

[Excerpted from Tom McCarthy, *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (London: Granta Books, 2006). Reprinted courtesy of the author and Granta Books.]

Tintin and the Secret of Literature

Tom McCarthy

How, then, can philosophy deal with the question of metaphor itself? ‘Only around a blind spot or central deafness,’ writes Derrida. Looking at philosophers’ attempts to do this, he is drawn to the example of metaphor that Aristotle favours in his *Poetics*: the sun casting forth light like a sower casting forth seeds. Wait a minute, Derrida says: when was it ever *seen* that the sun ‘casts forth’ light? The analogy relies on ‘a long and hardly visible chain’ of associations held together within language. But Aristotle’s choice of the sun is a good one, he continues, because all metaphors are heliotropic: they turn towards what is supposedly absolutely present and visible, and what is more absolutely present and visible than the sun? Is not the sun the very pre-condition of all presence and all visibility? And yet the sun is never wholly present within language; how could it be? It, too, turns, via all the figures, or ‘tropes’, of light and vision that pervade philosophy’s rhetoric of knowledge and understanding (clarity, insight, perception, illumination – they are everywhere). Metaphor, then, is doubly heliotropic: it is both the movement of sunflowers as they turn after the sun on the horizon *and* the turning of the (always metaphorical) sun itself within language. And notions of the true, the natural, are born of metaphor’s double-twist, its solar-floral prestidigitation – plucked from its hat, as it were. While classical philosophy turns always to the ‘true’, absolute sun, Derrida proposes that a more adventurous, poetic version of philosophy should let the absolute itself be taken captive, held to ransom, even disgorged at every moment in the twists and turns of language. To put it metaphorically: poetic and adventurous philosophy should collapse the sun into a sunflower and unfold it without limit, rupturing the horizon’s line, wresting open its circle.

Where is this new detour through secrets and sunflowers leading us? To the west, via Calculus – or, to restore to him his proper name, Toumesol: the turning flower who turns people into flowers via their names and people from their habits via flowers. As Abdullah finds out when he pushes him, *Tournesol tourne*: Tournesol turns, and turns, and turns. If he constantly mishears things, this is because the Epicurean Garden in which his flowerbed lies is located extremely close to the spot of central deafness that Derrida describes. Always twisting and mutating meanings, he is a principle of tropism, a tropic agent. On his entry to the books, he copies nature to make a submarine, giving his friends access to the bed of history. Returning from there, he makes money on the basis of his simulacrum. It is this money that returns Haddock to his home, completing his Odyssean circle, as we have seen. Later, as we have also seen, drawn westwards again by the sun, he distrusts the veracity of what the sun illuminates as it approaches its high noon, perceiving it as metaphor, which in fact it is. He, just as much as the others, is held by the forcefield of the secret – but he takes a different route through this, sliding sideways, turning words around, detouring through flowers, names, minerals to meaning. Tournesol is metaphor in action. While Tintin and Haddock track the secret and believe – mistakenly – that they have found it, he concerns himself with tropism’s embodiment, the pendulum, whose unending movement, rather than confirming the certainty of truth, unfolds it without limit. Philosophically and poetically speaking, Calculus is the real hero of the *Tintin* books.

[Excerpted from “Sirens, Symbols, Serendipity,” a talk given by Paul Feigelfeld at L’Atelier-ksr, Berlin, 23 April 2016. Reprinted courtesy of the author.]

Kittler and the Sirens

Paul Feigelfeld

Because this fiction - is history. It all happened. Or so the story goes. The Odyssey happened. The islands are real. The way it is told is fact and fiction, faction, science, poetry and history in one. Just like early science was philosophy and vice versa.

Ernie Bradford, retired Royal Navy first lieutenant, stayed in the Mediterranean and over many years of research and sailing recharted the course of Odysseus. So he also found the Li Galli islands - The Cocks - off the coast of Amalfi, close to Capri, also known now as the Sirenuse, the Siren Islands. One of them was purchased in 1922 by the principal choreographer of Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe, Léonide Massine, a close collaborator of Erik Satie and Pablo Picasso in creating the ballet Parade. Initially Massine restored and converted the old Aragonese Tower on Gallo Lungo into accommodation with a dance studio and featuring an open-air theatre. The theatre was subsequently destroyed by a storm. With design advice from his friend Le Corbusier he constructed a villa on the site of the original Roman structure. After Massine’s death the islands were purchased in 1988 by Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev, who spent the last years of his life here. He redecorated the villa in the Moorish style and clad its interiors with 19th-century tiles from Seville.

And in 2004, a bunch of Berlin media scholars, led by Odysseus Kittler, creatively applied for some research grants and traveled to Li Galli, to find the Sirens. Actually, they brought their own.

in between, they pass the island of the Sirens. Or do they? This is where Kittler and his crew landed:

"'Come here,' they sang, 'renowned Ulysses, honour to the Achaean name, and listen to our two voices. No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song - and he who listens will go on his way not only charmed, but wiser, for we know all the ills that the gods laid upon the Argives and Trojans before Troy, and can tell you everything that is going to happen over the whole world.'

"They sang these words most musically, and as I longed to hear them further I made by frowning to my men that they should set me free; but they quickened their stroke, and Eurylochus and Perimedes bound me with still stronger bonds till we had got out of hearing of the Sirens' voices. Then my men took the wax from their ears and unbound me."

The only problem being: From that distance, sailing past, you cannot hear, let alone understand what they were singing. If anything, you can make out the singsong of the vowels, but definitely no words or sentences. Ergo: Odysseus must have lied. He must have actually landed on the island to be, as the sirens promise, not only charmed, but wiser, and - and that's the part i never fully understood, but then again, it's Kittler - to have a threesome with the Sirens.

It's all about vowels and consonants, and about the edges of sound. Without the Alphabet, there is no poetry, no mathematics, no art, no knowledge.

We rarely recognize it, but since Sappho, we haven't read secrets between the lines, but between symbols. When one goes by way of symbols or characters, for the moment, there is neither the true nor the false, but only what possesses voice and what is without voice.

PHONEENTA

"φωνήεντα" (phoneenta / possessing voice) and "ἄφωνα" (aphona / without voice, voiceless) says a dead tortoise to the poetess, hence vowel and consonant.

Only those who possess speech can be speechless. At the transition from spoken or sung language to writing, it is poetry that seals the acoustic continuum with the two component adhesive of vowels and consonants. The great achievement in the form of the Greek vocal alphabet—whoever may then have invented it—was making it possible, by means of a finite number of symbols, to write the infinite of the acoustic, the continuum of flowing voiced vowels along with consonants that are voiceless or even sound along with the vowels and to mark the edges of sound, thus also initiating oxymoron and ontology.

"We have already detected an ancient analogy between language and love, implicit in the conception of breath as universal conductor of seductive influence and of persuasive speech. Here at the entrance to written language and literate thinking we see that analogy revived by the archaic writers who first ventured to record their poems. The alphabet they used is a unique instrument. Its uniqueness unfolds directly from its power to mark the edges of sound. For [. . .] the Greek alphabet is a phonetic system uniquely concerned to represent a certain aspect of the act of speech, namely the starting and stopping of each sound. Consonants are the crucial factor. Consonants mark the edges of sounds. The erotic relevance of this is clear, for we have seen that eros is vitally alert to the edges of things and makes them felt by lovers."

The first oxymoron in history—sweetbitter, or bittersweet, as we say today—is also found in one fragment by Sappho:

Ἔρος δηΐτέ μ' ὀ λυσιμέλης δόνει,
 γλυκύπικρον μάχανον ὄρπετον
 Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me,
 Sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up beast irrepressibly
 creeping in.

Sweetbitter is Eros, the god of absence, sweet is the flow of vowels, bitter their consonant edges. Sweet, bitter are also the cosmogonic pairs of opposites that Aristotle has appear in *Metaphysics*. All being sounds together in the bittersweet symphony of the oxymoron, the flowing and the constant, the unbounded and the bordering...

In the work of Aristotle this leads directly further to the systematizing of this cosmos in the grammar of language and writing. He writes in his *Poetics*:

Language in general includes the following parts: letter, syllable, connecting word, noun, verb, inflection or case, sentence or phrase. A letter is an indivisible sound, yet not every such sound, but only one which can form part of a group of sounds. For even brutes utter indivisible sounds, none of which I call a letter. The sound I mean may be either a vowel, a semivowel, or a mute. A vowel is that which without impact of tongue or lip has an audible sound. A semivowel, that which with such impact has an audible sound, as “S” and “R.” A mute, that which with such impact has by itself no sound, but joined to a vowel sound becomes audible, as “G” and “D”. . . . A syllable is a nonsignificant sound, composed of a mute and a vowel, for “GR” without “A” is a syllable, as also with “A—GRA.”

The fact that Aristotle supposedly stuttered does not only stand literally in this text. Thus, G-R-A-GR-GRA-GRA, slow morphemes, syllables, and ultimately a word called grammar is spoken and written starting from stochastic *stoicheia* (Lat. elements / Gr. letter). In the first occidental analytic science of language, there are therefore disruptions, moods, and (their) fluctuations.

Between sirens, symbols and sand, the serendipity of knowledge and invention is always tied to technologies, play, and love.