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Tim Stott
Technological University Dublin, tim.stott@tudublin.ie

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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 stakes a claim to meaning, criticism continues to engage in the myth of projective process of power at once reifying and discarding the subject the latent meaning of a complex of significant qualities. The task of interpretation is to cast a net across these qualities, then to describe and decipher what is brought ashore. Such a method of intellectual labour, whatever the flag under which it ventures out, finds meaning only in the depths. Some time ago, Susan Sontag lamented “the revenge of the intellect upon art”, for laying siege to the sovereignty of the sensuous and immediate: beauty. 

Lovingly following the contours of the body that arouses its desire, allowing its pleasure to accumulate upon the body’s surface, such an approach is perhaps the truest to the enigmatic “truths” of the body and the tall tales of the text; and besides, erotics begins in the vicissitudes of pleasure, not in the placatory certainties of beauty. Lovingly following the contours of the body that arouses its desire, allowing its pleasure to accumulate upon the body’s surfaces until it becomes visible, writing approaches intimacy with that strange, chimerical body. “The thing itself” is a fantasised origin that is just a place from which to begin. It is a default option that chases after some originary experience from which to proceed, but her own recommendations remain entangled both within her phenomenological prejudice for the “luminous” origins of things, and the more general hermeneutic project of resuscitating “the living spirit from the tomb of the letter”, which most often entails the reconfiguration of a disolate subjectivity irreversibly detached from and through writing. Nevertheless, however confused and reactionary her case against interpretation might be, her call for erotics is germane to the problems of artwriting in its encounters with the current array of art pleasures. 

So again, it is not a case of poetic evocation, of chasing language away from that phantom thing called “immediate experience”, or of laying down a placatory formula for beauty. If this is the case for the presumed objects of criticism, then why attempt to institute representation at the level of the text? This seems a rearguard action, a commitment to circulate words according to the Law, and not according to the perversities of writing itself. The demand for erotics is more difficult, and strictly incompatible with the demand for transparency, implying as it does the perverse act of making what is intimate public, with all its inexplicable associations and pleasures intact. It has found its most sustained response, so far, in various appeals to beauty. But such appeals continue to depend uncritically upon a hermeneutic subject (as well as an uncomplicated distinction between the ‘truths’ of the body and the tall tales of the text); and besides, erotics begins in the vicissitudes of pleasure, not in the placatory certainties of beauty.

Variant issue 29
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 keep it. That is to say … we do not touch 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 abstractions 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 Innaguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, 7th January 1977’, October 8, 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