

*Feet of Clay:  
Reflections on the Ceramic  
Works of Jesse Wine*

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What does it take to get out of bed in the morning? You've been lying there—a heavy, floppy mass of flesh, sunk into a mattress molded into dips and bulges by the knobbly contours of your body. At once immersed in yet buoyed up by the sheer bulk of the mattress, like a swimmer in water, you don't feel your own weight. That's why it always comes as such a surprise when unusual circumstances force one to lift a limb, or even the entire body, of another who is perfectly relaxed. Very occasionally I have woken to find that one arm has gone completely numb, and had to lift it with the other in order to shake it about and get the circulation going again. It's a scary situation, but perhaps most scary of all is to discover how heavy an arm is. It could just as well be a lump of clay.

Like a body prone on the mattress, a deposit of clay, so long as it stays in the ground, has mass but no weight. We only experience weight when we attempt to lift it, raising material from the matrix in which it ordinarily finds repose. We feel it as a kind of resistance, not in the depths of things but at their surfaces, where they come into contact with our own skin, and in a tightening of muscles to take the strain. In weight, writes philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, the thickness of material bodies “bubbles up.”<sup>21</sup> It rises to the surface. It is here, in the zone of contact, where the force of gravity, pulling matter back to the earth from which it once came, meets the gravity-defying resistance of muscular exertion. It follows that to truly know weight, it is no good staying in bed. You have to get up.

At that point, everything changes. You are standing erect, with only the soles of your feet on the floor, the rest gracefully steadied through the counterbalancing of forces of tension and compression in bones, muscles, and ligaments. No longer a lumpen mass of flesh weighed down by gravity, you have become a thing of flexible and sinuous lines, or fibers, that stands of its own accord. In bed, with your head on the pillow, eyes closed, off your feet, hands unoccupied, you were all arms and legs. You had sunk into yourself, into your dreams, oblivious to all around you. No sooner have you gotten up, however, than you are all eyes and ears, voice, hands, and feet, ready to radiate from the center where you stand into a world that now commands your attention: eyes shine, ears listen, the voice speaks, hands and fingers busy themselves with tasks of manipulation, feet flex and toes curl to find purchase on the ground.

You may now be standing still, but this stillness appears to be quite the opposite of the stillness of the body that lies asleep. To be sure, from time to

time even the sleeper tosses and turns—there is movement in their stillness—but this amounts to little more than a rearrangement of the limbs. The problem is to find a comfortable arrangement that does not impede circulation and the numbness that might otherwise follow. Standing still, on the contrary, is an equipoise sustained only through continual fine tuning and readjustment of every fiber of the body. This is not motion in stillness; it is stillness in motion. That’s what it means to exist, to take a stance, literally to “stand forth” (from the Latin *ex*, “out,” plus *sistere*, “to cause to stand”). If, asleep in bed, your existence had been in doubt, then to rise from your slumber is to reaffirm it.

For architectural theorist Lars Spuybroek, this is to turn from *gravity* to *grace*.<sup>2</sup> It is a move from the horizontal to the vertical, from the recumbent to the upstanding, from a ground crisscrossed by a pattern of rhythmic undulations, like ocean waves or the furrowed earth, to the poise of a body that rises and shines like the lighthouse with its radiant beams, or the tree trunk with its branches fanning out in every direction. The lighthouse and the tree don’t just exist; they also persist. Their standing lasts, if not forever, then for some appreciable time. The same is true of buildings, and of the people who inhabit them. The turn from gravity to grace, then, is effectively one from the unceasing flux of becoming and perishing to the temporary balance of being and persistence, and coincides with what Spuybroek calls “figuration,” the manifest appearance of things in a world.

There can be no figuration, however, without receiving and giving: without the being’s taking in from the world to which it owes its existence (as lighthouse from rock, or tree from earth), and without its also giving out again (the lighthouse in its beams, the tree in its foliage). The figure, then, is bound—indeed constituted—in a cycle of gift exchange, as should be obvious from the association of grace with gratitude. It gives, receives, and returns. And it’s the same every time we wake from slumber, giving thanks for the regenerative sleep that allows us to rise once again. In this cycle, perhaps, lies the key to an otherwise intractable paradox. For if the conditions of lying down and standing up were so completely opposed as the foregoing paragraphs make out, then how is it possible to traverse the interval between them? How, in other words, do we so readily manage the turn from gravity to grace and vice versa?

This is not really a problem for the tree or the lighthouse. For the tree both lies and stands simultaneously, respectively in the spread of its roots, weaving their way into the very fabric of the ground, and in the erectness of its trunk, rising skyward toward the light. In the very principle of its growth, the tree inhabits the interval. The lighthouse, too, holds fast to the bedrock,

seeming almost to emerge out of it. Truly, we cannot say where the rock ends or the lighthouse begins; it is thanks to their indivisibility that they can hold out as one against the waves. But it is surely different with humans. They are not so anchored to the earth. While awake, they are free to move. Yet they must also have their repose. They experience the interval, then, not in simultaneity but as an oscillation, tied to the diurnal cycle, of waking and tiring. Even as life is a journey toward death, so wakefulness is an approach to sleep. Conversely, as death issues into rebirth, so sleep is a release into waking life.

Let’s return to the sleepers on the mattress; there may, after all, be more than one. Are they as wrapped up in themselves as we first imagined? It turns out that their bodies are neither as limp nor as self-enclosed as we may have thought. For one thing, they are breathing, and in the heave of the lungs already immersed in a cycle of interchange with their surroundings. Their eyes may be closed, or open only to their dreams, yet their ears remain alert to the slightest sound. And they keep shifting about. These movements—of tossing, rolling, stretching, prodding—can appear ungainly, graceless, even comical. To the prying eyes of an observer, who perhaps feels like an intruder on the intimate and reclusive conversation of bedfellows, it might look as though the mattress itself had grown arms and legs, which sprout from its surface at odd angles. Eventually, however, these limbs will erupt, lose their umbilical connection with the mattress, and take on a life of their own.

It is a life, however, that does not come out of nowhere, for it was already there, albeit latent, in sleep. Nor are bodies that are wide awake and standing ever completely released from the gravitational pull of the Earth. A body with flexed knees, raised heels, and curled toes may be tensed and poised, ready to spring into action, as in a leap or sprint, but it could equally be one weary of its exertions, beginning to sag or droop. Instinctively, such a body looks for support, if not from a chair, then from something to lean against: a wall, pillar, or post. Leaning takes some of the weight off the foot, allowing the back to drop and hips and knees to bend a little. Thus, as the rolling and stretching that gets you up turns life’s pendulum from gravity to grace, so the leaning and sagging, as you tire, turns it back. Our lives are suspended in an oscillation between the two.

There is one kind of structure, however, that defies the principles of both simultaneity and oscillation, and whose verticality is comparable, therefore, neither to that of the tree or the lighthouse, nor to that of the person. This is the statue. The word itself comes from the Latin *statuere*, meaning “to set up,” “to establish” or “to erect.” This is not to be confused with the idea of

causing to stand, conveyed by the verb *sistere*. The body's standing, as we've seen, is sustained through a dynamic equilibrium among its equal and opposed forces of tension and compression. In this case, the vertical axis is not already given but is rather an asymptote—an ideal limit to which the body tends, but which has no material counterpart. In the statue, by contrast, not only is verticality presented in its most immediate, physical form; it is also sustained through its sheer weight upon a foundational pedestal. In a nutshell, the statue stands thanks to gravity, not grace. Its equilibrium is static, not dynamic.

By the same token, however, it is vulnerable in a way the body is not. For should any of the block at the foot of the statue crumble, the entire edifice will come crashing down. This is the point, in our story, when we can finally return to clay. Originally formed as a dense deposit of fine-grained particles, it is the nature of clay to sag, especially when wet. It hardens only when fired. Bricks have been made by firing blocks of clay since antiquity, and they can last for centuries. Yet in time, water can penetrate even the best-made clay bricks, causing them to deteriorate and eventually to crumble—a process known as spalling. Indeed, this propensity of clay to crumble was known as long ago as the mid-second century BCE, when the Greek Hellenistic king Antiochus IV Epiphanes ruled the Seleucid Empire in western Asia. It was during his reign that the Old Testament's Book of Daniel is thought to have been composed. And at the heart of the book is a prophecy about a statue.

The text tells of a terrifying dream that had appeared, four centuries previously, to Nebuchadnezzar, mighty ruler of Babylon. The crux of it is worth reproducing here:

You were looking, O king, and lo! there was a great statue. This statue was huge, its brilliance extraordinary; it was standing before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of that statue was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked on, a stone was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.<sup>3</sup>

The dream foretold the fall of Babylon and its aftermath. The statue's golden head, representing the great kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar, was destined to

give way to lesser kingdoms, first of silver, then of bronze and iron. But just as iron and clay do not mix, and as feet divide into toes, the polity would not hold, and it would take only a stone's throw for the entire edifice to collapse. That stone, thrown not by any mortal hand but by the hand of God, will set up a new kingdom, free from tyranny, that will last forever.

This is a story of political liberation. The statue Nebuchadnezzar saw, in his dream, did not figure *in* a world; it *was* a world. In its enormity and brilliance, in its commanding yet intimidating presence, it was less a manifestation of grace than an assertion of absolute power. Far from rising from the land, offering uplift, it pressed down upon its people, crushing them underfoot. This is gravity not as a guarantor of life and growth, nor even as a source of support, but as a force of oppression. But could it all have been an illusion? What if the gold, silver, bronze, and iron—all that masquerades as solid metal—was really just clay in disguise? And what if it was not as heavy as it appeared? Suppose that in its weightiness, the mass of the statue doesn't just bubble up to the surface, as Nancy put it, but actually evaporates in the intense heat of the forge or kiln, leaving only hollowness inside?

It is common, today, to hear the expression “feet of clay.” It refers to a fatal flaw of character that can reduce the mighty to rubble. But the original feet of clay from which the expression is derived belonged to no mortal being but to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Though the events it prophesied came to pass more than two millennia ago, the dream still haunts us, and remains compelling for our times. Around the world, once-mighty empires are crumbling, hollowed out by the manifest fraudulence of their imperial claims. Was it not a more recent prophet of liberation, Karl Marx, who, in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, foretold of how all that is solid would melt into air?<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the clay will crumble, destined to be blown away, as were the crumbs of the statue, like chaff in the wind. And after that? Who knows! We can be sure of only one thing: that for so long as life goes on, we'll continue to have to perform the bodily miracle of getting out of bed every morning.

## Notes

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 93.
- 2 Lars Spuybroek, *Grace and Gravity: Architectures of the Figure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
- 3 Daniel 2:31–35 (New Revised Standard Version).
- 4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 476.

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