

## Man Is A Rope

[Steven Connor](#)

A text written to accompany Catherine Yass's *High Wire*, a film installation first shown at The Centre for Contemporary Arts for the Glasgow international Festival of Contemporary Visual Art, 11 April – 24 May 2008. It appears in Catherine Yass, *High Wire* (London: Artangel and Glasgow International Festival of Contemporary Visual Art, 2008), no pagination.

The walking of the high wire has always itself teetered between strait alternatives. In the ancient world, rope-walking, along with other kinds of aerialism, flourished, as indicated by the different words that existed for it. Along with *acrobat* (literally, a walker on points, or in high places), Latin took over the Greek words *νευροβατης* and *σχοινοβατης* in the forms *neurobatus* and *schoenobatus*, both of which mean rope-dancer, but marking a distinction perhaps between a performer on a thick rope (*σχοινις*) and one who performs on a thinner, nerve-like cord. Latin would subsume them both under the term *funambulus*, which, despite the temptation to see in it, as in high-wire walking itself, the convergence of entertainment and injury, fun and ambulances, is from *funis*, rope and *ambulare* to walk. In neither Greece nor Rome were such activities allowed to form part of the world of sports and games. Thus, they inhabited a space apart – neither art nor spectacle, neither sport nor entertainment. This edginess seems to have encouraged acrobats and aerialist practitioners in the later Roman Empire to make associations with dubious groups of mountebanks and charlatans, and to develop their work into increasingly satirical or ludic forms. From this point on, the tightrope walker will always be suspended between the alternatives of sublimity and bathos. In its medieval and later manifestations, the art we know as ‘tightrope walking’ was more commonly referred to as rope-dancing, and the emphasis was upon extravagantly comic or grotesque performance rather than the display of disciplined concentration. The two came together in the ‘drunken walk’, the speciality of the eighteenth-century French rope-dancer Antony de Sceaux, in which the high-wire performer would wobblingly pretend to negotiate the wire while conspicuously the worse for drink (Isherwood 1981, 34; Demorlane 1989, 30 –1); this way of walking the line is indeed the soberest imaginable form of inebriation. Often the daring defiance of height was also associated with sexual licence. The tradition of aerial striptease is maintained into modern times in the film shot by Thomas Edison in 1901 of Laverie Vallee, a strong-woman and striptease artist, who performed under the name of Charmion, briskly dispensing with her blouse, corset, stockings and skirt while swinging on a trapeze, and by contemporary performers such as Jessica Lindsay. But even in the fourth century AD, John Chrysostom was asking in a homily ‘what is more difficult

than to walk along a tight rope, as if on level ground, and when walking on high to dress and undress, as if sitting on a couch?' (Chrysostom 1890, 445).

Rope-dancing flourished in the open-air fairs and carnivals of medieval Europe. It prompted a mixture of wonder and contempt. Francis Bacon dismissed the 'trickes of *Tumblers, Funambuloes, Baladynes* [theatrical dancers]' as '[m]atters of strangeness without worthynesse' (Bacon 2000, 119). During the eighteenth century, a battle developed between the legitimate theatre and institutions like Sadler's Wells, which, from 1740, had been staging the kinds of open-air or itinerant entertainments characteristic of gatherings like Bartholomew Fair. Rope-dancing and tumbling were a central part of 'physical theatre defined in terms of frenetic movement, the tyranny of spectacular objects and the wizardry of quacks, freaks and charlatans', which, by setting up home in permanent establishments, seemed to threaten legitimate culture (Moody 2000, 13). Rope-dancing often assisted the partitioning of legitimate from more dubious forms of theatrical entertainment: 'when fairground entertainers began to establish permanent theatres in Paris in the late eighteenth century and the authorities wished to draw a clear legal line between them and the "legitimate" theatre, one of the common distinctions was that tumbling and rope-dancing were to be found in the minor houses' (Carlson 1996, 84). In his 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth was still to be heard deriding those 'who will converse with us as gravely about a *taste* for Poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry' (Wordsworth 1974, I.139).

For seafaring nations like the British and the French, the two nations in which tightrope walking has been most popular and most perfected, walking up and down ropes and cables has unignorable maritime associations; as in the space of the theatre, this kind of rigging turns terrestrial places into vertiginously mobile vessels. The bad reputations of fairground and popular performers made for a close association between dancing on a rope, and the mortal dancing at the rope's end that was foreseen for many of its exponents. Ned Ward reports seeing a rope dancer 'whose Looks foretold such an unhappy Destiny, that I was fearful of his Falling, lest his Hempen Pedestal should have catch'd him by the Neck' (Ward 1703, 235).

Occasionally, the aerialist arts of the rope-dancer were recruited to spectacles of power, often subjecting to a complex kind of parodic play the worldly eminence and spiritual aspiration associated with lofty ecclesiastical buildings. Froissart's *Chronicles* describe the spectacle provided to mark the entry of Isabella of Bavaria into Paris in June 1389:

There was a master came out of Genes: he had tied a cord on the highest house on the bridge of Saint Michael over all the houses, and the other end was tied on the highest tower in Our Lady's church; and as the queen passed by, and was in the great street called Our Lady's street, because it was late this said master with two brenning candles in his hands issued out of a little stage that he had made on the height of Our Lady's tower, and singing he went upon the cord all along the great street, so that all that saw him had marvel how it might be, and he bare still in his hands two brenning candles, so that it might well be seen all over Paris and two mile without Paris: he was such a tumbler that his lightness was greatly praised. (Froissart 1899, 385)

It is striking that these spectacles often involved, not walking across ropes strung parallel to the ground, but walking or sliding down ropes at an angle, the funambulus thereby becoming a kind of funicular transport. One such spectacle attended the procession of Edward VI through London prior to his coronation in 1546:

When the king ... was advanced almost to St George's church in Paul's churchyard, there was a rope as great as the cable of a ship stretched in length from the battlements of Paul's steeple, with a great anchor at one end, fastened a little before the dean of Paul's house-gate; and, when his majesty approached near the same, there came a man, a stranger, being a native of Aragon, lying on the rope with his head forward, casting his arms and legs abroad, running on his breast on the rope from the battlements to the ground, as if it had been an arrow out of a bow, and stayed on the ground. Then he came to his majesty, and kissed his foot; and so, after certain words to his highness, he departed from him again, and went upwards upon the rope till he came over the midst of the churchyard; where he, having a rope about him, played certain mysteries on the rope, as tumbling, and casting one leg from another. Then took he the rope, and tied it to the cable, and tied himself by the right leg a little space beneath the wrist of the foot, and hung by one leg a certain space, and after recovered himself again with the said rope and unknit the knot, and came down again. Which stayed his majesty, with all the train, a good space of time. (Strutt 1903, 179-80)

A similar show was furnished to celebrate the arrival of Philip of Spain to London in 1554, though on this occasion the descent was rather more

precipitate. A rope was tied to the battlement of St Paul's church, and a rope-dancer, or perhaps we had better call him a rope-surfer or rope-skier, 'came downe vpon a rope tied to the batlements with his head before, neither staieng himselfe with hand or foot: which shortlie after cost him his life' (Holinshed 1587, 1121). Similar descents were practised from the steeples of various churches in Britain, including, most remarkably, that of Robert Cadman, a figure, according to William Hutton, the historian of Derby, 'seemingly composed of spirit and gristle' (Hutton 1791, 245), who, in 1732, using a board with a groove incised in it as a guide-rail, slid down a rope strung from the top of Derby's All-Saints' church steeple, finding the time during his six or seven seconds' descent to blow a bugle and fire off a pistol, as smoke billowed behind him from the friction. He died in 1739 attempting a similar exploit in Shrewsbury (Hutton 1791, 245 –7), but not before his example had sparked off a local epidemic of rope-flying:

No amusement was seen but the rope; walls, posts, trees, and houses, were mounted for the pleasure of flying down: if a straggling scaffold pole could be found, it was reared for the convenience of flying; nay, even cats, dogs, and things inanimate, were applied, in a double sense, to the rope. (Hutton 1791, 247)

The Derby 'flying rage' (Hutton 1791, 247) only came to an end in August 1734, when another unnamed exponent of the art attempted to perform the flight pulling after him a barrow containing a thirteen-year-old boy, to be followed by an ass using the same equipment. The rope broke, causing much injury and the operator slunk ignominiously and unrewarded out of town (Hutton 1791, 247 –50). All high-wire artists 'walk between earth and sky' (Fournel 1887, 335), but these hypotenusal rope-fliers connect the two realms by commuting rapidly between them. High and low invert, the rope-flier enacting a ceremonial exaltation even in their dramatic abasements.

Walking and dancing on wires and ropes was associated with tumbling and juggling, which have long been synonyms for the magical deceptions of devils and the magicians who have summoned them. Nowadays we would distinguish more clearly between the arts of the body and the ingenuities of the mind, but earlier periods seem to have found the body an altogether more tricky and guileful thing than we. Perhaps the real deception practised by the high-wire artist lies in prompting his audience to think that such feats of equilibrium must be impossible without some form of arcane deceit.

It is perhaps precisely because the funambulist has often been associated with the exercise of magic, natural or unnatural, that the idea of equilibrium has been taken over by Christian and mystic traditions, for whom the

liberty-taking and often lubricious cavorting on a rope gives way to a steady and temperate holding of the line. The magical expansion and entanglement of the dangerous mid-air was thereby contracted into the pinched precautions of the righteous middle way. In his *On Purity*, Tertullian encouraged Christians to walk the narrow path of purity, untempted, undistracted by the flesh:

Come now, you funambulist, walking on a tightrope of purity and chastity and every sort of sexual asceticism, you who, on the slender cord of a discipline like this, far from the path of truth, advance with reluctant feet, balancing the flesh by the spirit, moderating your desires by the faith, guarding your eyes through fear, why do you watch your step so anxiously? Go right ahead, if you can and if you so desire, since you are just as safe as if you were on solid ground. For if any wavering of the flesh, any distraction of spirit, any wandering glance, causes you to lose your equilibrium – remember God is good! (Tertullian 1959, 81)

Christians often followed Tertullian, Chrysostom and the other Church Fathers in appropriating rope-walking as an image of holiness. The seventeenth-century preacher Thomas Burt assured his audience that ‘like as we see by the same we call *Funambuli*, how that by great exercise, they make the body able and apt to obey the will of the minde: Euen so do we find that the greater dominion which the soule hath ouer the body, with so much the lesse labour and paines the body is mooued by the soule’ (Burt 1607, 34 – 35). But tightrope walking is at least as much a discipline of emptying the body of the mind as it is of dominating the body by the mind. Indeed, it is precisely by letting go of the idea that the body needs to be consciously and continuously monitored and subjugated that the arts of delicate equilibrium are possible at all. It requires a paradoxically intense and vigilant simplicity to walk a wire, a concentrated effort, not to purge the mind from the unbalancing distractions of the body, but to keep the mind empty of all but the body.

Rope-dancers and wire-walkers have had their admirers as well as their detractors. In an account given by the eighteenth-century freemason Thomas Dunckerley, no less a person than the sage Dr Johnson defended rope-dancers against the charge that they were the ‘most despicable of human beings’, declaring, by contrast, that ‘a rope-dancer concentrates in himself all the Theological and Cardinal virtues’. Johnson proceeded to enumerate seven of these, beginning with temperance – ‘Sir, if the joys of the bottle entice him one inch beyond the line of sobriety, his life or his limbs must pay the forfeit of his excess’, and proceeding through faith –

‘without unshaken confidence in his own powers, and full assurance that the rope is firm, his temperance will be of little advantage : the unsteadiness of his nerves would prove as fatal as the intoxication of his brain’ – hope (all rope-dancers hope for fame), charity – ‘what instance of charity shall be opposed to that of him who, in the hope of administering to the gratification of others, braves the hiss of multitudes, and derides the dread of death ’ – justice – ‘what man will withhold from the funambulist the praise of Justice, who considers his inflexible uprightness, and that he holds his balance with so steady a hand as never to incline, in the minutest degree, to one side or the other?’ – prudence, and, finally, fortitude:

‘He that is content to totter on a cord while his fellow-mortals tread securely on the broad basis of *terra firma*, – who performs the jocund evolutions of the dance on a superficies, compared with which the verge of a precipice is a stable station, may rightfully snatch the wreath from the conqueror and the martyr, – may boast that he exposes himself to hazards from which he might fly to the cannon’s mouth as a refuge or relaxation! Sir, let us now be told no more of the infamy of the ropedancer!’ (Oliver 1855, 143-4)

High-wire walking has also featured in many magical or occult evocations of states of discipline and control, such as *The Secret Doctrine of the Rosicrucians*:

The initiate strives to attain the state of equilibrium and absolute poise. He yearns to master the art of traversing the razor-edge of Life, balancing himself perfectly, like the trained mental athlete that he is, by means of the balancing-pole of the Opposites which he has firmly grasped. Pitting the Opposites one against the other – balancing law by law – the Master traverses the slender tightrope thread which separates the world of desire from the world of will. (‘Magus Incognito’ 1918, 246)

The tightrope walker has become a type of mystic soul, possessing the pure and focused consciousness of the enlightened. Oddly, this often seems to amount to the reattainment of a state of mind, or a balanced interpenetration of mind and body, that is also possessed by animals. Apes, squirrels and birds have little difficulty in traversing ropes and lines, and animals were indeed often incorporated into early rope dancing spectacles. There are reports that in Venice in 1680 a man mounted, traversed and descended a high wire on horseback (Depping 1878, 183). One historian even alleges that ‘*Elephants* were taught to walk the rope in the time of Galba and Nero’ (White 1827, 236), and the feat is recorded as having taken place

again in 1846 at Astley's Amphitheatre in London, of which Thomas Frost remarks drily '[i]t is not more difficult, however, for an elephant, or any other beast, to balance itself upon a stretched rope than for a man to do so; the real difficulty is in inducing the animal to mount the rope' (Frost 1881, 54). Quite. The mystic tightrope walker is, therefore, a kind of higher animal, who is more than human, precisely in being able to subtract from themselves their distracting humanity. The skills of high-wire walking are therefore often associated by early commentators with savage or barbarous peoples. Pietro Martire d'Anghiera's *De Orbo Novo* (1530) alleges of the children of 'Poliar and Hirava' that they are fed from the age of three months with goat's milk, and afterwards 'tomble them in the sandes all foule & filthie, where they let them lye all the day'. And yet, '[b]y this kinde of wylde bringing vp, they become men of marueylous dexteritie in swiftnesse of runnyng, and other thinges of great agilitie, as to walke vppon ropes, swymmyng, leapyng, vaultyng, and such lyke' (Anghiera 1577, 395). More recently, there have been reports that '[b]y a quirk of history that goes so far back in time no one really remembers it, nearly every man, woman and child in the remote mountain village of Tsovkra-1 [in Russia] can walk the tightrope' (Kilner 2007). The popular local explanation for this prowess is that young men would walk across ropes strung across the valley as a shortcut to their sweethearts a village on a neighbouring mountain side.

But the tightrope walker has acquired new meanings in the modern world, most of them having to do with an adjustment to the evaporation of religious and other certainties. Madame Blavatsky began her *Isis Unveiled* in 1877 with the statement that, since the development of modern science, 'Society seems ... to have been ever balancing itself upon one leg, on an unseen tight-rope stretched from our visible universe into the invisible one; uncertain whether the end hooked on faith in the latter might not suddenly break, and hurl it into final annihilation' (Blavatsky 1877, I.3). But the most decisive philosophical assimilation of the image of the tightrope walker is to be found in the prologue to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883). Having achieved enlightenment after ten years solitude in the mountains, the prophet Zarathustra comes down to earth to convey the truth of the death of God and the necessity for man to give way to the Superman. He arrives in a village where the people are gathered in the market place in expectation of a performance by a tightrope walker. His message of the coming of the Superman is misinterpreted by the people, who think he is speaking merely of the tightrope walker. Zarathustra then alters the terms of his discourse, to assimilate them to the imminent performance:

Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman – a rope over an abyss.

A dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still.

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved in man is that he is a *going-across* and a *down-going*.  
(Nietzsche 2003, 43-4)

At that point, the tightrope walker begins his crossing. Suddenly, just as he is halfway across, he is pursued out on to the rope by a garishly-dressed jester, who begins to taunt him viciously for his slowness and caution. As he is drawing near, the jester suddenly springs over the head of the tightrope walker, causing him to lose his balance and fall, twisting and thrashing, to the ground. Zarathustra comforts the dying performer that his soul is in no jeopardy of damnation, since there is neither God nor Devil. He then carries away his corpse, meaning to give it burial, though it turns out to be an appropriately aerial kind of interment, since the last we hear of the corpse is that Zarathustra has put it in the branches of a tree to keep it from being eaten by wolves.

The tightrope walker enacts the tense passage between worlds. He is like George Herbert's soul, 'a wonder, tortur'd in the space/Betwixt this world and that of grace' (Herbert 1953, 90), except that, for Nietzsche, one can never merely await the coming of grace, but must strive for self-overcoming. The fact that the tightrope walker, taunted by the ignorant mob, falls, is a warrant that the transition between worlds he both is and undergoes will always be arduous and uncertain: ' "You have made danger your calling", Zarathustra tells the dying tightrope walker, "there is nothing in that to despise" ' (Nietzsche 2003, 48). Anxious Christian watchfulness has thus become Nietzschean daring over the abyss.

Nietzsche's sense that '[w]hat is great in man is that he is a bridge' was carried across into the work of many modernist German artists and writers, and in fact probably suggested the the name of the artistic group Die Brücke. The figure of the *Seiltänzer*, the rope-dancer or wire-walker, appears frequently in paintings of the first two decades of the twentieth century, such as Erich Heckel's *Zirkus* (1909) , and *Seiltänzer* (1910) , E.L. Kirchner's *Drabtseiltanz* (1909) , Albert Bloch's *Slack Wire* (1913) , August Macke's *Seiltänzer* (1914) , and Paul Klee's *Tightrope Walker* (1923) (McCullagh 1984).

More recently, Jean Genet, in his essay 'Le funambule' (1958 ) written for his lover, the Algerian acrobat Abdallah Bentaga, has made the tightrope walker the figure, not of the imminent self-transcendence of man, but of the solitary, self-communing artist. Although the dancer must always perform in

front of a public, he is never in fact dancing for them, but rather for his own idealised self-image.

The fact that your solitude is in full light, and the darkness made up of the thousands of eyes which are appraising you, which dread and desire your fall, matters little; you will dance on and in a desert solitude, with eyes bound if you can, eyelids sealed shut. But nothing – least of all the applause or the cries – will prevent you dancing for your own image (Genet 1979, 11-12, my translation)

With his painted nails and excessive make-up, the tightrope walker is an image of the specifically sexual outsider:

Man or woman? A monster, decidedly ... With his first movements on the wire, we will see that this monster with purple eyelids could dance only there. Doubtless, one will say, it is his singularity which has him balanced on a thread, it is that elongated eye, those painted cheeks, those gilded nails, which oblige him to be there, where we, thank God, would never go. (Genet 1979, 16)

The tightrope walker thus belongs, not to the vulgar life of the world, but to death – not the accidental, bodily death that threatens at every moment to overtake him, but to the ‘mortal solitude’ (Genet 1979, 15) of a being that has left everything of vulgar life behind. He must risk death precisely in order to attain the condition of being beyond or outside life while still in its midst.

Something of the same oxymoron attaches to Didier Pasquette’s aborted walk between the two towers of the Red Road estate in Glasgow. His walk recalls the famous exploit by his teacher, Philippe Petit, who in August 1974 stole into the newly-constructed World Trade Center in New York, shot a cable between the buildings with a bow and arrow, and spent 45 minutes walking back and forth between the towers. It seemed to show, as his associate Jean-Louis Blondeau remarked in *Man on Wire* (2008), the documentary film made of the episode, ‘what the buildings were for’. Petit wanted to walk between the twin towers precisely because at the time they were the highest in the world and, like many other high-wire walkers of the past, he sought to appropriate for himself something of the eminence and glory concentrated in the two buildings, while also converting their bombastic swagger into lightness and grace. At the time they were built, the eight Red Road towers in Glasgow were the tallest residential project in Europe, but they have never been able to pretend to the grandeur of the

Twin Towers. Indeed, the architect of the development, Sam Buntun, warned future residents of the development that they ‘mustn’t expect airs and graces’ (quoted Dalgarno 2008, 10). Working with Didier Pasquette, Catherine Yass sought to restore, or just for the first time impart, to these buildings something fanciful, something of airy aspiration. Like the Twin Towers, the Red Road towers will soon no longer be there, though their demolition will take a more stately form, with their removal to take place floor by floor .

‘We had this clear image’, said James Lingwood, co-director of Artangel, ‘of finding these streets in the sky’ (quoted Brennan 2007). But, although high-wire artistry has become understood as a matter of connecting and traversing ‘a journey to join one point to another in the air’ , as Pasquette described it, there is another tradition within the history of the art, in which the rope or wire is turned from a vector into a domicile, the reticulated air made a place of habitation. What, otherwise, is the meaning of all that dressing and undressing, the habit of lying down on the wire, or of the hair-raising comedy of Charles Blondin sitting down midway across the Niagara Falls to cook and eat an omelette, using the stove he had carried with him on to the wire? In 2002, the Uygur performer named Ahdili pushed the fantasy of living on the wire even further when he broke the world record for living and performing on a tightrope, after spending 22 days aloft near Jinhai Lake in the Pinggu District of China (Anon 2002).

Unlike ordinary human beings, whose occupation of space is literally ecstatic, because they are always out in front of, or to the side of themselves, always inhabiting prospective space, extending themselves on various kinds of proleptic elastic, the wire-walker is concentrated around the strange, shifting, elusive core, his centre of gravity, which the philosopher Michel Serres has proposed as an alternative location for the soul (Serres 1998, 17). And yet the wire-walker also seems to be nowhere, his body a wavering average or aggregate of the elaborate apparatus of tensions and balances that keep him in the air. Didier Pasquette agreed to wear the helmet on which a camera was mounted for the sake of the film, but somewhat against his inclination, since it restricted the stabilising glances to left and right that were habitual with him. Landlubbers like me assume one can only be safe on the wire if one excludes from thought and perception everything but it. The truth may be that one can only be safe out there if one understands and accepts one’s place in the world, including and integrating the lines of force and lines of sight by which one is traversed. The most important conductor of these lines is the wire-walker’s pole, which echoes the extension of the wire before and behind him with a lateral extension to either side, centring him on the wire by spreading him out into the world. As his own precipice he goes, he becomes a kind of coordinator and exchanger of energies and

qualities, centre and circumference, near and far, self and world, weight and lightness, gravity and grace. ‘The *Funambulant*’, as observed by Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas, ‘seems to tread the air, and fall he must,/Save his Self’s waight him counter-poyseth iust;/And saue the Lead, that in each hand he bears,/Doth make him light’ (Du Bartas 1621, 514).

The high-wire artist is everywhere and nowhere, just as the viewer’s own body-image, as we attempt to correlate the four viewpoints of Catherine Yass’s installation, is dispersed and distributed. The wire-walker of *High Wire* represents a new kind of allegory for us, one that bears, appropriately enough for a work that has a residential complex as its setting, on the question of accommodation, of where we are to reside and the kinds of living it may be possible for us to make there. Pasquette’s walk offers an image of the midair briefly transfigured, even if this aspiration seems deliberately domesticated in contrast to the sublime gaiety of Philippe Petit’s Twin Towers walk. What is more, in contrast to Petit’s triumph (one that, on other occasions, such as with his walk across the Thames, Pasquette has certainly emulated), the Glasgow skywalk was aborted and reversed, as Pasquette sensed that the wind was making the wire unnavigable. In a terrifying compound of panic and grace, effecting a grimly parodic kind of moonwalk, Pasquette edges backwards, shouting unintelligibly, from the lethally soft middle of the wire to the rigidity of his starting-point. Ironically, the fact that the walk was never completed may forestall its being annulled into success, and thereby joining the historical series of such high-wire settings-out and arrivals. This reveals how little Nietzsche really understood about walking the wire. For Nietzsche, ‘Man is a rope’, because he is a go-between, a valve or strait gate to some other, higher condition, that of the Superman. But rope-dancers and wire-walkers do not, any more than chickens, want to get to the other side. Indeed, the most characteristic gesture of the wire-walker is, once they have apparently completed their walk, to go back out on the wire, as Philippe Petit did for forty-five minutes above the streets of Manhattan, in order to invent different, even more improbably appalling, serene things to do on it. Wire-walkers are not heroes but clowns, who offer better company, seem better, as the Americans say, to hang with – ‘come on up, come on out, it’s lovely!’ – than Nietzsche’s aquiline stylites. In Bruno Latour’s terms, the wire-walker aims to turn the wire from an intermediary into a mediator, to turn simple transportation into transformation (Latour 1997, 174). Like the tapdancer on a staircase, whose task is not to effect a simple ascent or descent, but to come up with as many different ways as possible to combine going-up with coming-down, the wire-walker aims to occupy rather than merely to penetrate space, to tangle up the line into a maze, to thicken the infinitesimally thin itinerary of the wire into a habitat. The wire-walker becomes an enactment of the Cartesian paradox involved in being human and therefore impossibly

adjoining the unextended substance of mind with the extended condition of matter. The destiny of the wire-walker is an indefinite deferral of destination, a putting off of coming to ground. Not an infiltrator but an expatiator, not a courier but a semi-conductor, not a transient but a temporiser, not a metre but a rhythm, the wire-walker offers, in place of Nietzsche's 'shuddering and staying-still' (*Schaudern und Stehenbleiben*) a joyously perilous set of variations on ways for the performance to last a little longer. The dallying business of the wire-walker is to insinuate a discourse – from *dis-currere*, to run back and forth – with the wire, forming a composite with it of flesh and geometry. For Genet, the role of the wire-walker is to bring his wire to life – 'you will perfect your leaps ... not for your own glory, but so that a dead, voiceless steel wire at last may sing. How grateful it will be if you are perfect in your attitudes, for its glory rather than yours' (Genet 1979, 10). In the complex conversation formed between Pasquette's uncompleted, but endlessly resumed walk and Catherine Yass's recapture of it, Pasquette is kept suspended between the wire and the ground, shuttling out and back in the continuous loop of *High Wire*, literally *surviving*, living on, living it up, tarrying in vertiginous persistence, carrying on yet awhile not being quite over.

## References

- Anon (2002). 'Tightrope Walk in Beijing Breaks Guinness World Record'. *China Daily*, May 8. Online at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/May/32156.htm>
- Bacon, Francis (2000). *The Advancement of Learning*. Ed. Michael Kiernan. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blavatsky, H.P. (1877). *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. 2 Vols. New York: J. W. Bouton.
- Brennan, Mary (2007). 'A Fine Line Between Fine Art and the Impossible.' *The Herald*, 18 July. Online at <http://www.theherald.co.uk/features/features/display.var.1552099.0.0.php>
- Burt, Thomas (1607). *The Glory of the Godlie Graine A Most Comfortable Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Assembly in Paules Church on Whitsunday 1605, on I. Cor. 15.42.43...* London: for Roger Jackson
- Carlson, Marvin A. (1996). *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Chrysostom, John (1890) *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and the Epistle to the Hebrews. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV. Ed. Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.

Dalgarno, Paul (2008). 'Last Days of the Tower.' *Sunday Herald Magazine*, 11 May, 10 .

Demoriane, Hermine (1989). *The Tightrope Walker*. London: Secker and Warburg.

Depping, Guillaume (1878). *Merveilles de la force et de l'adresse* , 3rd edn. Paris: Hachette.

Du Bartas, Guillaume de Salluste (1621). *Du Bartas: His Divine Weekes And Workes*. Trans. Josuah Sylvester. London: Humfray Lownes.

Froissart, Jean (1899). *The Chronicles of Froissart*. Trans. John Bourcher. Ed. G.C. Macaulay. London and New York: Macmillan and Co.

Fournel, Victor (1887). *Le Vieux Paris: Fêtes, jeux et spectacles*. Tours: Alfred Name et fils.

Frost, Thomas (1881). *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Genet, Jean (1979). 'Le funambule.' In *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 5 , Paris: Gallimard, 7 – 27.

Herbert, George (1953). *Works*. Ed. F.E. Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Holinshed, Raphael (1587). *The Third Volume of Chronicles*. London: Henry Denham.

Hutton, William (1791). *The History of Derby; From the Remote Ages of Antiquity, to the Year MDCCXCI*. London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson.

Isherwood, Robert (1981). 'Entertainment in the Parisian Fairs in the Eighteenth Century.' *Journal of Modern History*, 53, 24 –48.

Kilner, James (2007). 'Russian Village's Tightrope Walking Prowess.' *Renters*, 30 August. Online at

<<http://www.reuters.com/article/inDepthNews/idUSL2283380720070830>>

Latour, Bruno (1997). 'Trains of Thought: Piaget, Formalism, and the Fifth Dimension.' *Common Knowledge*, 6, 170-91.

'Magus Incognito' (1918) *The Secret Doctrine of the Rosicrucians*. Chicago: Advanced Thought Publishing; London: L.N. Fowler and Co.

McCullagh, Janice (1984). 'The Tightrope Walker: An Expressionist Image.' *Art Bulletin*, 66, 633–44.

Moody, Jane (2000). *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (2003). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Oliver, George (1855). *The Revelations of a Square; Exhibiting a Graphic Display of the Sayings and Doings of Eminent Free and Accepted Masons...* London: Richard Spencer.

Serres, Michel (1998). *Les cinq sens*. Paris: Hachette.

Strutt, Joseph (1903). *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*. London: Methuen and Co.

Tertullian (1959). *Treatises on Penance. On Penitence and On Purity*. Trans. William P. Le Saint. Westminster, MD: Newman Press; London: Longmans, Green & Co.

Ward, Edward (1703). *The London-spy Compleat, In Eighteen-Parts*. London: J. How.

White, Francis Sellon (1827). *A History of Inventions and Discoveries: Alphabetically Arranged*. London: for C. and J. Rivington.

Wordsworth, William (1974). *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. 3 Vols. Ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Oxford: Clarendon Press.