

AFTER ABSALON

SIMON OKOTIE

'OKOTIE'S LABYRINTHINE
SYNTAX AND MEANDERING
THOUGHT LOOPS BRING TO
MIND THE WORKS OF DAVID
FOSTER WALLACE AND
NICHOLSON BAKER
...DELIGHTFULLY ECCENTRIC ...
BRILLIANTLY FUNNY.'
—HOUMAN BAREKAT,
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SALT

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CROMER

*For
Sanghasiha*

CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

DEDICATION

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)

[37](#)

[38](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE PUBLISHER](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

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AFTER ABSALON

THE RAMP LED down from the flat area of pavement or sidewalk across which Marguerite was moving and then turned back on itself, via a horizontal rectangular plane, before descending, at precisely, he thought, the same gradient into the pedestrian underpass proper. And the function of the horizontal rectangular plane was to provide the landing position, as it were, not only for the ramp down which Marguerite would imminently descend, but also for a flight of stairs towards which a woman in a tight-fitting pinstriped suit was headed, as it's known. Note, though, that the precise landing positions of the two protagonists, to call them that, would not be at the same location upon this horizontal rectangular plane, presumably for reasons of safety: when viewed from above, the end of the ramp furthest from Marguerite formed the left half of the rectangle's closest long side whilst the edge of the top step formed the top half of the short side furthest from him, such that the landing position of the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit would, according to Marguerite's rapid mental deliberations, be in the left half of the top-right quadrant of that horizontal rectangular plane (given that the steps extended and descended from right to left across that quadrant), whereas Marguerite himself would land in the bottom half of the bottom-left quadrant of the plane since it was this quadrant that intersected, at its bottom edge, the ramp that extended and descended from pavement or sidewalk level directly in front of him. In other words, the long, flat, sloping rectangle that was the ramp down from

ground level joined the horizontal rectangular plane that was arranged at right angles to it (and to the ramp down to the mouth of the pedestrian underpass proper), with this horizontal rectangular plane (which was located halfway, or thereabouts, between ground- and subway-level) also being joined, as it were, in the opposite half from its intersection with the slope down from ground-level, by a series of much smaller, parallel (or should that be contiguous?), horizontal rectangles of decreasing (or increasing, depending where you were - or are - situated) altitude and of decreasing (or increasing, as before) distance from that intersection, with the decreasing (etc.) altitude being regulated by a further series of parallel or contiguous rectangles of the same (or similar) size (to each other) but arranged vertically at decreasing (etc.) distance from that intersection such that the two sets of smaller rectangles intersected (or were, in fact, fabricated in situ, as a block) to form a stepwise arrangement that joined the aforementioned horizontal rectangular plane whose breadth was twice the width of each of the ramps leading initially away from, and then back down towards, the mouth of the pedestrian underpass proper; and the reason the ramp down from the sidewalk did not terminate in the same half of the horizontal rectangular plane as the steps, and that the orientation of the steps was at right angles to the ramp down to the mouth of the pedestrian underpass proper, related quite straightforwardly, Marguerite thought, as his right foot touched down at the top of the ramp, to the following interrelated safety concerns: were someone such as a cyclist or roller-skater to freewheel, no doubt in contravention of local by-laws, down the ramp from pavement level, they would risk colliding with anyone descending the steps onto the horizontal rectangular plane were those steps to be located in the same half of that plane as the ramp; similarly were the

steps to be aligned with, rather than at right angles to, the ramp down from the horizontal rectangular plane to the mouth of the pedestrian underpass proper then a skateboarder, say, might be tempted, again no doubt in contravention of local by-laws, to jump the steps straight onto that ramp, thereby endangering anyone using that ramp to move towards or away from the pedestrian underpass proper that spanned that broad tree-lined avenue with a row of showrooms on one side of it and a wide expanse of parkland on the other. It was for these reasons, then, that Marguerite's landing position, were he to continue down the ramp and onto that horizontal rectangular plane, would be different to that of the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit, or, more specifically, the landing position of his feet, or the soles of his shoes, were he to be wearing shoes (broadly defined), would be different to that - or those (etc.) - of the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit, for the reasons previously adumbrated, this all being predicated upon Marguerite actually continuing down the ramp in question towards the horizontal rectangular plane en route to the pedestrian underpass proper, which he now committed fully to doing by lifting his left foot from the sidewalk in what was presumably a parabola - the upward arc of same, that is, which would, in fact, terminate at a lower level (and, hence, at a slightly more advanced position than otherwise) than that of its launching point, given that it would have joined (or, in fact, surpassed, as it were) the right foot which was already on the ramp leading down to, yet away, for now, from, the mouth of the pedestrian underpass proper that crossed underneath the broad, tree-lined avenue that he had his back, and, indeed, the other parts of the rear of his body, to, with the reason for proceeding in this manner being what he took to be a mutual physical attraction to the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped

suit, as his opposite (meaning that they tended, all else being equal, towards each other, as bodies in space), as well as a sense that she would assist him in his investigation into the disappearance of Harold Absalon, the Mayor's transport advisor, who was missing presumed dead, although for now, she looked distinctly displeased to see him.

A FURTHER DIFFERENCE between him and the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit - a difference, that is, in addition to the non-coincidence of their landing positions upon the horizontal rectangular plane - related to the *orientation* of their feet, his in his battered working man's boots, say, hers in her stylish working woman's shoes: whereas his front foot, having attained the surface of the ramp leading down to the horizontal rectangular plane, was now placed at an angle of minus whatever to the horizontal, with the 'whatever' relating to whatever the highway or wider transport authority deemed to be a suitable gradient for the situation that he and others using that ramp to descend to the horizontal rectangular plane found themselves in, her front foot would stay at zero degrees to the horizontal plane formed by the top step, which is to say that it would not subtend any angle, whether positive or negative, to the horizontal, regardless of the angle that it decided, as it were, to subtend between its launch point at the top of that flight of stairs and its landing position one step down from that launch point. That, then, was a further difference between them, Marguerite thought, as he noticed that the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit had turned right towards the steps and, in so doing, confirmed Marguerite's suspicion that she was holding a briefcase in her right hand belonging to Richard Knox, an influential colleague of Harold Absalon with whom the Mayor's transport advisor had fallen out, as it's known, shortly before his disappearance.¹

On further reflection, however, he realised that the feet of the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit would, in fact, given that they were housed, as it were, in what are known as high-heeled shoes, be likely to remain at an angle (and he left unspecified, for now, whether the angle subtended by same was a negative or positive one in relation to the horizontal) given the elevation provided by those heels compared to the toes of the same pair of shoes. He had been wrong, in other words, to assert that unlike his front foot (which had, of course, attained the surface of the ramp leading down to the horizontal rectangular plane), the front foot of the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit, on attaining the first step down the stairway to that horizontal rectangular plane, would remain at zero degrees to the horizontal, and that this was a further difference between him and that woman, or rather between their respective front feet - a difference additional, that is, to the non-coincidence of their landing points upon that plane. And the reason he had indicated this whilst now understanding that he had been wrong to have done so related to the inherent nature of the aforementioned high-heeled shoes that formed, he now realised, such a key part of the woman in the pinstriped suit's tight-fitting outfit, to call it that, a nature that was inherent, that is, in both what they were and what they were called, in that the heels of same were high, or, rather, that the heels of same were long such that, when one (such as the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit) was wearing them then, to the extent that they were being worn in the correct fashion, which is to say, the right way around, the heels of that person, which is to say, the heels of the person wearing those high-heeled shoes, would, and even will, be at an elevated position not only in relation to the toes (and, granted, the balls of the feet) of the same person but also in relation to the immediate area of the plane (assuming it to be solid)

upon which the heels of those shoes were, as it were, resting, and, given this fact, which is to say the fact of the angle of the feet of the person wearing those high-heeled shoes - which is to say the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit in the current scenario - then those feet would not, in fact, given the parameters inherent in the wearing of such footwear, be at zero degrees to the horizontal - unless, of course, she were walking up a ramp of precisely the same gradient (albeit in inverse) as the shoes in question (a tantalising prospect for Marguerite).

Were, then, the woman in the tight-fitting pinstriped suit to descend to the horizontal rectangular plane via the steps leading laterally down to it, a plane, remember, that also intersected the ramp leading down from the flat area of pavement or sidewalk across which Marguerite had latterly moved, and the ramp down to the pedestrian underpass that crossed beneath the broad tree-lined avenue roughly at right angles to it, the front (and, in time, in turn, the back) foot of that attractive woman would *not*, in fact, despite the fact that it would have launched itself from a flat, horizontal plane and would, in its descent, land upon a number (unspecified) of flat, horizontal planes at a steadily, although incrementally, decreasing altitude, necessarily be at a different angle to the feet of Marguerite, to call them that, even though his descent would have been made possible by his moving down a ramp which, by definition, was not at zero degrees to the horizontal, and the reason for this related, in summary, to the design of the high-heeled shoes that the woman in the pinstriped suit was wearing (and not, of course, just to the design of those specific shoes but to the design of all high-heeled shoes qua high-heeled shoes), a design that was to Marguerite's mind well captured, as it were, by the name of that item, or those items, viz 'high-heeled shoes'.

1 It would seem, in fact, now that the project had entered what's known as its construction phase, that Knox had simply been spending his time on site overseeing operations there. I saw a photo of him with the Chancellor, it might have been, and other dignitaries during the ground-breaking ceremony, and felt intense irritation that it was him, rather than me, who was mixing in such circles.