

Soap, Senstance and Semblance

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Things seem, for some considerable time now, to have been coming into their own. In a little paella I made in 2011 called *Paraphernalia*, I reflected on a number of different kinds of thing which I called ‘magical’, explaining that, what I meant by magical was ‘capable of giving us to, or detaining us in practical reflection’. I made up my mind that magical things were things that prompt and permit the exercise of the material imagination. Material imagination means the imagining of material, and imagining made material; we reflect on magical things, and seem to see in them the physical image, shape or even texture of our imagining given back to us.

However, it became apparent to me that many of the things about which I wrote in that book were really of interest not merely because of the kind of thing they were exactly, but because of the kind of quality they implied or exemplified – elasticity in the case of the rubber band, for example, or stickiness (weirdly and characteristically combined with gloss) in the case of sellotape.

Now I am minded to spend time thinking about our relation to these kinds of quality. I want to propose that we encounter these qualities as hybrid ‘sensation-substances’. I’m not crazy on the toy-train coupling of this phrase, but, alas, ‘substation’ has been claimed for other work, so perhaps ‘senstance’ can be made to earn its keep. A senstance would be a sensation made substantial, a substance so closely twinned with a sensation as to have become cosubstantial with it. Here, in imaginary, agonising slow motion, is how this might seem to happen. A substance (glass, butter, talcum powder) gives us a sensation; as the sensation becomes more familiar, and so may become an object of reflection and reference (‘I’ve got an itch’), that sensation seems to turn into a quasi-substance, the form, feel and sometimes name of which will typically be borrowed from the substance that gives rise to the sensation. So now the substance that originally causes a sensation has come to seem like the imaginary substance of what the sensation consists. Hence substance → sensation → senstance. I’m not claiming that this is what really happens, in the brain, or anywhere. What really happens, and wherever it is that we take things to ‘happen’, really, in the brain, or the mind of God, could easily be, very likely is, something different entirely. But it really happens that this is how it seems to happen (it seems to me). Like the belief in magic, the belief in the substantiality of sensation is a performative, something we act as though we think, and think by acting as if we did, the quality of *as-if*ness or taking-to-be in what we think.

The word *substance* has undergone a dramatic secularisation. In philosophy, a substance (literally, that which lies underneath), means an essential feature of things, that which can undergo modification without its own essential nature being modified. For a Democritean atomist, atoms are substances (and really nothing else is, Democritus famously declaring according to tradition ‘there are atoms, and the spaces between them; the rest is opinion’). Many philosophers have proposed that there can only be one substance in the universe, some

one kind of stuff from which everything else derives, but of which it is fundamentally made. Anaximenes thought that air was the best candidate for this *Urstoff* or, as it we might nowadays be tempted to call it, stem-substance, while Thales favoured water. Dualists think there are fundamentally two substances, or kinds of thing – matter and spirit. For monists, such as the Stoics, or Spinoza, there is only one substance (for the Stoics the *pneuma*, for Spinoza, God), of which everything else is the variously modulated expression (many melodies and chords but, as it were, only one sound). Many philosophers have assumed that there must be a psychological or existential substance, a soul or sub-ject, that underlies and unifies all individual perceptions and experiences, a notion with which David Hume coolly and breathtakingly did away, though not for good.

For us, substance has come to mean something like the opposite. A substance is a kind of material, a particular, contingent form or arrangement of matter – chocolate, cotton, aspirin, air – which may be locally and temporarily distinguishable from other arrangements of matter, but is not at all characterised by permanence or immutability. Substance has become phenomenal rather than noumenal. Our contemporary idea of substance seems to be able to do without the idea that there must be something behind or underneath all these local and temporary arrangements of matter. Coming down in the world as it has, the idea of substance has also gone up, since it lies now on the surface of things, rather than underneath them. As William James remarks, local arrangements of matter ‘*adhere, or cohere, rather, with each other, and the notion of a substance inaccessible to us, which we think accounts for such cohesion by supporting it, as cement might support pieces of mosaic, must be abandoned. The fact of the bare cohesion itself is all that the notion of the substance signifies. Behind that fact is nothing*’ (James 2000, 42). The mosaic metaphor is a favourite with James, and consequently with me, and he uses it to characterise his own ‘mosaic philosophy’ (James 2003, 22) of ‘radical empiricism’, explaining that ‘[i]n actual mosaics the pieces are held together by their bedding, for which bedding the Substances, transcendental Egos, or Absolutes of other philosophies may be taken to stand. In radical empiricism there is no bedding; it is as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement’ (James 2003, 45).

Substances lie in between stuff and things. All things are made of stuff, but substances are the kinds of stuff from which things can be made, stuff, that is, made distinct and manifest. Substances are thing-like, in that they are distinguishable forms of matter, but are not themselves partitioned off as things. The confirmation of this is that a substance – sugar, water, mist, gauze, chalk, cheese – cannot usually take an indefinite article. You can have ‘a sugar-cube’, but not ‘a sugar’, unless, in chemical parlance, you are naming a particular class of sugar. You can have ‘a shammy’, but only when you are referring to a particular piece of chamois leather. You can have ‘a cheese’ only when you are naming a specific variety of cheese. You can use the indefinite article of a substance, that is, only when the indefiniteness of the substance has hardened into an article. If I refer simply to sugar, I typically, though often, in English, also tacitly, employ the partitive, with its implied extraction of some part of a larger whole. If, in French, I request *du pain* or *de l’eau*, I may pragmatically be asking for some of the bread or water that happens to be on the table, but grammatically I am asking for some portion of all the bread or water there may be, anywhere, and that may be signified by the words *pain* or *eau*. Indefiniteness is characteristic of such terms.

Senstances are both exact and generic; the senstance relates to precisely that substance, and it is that substance and the sensations it engenders, the sensation of itself that it is, that, as we rightly and expressively say, ‘matters’. And yet that senstance is not limited to a particular

thing, but shared by many examples of it. A *senstance* is the *the* of the matter, a generic particular, a highly specific and idiomatic form of generality. Hence, in some phobic forms of *senstance*, the sense of appalled spreading or proliferation.

Things are always vaguer and more general than objects – ‘thing’, as Bill Brown observes, is the word we use when we don’t quite know exactly what the thing is to which we are referring; a thing is an object in question, ‘some thing not quite apprehended’ (Brown 2001, 5). Nevertheless, things point or tend toward singularity. When I groping call something a ‘thing’ it is in order to nudge it from a vague to a less vague condition, by giving it some kind of place-holding name to stand in for its as-yet unavailable proper name. Substances, by contrast, tend toward generality. Things aim at or move inward towards objects, substances subtend or spread outward from things. If I say that something feels ‘springy’ or ‘floppy’, I am inviting comparison with an entire class of equivalently springy or floppy things. This is perhaps the most important principle of what I am calling *senstances*, and which I am starting to quite like the sound of; they are distinguishable, but as classes of sensation rather than of object. These sensations are often typified by our reaction to particular substances, which then may give their names to the sensations (‘Bind fast his corky arms’). The joining of substances to sensations helps reciprocally to make sensations seem substantial.

Senstances therefore bring about a mingling of subject and object. Gaston Bachelard, who was a connoisseur of this kind of thing, identifies the bath of ambergris in chapter 94 of *Moby-Dick* as a particularly ecstatic version of the intermingling of substance and sensation, in the ‘*cogito* of the kneader’ (Bachelard 2002, 61). Like Hume, Bachelard does not believe in an all-purpose, simply subsisting form of self-consciousness. Rather, there are many *cogitos*, as many as there are states of things of which one can be aware:

It had cooled and crystallized to such a degree, that when, with several others, I sat down before a large Constantine’s bath of it, I found it strangely concreted into lumps, here and there rolling about in the liquid part. It was our business to squeeze these lumps back into fluid. A sweet and unctuous duty! No wonder that in old times sperm was such a favorite cosmetic. Such a clearer! such a sweetener! such a softener! such a delicious mollifier! After having my hands in it for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralize ...

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, – Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (Melville 1988, 426-7).

The most celebrated philosophical example of a *senstance* is Jean-Paul Sartre’s *visqueux*, or sliminess, which he puts at the centre of his analysis of the quality of being in *Being and Nothingness*. The nature of embodied existence is disclosed and dramatised for Sartre in the

fascinated apprehension of, and nauseated recoil from the slimy, or sticky (which? – they seem to be subtly, but decisively distinguished for English speakers). I would like to imagine and perhaps help to inaugurate an expanded repertoire of such sensation-substances, or sensances, a philosophical explication of all the conditions that Sartre set aside or just never got round to – the brittle, the tenuous, the cool, the granular, the smooth, the matted.

Our relation to sensances becomes conspicuous in what are called fetishes and phobias. Freud memorably wrote of the man who derived sexual pleasure from a ‘shine on the nose’, from which a phenomenology of gloss might very well be unfolded. The pleasure taken in the conjoined look, feel and aroma of certain substances can easily become an autonomous centre of affective organisation, sought out and cultivated for its own sake. This may be thought of as sexual – perhaps it is the rustle and flutter of silk, or the snap and creak of leather, that make your heart go pit-a-pat – but ‘sexual’ is an undemanding pseudo-explanation here for the much looser, yet lumpier set of inducements and appeasements concentrated in a particular substance, or the state of matter it exemplifies. No sustained expertise, whether with limestone or lace, with copper-plate or cricket-ball, is possible without this kind of involvement with the feel of the kinds of thing that I have called sensance. Phobias share with fetishes the quality of fascination. The phobic is obsessed by the object of their phobia, which is both more and less than an object, for they are terrified by their own desire to empty themselves into the object (the meaning of the slimy for Sartre is primarily that of engulfment).

My mother, for example, had a mildly phobic relation to sugar. She had no difficulty with most of the ways in which sugar was packaged and put to use, just as long as it was not spilled, on the table, or, most abominable of all, on the floor. Then there was a kind of horror, that I have never myself felt directly, but feel that I can now feel by proxy, the horror of the sudden explosion of the tractably pourable substance into innumerable grains felt beneath the fingertips and, most appallingly, the crunch, as of tiny, mobile molluscs, under your feet, a milling maceration that then sticks to you, that you carry with you on your soles, and renew with every step. The premonitory shudder that my mother let us know she experienced at the thought or accident of spilled sugar, was a kind of image of the thing itself, a kind of shivering dissolution of the flesh into the sticky atoms it abhorred. Spilled salt seemed to have none of the same power of horror for her, and I never thought to ask her to reflect on the experience of different grades and consistencies of sugar. I suspect that damp demerara would have been a little more tolerable than standard Tate and Lyle, and perhaps icing sugar too. I could not say where the crushing of a sugar-cube would come in the ladder of loathing.

It seems odd to me that there should be superstitions attached to the spilling of salt but not of sugar, despite their close similarity in many respects. But salt, when spilled, is a positive lightening and clarification of the spirit to brush away, best of all by first chivvying it into a little heap, then pushing it away all at once, I have in my mind one of those table-sized whisk-and-pan affairs that used to be a feature of classy tea-shops. Salt appears not to commingle with what it covers, and even allows a fantasy of cleaning or scouring. Sugar is different from salt, I think, largely because its granularity is combined with a stickiness. One imagines that pressure applied to salt would only grind it down into something even dryer and finer. One feels, by contrast, that pressure applied to sugar may force it into a kind of syrupy ooze. Salt rolls smoothly across the surfaces on which it has been spilled, leaving them as clean as, or maybe even cleaner than they were before. Grains of sugar exert a disgusting little tug at the surface on which they have been spilled, clinging like mites in hair. Salt is lapidary, jewel-like in its dryness; sugar seems quasi-animate.

The prospect of treading on sugar seems really to have been my mother's most intense form of dread. In fact, the witting or unwitting crushing underfoot of things are at the centre of an entire class of fantasies and sensations that would repay investigation as handsomely as the ritual reenactment of them does (there are persons, mostly male ones I suppose, who will pay good money for images of personable females crushing grapes and cherry tomatoes beneath heels or wheels, which, as I evoke it, is starting to seem like money well spent to me).

One popular psychoanalytic attitude to phobia is that it is a masking in material form of more abstract fears and desires. Accordingly, it aims, by revealing what the phobia or fetish symbolises, to put it at a cognitive distance, making it into a tractable object of knowledge, dissipating the mysterious and terrifying hold of mute matter by converting matter into symbol. But this is to miss the most important thing about the fetish or phobia, namely that it represents the fascination of matter as such. If there is symbolisation involved, it is the figuring of this mattering of matter to us, in which there is little or nothing of the cryptic, so exorbitant or even obscene the ostension may seem.

Soap

Soap seems not to have been in use for purpose of bodily hygiene on any considerable scale before the second half of the twentieth century. Although soap – by which is meant various forms of the mixture of fat and alkali – has been manufactured and used for the cleaning of clothes for many hundreds, even thousands, of years, the bodily uses of soap that interest me seem to have become widespread only when commercial 'toilet soap' began to be manufactured and marketed on a large scale in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is not until this period that the history of bathing, washing and bodily hygiene became a matter principally of soap and water.

It may seem obvious to us now that soap is for cleaning, but its existential importance is both narrower and broader than this, because of the particular manner in which soap cleans the skin. Earlier methods, like the oil and strigil regimes of ancient Greece and Rome, or water-bathing, employed the principles either of friction or rinsing. Soap introduces a new principle, a *tertium quid*, formed of bodily interfusion. Though the effect is the same – the removal from the surface of the skin of sweat, oil, grime and dust – the methods of the strigil, the sponge and the bar of soap are very different. The process effected by soap is not purification, but transformation, in which the most important principle is that the soap is itself changed. I rub the soap together with water, like a magic ring or lamp, and it becomes what seems to be a new substance, or rather state of matter, which is neither me nor it, the froth or lather. The meanings of rubbing and abrasion deserve a much lengthier elaboration here. 'Elaboration' seems right, since the process is a sort of working out, the work of making something exteriorise itself, as foam or froth do. The frothing of soap belongs to a much longer and larger history of the fascination with effervescence, and a belief in its powers of germination and transformation (Connor 2010, 325-32). As Barthes remarks, 'its abundant, easy, almost infinite proliferation allows one to suppose there is in the substance from which it issues a vigorous germ, a healthy and powerful essence, a great wealth of active elements in an original volume' (Barthes 2000, 37). Stanley Elkin, who meditates in his essay 'Pieces of Soap' on his lifelong habit of purloining soap from hotels, describes his habit of asking for extra soap every day in the hotels in which he stays, in order to maximise the mushrooming expansion of his collection, '[e]ach day adding Housekeeping's fresh soaps to the now

considerable pile growing like a sort of culture in the luggage – it has *become* the luggage – as yeast grows, as yogurt begins, from those primal founding seed soaps’ (Elkin 1992, 181). The lather that soap produces is doubly transformative. Itself the product of a transformation of solid into ethereal matter, its role is to bond with the fats and oils to which particles of dirt are clinging, and insinuate them into its foamy substance. Soap molecules are hydrophobic at one end and hydrophilic at another. One end of the molecule dissolves into a droplet of grease, the other remains bound to water, and then the grease and its cargo of dirt roll up into a globule held inside a hydrophilic outside. Locked away in this emulsion, a suspension of droplets of fat in water, the dirty oil can be rinsed away. As this happens, the vigorous, baroque cloud-mass of the foam begins to subside into dim, dirty grey, foam transformed by its own powers of transformation into a rat-fur of scum.

So soap is not just a sensation-substance pairing, it is a sensation-substance-practice intrigue. The flu epidemic of a couple of years ago left as its residue posters in public buildings (educational establishments in particular) which provided detailed instructions for how to wash hands. But washing has often been subject to such detailed guidance, in religious ceremonies. It is scarcely surprising that hand-washing should be one of the commonest forms of obsessive-compulsive behaviour. We could surely someday do with a cultural phenomenology of the wringing of hands here. Soap mediates my autotactation, acting at once as its medium and product. As in Melville’s tub of ambergris, the intercession of the soap, at once slippery and foamy, dissipates the outline of the hands, loosening their friction and multiplying their form – ‘After having my hands in it for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralize’ – and intensifying what Michel Serres has called the ‘white’ polymorphousness of the hand (Serres 1995, 34-5).

Large and improbable claims were made for the powers of soap. Among the largest and most improbable was that advanced in 1898 by the makers of ‘Amiral’ soap that their product provided an efficient treatment for obesity. The method they claimed to employ was called ‘the endermic method of administering drugs – that is to say, by absorption through the skin’ (Anon 1898, 5). In a section headed ‘How NOT to Treat Obesity’, their pamphlet warned darkly against the dangerous consequences of the traditional methods for treating obesity – namely, exercise and eating less. Both ‘entail more or less violent interference with the habits of the individual. He is required to submit himself to irksome and almost impossible restriction in the matter of food and drink, and when successful he but too often purchases a reduction of weight at the price of general enfeeblement, impaired digestion, and intense mental depression’ (Anon 1898, 7). Worst of all, sudden weight loss invariably left unsightly folds, flaps and wrinkles of empty skin. The recommendations for ‘Amiral’ set the tone for many other soaps and creams in the century to follow, namely that it combined vital strength with gentleness. The manufacturers claimed that the active ingredient in the soap was animal bile, which literally dissolved away the subcutaneous fat. The role of the soap was to allow the bile to traverse the skin barrier that would normally prevent it from entering: ‘just as mercury, which is similarly incapable of absorption by the skin, permeates the tissues readily enough when rubbed down with a fatty excipient, so bile, when incorporated with soap, traverses the skin’ (Anon 1898, 9). For all its dissolving powers, the bile ‘is absolutely devoid of any caustic or injurious property’ (Anon 1898, 9).

One of the great themes of soap is that of the transformation of labour into pure, spilling bliss. So, although we are assured that no suffering is necessary or even possible with this admirable soap, its magic nevertheless carries some ritual cost: for one must use the soap repeatedly (and repetition will be one of the great themes of the encounter with soap)to

ensure its results. Obviously, there are commercial motivations behind this advice, which is backed up by a grim warning: ‘It will be seen that one element of success in this method of treatment is perseverance, not because the action is slow, but because complete success without subsequent disfigurement is only attainable on this condition’ (Anon 1898, 9-10).

The magic of this soap is emphasised by its astonishingly localised action. Among the testimonials from medical professionals adjoined to the product’s earnest puff is one that attests: ‘I saw my patient who has been using the “Amiral” Soap, and have again examined his arms. I find the arm which he has been rubbing with the Soap is the same size as before, but the other one has increased in size; in other words, he has been getting stouter except where he has been using the Soap. My patient has not been taking much exercise and has been laying on flesh’ (Anon 1898, 14). Another lady, ‘whose hands were so fat that she could not wear her rings’ certified that ‘the “Amiral” Soap is bringing me down nicely; it certainly deserves a certificate. I can now wear all my rings without exception’ (Anon 1898, 18).

This kind of magic is not confined to the more fantastical end of soap advertising. In fact, we may say that the advertising of soap involves more energetic production of magical thinking than that of any other object or substance. This is largely because, more than any other industrial product, soap is so easy to make, and hard to make distinctive: ‘Any fool can make soap,’ Thomas Barrett, the grandson of the founder of Pears’ Soap, is supposed to have said, ‘it takes a clever man to sell it’ (quoted Briggs 2003, 288-9). The most important innovation that William Lever introduced was the packaging of soap in individual cartons, as opposed to the long, anonymous loaves from which grocers would cut off lengths as required. Soap in packages was not only easier to stack and store, it could also be branded and recognised as the product of a particular manufacturer much more easily (Lewis 2008, 62). Henry Wellcome would establish his fortune from exactly the same innovation with respect to pharmaceutical products, with his invention of the ‘tabloid’. Of course, advertising helped to turn soap from substance into sign, the hard of matter into the soft of information, in Michel Serres’s terms (Connor 2009). Stanley Elkin explains the value for him of the countless differentiations of label and appearance, which make soap into a kind of infinitely-discriminated currency:

I see now there *is* something fiscal, at least something vaguely denominational about this accumulation of mine, something safed, vaulted, deposit-boxed, and counting-housed. Denominational, too, in the papers that protect them. Not necessarily, I mean, in the often embossed, bas-relief aura of the punched dimensionality of these vaguely origami’d wrappers, so much as in a sense of graduated value in the embellished, ornamental strokes of the adorned lettering on the seals and crests of the various hotels like the signatures on banknotes or stock certificates, the faint heraldry of wreathed logo, uptown as an address written on a canopy. (Or even – value, denomination – in soap’s inflected hues, its declensions of ivories, creams and beiges. Up the palette of its peachy, ultimate pastels to something like gold itself, like colors rarified, extrapolated from precious stones and metals.) (Elkin 1992, 183)

But soap is perhaps more than just one example among others of this semiotic lenifying of stuff into sign. Rather, it is the very image of the transformability of matter itself, the embodiment of the soft body of matter-made-idea, and the materialisation of the immaterial. Soap is the essence of the becoming substantial of mere appearance. Soap therefore belongs to the class of pneumatic substances, which embody in themselves a formative or nutritive

principle – sperm, spume, cloud, manna, ambrosia. But it is also an image of the capacity of the modern world of commodities to melt and evaporate the solid world of appearance – but yet still to cling to material form. Soap seems to convene all states of matter, solid, slimy, liquid, foamy, vapid. It is not so much matter transformed, as the metamatter of morphology itself.

The elusiveness of soap is often represented by writers on the subject. For Pablo Neruda, in his ‘Ode to a Bar of Soap’ (‘Oda al jabón’), it is the fragrance of soap that renders it most polymorphous – is it from ‘clean clothes/and the hands that washed them’, or ‘green plums hanging on a bush’ (Neruda 1994, 69), or ‘young love or birthday/cakes’, or ‘faint smell,/of petticoat/flowers’ (Neruda, 1994, 71)?

Soap was the sign of honesty, and, for William Lever, was twinned with the honesty of signs themselves – ‘Honesty in advertising’, he said in 1923, ‘is a cardinal principle’ (quoted Lewis 2008, 86); but as such it was also a duplicitous sign. Soap was the allegory of the volatilising of labour itself, turning it from Stygian and stinking striving to the airy and light-filled utopia of the Merseyside workers’ colony Lever named ‘Port Sunlight’. Lather is luxury, but, like all luxury, it is the concentration and free discharge of stockpiled labour. Lever’s ‘Lux’ soap was first marketed under this name in 1900, in a combination of the ideas of luminance and luxury. As Anne McClintock has written, ‘[s]oap entered the realm of Victorian fetishism with spectacular effect, notwithstanding the fact that male Victorians promoted soap as the icon of nonfetishistic rationality’ (McClintock 1995, 208). For all their caustically demystifying rhetoric, of course, the analysis offered by Barthes and McClintock is elbow deep in a kind of magical thinking, in which soap stands for the substance of semblance, the miasmatic dissimulation of labour and exploitation under the bland froth of ideology, to be rinsed away in the lucid ablution of cultural analysis.

Yet hardness always lurks amid the softness of soap. Perhaps the most striking of the duplicities associated with soap was and is its suggestions of a delicious substance to be consumed, not least in the appearance a few years of special ‘wholemeal’ soaps, crammed like creamy biscuits with delicious crunchy chips, the suggestion being that the soap would be both nourishing and encourage healthy purging. In fact, though, in the punitive practice of washing out one’s mouth with soap, as a punishment for using dirty or abusive words indicates, soap reveals its hidden bitterness and astringency. When I insert or remove my contact lenses, I make sure to wash my hands, in order not to sully the magical pellicules on which I depend with my profane touch. Yet, if the merest mote or flake of soap somehow remains on my finger, and is transferred to the lens before insertion, the wincing scorch in my eye is like sulphuric acid. As Barthes puts it, there lurks in the softness of soap ‘the idea of a violent, abrasive modification of matter [by] a kind of absolute fire, a saviour but a blind one’ (Barthes 2000, 36). At the same time, of course, the occult cruelty of soap hints at a magical belief that it can indeed pass across the barrier separating the order of material substance from the order of signification.

It is tempting to think that senstances are a way of slipping under or away from sentences, or vice versa. The truth seems rather to be that discourse is always implicated in the evocation of what goes beyond or falls short of it in the senstance. The mingling powers of soap in particular seem to extend to the words used to evoke it and its operations. To think about soap is to rub oneself up against it, to subject it to the formative friction that brings it into being. In his meditation on soap, Francis Ponge goes back repeatedly to a collection of fragments, his ‘dossier-soap, soap-dossier’ (Ponge 1969, 9) begun in 1942 in Roanne, when he and his

family were refugees and the only soap available was 'the worst ersätze – which did not froth at all' (Ponge 1969, 11). There is 'something soapy, slobbering, foamy in the style – like the froth in the nostrils of a galloping horse' (Ponge 1969, 21), but this fervour is an effect of the repeated revisitings, the churning of the fragments of soap memories into a kind of voluptuousness to compensate for this primary lack. Speaking of soap awakens it into volubility, and rubbing the hands with it will 'loosen the dry tongue of the soap' (Ponge 1969, 37). Helen Vendler notes that the pieces of soap described in the title essay of Stanley Elkin's volume *Pieces of Soap* also designate Elkin's writings themselves, the 'hoarded noticings...the stored up soaps of his imagination' (Elkin 1992, 12). Ponge plays throughout with the paradox that everything in his book, especially given his commitment to the communist party, at least during the 1940s, can be condemned as the merest, most sudsy rhetoric; but, as such, it is a faithful rendering of the 'aerostatic pretention' [sic], the self-volatilising 'exaltation' (Ponge 1969, 75) of soap itself. So to be equal to soap is to mimic its incontinent capacity to overdo itself, to bubble over into words. 'There is much to be said about soap', Ponge says, 'Exactly everything that it says about itself' (Ponge 1969, 54)

Most of all, perhaps, soap effects a kind of dalliance, the condition of suspensive semi-attention that Bachelard repeatedly calls 'rêverie'. Soap takes time, it is drawn out into duration, and takes time up into itself. Soap is a soft, chronic bomb, it is as though the foam that soap forms were an image of time made semi-substantial. I can understand why hand-washing should so easily become a compulsion. There is no prescribed or prescribable limit to the number of times one might or must rotate one's hands around themselves. Washing one's hands, one enters and lavishly (yes, from *lavare*) surpasses the realm of need and number. There can be no natural culmination to this voluptuous friction, for all its obvious analogies to onanism, and every completed handwashing is a *lavatus interruptus*. For Ponge, the ecstatic spilling over of soap into words is an image of writing's own self-generation: 'Yes! Yes! It is in exactly this way that writing must be thought of: not as the transcription, according to conventional rules, of some idea (exterior or anterior) but, in reality, as an orgasm: as the orgasm of a being or structure, let's say, conventional to begin with, of course – yet which must fulfil itself, give itself, exultantly, as such: in a word to signify itself' (Ponge 1969, 96).

But this is no solitary effusion. Rather soap signifies the companionship, the congratulatory sociability of writing, in the joining of hands that it effects, and the joining of hands to other hands and to objects in the world of which it is the promise and product. Soap means 'rubbing our hands *with* something and, so to speak, by means of a means' (Ponge 1969, 96). Soap is a sign, absurdly and laughably literalised, of *Mitsein*, the principle of the '*with*, if not *av-vec*, *apud hoc*: near to, in the company of' (Ponge 1969, 97). Ever tending to its end, the emblem and event of consuming itself, 'a diminution and exhaustion of the central core, which gives itself the air of a recrudescence' (Ponge 1969, 87), soap is yet a way to prolong oneself in the 'objoy' (Ponge 1969, 97), the remission of ending in the not-yet vanished joy of there being objects to care for as well as wear away. The plug will always have to be pulled sooner or later on silliness like this, for there is, and will always be, much more serious, solid, sullyng work to be done. But the silliness of soap, the way 'its whole body gives up the ghost' (Ponge 1969, 70), goes hand-in-hand with the *seely*, the trifling, vain, frail and crazy, yet also the humble, holy, blessed, soul-ish.

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