More thoughts On the Calculation of Volume

James Joyce's *Ulysses* transformed modern literature by distilling the immensity of lived experience into the span of a single day. June 16, 1904, becomes in Joyce's hands a universe unto itself: a temporal container vast enough to hold myth, politics, history, desire, and the smallest gestures of the everyday. The novel's radical gesture was not merely narrative compression but the demonstration that the totality of modernity, its anxieties, its fragmentations, its pleasures, could be staged within the ordinary hours of a single date. Solvej Balle's *On the Calculation of Volume* undertakes a similarly ambitious project, though refracted through a contemporary sensibility that is both ecological and philosophical. In Balle's work, November 18 is not only the date around which Tara Selter's consciousness circles but also an emblem of how time itself can collapse, repeat, and be lived otherwise.

The significance of November 18, especially in its Danish context, underscores that this is no arbitrary choice. It suggests a historical memory and collective atmosphere imprinted onto the present. Yet in Balle's rendering, the repetition of this day becomes less about history as event and more about the possibility of inhabiting duration differently. Where Joyce excavates the myths and archetypes lying beneath the surface of modern Dublin, Balle turns to the structures of temporality itself, showing how repetition might create not stasis but a heightened awareness of interconnection. November 18 becomes an aperture through which the density of life (ethical, social, ecological) can be perceived.

As I noted in my other article about these books, the temporal compression of November 18 finds a parallel in the sestertius of Antoninus Pius that Tara Selter contemplates. The coin, depicting Annona with the *modius*, grain, cornucopia, and ship's prow, condenses the Roman system of provision into a single, graspable unit, where the measurement of grain enforces both nourishment and governance. The *modius* standardizes abundance, making it calculable, equitable, and socially legible. In reflecting on this coin, Tara apprehends the ethical and material stakes of measurement, just as the recurring day crystallizes human experience into a disciplined, perceptible unit of time. Measurement, whether of grain

or hours, becomes an ethical practice, an engagement with responsibility and the limits inherent in sustaining life, much like the gathering, interpreting, and distributing of data and algorithms, where each unit carries moral weight, shaping outcomes with both insight and consequence.

The resonance with Walter Benjamin's notion of history as constellations of fragments is strikingly evident in Balle's work. Perhaps its because his work has been on my mind lately but Benjamin posits that history is not a continuous progression but a montage of moments, objects, and dates that can illuminate the totality of a system when apprehended with insight; each fragment, each artefact, carries the potential to reveal the hidden structures of power, social relation, and human intention. In Balle, both the sestertius and November 18 function precisely as such fragments. The coin, with its depiction of Annona and the *modius*, condenses the economic, administrative, and symbolic machinery of the Roman Empire into a single tangible unit; November 18 compresses the ethical, temporal, and ecological stakes of modern existence into a recurring day. Together, they operate as microcosms, each having its own aura, carrying within it a dense network of dependencies, obligations, and consequences, where the material, social, and natural orders intersect.

Yet Balle's use of repetition diverges from Benjamin's messianic impulse toward redemption. The recurrence of November 18 is not a promise of liberation or fulfilment but a careful interrogation of limits and attentiveness. The reader, following Tara Selter's consciousness, is invited to inhabit a temporal loop that foregrounds responsibility, patience, and the ethical weight of observation. Each repetition becomes its own sphere or container: an opportunity to measure, to account, to confront scarcity and abundance alike, compelling a sustained focus that parallels the meticulous attention the Roman administration had to give to the distribution of grain. In this sense, Balle transforms Benjamin's fragmentary flash into a disciplined experience: repetition illuminates the structures and stakes of life not by producing transcendence but by demanding care, precision, and a continuous negotiation with both the natural and social orders. The coin and the day together suggest that understanding the whole is inseparable from attention to the smallest units (whether of grain, of time, or of ethical action) and that these units carry their own weight as sites of reflection, responsibility, and moral

reckoning.

In this respect, I was reminded of Byung-Chul Han’s reflections on the exhaustion produced by late-modern temporality and how this provides a counterpoint to Balle’s literary experiment. I find his work to be quite challenging but worthwhile. Han diagnoses contemporary life as dominated by relentless acceleration, the ceaseless expansion of tasks, information, and digital stimuli, and the consequent erosion of coherent narrative or ethical orientation; meaning is dispersed across a multitude of fleeting flows, leaving the individual fatigued, overstimulated, and disoriented. Balle, by contrast, deliberately inverts this condition. In *On the Calculation of Volume*, November 18 is not a day among many but a temporal loop, a durational container in which events repeat and attention must be sustained. The temporal compression forces a confrontation with the minutiae of existence and the limits of endurance, compelling both protagonist and reader to recover subtle distinctions, relational patterns, and ethical nuances that are ordinarily lost in the acceleration of ordinary life.

Where Han describes exhaustion as the product of constant motion and dispersal, Balle depicts a different form of fatigue: the strain of repetition, the psychological and ethical labour of inhabiting a single day over and over, attending to the consequences of each gesture, thought, and measurement. Yet this repetition is paradoxically generative rather than purely oppressive. By arresting time, Balle opens space for new modes of perception: the attentiveness to measurement, to the ethical distribution of resources, to the interplay of human action and ecological consequence becomes possible precisely because the temporal horizon is constrained. The fatigue here is not a loss of agency but a crucible for intensified awareness, a disciplined encounter with the ethical, temporal, and material stakes of ordinary life. The volume of it all. Through this temporal inversion, Balle stages a critique of modernity’s over-acceleration, showing that slowing, repeating, and attending can reveal dimensions of experience that rapidity conceals, and that the act of returning, calculating, and noticing can itself become a mode of ethical and perceptual renewal, much like meditation or the disciplined rhythm of pranayama cultivates awareness, patience, and a conscious engagement with the flow of breath and time.

The concept of vast, interconnected phenomena that defy easy comprehension resonates with Balle's text in profound ways. These are occurrences whose scale and duration extend beyond the grasp of typical human understanding—events like climate change or global environmental shifts. In *On the Calculation of Volume*, November 18 serves as a miniature version of such an overwhelming phenomenon. Though it appears as a single day, its repetition gives it a temporal and ethical magnitude that challenges simple linear understanding. Each recurrence builds upon the previous one, adding layers of consequence and action, creating a sense of accumulating significance that mirrors how large-scale ecological changes unfold over time. Just as these crises stretch across generations and ecosystems, the repeated presence of November 18 compels the reader to engage with time and consequence in new, complex ways.

The hyperobject-like nature of November 18 compels Tara Selter (and, by extension, us, the readers) to inhabit temporality differently. One must attend simultaneously to the immediate, tangible realities of action and measurement and to the broader, often imperceptible consequences that unfold across the infinite loop of the day. This dual awareness mirrors the ecological imperative imposed by climate change: human agency operates within systems whose scale is difficult to grasp, yet it remains consequential. Tara's recognition that she can "overuse" objects, whether by drinking too much coffee at her usual café until supplies run low or finding something missing from the grocery shelf, further emphasizes how small, individual actions reverberate through larger systems. In these moments, she becomes acutely aware of the fragility and limitations inherent in the cycles of consumption, a reflection of the broader, often invisible systems that govern availability and scarcity.

Balle dramatizes this tension in literary form, using repetition to make perceptible the otherwise invisible structures of responsibility, scarcity, and ethical consequence. In doing so, the novel cultivates a sensibility or an affect attuned to both temporal and ecological depth, encouraging readers to recognize that living responsibly entails not only action but careful, sustained attention to the interplay between the measurable and the immeasurable. In this light, Balle's work offers a subtle critique of the prevailing data-driven narrative, suggesting that while the rise of algorithms and metrics promises clarity, it often oversimplifies the

complexities of human experience. The novel’s focus on repetition and attention to the limits of measurement reminds us that not everything can be quantified, and that some truths, especially those that lie in the realms of ethics, ecology, and human relationships, elude the grasp of data.

Taken together, the coin, the day, and the novel itself function as material arguments about how humans orient themselves in worlds of overwhelming density. Joyce taught us that one day could be all days, that the everyday was vast enough to hold mythic significance. Balle takes up this challenge for our contemporary condition, showing how repetition, stasis, and recursion can equally serve as apertures onto the totality of our lives. November 18 becomes a new “Bloomsday,” not for Dublin but for the precarious world we now inhabit: a world where administration, ethics, ecology, and philosophy converge upon the smallest units of experience, compelling us to ask not only how to live through time but how to live in time differently.

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