

Writers on writing

Journeying through words: Les Back reflects on writing with Thomas Yarrow

You have written about the importance of taking the reader 'there', as well as on the relationship between what and where we write. The medium of this exchange is email and so the 'there' is distributed in time and space. I am writing this on a train between Durham and York, my daily commute, a space I like to use to write. I'd like you to start by setting the scene at your end.

Tom

I share your sense of the value of writing on the move – on trains, in cafés, or at places along the journey. This is for two reasons.

Firstly, the alchemy of Wi-Fi hot spots and the global reach of email make it almost impossible to escape academic responsibilities for longer than the duration of a plane flight or a train journey. Connectivity offers writers a staggering capacity to access information from all over the world and check facts and follow up leads. The price we pay for this resource, which has so quickly been taken for granted, is the exasperation of seemingly endless queries about meetings, essays, and deadlines. The academic life has become open access. In order to think and write, I find myself seeking out places to disconnect from and get off the information superhighway, places on the move where the 'connection' is bad. Those places afford writing time.

Secondly, sometimes I suffer from an allergic reaction to my desk and need to get out. In the age of the laptop computer and the mobile

phone, writers are no longer hostage to the immobile typewriter. A desk can be found almost anywhere as long as the battery is charged or there is a compatible mains socket close at hand. I settle down to work in crowded cafés, noisy airport lounges, or even parks. Today I am in my current favourite spot, Pistachios in the Park Café on Hill Fields, one of south London's most beautiful – and lesser known – parks. I find it an ideal location to get my laptop out and write. It is located almost exactly halfway between where I live and where I work. It literalizes aptly the place of writing in my own life: a vocation that is between what I get paid to do and the rest of my life.

Now I am surrounded by the sounds of toddlers crying, young mums laughing over the absurdities of parenting, and dogs barking loudly. 'Don't you find it distracting?' asks Fred, the owner. Truth is, I don't. On the odd occasion, explosions of mirth from sixth formers gathered around laptops watching comic YouTube virals disrupt my concentration – but those are exceptional lapses. The visitors to the café are busy getting on with more important things and are not asking for an immediate reply to an email inquiry. The middle-aged guy tapping away at his laptop in such a public place none the less draws comfort and inspiration from them. It helps counteract inhibitions of authorial self-consciousness, which can be so stifling. It gets me started and helps me keep moving with the work. The noise of the children playing is also a reminder that writing is a profoundly social activity, it connects my thoughts to yours – in short, it lets them travel.

Les

You have described how writing is shaped by the places in which we write. I'd like to follow up my initial question about where and what you write by picking up on the temporal dimension to writing, which you have also touched on in your message. I'd be interested to hear more about the times in which you write, and also about the sense in which you experience time in relation to your writing.

Tom

Writing is just difficult, plain and simple. The temptation to put off writing is strong as a result. We end up becoming what psychologist Paul J. Silvia calls 'binge writers' (2007: 14). Delaying the moment when we sit down to write means we are then faced with a deadline that can only be met through late-night binges at the keyboard. For Silvia the only way out of this pattern is to become a *routine writer* and treat writing time as a non-negotiable commitment – like teaching a class or attending a department board meeting. His little book entitled *How to write a lot* (2007) is crammed with useful tips on how to foster better literary habits. We all have periods in the day when we are most intellectually awake, which is when we should be writing.

I try to write in the mornings, because that is when my mind is most agile. Sometimes, like this morning, I wake up at 4.30 a.m. and suddenly a link or a connection I was trying to make in something I am working on becomes clear. I find that I have no real control over that process because ideas can't simply be willed to come. Leonard Cohen commented once that he didn't know where the good songs came from because if he did he'd visit that place more often. Imaginative leaps or analytical connections are like that too. They seem to me like unexpected guests that we need to be ready to receive at any time. I record their arrival with a few scribbles in my notebook.

Having said this, I do give myself designated periods of time to write. The torture for me is starting. Once I've started, I am usually fine, but if I get interrupted – if the phone rings, or if something else intervenes and time drifts – then I am really in trouble. I usually give myself a block of time rather than whole days. I find that after three to four hours of writing intensely I start to achieve less and less. So, your train journey sounds perfect to me – you start writing when the train pulls away from the platform and stop when it arrives at your destination.

The other thing that I try to do is stop a writing session before I have exhausted all of the

things I wanted to say. Always leave an argument or description to be written. So, I never stop writing without knowing what the next point is going to be. It makes picking up the thread the next time easier.

Les

You have described some of the ways in which what you write relates to where and when you do the writing. Your description complicates ideas about authorial autonomy, which have been widely deconstructed, but which none the less remain powerfully constitutive of the ways in which writing is thought about and practised. If writers can consciously control the conditions in which ideas emerge but not the ideas themselves, ideas involve a movement that takes us beyond ourselves. Because writing is creative, the journey is not prefigured. That makes it difficult but also transformative: it is a slightly different person who starts and ends a text. I'd like to pick up now on this relationship between the authorial 'you' and the words that you write. Adam Reed (2011) has recently written of 'inspiration' as a specific sense in which writers (in his case members of a literary society) imagine themselves as conduits of the voice and actions of specific others. Your writing has a distinctive voice, but I'd be interested in your reflections on where this comes from, which might return us to your earlier observation about the social basis of writing in a slightly different way. I am thinking less about the specific kinds of influence acknowledged in references, and more about whether or how your own voice contains others (personally known or not) in sedimented and habitual ways of thinking and writing.

Tom

To my mind, ethnographic writing has no point at all unless it takes us beyond ourselves. That was the danger of the turn to authorial reflexivity, or what is called derisively in American sociological circles 'me-search'. The writing we do is about our reasoning with others, our dialogue with them, and it should aim to communicate to the readers what we learned and brought back from those encounters. It has to be that, otherwise the profoundly sociable nature of the kind of writing that ethnography invites is lost.

I still think Salman Rushdie put it rather well: he said writing becomes a collective process 'that both writes as it reads and reads as it writes' (1991: 426). If we think of the process of reading as listening to the voices of others, then our own writing is never entirely individual.

You wrote kindly that my own writing has a 'distinctive voice'. I don't know what that is, to be honest, although I trust you as a reader to know that voice when you read it. I know, too, that my writing is not my own creation, although I would insist it is my sole responsibility. So, where then does it come from?

I want to pay your perceptive question the courtesy of a considered and serious answer. So, the first place it comes from is reading the writers I admire. This is reading not just for the content of their ideas but for the form of their rhetoric. Here I don't mean rhetoric as hollow sloganeering, but the art of persuasive writing. My writing voice is a *bricolage* of influences drawn from reading great writers without being consciously aware of their imprint. I don't think this is imitation but combination, adaptation, and reassembly. It is 'reading as we are writing', as Rushdie put it.

The second place it comes from is the encounter with the ethnographic world and texture of the lives I am listening to. I think our job as writers is to try to take our readers to that place, whether it is the football grounds of south London or an anti-racist political demonstration in Chinatown. I often listen to those voices and the soundscapes of those worlds as I am writing. That cultural landscape furnishes the texture of my writing as well as the content, be it ethnographic descriptions or quotations from participants.

Thirdly, I think the writing is often shaped by the critical eyes of trusted readers. I have been very lucky to have educated readers – not always academics – to let me know if I was 'writing it right' or not. I have an old friend who is a bus driver called Pete. We were at school together and he is the most gifted and intelligent person I know, although he didn't get a formal education beyond what we call GCSEs today. I often give him my things to read.

I remember I gave Pete a book I had written about football culture and racism. After a few weeks we met up and I asked him what he thought about the book. He said, agitatedly, 'It really pissed me off'. I asked him, 'Why'? He replied, 'Well, you seem so uncertain, you "suggest" all the time, but you don't tell us what you think!' It cured me in a single stroke of what Clifford Geertz (1988) called 'epistemological hypochondria'. I think I had fallen foul of the all too tempting passive literary voice. In Rushdie's terms I know my work has benefited from the rewriting that my critical readers do when they pass comment on the things I ask them to read for me.

So, that voice that you recognize when you read it is shaped by all of those dimensions. In recent times, too, I have felt a desire to try to make academic writing more artful. This means trying to make our craft *a bit more crafty* – working with the counter-intuitive and trying to surprise the reader if I can.

Les

I'd like to pick up on your point about ethnographic writing as a way of taking us beyond ourselves, and to pose a question about the different ways in which writing can affect that transformative movement in the reader. You have written earlier about the imaginative journey of writing from the author's perspective, and I'd like to ask now how you see the relationship between the journey that you take as a writer and the journey that the reader takes. Writing, as you have earlier observed, connects the thoughts of a writer to those of a reader and gives the reader space to travel. I am particularly interested to know what your understanding of writing as evocation implies for the way in which you envisage the relationship between the kinds of writing we call 'descriptive' and those we call 'theoretical'.

Tom

It seems to me that academic writing – particularly in the context of Ph.D. theses – has become increasingly heavy on theory and light on description. We're all so concerned to convey our theoretical sophistication that sometimes theory's referent (i.e. the ethnographic setting) is almost forgotten. The possibility then of theoretically infused descriptions is lost. To be honest, I just don't want to accept the simple separation of theory from description. What we notice and describe is often deeply connected to theoretical commitments, and theoretical arguments are often best communicated through a compelling description. I also think there are new opportunities in our time to imagine description differently.

In this sense I think James Clifford is right to warn that in order to return to realism you have to leave it in the first place (1986: 25). What I am thinking of is how to use digital photography, film, and sound recording to create ethnographic representations beyond words. Working with digital devices make us confront the fact that we don't simply reflect what is ethnographically real but rather we produce and assemble it – turning up the background or enlarging some small detail of life. I want to suggest that an embrace of this productive/creative dimension might help enable an encounter with 'the real' without a naive realism slipping in through the back door. The

recordings made by the digital sound recorder or camera provide the illusion of 'being there'. If we leave behind the simple idea that they 'capture' the real but instead see them as producing a realist imaginative object, then they may provide a different kind of possibility for social understanding or revelation as well as a medium for theorizing in which the abstract is made to live. Also, those digital facsimiles become props and aids for writing more descriptively about the unfolding of culture.

Les

You make an important point about the relation between description and theory. Descriptions are not simply accounts of the pre-existing 'reality' from which theoretical arguments are built; they are artefacts of interpretative processes that include the judgments that are made as part of the act of writing itself. Am I right to infer that from this perspective a commitment to the 'real' of ethnographic experience is as much about 'thinning' as 'thickening' description, involving selective erasure as well as layering? I wonder if you would share my observation that, though anthropological forms of writing routinely combine the two, truth to ethnographic complexity – manifold voices and contexts – points in a slightly different direction to the truth of an argument or conceptual 'point'?

Tom

We are indexing Clifford Geertz's famous notion of 'thick description' (1973) as a way of describing ethnography, and maybe we should make that explicit. One of the things I have always admired about Geertz is his insistence on the idea of a 'situated observer'. So any ethnographic account needs to acknowledge its own partial nature, that is, produced by a particular observer in a particular place and time. I think that involves 'thinning down' the arrogant claim that we know 'the real' once and for all, or the sleight of hand involved in what Bourdieu calls the 'view from nowhere' which writes out the writer. A winnowing of that kind of arrogance and certainty is very welcome from my point of view.

I have really tried to think about this differently by asking the simple question: what are we doing when we are writing descriptions? There is a passage in a book I wrote called *The art of listening* (Back 2007: 21-2) that focuses on this question. I have found Hannah Arendt's (1968) essay on Walter Benjamin is very suggestive because she characterizes him as a 'pearl diver' who descends to the bottom of the sea – not to bring the sea floor to the surface whole, because that's not possible; rather, he is prying loose the

rich and the strange pearls in the depths. Similarly, I think the empirical depths that ethnography tries to plumb in life's surface cannot be described entirely. Well, then, what am I doing?

I have come to think that what I am doing with writing is to describe fragments of life and enhancing them through description. This is not simply a kind of facsimile of the 'real' but an augmentation of it – turning up the background, enlarging the unremarked upon and making it remarkable. The usefulness of theory is that it can hover above the ethnographic ground and provide a vocabulary for its explication, magnification, and enchantment. I have come to realize that is what I am trying to do as I sit down to write in a crowded café.

I have just finished writing a chapter on writing for an edited book by Carol Smart, Jenny Hockey, and Alison James called *The craft of knowledge* (Back 2014). It argues that the words we write are valuable because they enable movements of imagination but also because they provide companionship in further thought. That sense of openness, or trying to write in such a way to facilitate movements of imagination, is what I have been aiming for. Whether or not I achieve it, the reader alone will decide.

Les

I want to end with a question about ending. I have recently been working with stonemasons working on the conservation of Glasgow Cathedral (Yarrow & Jones 2014). The masons describe the end-point – the point at which the stone is released as an object for incorporation in the Cathedral – as a moment of 'letting go'. Previously locked together through a process of cutting, stone and mason part company as subject and object. Related but distinct, they go their own way. I think it is quite a good analogy for the writing process, and the issues of ending. So my question to you is about how you work with your own words once they are there. Specifically, I am interested in the role of editing in your own work and how, through this, you achieve and experience the point at which you finish. A related question is whether stopping is always the same thing as finishing. Is it always clear to you that you have reached a point of resolution? Or is it inherent in the writing process that questions and doubts linger?

Tom

That is a lovely analogy. I know Mariam Motamedi-Fraser (2012: 97) talks about writing as the process of sculpting words. The first thing I do with my own words when drafted is to give them to a reader. I let them go almost

immediately. I think the cruel thing about authorship is that we cannot really judge our own work. I think that's what we need readers for, to help us cut and hone the writing. We all need a discerning reader whom we can trust. Feedback can come in many forms, from a Ph.D. supervisor or a referee's reports on a journal article or book manuscript. Being able to take criticism is a real skill because it involves not only being able to learn from critical comments but also having the capacity to act on them.

Stopping writing is not the same as finishing, because the words come back for re-shaping time and time again. I think a point is reached where you have to say, 'I can't do any more, I have polished the arguments as much as I can. That is the point to let it go and start something else. I often feel a sense of dissatisfaction and failure. I do not think it is wise to listen to those feelings because we are not the best judges of our own work. Those feelings are only useful as a spur to try to write better next time. People have said to me, 'Oh, you have written a lot of books!' To which I always reply: 'That's because I am still trying to write a good one'. I am not sure I will ever achieve this in my own estimation, but I will keep to that endeavour.

Les

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