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The writing body and the reading sensorium: material calibrations of a living encounter

Abstract:

This paper turns on a concern for that convention that sees the writer dissuaded from imbuing the material dimensions of a piece of writing with meaning – or rather, from disturbing the standardised meaning allotted to these dimensions by the contingencies of a history of print. I'm referring here to literary texts manufactured within a tradition ('ours') the particularities of which bar writing from having instilled in its sensually apprehensible *form* the affective capacity that is instead expected to inhere within writing's *intelligible content*. This paper draws attention to the vitality of the surfaces upon which we write and their potential pliability at the hands of the writer in aid of enriching or diversifying a text's semantic import. In fact, a certain consciousness of the materiality of writing and of its effects, I suggest, constitutes a writerly responsibility, the assumption of which is coextensive with an understanding of what writing is and what it can do. At stake is a singular ethical opportunity, since writing generates an opportunity for encounter with an external other – a union that is ethical insofar as it does not fail to foreground both writer's and reader's bodies as individualised and agential sensoria. As practitioners and as educators, to ignore the *stuff* of writing, I argue, is to insist upon a paradigm that miscalculates the sway of material bodies, reckoning them objects, rather than posthuman assemblages, active agents in the vital matter of life.

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This paper turns on a concern for the convention that sees the writer dissuaded from imbuing the material dimensions of a piece of writing with meaning – or rather, dissuaded from disturbing the standardised meaning already allotted to these dimensions by the contingencies of a history of print. I'm referring here to literary texts manufactured within a tradition ('ours') the particularities of which tend to bar a writer from instilling in a finished text's sensually apprehensible *matter* the affective capacity that is instead expected to inhere within writing's *intelligible content*. Where for the majority of other arts message and medium are inseparable, the industrial apparatus through which writing has developed as an art form dictate that these two elements can be – and as a matter of course are – distinguished from each other. This assumes that what we call 'literature' is somehow intangible, free to move unfettered and unaffected between media platforms. The opposition casts a pale Cartesian shadow; pale, because writers have long understood that their hold on readers depends upon the skill with which sound and sense – the sensual and the cognitive – can be made to hang together through the positioning of words in careful relation to one another. But I am concerned here with material properties rather than aspects of form – of course a sonnet's being a sonnet *means* something; built into the form are historically evolved meanings that are assumed or challenged at its every instantiation. And poetry in particular acknowledges language's sonic and visual affectivity beyond its intelligibility. However, I am less interested in drawing attention to the physicality of words than I am to the physicality of the surfaces upon which words interact, and the potential pliability of these surfaces at the hands of the writer in aid of enriching or diversifying a text's semantic import.

What I would suggest, in fact – and this will be my central contention – is that a certain consciousness of the materiality of writing and of the effects of this materiality constitute a writerly responsibility, the assumption of which is coextensive with a writer's understanding of what writing is and what it can do. Of the many discursive points generated by this proposition, just one will corral the scope of this paper and that is: that the call to pay attention to writing's matter – or to what might be described as writing's so-called 'negative space' – carries an ethical inflection. (Making this assertion in a pedagogical context, as I am here, triggers an attendant responsibility to foreground in the classroom the possibility – and potentialities – of seeing these 'positive' and 'negative' spaces as two sides to the one coin. However, elaborating on how what has been called 'new materialist' theory might be practically introduced to the writing workshop is reserved for a later paper.) In the present article, my intention is to contribute to a growing body of writing process theory, by stating the case for an ethics of writer-reader encounter via the body of the text.

So habitual is the impulse to distinguish 'literature' or the 'text proper' from the matter that literally supports it, that unpacking the *vitality* of material, its capacity to twin the affectivity of syntax, earns itself a fair amount of preliminary space in this paper. Lingering over the affective life of matter is also made necessary by a strong tradition of cultural or historical materialisms, whose monopoly over the study of texts as tangible objects perhaps encourages some automatic assumptions about the direction of the current paper, most of which I will want to dispel. Next, I will want to tease out the implications raised for an ethics of encounter in order to accentuate why

the ethical question is so pertinent to writing. Because, given the radical separation of writer and reader in time and space, if an encounter between these two parties is to take place at all, what is required, precisely is *a place*. This itinerary, then, in order finally to ask: what can writing practice gain from nurturing an awareness of the written product as a place; from considering the pre-established symbolic peculiarities of the textual meeting places (often books) in whose construction the writer participates? Moreover, what can we learn about the published artefact and its fabrication by reconceiving it as vital and incarnate rather than inert and objectlike, a mere receptacle of the ethereal text? And, how do writers (and students of writing) stand to benefit from responding to these questions?

Life, writing

Thinking through the materiality of writing and print cultures, Louis van den Hengel (2012) has recently deployed the term *zoegraphy* (*zoe* refers to the 'raw' or 'bare', usually prelinguistic, vitality common to nonhuman organic matter) to denote a kind of life writing that refuses to cohere around an anthropocentric notion of *bios* – a notion that, as van den Hengel describes it, takes in a 'discursive, social and political life appropriate to human beings' that fails to take seriously the vital forces emanating from and between humans and other organisms (2012, 2), and, I would add, from and between humans, technologies, affects and *non*organic matter. Equating human life to *bios* depends upon partitioning *bios* off from *zoe*, since *bios* is a discursively constituted and (thus) political existence that subsists on *zoe* even as it uses the nonlingual nature of such vital forces as the very boundary against which we are to understand human existence.[i]

Van den Hengels's incitation to life writers to reconsider the limits of human being is one of a raft of what have been labelled posthumanist manoeuvres, which aim to counter an understanding of a *bios-zoe* dyad as a pivotal opposition between humans and all other organic matter, including animals, plants and bacteria. (Interestingly, this understanding – the dominant paradigm in thought systems deriving from the Greco-Roman – is common to both humanism and post-structuralism.) But van den Hengel's *zoegraphy*, while uniting the human and nonhuman organism, introduces its own dyadic schema, uniting the organic in opposition to manufactured or nonliving things, allegedly inert. The Janus-faced irony inherent to this gesture gives rise to certain questions. Is not the human, beneath the skin as well as in its environmental dependence, so minutely interlaced with nonorganic matter that the partition between these is already a moveable feast? The problematic will recall Donna Haraway's cyborg forms, as well as the transhuman figure at home in speculative and science fiction. But I would furthermore ask (and thereby move my field of inquiry pointedly away from the transhuman towards the posthuman): can't objects also be considered to be in possession of a force that is inorganic but vital nonetheless, capable of receiving, manufacturing and emitting affective qualities? Don't objects have a molecular life that is agential even if it is not intelligent, which is to say, they possess a vivacity that inserts itself into and alters – animates, even – human life? And, in relation to the present paper: can't the printed surfaces – of, say, a book – be said to

be vital matter, equipped not only with its own inherent semioticity but also with the affective capacity to take an impression, as it were, of the writer's vitality and to transfer this to the reader?

This line of inquiry follows on from others engendered by the intersections of scientific and creative practice. Theorists, scientists and visual artists such as, respectively, Rosi Braidotti (2006), Elizabeth Grosz (2011), Vicki Kirby (2011), Karen Barad (2007), Oron Catts (SymbioticA) and Margaret and Christine Wertheim (the Institute for Figuring) seek to yoke the cognitive with the sensible, all within the cross-disciplinary entwinements that a redefinition of human being facilitates.[ii] As a brief example, Grosz – reading Henri Bergson and the Stoics – posits materiality as a kind of animating conduit or organic lifeworlds; indeed as conduits for the crystallisation of ideation or *logos* itself. Which is not to equate materiality with passivity, but rather to credit it with a catalytic function, since it is the particularities of matter that modulate the organic life it brings into being. 'Life,' she explains,

> is not some mysterious alternative force, an other to matter, but the elaboration and expansion of matter, the force unwinding or unfolding what matter winds up or enfolds [… According to Bergson,] matter itself is not inert. Rather, our mental habits are unable to see in materiality the same potential for dynamism and unpredictability that they discern in life. Matter and life are thus not opposites, binary pairs (plus or minus vital force), but intimately implicated in each other, different degrees of one and the same force. *Life is matter extended into the virtual; matter is life compressed into dormancy.* (Grosz 2011, 20, my italics)

Any hard and fast division between organic and nonorganic matter here dissolves into nonsense. In addition, if the human materialises as what Spinoza's monism would position as neither subject nor object but as an instantiation of a universally shared substance[iii], then we move towards repairing the incommensurability of self and other that grounds the ethical standoff common to post-structuralisms. I will return to the ethical question below, but it is worth pointing out that seeing life as an assemblage of elements, bound neither by a human skin nor by the biological, challenges the premise that has made it acceptable to posit (and grammatically to deploy) subjects and objects, the fraught relationship between which has thrown up ethical aporia from which neither humanist nor (post-)structuralist positions have been satisfyingly able by their own light to escape.[iv]

Thus a certain disgruntlement with an emphasis on the always already deferred encounter with matter, given the mediating function of *logos* (as language, as consciousness, as the symbolic order), agitates into existence the quite new academic field 'new materialism', to which Grosz's contribution is foundational. But scholarly concern with materialism beyond the discipline of philosophy is not new, of course. Cultural studies and cultural/historical materialisms in literary studies, on the one hand, are underpinned by a valuation of things relegated to the margins of power structures – though these approaches tend to assert a politics that avoids confrontation with the assumptions of *bios*; a politics, in other words, invested in artefacts only to the extent that human meanings are discernible within them. As Jane Bennett has indicated, Marxist attention to the tangible effects of economic structures has

consistently adhered to anthropocentrically circumscribed models of life (2010, xvi). Book history, on the other hand, as Leah Price points out in her guest editorial for the *PMLA*'s watershed 2006 special edition on that discipline, is motivated to 'keep redrawing the boundary separating the words themselves from [so-called] extrinsic features such as spelling, spacing, and typeface' (Price 2006, 11). Yet, although it points to the page's being only apparently blank and rightly insists that 'every aspect of a literary work bears interpretation, even, or especially, those that look most contingent' (Price 11), book history still stops short of positioning the written artefact as an affective and affected cell within a vital field of mutually constitutive bodies. The kind of materialism, then, that I am advocating for in creative-writing practice primarily differs from Marxist-inflected and palaeographic varieties in its embrace of posthumanist reinvigorations of life and its resulting tendency towards examining matter not as 'passive [or] mechanistic' (Bennett 2010, xiii) but as evidence of the ways in which 'human being and thinghood overlap, [of] the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other' (4).

Writing matter

In the area of literary production, attention to mater in this sense has been most unambiguously evident in (so-called) 'digital' writing since the advent of personal computing technologies. John Cayley (2007) has long defended hypertext, for instance, where drafting within a multilayerable and multisensuous electronic realm generates texts that are site responsive, altered ineluctably by the material conditions of their production.[v] Clearly this kind of mutually generative writing performance, in which the development of what is written depends upon the development of the space in which this happens, and vice versa, is a successful simulation of Grosz's argument about the reciprocally unwinding or unfolding play of matter and life. However, even as I describe hypertext in these terms, I hesitate to circumscribe as 'digital' only those kinds of writing that interact with certain networked information technologies. Writing has always been *hand*iwork: whether the hand types, engraves, or manipulates a pen, a 'digit-' or 'finger-led' performance is the inevitable substance of writing. So while binary code and the decimal hand have a shared history in numbering, deploying the term 'digital' nowadays obscures their commonality; the play between form and content that was always available to analogue writing modes is supplanted by that of electronic media. In other words, while responsiveness to material context is expected when writing in an electronically networked environment, the writer who composes on paper (or on a papered screen; see note 5), is to a large degree expected to take the page as given.

This luckless situation is aggravated by the fact that analogue writers *do* play with materials during composition: we do employ visual figuration, doodle in the margins and map narrative structures, stage and rearrange rewrites and cut-ups and crossings-out. In fact, the spectre of an encounter with writing-to-come can manifest searingly in the writing body, and can compel all kinds of activities that exceed the verb 'to write', narrowly defined. A 'manuscript' (there's the hand again) often displays graphically the time-space of its composition – and yet, these procedural aspects of

the art *do not figure* for the reader; they are erased as the text is condensed into the dimensions of the standardised page. Capitulating to a demand to make linguistic sense, the writer thereby loses access to the semiotically more ambiguous play between materials and content that is so gainfully available to other art forms.

One result of this convention is that the tangible traces of writerly play decline to function as a further conduit between writer and reader. As Johanna Drucker contends (1995), if the book can open up and maintain 'a constant state of becoming', then once '"writing" is finished […] the "book" as an on-going, open-ended dynamic operation can begin' (41). Another result, importantly, pertains to the potentialities of the writing act itself. Suspecting that much creativity is engendered by the physicality of the writing process, I argue that anticipating a text's inevitable material closure works to hamper a writer's procedural experimentation, the fruit of which can often be new, otherwise inaccessible, ideational avenues. What might it become possible to think, and to write, when these conventional blinkers are lifted?

Of course, historically, writers exorbitant to this tradition of standardisation are many, particularly since modernism. Play with shape can be found in concrete poetry and its Mallarmean correlates; artist's books interrogate paratexts, as do Derridean footnote fetishes; Isidore Isou's lettrisme intersects print with (other) images, and Stein's literary cubism is an obvious example of experimentation with the disjunctive space-time effects provoked by grammatical errancy. These incursions into the arrangement of writing in space exhibit a certain consciousness of a printed surface as an assemblage of elements, the semantic import of words being only one among many. Still, the ability to isolate this consciousness as characteristic of avant-garde movements or genres suggests its relegation to a politics of anomaly – which in turn serves to point to the success of traditional print forms in dissimulating the meaningfulness of their own material elements. Kenneth Goldsmith (2011) points out that although the advent of photography fundamentally altered how painting defined itself from that point on, literature's opportunity for paradigm reprisal only arrived with the digital, over half a century later (xvii). I would argue that this opportunity actually came earlier, with the materiality of Stein's cubism; but either way it is interesting to consider why such developments never enacted a foundational shift in the literary sphere in the way that Duchamp's work prompted inquiry in the visual arts into the exclusions and privileges that grounded the canvas as norm. Understanding why this might be the case – that is, understanding the ways in which creative writing as a concept might be invested in maintaining the friction that Martine Reid (1994) has drawn attention to between legibility and visibility – exceeds my scope here, but certainly warrants further inquiry.

What I would want to highlight, then, in concluding, is that what is at stake is the singular ethical opportunity that writing presents. Writing has often been theorised as fostering obligations variously to readers, to truth, to self, to subject matter, and so on. But I find Derek Attridge's conception (1999) of the mutual responsiveness of creator and material most compelling. Though still committed to subjecthood and otherness, the task of Attridge's writer is to bring into being 'that which beckons' (23) from just beyond consciousness; that is, the as-yet unrevealed product of the writing process. The writer is as responsible to this unknown alterity as 'it' is responsive to her, during

a process that alternates between the active pursuit of the 'that-which-beckons' and acquiescence to its agency, the agency of writing material. The emergence (or what Grosz might call the 'co-unravelling') of a piece of writing is thus framed as a concomitance that meets what Attridge describes as 'the demand that justice be done to thoughts that have not yet even been formulated as thoughts' (24). Recalling Grosz's description (2011) of life as 'matter extending into the virtual' and matter as 'life compressed into dormancy' (20), Attridge's approach can be brought to bear on the new materialist conception of writing I am advocating. Rearticulating Attridge's subjects and objects as affective matter, both organic and nonorganic, we could say that what beckons is abstracted ideation or the virtual, calling to be 'mattered'.

In addition, acknowledging that the writing *body* is, as much as any other element, part of the matter of the writing event implies a further ethical instance. Namely, that the writer, in writing, faces a prospective union with another; a union that will be ethical insofar as it does not fail – on the one hand – to foreground both writer's and readers' bodies as the sensoria of active agents, and that – on the other hand – takes into account the material object that houses their encounter (such as a book) as this equation's third body: a nonliving, but in no lesser sense affective, body. The emphasis I'm placing on bodies is essential, since the social background that authorises a continued mind-body split is, I would argue, the same series of conventions that removes from a writer's aesthetic jurisdiction the semantic fecundity of the material aspect of texts. Exorcising all evidence of the writing body from the final product (in order that writing might be that work of art most amenable to mechanical reproduction) perpetuates the grounding of writing in a neo-Enlightenment, anti-materialist conception of 'the text proper' as intangible content somehow liberated from the conditions of its production. It also insists upon a paradigm that miscalculates the sway of material bodies, reckoning them objects rather than active agents, and mobilising nonhuman others as linguistically constructed vehicles of identity performance.

Thus, if the writer is to be suspended in a tradition that assumes a normalised (because invisible) writing body, she will be blinded to the fallow sites that are the affective bodies at her disposal: not least crucial of which is her own, and not least accessible of which is that of her reader, whose experience of the text in this Cartesian tradition must in consequence be curtailed into intellectual *projections of*, rather than actual, somatic experiences in response to the creative text.

Endnotes

i. This nomenclature will be familiar to readers of Giorgio Agamben's expansion of Benjaminian 'mere life', but I echo van den Hengel in pointing readers towards Rosi Braidotti (2006) for a more complex delineation than can be provided here of *zoe* as an incorporation of 'the nonhumans and […] all the "others" of Man' (Braidotti, cited in van den Hengel, 3) and as a potential nonunitary alternative to the humanist political subject to which Agambenian 'bare life' is addressed.

ii. Exemplary of these entwinements are the internationally pioneering SymbioticA (2012), a research laboratory within the University of Western Australia's biological sciences department dedicated to artistic inquiry, where 'artists actively use the tools and technologies of science, not just to comment

about them but also to explore their possibilities' (no pagination; substituting 'writers' for 'artists' and 'publishing' for 'science' here would approximate the kind of radical inquiry I'm advocating for the writing workshop); and the Institute for Figuring (2012) in Los Angeles, which was established by writer and artist Christine Wertheim and her twin sister, mathematician Margaret, and is 'dedicated to the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of science, mathematics and engineering' (no pagination). Given the prominence of the visual arts in posthumanist discourses, and given that these discourses are troubled by the question of language as a (non?)exclusively human trait, figuring out the especial function of writers in the posthumanities is a conversation needs more attention. The symposium I recently co-convened (Hayes & Rozynski 2012) under the auspices of La Trobe University's Centre for Creative Arts and the University of Western Sydney's Writing and Society Research Centre, 'textobjectext | writing in the posthumanities: exploring the potentialities for writing practice after the material turn', was an early attempt at reparation in this regard.

iii. Spinoza's 'substance' corresponds to his term *Deus sive Natura*: 'God or Nature'. The nomenclature might be open to updating, but Spinoza's characterisation of this substance is instructive. As Jane Bennett (2010) elaborates, 'Spinoza's conative, encounter-prone body arises in the context of an ontological vision according to which all things are "modes" of a common "substance"' (21). Each of these modes, Bennett continues, citing Gilles Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, is '"actually composed of a very great number of extensive parts", parts that "come to it from elsewhere"' (22). Working out the nature and effects of this assemblage-inspired ontology on concepts such as authorship, creativity, drafting and appropriation within the context of creative writing is an aspiration that for the most part must exceed the capacity of this paper, but that invites further consideration.

iv. See Levinas' recourse to a transcendental 'Altogether Other' or god (Derrida 1999), and efforts to evade transcendentalism with Lyotard's (1988) and Agamben's (1999) calls to witness the differend and the Muselmann respectively. See also Critchley (1999) on Derrida's ultimate Levinasian entrapment; and for a negative critique of the 'obsessive' post-structuralist circling before the ethics of encounter, see Badiou (2001).

v. Which is not to suggest that features of the internet and other technologies amenable to artistic creation have been embraced beyond a relatively small coterie of practitioners. In fact, resistance to variation on the print-and-page theme is customary to late capitalist book markets, even as these progressively adopt digital guises. Underscoring the reticence of the mainstream tradition is the fact that in digital spaces, like those furnished by Kindle and popular apps for electronic tablets, publishing platforms designed to mimic the printed page and a kind of ideal bookshelf are favoured over innovation and variety in appearance and usability. Further study would question what it is about this format that the market is evidently invested in, and what values buttress the maintenance of its tradition.

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