

**INCARNATE WORDS:
PHENOMENOLOGY OF WRITING THE SELF**

by

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Abstract

This study describes the formation of identity in relationship to text, and specifically in relation to writing as embodied narrative. It weaves its way through historical perspectives on identity, poetic explorations of writing process, philosophical texts on embodiment in and around absences, textual and metaphoric, in order to show the possibility of a text, of a language, that would linger close to the flesh, and that engages kinesthetically with meaning inscribed in the body.

Embodied narrative arouses certain sensibilities inside the body, however it is also the process whereby a corporeal self finds an exterior. A moment can be reached in the act of writing when one enters the flow of flesh, in the space between self and other, self and text, that is the reciprocal mirroring of the other that becomes the same, yet is always other, the incomplete self coming to itself in each coming moment.

The forthcoming self is fleshed out of the oscillations between the self and other, reading the other in touching across absences that exist within the self and the text, in the space where the distinction between word and thing, or language

and experience, has not yet been made. This inscribing reveals the self as a kind of narrative, and writing the self as well as writing itself, as a fundamental way of moving.

In the dimension of both academic and personal narratives, this thesis considers writing as way of being, an embodied narrative, a possibility of carnal embrace that blurs the boundaries between the symbolic meaning of language and the meaning generated by sensual experience. Implied absences invite other forthcomings, both textual and sensual.

Dedication

To my mother, so far away now.

To my father, so close in absence.

To my family that gathered.

Acknowledgments

Many people guided, encouraged me and shared the woes and excitement of the process that has brought me to this stage of my journey.

I am deeply grateful for the patient and gentle guidance of Stephen Smith, my supervisor, who took my writing hand in his with respect, thoroughness and attention to detail I rarely experience, and who opened up for me a deeper space of scholarship where embodied writing could flourish. My many thanks for his mentorship cannot be measured in words, but are felt with my entire being, proprioceptively.

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...and if some pedants and university graduates try to stab you in the back, mumbling that it isn't true, just snap your fingers at them, because even if they can prove that you're lying, they can't cut off the hand you wrote with...
Miguel de Cervantes

It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.
Roland Barthes

Handwritten text, possibly a list or notes, with several lines of cursive script. The text is partially obscured by a black redaction box in the middle. The visible text includes:

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Prologue: Gathering

I had begun my writing journey when I was six years old.

I remember sitting with a blank journal and a pen, enjoying the scent of paper and ink that enfolded me like a blanket, the security of which I still long for. I wrote dark blue lines that resembled writing, pages of it, hoping something would come out of nothing, ink stains covering my fingers. In my imagination characters rode horses, climbed mountains, discovered treasures, and tried to be funny. When I learned to write actual words, I filled pads of paper with them. Rounded, big, fat words, written in child's hand. I imagine these pages yellow and crumbling now, but I doubt they exist anymore.

The environment I grew up in didn't support the ephemeral existence of an artist. "Just get a job as a secretary," they told me, "get married, have children."

The artist/writer burrowed deep inside of me, while my body carried on, dutifully. I became a secretary, got married, had children.

The movement of the pen nib over the paper still calls to me, but today it is a gesturing of self-discovery. This movement originates deep within my body. Gestures of writing these words comprise not only in the movements of my hand, that wrap the fingers around the pen or press the keys on the computer; they take into account the heat that coils over and around my stomach, that penetrates the follicles, the smallest of capillared veins, the blood that rushes into the farthest corners of my flesh, bones that resonate with rising excitement. With rhyme, rhythm, flow, the feet meet the floor of this space, and take a journey into a landscape within, a landscape that opens up not to eyes, horizons and vistas, but spaces that take root in the flesh of my flesh, that feather across my skin.

I feel the bones too close to the skin in which I shelter, bulging in strange protrusions, stretching, craving words, promiscuous, seductive. Sentences rolling from my tongue, my pelvis, reverberations of expectation and aftermath, I am a whore that lusts after more words: deciduous, embark, rejuvenated, crepuscule, endow, slippery, intuitive, generous, tumultuous, aberrant, yield, torment, precise, gripping, manifold. I love.

Writing with a bodily awareness illuminates clearly the meaning, the shape of words, words that have a corporeal presence, and is an embodied gesturing of discovering the self. This discovery takes place in writing, and reading as well. In my body, a carnal text writes itself prior to its emergence in language, proprioceptively.

I am made of many layers. I don't reveal myself. Writing doesn't reveal. It is perhaps fiction, perhaps poetry, perhaps philosophy. Words upon words, words in layers, in strings, that I so fashionably inhabit, layers upon layers. As I write, speak, I layer on more, never peel off. I am hesitant to reveal, to surrender the self in any narrative: in any relation to other, I am always veiled. This veiledness, these layers, are what I am willing to surrender as an offering to the other and to the self. I hesitate to reveal a self that exists in this text, and so I layer on more narratives, which I reveal. Not a true surrender. What I am surrendering is a narrative.

Words surround me in layers and layers of string that make up the round shape, like a cheek or a breast; but when you unravel it, there is nothing. Just string. A string of words. In a gesture of unraveling, a movement around space contains nothing. Perhaps something. Or both.

I write a single word. It shines in the vastness of the page. I rip the page from the notebook and fold it into a paper plane. The wind begins to gather. I throw the paper plane and its sole passenger into the next gust, make an offering of my word to an approaching cloud.

And within the folds of a storm cloud, swelled with moisture, something grows. Not nothing, but even that. That is what I reveal. A cloud, a storm, when it discharges, in a fit of laughter, droplets falling in ribbons of tears, crystal balls. I see the world reflected in them, upside down, lenses of perception. Rain falls down on

me, like an invisible ink, my skin is paperthin, it drinks the world. Upside down. I feel the world upside down. I feel it before I see it, side up. My body, my proprioceptor.

[Faint, illegible handwritten text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.]

Chapter One

Considering the Body

Early morning run along the inlet. The air is crisp and salty, full of the rich scent of rotting leaves and ocean things living and dying. My body gives off sweaty heat and I feel stronger in spite of my heavy, tired muscles. I meet other runners along the way. Some pound heavily, red-faced; some breathe loudly to maintain their effort; some leap athletically; and some flow by smoothly, beating the trail in their own inner rhythms.

Many people undergo this regular ritual for many different reasons.

We live in a society obsessed with the body. Countless exercises, diet regimes and fashion dictatorships make demands on our already fragile selves with urgent guidelines necessary to improve our bodies, make them more beautiful – or, should I say, less ugly – loathsome, even? It seems this obsession is misdirected away from the body, the material, felt body – flesh, bone and blood – and centered instead on the image of it. The body becomes an exteriority of surfaces, an abstraction of a perfect object that can never be attained. As our egos weaken in the assault, we begin to see our bodies, and in extension our selves, as inadequate, weak, fat, not blond enough, not masculine enough... Does this obsession stem from an unconscious hatred of our bodies? Is this kind of corporeal

unconsciousness tied to our rejection of the body as is, to the idea that the body is imperfect, tiresome baggage?

We have come to think of ourselves – our innermost essence (Abram, 1996, p. 45) – as something separate from the body. Yet the self comes in flashes of visceral experiences – disinterested of pleasure and knowledge at the precise moment of receiving them – that dissolve back to the prison of language.

Linguistic paradigms, enforced by dominant ideologies (so easily disseminated by the ubiquitous media) have become entrenched in our psyche; we are inscribed by ideology through language and unconsciously self-regulate its prescriptives. The modern subject is constructed in discourse; or in the words of an American linguist and philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, man himself is a sign, a product of language (Silverman, 1983, p. 18). Through language, the self is contrasted to an outer world, which, although 'social', becomes for it a kind of nature; the self is governed by language internalized as a nature (Barker, 1984, p. 52). As if somehow language is a system or an entity separate from our corporeal existence, as if we couldn't experience anything before we learn to name it. It is ironic that language, that wonderful enabler of knowledge, can imprison us in a box of illusions and, as Saul (1995) says, be responsible for our inability to identify and act upon our reality (p. 47).

This disembodied language always steals existence from the pre-conscious experience, from the carnal energy that gives meaning to the self through the body, proprioceptively. A non-eros, stillborn.

Not only are we unable to identify reality, we are at a loss to locate the coefficient of it – our body. We are still the Cartesian mind/body split (Descartes is laughing right now, wherever he is). Like 21st century Don Quixotes, we battle the postmodern windmills in the landscape of advertisement and information rhetoric, the images and language that flood our culture in media. In pursuit of truth, we cling hysterically to our unconscious¹ (p. 54).

Is there a possibility of a text, of a language, that would linger closer to the flesh, that would engage kinesthetically with meaning inscribed in the body? What words, what tensions would bring to language the full, multi-sensible excess of being in the world, within the body and outside of it? What text would enable a movement of words from the flesh to the billowing page, a movement between the self and other? What words could move the absences and intimacies of living in the flesh into language?

¹ In his *Unconscious Civilization* (1997), Saul describes our civilization as “gripped in ideology that denies and undermines the legitimacy of the individual as the citizen in a democracy, an ideology that leads to a worship of self-interest and denial of the public good” (p. 186), a civilization locked in “a passive certitude” (p. 36), with “an addictive weakness for large illusions” (p. 18), and “a difficulty perceiving this weakness” (p. 22), “a dangerously unconscious civilization” (p. 4).

I am thinking of writing, the engagement and animation of eros, the movement that can break language out of the prison of transcendent abstraction, that can bring a language of speaking and writing that enhances the corporeal, the flesh and more – a language, words, writing, that bring fullness, yet not closure, to the self in coming forth from within to the flesh of the world.

Reality is not a problem of appearance, of surface considered solely in scopical field, but a problem of being. There is a paradox of the social self, naturalized in language, and the interior, solitary self. For Levinas (1987) in this traversing of social and cultural landscape, the modern self nevertheless exists in solitude. In this solitude, the self speaks and writes in disembodied language, skimming the surface of existence, always in an attempt to transcend the carnal. Levinas points to this monadic existence when he talks about existence as a solitary mode of being (p. 42). He distinguishes an existent and existing, one as a substantive subject, the other as a verb, analogous to Heidegger's Being and Dasein (p. 45): "one can exchange everything between beings except existing. In this sense, to be is to be isolated by existing" (p. 42).

The way of being for the self is of necessity also a materiality. The self is both body and mind, as one. Yet even as Levinas speaks of existence as essentially weighted or enchaind in materiality (p. 68), there is a curious absence of the body in his theories, both discursive and conceptual. He maps out the self and the distance it takes from its own materiality as solitary "not just because of the

'subjective' character of the sensations it combines, but because of the unlimitedness of light and the impossibility for anything to be on the outside" (p. 65). That is to say, for Levinas, light, which for him equals knowledge, "is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me...the illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us" (p. 64).

The self and the other here seem to be insoluble entities/units, which are opposed to one another, never connecting beyond the visible. The self is always transcending in its solitude, this transcendence being possible only as "transcendence without a return to its point of departure" (p. 66). So the self, bathed in the visible, in the light/knowledge, is continually departing its own materiality into a disembodied exile. This transcendence is described by Levinas as a kind of liberation (p. 67), where the "relationship of identification is the encumbrance of the self, by the care it takes of itself or its materiality".

In the very instant of the transcendence of need, placing the subject in front of nourishments, in front of the world as nourishment, this transcendence offers the subject a liberation from itself ...the subject is absorbed in the object it absorbs, and nevertheless keeps a distance with regard to that object. (p. 67)

Why is the self or its materiality an encumbrance? The embodied existence in the material world of sensual experiences, needs and desires, which the self/existent finds itself somehow "thrown into" (p. 45), has to be disregarded in order to exist truly. For Levinas this transcendence is not possible in the body,

because "life could only become the path of redemption if, in its struggle with matter, it encounters an event that stops its everyday transcendence from falling back upon a point that is always the same" (p. 66). The embodied self is the same to itself in its materiality, in its body. Even though being/existence for Levinas begins in hypostasis (p. 43), which connotes embodiment², the existence, or being, is always solitary and transcending its materiality. Levinas positions this substantive subjectivity across time and space against the other. At the same time, the other is entirely impenetrable, unknown – unknowable – with the ultimate transcendence and the ultimate unknowable other for Levinas being death:

...unknown that is impossible to translate into terms of light – that is, that is refractory to the intimacy of the self with the ego to which all our experiences return...the unknown of death, which is not given straight off as nothingness but is correlative to an experience of the impossibility of nothingness. This way death has of announcing itself in suffering, outside all light, an experience of the passivity of the subject, which until then had been active and remained active even when it was overwhelmed by its own nature, but reserved its possibility of assuming its factual state. (p. 69)

The passive is the dialectic of active, however, implied as a potentiality for activity. Death is not passive, it is death – nothingness perhaps, but even beyond nothingness, an unknown, a mystery, an other which the subject no longer has any possibility of grasping (p. 76). Yet even in death there is a possibility of movement,

² The etymological relevance here is derived from *hypostasis*, meaning "the substance or essential nature of an individual" (Webster's, 1997), with *substance* being the "physical material from which something is made of" (Webster's, 1997), which in the case of an individual is his or her body, the flesh.

a gesture, for the body remains, to the very last breath, implied in accepting of, and embracing, death.

As it is, one cannot be liberated from that which is its material essence, yet transcendence in Levinas is not possible in the body. What is this transcendence? Transcendence is the word saturated with historical connotations of mind ascending from body, in the hierarchy of mind over body. We have come to revere the mind – the intellectual capital – as the possession that leads to power, and come to think of the body as a machine, made of separate parts to be studied, taken apart and reconstituted in a more desirable manner, whether conceptually or physically. As David Abram (1996) puts it:

...the living, feeling, and thinking organism is assumed to derive, somehow, from the mechanical body whose reflexes and "systems" have been measured and mapped, the living person now an epiphenomenon of the anatomized corpse. (p. 34)

Not a corpse, but a living body. Stephen Ross (1999) distinguishes singularities and individuals. Singularities, such as the Levinasian solitary self, do not belong to the folding, to the flesh. Instead, "always individuals in kinds rather than singularities " (p. 151). Ross turns to Deleuze and Guattari, who discuss multiplicities as rhizomatic, arborescent pseudomultiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari, quoted in Ross, 1999, p. 154), dependent on each other, rising, unraveling from each other, feeding off each other, intertwining, spreading across and through. A rhizome represents deterritorialization of corporeality that inhabits

a place, a bounded territory whose boundaries become permeable. This deterritorialization is always followed by reterritorialization for Deleuze and Guattari, by stratification (p. 155).

Insisting that our understanding of bodies and their materiality remain corporeal, Deleuze and Guattari turn to the metaphor of earth as a body (p. 149) and speak of stratification of kinds, imprisoning singularities into strata. The geological metaphor of stratification lends itself well to the idea of a body, bodies, living within a social structure. Although this stratification implies boundaries that are more solid and abrupt than the fluidity of folding and refolding that Ross emphasizes, still one can perceive the strata of the earth as less solid, in tearing of the strata, along the faultline, a fluid layering that remains in motion.

Ross speaks of “singularities falling and folding back into strata”, into “restricted economies”, yet also of the full body of earth, or “general economy, an abundance...filled with boundless flow and circulations of restrictions, strata and exclusions” (p. 150). This flow connects the strata at the faultline, a space of fluidity and multiplicity – the space between, a chiasm – where, even though some stratification takes place, a division, a territorialization, like a boundary of skin, still something penetrates, permeates. There are moments when the strata liquefies along the faultline, heat (or energy, throbbing) transforms the hardness, strata, boundary, momentarily, as when skin touches skin, when the faultline skips –

slippage – and rock softens, melts for a moment, merges with what it touches – deterritorializes.

In the corporealities that Ross discusses, “something moves and circulates beyond the strata that define the corporeal limits of [these] bodies” (p. 162). It is a kind of liberation of flesh within flesh, permitting of corporeal excess, confirmation of the body. We are bound as individuals in our bodies, not singular, as in entities existing against a solid barrier to the outside world, but individuals bound in skin, a permeable membrane, layered, folded into the flesh of corporeality that embraces and exceeds, as it enfolds: “we might think of bodies...in endless movements in the proximities of other bodies, styles, ways of touching, moving, reaching out and touching proximity” (p. 126). Here transcendence is a movement not away from the material body as in Levinas: rather, the body transcends, or perhaps ex-scends, extends, moves in all directions, into excess, a surplus of flesh into flesh, into multiplicities.

A scent of a storm, brought on by a shift along the faultline where my skin meets the thin paper page. Writing renders me in ink, something spills forth, from within. Words swell between the strata of skin that is only paperthin, fold over the solid, become liquid. Words erupt along these fissures, flesh spills forth into flesh. Words allow a merging in embodied tectonics of the becoming self, written in ink. Beyond the skin, “the sack in which I am enclosed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 134), resides the multiplicity of language spoken before words, inside and outside the

paperthin membrane, where the unspeakable dwells, gathers and seeks to move through. This first writing, before words, like a primary movement of kinesthesia, is not intentional in a sense of conscious purpose, although there is a proprioceptive intentionality that I call eros. Eros, the force that wakes the flesh in movement forth, marries with the kinesthetic sense of orientation toward a meaning. Upon reflection, words continue to shape, to open up, to embrace the self, which can then move into the world in search for more. Meeting of experience and language, consorts of flesh, is a fleeting embrace of reciprocity of proprioceptive intention. It is this corridor of flesh, of skin, bones and fluid, that allows language an access to the direct experience of writing as well as what one is writing about. Like a page on which words spill from an inked pen, coming forth, slick with movement. Voracious, voluptuous, volatile. Unstopable.



Returning to Levinas and his concept of liberation of self beyond materiality, I am reminded of the parallels within the classical philosophical paradigms: Levinas's transcendence echoes the western Cartesian mind/body split and the classic philosophers' denunciation of the flesh as encumbrance. In our contemporary social and cultural theory, it is Descartes, and proponents of Cartesian thought, who are usually credited with, and flagellated for, the idea of mind and body split. But it goes much further back – all the way to the 'cradle of civilization' – Ancient Greece. In his book, David Orr (1994) quotes from Robert

Proctor's *Education's Great Amnesia* "the ancients...conceptualized and experienced their humanity not as a separation, but as participation in the whole order of being" (p. 61). It would seem that the ancients practiced an affinity to nature in the wider sense of the word – an affinity to all things human and other-than-human, that they participated in the *whole order of being*. We don't really know how the ancients lived and what they included and excluded from daily lives. But we do have records of their philosophies, how they conceptualized and mythologized the world around them. To this day, Western culture is affected by these opinions, enamored, as it is, with the writings of ancient poets and philosophers, handed down through the countless translations and interpretations.

Some of the pivotal texts affecting the development of all subsequent western philosophy were the dialogues of Plato. The *Phaedo* is a record of Socrates' last day of life, and, not surprisingly, it deals among other topics with the soul's immortality. Socrates, aware that he is only hours from his own death, engages in a dialogue with some close friends, where he focuses on a question of how "the real philosophers wish to die and deserve to die, and what kind of death it is" (Plato, 467). In searching for the truth and knowledge of life and death, Socrates asks (as therein lies his specialty): "Is it through the body that real truth is perceived?" (p. 468). He answers:

...or should he (the one seeking knowledge) approach each thing to be known with his intelligence alone, not adding sight to intelligence, or dragging in any other sense along with reasoning, but using the intelligence uncontaminated, keeping clear of eyes and ears

and , one might say, of the whole body, because he thinks the body disturbs him and hinders the soul from getting possession of truth and wisdom when body and soul are companion?...genuine philosophers must come to some such opinion as follows...so long as we have the body with us in our inquiry, and our soul is mixed up with so great an evil, we shall never attain sufficiently what we desire, and that, we say, is the truth." (p. 469)

These are strong words. Why was Socrates so hateful of the body? What does he mean by "genuine" philosophers? And what about desire? Isn't desire, even for such a pure thing as truth, also born within the body? The ancient philosophers believed that there is such a thing as an absolute truth – known in the disembodied mind – and committing their lives to finding and defining it, strove to become "genuine philosophers" (p. 469). Was this intellectual elitism or fear that knowledge, acquired throughout life, should dissipate and come to nothing at death? Or a little bit of both? Perhaps Socrates and the philosophers who followed, culminating in Descartes and echoed in Levinas, wished to dismiss the body out of primal fear of death, fear of a nothingness that follows. In their deliberations on the finity of death they conceptualized the separatedness of soul and the aging, finite physical body. They mythologized the everlasting existence of soul, the seat of wisdom and knowledge. After all, how could they conceive all their lives' efforts at attaining knowledge as futile, dissipating into the nothingness in death? If soul should die with the body, would there be any meaning to their lives? The myth of immortal soul became central to their ability to overcome the fear of death and nothingness, since "those who rightly love wisdom are practicing dying and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world...should they not willingly go to the

place where there is good hope of finding what they were in love with all through life (and they loved wisdom), and of ridding themselves of the companion which they hated?" (p. 470).

Writing to Rescue the Body

flesh irrigated
by laughter
 falling
 in ribbons
from the stormy sky

words
like aberrant drops
skip in shamelessly
long ever after
the downpour has landed
in my mouth
on my tongue

We are born out of the body, exiled from amphibian existence, like some prehistoric creatures, that first abandoned the oceans for the land, we are born out of the amniotic waters and are still dreaming of those liquid days when we were suspended, with eyes closed. We are thrown, per Levinas, into this world and are, as individuals, constituted by both nature and culture. Why then are we so compelled to separate them, to shun the former and embrace only the other? By nature of our birth we are embedded in the natural world, as Orr (1994) points out:

...we are of the earth; our flesh is grass. We live the cycle of birth and death, growth and decay. Our bodies respond to daily rhythms of light and darkness, to the tug of the moon, and to the change of the seasons. The salt content of our blood, our genetic similarity to other life forms, and our behavior at every turn give us away. (p. 204)

Our bodies are embedded in the flow of the natural world and we need to become more aware of the interconnectedness of the intellectual and the corporeal, the ongoing reciprocity of our body and the world. Is knowledge really an exclusive possession of an immortal soul, or does it flow from the corporeal experience? Where does thought originate? Merleau-Ponty (1968) points us toward the possibility of ideas coming from the flesh, toward things that *mean* before language, wherefrom language can emerge:

...we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived – and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. (p. 135)

In speaking/writing the language comes from the body, that "is not itself a thing, interstitial matter, a connective tissue, but a *sensible for itself*" (p. 135). The problem, one Merleau-Ponty is not avoiding, is to determine "how the sensible sentient can also be thought" (p. 137).

The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh. (p. 135))

This flesh “is not matter, is not mind, is not substance” (p. 139). The words, like water bearing the heaviness of its flow, like air sifting through pages of an open book, this flesh is an element “in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being” (p. 139).

Without our tongue, ears, eyes, fingers we couldn't speak or hear another's voice. Nor could we have anything to speak about, or even reflect on, or to think, since without any contact, any encounter, without any glimmer of sensory experience, there could be nothing to question or to know (Abram, 1996, p. 45):

The living body is the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself – the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge (p. 45)

And more, prior to engaging the physical senses in the experiencing self, the impetus for all knowledge is the movement, born within the body, an animation that is “at the core of every creature’s engagement with the world because it is in and through movement that the life of every creature ‘acquires reality’” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 135). In the spontaneity of bodily animation, prior to reflection,

we find our “point of departure for living in the world and making sense of it” (p. 136).

But after this incarnate pre-reflection comes language, closing in on the bodily experience and the reality of the moment, obscuring the pre-reflective subject in ideology. Still, is it possible to conceive of using the language more fluidly, to connect the mind with the bodily perceptions? How can we make language more experiential? We begin with writing, with the experience itself, veiled in the dark, subtracted from the visible, multiplied by touches from within, without words at first, so words can come. Max van Manen (2002) speaks of the difficulty of this kind of writing, of words “killing what they name” (p. 244). Yet we write, “to make contact, to achieve phenomenological intimacy with an object of interest” (p. 245). Van Manen’s object of interest might be contact, a caress or embrace that one seeks in writing. And he finds that “rather than touching something with words, the writer feels being touched, an invitation as it were,” (p. 245), release of something out of nothing, in the space of text “that we create in writing but also (a text that is) in some sense already there” (p. 245). To shape the experience in words, as van Manen suggests, to write, one has to write already (p. 245).

This writing, in the landscape within the flesh, inside and outside of the body, can be experienced as a kind of pre-reflective intentionality, where the bodily motions are attuned to the materiality of the flesh of the world, and, as

Stephen Smith (2003) suggests, is a gesture akin to movements which “emanate from a primordial gesturing in space and time, the significance of which is first seen and felt in the rushes of movement that we identify with the child” (Smith, 2003, p. 12). Such “elemental gestures” as the caress, embrace and kiss involve the body in a reciprocal connection with the world outside, they are “gestural reciprocities and connections...intimate gestures of the flesh, such as the embrace, the caress and the kiss, (that are) primordial attunements, motions of rhythm and reciprocity, that emanate from the world in identification with it” (p. 12). These gestures not only connect the body to the world outside, Merleau-Ponty’s flesh of the world, but are experienced as movements within the body itself. Primary kinesthetic spontaneity is “the standard upon which our sense-making of the world unfolds” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 148). Both Sheets-Johnstone and Smith stress the embodied connection to the world prior to language, through movement/kinesthesia and elemental gestures. We can perhaps evoke memories of such primary motile “rushes” while observing children’s spontaneous pleasure of movement in play, as Stephen Smith intimates (Smith, 2003, p. 12). Yet as individuals always in the process of becoming, unfinished and coming forth into time, space and meaning, we are, even as adults, implicated in these gestures, even if perhaps not as vibrantly and spontaneously, less aware.

Writing is such a gesture, both a pre-reflective textuality which resides in the intentionality of direct experience as well as a phenomenological investigation of relationship between experience and language.



My Bulgarian grandmother never read. Some even thought she was not that smart. Yet she was completely bilingual. She taught me to live between languages. Now I write this not even in my mother tongue. Mother tongue...the self emerges from language like a body from the mother's womb. An embodied language gives shape to the self like mother's body gives shape to the sensuality of flesh. I want to speak/write words that connect the carnality of the flesh to language. Writing is an embodied experience, and the body, throbbing with the movement and shape, like a dancer, who knows that

shape is not only about what something looks like on the outside, but what it feels like on the inside. We make shapes on the outside by what we do with our bones and muscles on the inside; internal forming creates the external form. It is this internal sensing of oneself in stillness and in motion that turns what would otherwise be standing or sitting, walking or running, into *dancing* (Stinson, 1995, p.1).

Or writing.

Natalie Goldberg (1986) knows about animated, embodied writing:

What people don't realize is that writing is physical. It doesn't have to do with thought alone. It has to do with sight, smell, taste, feeling, with everything being alive and activated. The rule for writing practice of 'keeping your hand moving', not stopping, actually is a way to physically break through your mental resistances and cut through the concept that writing is just about ideas and thinking. You are physically engaged with the pen, and your hand, connected to

your arm, is pouring out the record of your senses. There is no separation between the mind and the body. (p. 50)

In her *Writer's Diary*, Virginia Woolf (1954) also speaks of writing in connection to the body, to its shape.

What I want is presumably unity...suppose I could run all the scenes together more? – by rhythms chiefly. So as to avoid those cuts; so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end – I don't want the waste that the breaks give; I want to avoid chapters; that indeed is my achievement, if any here: a saturated unchopped completeness; changes of scene, of mind, of person, done without spilling a drop. Now if it could be worked over with heat and currency, that's all it wants. And I am getting my blood up (temp. 99)...having got astride my saddle the whole world falls into shape; it is this writing that gives me my proportions. (Woolf, p. 160)

In the context of movement/gesture, I return to Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) who reflects on the notion of animation as a primary source of cognition. As I move the pen across a page, words flow from within, animate my flesh, just as the hand animates the lines into shapes, within the space of my body, the space of the page, and in between. These levels of movement constitute a kinesthetic consciousness (p. 151), an experience that bridges the gap between the experiential and the linguistic (p. 148), in the movement that is “the generative source of our primal sense of aliveness and our primal capacity for sense-making” (p. 132). Kinetic movement, according to Sheets-Johnstone, is the primal, proprioceptive, capacity to make sense of ourselves. It is the beginning of cognition (p. 137). Before language, before text. I am moved to write by a deep desire to engage with the force that swells within, like a storm cloud that gathers and implodes in every

nerve, muscle and bone. It collects in my stomach, and travels through my veins to the corporeal edges of my being, arouses the storm, an eros within. My thoughts are not separate from the body, but are born in my flesh, and “not just above my neck” (Stinson, p. 4).

This carnal philosophy should not be removed from writing practices, from theory. The textual existence should resonate carnally, and philosophy, as an academic discipline, should “pay more critical attention to the variety of somatic practices through which we can pursue our quest for self-knowledge, for the reconstruction of immediate experience into improved living” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 177). Embodied experience of writing, in the somatic, kinesthetic sense, “should belong to the practice of philosophy” (p. 177). The skin is just paperthin.

The Flesh of Writing

In contrast to Levinas and the classic philosophers, Merleau-Ponty writes about phenomenology’s concern with the pre-reflective world, which is the background of all reflection, the world in which human beings are already engaged prior to reflection, proprioceptively. The perceiver is not a pure thinker (or vehicle for language) but a body-subject, and any act of reflection is based on that pre-personal, anonymous consciousness which is incarnate subjectivity (Langer, 1989, p. xv). The boundary between the body and the world is not a solid, impenetrable barrier, preventing us from experiencing the reality, the body is more like a membrane that defines a surface of metamorphosis and exchange (Abram, 1996,

p.46). The character of the boundary here is diaphoric. Bodies have boundaries that both prevent entering and at the same time allow it. Skin is a permeable membrane. Merleau-Ponty describes a kind of transubstantiation of body and the other-than-human world as a matter of taking account of "the total situation, which involves reference from the one to the other" (Langer, 1989, p. xv). For Merleau-Ponty, the "*body* is a term within flesh" (Vasseleu, 1998, p. 26) and living flesh is the modality of the body inscribed within sensibility (p. 27). Mind and body are for Merleau-Ponty inextricably intertwined, for the self's being in the body "ideality becomes an extension, and by virtue of its ideality the sensible resides within the subject" (p. 27).

The diacritical structure of flesh is rooted, for Merleau-Ponty, in the visual (Vasseleu, 1998, p. 31) and the body/self oscillates across the chiasm, and this body "that cannot be properly conceived, adequately thematised or reproduced in thought is 'flesh'" (Vasseleu, 1998, p. 29). This reversibility marks out a body/self that is always in a process of becoming. The self can never contain itself in the visual field of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm; the visual field of the self is always incomplete by the virtue of the limits of sight's locality: I can only see what is in front of me. This incompleteness in sight's economy is well described by David Abram (1996).

The clay bowl resting on the table in front of me meets my eyes with its curved and grainy surface. Yet I can only see one side of that surface – the other side of the bowl is invisible, hidden by the side that faces me. In order to view that other side, I must pick up the

bowl and turn it around in my hands, or else walk around the wooden table. Yet, having done so, I can no longer see the first side of the bowl. Surely I know that it still exists; I can even feel the presence of that aspect which the bowl now presents to the lamp on the far side of the table. Yet I myself am simply unable to see the whole of this bowl all at once. (Abram, 1996, p.51)

Just as we can never encompass the object in its entirety within the scopic economy, the self can never be captured as complete. Although the self, situated within the symbolic system, could be perceived as contained in discourse, more contemporary theories of subjectivity emphasize the implication of such discursive situatedness in corporeal practices that equally entail an extralinguistic dimension of meaning (Lorraine, 1999, p. 4).

Language is like waking from a dream; it is a shifter. It shifts the domain of a dream, and the domain of experiences, into a world of its own. As Paul Ricoeur (1995) notes, “language no longer appears as a mediation between minds and things. It constitutes a world of its own” (p. 6). The most visceral experiences – like dreams upon waking – diminish in language. The space between experience and language, like the space between sleeping and waking, is a liminal space, a lacuna, an undiscovered landscape of the self. The self exists also in the precognitive experience, when a somatic event points to some place in discourse, and the connection isn’t always clearly defined in language. It doesn’t mean it is not there, or not real.

Many theorists close their area of inquiry into a conceptual prison, out of which there is no escape, or as Richard Shusterman (1997) puts it: "philosophy's traditional quest (was) to guarantee our knowledge by basing it on fixed, unquestionable grounds" (p. 157). But think of a door ajar, however slightly, of landscapes and bodies that are not totally knowable. The ultimate decree among most linguists and philosophers is that "it is in language that the subject has its site and origin, and only through language is it possible to shape transcendental apprehension as an 'I think' "(Agamben, 1993, p. 45). French linguist Benveniste considers language and subjectivity theoretically inseparable: "it is in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject" (p. 45). It seems a conclusive, finite, inescapable fate of self to be constituted by language. As I struggle to find an opening, my conceptual door always slightly ajar, never tightly shut, I turn to the moment of experience, the sense of reciprocity between mind and body.

How does one reconcile the phenomenological aspect of language, the corporeal experience of the moment of utterance, with the written/spoken language that is separate from and outside the body, as an independent structure? Is cognition only possible with language, as argued by many philosophers? Can language as a conceptual framework and experience as a phenomenological situation co-exist? Hélène Cixous thinks so:

...when I write fiction, I write with my body. My body is active, there is no interruption between the work that my body is actually

performing and what is going to happen on the page. I write very near my body and my pulsions...texts are made of flesh. When you read these texts, you receive them as such. You feel the rhythm of the body, you feel the breathing and you make love with these texts...(Cixous, 1990, p. 27)

Language and experience infuse each other as they remain separate. Some experiences are profoundly deep without using language. They occur in the body, not being pre-cognitive, but pre-linguistic. "Most experiences are unsayable", says Rilke, "they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art" (Rilke, 1984, p. 4).

It is too easy to reduce the immediate prediscursive experience to poetic aesthetics, but there is something in a poet's expression. I like to leave this door ajar, listening to a poet's words:

My steps along this street
resound
 in another street
in which
 I hear my steps
passing along this street
in which

Only the mist is real
 (Here, Octavio Paz)



Many narratives converge in the text of the inscribing self. Layers of meaning and layers of self are generated by sensual experience that can only come about within the body. Hélène Cixous (1990) equates body and text, since the pleasure of writing is also a pleasure of sexuality/sensuality. Reality shifts constantly towards fiction. Writing arouses certain sensibilities that bring about a way of knowing about what goes on inside this body and outside it as well. Writing through the body, writing words that please my sensibility not just aesthetically, although aesthetics cannot be entirely discounted here. Part of my sensibility has to do with aesthetics.

Some words are beautiful the way they are. Like poise, moist, sluicing, pomegranate, or contemporaneous. Plum is one of my favorite words, it connotes body in skin, in the sticky, soft texture of vein-riddled flesh, purple skin leaving stains on skin; the word plum brings inwardly and carnally a memory so real I get lost in its flow.

A tree in a garden, summer day, sky so blue it eats my eyes, juice of the sweet fruit dripping down my chin. It is a memory, but the moment is real, it is now. If just this one word can do that to me, imagine many, a poem, a novel, a self inscribed with flesh on flesh. A word, pronounced or written, can involve different parts of the body (even dry linguistic science uses words like labial, fricative and glide that connote the body)– tongue, lips, throat, lungs, you can feel the body's gestures as it expels the air in uttering the sounds, breath flowing in and out, warm

going out, cool coming in, over the tongue, teeth, the quivering glottis; or as the hand moves the thin line of ink across a page, the face flushed in the rush, the reciprocal engagement of body and mind.

Just because I am sitting in a chair, whether with pen in hand or fingers hovering in expectation over the keyboard, it does not mean I am still, motionless. The whole body is poised in between, and resonates with, movements, spilling toward words that mark out the journey along the markings on the page. Running between the blue lines, the movement out of nothing takes my senses beyond the limit of skin, beyond the optic nerve, beyond the taste buds, beyond the beat of the ear drum, deep inside my throat, beyond the vocal chords. I refuse to be taken from it, from the text, I am the lover and the prey to my language, an anatomical clause, weighed down by the absences left by the words that moved out of me onto a page.

Paperthin, the page weighs nothing.

The words slowly weigh it down, and page by page, the heaviness transfers and shifts, yet I don't become lighter: there is more. More to breathe, more to feel, more to birth, more to penetrate. The words re-invent themselves after the coitus of momentary truth, pass further into more. And I am inside and outside this language, I merge with it, merge with the world. Writing is the moisture I excrete, the air I breathe.



Next time I'm running along the inlet I will breathe the air as I drink the water or eat my food. I will taste it, crunch it, swallow it and then I will let it take a piece of me. In breathing we inhale the world – the air full of particles from other beings, other things, other bodies – and in exchange share ourselves in exhaling.

Just try it. Inhale. Exhale.

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Chapter Two

Deeper Into Flesh

They used to say I was a big boned person. Touching my finger, I feel the fragility of the bone inside, small and vulnerable. Did I diminish? Seeing a bird in flight, overhead high above me, I feel I know the fragile hollow bones, stretching in the wings, I feel the feet curled up, legs extended back to ease the flow through the cold wind. I feel the feathers protruding from the pores of the cold skin, the neck stretching into the movements of clouds.

As it is, walking down the street with my hand in a warm pocket, my fingers are small, diminutive, fragile. I stretch them out, trying to branch out into the winter air, trapped in skin.

There is no surprise that I have made the questioning of the self that I am my life's obsession, asking historically (and hysterically) with so many others "who am I"? As I write, I wonder: will this be just another of the garden variety of personal cathartic writing, dictated by existential crisis or a need to realize a suppressed vocation, which, as Eco (1997) critically points out, is a temptation for many contemporary thinkers who substitute philosophy with pages of *belletrisme* (p. 5)? Does the world really need another narrative spiked with self-observations, semi-autobiographical meanderings, therapeutic poetry? Yet how else is one to begin the

exploration of the textures and nuances of a forming self, a complex process of psychological, philosophical, phenomenological, social and yes, narrative layering? I have no other beginning than that of my own self. The inscribing of an individual's identity is akin to writing a text, a narrative.

Martha Nussbaum (1990) articulates the inevitable connections between such disciplines as philosophy and literature, the role of emotions in deliberation and self-knowledge (Intro., p. ix), and points out that certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and form characteristic of the narrative artist (p. 5). Just as in any writing, so in inscribing the self "we look for a close fit between form and content, (and) consider that only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist (and not for example, the style associated with the abstract treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them" (p. 7).

Milan Kundera (1999) is also critical of the separation of philosophical and scientific texts of modernity from the things human.

The rise of the sciences propelled man into the tunnels of the specialized disciplines. The more he advanced in knowledge, the less clearly could he see either the world as a whole or his own self, and he plunged further into what Husserl's pupil Heidegger called in a beautiful and almost magical phrase, "the forgetting of being". Once elevated by Descartes to 'master and proprietor of nature', man has now become a mere thing to the forces (of technology, of politics, of history) that bypass him, surpass him, possess him. To those forces,

man's concrete being, his 'world of life' (*die Lebenswelt*), has neither value nor interest: it is eclipsed, forgotten from the start. (p. 3)

For Kundera, this forgotten human being comes alive in the novel. He accuses modernity of relegating the novel to the philosophical margin (p. 4). In the company of Descartes, who is usually credited with ushering in the modern era, Kundera places Miguel de Cervantes. "If it's true," says Kundera (1999), "that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being" (p. 4). The intent here is an attempt at a discursive *salto mortale* to consider the process of self-formation as a narrative of a pre-reflective world in which the self encounters the other, the space where the boundaries between internal and external modalities of being become blurred.

Quintessential philosophical questions for the modern western subject, questions of 'who am I?', 'how do I become?' and 'what is a good life for me?', have preoccupied much of western philosophy and literature, certainly from Cervantes on. Many philosophers and thinkers have written extensively on the subject of identity and how it is constructed and produced in the context of the cultural and socio-political particulars of each era. We are all striving, some more consciously than others, to discover the 'authentic self', and who we are as individuals and as members of human community. This striving is an effort to sustain an active, meaningful and productive life, without which we should feel much too acutely the absences and incompleteness of our identities. Yet here is the

glitch – not only do we search to know, we want to know for *certain*, we seek a completion, a *whole* self.

This seeking to know for certain has resulted in a plethora of experts, and the segregation of our knowledge into disciplines. For instance, how does one know that an object is a work of art, if one is not an artist, or an art critic? Is an object a work of art only if it is deemed as such by an accredited member of the art world (Richmond, 2003)? Can one not trust his/her instincts about seeing the object and reflecting on it with one's own sense of pleasure? We have become accustomed to look to experts for answers. But where do the experts gain their knowledge? How does one become certified in knowing about something? And does the expert's opinion guarantee a person knowledge? Or is it just an illusion that empowers one in 'knowing'? These knowledges are really theories. The word theory comes from the word *theoria*, which in Ancient Greece comprised a group of people chosen to confirm formally an event taking place. Only when an occurrence was attested to by *theoria* as having taken place was it pronounced to be true. What the *theoria* certified to be seen could then become the object of public discourse (Godzich, 1986, Intro., p. xiv).

In more contemporary history, with Guttenberg ushering in the age of print, the text has become the privileged site of knowledge. The truths that are immortalized in printed words have become the focus of human knowledge, the preciousness of which precedes even Guttenberg: the enormous laborious effort of

countless of scribes who copied the religious and philosophical writings. Text has become *theoria*. In our modern culture of the text we have privileged ideas and concepts.

The transfer from orality to text removes the body from discourse. Participation in an oral culture requires the self to use the senses differently than when living in a literate culture (Carson, 1998, p. 43) and “with that different sensual deployment comes a different way of conceiving his [sic] own relations with his environment, a different conception of his body and different conception of his self” (p. 43). Instead of using the body to exchange information – in speech, gesture, dance, dramatic performance, etc. – now that ideas can be printed, ideas in text exist separately from the body. They are disembodied. As Carson (1998) points out,

reading and writing require focusing the mental attention upon a text by means of the visual sense. As an individual reads and writes he gradually learns to close or inhibit the input of his senses, to inhibit or control the responses of his body, so as to train energy and thought upon the written words (p. 44).

Knowledge captured in text, in written word, printed and visual, elevates sight over the other senses. In the body economy, organized around a hierarchy of the senses, we rely primarily on vision to provide us with facts/truth about ourselves, about our world. We ‘read’ the ‘textual’ by holding vision above the other senses; we are more acutely aware of seeing; sight provides the strongest reference point in our daily orientation to the environment. I open my eyes in the

morning and see the time on the clock, see the clothes I will wear, see the laundry basket is full, grab my lunch on the way out the door, look for a ride to work, skim through my email, exchange information by typing, check the phone display for voicemail, read faxes, letters and reports, type more letters, drive home, pick something up for dinner, watch the news, feed the dog, the cat, the family, read books. In these daily activities my vision is constantly engaged, the rest of the body registering only peripherally the world around and within. A kind of paralysis, a numbness, veils my body from experiencing fully. Time to engage other senses: the pesky discomforts that nag at me, as I rush about – a shoe too tight, ache in the upper shoulder, the tip of my tongue feeling a bit fuzzy from a burn, when I tried to sip hot coffee too fast, smell of the garbage bin that should have been emptied, the sound of the television set, the stereo, the computer, and the electric guitar, all assaulting with an excess of information. When the bodily gestures and sensual experiences are marginalized in favor of visual/textual information, the familiar gestures reduced to seeing which registers faster, pain and discomfort is often the first sign of neglect. In the return to the body through discomfort and pain, I register movements that “make the familiar strange” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 144). Time to slow down and pay attention to the fuller animation within the body, time to listen and taste, smell and touch, and tune into the movement within the body, to receive the proprio-sceptor.

I try to reach deeper, and feel like a Russian babushka doll, layers and layers of skin, smaller and smaller as I go inside. Mother of a mother, child of a child, a

lineage of self, each inside another, smaller and smaller. The bones are shrinking. How do I feel my bones shrinking? The dissonance between the tired body that feels enormous with heaviness and the bones I feel shrinking, melting away, is something I cannot see or name. It bears down on me and I sink into the sense of something that eludes the text. I sense the body that I am familiar with and another within, a chance meeting, a wave of the hand. Before language.

And yet, this somatic kinesis does not animate only the body within; it reverberates in spatial resonance with the outside world. This movement that “creates the qualities that it embodies, it [doesn’t only] take place *in* space...we formally create space in the process of moving” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 143). The physical being resonates in space and creates space, simultaneously. Its kinesthetic wavelengths reach well beyond the skin: the self meets the other, includes the other in the space it creates, enters the chiasm, a reciprocity.



In our society the recognition of the other is emergent in many relationships: the other can be something different from a human, anything we can relate to, that exists in the realm of our experience. It could be a natural landscape, an animal, an ocean, a tree, or a moment in a busy street when the experience of the crowd flowing by can evoke feelings of belonging or alienation. The result is the relatedness, the saying yes, meeting the other. Anything we come into contact with,

not just with our solitary mind, the insatiable ego (always hungry for recognition), but also with our body, can provide a kind of relational reciprocity of mirroring the self in the moment of encounter, whether it is human or non-human, real or conceptual.

Text can be a very powerful other acting as a mirror whereby our identity is constructed. By text I don't mean only written text, although that certainly, but also the visual matrix of the cultural milieu – the symbolism and iconography in our surrounding cultural landscape, from architecture to advertising. By text I also mean cultural paradigms, the ideological signifiers perpetuated as internalized self-imposed moral markers that make up our identity. We 'read' off the other, we read into the other, and we write ourselves only to be read, written and re-written, a work in progress.

Self as a Literary Performance

Such a text is a pivotal mechanism for the self's becoming in Cervantes' (2001) novel *Don Quixote*. *Don Quixote* is a novel of a knight errant. In this title that Cervantes bestows on Don Quixote, and by which Don Quixote incessantly insists on identifying himself, we can detect already the nuances of the novel. The word errant has a double meaning. It can mean 'one that is wandering in search of adventure' (which is Don Quixote's version), but also 'one erring of straying from the right course or accepted standards' (what Cervantes implies). In this way, the character of Don Quixote is textualized on several levels. One, as Cervantes sees

him, or writes his adventures (of his adventures), a pathetic madman, yet worthy of note. After all this is a huge novel. Why is Don Quixote a pathetic madman?

In short, our hidalgo was soon so absorbed in these books that his nights were spent reading from dusk till dawn, and his day from dawn till dusk, until the lack of sleep and the excess of reading withered his brain, and he went mad. (p. 26)

His particular madness resulted from reading too much! He read too many novels of chivalry and identified himself with the novels' numerous knightly characters to such a degree that he was able to transmute his reality – that of a poor landowner (hidalgo) – into an imaginary knight in a world full of adventures, fighting for justice and good, and rescuing lovely damsels worthy of all the danger a knight errant might encounter.

Don Quixote is seeking recognition for a particular way of belonging to a social group – he identifies himself as a knight. Working through the conceptions he encountered in books, not only his sense of life, but life itself becomes transmuted. He goes out into the world, seeking the fit between experience and concept, and transmutes his reality into the imaginary. The text, where he had seen his mirrored self, completed his sense of life. In his resolve to become a knight errant (an adventure seeker) he assumes a definite position in a world, however imaginary or erroneously construed. He sees the world and himself through a lens of a text, a novel of chivalry. And Cervantes quips:

The idea that this whole fabric of famous fabrications was real so established itself in his mind that no history in the world was truer for him. (p. 27)

Here I would like to return to Nussbaum's (1990) question of 'how should we live?'³ and ask also, as Nussbaum and Cervantes are both implicitly asking, 'how should we write'?

Cervantes (2001) writes a novel about how the text can be seductive in converging the self and the other (the text) in providing a mirror against which identities are developed. He does not word these as theoretical notions, but such interpretation remains implicit and comes to effect in the act of reading. The reader, no doubt a completely rational self, comes to feel a certain amount of embarrassment at Don Quixote's foolishness, or what he perceives as foolish as a result of the irrationality of the adventures that Cervantes describes. Don Quixote is "a sorry ...ungainly figure...with ill-matched equipment" (p. 33), who fights the (now legendary) windmills, mistaken for giants, or a group of monks, whom he mistakes for evil knights. Each adventure ends in a fiasco, with Don Quixote hurt,

³ Nussbaum (1990) pays attention to the ethics of living and how it is reflected in the novel, the text: "There is a distinctive ethical conception that requires, for its adequate and complete investigation and statement, forms and structures such as those that we find in novels" (p. 27). She relates philosophy and writing and suggests that "if the enterprise of moral philosophy is understood as we have understood it, as a pursuit of truth in all its forms, requiring a deep and sympathetic investigation of all major ethical alternatives and the comparison of each with our active sense of life, then moral philosophy requires such literary texts, and the experience of loving and attentive novel-reading, for its own completion" (p. 27). She proposes that asking 'how to live' is not a merely theoretical undertaking, but

thrown from the horse, left without teeth, immobilized by pain and injury, yet taking it in stride, because that is the life of a knight errant.

There exists an interesting tension between Cervantes' s text about Don Quixote and how Don Quixote textualizes himself. His textual level is completely congruous with his madness and desire to be identified as a valiant knight:

Happy will be the age, the century will be happy, which brings to light my famous exploits, worthy to be engraved on sheets of bronze, carved on slabs of marble and painted on boards of wood as a monument for all posterity. O sage enchanter, whomsoever you may be, to whom it falls to be the chronicler of this singular history... (p. 31)

Cervantes, when we consider Nussbaum's (1983) question of "what type and degree of control does the author present himself as having" (p. 33), does assume the role of a narrator of a story that is a composite of several other sources. There is an occasional disclaimer, as "...if anything worthwhile is missing from it (the story), it's my belief it's the dog of an author who wrote it that is to blame..."(Cervantes, 2001, p. 76), to create...an illusion of Cervantes's innocence in what he writes. In the introduction, Cervantes feigns innocence, sheds responsibility, in a fictional sense, when he endows his friend with the impetus for the writing of the novel:

...since this work of yours is only concerned to destroy the authority and influence that books of chivalry enjoy in the world and among

one that is urgently practical, one that we conduct every day, and must conduct" (p. 28).

the general public...always have as your aim the demolition of the ill-founded fabric of these books of chivalry, despised by so many and praised by many more; and if this is what you achieve, it will be no mean achievement. (p. 16)

So Cervantes writes the character of an insane man in a realistic manner, compiling the stories of Don Quixote's adventures from other 'sources', from what is said or written about the crazy knight. There is, however, another level of the text – the level of what is unsaid. Just as it is the nature of our being to remain incomplete in the lack of self as well as the other, there is a parallel with language. What is unsaid in language, is a dialectical part of what is said, and has a potentiality of completing the whole. Although, or precisely because, it is unsaid, and therefore not knowable for certain, its existence resides only in its potentiality.

Cervantes's greatness, in concurrence with Kundera (1991), is precisely this tension between the said and what remains unsaid, a textual absence, ready to be interpreted by the reader, which becomes the potentiality for philosophical ethics in literature that Nussbaum (1983) talks about.

To bring novels into moral philosophy is not...to bring them to some academic discipline which happens to ask ethical questions. It is to bring them into connection with our deepest practical searching, for ourselves and others, the searching in connection with which the influential philosophical conceptions of the ethical were originally developed, the searching we pursue as we compare these conceptions, both with one another and with our active sense of life. (p. 24)

In asking ' how to write', Cervantes' novel brings, in what is unsaid, in the mingling of style and content, of philosophy and literature, the potentiality for the ethics of how to live. In the layering of our identities, we are in our inability to complete the self left vulnerable, naked, and try to veil this unfinishedness with layers of characteristics mirrored from the outside, from the text. But as with the text, in the self that is always unfinished, incomplete, there is a sense of potentiality that is sublime, a mystery, something that comes out of nothing.

Textualizing Through Absence

As a child I loved the sound of high heels striking the cobble stone lined streets. The sound of footsteps certain of where they're going. There seems to be an attempt, intrinsic to our social web of being, to articulate a kind of certainty, a kind of wholeness. But Bakhtin (1990) points out that wholeness is a kind of fiction that can be created only from a particular point of view (p. 138). It has been a point of view focused on the interiority, on the idea of an individual, of an authentic self. Taylor (1991) defines authenticity as something we have to attain to be true and full human beings. This sense of authenticity has a certain numinous quality, an ideal somewhere within ourselves, yet beyond reach. And when Gebauer and Wulf (1992) discuss Rousseau, an attempt at isolating an intimate "I" defines the authenticity that Rousseau undertakes to realize as essentially the product of the elimination of all socially imposed falsifications (p. 207).

What exactly do we mean by authentic, original? Is there some tacit, ontological kernel of a complete self, adrift in the depth of the unconscious, to be discovered, or are we, our selves, evolving as we live, influenced in large measure by external, cultural forces? Where does my particular authenticity come from? At the time of birth, is it somewhere deep within me, lying dormant, waiting to be one day discovered, revealed, unveiled, layers peeled off, one by one? Or does it come in one luminous stroke of complete awareness? Does socialization obscure our pre-existing authentic self, or by imprinting upon a person in layers of experiences, daily moments of life-building blocks, does it slowly shape us into something like an authentic self, however incomplete?

Again and again, from Rousseau to Taylor, we come across this desire to establish for certain a possibility of a complete, authentic self. Yet coming out of the delusion of Enlightenment, we realize not everything is knowable after all, that some things will forever remain elusive, magic, uncertain. As Blake says, "if the doors of the perception were cleansed, we would see everything as it is, infinite" – i.e. unknowable, because we are finite, temporary beings. A person, a self, doesn't exist in isolation; it couldn't, or it wouldn't be anything. And if it was nothing, wouldn't that still be something?

The very premise of being is that it is the dialogical other of non-being, an existence that is one and the same as non-existence. They are both one, a unit. So the very idea of a unit is that it contains both the complete and incomplete.

Therefore a person is a self in a system (social, cultural, political etc.) that is by nature incomplete. There is a self that exists in this moment and the self that will go on being in the next moment and, as long as the self lives, there is a potentiality for being, but that potentiality, or possibility, a promise, is also the yet unestablished, because only as the time unfolds, one becomes, always unfinished, always entering the next moment, across absence.

The complete self is a *fata morgana* in the landscape of continuity. If there is a kind of unity, then it resides in the compositness, always moving into excess, the unknowable, the potential, of an individual, not in a closed, finished, completeness. It resides in the flux of exchange, reciprocity of many aspects of self, internal and external. Internal and external are not opposite mutually exclusive states of being. They intermingle at the interface of self's locality in the world. There are also signs of other philosophical articulations of self that are accepting of the unfinishedness and temporality of one's identity. David Hume, a Scottish philosopher of 18th Century, subverts in his writings his scientifically oriented fellow contemporaries and maintains that the self cannot be directly located, that it is a convergence of separate perceptions (Titus, Hepp & Smith, 1975, p. 33). Slavoj Zizek further expands this view on the relationship of self and the other when he states: "what makes the other difficult to access is the fact that he or she is never complete in the first place, never wholly determined by a context but always to some extent 'open' and 'floating'" (Eagleton, 2000, p. 96).



Direct experience, a pre-reflective moment, is like an unborn child, stirring inside, unknown, unnamed, yet present within. The sense of interiority is not an isolated, unilateral movement, always enclosing upon itself. The gesture of a direct experience is multilateral, also pointed outward, mingling with the exterior. Unlike transcendence in an ascent from the body, it is more like a series of pushes, plunging into the flesh of the chiasm. It is an effort of necessity to reach out to find out who we are as self and other. This pushing involves a severity of effort extended while giving birth. In this effort you can't help but push through each moment, birthing each moment into the unknown, into the moment to come. Rilke (1984) writes of the creative process as birthing:

Allow your judgments their own silent, undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be forced or hastened. *Everything* is gestation and then birthing. To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new clarity is born: this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating. (pp. 23-24)

Writing, painting, dancing and singing, or any other creative activity, for that matter, require real physical effort. This producing, a forth-coming, this overcoming the self's solitude, involves all of the body, when in the flow of the creative experience, cheeks become flushed, legs quiver, and while in the flow it is as if mind and body are truly connected and interflowing, not at all timid, doubting and

hierarchized in their relationship. There is not even a relationship *per se*, but a process and being all wrapped up in one. It is a carnality that does not sever eros from philosophy, from thinking. Without input from the world around us, without the senses collecting sounds, smells, textures and colours, shapes and gestures, how would the self live? And what kind of life would that be? Life without skin, without flesh, would indeed be reduced to the shriveling crispness of the disembodied, solitary self (Levinas, 1987, p. 63).

Reciprocity of Self and Other

As individuals we experience awareness in the midst of an exteriority, and as we are a part of that exterior, we also have an inner self. Augustine was the first, points out Taylor (1989), to distinguish between the inner and outer man: "the opposition of spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal, immutable/changing is described by Augustine, not just occasionally and peripherally, but centrally and essentially in terms of inner/outer" (p. 129). But the inner/outer is not separable. The two realms cannot exist individually, one without the other. They are not oppositions, but part of the same. Interiority cannot exist in isolation; in order for it to exist at all, there must be an ongoing dialogue with the exterior. For Augustine, what stands in the way of attaining this inner moral order "is the human absorption with the sensible, with the mere external manifestations of the higher reality" (p. 128). So what is this higher reality, and why is there a hierarchy at all, I wonder? Here we revisit the problem, picked up by Descartes, of separating body and mind.

No wonder Descartes came to the conclusions/theories he did, following from the Platonic hatred of the body, and later Augustine's focus on the inner, while the body, the sensible, resides in the external, other world. But what are we without the outer (*autre*) wherefrom we originate?

Even though the question of who we are and how we shall live has been asked since the beginning of consciousness, and the notion of duality – that of the self and the other – has occupied philosophical thought since ancient times, the category of 'the other' has been inserted into the academic and philosophical writings only recently. There are several different ways that the other has been conceptualized, each a complex theoretical undertaking. The more contemporary theories of subjectivity, based on writings of Freud, were grounded in sexual terms with each gender defined within the phallogentric order, the woman representing the lack. Following from Freud, the Lacanian other is also structured in sexual terms. The phallus is not available to either male or female, but the male is able to identify with it more easily. Both genders, however, experience lack. Lacan assumes that the human self derived from the original whole, which was divided in half with existence driven by the desire to recover the missing complement (Silverman, 1983, p. 152). This lack for Lacan is sexual in definition:

...the subject depends on the signifier...that is first of all in the field of the other. This lack takes up the other lack, which is the real, earlier lack to be situated at the advent of the living being, that is to say, at sexed reproduction. (Lacan, quoted in Silverman, 1983, p. 152)

In a Lacanian scenario, for a time after birth the child does not differentiate between itself and the things that give it pleasure, first of which being a mother's breast, but also other objects such as feces or the gaze and voice of the mother (p. 156). In the life of the self, there are many such objects, '*objets petit a*' as Lacan refers to them, which is short term for '*objets petit autre*', objects which are not clearly distinguished from the self and not fully grasped as the other (*autre*), and which derive their value from identification with "some missing component of the subject's self" (p. 156).

Another important feature of Lacan's subject formation theory, which I would like to mention, is the notion of the mirror stage, when the subject arrives at the apprehension of both the self and the other, assisted by the child becoming aware, for the first time, of its own reflection in a mirror. This reflection appears to the child as an ideal image, a whole self, before it is incorporated into the symbolic order of subject and object (pp. 157-8). Gebauer and Wulf (1992) call the mirror a "neutral medium" needed in order for the *I* to be able to depict itself faithfully (p. 209). But neutral here does not mean passive. According to Lacan, the mirror not only portrays but also contributes in a certain sense to the production of the one who is portrayed and a person being reflected can mount no resistance to it (p. 209)

But this recognition of the mirrored self is for me already problematic. Recognition means to know again (re-cognition), which implies prior knowledge,

some original thing to be known, not unlike perhaps Taylor's notion of authenticity. Even for Lacan, the mirror image can no more be assimilated than can any of those other privileged *objets petit a* (Silverman, 1983, p. 158). This self-recognition is always mis-recognition. Recognition is underpinned by the moment of surprise, the potentiality that represents the fundamental lack (Bingham, p. 65). As we validate the self by confirming the other, we also, however subconsciously, discover a lack, or absence, not only in the other, but consequently in the self. It is a moment of unknowability, the realization that self is always unfinished, incomplete, that one is always becoming. Paradoxically, once we acknowledge that we 'have' a lack, it becomes a possession, and ceases to be a lack. Lack itself becomes implicated in the oscillatory character of mimetic process.

The process of mirroring can be problematized by looking more closely at what is being reflected. The word reflect comes from Latin *reflectere* "to bend back", and means "to form an image, to bring as a consequence" (Collins English Dictionary, 1986). To utilize the mirror metaphor, the image in the mirror is a reflection that we can think of as an illusion, the image that is not a real self, only a consequence of bending back a re-flection after a brief trespass. This process of mirroring back and forth, the continuous reciprocity between the self and its image that is not the self, but is being mis-recognized for the self, this multitude of refractions of an imaginary whole, bending back, results in a self that is not real, but illusory. As Silverman (1983) points out "...the mirror stage is one of those

crises of alienation around which the Lacanian subject is organized, since to know oneself through an external image is to be defined through self-alienation" (p. 158).

There is further incoherence between the mirroring we imagine is taking place and that which is happening for the other. As noted, the Lacanian notion of the other suggests a kind of incompleteness of the self that has a potentiality for completeness, or at least a desire for completeness, in a unity with the other. All our psychological and cultural drives derive from this desire. In contrast, the other of Emmanuel Levinas (1984) could not be other if complete, because "if one could possess, grasp and know the other, it would not be the other," (p. 90), it would be the same. The relationship rests on the responsibility of self for the other, that is heteronomous, "always already consigned to the infinite responsibility for the other" (Chinnery, 2003, p. 8). The Levinasian other is mysterious, veiled in its own unfinishedness. But in Levinasian ethics, in this diachronic reciprocity of the self to the other as it occurs in time, forever unknowable, in the surrender to the other (p. 13), this mystery is divine. The desire for the other, even in its secular relevance, "cannot be fulfilled or satisfied, the relationship to the other remains forever incommensurate with desire, and this insatisfaction is itself sublime" (Levinas in Kearney, 1984, p.68). In a sense, wanting is better than having – haven't we all experienced the anticlimax of a purchase or of an achievement? What is the known but a mystery that unveils its own lack of completeness, for isn't there always more to know? We desire to know something inasmuch we don't know it. There is a difference between the modern self's 'knowledge as power' and the notion of

'knowledge as lack', that is empowering. I lack, yet I embrace this absence. It is a part of me, or as Carson (1998) says, "seeing my hole I know my whole" (p. 33).

The question still remains, is there such a thing as some ontological original, potential self, waiting to be discovered, an authentic self that Taylor (1991) talks about, even as our identities are constructed by our encounters with others, or are we just attempting to live with dignity, trying not to acknowledge the impossibility of a complete self?

The self's identity integrates absences in layers upon layers of text, cultural, social and intimate/private, between the inhale and the exhale, moments of self are interchanged with absences toward incompleteness that is a potentiality.

Potentiality of the Mimetic Impulse

One of the primary forces behind this becoming over time is the mimetic process. This process of mirroring the self in the other, a reciprocal process of recognition, provides the basic mechanism of our identity construction. There are external things woven into our experience – other beings and the reciprocity of relationship between the self and the exterior. The way of being resides in this process of relationality between the inner and the outer, between the self and the other. This relationality is really a process of mimesis, a self becomes in a series or re-presentations of the other it sees and tries to incorporate. This re-presentation does not come from an authentic self, recognizing similarity in the other based on

some ontological sense of primordial completeness, but instead it comes from the process of mimesis itself, which "is not the act of an autonomous mind but the product of a practice" (Gebauer&Wulf, 1992, p. 21). But in writing, just as in inscribing my identity, the one I present to the world, or think myself presenting to the world, I am hardly ever authentic, whatever that is. Authenticity is a great concept, but how many people are truly authentic? Does it mean just being different from others, even if that can be easily achieved through style? Or do we as we live develop some true being of self? The self can only exist in moments that sometimes, only for a fleeting second, protrude from the imprisonment of styles and opinions of others - individually or *en mass*. We are drenched in the everyday, drowning in otherness. This drowning in otherness, when we surrender to it, can metamorphose into an illusion of self. Like Don Quixote, who, while drowning in the other he found in books, surrendered and became, or brought into being, a self incongruous with the reality that surrounded him. Yet he saw himself, thought himself, absolutely authentic. Is authenticity then an illusion of our subjective world as it skews the reflection of self that we receive from the other?

It would seem that the notion of mimetic impulse provides the bridging process between the somatic (body) and symbolic (language). It is particularly difficult to locate the boundary between the self and the other, perhaps because such a boundary does not really exist. Or as the 2nd Century philosopher Nagarjuna put it, "things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves", they relate to each other in a kind of rhizomic multiplicity. Stephen

Smith (2003) describes the mimetic impulse as “a felt imperative...to [this] fleshy, fluidity, airiness, earthiness and fieriness of the world wherein movement arises not in the body, but in the nexus and intertwining of bodily engagement with the world” (p. 12). In this space, this nexus and intertwining, the boundaries are already blurring.

In our search for unity, we have drawn imaginary boundaries that have become culturally and socially enforced, and became internalized to the point of felt discomfort, fear even, at the thought of their blurring. Mimetic impulse is not the traditional, Platonic sense of miming or imitation, but more of a continuous process of re-presentation and assimilation, and Gebauer and Wulf (1991) make a salient point in locating mimesis as “*conditio humana*” at the “same time that is responsible for variations among individual human beings” (p. 1).

Otherness and mimesis impact directly the formation and understanding of the self. We are both interior and exterior, our existence shaped in the space in between, between the subject and the other, oscillating in an on-going relationality, a reciprocity. Even if the other does not respond, its mere existence steps into the relationship with the subject. This is the space where not only our social life begins, but also our identities, for they are interconnected in this reciprocal oscillation of events and connection between interior and exterior.

This kind of knowledge, fragmentary and temporal in character, “points to its incompleteness and imperfection in principle, which is what calls the mimetic faculty into action” (p. 99). Mimesis lends itself well to the mirror metaphor and the process of recognition of self in the other.

In many usages mimesis entails an identification of one person with another. People identify themselves by means of their mimetic ability when they see themselves in the other. (p. 5)

But “mimesis is not merely emotional or knowledgeable identification with another because the other is recognized as that which transcends self-identity and challenges my understanding of her, him or it. It is not merely bodily imitation and mimicry because it draws upon a somatic consciousness of reaching to an other that eludes my grasp” (Smith, 2003, p. 8). Mimesis is an embodied reciprocity enfolding around an absent other, one that cannot be fully known.

In acting out the reflection of the other, in imitation, there is the problem of achieving a kind of sameness, where the self becomes like the other and, instead of being an autonomous ontological identity (in Taylor’s sense), the diachronic being resides in the space between the self and the other, in the process of becoming itself. The temporal character of being becomes problematized when we conceptualize the idea of time: even though the self exists in time, the dimension itself doesn’t have the capacity to endow an individual with moral ontology, and neither do other truths, such as the mathematical truth that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is the performative aspect of mimesis, a mimetic oscillation, a kind of throbbing that

becomes one of the crucial constituents of the process of identity forming. This means mimesis is not an overriding principle, but a part of the process of exchange of moments of interaction, a movement between the exterior and interior.

How many people can stop and feel, taste each moment, without always already projecting how they will relate it to the other? Each word spoken is already a lie. It was only true while unspoken, felt, experienced in the stillness of a brief moment, not even long enough to name it. Yet we also live through language, and the language of reflection is always post-coital. We reflect on the moment that is past, dissolved already in language, when we compose ourselves *beside* our experience as a narrative for the other. It is only in the moment with the other that the self can come close to something we could call authentic, even in language, when a spoken reflection, an utterance, coincides with the lived energy of the moment. The reflective attitude saturates our daily moments of the self with an escape from this moment into the encounter with the other.

Breathing into Writing

In inscribing the self, I wish to get into the flow of writing, as my body commands. The pressure is upon me, weighing heavily like so much water, and I can't push through the surface, clenching teeth, my muscles are weak, like my mind, like my will. Bringing the self back to the pre-reflective moment, the 'I' must surrender to the corporeal, the sensual. What I want is to surrender to flow. But I am at a standstill. Quieter than a stone on a mossy bank, quieter than still water,

brown with rotting leaves, quieter than a bird, frozen to a branch, with wings tucked in, a futile surrender to nothingness. Not afraid of death, afraid of life, dead life, dried up and fragile, the life of a solitary crisped self, afraid of experience crumbling between my fingers like an old paper, a hundred years old. I feel a hundred years old.

But a strange thing happens.

The stillness of this moment gathers up, I catch my breath, inside there is a muted wave, slowly building like a thunder cloud, trying to fill a certain absence, eating from the sky, eating from my mouth, my body, eating from the air itself. This stillness becomes a fecund, voluptuous moment just before the energy finally discharges. It is an absence that in the next moment will flesh out my being. The moment of poise between breaths. I will not stop breathing, not yet.

This notion of absence parallels David Appelbaum's (1995) concept of "the stop". For him, "the stop" is the threshold between dull, everyday routine, which may prevent us from attaining a refreshed viewpoint, and a new, fuller, more intense way of perceiving. The first must come to a stop, before the second may begin (Intro., p. x). In this moment of poise or reflection, "a gathering of action," Appelbaum locates the impetus for the future possibility of intelligent choice.

An active concentration of awareness – the poise before movement – is the stop. The stop lives at the interstices of action, an ordinary recluse. It shuns the spotlight yet exerts a definite and important

control over what takes place. Furthermore, it gives us a key to a deeper engagement in a meaning that unfolds our lives. For it offers a choice. Either to remain habit-bound or to regain a freedom in one's approach to an endeavor. The stop is the advent of intelligent choice. (Intro., p. xi)

In the chase after the chimera of an authentic self, we are often lost in the temporal succession of day to day events, unable to see, smell, taste each actual moment, eyes always fixed on horizons, significant or not. In considering the temporal character of our being, it can be difficult to attain intersubjectivity, which requires the shift of perception from the self to the other. But we are always already poised, teetering on the edge of passing time, which has no edge, ready to hurtle from a constant curve into being where Applebaum's poise becomes an unstoppable stop.

The absence/stop is the impetus for an experience of self and other in pre-reflective space and weaves into the present, fleshes out the reflection, that can once again retain, even if for a moment, a carnal presence. This absence rushes in and clings to every sinue and bone, only to become flesh again. Absence is a condition of presence. One cannot exist without the other, like solitude that yields a relation of self to other. Like the pause after an inhalation, between breaths. Like a blank space on a page, between words. Or the distance the pen takes from the surface of a page, poised, just before I write. Absence touches the self that touches the other across the void/chiasm that becomes the Merleau-Pontian flesh of the world. This absence is a touch, a marking of the other left on skin.

very often it is a simple matter to see
that with such evidence the necessary conditions
of a mathematical theory cannot be met
and that the only way to proceed is to
try to find a new set of axioms which
will allow the theory to be formulated
in a way which is consistent with
the known facts of nature. This is the
method which is used in the present
theory. The first step is to show
that the old theory is inconsistent
with the known facts of nature. This
is done by showing that the old theory
implies the existence of an infinity
of particles which can be observed
simultaneously. This is impossible
because the number of particles which
can be observed at any one time is
finite. The second step is to show
that the new theory is consistent
with the known facts of nature. This
is done by showing that the new theory
implies the existence of a finite
number of particles which can be
observed simultaneously. This is
possible because the number of particles
which can be observed at any one time
is finite. The third step is to show
that the new theory is more general
than the old theory. This is done by
showing that the new theory implies
the existence of particles which
cannot be observed simultaneously.
This is not possible in the old theory.
The fourth step is to show that the
new theory is more in agreement
with the known facts of nature than
the old theory. This is done by
showing that the new theory implies
the existence of particles which
cannot be observed simultaneously.
This is not possible in the old theory.

Chapter Three

If I were
swallowed
by your gaze
drenched
by your touch
disemboweled
by your teeth
thrilled
at the precipice of your voice
dangled
by a silver string that
slowly
 unravels
 from your tongue

if I were
embossed
by the imprint
of your surrender

would I
become whole?

Eros as a Gesture of Absence

I wrote the above poem a year or so ago, but it wasn't until just recently that I realized it is really about my father. I don't remember him; he left when I was just a year old. Growing up, whenever I had a conflict with my mother, not really an argument but more like an emotional exchange and manipulation, a reciprocal pulling and tugging, without ever naming it, without an expressed meaning, whenever this conflict manifested between us, she would always end it by saying with a great amount of disdain and finality, "You are just like your father." In fact, an exact translation from Czech is more like "You are entirely your father."

She saw him in the expressiveness of my stubborn frown, in the movement of my body. She saw him also when I postured my will, with fists clenched and chin quivering, against hers. At the time, I was strangely excited at this connection that empowered my gestures in this manner. With time, the likeness settled in deeper in the layers of my being, in the viscous void within the becoming self.

And today I am here, so much 'like him'. My father doesn't have a body and he doesn't take up any physical space: he is a corporeal absence, grasping at my flesh, an invisible, intangible other.

Like a phantom limb, like the sound of snow falling.

I lack a memory of his skin touching mine. Yet he textures, textualizes, the very being that I am becoming; his presence, forever veiled, inscribes this becoming.

a silent witness of
everything I am
you watch, invisible
you touch, intangible

The otherness that penetrates the self tucked inside a brief immanence exists clandestinely in the implied presence, yet remains absent in the folds of skin, undisclosed, irretrievable, furtive. The other resides perhaps in the delicate moisture that collects around my mouth, my eyelids, as I ponder with some effort these notions of absence/presence. Without a body or a space, the other is implicated, bodiless yet carnal, in the pulses that propel me across each moment in time. This throbbing (incestual in the modern, Freudian, sense) in the space between self and the other, present or absent, dissolves in a brief moment of self-other blending, a fusion, a forgotten memory of touch. In this incorporeal yet fleshy contact, the presence of the other coincides with the presence of the self, who is

the other for the other's self. Both the self and other are intertwined, like lovers, in this exchange, a reciprocity of considering what is mirrored back in reflection, momentary desire for completeness, re-flection of recognition that comes both from belonging to each other at that moment, and in each moment that follows, and from memory of past forgettings. Touching in absence. In this narrative, an absent father becomes eros. Absent in touching, the other nevertheless flows in a caress across the text of the self that is forthcoming, seeking an embrace, a kiss. My flesh is inscribed by the absent other that I seek in this text.

Gestures of the Absent Other

Every text is a kind of opening up, seeking to caress, embrace, or to be embraced, kissed by, a reader, a kind of seduction. Writing/reading in an embodied way asks that I open myself up to the elemental gestures (Smith, 2003) of eros.

Caress

The gesture of the absent other is often textualized as touch in a literary performance. This caressing across the text has been thematized by Levinas (1987) and Merleau-Ponty (1968). Luce Irigaray discloses this sense of eros, of touch, as a kind of threshold between the body and discourse, in her responses to both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty in her *Ethics* (Boothroyd, 2001, 39). For Irigaray, touching the other takes place in the "unreflected and unrepresentable" (p. 44) and, insofar as it is prephenomenological, it is absent, and in such eros of the absent, "the relation to

the other permits no distinction between environment and (what reflection later comes to regard as) the other person" (p. 44). Irigaray approaches this eros from a female sexed position, a sensual kind of textuality that circumscribes the touch "in a gesture of *undoing* directed at the mastery of the masculine construct of the subject which has been responsible for the political subalterization of woman" (p. 43).

Unlike Levinas and Merleau-Ponty for whom sexedness is lost in consuming a passion in a physical, sexual sense (Boothroyd, 2001, p. 49), Irigaray "claims the existence of an internal relation of self-sameness, read off the form of the female body, or rather, the female bodymorph. The bodymorph can be thought of as a sort of discursive, *langue*-like substrate supporting the particular, *parole*-like discourse of female difference" (p. 50). This female difference is for Irigaray enfolded in touching, but never closed:

Woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite, *form is never complete in her...*this incompleteness in her form, her morphology, allows her continually to become something else, though this is not to say that she is ever univocally nothing...No one single thing – no form, act, discourse, subject, masculine, feminine – can complete the development of woman's desire" (Irigaray, quoted in Ross, 1999, p. 209)

It is this proposition, that the ethics of sexual difference cannot be separated from the ethics of eros, that I would like to explore further to illustrate how in the pre-reflective moment, in the absence of the other that nevertheless inscribes a self, the difference between the sexes is blurred, there is a slippage between the skins'

caress, where one feels fundamentally undifferentiated, same as the other, not in the sense of oneness, but in a momentary sameness. Irigaray resists this momentary sameness: "I will never be in a man's place, never will a man be in mine" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 13). But by the same token, I will never be in the place of another woman. Irigaray speaks of fluidity, porousness that can occur "only within difference" (p. 191), and of "sensual pleasure...[that] can return to the evanescence of the subject and object. To the lifting of all schemas by which the other is defined" (p. 185). But the schemas do not lift enough, not even for a moment, to allow for blurring of boundaries.

...neither man nor woman can manifest nor experience its totality. Each gender possesses or represents only one part of it...it is evident that female and male corporeal morphology are not the same and it therefore follows that their way or experiencing the sensible and of constructing the spiritual is not the same. (Irigaray, 1996, pp. 38-38)

The being I am is this never the whole and is always separate [from] inasmuch as it is a function of gender. (p. 107)

...the recognition of sexed identity as a dimension of a spiritual culture renders the unity of [this] totalization impossible. In fact, each gender must define and retain mediations appropriate to it, and we must determine mediations enabling communication and exchange between the genders. But there will be no final synthesis...Man being irreducible to woman and woman to man, there no longer exists any *absolute* spirit nor *one* finality of being. (p. 107)

I transgress the notion of sexual difference that Irigaray insists upon, the irreducibility, the fact that "the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually" (p.13), if only for a moment. The irreducibility furnishes

the self with a lack/absence of the different other, but the sense of lack/absence goes beyond the incompleteness of the sexed self. It is not that we are part of a whole, we are, as sexed beings as well as human selves, incomplete not only by virtue of having different sex, this difference, the becoming-other does not lie irreducibly in the difference between a man and a woman, that is to say, the difference is not essential difference-other-ness. We are boundaried from the exterior by skin – a permeable membrane, a membrane that defines a surface of metamorphosis and exchange (Abram, 1996).

Embrace

The difference between the sexes is based on irrefutable biological differences, un-sameness, and on cultural dissimulation of genders. I wish to experience writing from the body, not so much writing from the feminine as socially constructed, or woman writing as woman against the feminine such as it is designated by social environment and politics, but more as a body that happens to have a woman's sensibility, a sensibility that is historically and politically formed, yet not confined to those spaces, the ripple in the flesh of historicity against political determination, as a being, a body, that happens to be a woman's body. Or a man's body, writing against the masculine and feminine, writing from a human body. I would like to look beyond the ripple of this flesh, the feminine flesh, to allow for a gender slip, a fleeting exorcism of gender difference, a slip into an

embrace that dissolves the prescribed boundaries. And if a philosopher won't allow for it, perhaps a poet will:

...perhaps the sexes are more related than we think, and the great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in this, that a man and maid, freed of all false feelings and reluctances, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will come together as *human beings*, in order simply, seriously and patiently to bear in common the difficult sex that has been laid upon them. (Rilke, in Mood, 1975, p. 35)

When boundaries dissolve just for a moment, and not the entire boundary, but just at the point of touch, then self and other can slip into a space of sameness and understanding that is very much inside bodies, which remain separate physically, yet for a moment in space and time experience something of the same. The space between the skins is the gap where self can proliferate, a fertile space where the self germinates and prospers in an ongoing movement, oscillating between the layers of inscription and the intangible/absent other. An embrace in twinning, an attunedness of sensibilities, slippage between skins, a faultline between strata. This space that the self habituates is where being takes place, although it is a space that cannot be captured or fully known. In this space in-between the visible and the tangible, invisible and intangible at the same time, is a kind of energy palpating in a continuum between the self and the other. The interior/exterior of the self crosses over to exterior/interior of the other in a fleshy field of transvergence.

Kiss

Is this dissolving of self and other possible? Or, more precisely, what is the point of departure that would provide for this transvergence between the boundaries of embodiment across the space between the self and the other? The problem with this dissolving is that even if the self opens up unconditionally it can only do so for a moment, as a rare contact that resonates through the space curving around the body, folding around the material self in a fleeting, inconclusive unison, a kiss, a “fluid connection to another” (Smith, 2003, p. 12). When it happens, it really is a kind of throbbing, and it opens up a field of love for the other where it can flow both ways at the same time, unhindered by boundaries, epistemological entrapments and conceptual vessels.

This moment of surrender, of letting go, however, when the self gives to the porousness of being and lets the throbbing take over, can become performative, organ centred, erogenously self-absorbed. In the narrow field that defines the erotic in our western culture, it is what we call chemistry, and usually it is related to sexual love. But certainly this experience of dissolving, this transvergence, exists between bodies/entities carnally, that is to say, embodied sensually in an erotic fusion that is otherwise than coupled. This transvergence, or blending, can emerge from the gestures between the self and absent other, as movements around and within the absence of the other, because those are the moments when feeling is located in the porous flesh of the body. The feeling of love is embedded in the

movements within the body, in caress, embrace and kiss. Eros dwells in a possibility of a sensual contact, a sensual wandering that moves beyond the pleasure that in our culture is defined as sexual. Eros is love not *of* flesh, but love that comes forth *from* flesh.

Eros as forthcoming

While eros, that which David Steinberg (1992) calls “the movement we feel as erotic impulse” (Steinberg, 1992, p. 4), clearly relates closely to the world of sexuality, it equally clearly extends well beyond the sexual act itself (p. 4).

It is a prime ingredient in the electricity of connecting meaningfully with other human beings, whether that be by sharing a powerful experience, looking into the depth of their eyes, quietly touching their skin, entering or receiving their bodies with our own. It is central to the act of being born, of giving birth, of dying. (Steinberg, 1992, p. 4)

Take, for example, the movement of eros that comes about in the creative process, whether one is the producer or recipient of an art work. The most visceral (eliciting a gut response) kind of art, be it visual, music, dance or writing, is always in some way sexual, inasmuch as that which is inherently carnal and fleshy connotes sexuality. It is, as Rilke called it, blood-remembering, a progression from feelings through experiences through memories through forgetting. For Rilke (in Mood, 1975), an “artistic experience lies so incredibly close to that of sex, to its pain and its ecstasy, that the two manifestations are indeed but different forms of one and the same yearning and delight” (p. 36). But as in participation in a creative

process, so in most activities that the self gestures through, the sensual (involving all senses, all of corporeal nuances) expands the sexual beyond the coupled kind of coming together beyond, or rather prior to, the level of symbolic exchange.

Writing, before words.

The tremulous rapture of touching across the text is a kind of 'reading' the absent other whereby the distinction between somatic and symbolic, or language and experience, has not yet been made. Sensual experience expands sexuality beyond the moment of physical pairing. It belongs to a family of experiences that are normally categorized as sexual because the feeling can be described as orgasmic, a kind of tugging when the eros penetrates flesh with tendrils of desire, an energy that allows for a movement of self into space and time, a forthcoming.

Children are in possession of this kind of sensuality, before they enter the realm of mature coupling and sexual physicality in an adult sense. They experience the immediacy of sensual encounters with the world and immerse themselves in a carnality that is innocent, a fleshy reciprocity that is sensual without closure. Irigaray writes of eros which "arrives at [that] innocence which has never taken place with the other as other...at that indefinable taste of an attraction to the other which will never be satiated...which will always remain in the threshold, even after entering into the house" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 186) as a gesture of touch, touch of the

caress. But it is not a caress of the absent other. It is a “circulation from the one to the other that would happen in lovemaking” (p. 188).

Artists, like children, understand eros as the gesturing of absence. They can surrender to the void, to absence, because only from an absence, a void, does the potentiality of something new can come forth, perhaps a question answered, perhaps a cloud, perhaps love. They don't know, yet they seek, curious creatures, listening to the eros within, in an organic state of questioning, they move.

Toward.

I am reminded of John Berger's (2001) words, when he describes the creative process with the idea of darkness, an absence, where something can come out of nothing:

How does a painter work in the dark? He has to submit. Often he has to turn around in circles instead of advancing. He prays for collaboration from somewhere else...He builds a shelter from which to make forays so as to discover the lie of the land. And all this he does with pigment, brush strokes, rags, a knife, fingers. The process is highly tactile. Yet what he is hoping to touch is not normally tangible. This is the only real mystery...

When painting becomes a place, there is a chance that the *face* of what the painter is looking for will show itself there. The longed-for 'return look' can never come directly to him, it can only come through a place.

If the face does come, it is partly pigment, coloured dirt: partly drawn forms always being corrected: but, most importantly, it is the becoming, the coming-towards-being of what he was searching for.

And this becoming is not yet – and, in fact, never will be – tangible, just like the bison on the walls of the canvas were never edible.

What any true painting touches is an absence – an absence of which, without the painting, we might be unaware. And that would be our loss. The painter's continual search is for a place to welcome the absent. If he finds a place, he arranges it and prays for the face of the absent to appear. (pp. 31-32)

The absence in paint brushed on canvas, or in ink marks scratched on a page, in a line of font marks preceding a cursor flashing in a rhythm of a beating heart at the end of a word or a sentence, waiting patiently to carry more across, like the pause of a hand in between gestures, this absence calls for eros in a gesture of coming forth. Like the painter, embracing the absence between brushstrokes, the poet feels this absence between two parentheses.

If it is real the white
light from this lamp, real
the writing hand, are they
real, the eyes looking at what I write?

From one word to the other
what I say vanishes.
I know that I am alive
between two parenthesis.
(*Certainty*, Octavio Paz)



Imagine a child standing on a platform. There is a train arriving and the sooty air of the black railway station in a black city shimmers with expectant heat

with cracks like laughlines. The wave of heat from the engine precedes the actual arrival, caressing the child who stands close to the curb and offers her face to the swelling storm of the arriving train. The heat ahead is burgeoning. It collects and builds. Reticent to discharge, it grows further, as if trying to fill a certain absence, eating from the air itself, it is finally followed by the train so immediate, that even the air pulse of its arrival feels solid. The child is left gasping for air. The storm cloud discharges. The child steps back, yet is fascinated, drawn by the force that promises unspeakable experiences. She creeps tentatively, in small steps, a little closer and yet a bit closer...how close can she get before the force swallows her whole? Imagine this child wanting to *be* the train.



The sexual connotations in the metaphor of the train are certainly obvious. Donn Welton (1998) points out that the pleasure that a child derives from such lived bodily modality is in Freudian terms sexual. Freudian eros, which he first attempted to characterize as a “distinct type of biological, instinctual drive, sexual in nature” (Welton, 1998, p. 185), is governed by the pleasure principle. For instance, in a suckling child Freud distinguished between nutritional sucking at the mother’s breast and sensual sucking of a thumb, which then “becomes dominated by the pursuit of pleasure alone” (p. 186). Based on this, Freud held that certain parts or sites of the body can be categorized as erotogenic, that is to say that the body is understood only as a “physical organism consisting of places or zones

possessing a 'susceptibility to stimulation' " (p. 187). But for Freud the sensual is attached to the biological, reducing erotic drives to being biological in nature, eros is defined within the need for affection that is "anaclytic and thus derived from the biological" (p. 187). The Freudian concept of desire/eros is mapped out "across the surfaces of the body, (p. 188), characterized by an interplay of zones, or more succinctly, "the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body" (Freud, quoted in Welton, 1998, p. 189). In short, the Freudian carnality has been associated with a sexual love or seeking of affection to satisfy primary biological drives. This reliance on instinct disables the connection of desire/eros to the body, to the flesh (p. 191). The body becomes "only the field in which eros plays out its war with culture " (p. 191), and eros becomes a drive, an uncontrollable force. This body remains two dimensional, cartographic, representational of the mental projection of biological needs.

But as Welton suggests, a child's need for affection, that Freud assumed to be the basis for later adult sexuality, "does not necessarily need to be directly identified with eros" (p. 192). When Welton says "simply introducing the pleasure principle will not do, for we find pleasure in countless ways that have nothing to do with eros" (p. 187), he is rejecting a specific Freudian notion of erotic that is sexually and biologically driven. He suggests, instead, that perhaps the need for affection is, first of all, a "complex belonging to a different order, to the lived-body with which we are directly and experientially acquainted" (p. 193). While Freud

dispenses with the lived-body as flesh in his account of eros, Welton locates eros deeper within the body in the process of self formation. He deals with affectivity, a term he prefers to substitute for eros, in general, and the desire for affection, in particular, in an analysis that presents eros as a somatic movement across a gap. This gap, similar to Irigaray's (1993) *interval*⁴, or as I discuss later, Carson's (1998) *eros*⁵, is the absence that defines the self's movement in relation to the other or self/other. The sense of body for the self is acquired in the movement in space, across and within a gap, in the motion from here to there within its immediate environment:

With the movement of parts of the body and then of the whole body itself, a sense of the difference between "here" and "there" is acquired. The body runs up against what it cannot move or cross. It senses forces pushing against it and, in the face of their stubborn presence, begins to develop an awareness of itself as both different and bounded. Or it finds its cravings for food or its yearning for warmth go unfulfilled and frustration ensues. With desires the body becomes flesh...Through its movements and their restraint, through the awareness of its own limits, the infant acquires a sense of a bounded body, of body integrity. (Welton, 1998, p. 199)

⁴ In her *Ethic of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray discusses the economy of desire: "desire occupies or designates the place of the *interval*. Giving it a permanent definition would amount to suppressing it as desire...desire ought to be thought of as a changing dynamic whose outlines can be described in the past, sometimes in the present, but never definitively predicated..." (1993, p. 8,)

⁵ The Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1997) defines Eros in Freudian terms as "an aggregate of pleasure-directed life instincts whose energy is derived from libido". An additional meaning, however, locates Eros as "love directed toward self-realization", a meaning that is closer to what I perceive as the energy/drive toward being. This eros is not to be confused with the capitalized Eros, a "son of Aphrodite who excites love in gods and men" (Webster's, 1997).

Eros, or the field of desire, is deployed across the body; it is a movement, an action. The gap for Welton (1998) is a space between needs and demands, where desire resides, the gap filled with substitutions and deferred objects (p. 194). But desire is continually deferred, the gap never closed. Instead, it is the oscillations, the pushing across this gap, a forthcoming, that creates the flesh of being for the self. This gap, which I refer to as an absence, is an integral part of the process of self-formation. And the pulsations, forthcomingings, that move the self deeper into being within and without, deeper into flesh, this gesturing of absence, constitutes eros.

Anne Carson (1998) also defines the sense of absence or lack in the milieu of erotic love and desire, but eros, that gnawing forward-pulsating impulse is even more acutely tied to the self that is constituted along the rhythmic continuum of lack/desire/fulfillment that is never broken, never complete. As Carson (1998) points out, the Greek word *eros* denotes 'want', 'lack', 'desire for that which is missing'. The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting (Carson, 1998, p. 10). The fulfillment is a passing, fleeting experience – as soon as we are fulfilled (or have found a moment of self), time moves on, and the self follows time in space. New desire opens up like a window to a new landscape, one that we haven't traveled yet. We begin to feel the absence/lack anew. What is the destination of this movement? All desire is for a part of oneself gone missing, or so

it feels to the person in love (p. 31). But it is more than erotic love. The drive of eros across the absences is the underpinning mode of being for the self.

Everyone is seeking to receive love from the outside, yet the experience comes from within; it is felt in the flesh, an intense feeling of connection to someone/something other, that blurs the boundaries between mind/body, interior/exterior, self and other. Carson (1998), as well as Welton (1998), argue that eros is an issue of boundaries:

(Eros) exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between 'I love you' and 'I love you too', the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can. (Carson, 1998: 30)

Carson (1998) closes the impenetrable boundary on itself, when the desire for an object outside of the self "looks back on (itself) and sees a hole" (p. 33), in a realization of incompleteness that grows within the deep furrows of desire. It is a "desire for a necessary part of self" (p. 33) which is nevertheless lacking; it is not a whole self, one for whom Carson would offer "new knowledge of possibilities (that) is also a knowledge of what is lacking in the actual" (p. 36). Or, perhaps, in a shift of emphasis, what is lacking, i.e. not yet actual, not there, carries with it that which is possible, or potential. Even if the blurring of boundaries eludes Carson here,

there is still a possibility for such a blurring within the flesh of self and the Merleau-Pontian flesh of the world.

Within this blurring, “in between [the alleged colors and visibles] we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 132-133). The possibility, gathered within an absence, is the challenge of the chiasm for Merleau-Ponty to reap what “comes of nothing” (Vasseleu, 1998, 30). In the crisscrossing between the self and the world, in the chiasm, the void, the absence, there is a potentiality for interiority that comes out of nothing. In this folding and re-folding of the seeing and touching, the self comes forth within and without in the act of concatenation and reversal.

While each monocular vision, each touching with one sole hand has its own visible, its tactile, each is bound to every other vision, every other touch; it is bound in such a way as to make up with them the experience of one sole body before one sole world, through a possibility for reversion, reconversion of its language into theirs, transfer, and reversal, according to which the little private world of each is not juxtaposed to the world of all the others, but surrounded by it, levied off from it, and all together are a Sentient in general before a Sensible in general. Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching...landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly: this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same ‘consciousness’ the primordial definition of sensibility, and as soon as we rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient. For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 142)

It seems this ray of light that illuminates all flesh is a metaphor grounded in scopic economy. Merleau-Ponty relies on the visible to cross over to the invisible, the possibility of more than what an eye could see, the possibility of touch. Vasseleu (1998) argues how the vision metaphor is ruptured by Irigaray, who “pursues the trail of an invisible materiality which is systematically ignored in the adoption of a metaphysics of presence...and rather than tracing the history of light’s annunciation...attends to the traces or the material conditions of its articulation” (p. 11). For Irigaray, without the sense of touch, seeing would not be possible (p. 12). Yet Merleau-Ponty (1968) fleshes out the visual beyond what can be seen with a human eye, brought to appear directly “in the infrastructure of vision...brought to appear, [and] not brought to birth: for we are leaving in suspense for the moment the question whether it would not be already implicated there. Manifest as it is that feeling is dispersed in my body” (p. 145). The visual carries over to

the movements (that) no longer proceed unto the things to be seen, to be touched, or unto my own body occupied in seeing and touching them, but they address themselves to the body in general and for itself (whether it be my own or that of another), because...through the other body, I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives...(p. 144).

Merleau-Ponty finds the body a membrane that permeates the tactile, sonorous and the visible within the chiasm, “an intercorporeal being, a presumptive domain of the visible and the tangible, which extends *further* than the things (I) touch and see at present” (p. 143, italics mine). The folding and

reversibility of the visual moves across a texture, blending vision and touch. Vision enters a realm of touch which no longer requires a human eye, but involves the whole body, all of the senses and *more*, the flesh and the flesh-of-the-world. And this body, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, contributes more than it receives. The 'more' is defined through absence. Not nothing, absence, is a "negative".

The only way to think of the negative is to think that it *is not*, and the only way to preserve its negative purity is (instead of juxtaposing it to being as a distinct substance, which is to immediately contaminate it with positivity) to see it out of the corner of one's eye as the sole *frontier* of being, implicated in being as what being would lack if absolute fullness could lack anything – more precisely, as calling for being in order to not be nothing, and, as such, called forth by being as the sole supplement to being that would be conceivable, a lack of being, but at the same time a lack that constitutes itself into a lack, hence a fissure that deepens in the exact measure that it is filled. (p. 53)

Within the chiasm, or absence, "before all reflection, I touch myself through my situation; it is from it that I am referred back to myself...to be is not to remain identity, it is to bear before myself the identifiable, *what there is*, to which I add nothing but the tiny doublet 'such as it is'" (p. 57). The flesh of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is not only matter, or the biological body, it is "the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body...as though the visible body remained incomplete, gaping open" (pp. 146-147). Within the coiling, or folding over, the body contributes more, and it seeks out more as well, in nothing, in absence, that is eros.

Eros is both touch and movement. In the movement that comes from within, the body originates a caress of self and from self to the other. And the caress moves forth the self across the chiasm of absence, into flesh, within flesh. This energy, where does it come from? This within-ness resonates from an unseen source, it is something felt, yet it activates, animates.

From nothing.

It is not a push of another physical entity from the outside that moves me into space; it is not a moving trajectory of a stone I pick up and hurl through the air. It is a kinetic energy that drives our movement from within. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) quotes Ludwig Landgrebe, this energy is a “prelinguistic acquaintance with oneself as the center of a spontaneous ability to move” (p. 138).

Eros is akin to this kinesthetic cognition that is pre-reflective, before language, or as Sheets-Johnstone elaborates, “movement forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement” (p. 138). But eros is more than a proprioceptive kinetic mobilizer. The kinesthetic movement originates, according to Sheets-Johnstone, in everyday “tactile-kinesthetic activity: chewing, reaching, grasping, kicking etc.” (p. 134). It is “I move” before “I can do” (p. 134). If the experience “I move” precedes the conceptual realization “I can do” (p. 134), where, in this sequence, can we locate eros, the “I want”, “I desire”? And, furthermore, can we even speak of a ‘location’ of eros in spatio-temporal terms?

Eros is a pulse (although not an impulse)⁶ that is born within the body somewhere between the somatic “I move” and the discursive, reflective “I can move”. The body moves kinesthetically, spontaneously, prior to description, and eros oscillates in between, it holds with “I move” while it drives towards the “I can”. Eros posits “I want to move”, but it moves even before that. Eros infuses both, the pre-reflective originary kinesthesia and discursive reflection, with a drive across the absence that resides within the self, in between self and other; it infuses the movement with meaning that is a drive toward, forth. While the meaning of the kinetic experience is in the movement itself (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p 151), the movement of eros *means* as a desire to move.

It's not that important that eros should be reciprocated, as in a 'declaration of romantic love', because just by virtue of the love object existing (person/thing), its ability is to provoke the feeling of love in the self, that already implicates the body in the viscosity of flesh and eros.

Anais Nin (1961) describes a woman coming to terms with desire for its own sake, an eros that can exist as a force which fills the absence and remains elusive.

She did not know then what she knew now: it had been an encounter with a fear greater than her own. She could desire him violently, because she had an instinctive knowledge that he would not respond. She could desire him without restraint (and even admire her

⁶ Here I differentiate between impulse, defined in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1997) as a force so communicated as to produce motion suddenly, and pulse, which is more a drive, a throbbing, one that initiates the movement.

own spontaneity) because the restraint was safely prearranged within him. She was free to desire knowing that she would not be swept away into any fusion. (p. 108)

And I don't know, if as Levinas (1984) says, this surrender to the other, this saying yes to the other, is pre-ontological, because without living in the body, in the landscape of human and other-than-human interactions, it could never take place. It is some genetic predisposition, like bad eyesight or the propensity for moody outbursts. It is something that we come to, like a crossroad.

The utterance "I am" can only mean the layering of unbearable moments of an unfinished self, a self in a discourse with the absent other. "I am" in a totality of past moments of self that occur in the space between the embodied self and the absent other, seeking to fulfill a desire, to bring about the movement between this space and a location unknown, mysterious, of unknowable depth, from without yet completely within. Saying "I am" means a self that is fluid and touching provides markers whereby one's corporality manifests itself as text in time and space. What is important is not whether there is a whole self to be attained, possessed, but the process of attempting to reach it, in touching the invisible. In this absence of the other, the invisible/intangible, in the darkness, with eyes closed, I become used to the uncertainty.

To experience an absence, such as that of my father, there must have been a presence. Eros, absence, father. Father. I don't remember your presence, only your absence. Yet you must have been there, once. The memories of your presence are

buried deep inside, but they live, folded in my flesh, your presence in my flesh. What would your face look like? What would your touch feel like? The absence tells me. In its gesture, eros tells me. Eros, a gesture of absence, moves me. Something comes in an absence which is 'something', not 'nothing'. Absence doesn't necessarily fill a space of something that was present once and now it's not. Although that, too, is an absence.

Absence is a thing of its own, filled with lack that cannot be encapsulated, replaced with something. This lack is like a storm cloud collecting, building, never discharging. Absence is part of the palpations that take place between self and other; it moves in the landscape of flesh, moves between the self's interior and exterior. There is no beginning or end. Absence is tangible, it touches as it fills the flesh, it is part of the flesh, like a stop that Appelbaum talks about, stop, waiting, yet a part of the motion, of gesture in forthcoming. Like the moment between inhaling and exhaling, when for a fraction of a second we are not breathing, without this stop, this absence of breath, breathing/presence could not take place. The stop/absence facilitates breath/presence in the continuum of existence. It is a gesture of desire in time and space. Eros moves the self into becoming. Becoming. No, not that. Not something that comes to be, like a singularity, as if there was something final to come to.

I return to the coming forth, which suggests movement, unstoppable, always coming into, merging with flow, toward. I do not be-come, I am forth-coming.

Upon waking, words rush in like chattering birds, I can't write fast enough to record their story. As if in the darkness, asleep, with eyes closed, as the blood sleepily pulses through veins, in a dimension behind shuttered windows, my fingertips tracing the shadowy vault of secrets, the body collects the storm cloud of words, the storm cloud that is coming forth, swelling, burgeoning, like the heat wave, solid, ahead of the approaching train, and that upon waking discharges. I reap the riches of my darkness, in this I can become the storm, the train, the forthcoming.

Forthcoming, a word full of potential, signaling a birth: coming forth, a force of birth. Out of the incoherence of words dreamt in darkness, a forthcoming.

I am a nocturnal writer, seeing with my flesh, my proprio-sceptor. Before I write, I expose my self to the dark, a blind mirror. Before I write.

Inhale. Stop. Exhale.

Handwritten text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. The text is mostly illegible due to blurriness and bleed-through.

Chapter Four

Writing the Self

I write myself as well as I am written on – my skin is just paperthin. There is an element of fear involved in writing. Beginning a new piece, I face the fear of the unknown in front of a blank page, the fear of a possibility that nothing will come, only something someone has already said. It is not unlike the feeling of uncertainty of the next lived moment, in writing the self. The fear of each coming moment, when I could discover a void, I could discover there is no self. A sense of fragility follows every step I make into each future moment, a fragility of always forthcoming, never complete.

Writers, obsessive in their craft, have different methods to deal with doubts that inevitably creep up into the body, in a word-freeze, a writer's hell, frozen over. When writing loses touch with the kinesthetic eros, it can become a chore. Virginia Woolf (1954) kept a writer's diary, her "loose, drifting material of life" (p. 13), to keep up her writing practice. She noticed that the creative writing, which "bubbles so pleasantly in beginning a new book quiets down after a time" (p. 25). Then

...doubts creep in, one becomes resigned. Determination not to give, and the sense of an impending shape keep one at it more than anything. I'm a little anxious. How am I to bring off this conception? Directly one gets to work one is like a person walking, who has seen

the country stretching out before. I want to write nothing in this book that I don't enjoy writing. Yet writing is always difficult. (p. 25)

For me, I feel the heaviness of the words, swelling within. The writing weighs me down, I am so heavy with words – gestating – I can barely keep upward. There is fragility in this heaviness, but also strength in its bearing. I like this heaviness, I like being filled with it, I like what comes of it. Yes, writing is difficult. But Rilke reminds me that in difficulty I am born.

Most people have (with the help of conventions) turned their solutions towards what is easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must trust in what is difficult; everything alive trusts in it, everything in Nature grows and defends itself any way it can and is spontaneously itself, tries to be itself at all costs and against all opposition. We know little, but that we must trust in what is difficult is a certainty that will never abandon us; it is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it. (Rilke, 1984, pp. 67-68)

My heaviness, however difficult, bears fruit. These words, like pebbles on the beach. Head down, eyes on the sand, searching, as I walk, for the perfect shell, the perfect beach glass, the perfect pebble, the perfect word, that a storm washed up on a shore of my landscape. After picking it up, I bend back down again and again, looking, searching for more, tension building, excitement at the moment of sighting the desired object and the energy of moving the limbs, thrusting the body, head before hips, hands, toward the perfect object, caressing it in my fingers and placing it into a heavily laden pocket weighed down by the spoils of my search. And what will I do with them now? Tomorrow will find me back on the beach, looking for more.

Even for a small piece of writing I have to create a new world inside my head, feel with my body, in the twilight. As I rummage through the heaps of fictions that make up layers and layers of my skin, I glimpse memories, long forgotten, of gestures that allowed my forthcoming. Did I consent? Did I open up to this awakening memory that I am not sure I haven't dreamt of? Am I a piece of fiction that my mind re-reads to straighten up the clutter of random texts? Not knowing who I am, I imagine myself. I picture this woman, projected on the screen of my mind, as if my daily self could not possibly accomplish anything. Replete with a void, I slowly circle around, like a hungry animal scenting the flesh and the blood, the "real thing", but remain hungry at the periphery of experience. I look at a black and white photo of Roland Barthes. He appears deep in thought, gentle and uncompromisingly vulnerable in his intellectuality. Beautiful, actually. I want to be *like* him. In this moment I am held at the threshold of mimetic impulse. But I am not like him. I am like my father. An absence, in the space between, in between the lines.

I reach into the absence with my heart and gut, my hand and tongue, my bones and nails, with my softest, most fragile tissues. I search, in my blind mirror, where what is visible is never seen.

Writing is the delicate, difficult, and dangerous means of succeeding in avowing the unavowable. Are we capable of it? This is my desire. (Cixous, 1993, p. 53)

The space between, the space before the visible. Like listening to music in the dark. Or writing. In the dark. In writing, or listening to music, I forget where I end and the text begins, the boundaries become blurred. Listening to Bach, slow, rich, flowing sound makes me think of a room, of a space within me yet around me as well. I inhabit this space, this room; its architecture takes root in my flesh, and I merge with it. Multiplicities. I feel surrounded by this space even as I write, listening to music, writing words that move me into space that is in constant motion, that surrounds and includes the body, where flesh becomes one with it. Music or writing are more spatial than the space itself. They include, engage, mingle with, the body.

Imagine a child who lived her life like it didn't really matter. Night after night, she lay in the child's bed she long since grew out of, watching the ceiling, darkness cut by patterns of passing traffic, stretching from corner to corner like a grim-reaper-light that comes to steal the dark. She waits patiently, follows each movement as if its journey should reveal something, something...Light reveals many things, yet it is the darkness that measures out the immeasurable spaces where the child could go. She lies in the darkness, waiting for the light. On her street, the trees line the sidewalk like soldiers, blossoming every spring with lush faces turned to the rising wind, dressed in pink uniform, guarding her nocturnal wait. The storm is coming.

Just close your eyes, I want to say. Fold yourself and slide into the envelope of eyelids, a letter yet to be written; you will remember existing in another place. Here, I am detached from everything, I am attached to everything, by strings of invisible words. As if I had two bodies, one that performs the tasks of everyday, and the other, flesh humming underneath the skin. A hand traces the dimension of words, dormant within, returning now and then to the traces on paper, on skin, with a sanguine sensibility, a creature of bloodlust. A hand, lapping at my skin from inside, bulging, detonating, touching the upside down world, it rips and reveals the viscous inner landscape, tears it open, excretes the self in exposure. Secrets ooze out from these wounds, I fight this irreverent hand, try to tuck the skin over the gap, too late, too late. My body, my home, its internal flow couples with the outside.

Words shift my reality toward fiction upon sunrise, breath rises unexpectedly, and skin fails to protect the secrets of the flesh. Consumated in a reluctant union, I emerge from darkness into the light, wounds and all, flowing out of life, dying of life. The shapely words wait, dormant in my daily illuminated existence.

Imagine a child standing on a platform. There is a train arriving. The mother, she stands behind, warning, fussing. "Stand back. It will suck you under if you get too close". The child steps back, yet is fascinated, drawn by the force that promises unspeakable experiences. She creeps tentatively, in small steps, a little closer and yet a bit closer...how close can she get before the force swallows her whole? I

imagine her mother standing behind, probably afraid of the train and also of the child herself. I think she knows that the child is much like that force, and she hesitates to reckon with it.

Here, on the platform, the child feels the train arriving. How bewildering, how adventurous, how exciting, is this moment at the threshold of the yet unknown! But the mother holds her back, aware of risks, aware of dangers. Imagine this child living her life like it didn't really matter. Like she didn't really matter. Her purpose was to love her mother. Because her mother was not really loved, not enough, anyway.

The child lets go of the train. She and her mother board and become passengers, moving along the corridors to the dining car. The tea is served. The child sits across from the mother, wanting to be the train, but unable to decide that for herself. Her mother's lips are heavily rouged, and with each sip become unveiled, shade by shade, until she can see the texture, the thin pale skin, with a darker spot where the lip bled, bitten in a nervous worry about the child and the train. As if the rouge veiled her true emotions, the denuded lips revealed the mother's face, and all of a sudden the child can see all of it, the whole, uninterrupted, even if unfinished, and worthy of all the love she has to offer. The child forgets about the train. And so she lives her life like it doesn't really matter, like she doesn't matter. She lives a life that doesn't matter to her.

Past the memories

The cerulean sky devours my eyes, the bergamot leaves float around the golden corona of tea at the bottom of the cup. How do I hold myself so upward? I can taste the bitterness in my mouth, feels like punishment for abandoning desire to regulated normalcy.

Sounds of heels certain of where they're going. The sounds of women I admire. I long to be certain as, surely, they must be, walking across the cobble stoned street with certainty only a grown woman, surely, must feel. As the sounds of clicking heels recede, they call to my subliminal homing instinct, out of the milky fog that mirrors back my own aura of incoherence, an absence of the visible. The obscured visible becomes more tenuous, it reverberates with a rhythmic murmur, dreamlike, of blood flowing, viscous and sweet, hot like liquid lava distributing heat to the far reaches of my body, through fingertips and beyond, toward. My legs carry me forward gently, barefoot, over the hard cobblestones and sandy grit that irritates, makes me more aware, deeply within. An encounter with pain is an indication that I am in a body. I am unprotected, exposed. I feel a place for a woman is not certain at all. It is ambiguous.

I watch faces. Particularly older women's faces. Wrinkled, darkening sacs under the eyes, soft skin folding tiredly over the cheekbones. I try to see myself with such a face, like a mask.

I define my self through my absent father.

But I see my mother's eyes.

My mother's eyes always looked like she had just been crying. Sometimes I see her eyes in my face, when I'm washing off the evidence of sadness and suffering just after I cried – I splash water over my face and, looking in a mirror, I see my mother's eyes. The surrounding skin is thin and swollen, reddish in hue, like an inflamed wound, bereft of vital energy, filled only with sadness, vulnerable and fragile. Her face, quivering, ready to fall apart at the smallest of life's cruelties. Only rarely, in the deepest moments of desolation, do I see my mother's eyes in my reflection. For her, this self-absorbed suffering was a way of life. And I, did I contribute? I, of all people, whom she loved the most, had the power to inflict this destruction on my mother's face. And as I write, I am not her. Not even an absence. I do not have a mother, a body to my body, the visceral, the real. My emphasis is on the absent, which for me is my father.

Suspended between sleep and waking, behind the eyes, closed, in the dark, in my mind I kiss faces, I touch skin. But my body is cloaked in a membrane of forgetting. Blended in violent brushstrokes of colour. Just a while ago I was certain that I felt like ripe colours of plum blue, lavender purple, deep red, sage green. Now there are incoherent bursts of bright, fire engine red, lemon yellow, crayon blue...primary colours, primary ways of being.

I shut my eyes, blinded.

The scent of roasted red peppers, a gastronomical hard on.

I hum a tune.

A memory of a garden and eating bread with roasted peppers and tomatoes, hands black from the coals of fire, dusted with dirt. Hands ridden with cracks that are black with earth like dried out riverbeds, earth that mingles with ink stains left on fingers. Afterward I lie down in a tired stupor, and start humming. Not a song really, just a monotonous murmur that comes from the back of the throat, from deep in the chest, a chest flat and small, a chest of a child. The hum rattles in the throat, and begins to thunder in my head, neck and shoulders, penetrates down to my stomach and lower still, melts in the knees and feels its way out through my toes, to the air outside.

An embodied arousal, as long as the breath is coming from me.

Eventually, it comes to a stop, before the next inhale. But in this stop, the body is there, pulsating within and without, in this garden with blackened walnuts fallen in the grass. And writing this, my knees shake, writing this arouses the sensibility of a woman in shriveling skin.

My skin is paperthin. As the dark falls, like rain, into the folds around my mouth, with every page I swell like a storm above a city. Writing reminds me of

something that hurts, early in the morning, in the space between sleeping and waking, before the light ushers the visible. With eyes closed. It is this moment in the dark, without seeing, when nothing is visible, or nothing visible is seen, when it is not necessary to see the visible. Space opens up into another landscape, darkness so soft and yielding I forget I have a body, yet it is there, more than ever, flesh in flow, flowing, uninterrupted. My body, my proprio-sceptor. When something comes out of nothing, this darkness opens me up, with hands that are very involved inside my body. Words are expelled from the dark corners of the mind, like so many little sounds that slip out of the mouth of a sleeping poet. The poet sleeps, or so we think. The words come out to play.

I blow into a cloud, breathe into a storm. Inhale. Stop. Exhale. The cloud is moving, swelling within me like a ravenous monster, gasping for air, my air. When it finally discharges, it echoes through the landscape in ever expanding pulsations, a shroud revealing, it creates another absence in its epicenter, like a landslide that leaves an empty gap in its place. As the cloud wraps around me, I feel strangely exposed, excreted.

Writing, I attempt to salvage the temporality, living from moment to moment, between breaths, between the lines. I'm trying to say something, somehow. It is in the somehow, in the way I will say it, where my self will be found. Not so much in what I say, but how it will feel when I say/write it. I try to write a note to self – I am no poet in any language I know, but in this landscape

words keep rushing in. I am the longest sentence, a question unanswered. My skin
is just paperthin.

Epilogue

Writing about absence is a privilege. Many people suffer absences, their basic needs unanswered. I am aware of the fortune of my situation in this world, where I can focus my writing on the role that a text has in inscribing the self. And more. The process of reading and writing, the words that evoke a space where the mind and the body can become one living modality, this writing comes from the fleshy corporeality of the body moved forth by eros, a gesture across absences, between the lines. My writing is driven by thirst and hunger even after my stomach is filled. Satiated, I can surrender to the void, to absence, so something new can rise, come forth.

If there was always something, that would be all that could ever be, not more. But in absence, there is more, a potentiality of something, even if that something is a void. Absence is not nothing. Rhyme and reason, being and writing, body and mind. Equally. With spaces in between, so others may gather something of their own. From my body to yours, an approach toward an absence, claiming it, momentarily, as it swells within. In writing one can perhaps find the empowerment of a self in corporeal folds of flesh in the world, that fold around.

We are moved to speech and we are moved to writing as well, a solitary expression that nevertheless provides a faultline, a touch of other on skin. Pressing against my skin, bulging, my self pushes out – ex-presses – toward the other. Embossed by the imprint of absence, in its carnal embrace, caress and kiss, I move with eros.

Writing from the body, I wait at the edge of absence. I ask the “how does the body know”, and it tells me. Writing in the dark, or by daylight, sometimes the words flow and sometimes they remain dormant for some time, reticent, unlikely morsels of meaning that feed my hand, my mind, my flesh. In writing the body remains spellbound, in these words the self releases into self and overflows into world, toward more than I could ever imagine. In considering the formation of self, the layering narratives of a body animated by eros bring forth a self that is incomplete, yet full.

In writing, I don't mean to fill your absence. I mean to provoke it. Into more, an astonishing narrative that enfolds this forthcoming. Like a storm cloud gathering, always before, always toward.

Your skin is just paperthin.

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