

A meditation on creativity in life, art and psychotherapy, its expression as a phenomenology of bursting, and the challenge of keeping going, with John Coltrane, Rainer Maria Rilke and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as companions.

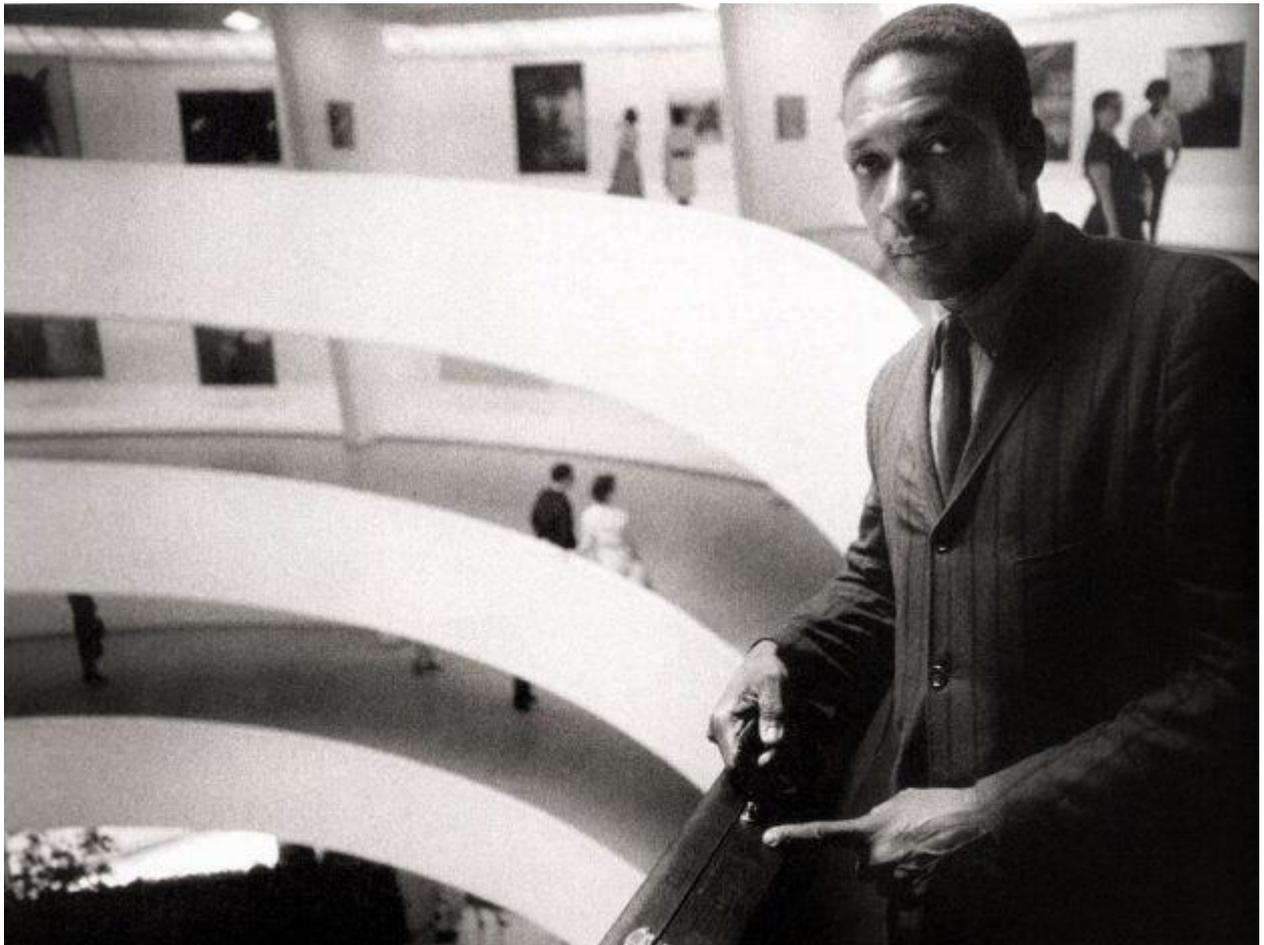
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*Art is always the outcome of one's having been in danger, of having gone right to the end of an experience to where no human being can go further – Rainer Maria Rilke*

I am listening to John Coltrane ablaze with sound. Probing, relentless; beyond now his infamous 'sheets of sound'. In *My Favourite Things*, a signature tune to which he returned many times, recorded at Temple University on November 11, 1966. His soprano horn breath searching and soaring. Soaring and then suddenly abandoning into shouts and strange chanting. A bursting of himself.

Coltrane's innovative sound, whilst remaining rooted in gospel and blues, had always pushed against the boundaries of the genre, and by the mid-1960's, he was also exploring Indian classical and Sufi forms of modality and musical structure. A quiet and very spiritual man, his music was described by the jazz critic and writer Nat Hentoff as 'a way of self-purgation so that he could learn more about himself to the end of making himself and his music part of the unity of all being'.



*John Coltrane at the Guggenheim Museum, 1960*  
*William Claxton Photographer (Creative Commons, CC BY-NC)*

Always emotionally charged, Coltrane's playing by this time could be hypnotic, incantatory and densely textural in a search for seemingly infinite musical possibilities. And when, at Temple University in 1966, his saxophone could not make the emotional leap he demanded, he broke into chanting, singing wordlessly, pounding his chest to change the sound he vocalised, before returning to his soprano. It was one of Coltrane's last concert gigs and the last full year of his life.

Listening to John Coltrane I think of Rilke and his terrifying angels. The angel of the *Duino Elegies* (1923) and, in particular, the angel of the first elegy:

*For beauty is nothing  
but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to  
endure,  
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains  
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying*

Coltrane seems to soar on flaming wings and take us into a beauty almost unbearable, for us and for him.

### **Bees of the invisible**

Rainer Maria Rilke brought us many angels. Not angels of a Christian order (Rilke disowns any such association), but angels who, in mysterious ways, are present and active with us in the world, 'this fleeting world, which in some way keeps calling to us'. Some are gentle and watchful, and I can't help thinking here of Damiel and Cassiel in Wim Wenders evocative film *Wings of Desire* (1987); others are fierce and challenging, come to 'seize you as though they'd created you and broken you out of your mold'. And how powerful a breaking open this is, in poetry and in art, when, beyond image and beyond metaphor, it touches us as lived experience. This is the angel of the *Duino Elegies*.

In a letter written shortly after publication of the *Elegies* (to his Polish translator), Rilke describes how the elegies were a white canvass upon which he sought to represent his 'affirmation of life as well as death' where 'there is *neither* a This-side, nor a That-side' and the whole is the realm of the angels. For Rilke, the very transitoriness of life, and of things, needs to be rescued, taken in:

*To impress this fragile and transient earth so sufferingly, so passionately upon our hearts that its essence shall rise up again, invisible, in us. We are the bees of the Invisible. Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l'accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l'Invisible (We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible).*

Rilke's poetry expresses beautifully an enigmatic shifting between visible and invisible, self and world, subjectivity and being, with, in the *Duino Elegies*, his angel as watcher and interrogator. What Michael Heller has called catching the moment of being/non-being, offering an openness to the permeability of 'inner' and 'outer' worlds. Where, for Rilke, the angel is 'terrible' for us because we cling so strongly to the visible. Yet this is always an ambiguous space, with every possibility of jeopardy and loss. Hannah Arendt, writing on the elegies in 1930, sees the paradox and ambiguity, but equally a witnessing of desperation in the human situation. For Arendt, Rilke's poetic mission to rescue things also shows us knowledge of futility and despair in the human condition, 'despair at not being able to be heard, and finally the need to speak even without an answer'.

In his letters to his wife Clara, Rilke spoke frequently about the painter Paul Cezanne, identifying with his artistic struggle, his seriousness, and his crisis:

*Without real pleasure, it seems, in a continual rage, ever at odds with his every endeavour, none of which appeared to achieve what he regarded as the ultimate desideratum. This he called la réalisation...The incarnation of the world as a thing carrying conviction, the portrayal of a reality become imperishable through his experience of the object.*

Cezanne, who 'concentrated so much incorruptible actuality into the constitution of its colours that it began a new life on the *further side* of colour'. In his introduction to the *Selected Letters*, John Bayley observes how Cezanne's aim of *réalisation* became Rilke's own and how Rilke devoted himself to the same honest realisation of himself in things. What Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his essay *Cezanne's Doubt* (1948), describes as a powerless wanting 'to make *visible* how the world *touches* us'. This was always perilous for Cezanne and felt as wretchedly unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Cezanne's art inspired in Rilke the greater possibilities of a life *put in danger*, spent going further, in seeking his own transformation of the '*Here it is*' that the truthfulness of Cezanne's colours taught him: 'The good conscience of these reds, these blues'.

### **A flesh of things**

Merleau-Ponty was a dancer. His friend the cabaret singer Juliet Greco apparently praised his jive and swing talents. The body was pivotal to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy and he was a man who seemed to enjoy bodies, including his own. He enjoyed the night-life of Paris and the physical throng of its jazz clubs. On March 21, 1960, John Coltrane played a concert at the Olympia Theatre in Paris with the Miles Davis Quintet, the first of a 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' European tour. This performance, and in particular Coltrane's ferocious and expansive solos, sparked controversy and was reported by one reviewer as having outraged concert-goers in the way not seen since the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* back in 1913. Greco had met Davis during an earlier tour, when they became lovers, and when Davis became feted by many of the city's intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre. And whilst there is no record of Merleau-Ponty attending the March 1960 concert, I can nevertheless easily imagine him being there.

Merleau-Ponty's enterprise is a phenomenological investigation into what it means to see and live in a body that sees and is seen and caught up in things. In his essay *Eye and Mind* (1961) he seeks to enter the sensibility of the painter, who by welcoming light, colour and depth into their body, changes the world into a painting. Exploring the works of modern painters, and Cezanne especially, Merleau-Ponty identifies an enigmatic instability 'in what is between' their colours, forms and lines. Thus, a line, or a border of colour or form, is not visible in itself but appears 'always on the near or the far side of what we look at'. There is an animation or 'radiation of the visible'. And, for Merleau-Ponty, this disequilibrium of vision has a profound and radical significance:

*Every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension, because it gives itself as the result of a dehiscence of Being. What this ultimately means is that the proper essence of the visible is to have a layer of invisibility.*



*Maurice Merleau-Ponty*  
(Wikimedia Commons, CC BY)

In the uncompleted manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), published posthumously, Merleau-Ponty unfolds his phenomenological project to show how this 'visual something' catches the invisible in the visible, as he had described operating in the eye of painters. The visible becoming 'a flesh of things' of which we are a part and to which 'we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look'.

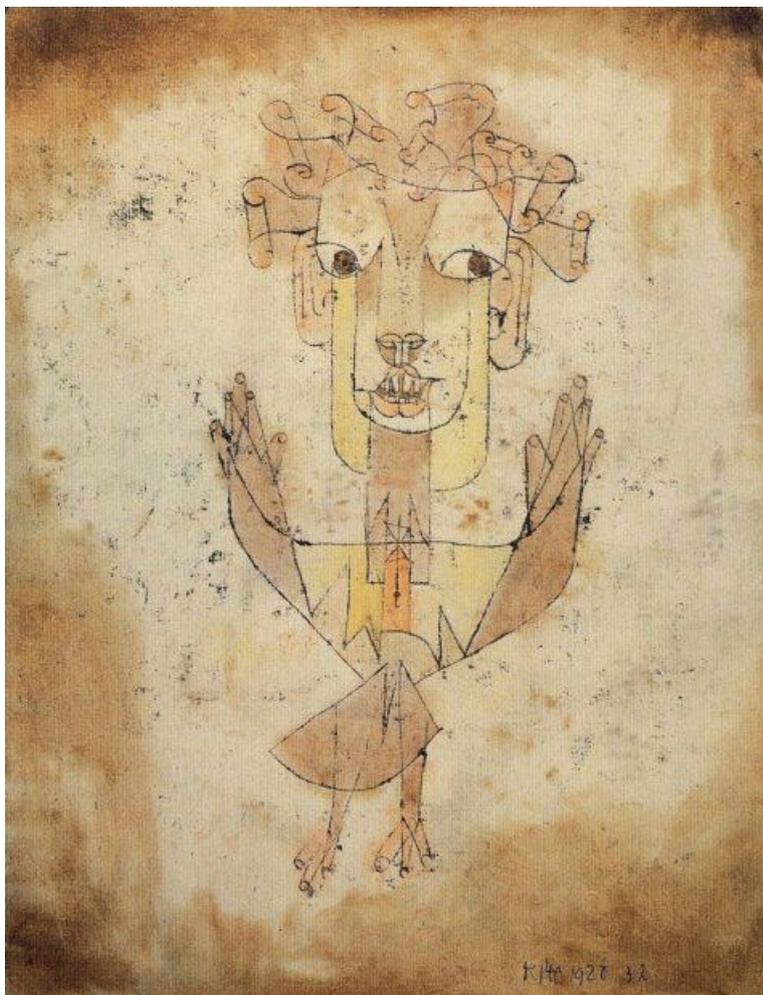
Merleau-Ponty develops his understanding of the shifting and uncertain boundaries in the artistic practice of painters to articulate his conception of a thickness of seeing, where there is a kind of bursting ('dehiscence') of the seeing into the visible and the visible into the seeing. In a body that sees and touches, the contents of the visible world do not sit before it as objects, rather they 'enter into its enclosure, they are within it, they line its looks and its hands inside and outside'. This is Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of incarnation and the echoes with Rilke are striking. We are at one and the same time separated from 'things themselves' and at the heart of them through the thickness of

the perceiving body. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the experience of the whole kinaesthetic body: the body that dances! And this 'reciprocal insertion', or reversibility, of one in the other, as exhibited in his tantalising description of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty names as the intertwining, the *chiasm*.

In this final expression of his thought, Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh as akin to an element of being, as we might speak of water or fire (or music perhaps). He fully recognises the strangeness of this domain where 'I slip on these "elements" and here I am in the world, I slip from the "subjective" to Being'; a domain that has 'no name in any philosophy'.

### Angels of history

In the 1920 painting by Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, we find one more provocative angel. From this small watercolour, showing a rather fragile figure with wings, looking anxious and disturbed, Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1950) evokes for us the angel of history, who looks upon the past and its ruin whilst being blown into the future by a storm. This angel would like to return and make whole what has been broken, but is inexorably propelled forward. For Benjamin the storm is 'progress', but we can also see it as the exigency of time and human existence. Life crashing on regardless; 'affirmation of life as well as death' (Rilke).



Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, 1920  
(Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Rilke finished the *Elegies* simultaneously with writing *The Sonnets of Orpheus* (1922), but angels don't appear in the *Sonnets*, written unequivocally in praise of life and the sensuousness of the

earthly. All testing by angels is absent, perhaps exhausted. I think again of Daniel in Wenders' film, plunging between worlds, from all-seeing angel to a corporeal being. According to Christian Rogowski, Wenders kept quotations from the *Elegies* above his studio desk while making *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin* in the original German, literally 'the sky/heaven over Berlin') and an early draft of the script included lines of Rilke. In a key scene, Peter Falk, playing himself but also another angel become mortal, speaks of discovered human pleasures. The palpable pleasures of living and experiencing:

*I wish I could see your face,  
just look into your eyes and tell you how good it is to be here. Just to touch something!  
Here, that's cold! That feels good!  
Here, to smoke, have coffee. And if you do it together it's fantastic! Or to draw: you know,  
you take a pencil and you make a dark line, then you make a light line and together it's a  
good line.*

Daniel wants to feel these physical sensations and desires of the body (and other bodies); to go the way of the flesh we might say (and Daniel's first experience falling to earth is, tellingly, a physical injury). Wenders brings a cinematic poetry to Daniel's new bursting of the heart, but perhaps also to the artist's quest, as Rilke writes in the ninth elegy:

*To have been this once, completely, even if only once:  
to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.  
And so we keep pressing on.*

### **Being in danger**

The last of Merleau-Ponty's *Working Notes* included in *The Visible and The Invisible* is dated March 1961. Merleau-Ponty died later that year, unexpectedly and unattributed to either illness or age (he was 53 years old). His work had not come to an end and at his death he was planning a second book, *The Prose of the World* or *Introduction to the Prose of the World*. In the notes and manuscripts for his last published works Merleau-Ponty enters a territory with 'no name' and in his search for a language full enough to articulate his understanding and purpose, taking his readers to the very edge of what words can hope to say, we sense a desire in Merleau-Ponty so intense that it feels flammable. An intensity beyond which perhaps a human life cannot endure or sustain itself.

Coltrane, Rilke, Merleau-Ponty, all show us something of the beauty and terror of life and art, revealing for us the creative desire of life as, in Merleau-Ponty's words, 'a dehiscence of Being'. A breaking-through of images, words, or sounds, after struggle: unexpected, urgent, making sense or no sense. Sometimes gentle, sometimes violent. Unrepeatable; where there is no going back, only the thickness of it, touched or exploded, held onto or let go. Perhaps opened up by Rilke's angel, and where expression 'without an answer' (Arendt) includes fallibility and loss. Where, for the musician, painter, philosopher, and, also, psychotherapist, who risks taking themselves to the limits of experience and expression, being itself is put in danger. A necessary danger attendant on the creativity of art and life. I include the practice of psychotherapy: the collaborative work of finding, embodying and sharing expressions that fit, give shape, hold true, to feelings and experiences that have shaken, tested, or traumatised, at dehiscent moments of opening, disclosure, revelation, transformation. A *phenomenology of bursting* in the therapeutic experience, which yet stays with the uncertainty and instability 'in what is between' (Merleau-Ponty).

Shortly after the Temple University concert, to which many reacted critically, Coltrane, with all boundaries now becoming blurred in his music, and worried that his playing puzzled people, resignedly responded 'I find there is nothing else I can do but go ahead'. A youthful Rilke urged 'Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going'. Yet, dwelling at the chiasm of beauty and terror, in exposed landscapes of creativity and anguish, of love and loss, of hope and sorrow, of words and silence, how far can we go? How long can we stay and hold, where we, our bodies, do not necessarily recover?

I listen to Coltrane chasing his sound, risking his all, holding with him in the storm.

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