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Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing



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Thought Voice[ing] Feel[ing]

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Thought Voice[ing] Feel[ing]

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Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over.

Adorno, "The Essay as Form" (1954-1958)

In coformations of material agency some "we" just might create projects for a viable present despite the generic impossibility of the task. This is why the extra-generic, experimental instrument of the essay may be indispensable to the collaborative project of our humanity.

Joan Retallack, "Wager as Essay" (2003)

What one writes and the other hears is never exactly shared, it's more like something imagined and re-imagined, and projection is our constant companion; and we're left to wonder about disentangling generosity from appropriation.

Timothy Mathews, "Overture," *There and Not Here, Chronicles of Art and Loss* (2022)

I.

Three epigraphs: three moments to be related to each other. Regarding the first one: for all its historicity, and entangled as it is in a Cold War climate that compelled thinkers to take sides, most notably on the high cultural front, true to the task it sets itself, Adorno's essay does not delimit itself in stating how the essay experiments with critical paradigms and ways of reading. Rather than a discourse on method, it creates folds in which the subject/object binary is brought into play through the antagonism and the interrelatedness that it entails. Adorno's essay is a *mise-en-abyme* that "can be broken off at any point" (16), therefore contingent on the decision to carry on or to stop writing. Regarding the second epigraph: although the question of form as genre narrowly conceived, is largely irrelevant given the transgeneric crossovers and

unclassifiable configurations that have emerged since the heyday of the historical avant-gardes, Retallack reminds us that we have to carry on experimenting with life *and* form in order to envision a viable present. Regarding the third one: we need to take ourselves to the interstices between our singular experience and a “never exactly shared” (Mathews 13) present in order for writing to become a space of sharedness and imagined reciprocities.

The text that triggers this prefatory note is Timothy Mathews’s “She Voices If, on *Blindness* by José Saramago,” which was written in response to a play that was devised during the coronavirus pandemic: an adaptation of José Saramago’s *Blindness* (1995) written by Simon Stevens, directed by Walter Meirejohann, and narrated by Juliet Stevenson. It was first staged at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2020 and then toured across the UK and internationally. The play was voiced rather than staged, as the socially-distanced audience was just hearing the voice of Saramago’s fictional seeing narrator through Stevenson’s voice. “She Voices If” would not have been out of place in Mathews’s recently published *There and Not Here, Chronicles of Art and Loss*: a volume that brings together writing on encounters with diverse works and cultural forms; encounters punctuated by the writer’s own “psychic pain and internal devastation” in the wake of the loss of a life partner. Like the movements of a musical piece, each text conjoins reflection, introspection, memory, and a range of affects, states of mind and feeling, from astonishment to wonder, from disquiet to estrangement. Mathews’s ‘chronicles’ speak of how the experience of art becomes part of a “never exactly shared” personal storehouse that we tend to think of as uniquely our own, as part of our intimacy, comprising our experiencing of ourselves, of the world, and the ways in which the things of this world come to us. Sharedness takes shape as each encounter puts to the test our ways of thinking and feeling, our ways of relating to ourselves and to others. Mathews’s ‘chronicles’, like an essay, are both experiments and forms of experience. As such, they have no set boundaries and are not intended to exhaust their subject once and for all. The fact that an essay does not exhaust itself is proof of its inexhaustibility: “Even in the manner of its presentation, the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object and there was nothing left to say about it,” writes Adorno (16).

The inexhaustibility of the essay may also be thought of as a metaphor for what delimits and/or emancipates us through our relations: and relations entail loss. As a form of experience, the essay is a trope of connection, a prismatic and malleable form that can speak of many things: loss, recovery, resistance, perception, affect, speaks of ‘what’ happens to us, rather than ‘why,’

of 'if' or of 'unless,' of how 'before' or 'after' inhabit our present writing. The essay has an intractable temporality and is experienced as a juncture that renders other junctures meaningful. To bring back Joan Retallack, the 'wager' of the essay is to invest in the inexhaustibility of relations. And, inexhaustibility may rhyme with availability: from the Surrealist objective chance to the situationist *dérive* and beyond, an encounter should be premised on availability, reciprocity, and chance. Afterwards, it is the thinking through that resonates in us.

II

What does Saramago's novel have to offer beyond a parable of abjection, violence, pain? Perhaps a rather dark warning about misrecognition. Towards the end, the ophthalmologist, the husband of the woman who does not go blind and is the central consciousness of the novel, has the following exchange with a former patient of his, a man with a black patch that since all else fails becomes his distinguishing mark through touch:

here is the one person who was missing here, the patient with the black patch, he exclaimed, What do you mean, who are you, asked the old man, I am, or rather I was your ophthalmologist, do you remember, we were agreeing a date for your cataract operation, How did you recognise me, Above all, by your voice, the voice is the sight of the person who cannot see, Yes, the voice, I'm also beginning to recognise yours, who would have thought it, doctor, now there's no need for an operation...
I remember you telling me, doctor, that after my operation I would no longer recognise the world in which I was living, we now know how right you were. (n.p.)

Saramago's tale ends in the ambivalence of a 'perhaps' and leaves us with a quandary at best: the cause of the contagious blindness may never become known, and maybe people were and will remain blind after all: "Blind people who can see, but do not see" (n.p.). Beyond the predicament of seeing and the tyranny of the visual, as it were, Mathews relates his experience of the play as a story that moved him and as a story that may move us. The tale about his encounter with 'blindness' through Juliet Stevenson's voice is also about an inner voice that bears witness to how "a line" is drawn

from the intimate to the uncompromising. From Love to the death of all respect for life. A line from fiction to me, to you, to caring, to violence, a line that has nothing to do with metaphor, even association, let alone affinity; simply contiguity.

Contiguity is the requisite for understanding, care, and compassion that would not compromise a "prospect of generosity"; the condition that would not

compromise fallibility and vulnerability. At its best, the essay creates that space with the gift of reading. In “She Voices If,” Mathews’s wager is to write humanely about a tale of dehumanisation, degradation, contagion, and irrecoverable life. And this happens precisely by virtue of a contagion of a different kind: a transformative experience may become contagious, as it were, when a writer sets out to write about our unease vis-à-vis the unthinkable and to disentangle “generosity from appropriation.” Generosity always entails an element of the unexpected: one may aspire to offer more than may be expected or at least try to do so.

Coda

In the opening of *Listening* (2022), Jean Luc Nancy asks whether “listening” is “something of which philosophy is capable,” since it seems that philosophy has substituted “understanding” for listening (1). Does philosophising require neutralising listening, unlike the writing of essays? Nancy goes on to ask. In the first part of this long essay, Nancy sets seeing and listening, the aural and the visual against each other. As we need to look in order to see, and even so, looking is not tantamount to seeing, we need to listen in order to hear, although hearing is not tantamount to listening. This is imagined in its most ominous and nefarious consequences by Saramago.

In Nancy’s *Listening*, the order of listening certainly comes across as more humane than the order of the visual: “The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence,” Nancy writes (2). Can this permanence be taken as a metaphor for a viable life? “The sonorous outweighs form,” writes Nancy, “it does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it” (2) Is this another metaphor for generosity rather than appropriation? Can we imagine the essay as of the order of the “sonorous,” outweighing a fixed form; the essay as a “sonorous” entity that would not compromise the inaudible and the unintelligible, because it is wary of the pitfall of certainty and intelligibility. The “sonorous” essay’s task is to establish and to envision reciprocity: “I’m only hoping that you’re there reading,” writes Mathews towards the end of the piece that you’re about to read. This hope, which is one of the gifts of *Chronicles of Art and Loss*, is a hope that safeguards and rests on the contiguity between the experience of our vulnerability and the fallibility of our experiments with life and writing.

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