Loving Art

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Loving Art
Tim Stott

The primary directive of Irish art criticism at present seems to be to launch artists, works, and critics onto the high seas of legibility, legitimacy and exchange. This puts interpretation in the service of promotion and general arts management, certainly, but rather than seeking to counter this with belaboured wrangling over meaning, the time is ripe for a little love, perhaps. Insofar as it Stokes a claim to meaning, criticism continues to engage in the fraught, polemical process of repurposing and discarding the arts for a more potent instant of the movement of writing or art. … [revealing] the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it”. Writing must therefore become transparent so that through it we might experience “the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are.” Otherwise, the assimilation of Art into Thought would only further atrophy our sensory correspondence with the world.

So again, it is not a case of poetic evocation, of chasing language away from that phantasmagoric subjectivity that engenders art. It is already dense with words, a glut of quotations, but reading and writing this surface is quite unlike the linear, speculative, agitating what is unwritten. Agitation is not the same as criticism, and much more like those crises upon which criticism nourishes itself, a crisis being, after all, neither more nor less than a moment of decision.

Such a demand also suffers from an aversion to a number of rather important things about writing. Firstly, as much as it compels, and courts authority, writing is anarchic and duplicitous, inescapably so. Secondly, writing too is a sensuous surface of inscription: when Sontag calls for the writer’s body to become an open, yielding surface for the inscription of sensory data, she simply transfers the origin from artwork to body, thereby disavowing those more or less automated operations that constantly inscribe upon this body and distribute its sense-making functions across a multiplicity of technological sub-systems, writing being one of them. Thirdly, writing dramatizes knowledge, making it festive. As writing wriggles away from the grip of legislation and power, it approaches theatre, and so too approaches the object of its musings and desires, its beloved, so to speak, with a performance – parades of masks and gestures, games of hide-and-seek: “Larvatus prodeo: I advance pointing to my mask, but with a discreet (and withy) finger I designate this mask. Every passion, ultimately, has its spectator … no amorous obligation without a final theatre …”

So again, Sontag is not really the target here: transparency, interpretation and criticism remain inseparable for many. An aversion to literariness – often conflated with the belle lettre – prevals, still, even where aspirations surpass the lacklustre treadmill of promotional stock. The demand for transparency is persuasive, and commonly a default option. It is timely and efficient. It works to deadlines. It uses predictive text formations, but in doing so makes language redundant at the moment of writing. Whatever declarations such texts might make concerning their exegetic function, they foreclose the movement of text, measuring out the rhythms of syntax according to representational dictates. The generally muddled thoughts and gory odious admonishments that accompany this hangover from the politics of representation seem unwilling to entertain the possibility that art is representable only in a weak sense, if at all, and as a means by which society represents itself it is largely irrelevant.

If this is the case for the presumed objects of criticism, then why attempt to institute promotion and general arts management, certainly, but rather than seeking to counter this with belaboured wrangling over meaning, the time is ripe for a little love, perhaps. Insofar as it Stokes a claim to meaning, criticism continues to engage in the fraught, polemical process of repurposing and discarding the arts for a more potent instant of the movement of writing or art. … [revealing] the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it”. Writing must therefore become transparent so that through it we might experience “the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are.” Otherwise, the assimilation of Art into Thought would only further atrophy our sensory correspondence with the world.

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to signpost the proprietary rights of meaning. These are both acts of possession quite inimical to those of love. Without doubt, there are obligations for artwriters, but beyond these, they should risk greater ambition, and greater intimacy, than the narcissism of magnificent failure: this only leads each party to fall back into itself, whereas erotics, after all, requires the opening of two bodies to each other. It requires a gift, and the “right density of abandonment” that entrusts one body to another and vice versa, and that animates both outside any particular frame of interpretation, “as if the [erotic] image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see.”

Writing not contracted to the laborious recovery of meaning might engage instead in something akin to an overseas correspondence. As Maurice Blanchot famously wrote long ago, if there were not this interval, the remoteness and enigmatic silence of one correspondent to another even as they face each other, nothing would pass between them.

“We should renounce knowing those to whom we are bound by something essential … the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even in the greatest familiarity, an infinite distance, this fundamental separation from out of which that which separates becomes relation.”

The generosity of such an attempt to exchange addresses is a consequence of writing’s aforementioned failure to reach its address. There never is an amorous encounter through writing: hence, for Barthes, there can be no “amorous” text, only writing “amorously.” But, failure is the source of generosity, as it sends writing beyond mere autoeroticism and into the mutual vulnerability of erotics: masturbation, the augmentation and bringing to climax through writing of a previous encounter is much too authoritative – it short-circuits erotics and introduces some retrograde voluntarism into affairs. One does not choose to love, one falls in love: love is something we are in rather than something we do, a by-product of our well-laid plans. A lover’s discourse gets carried away in the movements of Eros:

“Straining towards something different from ourselves, we had been penetrated by something we already carried within us. But it was also as if it were only by entering us that the work could know itself … These are hardly attributes of a personality; we are pregnant with what doesn’t exactly belong to us, and self-delivery (self-reproduction) turns out to have nothing to do with self-expression.”

To conclude, a few requests. Firstly, that artwriting attempts not to recover some present prior to writing but to live restlessly in the present through writing. Secondly, that it transcribes the incomprehension that engenders love. Thirdly, that it takes its motivation from the voluptuous density of relations between lovers and seeks knowledge neither in the lover nor the beloved but only in what passes between them. And lastly, that it does not engage in gossip: loving consists of believing that one knows the secret the loved one holds back, even as one knows that such secrets only come into being in response to one’s probing. Can we think of a writing that keeps that secret rather than attempts to spread it around? For how can we love if we cannot keep a secret?

“And this secret that we take by surprise, we do not speak of it … we leave it intact. This is love.”

Similarly, one should not write of an encounter, for fear of betraying its secret, or worse, revealing that it has no secret. One can write to this encounter, but at the expense of clarity for those who are not party to it. Hence the use of opaque jargon, the distribution of the vernacular in the midst of the vehicular, which lacks clarity only to those who perform the ablutions of legitimate and/or critical discourse.

If artwriting cannot trade in silences and secrets then it can only trade, i.e. become a mere function of logistics; and it certainly cannot love.

Notes
3 Nicholas Davey, J.R., ‘Writing and the In-Between’, Word & Image, volume 16, number 4, October-December 2000
4 Barthes, Roland, ‘Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, 7th January 1977’, October, spring 1979
6 Deleuze, Gilles, Foucault, translated by Sean Hand, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp.66-67
8 See Perling Hudson, Suzanne, ‘Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism’, October 104, Spring 2003
13 Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, p.78
15 Cixous, Hélène, Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing, London: Routledge, 1997, p.17