§III.

NEARER TO YOU THAN THE SEA

for Zahid R. Chaudhary and Eileen A. Joy

“Nearer to you than the sea”—it’s with these words that L.O. Aranye Fradenburg ends the final sentence of a paragraph mid-stream in the argument of her final chapter in *Staying Alive: A Survival Manual for the Liberal Arts*, “Life’s Reach: Territory, Display, Ekphrasis.”23 In itself and in context the paragraph is unremarkable—which is to say, exemplary: from biology to neuroscience, from psychoanalysis to developmental psychology, to ethology, art, and ecology, the range of scholarship cited and discussed in a single paragraph is par for the course, as is the

artfulness with which it is arranged. Nor is the sentence itself remarkable. A typical final sentence of a body paragraph, it offers a paraphrase of the foregoing and an example. What one might call a throwaway sentence. Almost. I’d like to attempt to situate that sentence—“I am, in part, where I am—at a certain angle to the sun, nearer to you than the sea”—and to demonstrate its reach today, here, where the sea could not be nearer.

In a 1917 letter to Scholem, Walter Benjamin writes,

Knowledge becomes transmittable only for the person who has understood his [sic throughout] knowledge as something that has been transmitted. He becomes free in an unprecedented way. The metaphysical origin of a Talmudic witticism comes to mind here. Theory is like a surging sea, but the only thing that matters to the wave (understood as a metaphor for the person) is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks. This enormous freedom of the breaking wave is education in its actual sense: instruction—tradition becoming visible and free, tradition emerging precipitously like a wave from living abundance.²⁴

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, quoted in Zahid R. Chaudhary, Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012),
A series of questions, like a wave, here suddenly breaks: That knowledge is not transmittable but becomes so (“Knowledge becomes transmittable” are the passage’s opening words, and although perhaps a salutary assertion, it is no less astonishing for that)—what precipitates that becoming, and under what conditions does it (might it) obtain? When and after what fashion can one be said to have understood one’s knowledge “as something that has been transmitted”? Can that be an object of knowledge? Or is it only then, in transmission, that it’s first given to be “understood”? What frees knowledge for transmission, and in what manner (“unprecedented,” Benjamin writes) does one who has so understood it become “free”? If it has been transmitted—and is so understood—is it truly without precedent? How freely does the “unprecedented” come to take precedence, here? And from where? Is it “metaphysical” that “a Talmudic witticism” comes to mind

193–194. I could have saved face after a fashion—one to be interrogated in the following text—and quoted this passage from the volume of the correspondence in which it appears. But I let the citation stand, not simply for the sake of honesty, nor to mark a humdrum scholarly debt. It marks an additional—and happy—debt: I had the great privilege and pleasure to study with Professor Chaudhary at his first teaching post, the University of Washington, Seattle. I dedicate this to him fondly and in thanks, and to Eileen Joy, without whom—and this is the very least indication, the most proximal (the nearest!)—this would not have been written.
here, or is only its “origin” metaphysical? Can that
be known, and transmitted—and so known as
transmitted—as it is here, where it comes to mind,
in a letter? And what precedent does (might) that
set?

Must it have come over one like the surging of
the sea? Or is that “only” a metaphor?

That theory “is like a surging sea” makes the
(attempted) pivot away from it all the more con-
spicuous, if less understandable: What is one to
make of the syntax of that sentence, of the sudden
ebb that stems the flow? “Theory is like a surging
sea, but”—but, yet, however—Benjamin goes on to
write of “the only thing that matters to the wave”?
How is one to theorize that transition? How is one
to understand the manner in which that transmis-
sion breaks?

(And what hinges on that parenthetical inser-
tion, “understood as a metaphor for the person”? What
comes to pass here, very much in passing?)

And what is one to make of the swirling break-
water of figurative language here? How does the
mention of metaphor, one staging the wave as the
person, the person as wave, named and “understood
as a metaphor,” complicate the use of simile (“Theo-
ry is like a surging sea”) employed but a few words
earlier in the same sentence? And what is the rela-
tionship between these two figures? Synecdoche?
How is that, in turn, to be understood?
Is this where “theory” comes into the picture? Is this what it is “to surrender itself”—oneself, one’s self, one self or other, “like a wave”—“to its motion”? What’s to be made of that motion so as to crest and break (“to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks”)?

Is that something like freedom (“This enormous freedom of the breaking wave …”)?

Or is it something like education (“… is education in its actual sense”)? What would it be to be one for whom there is no longer—knowledge having become transmittable—a difference between freedom and education, and for whom that is “the only thing that matters”?

Would that “in its actual sense” be “instruction”? Is this where becoming transmittable transpires, instructively, knowledge becoming transmittable where tradition becomes “visible”? To what “visibility,” consequent to what education, might tradition become as if luminous? For how “precipitously” from “living abundance” would tradition have to emerge like a wave for it, in its instruction, to free? (As if into the air, into the light, at a certain angle to the sun …)

An emergence “like a wave”? Or, perhaps, like a person—“the wave (understood as […] the person)—a certain person?

It is living abundance Fradenburg brings “nearer to you,” today, remarkably, “than the sea.”
§ “Being is also non-being,” Gilles Deleuze wrote in *Difference and Repetition*, “but non-being is not the being of the negative; rather, it is the being of the problematic, the being of problem and question.” Deleuze returned to those words in a lesser piece, republishing them four years later with an exemplary series of discreet emendations. “Non-being is not the being of the negative, but rather the positive being of the ‘problematic,’ the objective being of a problem and of a question.” The positive being of the problematic, the objective being of problems and questions—what is the sense of those additions, and according to what necessity does the recourse to elaboration impose itself there? How, in other words, is one to understand the “‘problematic,’” the “being” of the problematic, in its “positivity”?

25 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 64; emphasis author’s.