two beautiful chapters on Leibniz in *The Inner Sense: Archaeology of a Sensation*: Chapter XVIII, "On the Merits of Missiles," and Chapter XIX, "Thorns." Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Sense: Archaeology of a Sensation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 2007), 179–192, 193–210.

[26] "To judge otherwise is to know little of the immense subtlety of things": Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Preface to the *New Essays*," *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 297.

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[27] Smith, "Deleuze, Kant, and Ideas," 51: "It would take a separate paper

> to analyse Deleuze's indebtedness to Leibniz on this score. Deleuze's readings of Leibniz, not only in *The Fold*, but even more so in *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, are decidedly critical and post-Kantian appropriations of Leibniz. Many, if not most, of the fundamental criteria Deleuze uses to define immanent Ideas are derived from Leibniz, or from the history of calculus (which Leibniz invented, along with Newton): differential relations, singular points, ordinary points, fluxes or flows, the virtual, multiplicities or manifolds, and so on. Two of these components of Deleuzian Ideas are worth mentioning here: the differential relation and the notion of singularities. The differential relation is a relation that persists even when the terms of the relation have vanished. It is thus a pure relation, a pure

> relation of difference; it is what Deleuze means by 'difference-in-itself'. Moreover, not only is the differential relation external to its terms, it is also *constitutive* of its terms: the terms of the relation are completely undetermined (or virtual) until they enter into the differential relation; on their own they are simply determinable. Once such elements enter a differential relation, their reciprocal determination determines a singularity, a singular point. Every multiplicity (that is, every *thing*) is characterized by a combination of singular and ordinary points. In geometry, for instance, a square has four singular points—its corners—which are prolonged in an infinity of ordinary points that connect them. A cube, similarly, has eight singular points. The case of curves is more complicated: the differential relation determines a singular point in a curve, which continues over a series of ordinary points until it reaches another singularity, at which point the curve changes direction—it increases or decreases—and continues along another series of ordinary points, until it reaches another singularity, and so on.

See Daniel W. Smith, "Deleuze on Leibniz: Difference, Continuity, and the Calculus," in

Essays on Deleuze (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 43–59. See also, Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

[28] "In this respect it is surprising, given Kant's great admiration for both Leibniz and Newton, that he did not make more of the calculus rather than arithmetic and geometry" (Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 107).

[29] "Everything is a multiplicity," every *thing*, yes, but that is so "insofar as it incarnates an Idea." "An Idea is an *n*-dimensional, con-

tinuous, defined multiplicity": "By dimensions we mean

> the variables or co-ordinates upon which a phenomenon depends; by continuity, we mean the set of relations between changes in these variables—for example, a quadratic form of the differentials of the co-ordinates; by definition, we mean the elements reciprocally determined by these relations, elements which cannot change unless the multiplicity changes its order and its metric."

Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 182–183. "The Idea is thus defined as a structure. A structure or an Idea is a 'complex theme', an internal multiplicity—in other words, a system of multiple, non-localisable connections between differential elements which is incarnated in real relations and actual terms" (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 183).

[30] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–25.
[31] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 8–9.

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[32] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4: "We will never ask what a book means,

> as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. A book exists only through the outside and on the outside.

[33] The aside: "(And today the book is already, as the present mode of scholarly production demonstrates, an outmoded mediation between two different filing systems. For everything that matters is to be found in the card box of the researcher who wrote it, and the scholar studying it assimilates it into his own card index.)": Walter Benjamin, *Reflections:*

Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1978), 78.
[34] "Study, in effect, is

> per se interminable. Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment, every codex, every initial encounter seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that 'law of good neighbors' whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one.

Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 64.

[35] For what it might be, against tradition, to privilege learning over knowledge, see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 164–167. "In fact, the Idea is not the element of knowledge but that of an infinite 'learning', which is of a different nature to knowledge. For learning evolves entirely within the comprehension of problems as such" (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 192).

[36] "We never know in advance how someone will learn: by means of what loves someone becomes good at Latin, what encounters make them a philosopher, or in what dictionaries they learn to think" (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 165).

[37] Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3–31.

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[38] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 219: "We are always patients where Ideas are concerned." "More precisely," Steven Shaviro has clarified, "passion is not just passive (as its etymology suggests), but hyperbolically more-than-passive": "The scandal of passion is that

> it is utterly gratuitous: it has no grounding, and no proper occasion. In this sense, it is entirely free (although I am not free with regard to it). Passion has nothing to do with my actual needs, let alone my self-interest, or with what is 'good for me.' It doesn't seem to be anything of mine. It moves me, drives me, takes possession of me; but it always remains *apart* from me, outside of my control. It is something superfluous and supplemental, yet inescapable.

Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 9; 6–7.

[39] "And so I learned things, gentlemen. Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs": Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa Muir, Edwin Muir, Tania Stern, James Stern, Ernst Kaiser, and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 258.

[40] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 189–190: “The problem of thought is tied not to essences but to the evaluation of what is important and what is not,

> to the distribution of singular and regular, distinctive and ordinary points, which takes place entirely within the inessential or within the description of a multiplicity, in relation to the ideal events which constitute the conditions of a ‘problem’. To have an Idea means no more than this, and erroneousness or stupidity is defined above all by its perpetual confusion with

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> regard to the important and the unimportant, the ordinary and the singular.

See also, Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 197: "Problems or Ideas emanate from imperatives of adventure or from events which appear in the form of questions."

[41] Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, 179: "Mathematician no less than metaphysician, logician as well as diplomat, theologian, jurist, and, not least, philologist, excelling with particular distinction in the study of Chinese,

> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz cultivated many of the branches of learning known to his age, and there were few to which he can be said to have failed to add much in one, if not several, of the European languages to which he entrusted his reflections. It is perhaps only natural that among the multiple subjects on which the seventeenth-century German thinker pronounced himself more than once was the venerable field to which he no doubt knew he had contributed in numerous ways: the history of learning.

[42] "In a technical sense," in sum,

> what Deleuze gets from Leibniz [...] is a purely immanent determination of Ideas (whereas in Kant, two of the three components of Ideas are defined extrinsically). First, the elements of an Idea are completely undetermined (or virtual); second, these elements are nonetheless determinable reciprocally in a differential relation (dx/dy); and third, to this reciprocal determination there corresponds the complete determination of a set of singularities (values of dx/dy) which defines a multiplicity (along with their prolongation in a series of ordinary points). It is these three coexistent moments—the undetermined, the determinable, and the determined—that give Ideas their genetic power.

Smith, "Deleuze, Kant, and Ideas," 52–53.

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[43] Of "these three coexisting moments—the undetermined, the determinable, and the deter-mined," in what sense can one say that they are in fact contemporary with one another in the determination of an Idea?

> Contrary to what common sense would tell us, contemporary entities do not prehend each other. Appealing by way of example to the discoveries of relativity physics, Whitehead actually *defines* the simultaneity of two events in terms of their causal independence from one another. Whatever we prehend of another entity can only be that in it which has already passed away, that objectification which has finally reached us after an indefinite layover. The argument for this is unclear enough that Whitehead's greatest disciple, Charles Hartshorne, denied for many years that it was true before later reversing himself and coming to agree with Whitehead. But however uncertain the argument, the consequences of this view are fascinating. Instead of memory being an internal mental engine

> that cooks and mixes left-over perceptions, perception is redefined as a form of cosmic memory, as an instrument for gathering information emitted by a past reality already dead. This also means that prehension is asymmetrical. Whatever I prehend does not actually prehend me in return, since what I prehend no longer really exists.

Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 40. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 195–197. See also, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 61, 123. See in addition, Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus?: And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54. Perhaps it is by way of the contemporaneity of its elements, in Whitehead's sense, that the genetic power of Ideas finds its expression: An Idea attains its determination—and its elements their contemporaneity—by way of a kind of dramatization, "the movement of dramatization," that gene-rates what Deleuze will call "spatio-temporal dynamisms": "Through drama-

tization, the Idea is incarnated or actualized, *it differentiates itself*": Gilles Deleuze, "The Method of Dramatization," *Desert Islands: And Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 94 [94–117]. See also Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 214–221; cf. 222–261; 279–280.

[44] On January 28, 1967, Deleuze read "The Method of Dramatization" before a meeting of the *Société française de philosophie*. A question and answer session followed and among those who spoke was Ferdinand Alquié, a professor of Deleuze's, a professor of philosophy, who questioned whether Deleuze's concerns—as evidenced by the examples he used and the problems he posed, "scientific, psychological, and historical"—were "perhaps," as Alquié put it, "not strictly philosophical." Deleuze began his response by

addressing a lesser issue Alquié had raised, clarifying his remarks on the form of questioning that has traditionally guided philosophical inquiry. He then spoke directly to Alquié: "It's your other criticism that hits home more forcefully. Because I do believe in the specificity of philosophy, and furthermore, this belief of mine derives from you yourself. You say that

> the method I describe borrows its applications from all over, from different sciences, but hardly at all from philosophy. And that the only philosophical example I used, the problem of truth, went astray because it consisted in dissolving the concept of truth into psychological or psychoanalytic determinations. If this is the case, then I have failed.

Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 106–107; 300.

[45] "If we wanted to insist on his rejection of a certain form of philosophical inquiry," Michael Hardt has contended, "we would have to pose the statement in paradoxical form and say (borrowing a phrase from Althusser) that Deleuze develops 'a nonphilosophical theory of philosophy'." Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xix. For the suggestive beginnings of a clarification as to the status of the 'non-' in the phrase 'a nonphilosophical theory of philosophy,' see Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 189–190: "This void is, however, not a non-being; or at least this non-being is not the being of the negative, but

rather the positive being of the 'problematic,' the objective being of a problem and of a question."

[46] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 197: "Questions are imperatives—or rather, *questions express the relation between problems and the imperatives from which they proceed*."

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[47] Kristie Dotson, "How is this Paper Philosophy?" *Comparative Philosophy* 3 (2012): 3–29; http://www.comparativephilosophy.org/index.php/ComparativePhilosophy/article/view/121/123. With a view to the imperatives from which it proceeds: How, indeed, is *this* "paper" philosophy?

"Philosophy would be," in part, according to a curious proposal made by Duncan Richter, "the activity of gathering well-chosen words." "This I think could be considered a definition of poetry,

> and philosophy might be defined as the reading, writing, and collecting of poetry thus defined. I am not claiming that

poetry and philosophy are or should be the same thing. I am claiming that they are, or should be, more similar than most philosophers recognize.

"Philosophy deals with questions of a certain type," Richter concludes, "and these do not belong to poetry. But answering them could well involve the kind of creative use of language that is usually associated with literature and that cannot be sharply distinguished from it." Duncan Richter, "Philosophy and Poetry," *Essays in Philosophy* 12 (2011): 267; http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/vol12/iss2/5.

A contemporary of philosophy's, perhaps, a singularity or point of inflection with respect to it, might this paper not partake in the dramatization of the Idea of philosophy? And what else might philosophy be, finally, other than the dramatization of Ideas?

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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a thought-army, a thought-pack, which would storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament. He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-outsiders. What distances would shine in their eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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WE ARE ALWAYS PATIENTS

WHERE IDEAS ARE CONCERNED

Of Learned Ignorance
Idea of a Treatise in Philosophy

Michael Munro

We never know in advance how someone will learn: by means of what loves someone becomes good at Latin, what encounters make them a philosopher, or in what dictionaries they learn to think.
~ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

What is a problem? What's asked in that question, and how does one even begin to take its measure? How else could one begin, except as one does with any other problem—by way of *its impulsion*. *Of Learned Ignorance* is about philosophy because philosophy is about problems: philosophy, in a word, is where problems become a problem. *Of Learned Ignorance* is a dead letter because it is, cautiously, a love letter. It's a dead letter because it lovingly stages an experiment in whimsy, and perhaps above all, because it is problematic (in the Kantian sense): It is a (sober) attempt at exemplifying what it talks about—and what eludes it: A series of footnotes, with blank pages above, effects something like the integration of a differential, the reciprocal determination where the sources enter into relation to one another in order to produce a paper, essay, or (inexistent) (chap)book. In facing down a problem, this book makes a wager; it courts failure; it puts it all on the line. All, yes, for love—a kind of love … (of wisdom?).

Michael Munro practices philosophy in its absence in Edmonds, Washington with his family, whom he thanks for everything. His work is approved by the Interzone Bureau of Vagabond Thinker-Lovers.

dead letter office

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