

Say who I am¹: Or a Broad Private Wink²

I had two books with me, which I'd meant to read on the plane. One was *Words for the Wind*, by Theodore Roethke, and this is what I found in there:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go.

My other book was Erika Ostrovsky's *Céline and His Vision*. Céline was a brave French soldier in the First World War – until his skull was cracked. After that he couldn't sleep, and there were noises in his head. He became a doctor, and he treated poor people in the daytime, and he wrote grotesque novels all night. No art is possible without a dance with death, he wrote."³

Re-imagining the art object as sharing a number of basic ontological qualities with the riddle, I would like to discuss some ways to write about, or again write *round* the art object: to illicit; to unlock; to *induce* its essential obscurity with essential obscurity.

Approaching the writing of this text, I looked back at my original proposal, and discovered that I had used a very wrong word. In fact the usage of this wrong word was somewhat of fundamental error on my part, and thankfully, now that I've amended this, I can proceed with the proper word, (or so I hope).

My wrong word was *deduce* – what I really should have said was *induce*. For to loiter near the art object, with the intention of capture through critique should essentially be a procedure of *induction* rather than of *deduction*, in that we are creating or tracing a broader, possibly more fertile environment through close looking, rather than tracking a logical conclusion from the clues given. To concur with Maurice Blanchot as he would have it in his 1941 novel *Thomas the Obscure*, "...making no distinction between the figure and that which is, or believes itself to be, its centre, whenever the complete figure itself expresses no more than the search for an imagined centre."⁴ Working in the margins, writing the "...the inside meaning of it if you understand me."⁵

We should keep in mind that after all, the supposed ur-deducer, Sherlock Holmes, had detailed knowledge of 'everything' that could be applied to his inductive investigations of crime, but little to no knowledge of the material world outside of his investigations. We can see this inductive approach – the approach of the conscientious critic perhaps – here from Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* originally published in 1887, in a comment made by Holmes to Watson:

Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be. They can put those events together in their minds, and argue from them that something will come to pass. There are few people, however, who, if told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backward...⁶

This backwards reasoning is temporal in nature – traversing past-production no longer accessible, shot through a present of inscription, towards a future that will probably be barely dented by our observations. Without this reasoning however, there cannot be a full understanding of *what* or *why*, critical art writing that harbours at its core a vocative aggregate problematises yet harmonises its subject; to borrow an observation of Marie Darrieussecq's, "The unsaid is that which advances literature, that which it explores as a virgin or submerged land. Ghosts are born of the unsaid... To write is to give a voice to ghosts."⁷

To read and write the object simultaneously.

Or again, to write as you read.

All of this of course has direct implications not only for the validity of the judgement procedures of art criticism, but also for its direction, speed and methods of approach.

Let's reconsider Sherlock Holmes' impulse of reasoning backward in relation to an observation from Michel Tournier in his autobiography *The Wind Spirit*, an observation in which we may catch strains of the faint scent of critical methodology: "... in all good philosophy the solution always precedes the problem. The problem is nothing but the shadow cast by its solution, a fountain of clarity that spurts *motu proprio* ['of its own accord' – *Ed.*] into the empyrean of the intelligible."⁸

Whilst I would not necessarily hold with, or even particularly desire the type of clarity that is generally assumed to be of use to culturally assemble (or is that re-assemble?) a 'complete' art object – rendering it less leaky, and therefore more substantive or even marketable from any viewable angle – I would like to spend some more time re-imagining how backwards movement might help us to 'assess' the art object more clearly, that is to further the purposes of parlous (here meaning difficult or uncertain, rather than its homophone *powerless*) navigation.

But then again, there's backwards movement, and there's backwards movement.

Looking for the wrong kind of help here, we can glance briefly toward a fundamental principle of Cartesian analysis, which suggests that when given a problem to be solved we examine the conditions to be fulfilled, dividing them into simpler conditions that are themselves easier to solve, to go backwards, so to speak, from the given problem to the simpler and solvable constituents. *This* type of backwards movement presents a problem, however, in art writing, in terms of how to divide, sort or

again order the parts into a form that seems easier to inspect. The ‘ordering’ action, by its very nature, suggests a sequential or narrative thrust toward a specific destination, the place of judgement, not, I would suggest, a very useful movement in criticism, and one that is often characterised by descriptive, rather than inscriptive processes.

The kind of backwards movement that interests us here is more closely identified with the seemingly counter-intuitive dynamism of Maurice Blanchot’s ‘Orphic Gaze’: its power to inspect, to vaporize, to transform. Blanchot has said in his essay ‘The Gaze of Orpheus’:

At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image... what is left behind is precisely this cadaver, which is not of the world either – even though it is here – which is rather behind the world... and which now affirms, on the basis of this, the possibility of a world – behind, a return to backwards.”⁹

This “return to backwards” depicts a resistance or perhaps more exactly a sly challenge to comprehension, highlighting as it does the essential obscurity of the image – or here as we are terming it, the art object – thereby suggesting that it must be approached in a different way, and, just as the cadaver itself is in a state of “infinite erosion”, so too is the art object, in terms of its physical presence, together with its cultural and economic currencies. Contemporary art criticism that is nurtured by the appearance of value may be both witness to and witnessed to be assembling an inauthentic absolute object or teratological corpus, through rationalist grafting of interpretation from scrappy parts – criticism demanding to be read of itself, whilst simultaneously calling for a re-reading of something which is outside of itself.

We can look to less orthodox modes of criticism to examine the dissolution or again dissemination of the absolute object, in the same way as we look to fiction to lead us on an aporetic procedure; enacting critical judgements through question after question, rather than answer after answer.

Criticism *can* cajole objects to speak.

But, we must be prepared to accept that these very same objects may only be able to answer us in riddles, and, furthermore that we must be prepared to approach them in riddling form in order to elicit the most sophisticated or productive responses. This complex object, this art object may, by speaking, shed itself of the soup stowage of deductive judgement value, encouraging us to develop the catoptric approach of being reader and writer at the same time: or again to write as we ‘read’ the object critically.

Monsieur Teste, Paul Valéry’s eponymous antihero asserted that, “God made everything out of nothing, but the nothing shows through.”¹⁰ Perhaps it is the very ‘nothing’ of the art object which may be interrogated and indeed celebrated as half-intended discovery through the backward reasoning of

more experimental modes of critical art writing, but only if that very same writing is willing to embrace, and yes, even to embody the inherent obscurity, the delicacy, the dispersive excursion of induction.

1. Daniel Tiffany 'Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism and Poetic Obscurity' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.28, No.1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 73.
2. Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 117.
3. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5* (St Albans: Panther, 1972), p. 21.
4. Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*. (New York: David Lewis, 1973), p. 3.
5. Flann O'Brien, op. cit., p. 167.
6. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 123.
7. http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/en/exc_interview.html (accessed 01 February 2009)
8. Michel Tournier, *The Wind Spirit* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1991), p. 125.
9. Maurice Blanchot, *The Stationhill Blanchot Reader* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1999), p. 439.
10. Paul Valéry, *Monsieur Teste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 101.