The Writer as a Reader: A Fugue of Confession

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Panel: Most Important Book on my Bookshelf
I believe in the reader. The writer’s relationship to the reader is like a child’s relationship to a grown-up. As a writer, you must believe in the reader, otherwise you will soon be dying of hunger, loneliness or emotional neglect. The reader looks after you, nurses and raises you, serves your needs, strengthens your weaknesses, tolerates your extremeties and in the end leaves you alone, and burdens your load with a heritage of goodwill, faith and respect. Or instead, the reader might spoil you and you will follow the trace of your unbridled instinct. And when at last the reader dies, no matter how strongly the writer beats on her grave, there will be no resurrection.

I believe in the writer. The reader to the writer is like a child to a grown-up. She follows traditions rendered in sentences, contradicts or accepts thoughts and emotions rendered in apparitions, responds to the deaf smugness of statements by closing the book, forgets about good pieces of advice inadvertently, or gets down to the business of living, using the patterns submerged in the unconscious.

The writer is her own first reader, in all but the most unusual cases. Daughter is Mother of the Woman. What happens to the mutual interdependence of the selves when writer and reader become one? Who really is the begetter if you, as a writer, bear a child that provides you with heritage? The begetter may also be called the White Sustenance, to borrow an expression from Emily Dickinson, whom I have been studying and translating for more than ten years now. This White Sustenance has a bearing in both despair and ecstasy, and works like a paradoxical elan vital in the circular process of writing and reading, as if the Mandala of the hermeneutical circle were discernable or palpable to the spiritual sensibility. In Dickinson’s case the White Sustenance was composed of Awe and the Circumference that set the several whirls of view into motion, making paradoxes out of statements, whirls out of directions, interrelations out of relations, well-earned doubts out of well-earned beliefs.

I believe in the writer and the reader. The moment any reader begins with that first letter in the Torah, the world itself is read. I believe in the writer and the reader. I believe in that magic knot of time and of generations, the knot which writing may ravel or unravel in the process of reading what you are to write. In the process of putting down what someone reads in you. In reading others in what they write. In reading others in how they read what they are putting down. All of these are mirrors of patterns of being, which a writer must allow to reflect and flourish in her.

When I translate I let two mirrors of this kind face one another. The space between those mirrors is the no-man’s-land of language where expressions and emotions are hovering, weightless in a temporal and temporary freedom with the burden of an approaching linguistic Eucharist, an immanent corporeity out of the Yeatsean “brute blood of the air” finding its form in my mother-tongue.

Finding form, a work may lose content, or peace of mind at least, which loss will make up for the unforgivable merit of transition between two cultures. Which language begets the other? Is
there an original language if your work of art is inherently embedded in a paradoxical deontology?

Originality is equivocal. If the surface of the water reflects the sky, which one of the two is original enough to deny copying the other? The process of reflection, it goes without saying, generates an image even if that reflection will never find an eye. The shimmering on the surface of the water is motionless compared to the moveability of sheer space. Turn the whole scene upside down: what happens to the sky below? Is the mere void down there a reflection? Is it always the upper part that has the right to be original? What if death may vindicate its originality? Questions of Emily Dickinson are questions of mine. Questions may reflect questions. No answers will have the right to invalidate them, providing they are really asked.

If I really read, I might have written what I have read. Not that I have instantly written the words that I am reading. I mean only that reading reflects writing, and reflection is all that matters. If I really write, I might have read what I have written. Not that someone dictated my writing to me or, as one may suppose in Blake’s case, that a medium-poet is at work. It is rather that the real process of writing fills the void it extrudes, following the creative track of coming into being.

Something new is always born when you write, and something is passing away if you read what you have written. Something is happily deceased when you write and something new is emerging if you read what you have written. The burial ceremony is performed at the cradle. Someone may “give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it is night once more” – that is how Beckett puts it. But listen to the prayer spoken a hundred years earlier in Amherst: “Now I lay thee down to Sleep – / I pray the Lord thy Dust to keep – / And if thou live before thou wake – / I pray the Lord thy Soul to make –.”

This little piece of prayer falls back upon the trite text from which it is derived and which it echoes: “Now I lay me down to sleep / I pray the Lord my Soul to keep. / And if I die before I wake / I pray the Lord my Soul to take.” In the vortex of the Dickinsonian apprehension words start to be distorted, persons become interchanged, the word take gives itself over to make, the I lends itself to the You, the ceremony of falling asleep deepens into a paradoxical imploration for the sacrifice of Love. The alchemy of energy traces out a divine metamorphosis. The way of all Flesh becomes a unique path to spiritual Insight as the process of imploring meddles with the orthodox fashion of reincarnation and sets an inverse mode of transfiguration into motion, where the bodily remains may seek for a new soul, instead of the old soul finding a new shape. The divine power will reverse the direction of the Platonian energy of desire – and, in a blasphemously Christian way, bodily incarnation becomes logos-centrically disposed – transritualized in a sexual endurance of linguistic desire.

“And if thou live before thou wake” – coming round precedes resurrection hypothetically in this heretic liturgy of conjecture. That is how the process of reading handles the paradoxical “rub” of writing, and that is the inherent relationship between the eternal lover and the beloved.

How can we know the dancer from the dance? When I am reading Dickinson (aware of Yeats and Beckett) I take part in this ontological detour, I lose my sense of the temporal, I swap the
grammatical persons and in a generational vertigo I become a father to Dickinson. Or a son of Wordsworth, whose child is father of the man – do what you will. Does this sound like a testimony of what I believe?