ENTRE PHARE ET SHAFT / BETWEEN BEACON AND SHAFT

0a. Préambule

It's the eternal question: where do I end and you begin? Where is the border line? Is it on the fabric of your shirt, or a foot away from your body, or halfway between you and me? What if we're on opposite sides of the street?

Maybe the border only exists if we're touching. Maybe it's not a point or a line; it's the place where your skin touches mine. In any case there has to be a border, otherwise our bodies would get all mixed up.

Oh that would be too simple! That's the easy way out: 'there's only a border if we're touching'! First of all it's like we're touching even if we're two or three feet away from each other. My warmth mingling with your scent, your scent meeting my aura, my aura enveloping your little noises, your little noises floating in my breath, your breath tingling my antennae, my antennae crossing your antennae...

For example, if somebody walks between us when we're standing 2 feet apart from each other, or even one metre apart, it's unpleasant. It's an intrusion, to break through our shared border like that.

Let's say that the border line is 2 feet away from the body. If we're more than a metre apart then people can pass between us without causing a disturbance, without trampling over our borders. And nothing is stopping me from coming to you or you from coming to me.

- No, no way! I'm not having individual borders 2 feet away from our bodies! (1) Imagine that we're on opposite sides of the road. People could pass between us, and they could head towards you without me knowing, or you could disappear with somebody and I wouldn't even know it.
- Well then?
- Well I won't have it. The border is in the middle between me and you, or closer to me or closer to you. It doesn't matter; the important thing is that there is only one border line between us! If you reckon that we've each got our own borders then I'm going to get a chain and stretch that chain out from me to you and then people won't be able to pass between us or make off with you or me.
- Oh no, that'll never do, if you do that we'll never see anybody, nobody will come near us. If you do that then I'll take your chain and lay it out in the other direction, between us, like the horizon, but like a horizon separating me from you. People will be able to come up to us, we'll be able to meet them and go off with them if we want to, but between us it'll be over. There'll always be that horizon, the line you can never reach. So please, drop the chain idea.

0b entrée dans phare

Here he is, at last!
It's a tiny little boat... a dinghy...

Maybe he got a bit lost, it's understandable really.
This beacon doesn't feature on any maps; it's a lighthouse without a light in the middle of the Ocean.

- HALLO THERE!
WELCOME TO THE BEACON!
I've been waiting for you!
The door
Is only visible
When the tides are very big
And the sea is already coming in!

Yes leave the boat there, come on in... here, take my hand... *hup.*
Welcome!

First things first, take a look inside of the beacon:
There are no floorboards here. Down there, the only floor is the bottom of the ocean. So if you fall... ! Are you wearing solid shoes?
Go ahead, shuffle your way along the path around the edge.
Hold onto that iron bar, it's a railing.

I'll just close the door...
Cast iron door. There's another one downstairs. Right at the top there's a gallery of full-length windows.

It's dark in here. Your eyes will get used to it. The inside of the beacon is bathed in a dim light from top to bottom. It's a faint light produced by the beacon itself. But the beacon does not shine any light into the outside world.

Follow me, follow me down. I always start my tours from the bottom.
The ladder is made of wrought iron bars set into the stone. Not very comfortable! You get used to it soon enough, you'll see.

Soon we'll be able to see the underwater windows. From the beacon's windows, underwater or up in the air, you can see everything that has ever happened, everything that will ever happen, and everything that is now happening in the world. They're well spaced-out though; there are only three floors under the water and three above. Two windows per floor, except for the top floor.

Are your hands cold? So are mine.

(upwards)
Are you OK? Have you grazed your knees? The granite is rough, even through your clothes. Put two feet on each rung if you like, it's easier that way.

More windows.

Here we are.
The ladder doesn't go all the way down.
I'm going to jump.
Your turn.

The beacon's lowest point!
Your feet are now standing on the ancient granite of the ocean depths!
I can see a few footsteps in the dust...

Down here you can find rock crystals. It takes millions of years to transform quartz into rock crystals like these. Look, there's one. When you rub them they catch the light. And there's another one!
No I don't want to polish them up. I know that they're here, that's good enough.

The downstairs door.
It's very heavy. I came in through this door. There's no lock and no handle on this side...

Yes, the dust sticks to your shoes a bit. It's damp.
Let's go back up and see the windows. They look so high up and far away from down here.

1er étage, 1ère fenêtre
1. Corps-sans-peau-ni-os

Here we are, the first floor. We're standing on the first gallery.
Hold on to the railing. Come closer. Remember: through these windows you can see everything that has ever happened, that ever will happen and that is currently happening on the earth... I'll let you open the curtains.

Ah: No-skin-no-bones! She's a long way away, in another part of the world. When you look through the windows of the beacon, it's hard to be sure where or when things are happening.

No-skin-no-bones... A creature with neither skin nor bones, just calmly rising and falling with the ages, and breathing with the waxing and the wanning of the moon. She has no skin, you can go right anywhere inside her without doing any harm, she just keeps slowly rising and falling and breathing. She has no real shape, she just spreads out along the bottom of wherever she happens to be: if there's a hole or a crack, she sinks down into it and takes that shape. If there's no hole or crack nearby she spreads out, sometimes over a great distance, until she finds one. And the really extraordinary thing is that every part of her body which comes into contact with the air immediately becomes flat and horizontal.

She's come to settle here, between two oceans, at the edge of a continent. She found a hollow space, worked her way in, linked the two oceans together, cutting the outer edge of the continent in two, and cutting right through the middle of the people living there. She's constantly tossing and turning in this space. Little by little she's digging her bed a little bit deeper, though you'd never tell to look at him.

That's her, No-skin-no-bones. The two separated halves of the people like to decorate her with all sorts of jewels, ribbons and shells. They like her. They know they mustn't push her too far, but they like her all the same. No-skin-no-bones! There are other people too, who come from far away to decorate her with their own jewels. It's a pretty sight.

Come over here. Yes, close those curtains please.

12,000years ago, you could get from Dover to Dunkirk on a bike, if you had a bike. But it was very cold.

1,500 years ago, the same sacred trees were planted on both sides of the Channel.

1er étage, 2è fenêtre
2. guirlande de phares

From the other side you can see No-skin-no-bones. Now pull open the curtains on this side...

It's night time. The Earth, seen from afar, dimly illuminated by the moon... You see that line of light which stretches from one Pole to the other? That line separates two long sections which stretch from pole to pole, like two segments of an orange: one segment is solid, the other liquid. The line between the two is a ribbon of lights, floating fifty yards above the ground.

This line marks the border between solid and liquid, because you know how difficult and dangerous it can be to go from solid to liquid, or from liquid to solid. Let's say you're walking on something solid, along a footpath for example, and then you come across some liquid: what happens if you keep on walking? Well try it for yourself: you'll walk down to the bottom of that liquid and you won't be able to breathe. You'll go on walking like that and you'll die. It's tough. Or how about the other way around: you're swimming through some liquid, you come to some solid and you decide to keep swimming. Well you won't go far! You'll be swimming on the spot, it can't be done.

Come fog, rain or snow, the ribbon of light becomes invisible, and it is replaced by a ribbon of sound. A ribbon of bells and foghorns, running from North to South, rising above the roar of the liquid beating against the solid. By night and as well as by day.

All it takes is one click to put out the whole ribbon: the ribbon of light or the ribbon of sound. Just one click.

Let's go up to the second floor.

Listen to that, on the difficulty of going from solid to liquid:

> *In July 1804, from Boulogne-sur-mer, Napoléon wrote to Marshal Brune, his ambassador in Constantinople:*
> *"I have with me some 120,000 men and 3,000 barges and gunboats; all I need now is a favourable wind and the Imperial Eagle shall soon be standing proudly over the Tower of London."*
>
> *On 2nd July 1804 he wrote to Vice-Admiral Latouche-Tréville:*
> *"If we can be masters of the Channel for six hours, then we shall be masters of the world".*

And against the difficulty of going from liquid to solid:

- in 1825, the decision was taken to construct a network of lighthouses along France's coastlines.

And increasing the difficulty of going from liquid to solid :
- in 1940, the decision was taken to switch off the lighthouses of Western Europe
- in 1942, the occupying forces equipped France's lighthouses with cases of dynamite.
- in the Summer of 1944, over a hundred of these beacons were destroyed by dynamite.

...All it takes is one little click...

2ème étage, 1ère fenêtre
3. bulles tranquilles

Here we are on the second floor.
This one first. Go on, open it...

Down there is the ocean bed. I don't know where. Vast expanses of sand... here and there a few bunches of seaweed, the odd rock. The sand is dotted with little holes, little bumps and little dark spots. And out of these little holes, bumps and spots come little streams of bubbles, rising in regular clumps, clumps of regular bubbles...
Look, a man! He's coming out of one of the bumps. Off he goes, calm as you like. And there's a family coming out from their hole, three children... two adults... and another one. They're going into the bump next door. What's that? Oh nothing, just some kids making waves in the water with their football.

Everything is calm and normal. Up there on the surface, the beacons come alive at night. If everything is alright, the beacons are lit up – at night.

Listen to the silence!
You can hear the sound of your own breath.
It's the same over there, too - look.

The bottom of the ocean again, but not the same spot. A vast expanse of sand; here and there a few bunches of seaweed, the odd rock. But no little holes, bumps or dark spots. Instead, great metal plates. Thick, heavy cast-iron plates, like drain covers, but in all different geometrical shapes. And they all have handles with little air holes underneath. Air holes which give out irregular bursts of bubbles, little spurts here and there.
Hang on... Here they come, you'll see...

27th November 1685, Dunkirk – a text from the archives:
The Bailiff, Burgmeisters and Aldermen of the City and Territory of Dunkirk, under order and command of His Honour the Intendant, hereby order all officers and residents of Leffrinckoucke and Téteghem to keep watch night and day on the bridge over the River Furnes, to ensure that no person of the So-called "Reformed religion" should pass over it, in order to prevent the flight of such persons from the Kingdom.

21st August 1940, Dunkirk, Sub-Prefect R. Le Gentil, - a text from the archives:
By order of the Feldkommandantur, residents of coastal areas are henceforth required to stay within a 3-mile radius of their place of residence. (This measure remained in force until 1945)

Suite (2è étage, 2è fenêtre)
5, bulles contraintes, 2ème partie : pinces et viviers

There they are. Over there. They're coming this way, and quickly. There's about fifteen of them. They almost look like serving tongs – huge ones. A team of pincers, moving in orderly formation like a squadron of fighter planes... but underwater. They're heading straight for the iron plates... There, look: each one is picking up a plate... Look, they're only interested in the squares and triangles... They lift them up by the handles, push them away and rummage around underneath. They rummage around in the nooks and crannies, grabbing whatever they can find: here an old woman, there a couple with three kids, here two men, there a woman and her daughter, and there again 5 adults... It all happens so quickly. They all pull out at almost exactly the same moment, and almost all of them have grabbed something. They return to their formation and they leave. Watch where they're going.

They're headed for the tanks (have you ever seen tanks like that? They're great big cages or boxes, made of bricks or wire mesh, where you store live fish ready to be sold). The pincers release their prey into these tanks. I don't know what's going to happen to those people. But I can say for sure that up there on the surface, the beacons marking the boundary between the sea and the land are permanently switched off.

Later on I'll tell you how I came to be here.
But now, before we go any further, let me tell you this...

5th June 1785 – a text from the archives: His Majesty's Royal Council hereby decrees that the commercial subsidy granted for the Slave Trade shall be repaid one-and-a-half times by those Ship-owners who have not imported Negroes to the colonies.

12th July 194-, The Chief of Police in Dunkirk writes to the Senior Commissioner of the Préfecture du Nord – a text from the archives:

It is my honour to inform you, in response to the prefectural memorandum dated 7th July last regarding the possession of messenger pigeons by the Jews, that there are no longer any Jews, nor indeed any messenger pigeons, in Dunkirk. In accordance with your previous instructions, all of the messenger pigeons were slaughtered."

3è étage.
6 Trou creusé dans le vivier

These floors are so far apart, but then what do you expect? The ocean is so deep!

Here we are on the third floor... Over to you!

Ah! Now this I recognise!

All of these people are in a tank, just like I was. Piled up in a tank, in the depths of the ocean. The pincers arrive regularly with a fresh batch. Men, women, children. The ones at the bottom are covered by the ones on top; they're getting together and digging a hole in the sand. Next they'll start digging through the seabed, then the basalt layer, right on through to the hot, viscous layer where precious gemstones are formed. They're digging with shells and pebbles, that's all they've got.

We did the same thing, in my tank. We didn't know what lay in store for us so we decided to start digging. For days on end we took turns at it. It was hard work keeping the hole from collapsing in. We managed to keep it open by using pebbles to shore up the wall. Look at them go: they're going to need pebbles soon too, otherwise the sand will just fill their hole in.

We attached a rope to the base of the tank, and we'd lower ourselves down into the hole to keep digging. When it was done we all followed the rope down to the bottom of the hole, lowering ourselves down for miles and miles. It was like an inverted version of the celestial ladder, where gods and men go up and down between heaven and earth on special occasions. Once we had all reached the bottom, we set fire to the rope and let it burn away like the wick of an upside-down candle. When the rope was gone, we all split up and headed off into different tunnels. That's how I ended up here.

And over there?

3ème étage, 2è fenêtre
7. Murs à l'Ouest

The Earth again, far away in the distance. Continents and Oceans laid out before us from North to South, and between the continent and the ocean a long line peppered with millions of little black dots. Like a swarm of bedbugs or woodlice. Those are men, hundreds of thousands of men building an immense wall, lined with cannons facing out to sea. I'm just telling you what it is. And what's going to happen. Fortunately for you and me, the beacon we're in is no ordinary lighthouse.

That's the way it is. In the beginning, in my country, we built a wall on our Eastern border to stop our neighbours from bothering us. Troublesome neighbours we had, who went around calling themselves the Cleaners of the World (we called them the CotW). But these Cleaners of the World got over the wall. They made it all the way to our homes, they stayed and we became their servants. They made us tear down the Eastern wall and build another one to the West, on the seafront, with cannons facing outwards (to sea). It was hard work, but – thanks to the CotW – we had work and we could feed our families.

Then the Cleaners of the World conquered the sea to the West of our country.
And everything changed.
They put up a wall on the other side of the sea, on the banks of the other continent, built by the people who lived there. Cannons facing out towards towards yet another continent. And then they told us to pull down our wall; so we did. Then they told us not to move, and so the people of my country don't move anymore. Those that are well-behaved are given a scrap of bread once a day.

And then the CotW conquered the other continent.
And what you see before you is the new wall being built, on the West coast of this new continent. The people to the East have been told to destroy their wall and stay where they are. The well-behaved among them will get one bowl of rice per day.

That is how things stand. A new wall is being built, with cannons facing outwards towards another sea.

Soon enough the Cleaners of the World will conquer this new sea. And then the next continent. And since the world is round, they'll end up back where they started.

And then it'll be finished! People will be at home anywhere they go. No more walls and cannons, because there will be no more 'out there'. Nothing left to clean up. Universal peace. With just one law, one truth, one reality. No more questions, no more trouble, no more disagreements. Amazing!

Close that! Let's carry on up!

11th November 1943, the Prefect of the Nord region writes to the municipal authorities of the Lille region- a text from the archives:
The occupying authorities have asked us to provide a contingent of 6000 men for the Todt Organisation work programme within the next two weeks. If we do not comply, the occupying authorities will requisition municipal employees and impose a fine of 1000 Francs per man missing, per day.

Between March 17th and 22nd 1944, the mayors of 8 towns in the Canton d'Avesnes wrote to the sub-Prefect to announce the arrest, apprehension, seizure, collection, rounding up or snatching of 55 men, at their homes or in the streets. Archive texts.

Now we're getting towards the surface of the ocean. You can hear the waves breaking and the wind blowing...
The part of the beacon above the water is so small compared to the part beneath the waves!
But even above sea level, the windows look out onto unexpected places and moments in time.

4è étage, surface de la mer, fenêtre
8 Route maritime

Daylight over the sea. A strait, with lots of traffic. A concentrated cluster of sea routes, boats of all shapes and sizes heading in all directions. Some are crossing the strait, others are passing through, still others are cutting across diagonally.

Two flocks of birds fly overhead: white gannets and black cormorants.

One black cormorant breaks from the flock and flies downwards, heading straight for a gas tanker. The bird plunges into the water just in front of the tanker. At the point where it hits the water, a whirlpool forms, growing steadily bigger and stronger. Within two minutes the tanker has been sucked in. The whirlpool slows down, closes up. Look: the bird has popped back up, it's swimming along the surface. It takes flight and disappears into the distance.

A gannet flies over a container ship... Plunges into the water 100 metres in front of the ship... Whirlpool... the container ship is sucked down. The whirlpool closes up, calmly. The bird will pop back up in a second... there it is. It flies off, faraway.

Over there two gannets form a pair and fly down towards a huge cargo freighter...
And over there a cormorant is circling over a trawler...

It keeps on happening. The two flocks are still just as big, and yet every time a bird takes the plunge it flies off into the distance. And there are still just as many ships, yet the birds are constantly making their whirlpools.

And what about night time? *Yes let's go and have a look out of the other side*. Well I don't know what happens at night, maybe the beacons are lit and maybe they're not; we might be in peace time, or wartime...

> *In 1915 metal nets were set up off the Belgian coast to prevent the occupying enemy's submarines from getting offshore and patrolling the Channel.*
>
> *In 1916, a chain of magnetic mines was laid between Folkestone and Cap Gris Nez, in order to close the strait to the enemy. Magnetic mines float. They're held in place beneath the surface by cables called buoy ropes, connected to concrete blocks which anchor them to the sea bed. The French call them* crapauds *– toads.*

4è niveau, 2è fenêtre
9. les portes

A ship with no sail and no engine, drifting in the middle of a strait. The ship is all alone in the middle of this channel. It is deserted and drifting. This boat contains everything you don't have at home but would like to have. Getting on board is risky, because it's forbidden. There's a couple walking on the deck of the boat.

The weather is fine; it's mid-afternoon.

The couple enter the cabin. Go down into the hold. You can see it all; it's real enough to touch! They come into a big hall, lined with a dozen labelled doors. They call out... No answer. Just an echo. A rat follows quietly behind them.

The man and woman look at the doors. They open the one marked 'Shoes'. It's a little room filled from floor to ceiling with shoes of all sizes, marked -20, -50, -100. They try some on... Incredible, these are gravity-defying shoes! The numbers are their weights: minus 20 kilos, minus 50 kilos, minus 80 kilos... They certainly don't have any shoes like that at home. They each take a pair, skip lightly back up above board and put them on... They're barely touching the surface of the boat. They blow raspberries at the rat and jump overboard. Now they're skimming joyfully across the surface of the sea, barely touching the water. They disappear towards the horizon...

> *1st February 1802, the archives of the Customs Authorities in Dover: a certain Madame Dufrot, who claims to be the Comtesse Dufrot, arrives from Calais and tells the customs officials that she has just learned of the death of her father, and so bought some black lace with the intention of making a mourning dress. They open up the lady's trunks, and inside they find:*
> 67 pairs of lace and needle work sleeves...
> 35 habit shirts.....All wrought of lace, needle work, cambric, muslin, & lawn stitched
> 10 handkerchiefs.....
> 4 caps and 25 tops for dresses.....
> 62 yards of black silk lace.
> 7 ¼ yards of white thread d°.
> 54 yards of velvet trimming.
> 168 fans, 6 embroidered girdles.
> 37 necklaces, 35 pairs of earrings, 15 glass bracelets.

5è étage, première fenêtre
10 camions et diodes

A winter's afternoon. A line of trucks stretches out along the road, which rises just in front of us, heading towards the sea... That's all you can see: a hillside covered with trucks, and you can't tell what happens to the road on the other side of the hill. The trucks are racing up the hill, almost bumper to bumper. Thousands of trucks from far and wide, all pouring up this hill one after the other. When they get to the crest of the hill they disappear. You can hear the rumbling of the engines as the trucks arrive, but no noise reaches us from those that disappear over the top. They're not falling – we'd hear them fall if that was the case. And then everything stops. The flow is interrupted. Silence. The hillside is empty, you can see the grey-blue road sloping upwards. Until suddenly the road itself rises slowly to reveal an immense cargo-monster. The monster is stuffed full, loaded with the trucks which he swallowed up without the slightest burp. The monster sets itself in motion, and heads off to relieve himself (or take a crap) a little further along. He'll gorge himself elsewhere then come back and crap here. Thousands of trucks, day after day.

Evening arrives and darkness falls. Dusk. You almost need binoculars. Over there, by the trucks, lies a wasteland... weeds, rough bushes... you see those little dots of light? They're almost flashing. They look like glow worms, by turns dark and luminous. They move about here and there, but they always stay together... Look, there are dozens of them. There are a few isolated dots scattered here and there... Those are the people who cannot make the transition from solid to liquid.

They don't have what it takes. And they can't get up into the trucks because they have those little lights on their heads. So they just stay where they are. That's their life.

The beacons are lit, everything is OK.

> *Be careful when you close the curtains. The curtains up here are a bit more worn out than the ones underneath the sea. It's the light from outside, gradually burning them away. And now, it's time for the last window but one.*

5è étage, 2è fenêtre
11. deux étages

I wasn't expecting to see that! Two countries which aren't side by side, but rather one on top of the other – like a double decker country.

One of these two countries has all the hilltops and high ground, its cities are on the peaks of mountains and the summits are linked together by roads in the sky. Down by the sea, the sky roads connect to a coast road. And so the Country of the Hilltops has access to the sea.

The other country is set in the depths of the valleys. The valleys are more or less connected to each other, but they are cut off from the coast. The Country of the Valleys have no access to the sea.

The border between these two countries is marked on every hillside, halfway between the peak of the mountain and the trough of the valley. Occasionally one of the sky roads may need to come down and run along the ground for a few miles, for practical reasons. In such cases, the border takes the form of a tightly-sealed wall which encloses the road as long as it is on the ground.

The first country is restricted to the hilltops, the second is all valleys. The people in the country of valleys are rotting away. If you look closely you can see them rotting. Their livestock are rotting away with them. Meanwhile the people on the mountain tops are burning and going slowly mad. It's because up there they're too close to God. – What's that you say, "what about the wildlife?" Oh there's nothing left but insects.

And of course, in the Country of the Hilltops the beacons are lit up every night. Deceptive isn't it!

Let's go up to the last window!

6ème étage
12 Ile aux moutons

An island, covered in grass and split down the middle by a low stone wall.
On one side of the wall white sheep are grazing.
On the other side, black sheep.
Sat astride the little stone wall, an enormous man is playing a game.
He stretches his hand out into the middle of the white sheep, grabs one and throws it in with the black sheep. The white sheep instantly turns black.
Then he stretches out his hand amid the black sheep, grabs one and throws it over into the white flock. The black sheep immediately turns white.
He keeps doing this with a distracted air, hardly looking at the sheep.

I once gave this same tour of the beacon to a couple, who found this island so intriguing that they wanted to go and visit. A few days after they left I happened to see them from a window. They were approaching the island. The woman got out onto the side with the white sheep, her partner stayed in the boat. The huge man straddling the stone wall was still playing his game, throwing the sheep from one side to the other. She walked through the grass towards the man on the wall, through the flock of white sheep. And as she walked through the grass her hair gradually became whiter and whiter, and so did her eyebrows, her skin, her clothes, her shoes... everything.

Her companion called out to her to come back, but she had already sat herself down amidst the white sheep. He called out to her again and she just looked back at him impassively, sitting there surrounded by white sheep.

In the end the man went away.

Come with me right up to the top.
I'm desperate to open a door.
Fed up of looking through windows!
... daylight!
... the rush of the wind!