Itinerant Philosophy: On Alphonso Lingis

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Fans of Alphonso Lingis have cause for delight in the recent appearance of his new book *Violence and Splendor*.¹ Lingis is of Lithuanian ancestry but native to the rural region near Chicago, and has been well known since the 1960s in several capacities. In his early career he was known primarily as an encyclopedic authority on French phenomenology, in particular as the key English translator of the philosophers Levinas and Merleau-Ponty. As a professor at Penn State he was a popular and magnetic character, earning the allegiance of generations of students due to an informal personality and a startling mid-block household filled with live tropical birds, sharks, octopi, and electric eels, life-sized wooden Buddhas, flourishing colonies of bees, specimens of colorful moths and beetles, and a bathroom mirrored on all horizontal and vertical surfaces. As an author of books he emerged relatively late, in 1983, with his debut *Excesses: Eros and Culture*.² This work set the pattern for his future writings, mixing philosophical erudition with travel narratives from the most exotic locations. Along the way he established a reputation with many readers (including me) as one of the greatest living masters of English prose. Lingis has been retired from Penn State for
nearly a decade and now lives near Baltimore, where he continues to write in the same spirit found in his earlier books.

Aside from his running commentary in a recent book of photographs by Mark Cohen, Violence and Splendor is the first new book by Lingis to appear since The First Person Singular in 2007. Lingis’s favored genre is the short or medium-sized chapter. Aside from his 1998 classic The Imperative, we rarely find Lingis attempting to systematize the content of his books. Perhaps in keeping with Nietzsche’s maxim that “the will to system is a will to falsity,” he prefers to maintain the integrity of his individual chapter themes, not yoking them together with any sort of rigid framework. In one respect Violence and Splendor takes this preference to a new extreme, offering twenty-five short pieces clustered together in five parts of varying length. Those parts are entitled as follows: Spaces Within Spaces, Snares for the Eye, The Sacred, Violence, Splendor. But in another respect, the new book links its sections loosely through recurring references and proper names, like Wagnerian leitmotifs announcing the occasional reappearance of sword, giant, and Tarnhelm. Not surprisingly, the book is a pleasure to read; it is even a pleasure to gaze upon and leaf through, due to the author’s typically enchanting photography. In what follows I will offer samplings from the book by briefly considering one chapter from each of its five sections.

The opening chapter of the book is entitled “Extremes,” and is noteworthy for its style no less than its content. Like many high artists, Lingis often reacts with boredom or dismay to technical speculations on the workings of his style. Yet I am obliged to risk his annoyance here by noting his powerful use of second-person narrative, one of the staples of his books. On the very first page of Violence and Splendor, we read as follows: “Forty years ago you crossed the Atlantic by ship . . .”; “In Bali you got very sick . . .”; “From Tierra del Fuego you took a ship to Antarctica . . .”. No, I did not. But
in the hands of Lingis the technique is powerful, forcing the reader into an illusion of direct experience. Of course, this apparently direct experience is mediated through the suggestions and recollections of Lingis himself, who resembles a hypnotist or a Gandalf telling us our fate in reverse. The opening chapter of the book has no “plot” and reaches no conclusion. Instead, it simply draws us from our normal space of daily life and thrusts us into a new geography. While ill with hepatitis in Bali, we have nothing to do but kill several weeks on the seashore, not far from the shark-patrolled Wallace Trench, seven kilometers deep. The Balinese “are not seagoing people,” Lingis says, reminding us of Gibbon’s remarks on the terror of the great ocean as felt by the Romans, bound as they were to their little Mediterranean. The Balinese irrigate their crops from the crater lakes of volcanoes, “but at the end of the day” these Balinese “descend to the ocean shore, hundreds of them, and seat themselves on the dunes where they wait, silenced by the descending sun.” Your hepatitis is no longer a miserable tourist’s setback, but an opportunity to rest side by side on the Balinese seashore with the silent natives descended each evening from their volcanic highland lakes. In the next paragraph you are on a ship to Antarctica. You are not initially in romantic authorial isolation far at sea. Instead, you are surrounded by numerous other tourists, though you soon sequester yourself in your room and gain a reputation as an anti-social. Left alone, “you gaze in silence at the glaciers imperceptibly flowing into the ocean, ice millions of years old, compacted under enormous weight so that the crystalline structure of the ice is changed . . . .” In one sense, nothing at all has happened in this page-and-a-half of an opening chapter. But in another, you may as well have traveled to another planet with these brief introductory words. You have entered the world of Alphonso Lingis, in which the reader shares the most astounding travel experiences with the author, who successfully cre-
ates the illusion that no author is present and that everything is unfolding in the reader’s own life. There is incredible solitude in this literary world, despite the generosity of the author’s descriptions, and despite the lack of elitism in the friendships he has us strike up along the way with slum-dwellers, academics, artists, dentists, and young children.

The title of Chapter 9, “The Fallen Giant,” is a phrase normally used metaphorically to describe prominent humans who have undergone an abrupt diminution in social status. But here it is meant literally, and refers to an actually fallen actual giant from the world of plants. As Lingis begins: “The sign does not say when the sequoia fell. Or why. Perhaps it died of old age.”10 We are immediately informed that sequoias have been known to live up to 3,267 years. Counting backwards, this places us in 1256 B.C. as the possible birthdate of a sequoia dying of old age today—born five years prior to Hercules, and dead under Obama, Cameron, and Sarkozy. A flood of numbers quickly follows. The dead sequoia was 220 feet high and 72.6 feet in circumference. Like all numbers, these give us little guidance except by way of comparison, and this is just what Lingis gives us: a blue whale can be up to 110 feet long, and the figure rises to 130 feet for the dinosaur known as *Argentinosaurus huinculensis*. Both of these colossal sentient creatures are eclipsed by the fallen sequoia now lying before us. The author invites us further to imagine the ascent of the tree, its life fully invested in upward ascent, given that many of its branches die along the way. In the manner of Leibniz, Lingis observes that this tree is not a mere aggregate of parts: “the life attached to the enormous inner space of the sequoias, to these hundreds of tons of matter, is somehow one. One life governs the system you see in the branches . . .”11 Nonetheless, “each branch has to adjust to local conditions and events,” and “the mighty trunk itself . . . [also] has had to adjust to the impact and pressures of events. Swerves of bark mark these adjust-
ments." But despite these local variations and events, Lingis remains true to the guiding insight of phenomenology concerning the unity of sensuous objects beneath their sparkling contours. For “when this tree died, it died everywhere,” and “the sense of life attached to the enormous inner space of a sequoia, or to that of a beached blue whale, dominates our perception of their surface colors and forms.” Elsewhere, our sense of the unified life of “guppies or sandflies . . . overwhelms our fascination with their external designs and colors.” The potency of this life is often staggering. Tiny plants of 0.6 millimeters in size, Lingis reports, are able “to produce 1 nonillion (1 with thirty zeroes) new plants in four months, a volume of flowering plants equal to the size of the Earth.” These reflections on the inner life of things turn Lingis explicitly to a meditation on the philosophical concept of substance, which he has elsewhere tried to revive in a stirring and under-read article on Levinas, printed in an obscure periodical. Modern philosophy “pronounced us incapable of knowing the substance, the nature, or the essence of things.” Empiricist philosophy turns appearances into discrete sense data, phenomenology converts them into shifting profiles, and Heidegger into an instrumental layout of practical purposes. But Lingis (with a passing nod to Oliver Sacks) makes the intriguing claim that “the distinction between appearances and things that appear is peculiar to vision and does not really have analogues in the realm of sound, taste, odor, and the tangible.” Summarizing Heidegger’s distinction between the zuhanden and the vorhanden, in which entities become visible primarily through malfunction, Lingis asks: “is not this a strangely narrow picture of our experience?” Far from agreeing that substances are inaccessible to human knowledge, Lingis favors a form of what analytic philosophers call “direct realism,” in which human insight makes direct contact with the things rather than with mere representations of them: “When we look at the butter-
flies, trees, and mountains in their independence of and indifference to us, we see them as they are.”

Chapter 9, “Sacrilege,” begins with a sinister photograph of knives, followed shortly thereafter by sinister words: “In a sacrifice something supremely precious—our finest harvest and livestock, our firstborn son—is set aside from all use, separated from the profane sphere. What is set apart from all profane use is separated absolutely, definitively, in being destroyed.” It is in this spirit that we must interpret the two most troubling stories in the book, both of them found in the present chapter. In the first story, the author visits a photography show and passes behind the photos to find a disturbing installation: “a man, powerfully muscled and virile, naked, hanging upside down, his feet bound by a rope looped over a hook in the ceiling.” This is a real man, no mannequin. Along the walls are “piles of knives . . . butcher knives, serrated knives, hunting knives,” as if placed there deliberately to incite cruelty against the naked human suspended from the ceiling. Although Lingis remains passive, his companions do not: “Finally one of us took a knife and cut the rope; the man fell to the floor.” A student named Andy mutters alarmingly: “The show is not over like that.” Andy grabs a knife, stabs at the naked man with full force, but barely succeeds in grazing his body. Instead, the sacrificial animal turns out to be Andy himself, for “he had thrust so violently that, without realizing it or feeling it, his hand had slipped off the handle and down the blade, which cut deeply into the palm of his hand and his fingers.” Blood splatters everywhere, as with any sacrifice by knife. Later, surgeons are unable to fully repair the damaged hand, and Andy’s career as a musician (“something supremely precious”) is ended. Nonetheless, he emerges from this saga “more energized and ebullient than before.” Lingis adopts a less passive role in the second story, giving us instead a confession worthy of Augustine or Rousseau. Lingis meets a young boy in Istanbul named Omar,
who takes him to the cathedral of Saint George; as a Muslim, the boy prefers to wait outside. Amidst the candles and incense of the empty cathedral, he finds the tombs of the Patriarchs of Orthodox Christendom. Checking carefully to make sure no one is in the cathedral, he opens the heavy lid of one of them; blood rushing to his face, he finds only a bronze coffin. Thwarted by this unexpected obstacle, his temptation to sacrilege might seem to have passed. But much like the Franks cutting down the sacred trees of the Goths,27 his urge to violate the sacred remains unquenched: “I moved back to the catafalque, lifted the lid again, set it back and lifted the lid of the bronze coffin.” The final obstruction to sacrilege now removed, the author witnesses “a dark brown skull showing under what looked like shreds of dried beef, scabs in the eye sockets, and patches of skin shriveled from the crooked rows of the teeth.”28 Leaving the cathedral, he goes off for tea with an unsuspecting young Omar, though “the enormity of what I had done tormented me for days, for weeks.”29 Perhaps what makes the tale so disturbing is that it lacks any of the usual motives to crime (and if discovered in the act, it is as a criminal that he would have been treated). We imagine most crime as motivated by the pursuit of wealth, of sexual violation, or perhaps of revenge. The coffins of Saint George were left relatively unsecured for the simple reason that, unlike gold, no one really aspires to direct commerce with the decayed head of an Orthodox Patriarch. While the author expands his geography beyond the United States to include such regions as Balinese fields beneath volcanic craters, the glaciers of the Antarctic, and the inner lives of sequoias and microbes, he also finds himself tempted to cross the sacred boundary separating us from the sealed-off remains of the dead. But the teahouses of Istanbul do not assuage his conscience, as for once he discovers a space in the world that he wishes he had never entered.

The theme of corpses returns in Chapter 21, “The Art of
War. War has been glorified in the arts from ancient times until relatively recently. “This art depicted the ruler as sublime in himself, absorbing into his destiny the lives of nameless multitudes. It depicted the blood of defeated armies and massacred populations turning into golden radiance about the victorious warlord.” Above these corpses stand God or the nation, apportioning mass death by a supreme and glorious decree. The situation changes with Francisco de Goya’s series of etchings, Disasters of War, first published in 1863, more than half a century after their completion. Goya had experienced the Napoleonic rampage through Spain, and though he was accused of French sympathies himself, that sympathy is not evident in his etchings. “They depict close-up men cornered and disarmed and then castrated and dismembered, the infirm and aged unable to fight or flee [are] butchered, children mutilated and slaughtered.” The heroic narratives of war are replaced by an art in which “soldiers, peasants, women and children tear at one another like so many rabid dogs. Goya depicts mutilated corpses covered with flies and picked at by vultures under dark skies, where there is no god above to witness, pity, and redeem so much agony, so many deaths.” These depictions of massacre later become an object of massacre themselves, at the hands of the “shock jock” British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman, who serve as recurring characters throughout Lingis’s book. “In the year 2000 they purchased for £50,000 a set of Goya’s etchings, and painted grinning clown and puppy-dog faces over the faces Goya had depicted stricken with heart-wrenching pathos.”

And here we encounter one of the central tensions of Violence and Splendor. On the one hand we still find the Lingis of The Imperative, for whom it is ethically binding to stamp out a burning cigarette in a forest, and even binding not to abuse the preciousness of such items as rare bottles of wine by consuming them carelessly or under inappropriate circum-
stances. In the chapter on the sequoia described earlier, when Lingis muses that “perhaps it died of old age,” we sense his genuine concern that it might have been knocked down through the perversity of vandals or a lumber company. Everywhere in his writings, Lingis seems concerned that the intrinsic powers of the things themselves should be allowed to shine forth in all their splendor. But *The Imperative* is not really a “normative” book, since there Lingis also admits that there is an indeterminacy related to the existence of an imperative in things. As he wrote in that work, with a gripping cruelty: “We do have the power to crush the penguin chick and knock over the sunflower with a blow, as we may block and muddy the river, but our cruelty and our disdain feel the panic of the chick and the vertical aspiration of the sunflower.” In this sense *The Imperative* is more a work of ontology, and counts as a book of ethics only insofar as our ethical subtlety is ripened by the notion of a command emanating from the inner life of things. For the existence of an imperative can also serve to provoke aggression and violation, as in the cases of the naked man hanging from the ceiling of an art gallery, the coffin of an Orthodox Patriarch, humans reduced to mutilated corpses by Napoleonic armies, or the art treasures of Goya defenseless against vandalism by the Chapman Brothers—who would perhaps be interested in crushing the penguin chick, knocking over the sunflower with a blow, and blocking and muddying the river, presumably uttering swear words while doing so. Not only is this ambiguity never resolved by Lingis—it is even the central theme of his book, as seen from the two main words in the title *Violence and Splendor*. But the author limits himself to describing this reversibility rather than attempting to resolve it.

The book ends with Chapter 25, “War and Splendor.” This chapter ends the book on a warm note of optimism, with splendor prevailing over violence. It begins with the Rio Carnaval, in which the impoverished slum-dwellers save for
years to purchase costumes for an *escola de samba* (samba club). In Carnaval, “everything—plants, insects, birds, beasts, heroes, knaves—becomes beauty, samba, and alegria.” The contrast between Lingis’s first visit to Carnaval and contemporary world events is explicitly marked: “I arrived the week of the outbreak of the First Gulf War, in which thirty-four advanced countries united in no higher cause than to secure for themselves the sources of cheap petroleum. At the Rio Carnaval, I thought this is the most important event on the planet.” The collected writings of Lingis might easily be viewed as a multi-volume account of a global Rio Carnaval, with “the Rio Amazonas and Rio Tocantins, the spectacled bears, the golden lion tamarins, and the toucans, the Indians of the Amazon and the outposts of the Inca, the queens of Africa, the *bandeirantes* (slave hunters and prospectors), the *quilombolas* (escaped slaves), the travelers of outer space.”

The chapter shifts quickly from the Rio Carnaval to a similar outburst of *alegria* in Papua New Guinea, at the so-called Mount Hagen show (the gorgeous photograph on the book’s cover depicts a Mount Hagen celebrant). Although the Papuans were dismissed by Australians as “Stone Age people and savages,” Lingis reports that their wars were primarily theatrical: “When battles did break out, they were so constrained by rules and fought with weapons so ineffective—the arrows without fletching are really inaccurate—that it would be rare that anyone was actually killed.” While the First Gulf War prepares industrial mechanisms for slaughter in the name of cheap oil, Lingis finds that war in Papua is splendor: “battles were fought without leaders or strategies, each warrior darting and shooting his arrows where he could, exposed to volleys of arrows and spears, exposed not only to cunning and hostile humans but also to supernatural powers and the weapons of sorcery. Battles where no territory was taken, nor women captured or wealth plundered.” We are no longer in the world of Goya, and also not in the world of
Jake and Dinos Chapman, despite the author’s trace of apparent sympathy for their frank violations of normal limits of artistic behavior. Ultimately, Lingis’s real preference is not for crushing the penguin chick, but for splendor in all its historical and animal forms:

We shall not define with one concept the splendor that glitters and resounds under Mount Hagen, in the liturgical processions in Byzantium and the high mass of Medieval cathedrals, in the Negara, the theater-state of old Bali, in Carnival in Rio de Janeiro—in the plumage and dance of the Great Argus pheasant, in the sun’s gold spread over the blue oceans, in the fisherman rowing with golden oars... We are mesmerized by beauty as birds-of-paradise are mesmerized by their glittering plumes in their courtship dances; we create beauty as in the primordial ocean mollusks create the iridescent colors and intricate designs of their shells.41

In recent philosophy we find no other prose stylist capable of such extended literary brilliance—not even in France, where Merleau-Ponty’s finest gemstones tend to be wrapped and muffled in the surrounding cotton of technical argument.

For this reason, it seems appropriate to end this review of Lingis’s latest book with the closing half-sentence of the book itself. When observing the festival at Mount Hagen, the second highest volcano in Papua New Guinea: “you feel your blood hot and surging with the exultation of two thousand men and women, of 125 tribes, zigzagging back and forth like slow-motion bolts of lightning across the crowded field of the magnesium-white sun.”42
5 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 5.
6 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
8 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
11 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
12 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
13 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
14 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 60.
15 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
16 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
18 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 50.
19 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
21 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
22 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 87.
24 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
25 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
26 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
27 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 90.
28 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 93.
29 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
31 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
32 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
33 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 120.
35 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 139.
36 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 140.
37 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 139.
38 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 141.
39 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*.
40 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 144–145.
42 Lingis, *Violence and Splendor*, 150.