

Wandering off from Willful Disobedience

(three remarks and an imaginary title)

Alejandro de Acosta

2011, August

Contents

From the will to nonvoluntary action	3
A logic of faith	6
The discovery of mysticism	9
The idea of willful incompetence	11
Post-script on <i>The Anvil</i>	13
Works Referenced	13

“ ... outside everything else and inside myself ...”
- Plotinus *Enneads* IV, 8, 1

I have some comments about a compilation of short writings entitled *Willful Disobedience*. It may be an odd experience to read through the book cover to cover as I did. Written over the course of a decade, the pieces in it quietly overlap and repeat each other in form and content. One does not gain or lose much through a linear reading of this collection. But that is how I read it. And so much about this book is strange to me in a way I can barely express! I prefer to say very little about its combination of precision and vagueness, its compact historical narratives and impossibly hostile denunciations of the present. My impression is that of being before a synthesis of incisive challenges and almost dreamlike stories offered as explanations: unusual gifts of an unusual understanding. As far as I am concerned all of this is a wonderful sort of prose poetry for what are admittedly restricted tastes.

What follows is hopefully too bizarre to be mistaken for a critical review. It consists of three interlinked remarks. They are the results of my attempt to orient myself in this mixed writing while wandering progressively farther off in the direction of an imaginary title.

From the will to nonvoluntary action

My first remark concerns the role of the will in *Willful Disobedience*. In the last selection, Wolfi Landstreicher presents in its most complete form a case for revolution that he calls “the revolutionary wager.” I will cite two lengthy passages:

[B]oth hope in a collapse and despair in the face of the present catastrophic reality involve looking at the present world on its terms, not on our own. Those who hold to either perspective have already assumed their own incapacity to act effectively in the world to realize their own desires and dreams. They, therefore, look at the realities of the world not as challenges to be faced and overcome, but as inevitabilities that must be endured. What is missing is the reversal of perspective referred to by Vaneigem, the individual insurrection that is the first step toward social insurrection. To take this step, it is necessary to have the courage to wager on ourselves and our ability to act, on our own when necessary, and together with others whenever possible.

[...]

The world as it is today can seem overwhelming. The idea that revolution is “unrealistic” is not an illogical conclusion, but regardless of the fierceness of the rhetoric of those who assume this, it indicates a surrender to the present reality. No matter how we choose to encounter the world, we are taking a gamble. There are no certainties, and for me this is part of the joy of life. It means that I can make choices on how I will act and that I can base those choices on my own desires. I desire a world in which the relationships between people are determined by those involved in terms of their needs, desires and aspirations. I desire a world in which every system of domination, every form of exploitation, all forms of rule and submission have ceased to exist. If

I lay my wager against revolution, I am bound to lose. If instead I stake my life on immediately rebelling against the ruling order with the aim of social insurrection and revolutionary transformation, there is a possibility that I may win in the long run, and in the short run I will definitely win, because I will have made so much of my life my own against the ruling order that I will have actually lived, vibrantly in rage and joy. (299, 303-304, from “The Revolutionary Wager”)

I repeat: “No matter how we choose to encounter the world ... I can make choices.” Now I underline: *choose, choices*. It seems that the background of choice is an experience of “encountering the world” that, in its uncertainty, seems to hold open for me the possibility of choosing now this, now that path. Here I would like to introduce a cleavage between choice and the experience of encountering the world. In the schema of the wager, we can choose *how* we encounter the world; but can we choose *whether* to encounter the world? On the one side is choice, whatever that is. On the other is the apparent inescapability of a relation to the world. For me these are both striking. The wager emphasizes only the first.

I will illustrate my perplexity about the second with an example taken from elsewhere in the book. In a piece called “Resisting Representation,” Landstreicher advocates “refusing to make ourselves into an image” (137). The idea there is to stop focusing on how we are represented, especially by agents of a hostile media; to reject their advances and not to plan what we do or say around our anticipated representation by them. I tend to agree. But the greater issue for me is about the inevitability of images. Landstreicher writes in this piece as if any of us could halt the production of images, mediatic or otherwise. It seems to me, however, that the production of images ultimately has nothing to do with the media. If one posits a world, there must be images in it. Re-presentation re-produces images — images produced, presumably, in an initial, primary presentation. The bodies that compose the world radiate images, shed them, merely by being in it. Images are produced automatically just as shadows are cast. What we see in them, or their copies, is another matter. I do think the attitude one takes towards the production and reproduction of images matters, but I do not think I can simply refuse it. How does a critique of spectacular images account for these ordinary ones? How does choice account for the givenness of the world?

For Landstreicher, what in me refuses or, more generally, chooses, is the will, a venerable philosophical and political concept. The term and the idea are everywhere in his book. I imagine that, for him, this emphasis on the will is the natural correlate of a focus on the individual. The will, as the faculty of affirming or denying, is indeed traditionally parceled out to individual bodies, souls, or selves. But my question is beyond individualism. One can conceive of individuality with or without the will. One can also experience many forms of group belonging and feel that certain groups do or do not have a collective will. But perhaps the greatest problem with assuming the will as a distinct faculty of the individual is that it divides out in me what chooses from what does not. What does the rest of me do? Follow? (Another, perhaps more obscure, form of this question would be: do I encounter myself in the world? If part of me does not revolt, is it really me, or is it another aspect of the world that the rest of me, presumably the true self, confronts? Aren't all of these unanswerable questions the result of a leftover idea of the self as a thing, a substance?)

Reading “The Revolutionary Wager,” two questions impressed themselves upon me: what if I have no experience of choice, of the will as a separate faculty in me? What if I merely remain skeptical of such an account?

Entertaining these questions (right now I am not interested in distinguishing between them), we could draw up a more complete picture, wandering off from the strict terms of the wager as proposed by Landstreicher. There have to be at least two other options.

– I could find that I do not revolt. But instead of framing that discovery within the wager (as automatically losing!), where not rebelling is seen as a choice, I could explore further and determine that, here and now, I cannot revolt. Whatever I am, however I am composed, it is not up to me. If I remain within the wager, my determination shows me as pathetic, cowardly. Wandering off from the wager, a new option makes me curious to myself. This is the realm of the involuntary.

– I could find that I *do* revolt. But, in so doing, I realize that my revolt is not the result of a choice I have made. I discover that I am already revolting. This is the realm of the nonvoluntary. Retroactively, I could say I willed it, but why re-enter into that terrain of explanation when the discovery of nonvoluntary rebellion is so interesting?

What is called a choice seems to me to be a minute inclination wrapped up or entangled in a vast network of other, more obscure, less well understood, inclinations. It is something like an unexpected and unpredictable tipping point wherein inclinations get arranged in a certain pattern. I understand such inclinations and arrangements, in their multiplicity, fairly well; I do not understand the place of a supposed faculty of the will among them. Every tipping point is different, because it involves different inclinations. There is no reason other than a moral or aesthetic one to crown a series of actions and events in this manner. There are other ways to tell this story. Most importantly, at any given moment I may be composed of contradictory tendencies, patterns of inclinations arranged in divergent tendencies — at the limit, contradictory tendencies in open combat. What I call nonvoluntary actions are the expressions of such impure and complex processes. In sum, the two new options I propose frame the will, the supposed faculty of choice, as something more artificial, more dependent on naming and narrative, private and public, than the two options offered to me in the revolutionary wager.

To ignore the insistence of my questions and forge ahead, assuming the reality of choice and the will, seems like something one does or ought to do if one has already decided one has a will (and presumably that everybody else does as well). But it seems to me that I can make no such decision except in passing, at exceptional moments. In such moments I might say that there is voluntary action. But there are other moments, far more common: the rest of the time, I would say there is involuntary and nonvoluntary action. From these last two perspectives, I suggest instead that one can feel one is already rebelling, revolting, resisting (or not!), without any clear sense of why. Rather than a wager that explains revolt in terms of the will (or some kind of argument that justifies it in terms of reason) I invoke these odd impressions: “I cannot revolt” (involuntary); “I am revolting” (nonvoluntary). (The dualism is simplistic and awkward, of course. I employ it in the interest of complicating the either/or of the revolutionary wager). In these cases I do not know or cannot justify the action of the inclination that tips a multiplicity of inclinations in this or that direction, let alone multiple simultaneous directions.

The multiplicity of the self is one issue. Value is another. Landstreicher suggests that his wager in favor of revolt is desirable because, opting for revolt, no matter what, I win. If I deny the choice in favor of revolt, I lose. I am profoundly unconvinced by the valuation implied in these terms,

and especially in their opposition. It is odd to say this, but there are many people I know, some of whom I collaborate with, whose victory I dread. And as for those who have lost or are losing, there is much to be learned in their failures. I would even go so far as to say that the idea of my own victory, especially when I am with others, is somewhat repugnant.

Asking “am I nonvoluntarily revolting?” ought to generate a great variety of answers. It is a far more rich terrain than what is revealed in the flat yes or no of the wager. It is only in the rarest case that I will conclude that I am not, in any way, revolting. (But this insight requires an attention to micropolitics that is, to say the least, scarce). And if we accept the multiplicity in what we call individuals, we can also broaden our thinking to include the almost irreducible complexities of aggregations of people: groups, clans, tribes ... societies. Now, Landstreicher numbers himself among those “who reject this society in its totality” (Introduction to *Reasons of Flame*). But what he repeatedly calls “this society” is far less unified, far more unstable than he conceives it to be. It is not any one thing! To call a society or a civilization a “totality” as he does is to engage in abstraction. To imagine a society or civilization as a great organism or mega-individual presents the same problems as the analogous insistence on a certain kind of personal individuality (they are the results of the same habits of thought). It is one of the fancies of the true individualist, of the mask called the ego: me and the world, me-and-then-the-world, offered as the desirable reversal of everyone else’s the-world-and-then-me. I “encounter” the world, he writes; I do not cease to find such formulations strange. I have only had such experiences (of the unification of society or world into a totality, of facing my life or the world, of the distance implied in such ... metaphors) in moments of the greatest intellectual abstraction.

That is all I have to say about the idea of choice as a pure event, really: when somebody reports on having chosen this or that separate from (in a position of transcendence with regard to) a vast network of other dispositions, I usually suppose he or she is somewhat deluded. But when someone like Landstreicher reports on an absolute and sovereign “encounter with the world,” this claim seems to emerge from a very private, quite incommunicable experience (it is much more difficult to identify a transcendent element in it). In neither case can I say I share this experience; but Landstreicher’s version is clearly the more interesting one for me.

A logic of faith

A second remark begins with the discovery of a silent allusion, that, in my curiosity, I will explore, wandering off in a different direction. The text of the revolutionary wager, in its title, in its logic, and in its insistence, echoes Pascal’s famous text on the wager, which concerns, at least on the face of it, belief in God.

God is, or is not. But towards which side will we lean? Reason cannot decide anything. There is an infinite chaos separating us. At the far end of this infinite distance a game is being played and the coin will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose one or the other, reason cannot make you defend either of the two choices.

So do not accuse those who have made a choice of being wrong, for you know nothing about it! 'No, but I will blame them not for having made this choice, but for having made any choice. For, though the one who chooses heads and the other one are equally wrong, they are both wrong. The right thing is not to wager at all.'

Yes, but you have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed (*Pensées*, 153-154)

Because we are already committed, Pascal argues, it follows that we should choose to believe in God. If we do so and are wrong, nothing happens. If we believe and are right, we can look forward to eternity in heaven. But if we do not believe and are wrong, we will suffer for eternity, while if we do not believe and are right nothing happens. This, in addition to the presumption that the first "nothing happens" is a happier life than the second, tips the scales for Pascal in favor of faith. The wager is stated in absolute terms: I can choose to believe, and accept every consequence of so choosing, or not. Choosing to believe seems to be a sovereign act of will, an irreversible event. Belief is the will's flourishing: "one must believe something!" as the consequence of the implicit "you have a will." But the wager is less about the will as such, and more an argument for the inevitability of faith. This makes sense if we consider an anti-Pascalian response: "I believe nothing!", or at least "I suspend judgment" as the correlates of "there is no will" or "I doubt that there is a will." Pascal includes the second in his text as an impossible position (elsewhere he calls it Pyrronism, because he knows the skeptics are his enemies).

In any case, the wager presupposes the will and conceives belief or faith as its proper deployment. So the question for me is about the strange connections we might make between the will, faith and anarchy. David Graeber refers to faith in an exposition with some instructive parallels to the revolutionary wager. Here he is in the course of enumerating some liberatory principles:

... institutions like the state, capitalism, racism and male dominance are not inevitable; ... it would be possible to have a world in which these things would not exist, and ... we'd all be better off as a result. To commit oneself to such a principle is almost an act of faith, since how can one have certain knowledge of such matters? It might possibly turn out that such a world is not possible. But one could also make the argument that it's this very unavailability of absolute knowledge which makes a commitment to optimism a moral imperative: Since one cannot know a radically better world is not possible, are we not betraying everyone by insisting on continuing to justify, and reproduce, the mess we have today? And anyway, even if we're wrong, we might well get a lot closer. (*Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, 10).

This version of the wager is much more pragmatic; and not surprisingly, Graeber's use of the term *faith* is more nominalistic ("almost"). They are tempered, I suppose, by the sociological and anthropological traditions he draws on. In this schema, one could partially succeed. Graeber probably thinks of faith as emergent from the socius, as an attitude made available by groups through and in their practices, variable as practices are variable, stable as they are stable, etc. Accordingly, he not only proposes we commit, but that we commit to optimism. (It would seem that optimism is the correlate of partial victory.)

Contrast this with another passage by Landstreicher on the wager:

Revolution is a wager, and that wager is precisely that the unknown, which offers the possibility of the end of domination and exploitation, is worth risking, and that taking this risk involves the destruction of the totality of this civilization of domination and exploitation — including its technological systems — that has been all we have ever known. Life is elsewhere. Do we have the courage and the will to find it? (251, from “On the Mystical Basis of the ‘Neutrality’ of Technology”)

The differences should be obvious. This version of the wager is clearly more absolute: the use of the terms “totality” and “will” is its marker. We are not to commit to optimism; the idea is rather that of a pure commitment corresponding to the all or nothing terms of the wager. It is this absoluteness of Landstreicher’s version of the wager that brings it so close to Pascal’s. They both set aside reasonable arguments (for the existence of god, for revolt) and speak to the will. Pascal: “you must wager.” And in so doing, they tell the rest of us, those unimpressed with such a necessity, that we are in fact creatures with a will, “already committed.” Pascal: “how will you wager?”

Let us learn to see the gradations between Graeber’s version of the wager and Landstreicher’s. Let us remain open to the possibility of a qualitative difference between them. One could, of course, describe that difference in more detail as a cultural difference, a difference between practices and ways of life, as well as understandings of the world — which they are both, each in his own way, interested in. For example, Landstreicher contrasts his position with what he calls “moderation,” an “acceptance of what is” (123); not to accept is, for him, acting “forcefully” (223). This all follows: once I suppose I have a will, force seems to be its highest expression, its optimal deployment. From there, it is not far to describe “one’s life as a weapon.”

Something about the absolute character of Pascal’s wager, its way of framing the world “on his own terms,” is relevant to understanding Landstreicher’s complete rejection of “what is.” They name the world, society, “infinite distance,” “infinite chaos,” so as to destroy it, attack it, leap over it. Very well. But I still can’t say that I have filled out this picture, or answered my own questions about will and world.

Was Pascal, is Landstreicher, doing anything more than reporting on their own experience? If so, what is communicative in their statements? For my part, I do not think that Pascal refuted religious skeptics. What he did do successfully is write out a logic of faith, attempting to communicate the inner experience of the faithful. But is a wager the true or ultimate logic of faith? Or is it a mask for it to wear before a hostile public? I leave that question to the faithful, just as I leave Landstreicher’s wager to those who feel it speaks to them.

Consider the following notes written by Paul Valéry in a notebook of 1936:

Pascal is the type of the anarchist and that is what I find best in him.

“Anarchist” is the observer who sees what he sees and not what he is supposed to see.

He reasons upon it (*Les principes d’anarchie pratique et appliquée*, 19, translation mine).

(Note the parallel with Landstreicher’s insistence on encountering the world on our own terms). Of course Valéry is only partly right. However provocative it is to register Pascal as *the* type of the anarchist, it is obvious to me that there is more than one type. The interest of

these lines is not in the clarification of who or what is an anarchist, but rather in the making impure of the category of the anarchist by suggesting its type could be someone like Pascal. This making impure challenges us to think differently — about the status of the revolutionary wager, for example.

More impurity: Pascal should not be reduced to his wager (there are, for example, those delightful pages on boredom in the *Pensées* ...). Nor Landstreicher to his. Seeking to reject moderation and to act forcefully *in writing*, though, he had to invent something like the revolutionary wager. But if I think this, I can no longer take the wager on its own terms. It registers rather as an excessive attempt to communicate something that is very difficult to say.

The discovery of mysticism

Wandering one step farther out, a few more lines from the same page in Valéry:

Every mystic is a vessel of anarchy.

Before God considered in the secret of oneself, and as one's secret, everything else is powerless.

All power is contemptible (*ibid.*)

Thanks to my detour through Pascal and Valéry, I have found a way of understanding Landstreicher. It is to say that he speaks mystically. I can understand calling society or civilization a “totality” as something other than a grotesque abstraction if I treat it as a mystical utterance. Maybe for those of us that remain skeptical, or speak from another perspective, this is the most generous approach. I also think, however, that mystics are precisely those who succeed by failing (to communicate). It is no coincidence that the preferred form of expression of the greatest among them is the *paradox*. What characterizes mystics is their propensity to use *every* word, especially *God*, in a way that is paradoxical. What happens when we apply an analogous interpretation to certain anarchist uses of terms such as *society*, *civilization*, or *technology*? I will try to push Landstreicher in this direction, in part because his writing implies it, in part because I suppose he would reject it.

I say that he would reject it because of the way *he* uses the word. In a piece on Marxist “determinist” approaches to technology and progress, he contrasts “a truly historical approach to social struggle” (249) with a mystical one — and classes the determinist one as mystical! This is just name-calling. Mysticism is an experience, not a kind of theory. “The idea of history as human activity” (249) can just as well be a mystical idea as it can be a materialist (or whatever is proffered as the non-mystical position) one. It ought to be clear that I do not use the term *mystic* as an epithet of any sort — though in this context it is, of course, a provocation.

Landstreicher makes a Pascalian case; he uses Pascalian logic. But I doubt he is asking us to have faith in anything. I prefer to say that he is reporting on an experience (of society or civilization as a totality, for example) that I think of as mystical, and that this experience finds its paradoxical expression in a retooling of Pascal's wager. But the paradox does not lie in an overt logical contradiction in the terms of the revolutionary wager. It is in the gap between the wager itself and what it might be imagined to express: inclinations that exceed its terms.

One curious piece entitled “Religion: When the Sacred Imprisons the Marvelous” could be interpreted along these lines. It begins by invoking an “encounter with the world” that Landstreicher calls “an experience of the marvelous” (198). The thrust of the piece is to stridently contrast the sense of the marvelous in individual experience with every form of religion. Here Landstreicher joins those who claim that religion works through separation. Consecration, making things sacred, is its operation, and this expropriation of the experience of the marvelous is theorized in strict analogy with political or economic expropriations. The sacred is of a piece with private property and the state; its agents are specialists of the holy: shamans or priests. Landstreicher concludes:

If we are to again be able to grasp the marvelous as our own, to experience wonder and joy directly on our own terms, to make love with oceans or dance with stars with no gods or priests intervening to tell us what it must mean, or, to put it more simply, if we are to grasp our lives as our own, creating them as we will, then we must attack the sacred in all its forms. We must desecrate the sacredness of property and authority, of ideologies and institutions, of all the gods, temples and fetishes whatever their basis. Only in this way can we experience all of the inner and outer worlds as our own, on the basis of the only equality that can interest us, the equal recognition of what is wonderful in the singularity of each one of us (204).

To “grasp our lives as our own” is equated here with “grasping the marvelous as our own.” Here we have the now-familiar “encounter with the world” “on our own terms” of the wager described in a manner that, for me, cannot remain separated from the claims of mystics.

I will try to imagine myself into this experience. Here is the world; it should be mine, without mediation. Every custom and institution is an obstacle between me and the world. I discover in myself a set of inclinations that act to remove these obstacles; they come in a bundle; I call this bundle the will. The relative totalization, becoming-bundle, of inclinations, seems to me to be identical to the emergence of the experience of the will. End imagination.

Now, I would not say that the becoming-bundle of certain inclinations is *identical* to the will. That is only one way to tell this story. But the feeling of a forceful pattern — that the inclinations are forceful, or seem to get arranged forcefully — in a single direction is my way of accounting for the will as an occasional emergent phenomenon. This emergence is obscure for most. Naturally, those who become aware of, and report on, such processes speak obscurely. Dwelling in all of this obscurity matters, as it could be that the relative totalization of the bundle (it acts as one, it is forceful) is how the experience of society or civilization as a totality is able to occur at all. Once I feel that I can “totalize” part of my experience, creating for myself a faculty of will, I will likely see this effort mirrored in the environment, but now absolutely, as the world. Or as: all of the inner and outer worlds ...

William James offers two key defining traits of mysticism in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The first is *ineffability*: something in mystical experience defies expression. Landstreicher does not claim this of the wager or of his encounter with the world, but the experience of the marvelous “on own terms” must have something ineffable in its immediacy. I propose that there is a gap between this ineffability and the text of the wager. The second trait is a *noetic quality*: mystical states are productive of knowledge. There is insight there, important yet difficult to articulate. When something is difficult to articulate, especially if it has to do with an experience of the All, it is common to state it in all or nothing terms.

In the second fragment on the wager cited above (“The world as it is today ...”), Landstreicher mentions “immediately rebelling.” From the point of view of choice this probably means rebelling *right away*, but the context also suggests rebelling *without mediation*. This slippage between references to temporal urgency and to reality is also visible in the description of victory in the same fragment: “I will have actually lived.” Here the order of priority is reversed, since “actually” probably means *with a superior grasp on reality*, whereas the context also suggests doing it *now*.

This refusal of mediated, second-hand experience (the world “on its terms”) is done in the name of immediate, first-hand experience (the world “on our terms”). The mystical Now *is* the immediate real. Well, all of this is precisely what we need to pragmatically define those who speak as mystics. They are not in a role, nor are they specialists; their experiences are singular to them, untranslatable. Landstreicher rejects what he calls “becoming passive slaves or dissolving ourselves in the alleged oneness of Nature” in favor of “becoming uncontrollable individuals ...” (214, from “Afterword: Destroy Civilization?”). This does not tell us he cannot be heard as a mystic, but it does tell us what kind of mystic he might be heard as. *Who* is the uncontrollable individual? One who senses something in her that can remove every obstacle between her and the marvelous.

For my part, I do not deny the experience of the marvelous. Quite to the contrary! I have it all the time. But it would occur to me only rarely, if at all, to couple it with some kind of sovereign choice or act of will. That coupling suggests to me, in James’ terms, an ineffable experience with a noetic component. That is what makes me — generously! — want to say that Landstreicher speaks as a mystic.

Rather than attempting to destroy the totality, the obviously desirable choice in the revolutionary wager, I prefer to begin by asking how it is that someone could come to see society or civilization as one! I could also ask whether it makes sense to describe the irreducible manyness of impressions and sensations as a world. In so asking I am also able to explore what in me does not share in such a vision. This does not divide me from the voice that speaks in the name of willful disobedience: it brings me (pervertedly, I admit) one step closer to a conversation.

Such a conversation could take up impurity. I do not really think Landstreicher is a mystic. But it does seem to me that instead of accepting the terms of his wager, I can show myself as incompetent in matters of choice, and busy myself with studying what is impure in his statements as well as my person.

I could say: very well, you have spoken. Your utterances are so strange, but also so interesting, that I am tempted to call some of them mystical. This is not an epithet; it is the mark of my interest and also of my distance. When I compare you to Pascal, I see in you the anarchist Valéry saw in him. When I say you speak as a mystic, I am recognizing that you are a “vessel of anarchy.”

The idea of willful incompetence

I am tempted to write something in the future to share my perspective on these matters. I might call it: *Willful Incompetence*.

It could begin from the experience of those who, some or all of the time, do not think they can deploy their will in the manner I have been interrogating; those who do not, or very rarely do, find themselves opting for failure or victory.

It could discuss incompetence (willful!) at making metaphysical determinations.

Here is an inappropriate question: what is the genre of the pieces in *Willful Disobedience*? Are they articles, essays, letters, manifestos, communiqués, rants? They owe something to all of that, and yet they are none of them. I doubt this question is important to most of its audience, but it is important to me. (At the very least I think it is worth asking why they are all roughly the same length. What is this if not a technological constraint — which ought to be interesting to those critical of technology — of zine and web writing? Not to mention the more important issue of attention spans ...). When I called them prose poetry above, I was inventing an answer to this question. As prose poems, though, they immediately spoke to me in philosophical terms. I answered accordingly.

Now, what I am trying to do (here and elsewhere) is to write an essay that wanders off from the thesis. The revolutionary wager is a political proposal, but it is also, oddly, a stylistic option. Pascal's "but you have to wager" is emblematic of this style: *either* you present a thesis (one traditional way is to nail it to a door) *or* you automatically lose by saying nothing in particular.

But one can also refuse the game of the thesis. The game is played by accepting the thesis or offering another; it is refused by wandering off.

Wandering off is to show a kind of practiced incompetence in writing, in thinking — towards the thesis, at least. And much of what is classed as incompetence is in fact a sophisticated and indirect resistance. It could be called nonvoluntary. The thought "in my incompetence I resist" is a more precise instance of the realization "I am already revolting" invoked above. The incompetence in question is something like an unconscious or semi-conscious sabotage of the performance of competence: the dreadful seriousness of willful intervention, force, self-assertion. Someone willfully incompetent finds joy in shame and embarrassment and is well positioned to discover what is glorious in failure. She dwells in the brightness of her symptomatic actions, and could go on to discover in herself the intelligence of a thousand conflicting drives, the multiplicity of passions that does not mirror the supposed totality of the world but consumes it and shatters it, as it is consumed and shattered by it.

How does such an individual meet the friend of a friend? Playfully, remembering Pascal:

Dear Wolfi,

 "If he praises himself, I belittle him.

 If he belittles himself, I praise him.

 And continue to contradict him

 until he understands

 That he is an unfathomable monster."

 (*Pensées*, 40)

 Yours,

Alejandro.

Post-script on *The Anvil*

The Anvil, the image, in our context, perhaps suggests first of all smashing. But here we are focusing on the base (the basis) upon which something is smashed rather than the instrument that smashes. At the same time, this Anvil also suggests the craft of slowly, patiently forging *other* instruments.

We do this by writing reviews.

An ordinary review is not much more than a more or less clever summary coupled with an appraisal, a recommendation for or against. The world is full of such reviews. (They are useful to those in a hurry.)

A review in bad taste is written entirely to dismiss a work, a set of ideas; the worst possible review exaggerates this bad taste, and, losing all critical acumen, merely hurls accusations at its author. Those who discover themselves engaging in the most ignorant expositions, the sloppiest thinking, might be invited to explore another discipline, that of silence.

It occurs to me that the superior form of a review is neither to summarize the contents of a work nor to recommend for or against it. It is rather a kind of plagiarism, simultaneously clever and clumsy. If something is in any way stimulating, worth thinking about, I prefer to respond and comment in the mode of probing curiosity, of absurd generosity. To approach what to you is strange, and to forge it into something stranger still.

Works Referenced

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In *Writings 1902-1910*. New York: Library of America, 1988.

Landstreicher, Wolfi. *Willful Disobedience*. [Berkeley, CA]; Ardent Press, 2009.

Landstreicher, Wolfi. *Reasons of Flame*. Venomous Butterfly.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Valéry, Paul. *Les principes d'an-archie pratique et appliquée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alejandro de Acosta
Wandering off from Willful Disobedience
(three remarks and an imaginary title)
2011, August

Retrieved on July 12th, 2016 from
<https://web.archive.org/web/20111130095349/http://theanvilreview.org/print/wandering-off-from-willful-disobedience-three-remarks-and-an-imaginary-title/>

theanarchistlibrary.org