

## “I AM AFREGE THIS IS TRUE”: PUZZLING OVER $\Sigma$ NOT-PERCIVAL’S WOR(L)DS

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Der ganze Strudel strebt nach oben:

Du glaubst zu schieben, und du wirst geschoben.<sup>1</sup>

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I*, Vers 4116 f. / Mephistopheles

1. Trying to frame Percival Everett into a critical category is irremediably doomed, as the reader cannot find her footing on an elusive ground that keeps shifting her reading subject’s position as if she were caught in a hall of mirrors. The title: *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* frays the work at its edges while suggesting an endless loop undermining the very notion of origin. Beyond the biographical streak and the self-reflexive game on split authorial identities, two vistas complicate the framing process of the title, illustrating a parergonal logic which both stabilizes the work while setting it into motion. Reading into the proper name, Virgil Russell, I cannot help but think of an anachronistic and paradoxical conflation, bringing together the figure of Virgil, the Roman poet and paragon of lyrical poetry, and Bertrand Russell, the logician and author of *Principia Mathematica* whose title is incidentally mentioned along with facetious remarks about Whitehead, whose “name was unfortunate,” and Wittgenstein, labeled as “a pompous asshole” in the very first pages of the novel (PEVR 6). Despite the humorous tone of the conversation between father and son, Everett playfully confronts the expressivity of poetic language as the locus of subjective emotion with the rationalization of reasoning devoid of the ambiguities of natural language through the idealized logical abstraction performed by the forefathers of analytical philosophy.
2. Virgil Russell: what’s in a name then? Is this the partial anagram of the author’s name, Percival Everett once it has passed through the looking glass of pseudo-biographical fiction? The dedication “For Percival Leonard Everett 1 August 1933 – 1 May 2010” could be misleading the reader as to the genre of this particular novel. Part of the story is that of a dying father and his son, the following quotation being excerpted from a chapter entitled “So Wider a River of Speech” (PEVR 43):

Dad.

<sup>1</sup> “Upward the billowy mass is moving;  
You’re shoved along and think, meanwhile, you’re shoving.” (P. Everett, *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, 146.)

Yes?

Okay, okay.

You will be my Virgil?

3. Now, this filiation also takes us full circle back to Dante's *Inferno*, as translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow<sup>2</sup>, the father figure turning into his son's guide into the folds and recesses of another fiction:

Now, art thou that Virgilius and that fountain

Which spreads abroad so wide a river of speech?"

I made response to him with bashful forehead.

4. Meanwhile, looping the metafictional loop, a few pages ahead, another chapter heading reads in distorted Latin: "Aliud tamen quand unde sumptumb apparet." (PEVR 46). And this misquotation happens to be a truncated and twisted version of one of Roman philosopher Seneca's letters to Lucilius, "On gathering ideas," which should read as follows: "aliud tamen esse quam unde sumptum est apparet," that is to say "yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came"<sup>3</sup>, or in Mary Carruthers' more literal translation: "it will appear to be something other than that from which it was taken."<sup>4</sup> The latter translation aptly illustrates the variability of the meaning of signs according to context, indirectly pointing to a metaphysical interrogation about the transcendental substrate of language that runs through the novel. Now, through this game of blurred identities and frayed filiations, Seneca's text (see footnotes <sup>3</sup> and <sup>4</sup> for a more substantial excerpt) aptly describes the way Everett plays with intertextual references as he keeps making forays into a wide range of genres and time periods. The various fragments that compose his novels function as innumerable reflective surfaces that demultiply the origin of inscription in a dizzying, baroque and mostly ironic reduplication of poststructuralist tenets. The composite and unstable images that emerge from this process parasitize both theory and fiction, transforming set categories into lures caught in the loop of a self-reflexive meta-metafiction for lack of a better word, or literary category. The heterogeneous fragments beg for their re-inclusion into a general picture that cannot be drawn

<sup>2</sup> D. Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> "We also, I say, ought to copy these bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading, for such things are better preserved if they are kept separate; then, by applying the supervising care with which our nature has endowed us, — in other words, our natural gifts, — we should so blend those several flavours into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came." (L. A. Seneca, *Moral Epistles.*, vol. 2, 277-279)

<sup>4</sup> "We should imitate bees and, whatever we have gathered from our diverse reading, we should separate it (for things are better preserved when distinguished), and then, applying our mind's care and resources, we should blend together these various droplets into a single taste, so that even if it is apparent from where it was taken, it will appear to be something other than that from which it was taken." (M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 192).

as the parergonal logic of the work keeps folding the inside into the outside in an endless process of foliation ultimately interrogating the very possibility of meaning.

5. Everett is plowing the fields of theory as he fictionalizes concepts and conceptualizes fiction within the double bind of a Moebius strip. As Derrida puts it: “A certain practice of theoretical fiction can work (against) the frame, (make it or let it) play (it) (against) itself.”<sup>5</sup> One of the most patent examples of this dual process certainly lies in the parodic rewriting of Barthes’ *S/Z* into *F/V: a novel excerpt* in *Erasure* in which Everett operates the deconstruction of the semiological codes invented by Barthes to reveal their intrinsic arbitrariness and paradoxically ossifying effect<sup>6</sup>. As if in echo of this comic spoof on Barthes conducive to an actual fight between scholars in *Erasure*, the father figure’s comic anecdote in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* confirms the violent and systematic rejection of constraining categories:

What was the thing in your career that irked you the most?

Funny you should have me have you ask me that question.

Strange.

Son, it was being called a postmodernist. I don’t even know what the fuck that is! Some asshole tried to explain it to me once, said that my work was about itself and process and not about objective reality and life in the world.

What did you say to him?

After I told him to fuck himself and the horse he rode in on, I asked him what he thought objective reality was. Then I punched him. (PEVR 79)

6. Beyond the obvious parodic streak and burlesque shift, the relation of language to reality and more particularly the correlative question of the existence of a “real,” empirical world outside language looms large in the book. According to Frege’s essay titled “On sense and reference,”<sup>7</sup> it would appear that sense does not automatically involve reference, that it is to say experience, while its cognitive significance may also vary with each subject independent of any empirical reality, an analysis grounded on the famous example of the planet Venus’s double denomination, the evening star and the morning star. Unsurprisingly, Everett’s novel falls into three sections respectively entitled after one of the planet’s names, Hesperus, Phosphorus, and finally Venus, pointing to a common frame of reference while acknowledging each reader’s own subjective grasp of sense. Frege adds, however, an important qualification which not only lies at the core of his philosophical endeavor

5 J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 81.

6 M. Feith, “Ellison avec Barthes : occultation et désoccultation du ‘canon ethnique’ dans *Erasure* de Percival Everett”, 61-77.

7 G. Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 31.

but also definitely finds several ironic echoes in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*:

In the case of an actual proper name such as “Aristotle” opinions as to the sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great.... So long as the reference remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a perfect language.<sup>8</sup>

7. Now, the imperfection and intrinsic treacherousness of language as an epistemological purveyor of metaphysical truths is certainly one of the main mottos of Everett’s novel as both meaning and reference keep shifting with context, challenging Frege’s semantic dualism. At this stage of our analysis it might prove useful to point to an analogy with Husserl’s distinction between “expression” which carries an ideal meaning formed in the “solitary mental life” of the subject and meaningless “indication” (but not without signification) which carries a movement of empirical association: “Expressions function meaningfully (*Bedeutungsintention*) even in *solitary mental life*, where they no longer serve to indicate anything”<sup>9</sup>. As different as they may be<sup>10</sup>, both Frege’s and Husserl’s conceptions nonetheless imply the transcendental notion of a pure language lying outside the empirical sphere, which in turn questions the possibility of intersubjectivity and communication at large.

8. Translating these issues onto the grounds of authorship considered as a cultural construct and a mere literary effect, a notion taken up at various stages in the narrative, Everett not only blurs the origin of the narratorial voice but also conjures up the logical issue of identity relations, focusing on the case of proper names to subvert the notion of an ideal language, or in Derridean terms, a “transcendental signifier.” The following example (among many other metafictional spoofs on naming names<sup>11</sup>) excerpted from the comatose father figure’s prosopopoetic speech illustrates the baroque reduplication of authorial identities at play in the novel ending up in a series of unascrivable performative acts whose illocutionary force turns into a violent severing gesture:

I could be writing you could be writing me could be writing you. I am a comatose old man writing here now and again what my dead or living son might write if he wrote or I am a dead or living son writing what my dying father might write for me to have written. I am a performative utterance. I carry the illocutionary ax. But imagine anyway that it is as simple as this: I lay dying. (PEVR 216).

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, footnote 4, 24.

<sup>9</sup> E. Husserl, *Philosophical Investigations*, quoted in J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> “In *Ideas I*, the dissociation which occurs between the two notions [Sinn and Bedeutung] does not at all have the same function as for Frege [...]: meaning is reserved for the content in the ideal sense of verbal expression, spoken language, while sense (Sinn) covers the whole noematic sphere right down to its nonexpressive stratum [...]”. (J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 19 (see also 154)).

<sup>11</sup> See in particular the passage running from page 219 to page 222 featuring an absurdist dialogue between a little girl named “Name” and a puzzled character, either father or son. For instance: “My name is Name. My name is my name and the name of both the word *name* and Name, my name. I am not the only one with name Name and also there are other names.” (PEVR, 219).

9. The interplay between various intertextual references problematizes the issues of both narrative voice and filiation, the narration later shifting to historical figures (including Nat Turner), a movement pointing toward such Derridian notions as textual openness and overrun in what can be interpreted as a parodic fictionalization of the patriarchal structures pertaining to phallogocentrism, repressing writing in favor of live speech as the locus of truth. To illustrate this point, let us graft onto the father's evanescent, half-living, half-dead textual body an excerpt from Derrida's *Dissemination* that incidentally also reads as a philosophical fiction:

[...] as a living thing, logos issues from a father. There is thus for Plato no such thing as a written thing. There is only a logos more or less alive, more or less distant from itself. Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath. The phantom, the phantasm, the simulacrum [...] of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little, and always the same thing. The signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant. [...] Wandering in the streets, he doesn't even know who he is, what his identity — if he has one — might be, what his name is, what his father's name is. He repeats the same thing every time he is questioned on the street corner, but he can no longer repeat his origin<sup>12</sup>.

10. Naming names then. God the author is dead (what else is new one may wonder though?) and cannot claim to be the origin of any Genesis of sorts thanks to the power of the word as he is confronted with free-floating, empty signifiers starting with proper names as mere signature-effects. The ontological argument, that is the idea that divine perfection could not possibly leave out existence, collapses and shifts into the field of fiction, a mere thought experiment whose logical structure holds independently of an external reality which fails to produce any truth:

[...] he was happy [...] because he finally understood that the Ontological Argument was sound and yet he knew with all certainty, beyond all doubt, that there was not and had never been any god. If there was no god and the argument for his existence was sound, then language was a great failure or deceiver or bad toy or good toy, that it could be wound up or twisted and if he knew that, that I could not be trusted, then he knew where to put it, how to view it, that it was there for his pleasure, that it was not pernicious, for how could a thing so twisted finally mean anything. But he was twenty-three when he understood what he would for the rest of his life refer to as the truth, even with his patients and his colleagues, according to the truth, he would say, according to the truth you have six months to live, according to the truth your wife will leave you, the truth never unravelled, clarified, solved, or explained, never defined, never deciphered or illuminated, but the truth, it coming to this, according to the truth  $A = A$  is not the same thing as  $A$  is  $A$ , and may  $A$  have mercy upon your pathetic, wretched immortal soul, according to the truth. (PEVR 7)

11. The transcendental value of pure language reduced to an algebraic notation is therefore being questioned as it does not prove anything about the existence of a world, or God for that matter.

12 J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 144.

Naming names may not tell anything about a hypothetical *there*, as the sum of all our linguistic operations from zero to infinity may boil down to a logical truth that does not say anything about the world. I take this view to be exemplified in the metafictional passage that encapsulates a whole list of gerunds framed within the same cryptic math formula, a layout that possibly symbolizes a self-contained linguistic paradigm, or in other words, the ouroboros structure of language always adding up to the same unknown and possibly senseless (*sinnloss*) constant “a”<sup>13</sup>:

The question was whether there was some real value to which all of this, all our naming, thinking, speaking, breathing, wanting, loving, lusting, fearing, worrying, laughing, obsessing, liking, hating, changing, hindering, bringing, facilitating, curbing, retarding, tilting, running, sitting, looking, gazing, staring, listing, learning, ignoring, forgetting, misplacing, framing, distrusting, calling [...] and naming, would lead to. (PEVR 187-189)

12. The fundamental issue of the text may then lie in the impossible articulation of sense and meaning (*Sinn* and *Bedeutung*), or the noetic with the noematic in Husserlian terms, subsequently threatening the phenomenological constitution of a self-reflexive consciousness. Far from being innocent, the choice of “*i*” instead of *x*, *y* or *z* for a variable echoes another passage of the novel in which “*i*” has been ascribed a twofold value conflating the algebraic notation for imaginary numbers this time with that of the first person singular in English, a natural language. It ensues that beyond its grammatical value as a shifter, “*I*” becomes a mathematical variable encompassing the infinite set of imaginary numbers which in the end simply does not *make sense*, pointing to the realm of pure abstraction:

My first self-conscious attention to a heading. I. A pronoun denoting the self. Me. It is also the letter representing an imaginary unit in math, the unit that lets the real number system extend to complex numbers. Me. I'm sorry, my best and favorite lover said to me, you are imaginary. I suggested that she multiply me by *i* and give me another look and try. But all of this to prolong a deferral, right? (PEVR 157)

13. What is left, then, besides constant miscommunication if language fails to express the truth or simply to mean something, seems to be one of the recurrent questions raised in Everett's novels. Considering Wittgenstein's famous aphorisms in the *Tractatus*<sup>14</sup>, one may legitimately wonder whether there is a world outside the boundaries of language:

5.6 *The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world

5.62 The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language

13 I am deeply indebted to the highlights brought by Gwen Le Cor in her presentation entitled, “‘Pass the rib-spreader, if you please’: the Frame and the Framed in Percival Everett's Writing.” “Conceptualism, abstraction and writing as ‘intensification of a verbal universe’: A Seminar with American writer Percival Everett,” Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis, April 12, 2013.

14 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.6 and 5.62.

which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world.

14. In other words, for something to exist in the world (in actuality or imagination), it must be potentially thinkable by us, otherwise it could never register in our minds at all, adding another twist to the ontological argument taken up in another passage of the book. It deals this time with the question of qualia in the form of a thought experiment, that is to say a theory elaborated as sheer fiction.

First, imagine a quale that which none more experientially intimate can be conceived.

What is this exactly?

This is the beginning of my ontological argument for the existence of qualia. I like it better than the inversed spectrum argument, don't you? Hardly different, but it's prettier. No reason to be locked into any one way of thinking. I think it's a decent first step toward the establishment of my solipsistic construction of, well, everything.

That would make the rest of us zombies.

More or less. (PEVR 89)

15. The fact that Everett keeps weaving theoretical reflections into the narrative loom while disentangling the threads proves bound to failure especially as he disseminates erudite puns opening new vistas along the way. The work eludes any conceptual systematicity while it nonetheless raises philosophical issues with which we are left to ponder as part of a self-reflexive reading experience over the nature of language. A seemingly innocuous sentence such as “No reason to be *locked* into any one way of thinking” (emphasis mine) may lead the reader further into the ongoing philosophical discussion of qualia, bearing in mind that Locke is taken to be the first to tackle the thought experiment known as the inverted spectrum scenario in his essay *Of True and False Ideas*<sup>15</sup>. The metaphysical question pertaining to the existence of qualia, that is properties as they are experienced as distinct from any source they have in a physical object, or what it feels like to see the color red for instance, also brings us back to Wittgenstein's example of the impossibility of a private language<sup>16</sup> meant to describe our intimate sensations as formerly presupposed by the supporters of logic as the foundation of language. Without a universal quality though, language would amount to incomprehensible gibberish, taking the possibility of intersubjectivity in its fall.

16. Is the language of fiction the work of a solipsistic monad then, and are we, readers, philosophical zombies, that is to say mere duplicates deprived of qualia? The conclusion reached in the passage quoted above sounds pretty much like a *reductio ad absurdum* that undermines the metaphys-

15 A. Byrne, “Inverted Qualia,” n.p.

16 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §243-315.

ical approach upholding the existence of qualia while favoring a more materialistic vision of the world, or at least of language as matter as claimed by one of the characters named Dave: “Language is not immaterial [...]. It is a subtle body, but it is body. Words are bound up in body images that hold the subject.” (PEVR 33). However, the inadequacy of language to communicate experience still remains problematical and points, once again, toward the question of intersubjectivity, or the sharing of a common wor(l)d as both division and articulation. In the particular context of the novel, our interpretation leans toward that of sharing the experience of loss and mourning through poetic language, that is to say conveying the lyrical, elegiac qualities elicited by intimations of man’s mortality. In other words, how can language express inner sensation? Or, conversely, how can we reach pure perception, that is to say reach a paradoxically unmediated, and literally innocent form of experience, the pure self-presence of a timeless subjectivity? This question haunts the father’s stream of consciousness on the verge of dying as exemplified in his (last) wishful thinking along with its photographic representation, yet another echo of the constant struggle with the epistemological function of language understood as the locus of truth at play throughout the novel:

I’ve always wanted to see this place. I can see there’s a river down there. I wonder if it’s deep. Probably fast in places. I’m angry with my education. I wish I could have come to this landscape with no knowledge. I wish I could have been simply hiking along until I paused and shook my head and wondered, what is that ahead of me? Imagine the marvel of it. (PEVR 202)



17. The interpolation of photographs fulfills a performative function meant to frame and present before our eyes the character’s vision that turns out to be an inner landscape. One of the problems raised by the presence of photographs is the failure of language to depict a reality which in turn needs the construction of an external view point, that of the reader, to function as an image proper.



18. What's more is that miscommunication, or mistranslation for that matter, seems to lie at the root of the poetic experience as the various fragments of quotes and phrases more or less faithfully rendered in foreign tongues seem to suggest:

明日は明日、今日は今日

What?

Ashita wa ashita, kyo wa kyo. It's Japanese.

That much I gathered. And it means?

A shrug (PEVR 71).

19. The failure of translation to convey an identical meaning, together with Everett's own distortions and reappropriations of others' phrases questions the universality of language. The multiple references to various philosophical attempts at reaching the fundamental logic inherent in language echo Benjamin's concept of a pure language (influenced by Brentano), *die reine Sprache*, that is according to Antoine Berman an intransitive language that is not instrumental to the expression of sense<sup>17</sup>. In our current example, not only does this seemingly tautological Japanese proverb not translate as such into the text ("tomorrow is tomorrow, today is today"), but it also suggests a crossing over into the mathematical realm of the visual, introducing a further disturbance in the linguistic flow, a twofold suspension of sorts which opens the linguistic system to its outside (the foreign and the visual), and splits the theoretical unity which claims to mark its edges.
20. In the same way as words must refer to a certain generality on which we agree, for the interpolated photographs to make sense, the viewer needs to call up the mental image of a certain composite generality, or knowledge, to tie it up to the indexical value of the present experience that distinguishes it from other past experiences. Raw experience is impossible to attain.

This is a picture of the road that I find myself walking along now. You will note the trees and perhaps you will recognize them and so imagine you know where I am, but you would be wrong. It's okay to be wrong. I used to think that everything was about exposing nonsense in the world. How did that asshole Wittgenstein put it? To move from disguised nonsense to patent nonsense? Well, turns out that bullshit. I thought for a while that we were supposed to make sense out of nonsense and then I thought that we were supposed to try to turn sense into nonsense and now I know that we're supposed to make sense that sounds like nonsense and then call the sense nonsensical. That's what I think now. I've had a long life of thinking, if not nonsensical things, then particularly useless and annoying things. Like this. (PEVR 209).

21. In the second quotation, the narrator highlights the exclusion of the viewer from the scope of
- <sup>17</sup> A. Berman, *L'Âge de la traduction*. "*La Tâche du traducteur*" de Walter Benjamin, *un commentaire*, 116-117.

the photographer, the impossibility to adopt the same view point. It ensues that intersubjectivity is based on a deceptive mirroring structure, a self-reflexive misreading tangentially touching upon the other's world. The deictic gesture performed by the text "this is a picture of the road [...]" points to the fact that "there is no there there," but a spectral haunting, a remanence enacted in the duplication of the same picture on the last page of the novel (PEVR 202 /227). A voiceless trace, a silent call (PEVR 71):

Dad?

Son?

I can't keep up.

Und so weiter.

明日は明日、今日は今日

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