The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting

Paul Carter

Deakin University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Volume 12 Issue 4 (December 2010) Article 4
Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.4 (2010)
Thematic Issue, *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*
Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/>

Abstract: In his article "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting" Paul Carter develops a discus-sion of interpersonal encounters by mobilizing an apparatus of references, ranging from Jean Genet to Lévinas, Derrida, Bachmann, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt. The hypothesis is that meeting another per-son entails and subsumes a non-meeting; a resistance and a refusal. The article pursues the ambigui-ty at the heart of encountering the other through an investigation of the urban spaces that are alleg-edly designed to invite and facilitate meetings. The argument put forward is that these spaces are paradoxically designed to avert encounters. This is especially true in the context of a "new social, eco-nomic, and institutional life that seems to call into question the very existence of the collectivities re-ferred to as 'community' or 'society.'" The unfolding of this proposition describes a space and a topog-raphy that are open, supple, and capable of "mutual transformations." The Greek letter *Chi*, both in its meaning of chaos and *Chora* ("a process of cleavage in its double meaning"), is employed as a theo-retical example of a place that defies rigidity and closeness and that invites us to linger and pause in order to allow the other to meet and be met.

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 2 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

Paul CARTER

The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting

An ambiguity attends meeting. Objects that meet are understood to touch, join, or otherwise physical-ly connect. When people meet, however, they do not physically merge but come face to face. The meeting of conscious beings involves an act of recognition, an experience described with archetypal simplicity by Jean Genet, who, on entering a railway compartment, found himself opposite "an appal-ling old man." Genet tried to avoid contact when "His gaze crossed, as they say, mine, and, although I no longer know if it was short or drawn-out, I suddenly knew the painful — yes, painful feeling that any man was exactly — sorry, but I want to emphasize 'exactly' — 'worth' any other man. 'Anyone at all,' I told myself, 'can be loved beyond his ugliness, his stupidity, his meanness.' It was a gaze, drawn-out or quick, that was caught in my own and that made me aware of this" (Genet 49). The par-adoxical crossing described here, where meeting is possible *only* because they are absolute strangers, is one characteristic of public space. In the intimacy of private space bodies may embrace, fuse sex-ually. But the genius of public space is to stage meetings at a distance. Public space provides a meet-ing place because people do not collide there. "The public realm," Hannah Arendt suggests, "gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak" (52).

In contrast with the meeting of inanimate objects, in which an unproblematic fusing or adjacency occurs, there is secreted within the meeting of animated beings a foreknowledge of non-meeting. This is the ambiguity explored in this article, and it is particularly associated with public space, whose breakdown, as Arendt argues, occurs when "the world" between people "has lost its power to gather [people] together, to relate and to separate them" (Arendt 52). One reason for considering the meet-ing/non-meeting paradox as an aspect of the public realm is reactive. There is now a considerable lit-erature, significantly inspired by Emmanuel Lévinas, exploring what can be characterized as a post-Existentialist ethics of the Other, exploring questions of recognition, identification, and obligation. It is Lévinas, who locates meeting against "all the surplus or all the goodness of a lost sociality," explaining how distance — "a distance which is also proximity" (Lévinas, *Ethics* 11) — is inscribed in any ap-proach to the other. That surplus he also evokes as "the 'beyond' from which the face comes" (*Basic Philosophical Writings* 59). Derrida's characterization of the trace as a supplement constitutionally un-like what makes it (*Archive Fever* 59), Giacometti's sculptures evoking "a face, in a concrete situation, in its existence for others, from a distance" (Genet 49), and Jean Genet's meditations on "the most irreducible part" of a human being, "his solitude of being exactly equivalent to every other human be-ing" (49), are other expressions of a philosophical theme and intellectual milieu whose epicenter was post-war Paris.

If these writers and artists focused on the existential dilemmas of individuals, others in their wake have considered the implications of a lost sociality associated with the breaking down of a "common world" to the fate of community as a whole. In the social theory of philosophers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and, in a different way, Alain Badiou, the enigma of meeting/non-meeting express-es itself in the mechanism of a double movement that simultaneously draws us together and causes us to withdraw from one another. Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that "At the heart of things we are hardly ever together. It is not a question of being present to ourselves. It is always a matter of com-ing-together, clearly, of deciding to say 'we, now.' Once we reach this decision, we prepare ourselves for a new chaos" (qtd. in Wurzer 97). The god of this ekstatic coming is Dionysus (Wurzer 98) and his acceptance "involves a new politics, a breaking-forth of a distinct absence of ground" (Wurzer 98). Nancy finds this coming together that always disappoints: "Communication is always disappointing, because no subject of the utterance comes in touch with another subject" (qtd. in Wurzer 97). He shares with Giorgio Agamben an emphasis on timing. "We are not a 'being' but a 'happening'" (qtd. in Wurzer 97). Or, as Wurzer puts it, "We happen. This happening is history or community" (Wurzer 97). Coming together, then falling apart: these lend social time a rhythm. Meetings are rhythmic struc-tures. They take place in a double sense. They stand out, lending *existence* to things in the etymologi-cal meaning of the term. They belong to the flux but they also punctuate it. They can be compared to the artwork whose structure, according to Agamben, is ambiguous, being both calculated and playful,

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 3 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

both outside time and inside it: "Such reserve — which gives and at the same time hides its gift — is called in Greek *epoché* — from a verb that has a double sense, meaning "both to hold back, to suspend, and to hand over, to present, to offer" (Agamben, "The Original Structure" 99-100). The meeting, like the artwork, is a "genuine event" in Badiou's terms, an encounter that at once breaks with history and recalls us to it, "forcing chance once the moment is ripe for intervention" (Bensaid 98).

The ambiguity of meeting, that it is both a turning towards and a swerving aside, is not only of interest to thinkers wrestling with the Cartesian legacy. It is not only the behavior of a multitude of self-conscious egos that exhibits these paradoxes. It characterizes the choreography of everyday encounter. Our vernacular expression "bumping into" illustrates this. To bump into somebody describes an unexpected, often unlooked-for, encounter. The violence of the collision evoked (the bump) does not refer to a physical collision, but to a psychic one. There is no physical contact: the involuntary crossing of eyes provokes the opposite reaction, a hurried exchange of pleasantries and a withdrawal. To bump into someone is not to meet them. But the verb preserves the ambiguity of this non-meeting — its twinning with a meeting that disappointed. But this ambiguity attaches to the noun as well. A bump is what causes a collision (an irregularity in the ground, say, against which one stumbles). It is also what is caused by a collision, the protuberance formed after hitting one's head. The embarrassment understood in the phrase "bumping into," the emotional state that transformed a turning towards into a turning aside, is understood because the same double movement is associated with meeting. Etymologically, meeting seems connected with words like measure and meter. To meet is not to come to a standstill, face-to-face, or breast-to-breast: it is a matter of timing.

An attention to the choreography of meeting is a symptom of the feeling that "community" has lost its meaning (Martin 3). The always-ambiguous relationship between autonomy and solidarity, between the rival claims of self and others, is perceived to have broken down. In the withering of democratic institutions guaranteeing individual rights, autonomy yields to the anomie characteristic of neo-liberalist self-interest (Martin 133). As communitarianism tends to produce solidarity at the expense of diversity, a third model of social relations, positionality, emerges. In moving from subjectivity to positionality, essentialist definitions of identity yield to ones that are situated. The question becomes, not who are you but where are you, and where are you going (Martin 150). This is the crudest summary of a continuing debate in recent social theory, but it is enough to show that a study of the threads of society — individuals as they interact — is seen as functionally related to understanding how the fabric of society as a whole is woven. In fact, the way positionality theory uses the weaving metaphor directly recalls the ambiguous character of meeting. Is the new subject to be imagined as "a 'nodal point' of criss-crossing media" or as "an always moving line" (Martin 151)? The same question can be addressed to the phenomenon of meeting: does it reside in the "opening" to the other or in the trajectories of those who converge?

In social theory these questions are addressed to figures — to groups of human beings imagined as timed and spaced in relation to one another. Little or no mention is made of the ground where these different approaches to the other are played out. There is, following Heidegger, considerable discussion of the metaphysical grounds of being (and being for one another), but this does not translate into anything as vulgar as a consideration of the material characteristics, the topography, the design and the programming, of the public spaces where, presumably, the politics of positionality assume a physical form. The result of this is that descriptions of renewed community in writers like Nancy or Lyotard seem to the non-European overly confident that streets, squares, and other sites of public congregation both exist and are freely accessible to all citizens. A new complexity is attributed to social relations, but the situations of sociability continue to be imagined theatrically, as voids awaiting the animation of actors. The theorization of community in a post-secular age has left the theory and practice of public space design far behind. If the public realm is chiefly mediated through an increasingly integrated system of digital telecommunications systems, then public space, the old agora of democratic discourse, has become ghostlike, ruinous, and abandoned. Yet this conclusion is premature. Governments continue to sponsor the embellishment of public space, and even if these pander to the society of the spectacle rather than incubating the kind of crepuscular social resistance Guy Debord envisaged (qtd. in Apostolidès 45 n. 1), they remain essential if we are to avoid falling over one another.

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 4 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

How, then, can or should our public spaces take cognisance of the changes in our social, economic, and institutional life that seem to call into question the very existence of the collectivities referred to as "community" or "society"? The more monumentally they are asserted, the less able they seem to weave us together. This is not surprising. Following the double sense of *agora*, meaning both the place of assembly and the people assembled there — an ambiguity *avant la lettre* in which the figure-ground opposition referred to before was already collapsed — a communal space can hardly exist without a community to commune there. The present design of spaces and the legislation governing their use reflect this fact. Their commanding aesthetic quality is smoothness, the activity they prohibit is writing. It is not simply that "public space, *Öffentlichkeit*, in these conditions, stops being the space for experiencing, testing and affirming the state of a mind open to the event, and in which the mind seeks to elaborate an idea of that state itself, especially under the sign of the 'new'" (Lyotard 76; "public space" is possibly an inadequate rendering of the German — by "*Öffentlichkeit*" Lyotard means to evoke the larger public sphere of interaction, not simply a physical space where people might meet). It is also that such places forbid "writing, inscribing" (Lyotard 76; see also my discussion of the writing that would be appropriate to a revivified public space, Carter, "Other Speak" 240-65). Then the implication is plain: public space recovers a communal relevance when it resists the temptations of autonomy and solidarity. It has to find a way round the pressures of state-backed privatization characteristic of most inner urban infrastructure and gentrification. It has to break up and disperse the centralizing, geometrical vision that identifies being together with gigantism.

But how is this to happen without a kind of prescriptiveness entering into the design? The proposal here is that the enigma of meeting already discussed provides a way. The casual manner in which urban design briefs stipulate the provision of "meeting places" might suggest that they are unproblematic. But the ambiguity inherent in meeting suggests otherwise. In reality, most officially-designated meeting places are markedly sites of non-meeting. Far from encouraging a state of mind open to the event, they attempt to program social activity and to prescribe what will happen. Just as the camera lens tames the wildness of the medium, ensuring that what is recorded is in focus: so with the design of public space, it is intended to neutralize the crossing of eyes that must multiply where "all the views" are licit. As the great analyst of inner and outer space, Adrian Stokes, wrote, "Our model structure is an occupation force … Wherewith without a nod, we exercise our right of sight." But he opposes to this "The best of Nature … its nerveless face / Bright, glowering, or the rain / Torn through our massive and unhindered glass / A mirror wall that holds the domus up, / Translates Out into dry, all-spacious In" (Stokes 44-45). Here reference is made to a psychological translation in which the autonomy of the gaze yields to a genuine meeting with the other — Nature's nerveless face — out of which comes a new solidarity, an "all-spacious In" that does not prescribe or dominate.

As public space is discursive space, it is not surprising that some of the best evocations of the meeting place occur in reflections on the rhetorical construction of knowledge. Discussing one of the earliest forms of thought, the chiasm, Rodolphe Gasché, for example, explains, "it allows the drawing apart and bringing together of opposite functions or terms and entwines them within an identity of movements" (Gasché 273). When Emmanuel Lévinas speaks of "a pleasure of contact at the heart of the chiasm," it is clear that a form of physical as well as mental movement is understood (qtd. in Gasché 273). And in this form the movement is timed as well as spaced, corresponding to a relational and differential space of the in-between which in terms of what happens is "*always already* and always not yet" (Gasché 273). Andrzej Warminski contends that such chiasmatic environments are not blandly or neutrally ambiguous but are sites of "radically undecidable difference," a distinction that also illuminates the enigma of meeting (qtd. in Gasché 271).

If Gasché focuses here on the ambiguity of the nodal point, literary theorist J. Hillis Miller contemplates the ambiguity inherent in the constitution of the matrix. The term *anastomosis* refers to "intercommunication between two vessels, channels, or distinct branches of any kind, by a connecting cross-branch" (Hillis Miller 154), but Hillis Miller notes that it is also the name of a figure of speech, referring to the "insertion of a qualifying word between two parts of another word" (Hillis Miller 156). His point, though, is that the word seems to mean different things depending upon which part of the intercommunication is taken to be primary. Is the intercommunication between two closed vessels (two lakes joined by a stream) or between two open vessels (two channels joined by a branch chan-

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 5 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

nel)? Or, to put it another way, is the anastomosis "an external link between two vessels or channels" or does it enter into the vessel it opens "so that it becomes a version of the figure of container and thing contained" (Hillis Miller 155)? Hillis Miller adapts these "contradictions" to a discussion of the "crisscross" relations between the four principal characters in Goethe's novel, *The Elective Affinities*, but, again, the figure of exchange has a physical as well as psychological expression. In his discussion of pagan mysteries secreted in Renaissance art and poetry, Edgar Wind refers to these as "'hedges' or *umbraculae*, belong[ing] to an intermediate state, which invites further 'complication' above, and further 'explication' below" (Wind 206). These are not simply discursive figures. They can be choreographed: In Ben Jonson's masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618), "when 'complication' reaches its height, and the opposites become indistinguishable, all multiplicity vanishes in the One beyond being — the absolutely familiar, for which there is no fitting image or name" (Wind 206; the applications of this figure to my public space design, Nearamnew, [Federation Square, Melbourne, 2003], are discussed in Carter, "Arcadian Writing" 142).

These citations show that the enigma of meeting exists not only for social theory, interpersonal psychology, public space design, and the choreographic notation of movement. It also embodies defining questions in the history of Western metaphysics. In *The Sophist*, Plato "explained that the divine community [is] alternately divided and joined by a dialectical 'movement' [kinesis] which brings out their 'sameness' and 'otherness' through a series of changing configurations" (qtd. in Wind 198). The movement described here, like that achieved in Jonson's masque, represents a choreographic resolution of the problem that dogs metaphysics from the pre-Socratics downwards, that of the relationship between the One and the Many. The solutions enacted here involve a form of *methexis* or participation in which a doubling occurs, producing a self-other environmental dyad in whom the old binaries dissolve (Carter, *The Lie* 81-85). In a chapter in *The Visible and the Invisible* called "The Intertwining — The Chiasm," Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes just such a pre-reflexive dyad in which "subject and other are not yet distinguishable, instead co-existing all at once, pell-mell" (qtd. in Gasché 278). He refers to an intertwining of subject and world, visible and invisible characterized by "a sort of folding back, invagination or padding" (qtd. in Gasché 278). The result of this "mediating reversal" is that "no bifurcation or positing of isolated and opposite entities takes place" (Gasché 278). Merleau-Ponty sees this "new type of intelligibility" leading to "a complete reconceptualisation of philosophy" (qtd. in Gasché 278). Gasché differentiates Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm from that of Derrida; the former is a figure of finitude tied to "the problematic of consciousness"; for the latter the chiasm suggests "an essential unfinishedness of totalities" (Gasché 279).

At the level of social praxis, the constitutionally ambiguous intertwining Merleau-Ponty describes is a not unfamiliar trope of recent anthropological writing. According to Sylvia Caiuby Novaes, "the social self" among the Amazonian Bororo people "manifests the transformation and transcendence of the individual as a 'worldly object,' that is, an empirical subject that talks and acts" (Caiuby Novaes 143). This exemplifies in the social realm what Merleau-Ponty posits as the grounding of consciousness. The Bororo's "worldly object," brought into being through the practice of others, and through the situatedness of being, corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's "'general thing' beyond the body and the world … 'a sort of incarnate principle' that he calls 'flesh'" (Gasché 278). It is telling in this context that Merleau-Ponty elsewhere evokes the character of his philosophy in specifically fleshly terms. As his subject is the enigma of intertwining, his bodily analogy is drawn not from bones or flesh but from what joins them: "The joints of our bodies, as distinguished from the bones, are themselves hollows of a specific kind" (qtd. in Gill 66). That is, they operate in, they articulate, the spaces between substances (bones): focusing on these, "philosophy seeks to allow the way the world works to display itself by first subtracting from it the stuff of which it is made" (Gill 66). This is a characteristically ambiguous metaphor from a philosopher who, rather exceptionally, did promote "a feeling for ambiguity" (Gill 66).

These reflections on the chiastic construction of reality suggest that ambiguity is in the eye of the beholder. Once the subject lets go of being an autonomous subject, the problematic nature of the relationship with others also loosens. As there are no figures without other figures, so there are no grounds for being different except in relation to others. If, going back to our earlier line of thought, we apply these insights to the enigma of the meeting place (and its design), it looks as if it will not re-

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 6 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

semble the flat, ideally voided public square of the urban planner's imagination. The in-between, that interstitial stuff of which chiastic reality is made, is, as it were, everywhere. Wind refers to "hedges"; Merleau-Ponty asserts that his joints or hollows have topographical analogues, being like "a natural meeting place or storage place, as a valley … or a trunk of a tree" (qtd. in Gill 66). Even if these are figures of speech, they evoke an environment that encourages meeting because it is composed of ambiguous forms, vessels that also act as channels, and channels that contain and separate. Perhaps these can best be thought of poses, temporary landing places. They define arrival as the punctuation of flight, and, giving flight a curvilinear form, emphasize that the geometry of meeting is non-linear, quirky, softly angular, and opportunist. It is always a matter of going beyond oneself, whether this means self-transcendence or a fall into the abyss. In this topography, the open is filled with hollows or angles. Physically, the angle is the expression of a double movement. As the hiding place lamented by the Triestino poet Umberto Saba, in his poem "The Village," it is also the corner where he might have contemplated himself "from being no longer myelf, / to be this alone: among men, / a man" (Saba <http://www.uga.edu/~italian/novecento/sab.htm>).

Artist Arakawa and writer Madeline Gins seem to envisage a similar kind of temporal topography when they explain their concept of "perpetual landing sites": as they explain it,

Something's happening and it is happening in terms of two opposing actions at once; but this is not an event that is so oppositionally constructed as to be prevented from ever taking place. Say that intermixed in this combining of two movements into one self-contradicting joint action are that which the world, accorded here a provisional existence for exploratory purposes only, provides, and that which the perceiving organism contributes through its actions. The term "to cleave" which has since the fourteenth century come in English to mean two opposing actions (taken, of course, until now, one at a time) is useful for suggesting what we have in mind. By chance, both of the opposite actions which this word stands for turn out to be, as we see it, essential to the process in question … Cleaving appears to us to be a basic operative factor in the conducting of the world. The physical law declaring that "No matter can be destroyed" could be translated in terms of cleaving to read "Even when something seems to have been cut off from all the rest, still can it be seen in the end to have somehow adhered. The world, energymatter, might be said to cohere by means of cleaving or cleaving, a simultaneous dividing and rejoining, ubiquitously maps this coherence. (3)

Writing about Michel Leiris's book *Biffures*, Lévinas brought the discursive and spatial expressions of chiasmus together when he compared Leiris's enterprise to certain drawings by the artist Charles Lapicque. *Bifurs* means "bifurcations" or "forks in the road." *Biffures* means crossings out or deletions. Taken together, they suggest that, "it is not so much a question of exploring the new paths opened, or of holding to the corrected meaning, as of seizing thought at the privileged moment at which it turns into something other than itself" (Lévinas, *Outside* 145). Locating meaning at the break-open point, Leiris posits "the multiple as simultaneity, and the state of consciousness as irreducibly ambiguous" (Lévinas, *Outside* 146) and Lévinas compared this technique with Lapicque's *Figures entrelacées*, writing, "Destroying perspective in its function as the order of walking and of approach, Lapicque creates a space that is mainly the order of simultaneity … It is not space that houses things, but things, by their deletion, that delineate space. The pace of each object sheds its volume. From behind the rigid line there emerges the line as ambiguity. Lines rid themselves of their role as skeletons to become the infinity of possible paths of propinquity" (Lévinas, *Outside* 146; for further discussion and illustration, see Carter, *Repressed Spaces* 190-192).

Ambiguity is in the eye of the beholder, doubly so when that subject is conceived as being immobile. To approach the other is to be on a path of potentiality. Immobility, in this sense, is not only spatial but temporal. It is the condition of the ego conceived as being sovereign, autonomous, and self-same. As Lévinas indicates, the character of the meeting place (as of meeting) is a movement form, a figure whose notation lies ambiguously between choreography and chorography, the writing of dance steps, and the discourse of the *chora*, both of which are ways of writing places into being (this term is used with the third sense attributed to it in Plato's *Timaeus*, that is, not as a "receptacle of the forms" but as "a complex movement, one that involves movements both of the *chora* and of the traces within the *chora*" (Sallis 126). But such a writing will have to imitate its subject. If its theme is meeting, then

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 7 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

it will have to disappoint the reader, remaining open-ended, unfinished. In Ingeborg Bachmann's short story, *The Thirtieth Year*, the narrator returns to Vienna. "He bought a guide to the city in a bookshop, a guide to the city where every smell he knew and about which he knew nothing worth knowing" (Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year* 38). The results are not good: "He put his hand over his eyes and thought: All that is impossible! It is impossible that I have known this city. Not like this" (Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year* 38). Her narrator has made the mistake of thinking he could return. Instead of living in flight, constitutionally in the in-between, he has succumbed to a Romantic nostalgia for a return to origins, for reunification. When he makes this mistake, he learns that being, exposure at that place and time, that "happening" Nancy refers to, produces a knowledge that cannot be represented. The Guide mapped a city as if it were already complete, the logical outcome of its historical and geographical necessity. But to live there had been to be in flight from certitude, to live in a state of undecidability.

The narrator — and perhaps the reader who expected a satisfactory resolution — discover that his project — "My plan: to arrive" — is self-contradictory. To plan arrival is to foreclose on what might happen; "the thirtieth year" is as it were always lying in wait, to borrow Nancy's characterization of what he calls the "inoperative society." As Bachmann's male narrator reflects, "No, the day will not come — it was already there, contained in all the days of this year which he has survived with an effort and at a pinch" (Bachmann, *The Thirtieth Year* 55). To plan in this sense is not only to subtract the future conditional tense of happening (the "always not yet"), but to separate oneself from the past (the "always already"), which, conceived as a trajectory, was always tending here. As Bachmann says in "Letter in Two Drafts," "I'm in the midst of it — what do you expect!" (Bachmann, *Songs in Flight* 201). The meeting place of beings knots time into the *chora* where future and past, necessity and possibility, yield to the transcendental experience of living in the here and now. As she says in "The Game is Over": "your age, my age and the age of the planet / in years can have no measure" (Bachmann, *Songs in Flight* 111). Evidently the only success in this situation can come from his hope's disappointment, from a repeated sensation that it was "not like this." As Nancy suggests, in the *chora* communication must disappoint. The "inoperative" community withdraws from closure; its exposures constantly defer the prospect of unification — or, as we might say, return (see Nancy). In Bachmann's stories and poems, the insight, that arrival, meeting with one's destiny, must always be deferred, expresses itself as the condition of being in flight. Embedded in a history that both recalls the subject and repels it, flight turns out to be ambiguous, too.

Referring to the interlacing of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy in recent clinical practice, Nikolas Rose coined the term "psy complex" (Rose 3). But, in view of the interest that the enigma of meeting arouses across a wide range of disciplines and practices — from dance to design, from theories of society to theories of consciousness, from ethics to politics and back again — couldn't we with equal justification speak of a "chi complex" haunting the human and social sciences, one incarnate in the word *chiasm* and the constellation of terms associated with it? A short history of ambiguity could be written through the letter *chi*. The kiss, symbolized by *x*, is where two lips meeting produced a momentary emotion; in doubling up, they cancelled out difference — but they also courted the solipsism of same on same. As the cross-hairs in a rifle sight, the same sign defines the meeting place as a vanishing point. To avoid this confusion, the carpenter uses a V to mark the spot instead of an *x*. The ambiguity of the symbol is magical: the *x* of the Runic alphabet signified bad luck; crossed matchsticks, on the other hand, signify good luck. As the sign of cancellation, it stages a disappearance act: Irish Celts omitted the Roman numeral X because they associated the term with the sacred, ineffable figure of Christ. Crossing and crossed, the eloquence of the line is interrupted, and ambiguity installed as the mark of communication. It hardly seems accidental that the first letter of the ancient Greek word chaos is *chi*. The Greeks identified chaos with the yawning, or gaping open of time and space to permit creation (see, e.g., *Encyclopedia Mythica* <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/c/chaos.html>). The word is connected with another chi complex term, *chora*. *Chora*, like chaos, is active not passive, a process of cleavage in its double meaning. Greek chaos imagines the interpenetration of lines, a crossing that does not cancel out but mutually transforms.

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 8 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

Finally, with reference to the form of the letter — unequal St Andrew cross-style diagonal strokes, one hooked at both termini — isn't this a hieroglyph signifying a qualified release from the finitude associated with Merleau-Ponty's interwining? Chi is the limping figure, where, because one leg is stronger than the other, that disabling symmetry between opposite impulses is easily overcome. Derrida sees in the asymmetry of the Greek letter an allusion to "a same that is not the identical," to an origin that is constitutionally forked, unequal and unstable (qtd. in Gasché 275). It's interesting in this context that Merleau-Ponty cites Socrates as an example of a philosopher who possessed "inseparably the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity," suggesting that the meaning of "good ambiguity was reflected in his 'style of existence'" (qtd. in Lanigan 91). For Socrates limped. A philosophy of finitude "is justified, but only under a limping form" (Greisch 107). To limp is to gain traction where the ground offers no rest or relief. It is the figure of desire, dramatizing the suffering involved in any approach to the other (Carter, *Repressed Spaces* 59). To be limpid about this is to be lame. It is the introduction of measure into a world whose worship of speed has overwhelmed rhythm. It is the sign of withdrawal that advances. It is, in short, one of the movement forms that unravels the enigma of meeting.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. "The Original Structure of the Work of Art." *The Man Without Content*. By Giorgio Agamben. Trans. G. Albert. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 94-103.

Apostolidès, Jean-Marie. *Les Tombeaux de Guy Debord*. Paris: Champs-Flammarion, 2006.

Arakawa, Shusaku, and Madeline Gins. "The Tentative Constructed Plan as Intervening Device (for a Reversible Destiny)." *A+U: Architecture and Urbanism* 255 (1991): 48-57.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1958.

Bachmann, Ingeborg. *Songs in Flight: The Collected Poems*. Trans. P. Filkins. New York: Marsilio, 1994.

Bachmann, Ingeborg. *The Thirtieth Year*. Trans. M. Bullock. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987.

Bensaid, Daniel. "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event." *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*. Ed. P. Hallward. London: Continuum, 2004. 94-105.

Carter, Paul. "Arcadian Writing: Two Text into Landscape Proposals." *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 21.2 (2001): 137-47.

Carter, Paul. *The Lie of the Land*. London: Faber & Faber, 1996.

Carter, Paul. "Other Speak: The Poetics of Cultural Difference." *Empires, Ruins and Networks: The Transcultural Agenda in Art*. Ed. S. McGuire and N. Papastergiadis. Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2005. 240-65.

Carter, Paul. *Repressed Spaces: The Poetics of Agoraphobia*. London: Reaktion, 2002.

Caiuby Novaes, Sylvia. *The Play of Mirrors: The Representation of Self as Mirrored in the Other*. Trans. I.M. Burbridge. Austin: U of Texas P, 1997.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

Encyclopedia Mythica <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/c/chaos.html>.

Gasché, Rodolphe. "Reading Chiasms." *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation*. By Rodolphe Gasché. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 263-84.

Genet, Jean. *Fragments of the Artwork*. Trans. C. Mandel. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.

Gill, Jerry H. *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities P, 1991.

Greisch, Jean. "In Praise of Philosophy." *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. Ed. F. Evans and L. Lawlor. Albany: State U of New York P, 2000. 103-20.

Hillis Miller, J. *Ariadne's Thread: Story lines*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.

Lanigan, Richard L. *Phenomenology of Communication: Merleau-Ponty's Thematics in Communicology and Semiology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1988.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans R.A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Outside the Subject*. Trans. M.B. Smith. London: Athlone P, 1993.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "Domus and the Megalopolis." *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991. 191-204.

Martin, Bill. *Matrix and Line: Derrida and the Possibilities of Postmodern Social Theory*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1992.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968.

Paul Carter, "The Chi Complex and Ambiguities of Meeting"   page 9 of 9
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 12.4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/4>
Thematic Issue *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*. Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.
Rose, Nikolas. *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Routledge 1990.
Saba, Umberto. "The Village" (2010): <http://www.uga.edu/~italian/novecento/sab.htm>.
Stokes, Adrian. *With All the Views: The Collected Poems of Adrian Stokes*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1981.
Wind, Edgar. *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*. London: Penguin, 1967.
Wurzer, Wilhelm S. "Nancy and the Political Imaginary After Nature." *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy*. Ed. Darren Shephard, Simon Sparks, and Colin Thomas. London: Routledge, 1997. 91-102.

Author's profile: Paul Carter teaches at Deakin University and he is creative director of the place-making design studio, Material Thinking (Melbourne). His new book is *Ground Truthing: Explorations in a Creative Region* (2010). E-mail: <paul.carter@materialthinking.com.au>.