

Jane Bennett

Out for a Walk

2019

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18727>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bennett, Jane: Out for a Walk. In: *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*. Ontography, Jg. 10 (2019), Nr. 1, S. 93–105. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18727>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 3.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - Share Alike 3.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Out for a Walk

Jane Bennett

WALKING, THAT »forward-leaning process in which we almost-but-not-quite fall down«,¹ is good for human health—good for heart and lungs and circulation of blood, breath, lymph fluid. It is also good for philosophizing, as a very old peripatetic tradition attests: »Let us walk along the Ilissus river as we talk,« says Phaedrus to Socrates, accompanied by a chorus of cicadas; »My mind only works with my legs,« says Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. The nineteenth century naturalist Henry Thoreau also extolled walking, or, to be more precise, that unhurried, undirected version of it he called »sauntering«: »I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who ... had a genius ... for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived »from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la SainteTerre,« to the Holy Land.«² Sauntering is also what Paul Klee says a line does: »an active line, moving freely, goes for a stroll on its own, without destination.«³

In what follows, I explore two walks, one by Thoreau on a hot day and one by a line as it winds its way into a doodle. Walks, I will contend, generate circuits of energies and affects, some of them issuing from people, some from elsewhere. It is hard to keep a human eye on the latter, but my goal is to do so—to accent how ahuman energies and affects inscribe themselves upon selves and inflect their positions and dispositions. Borrowing a term from Lorenz Engell, I will call this inscriptive inflection an »ontographic« procedure, in that it »grasp[s], open[s] up and register[s] the ontic reality without being conveyed by language or [...] even the conceptual«⁴ (at least not in the first instance). Ontography is a term that marks

¹ Kathy E. Ferguson: Anarchist Women and the Politics of Walking in: *Political Research Quarterly* 70/4 (2017), pp. 708–719: 709.

² Henry David Thoreau: *Walking*, in: William Rossi (ed.): *Walden and Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*, New York 2008 p. 260.

³ »Eine aktive Linie, die sich frei ergeht, ein Spaziergang um seiner selbst willen, ohne Ziel.« (Paul Klee: *The Thinking Eye*, London 1964, p. 105.)

⁴ Lorenz Engell: *Ontography: Procedures, Problems, Prospects*. Invitational description for the International Workshop, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, IKKM, October 17–19, 2018. The notion of »ontography« bears a family resemblance to what Friedrich Schiller called »aesthetic education«—a shaping power that initiates its effects upon bodies by tapping sensuous experience more than thought. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*

the operations of a *creative* cosmos, of a more-than-human world continuously impressing itself upon us. At the end of this essay, I will return to the linguistic, to human attempts to »write up« the ahuman ontographies they encounter.

1. A Man out for a Walk

Out for a walk one summer day, Thoreau is surprised to feel »pressed down« upon by the atmosphere and its »15 pounds to a square inch« of barometric pressure. On days with more comfortable weather, such »stupendous piles of light ethereal influence« would go unnoticed. But on that hot and sticky day (July 23, 1851) in Concord, Massachusetts, the atmosphere announces itself as an active force, refusing the status of background condition. The atmosphere imprints itself onto Thoreau's body in a rather dramatic fashion, in an ontographic operation that (as we learn later from his journal) redistributes the relative strengths of his »faculties«. Thoreau's faculty of thought—a capacity to organize experience into ideas, words, phrases—had been »drowned«. *It was too hot to think*. At the same time, a vegetal faculty—a capacity to receive, absorb, and »store up influences«—gained prominence. *I can only nod like the ryeheads in the breeze*.

Here is Thoreau's journal entry for that day:

»out of doors my thought is commonly drowned as it were and shrunken, pressed down by stupendous piles of light ethereal influence – for the pressure of the atmosphere is still 15 pounds to a square inch – I can do little more than preserve the equilibrium & resist the pressure of the atmosphere – I can only nod like the ryeheads in the breeze. I expand more surely in my chamber, as far as expression goes, as if that pressure were taken off; but here out-doors is the place to store up influences.«⁵

(1795), Schiller offers a friendly amendment to Kant, showing how the »moral« and the »aesthetic« were not at all opposed: morality was not »indifferent« to the sensuous, and, moreover, it needs the active participation of a pleasurable »play-drive« innate to the human self. I share Schiller's conviction that aesthetic experiences, including those induced on walks outside, adjust the sensibility of the self. But I hesitate at the idea that the education of sensibility induced by »aesthetic« experience tends naturally to promote moral goodness. Better to leave that second claim, about the ultimate normative effect of aesthetic experience, an open question. Better, then, to say that a walk is an »ontographic operation.«

⁵ Henry Thoreau: *A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851, July 23, 1851*, in: Daniel Peck (ed.): *New York 1993*, p. 126.



Fig. 1: *Too Hot to Think* (J. Bennett)

If ontography consists in »procedures that grasp, open up and register the ontic reality without being conveyed by language or [...] even the conceptual,«⁶ then the New England scene above includes (at least) two efforts of ontographic inscription. The first is the impress of »atmosphere« that brew of summer sun, heat, humidity, dust, pollen, sweat, breeze, and buzz of insects. (Regarding the latter, we now know that on any given summer day in the northern hemisphere, in a 0.6 mile wide column of air from the ground up to 14,000 feet, there exist three *billion* insects: »Sometimes they hover, sometimes they glide, sometimes they free-fall, sometimes they soar,« and sometimes, as with airborne spiders, they float on the sticky threads they send out from their tiny bodies.)⁷ This living atmosphere, consisting of all these and many other shapes, sounds, and movements, exerts itself upon sensitive flesh. That flesh is a second node of ontographic effort: it transmits the impressions received from atmosphere to Thoreau's body-as-an-organism, to the effect that »ontic reality« now re-manifests as Thoreau's mental fog—as, that is, the specific bodily comportment (posture and rhythm) that is *nodding*. »I can only nod like the ryeheads in the breeze.«

⁶ Lorenz Engell: Ontography: Procedures, Problems, Prospects (as note 4).

⁷ Hugh Raffles: *Insectopedia*. New York 2011, p. 10. See also Robert Krulwich: Look Up! The Billion Bug Highway You Can't see, National Public Radio, July 15, 2010.

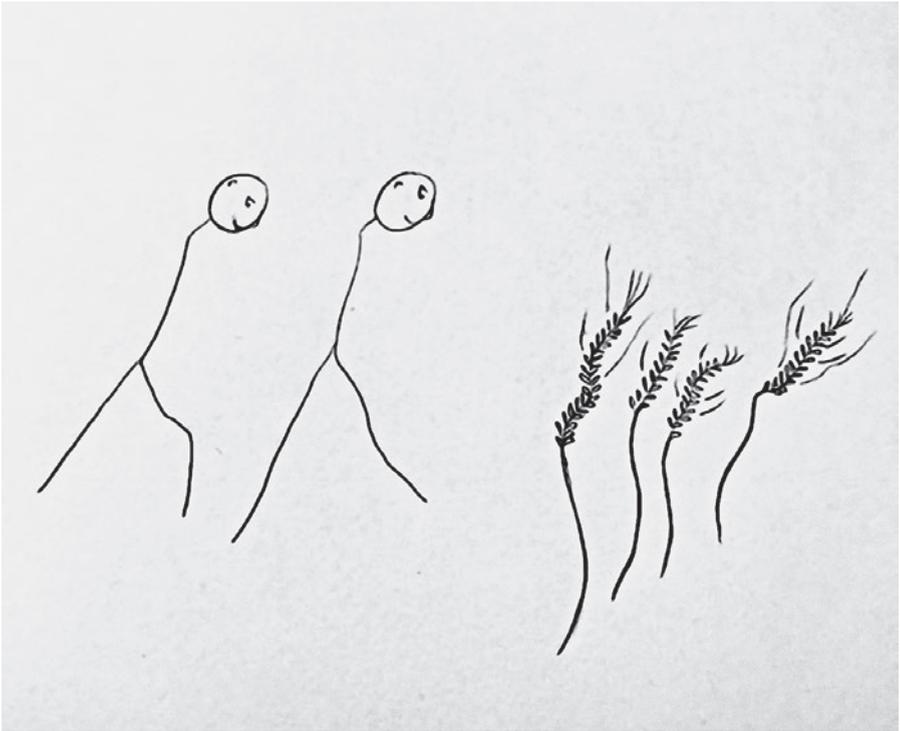


Fig. 2: *Noddings* (J. Bennett)

Atmosphere graphs itself onto man and plant; it evinces itself by inducing nodding in Thoreau and ryeheads. This inducement depends upon the qualities of the materials of flesh and grain: they are permeable and sensitive to wind, heat, moisture, and have an upright shape and parts capable of bobbing. At work is a *distributed* efficacy requiring active participation from both »giver« and »receiver«. That is why it is better to describe the action of ontography as an »inducing« rather than »producing«. Indeed, it is in the final instance quite impossible to determine just where or when the process of nodding starts. The nod comes from Thoreau—or was it the effect of a prompt from without? The nod comes from the atmosphere—or is atmosphere but a complement to those postures already underway within the repertoire of the affected bodies?

After Thoreau goes back inside, his power of thought again comes to the fore—»I expand more surely in my chamber, as far as expression goes.« He is able now to write up the recent happenings as a scene of cognitive–suspension and vegetal nod-activation. In his chamber, atmospheres and bodily postures morph into

meaning-filled squiggles on the page. Thoreau describes this as »speaking a word for Nature,« for forces whose efficacy is not, in the first instance, linguistic.⁸ By way of the efforts of thoughts, memories, and the »motor intentionality« of fingers and forearms,⁹ and also by way of the leanings of pencil, ink, paper, cooler air and less glaring light of his chamber, »ontic reality« becomes journal entry. The entry resonates with and adds to an ongoing tune: Thoreau's literary output is a riff on a (self-)expressive outdoors.

More on such writing up later.

2. A Line out for a Walk

Thoreau tries »to speak a word for Nature.« Paul Klee does the same for the line, for that rhythmic pulse traversing space: »An active line, moving freely, goes for a stroll on its own, without destination« is the famous line, here in written form.¹⁰ As an inveterate doodler, I am familiar with strolling lines—flowing down arm, fingers, pencil, and out the graphite tip, joining and diverging from trajectories already taken by predecessors on the page. The lines saunter, curve, loop, zig-zag, double back to the east, north, south, west, and eventually come to a rest, sometimes after a walk that is brisk, sometimes after one more lazy.

Doodles are rarely born out of doors, more often they emerge in a »chamber« where something else is the official site of attention—a meeting, a phone conversation, a lecture, while waiting for the check at a restaurant. Doodles do not need a lot of space: they make landfall on margin of text, corner of napkin, upside down is fine, though, as Klee notes, they do like to roam. I feel confident that their strolling shapes are something other than, or in excess of, the expression of my intentions, drives, moods. Even more than the less »absent-minded«¹¹ works called

⁸ »I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one [...]« (Henry David Thoreau: *Walking*, in: *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: V: Excursions and Poems* New York 2016, p. 205.)

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes. New York 2014, pp. 112–114.

¹⁰ Paul Klee: *The Thinking Eye*, London 1964, p. 105.

¹¹ »Doodles are the scribbled drawings or markings that are spontaneously produced absent-mindedly, when one's mind is preoccupied with something else rather than concerned solely with the process of drawing itself [...]. For the purposes of this study, doodles are understood as a subjective phenomenon involving the subconscious.« (Ben Watson: *Oodles of Doodles? Doodling Behavior and Its Implications for Understanding Paleoarts in Rock Art Research*, 25/1 (2008), pp. 35–60: 35–36.)



Fig. 3: *Lo, a Shape* (J. Bennett)

drawings or paintings, doodles *surprise* she who holds the pencil. »Lo, a shape !,«¹² I say to myself (quoting Walt Whitman) as they emerge on the page.

Doodles do not have the same prideful feel as, say, the diagram I put on the blackboard to visualize the logic of an argument or the chart I draw to operationalize a plan I am about to hatch. A doodle, writes Matthew Battles, is »about anything but [intentional] expression. Its joys are sensuous and immediate: the dry catch of the pencil point as it tangles in the fibers of the page, the gelid smoothness of the ballpoint unrolling a fat swath of ink, the pliant bouquet of crayons and the stink of coloring markers.«¹³

¹² Walt Whitman: Europe, the 72nd and 73rd Years of These States, in: Michael Moon (ed.): *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, New York 2002, p. 224.

¹³ Matthew Battles: *In Praise of Doodling in American Scholar* 73/4 (Autumn 2004), p. 108. Battles notes that Russell M. Arundel, an early theorist of the doodle, claimed that »civilized man's natural state is one of ›pixilation‹—a condition of pixie-like enchantment that, though concealed by the lumber and business of modern life, emerges most clearly in the ›automatic writing‹ he calls ›doodling.« (p. 105.)



Fig. 4: *Anexaction* (J. Bennett)

More faithful to the phenomenology of doodling would be the assertion of an efficacy that is ontologically multiple, variegated, distributed across a broad field. David Maclagan, in a fine study of doodling called *Line Let Loose*, takes a step toward this idea when he invokes the agency of »the drawing process itself,« whose »kinetic« energy (the »to-and-fro of the pencil«¹⁴) is such that a doodler watches her hand »as if it belonged to someone else.«¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari might say here that the doodle follows the rules of a »protogeometry« which concerns itself not with the established shapes known to geometry (cone, parallelogram, sphere, etc.), but with forms that are »anexact«, »vague«, »vagabond or nomadic.«¹⁶

The Surrealists, influenced by Freud and psychoanalysis, took the non-intentionality of doodling to suggest that the image was the expression of an obscure

¹⁴ David Maclagan: *Line Let Loose: Scribbling, Doodling, and Automatic Writing*, London 2014, pp. 84–86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁶ Protogeometry concerns itself specifically with »vague, ... vagabond, or nomadic, morphological essences. These essences are distinct from sensible things, as well as from ideal, royal, or imperial essences. Protogeometry, the science dealing with them, is itself vague, in the etymological sense of »vagabond: it is neither inexact like sensible things nor exact like ideal essences, but *anexact yet rigorous* (essentially and not accidentally inexact).« (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis 1986, p. 367.)

region of the human psyche—of the Unconscious. Max Morise, for example, described doodles as »spontaneous images« prompted by »imperceptible undulations of the flux of thought.«¹⁷ Surrealist games of automatic drawing, such as *cadavres exquis*, were designed to unearth the »secrets« of the Unconscious; they rendered more perceptible the »undulations« of thought.¹⁸ There is no doubt that the figure of an inner, unconscious flux has had much explanatory and therapeutic power. But it does not capture well the doodler's sense of the presencing of a creative »flux« that *exceeds* intra- and inter-psychoic relations, which operates »out of doors«. The anthropocentrism of Surrealism makes it difficult to detect and acknowledge contributions made by, for example, Concord's ahuman »atmosphere.«

Various 19th century »spiritualist« and »mediumistic« forms of artistic automatism (later to be absorbed into discourses of »psychotic« and »outsider« art) *did* address this outside. The drawing hand of a (usually female) medium at a séance is guided by disembodied spirits. Most (all?) such claims end up involving some kind of earthly intentionality. But I think it is also important to acknowledge the intuition motivating practices of séance, automatic drawing, or other rituals of aesthetic possession. And that is the sense that more-than-human forces of creativity are active and real. Had Maclagan, for example, attended more closely to this—perhaps by way of the figure of a »virtual« realm that is real despite not being fully actual (Deleuze) or the figure of »creative evolution« operative in the spaces between life forms (Bergson), or the figure of »etherial« yet efficacious »natural influences« (Thoreau)—he might have spared himself the either-or question organizing his study of »lines let loose«: Is doodling automatic or intentional? That question is a precipitate of an ontological framework that posits active subjects and relatively passive objects; it also tends to revert to the notion that artistry is an exclusively human realm. But if, instead, bodies of many different sorts are acknowledged to engage in ontography, then other questions concerning doodling can come to the fore. Not »Which of the human faculties produce and direct doodling?« but »How does doodling help us to rethink our sovereign-centric model of action, of what it means *to act*?« The doodle bears witness to outdoor forces that have seeped in, and to a distributive, conjoint quality of action. »Ontic reality« activates a »drawing process,« which leans into the momentum of the strolling line, which taps the shoulder of the human doodler, who lends her arm to the pencil, which gives the nod to emergent shapes. (And vice versa, all around.)

¹⁷ Morise is quoted in Jim Toub: In and Out of the Margins: The Doodle in Art and Popular Culture, in: SECAC Review XVI/4 (2014), pp. 472–484: 473.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 479.

3. On Writing Up

I turn now to the productive paradox of *writing* about ontographic operations that include the ahuman and alinguistic. What are the characteristics of a rhetorical style that is least distorting of these? What grammar, syntax, tropes and tricks are most pertinent? How to speak a word for ontography?

Thoreau's writing, which hovers between the genres of political theory, myth-making, and poetry, is very good at acknowledging the contributions made by forces whose first language is not human. Thoreau writes up his encounters in ways that mark how not-quite-human vitalities prompt written texts, and continue to inform and deform them each time they are read. Thoreau, writing as »the scribe of [...] the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing,«¹⁹ insinuates into the reader an uncanny sense that, at this very moment, one is amidst a bevy of active forces, some human and many not.

A poetics appropriate to ontography might try, then, to acknowledge and dramatize how its metaphors *remain infused and fueled* by the physical forces more obviously at work when one is out in the sun on a really hot day. Such writing could show, for example, how the throat-and-chest feeling of breathing and the texture of wind on your face still vibrate inside the word »inspiration,« or how hearing the phrase »on the one hand ... on the other hand« induces a subtle rocking to-and-fro of your body.²⁰ Such a rhetoric might push the »metaphorical« to the point where it becomes uncertain whether a sentence speaks in a descriptive or an aspirational voice, and also uncertain whether the speaker is positioned outside the scene (like a bird or a god from above²¹) or a body swimming in a processual sea.

Such a rhetoric would also try, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, to bring sentences *to* life, showing not only how sentences ex-press the humanist, societal life of its writer, but also press forward a vitality proper to ahuman shapes. Such sentences would »light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it.«²² They would acknowledge that (what Thoreau calls) »natural influences« linger in the language enlivened by them.

¹⁹ Henry Thoreau: *A Year in Thoreau's Journal*, September 2, 1851, New York 1993, p. 188.

²⁰ Iris K. Schneider, Anita Eerland, Frenk van Harreveld, Mark Rotteveel, Joop van der Pligt, Nathan van der Stoep, and Rolf A. Zwaan: *One Way and the Other: The Bidirectional Relationship between Ambivalence and Body Movement in Psychological Science* XX(X) 1–7 (2013), pp. 1–2.

²¹ Donna Haraway speaks of »the God trick of seeing everything from no where,« in *Donna Haraway: Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (Autumn 1988), pp. 575–599: 581.

²² »I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an œuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply

One of Thoreau's contemporaries, the American poet Walt Whitman, also sought such a poetics, one »done with reviews and criticisms of life« and instead »animating now to life itself.«²³ To »animate« to life is to throw oneself heartily into an ongoing creative process. It is neither to »take« a decisive action (as in »to act more animatedly«) nor to endure as a patient of an outside force (as when Frankenstein's monster is »animated« by electricity.) Thoreau makes a similar point in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*:

»A perfectly healthy sentence, it is true, is extremely rare [...]. It is as if a green bough were laid across the page, and we are refreshed as by the sight of fresh grass in mid-winter or early spring. You have constantly the warrant of life and experience in what you read. The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much that was done. The sentences are verduous and blooming as evergreen and flowers, because they are rooted in fact and experience [...]«²⁴

Such a rhetoric might also try to speak with a tongue that is ramified or many-branched, like a huge old tree or a neural network. Or perhaps with a voice that is rhizomatic in the sense of being all branches and no trunk. »The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd,« say Deleuze and Guattari.²⁵ Such a rhetoric would be roomy enough to accommodate a heterogeneous swirl of agents, some human, some not. It would find work-arounds to the grammar of subjects and objects—in order to display how »writing up« consists in overlapping waves of expressive effort, some mine, some yours, and some apersonal.

To bespeak from within an ongoing process, rather than from an external vantage where the subject of a predicate *either* directs activity (the active voice) or is acted upon (the passive voice), is what verbs in the *middle-voice* do. The middle voice is a grammatical form appropriate to, prompted by, and traversed by stupendous, ethereal influences. Middle-voiced verbs are marked formally in classical Greek and Sanskrit but not in English. They name activities whose *impetus* is apersonal

not judgements but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightening of possible storms.« (Michel Foucault: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* in: Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, Vol. 1. New York 1997, p. 323.

²³ Walt Whitman: *By Blue Ontario's Shore*, in: Donald Moon (ed.): *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, Norton Critical Edition, New York 2002, lines 189–190.

²⁴ Henry Thoreau: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, New York 1921, p. 73.

²⁵ as note 17.

and multiple and whose *efficacy* is proper to process rather than a function of the aggregated efforts of its dividuations. According to linguist Emile Benveniste, the dominance of two voices (active and passive) was a relatively late development of the Indo-European verb form. It was a »transformation« of an older linguistic order in which the key difference was between activities in which an actor stands *outside* the activity and thus not changed by it (»external diathesis«) and activities in which an actor is *inside* and thus also subject to being altered by the process (»internal diathesis«). Internal diathesis would only later be presented as *midway* between active and conditioned verbal forms. Benveniste makes the case that the »middle« of middle-voiced verbs is thus *not* a mean between an active and a passive voice. It indicates instead an effectivity *amidst* a (complex, heterogeneous) atmospheric process. Any acting I »effects while being affected, in the middle.«²⁶ For example, in the Greek middle-form verb *oimai* (to think), what will become the essence and the essential activity of the Cartesian subject here appears as »an activity that speaks in its own sphere and reverts to itself of itself prior to a subject’s taking charge of it. Thinking in this case would be an activity that enacts itself out of its own processes.«²⁷

Gavin Parkinson emphasizes how hard it is to theorize the middle voice in »a language like English which has almost entirely eradicated« it. The »sheer difficulty and awkwardness« of attempts to do so remind us of the power of grammar to circumscribe what can be felt of life.²⁸ Let me emphasize, however, that this

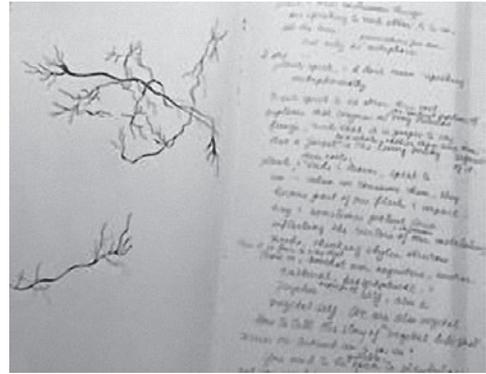


Fig. 5: *Sentences to Life* (J. Bennett)



Fig. 6: *Rhizomatic Speech* (J. Bennett)

²⁶ Emile Benveniste: Active and Middle Voice in the Verb, in: Problems in General Linguistics, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables, Miami 1971, pp. 149–50. See also Hayden White: Writing in the Middle Voice, in: The Fiction of Narrative, Baltimore 2010, pp. 255–262.

²⁷ Charles E. Scott: The Middle Voice of Metaphysics, in: Review of Metaphysics 42/4 (June 1989), pp. 743–764: 748.

²⁸ Gavin Parkinson: (Blind Summit) Art Writing, Narrative, Middle Voice, in: Art History

circumscription is not *complete*: linguistic forms that nod to a distributive kind of agency persist. And they can be amplified through practices of »writing up.« Take, for example, Whitman's »I sing the body electric,« whose non-atomic I is enmeshed in a process with flesh, electricity, and sound. If there is any choosing-to-sing on the part of the poet, it is best understood as what Angus Fletcher calls »a passage through an intermediate state of cohesion, a sense of apprehending a presence, so that only in that rather indirect way is he active.«²⁹ Or consider Whitman's phrase »It sails me, I daub with bare feet,« where the I is suspended between the status of the passively windblown and the volitional toe-tapper:

*I hear the train'd soprano. (what work with hers it this?)
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess'd them
It sails me, I dab with bare feet ...*³⁰

Or take these less poetic examples of middle-voiced phrases: »It sounds good«³¹ and »I be going now.« Both are responses to happenings in which the speaker remains currently entangled. The activity so named comes not from a discrete body but from an admixture of influential currents.

All this suggests that a rhetoric for ontography would be sprinkled liberally with process-oriented verbs—to induce, to animate to, to inflect, to partake, to sing, to sound. Such verbs mark activities with multiple loci of impetus, and they position partakers as already caught up in an ongoing flow that precedes them and to which they may add impetus, drag, swerve. Such verbs position human participants as always already involved in a creative flow before it is possible to feel

34/2 (April 2011), pp. 268–287: 277. Charles Scott also notes how »the dominance of the active and passive voices [in modern European languages] makes inevitable the priority of the spectator-subject for philosophical thought, whereas the middle voice yields a different way of thinking.« (Charles Scott: *The Question of Ethics*, Bloomington 1990, pp. 18–19.)

²⁹ Angus Fletcher: *A New Theory of American Poetry*, Cambridge 2004, p. 168.

³⁰ Walt Whitman: *Song of Myself*, in: Donald Moon (ed.): *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, Norton Critical Edition, New York 2002, line 606.

³¹ Languages such as »classical Greek, Sanskrit, or modern Hungarian« do register »middle marking [...] in verbs that might more usually be considered passive. Constructions such as the German [...] »es hort sich gut an« [it sounds good] use middle forms [...] to de-emphasize the agent.« (Elizabeth Barry: *One's Own Company: Agency, Identity and the Middle Voice in the Work of Samuel Beckett*, in: *Journal of Modern Literature* 31/2, pp. 115–132: 116.) Barry uses »It sounds good« as an example of a sentence that is »agentless but not devoid of agency« in the context of a discussion of the rhetoric of Samuel Beckett.

themselves being so. Before they »take« action. Eberhard calls this a condition of being »incorporated in a process that carries us along, a process in which and especially of which we partake.«³² We are middle-voiced partakers even more than actors *or* recipients.

Language can never be wholly faithful to influences not itself: every rhetoric, poetics, or wordy composition will be more or less untrue to stupendous, ethereal influences that signal without words.³³ But writing them up remains one powerful way to get in touch with them, however crookedly or off-key. The question of a rhetoric apposite to ontography, to a middling, more-than-human, creative process, is a daunting one. Like the neo-vitalist, new materialist, assemblage-focused, and nonhuman turns in scholarship that have made it possible to define this as a task, discussions of how to use words with (ontographic) things are still fledgling. But we be trying.

³² Philippe Eberhard: *The Mediality of Our Condition: A Christian Interpretation in* *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67/2 (1999), pp. 411–434: 420.

³³ What is more, each writer will contaminate the influences she targets for expression with other influences embedded in her perceptual, ideological, social-positional, and body-capacity styles. And at least some dimensions of our »subject-position« must remain unmarked, unconscious, vague to their bearer. The attempt to unearth these, and to confess to their influence, is a valuable element within (post-colonial, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, neuro-diversifying) strategies of resistance. For an excellent discussion of the politics and philosophy of neurodiversity see Erin Manning: *The Minor Gesture*, Durham 2016 and her *Me Lo Dijo Un Pajarito: Neurodiversity, Black Life and the University As We Know It*, unpublished manuscript. The point I am trying to make, with the help of Manning and others, is a trans-humanist extension of the claim, characteristic of the linguistic turn, that the writer is not to be understood as only directing language but as also affected by the force of the writing.