Water

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> *That which does not have much sparkliness, we must drink quickly, before all of the bubbles have gone away and left our beverage in silence.*
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> —Wittgenstein

There is a moment, somewhere in the first day or two in Germany, when you ask for water and the waiter says a word back at you that you do not at first understand, and the word, you slowly realize, is a question, and the question is not whether you want water but which water, by which he does not mean still or sparkling, a binary you would have been prepared for, but rather where, precisely, upon a continuous and apparently well-populated axis of effervescence, you wish to be situated, and you understand in that mo-

ment, with a small cold drop of the feeling you get when you discover that a thing you thought was simple has a whole literature, that you have been living your entire life at one impoverished end of a scale you did not know was a scale.

Because at home—and I am speaking here of Sweden, though I have not had a home there in fifteen years, so calling it home is more an honorific than a fact, and in any case the same applied to everywhere else I have lived, as far as I can remember—water has two states, and they are named with the brutal economy of a people who have never thought about it: still, and sparkling. That is the whole vocabulary. Two boxes. You tick one. And the still box is unmarked, which is to say it is the default, the thing you get when you say only "water" and nothing further, and the sparkling box is the marked one, the one you reach for, the one that costs an extra word and usually an extra dollar and arrives with a faint air of occasion, as though you have ordered not a drink but a small celebration. And this binary, these two boxes, felt to me my whole life not like a choice somebody had drawn but like the natural shape of the thing itself.

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The Germans have moved the zero.

This is the thing it took me an embarrassingly long time to articulate to myself, standing in a Berlin supermarket in front of a wall—and I do mean a wall, a vertical territory of water extending past my reach in both directions—trying to find a bottle of the plain stuff and failing, repeatedly, because there was no plain stuff, or rather because the plain stuff, the unmarked default, the water-when-you-mean-nothing-special, was carbonated, and the thing I was looking for, the still water, the water of my entire previous life, had been exiled to a narrow and faintly apologetic shelf at the bottom and labeled, in each case, by a word of subtraction. *Still. Naturell. Ohne Kohlensäure.* Without carbonic acid. Without. The defining feature of the water I had drunk every day since birth was, in this country, an absence, a lack, a thing removed. They named my water by what had been taken out of it.

And I want to be precise about the vertigo of this, because it is not the vertigo of mere unfamiliarity, of foreign packaging or unreadable labels, which is a shallow and quickly-exhausted disorientation. It is the deeper vertigo of discovering that a coordinate you believed was fixed—the origin, the $(0,0)$, the place the graph starts—is in fact a convention, a decision, a thing some

culture planted in the ground at a particular spot and could have planted elsewhere and, elsewhere, did. The zero of the water axis is not given by nature. Germany put it in a different place. And once you have seen one zero move, you start to wonder what other origins you are standing at without knowing you are standing anywhere at all.

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But the moved zero is only the doorway. Walk through it and you find the gradations, and the gradations are where it gets genuinely strange.

Because it is not two boxes there either, not still-and-sparkling with the default flipped, which would be merely an inversion and inversions are easy to grasp. It is a graded thing, an ordinal scale, a dial with detents, and the detents have names and the names are printed on the bottles and the bottles are arranged on the wall in a sequence that you eventually understand to be a sequence, running from the most violently carbonated—a tier whose bubbles are coarse and fast and aggressive, that fizz against the roof of the mouth like something faintly punitive, water that has opinions—down through a calibrated middle and into the still flatlands at the bottom. *Spritzig* at the top, the prickling maxi-

mum. A medium grade below it. And then the one I came to love, the one I would order by name once I had learned the name, which they call, with a confidence that still moves me, *Classic.*

Consider that word in that position. *Classic.* Not "medium," which would be merely a measurement, a neutral readout of a quantity. *Classic,* which is a judgment, a canonization, an assertion that of all the possible amounts of carbonation a water might have, *this* amount, this specific mid-scale liveliness, fine-bubbled and bright but not harsh, present but not assaulting, is the correct one, the reference standard, the amount against which the others are to be understood as deviations. They did not make the default the absence of the quality. They made the default the *right amount* of the quality. They found the optimum and they installed it as the floor and they named the floor "Classic" so that lesser water would understand itself as a departure from a settled good.

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I drank Classic for a week and thought about almost nothing else, which I recognize is a symptom of something, probably several things, but the thing it was most immediately a symptom of was the sudden activation

of a faculty I had not known was dormant. Because what I was tasting, when I tasted the difference between Spritzig and Classic and the medium grade between them, was not really carbonation. Or it was carbonation, but carbonation was only the local instance, the particular case, of a more general quality I did not have a word for, and the absence of the word is the whole point and the reason I am writing this down.

The quality is sharpness. And its opposite is flatness. And once you have the pair in mind you start to find it everywhere, running underneath the senses like a cable buried under five separate streets.

Music has it most literally, where it is not even a metaphor: a sharp note is raised, a half-step up, tense and bright and leaning forward; a flat note is lowered, slack, leaning back, gone a little dead. But the pair does not stay in music. A sharp cheese has an edge that cuts the tongue; a flat one has surrendered, gone soft and characterless and dull. A sharp wine, a sharp mustard, a sharp cold morning. A sharp mind. A sharp dresser. A sharp reply, a sharp turn, a sharp dressed man, *look sharp.* And on the other side, the whole dismal vocabulary of the flat: the flat joke, the flat performance, the flat note, the flat affect of the depressed, the soda gone flat, the evening that fell flat. The pair travels across taste

and touch and sound and sight and temperament and wit, holding its valence the entire way—sharp good, flat bad—across senses that have no business agreeing with one another.

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And this is the thing, this consistency, that tells you you are not dealing with a heap of dead and unrelated metaphors that happen to share two words by accident. You are dealing with a single axis. A real one. A dimension of experience that runs underneath the five official senses and organizes them, the way pitch organizes the sounds we hear or the way temperature organizes the things we touch, except that this one has no organ, no dedicated patch of skin or coil of the ear, and—more to the point, the point I keep arriving at—no name.

We perceive it constantly. We sort nearly everything along it without noticing we are sorting. The spiciness of food is an instance of it: a sharp heat, a chili's bite, against the flat and the bland. Acidity is an instance: the sharp tang of the lemon against the flat sweetness that cloys. The brightness of a color, the attack of a sound, the snap of a good sentence against the limp drift of a bad one—all of these, I want to say, are readings off the same dial, the sharp-to-flat dial, the dial the Germans

have so lovingly calibrated for the single narrow case of water and that the rest of us turn blindly, all day, in the dark, having never been told it is there.

It is, if you think about it—and I have thought about it more than is probably advisable—something very like a sense. We are taught that there are five, and then someone tells you there is a sixth, proprioception, the sense of where your limbs are, the thing that lets you touch your nose with your eyes closed, and you think, all right, six. But there is at least this seventh thing too, this registering of sharpness-and-flatness, this constant low-level appraisal of how much *edge* a given experience has, and we run it without instrumentation, without vocabulary, without ever having been issued the manual. The Germans wrote a small chapter of the manual. It was about water. It is the only chapter anyone has written.

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And here is where it goes somewhere I did not expect when I started, which is into the strange poverty of one end of the scale.

Look at the words again and you notice that the sharp end of the axis is rich, is lavishly served, is attended by a whole retinue of admiring synonyms—keen, crisp,

bright, biting, incisive, piquant, zesty, pointed, tangy, acute—every one of them a compliment, every one available to praise a knife or a mind or a cheese or a coat. And then look at the flat end and there is nothing. Or there is something, but everything there is an insult: dull, blunt, bland, insipid, vapid, stale, lifeless, slack, flat itself. There is no word in the language—I have looked, I have genuinely looked—that means *flat* and is a term of praise. You cannot compliment a thing on its flatness. The language has not provided the means.

This is strange, and it is strange in a way that the German water wall, of all things, is what finally let me see, because the German water wall contains a flatness that is not a failure. The still water at the bottom of that wall, the *ohne Kohlensäure,* the water named by subtraction and exiled to the apologetic shelf—to a German that water is depletion, the spoiled version, the flat Coke ordered on purpose. But to me, raised at the other zero, that same water is just water, and good, and right, and exactly what I want on certain mornings. The flatness is not a fall from sharpness. It is its own place, with its own correct uses, a real value on the dial and not merely the dial's failure to reach the other end. And we have left it almost entirely without advocates. We have built a cathedral of vocabulary at the sharp end and

abandoned the flat end to the language of disappointment, so that a person who wished to say that a thing was *rightly* flat, admirably flat, flat on purpose and well, would discover that the words to say it do not exist and would have to build them, awkwardly, out of negations and apologies, the way the Germans build their word for the water I love out of the absence of the thing they love.

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So I left Germany with a small and probably useless conviction, which is that we are walking around half-equipped. We have a sense we have not named and a scale we have not numbered and a whole end of that scale we can only insult.

The Germans noticed one inch of it. They noticed the inch that runs through water, and they numbered that inch, and they named its detents, and they found the optimum and called it Classic and made it the floor. It is, I think, the most German thing imaginable—not warmth, not spontaneity, but the patient taxonomic optimization of a single small sensory variable until the ideal is located and standardized and installed and printed on a label so that no one ever again has to leave it to chance. I went there and I hated almost everything about the

place, hated it with a steadiness that surprised me, and in the middle of that hatred I fell in love with the Classic water—fell in love is the only phrase, though I am aware of how it sounds, and I want to be exact about why it sounds that way, which is that the feeling is not supposed to apply to carbonated water, the apparatus of longing and fixation and tender particular attachment is built for other objects entirely, and yet I felt it, unmistakably, for a mid-tier German mineral water, the way Humbert Humbert felt what he felt for the wrong object and knew the feeling perfectly even as he knew it had attached itself where it had no business going. A hydrophile, then. I came away deranged by the water, which had, without my permission, shown me the dial. I cannot stop seeing it now. I sort everything along it. I am sorting this sentence along it as I write it, and I will not tell you where it falls, except to say that I have tried, throughout, to keep it on the Classic side.

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