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Words in Flight:

Meditations on Writing and Otherness

Freud's couch

A horizontal body is sure to daydream, to fragment one's sense of self and, more dangerously, prone to cultivate erotic thoughts. Lying down = letting your thoughts get away with you.

Freud thought this to be perfect. His couch was a simple thing; wrapped in an oriental rug, upholstered with springs and horsehair stuffing. Fragments, nonsense, unruly words were spoken from that couch, words that did not, of their own accord, create a narrative.

studio

It's late afternoon. I've been working all day in my studio, writing has come easily. I lay down on the couch to read, but fall asleep, only to wake twenty minutes later, disoriented. My world is in pieces.

The first thing I see is the curtain, transparent and white. A shadow: curly metal from the window-bars falling and shifting as the curtains move. Someone is playing guitar in the flat upstairs, and I hear the familiar sounds of my daughter and her dad somewhere outside, no words, just sound. The world is for a moment digested through my body, deep and heavy, fragmented but full of sense, sense that I am not awake enough to appreciate, verbalise, intellectualise; sense that I am not awake enough to orient myself in. Or to direct.

If I had spoken the moment I woke, I could have said anything and nothing.

Maybe unexpected words would have expressed my deepest fears, or love, or maybe I would have said "star, puzzle, reach, and never come back" ... just like that.

Kafka's overflowing

Traditional storytelling structure with a beginning, middle and end relies on unity of plot. One predictable step follows another. This structure does not yield any surprises. It does not overflow with startling words, fragmented sentences or straying ideas.

Helene Cixous describes the last words that Kafka wrote, on a serviette at the garden

table when he was no longer able to speak: “Limonade es war alles so grezenlos”; Lemonade everything was so infinite. The words, in their non-association, disrupt and make room for what Cixous describes as an overflowing, words all new in meaning. For Cixous, Kafka’s sentence sums up “the beginning and the end, the whole of life, enjoyment, nostalgia, desire, hope.”

My mother may have wanted to write. I am not sure. She had many volumes of poetry, and she loved to read. Once she wrote on a serviette. She had heard about automatic writing, and at a dinner party she and her friends wrote whatever came to mind while counting backwards from one hundred to one. They wrote on serviettes, snippets of paper, and receipts hauled from woolly pockets.

Later she stood in the lounge room holding a red serviette. She stood in the middle of the room, reading it to herself. Was it an infatuated look on her face or a look of surprise? I am not sure. But I do know that she looked at the serviette as if the writing didn’t belong to her. I don’t know what she wrote. It could have been something beautiful or simply a line she might not have imagined herself writing. Perhaps she was lying on Freud’s couch without knowing it. Perhaps the words no longer wrapped themselves around her like a comfortable old coat, but were in flight, escaping her grasp.

misreading

The word “pear” came to my mind when I read the words: “linear perspective.” Maybe I am a bit dyslexic, maybe a writer needs to be. I go from linear perspective to thinking about pear trees:

Pear trees at night, lots of them,
an orchard maybe, a sloping hill,
and all the pears lit, like
fireflies in
blue
blanket darkness.

automatic writing

The Breton movement claimed that automatic writing produces original writing: weird, wonderful, uncorrupted. Poetry in the raw. At times I write like that. Most of what arrives is everyday phrases: remnants and waste, body, breath, thoughts, recipes, shopping lists, phone

conversations with friends, arguments, and how much money I have left in my bank account. But sometimes the most tender word combinations or beautiful visions arrive. Little surprises. And because the origin is uncertain meaning escapes.

weighty words

Novelist Annie Dillard writes about the difference between a vision and the writing that may originate from that vision. The vision, argues Dillard, cannot be fully known. It escapes the writer's grasp. Dillard writes:

It is a glowing thing, a blurred thing of beauty. Its structure is at once luminous and translucent; you can see the world through it.

The process of writing does not consist of filling in the vision. Dillard argues that "you cannot even bring the vision to light." A writer might exclaim: "I've got it! I have an idea so wonderful that it will give meaning to my life, in fact to the whole world!" It is likely, however, that when the writer is asked what the idea entails, they will only be able to give vague sense impressions. Fragmented and incoherent. Small, almost undetectable, currents in a large sea.

The writer feels the vision in its translucent splendour. But when the work begins the writing follows its own laws. It has its own weight and the translucent beauty of the vision is replaced with something solid. Dillard writes:

The page is jealous and tyrannical; the page is made of time and matter; the page always wins. The vision is not so much destroyed, exactly, as it is, by the time you have finished, forgotten. It has been replaced by this changeling, this bastard, this opaque lightness, chunky ruinous work.

The vision is, according to Dillard, replaced by a "changeling," a "bastard." For an emerging writer, indeed for any artist, this can be a devastating experience.

cardboard box

I had a box made of cardboard. It could fit a tiny cake. I was eight.

I wanted to create a world inside it; the same magical world I sensed between the trees in

the morning, in the wet moss, in the glistening trunks of birch trees. And in the mist. My body stretched with longing, to show, to sense it all again, exactly the same, in one little box.

I furiously collected leaves, moss, branches, pebbles. I didn't know it was impossible to re-create, to make something exactly the way I had experienced it, to bottle that sense, pure, undiluted. And I didn't know it was going to be a disappointment so deep that my stomach still turns when I remember the box: leaves pathetically arranged, bits and pieces, ugly and easy to discard. How could the garden I sensed be evoked? Was it even possible?

sea monster

Leonardo da Vinci had a vision of an antediluvian sea -monster while he was examining marine fossils. Attempting to capture the vision, he tried to write about it. Three of his attempts are recorded. Maybe he wrote more. Maybe he sat up a whole night trying to get the words right, or maybe he sat up for a week struggling to replicate his vision:

O how many times were you seen among the waves of the great swollen ocean,
with your black and bristly back, looming like a mountain, and with grave and
stately bearing!

And many times were you seen among the waves of the great swollen ocean, and
with stately and grave bearing go swirling in the sea waters. And with your black
and bristly back, looming like a mountain, defeating and overwhelming them!

O how many times were you seen among the waves of the great swollen ocean,
looming like a mountain, defeating and overwhelming them, and with your black
and bristly back furrowing the sea waters, and with stately and grave bearing!

Da Vinci, like any other writer, adds a line here and takes one out there. He changes the words. He moves them around in an effort to get closer to his vision. Did the words eventually satisfy him or did he abandon the attempts? Was the page tyrannical like Dillard's and the words inadequate? Did they fail to describe the splendour of his sea-monster vision? Or was he happy with the last attempt, getting up from the table, finally able to sleep?

world qualities

Italo Calvino describes the distance between one's vision and the writing generated from that vision. He writes:

Soon I became aware that between the facts of life that should have been my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross. Maybe I was only then becoming aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world-qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.

Calvino does not, like Dillard, insist on the impossibility of realising one's vision. Instead he points out the difficulty of doing so. Calvino's notion of "word-qualities" points to the way writers feel pulled towards imitating stories heard before; stories with stereotypical characterisations within a traditional structures. The pen travels automatically towards the familiar.

the man of the late hour

My curtains are open onto the street. It's evening and it's raining. I can see dark shadows moving past my window; cars driving past, people coming home from work. Ahead of me, slightly to the left, lie the railway tracks where rattling, whispering trains pass every so often. I don't notice them much.

I've been writing since early morning. Things take time. Sometimes I work on a sentence or a paragraph endlessly. Then, just as I decide to do another half an hour, I am suddenly aware of him. He is standing next to me, not of this world, not of another. At first he seems patient and kind. He explains with quiet authority that he is there to tell me that I am wasting my time; that no one will like my novel, nor will they find it even the slightest bit amusing. People, he says, and nods importantly, need something that makes them feel good. They do not want strange curious narratives.

It's hard to ignore him. "I am going to finish the novel and see what happens," I say resolutely. "Perhaps someone out there will like it." But I am already starting to doubt.

"Do you want to fail?" he asks me gently, in a way that sounds as if he has the utmost concern for my wellbeing. "Why not write something people like? It would be so much easier. You're wasting your precious time and you haven't got any money." Then he says the most important thing of all, the one thing that makes my heart take notice. He says, "You will be liked—

loved even.”

I feel it in my gut. I feel how good it would be to belong, how much I miss it, and ideas for popular novels flit across my mind. Maybe I should write a popular novel, I think, remembering the abandoned crime novel collecting dust at the back of my drawer. I remember it having potential. But just then, outside on my dark lit window flutters a large grey moth. There is something so strange and gracious about the way it tries to get past the glass towards the light that I stop my conversation. The man disappears, for a moment.

what Calvino does

In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* Calvino attempts to evade the “world-qualities,” the worn-out phrases associated with traditional storytelling, by introducing the reader to multiple-narrative beginnings. In the first chapter a man arrives at a small town by train. The reader is given a few vague details about the town and is told that there is going to be a suitcase switchover between the man arriving and someone in the town. Calvino writes:

For a couple of pages now you have been reading on, and this would be the time to tell you clearly whether this station where I have got off is a station of the past or a station of today; instead the sentences continue to move in vagueness, greyness, in a kind of no man's land of experience reduced to the lowest denomination. Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it-a trap.

A narrative trap for Calvino is developing an expectation of how the narrative is going to progress. What is normally revealed at the beginning of a narrative—place, characters, and hints of what obstacles there might lie ahead—is hidden behind a veil of steam. Calvino writes: “The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph.” In the second chapter, Calvino begins a potential love story, unrelated to the train narrative, and in the third chapter he starts anew in Poland with a story about a young boy who is about to leave home. The novel touches upon a mosaic of conventional narrative beginnings but catapults the reader ahead just before they develop an expectation of how the story should progress and ultimately be resolved. Calvino writes:

Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death.

As the narrative beginnings in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* do not point to any possible endings, the novel cannot refer to either the "continuity of life" or to the "inevitability of death." Instead the novel, in its refusal to carry out a traditional narrative structure, achieves a particular kind of otherness. It is an otherness that arises from the absence of what we vaguely imagine should be there, a blurry structure, faintly echoed again and again.

mountains

On a holiday to Norway we arrive late in a small village. It's already dark when we check in to the only guesthouse open in the winter. We go to bed, exhausted.

Dawn comes, and from my bed I see the mountains, invisible when we arrived, now shapes, pushed, by the sunrise, into rapidly changing forms. I watch breathlessly, feeling as if I'm catapulted into one new scenario after the other, until I almost lose sight of myself. Memories I haven't visited for years, float, loosen themselves from deep muddy grounds; like water lilies letting go of riverbeds, drifting aimlessly.

into the woods

Gaston Bachelard writes of a presence in poetry that cannot be pinned down; a presence that arrests. An encounter with this presence is similar, argues Bachelard, to being immersed in the deep woods. It is a feeling, not only of being in unknown territory, but also of not knowing where one is going. Bachelard writes:

We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of "going deeper and deeper" into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are.

Poetic space, claims Bachelard, is a phenomenology of expansion, an experience of space that goes from "deep intimacy to infinite extent." Bachelard names this boundless quality "inner immensity."

Inner immensity stands “apart from objective expression”; it escapes our attempts to know it and to pin it down. The only way we can make “sense” of it, is to reach back into a childhood way of dreaming. Bachelard writes: “When he would dream in his solitude, the child knew an existence without bounds. His reverie was not simply a reverie of escape. It was a reverie of flight.”

In the activity of engaging with poetry we experience, argues Bachelard, going from “deep intimacy to infinite extent.” We reach back to childhood memories, while at the same time transcending what was. An example of Bachelard’s poetic space can be found in the poet Jan Zwicky’s fifth poem of the series, “Six Variations on Silence.” The poem reads:

The jade river in its skin of wind
below. Sudden coolness
of cloud shadow, even at mid-day.

Even though we may never have experienced a river, it is still possible to access the poetic space of river, by reaching back and with child-like imagination make more of whatever sense impressions and memories we have. The experience of poetry becomes something intimate. It is anchored in previous experiences, while simultaneously taking flight, escaping our grasp.

book shop

It’s a rainy morning. I walk through my neighbourhood bookshop to get to the café upstairs. Before reaching the staircase, I notice new arrivals on the front table. The books look radiant in the grey light. They lie in neat rows showing off their colourful covers. The shop smells of paper and ink. I pick up a poetry collection and read the first poem. It is about snow.

Then it happens. I feel it straight away, my body tenses in a mixture of sexual desire, excitement, fear and something else that I can’t quite name, I am propelled forward, into a feeling of almost ... taking off, almost ... falling over. I know snow. I can feel it on my skin, on my arms like wings.

I have only limited, fragmented memories of my childhood; a string of pearls, apart, like teeth on an old man. But a winter morning springs from my body into mind: red jacket, flushed cheeks, breathing in, breathing out. The sun is hanging low and still on a white horizon. Snow-covered fields stretch endlessly.

I respond to the poem. My encounter with the words arrests me. I am transcending in flight, a flight without a destination. I touch childhood; memory becomes red, becomes orange,

becomes white, childhood fields, a house of straw, and the smell when frost hits last night's ashes from the fireplace.

Later I show the poem to a friend, certain that she too would see its beauty and its strangeness. But she is neither arrested, nor the slightest bit moved. My encounter with the poem was intimate yet escaping. It was similar to Bachelard's arrest, a relation with something in flight, yet at the same time with the colours and tastes of memory and body.

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