

# Gesture of Absence: Eros of Writing<sup>1</sup>

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*Writing arouses certain sensibilities that bring about what goes on inside the body, but also, while writing, it is the process whereby self gains access to the exterior. A moment can be reached in the act of writing when one enters the flow of flesh, or the space between self and other, self and text, that is the reciprocal mirroring of the other that becomes the same, yet is always other, the incomplete self always in the process of becoming. This is the Merleau-Pontian idea of the chiasm, where being in the world, the becoming self is fleshed out of the oscillations between self and other, reading the other in touching across the text in which the distinction between word and thing, or language and experience, has not yet been made. This inscribing reveals the self as a kind of narrative yet phenomenological aspect of the becoming self. What I'm trying to explore here is writing that reflects the corporeality of the becoming self; the mimetic impulse that yields the self to the other; the oscillations on the threshold of interior/exterior, this textualizing as the fundamental way of our being.*

I had begun my writing journey when I was six years old. I remember sitting with a blank journal and a pen, enjoying the scent of paper and ink that enfolded me like a blanket, the security of which I still long for. I wrote dark blue lines that resembled writing, pages of it, hoping something would come out of nothing, ink stains covering my fingers. In my imagination characters rode horses, climbed mountains, discovered treasures, and tried to be funny. When I learned to write actual words, I filled pads of paper with them. Rounded, big, fat words, written in child's hand.

Salman Rushdie said at a conference recently that he found it interesting that they would invite him, a writer, to speak at a conference about communication. "Writers don't speak, writers write," he said (IABC International Conference, 2004, Los Angeles). And Rainer Maria Rilke (1984) said "writing is difficult" (p. 6). Actually, he didn't say it, he wrote it. It's interesting how we habitually interchange saying and writing, glazing over the different modes of textuality of the two words. Both forms of expression involve more than just text. Both involve the body, but there are differences in the physicality of the production of words, the subjectivity of the speaker/writer, and his or her relationship to the other. As graduate students and scholars we are immersed in the process of reading and writing on a daily basis, and often find ourselves in the fringes where the boundaries between the two fold over each other in blurring. Even though my interest in this paper is focused on writing, I cannot deny the interrelatedness of

writing, reading and speaking. The experience of writing is really a re-reading of self. It originates at the sensual site of mimetic re-cognition and reciprocity that mirrors the text and the reader/writer across the skin. At the moment of reflection the perception turns the corner of reality of the textual world into the reality that we embody sensually.

Writing is my interest and here I have focused on the relationship of self and other across absence. The investigation of this absence, for me, emerges from a personal experience.

I grew up without a father in what was then Czechoslovakia. I don't remember him; he left when I was just a year old. Growing up, whenever I had a conflict with my mother, she would always end it by saying with a great amount of disdain and finality, "You are just like your father." In fact, an exact translation from Czech is more like "You are entirely your father."

She saw him in the expressiveness of my stubborn frown, when I postured my will, with fists clenched and chin quivering, against hers. At the time, I was strangely excited at this connection that empowered my gestures in this manner. Later, the likeness settled in deeper in the layers of my being, in the viscous void within the becoming self.

And today I am here, so much 'like him.' My father doesn't have a body, and he doesn't take up any physical space: he is a corporeal absence, grasping at my flesh, an invisible, intangible other.

Like a phantom limb, like the sound of snow falling.

The otherness that penetrates the self tucked inside a brief immanence exists clandestinely in the implied presence, yet remains absent in the folds of skin, undisclosed, irretrievable, furtive. The other resides perhaps in the delicate moisture that collects around my mouth, my eyelids, as I ponder with some effort these notions of absence/presence. Without a body or a space, the other is implicated, bodiless yet carnal, in the pulses that propel me across each moment in time. This throbbing (incestual in the modern, Freudian, sense) in the space between self and the other, present or absent, dissolves in a brief moment of self-other blending, a fusion, a forgotten memory of touch. In this incorporeal yet fleshy contact, the absence of the other coincides with the presence of the self, who is the other for the other's self. Touching in absence.

This touching in absence takes place in a gesture of writing. In writing, the self folds around absences, literally, shapely words, lines curving around space on the page, space that contains nothing, yet reveals something, in

the movement of writing. Just because I am sitting in a chair, whether with pen in hand or fingers hovering in expectation over the keyboard, it does not mean I am still, motionless. The whole body is poised in between and resonates with movements, spilling toward words that mark out the journey along the markings on the page. Running between the blue lines, the movement out of nothing takes my senses beyond the limit of skin, beyond the optic nerve, beyond the taste buds, beyond the beat of the ear drum, deep inside my throat, beyond the vocal chords. I refuse to be taken from it, from the text, I am the lover and the prey to my language, an anatomical clause, weighed down by the absences left by the words that moved out of me onto a page.

Paperthin, the page weighs nothing.

The words slowly weigh it down, and page by page the heaviness transfers and shifts yet I don't become lighter: there is more. More to breathe, more to feel, more to birth, more to penetrate. The words re-invent themselves after the coitus of momentary truth, pass further into more. And I am inside and outside this language, I merge with it, merge with the world. Writing is the moisture I excrete, the air I breathe.

As it is for the self, and not just metaphorically, writing animates the movement that occurs inside the body and shifts across the boundary of skin to the flesh of the outside. The skin is just paper thin.

How can we make language more experiential? Is there a possibility of a text, of a language, that would linger closer to the flesh, that would engage kinesthetically with meaning inscribed in the body? What words could move the absences and intimacies of living in the flesh into language?

I am thinking of writing, the engagement and animation of eros, the movement that can break language out of the prison of transcendent abstraction, that can bring a language of speaking and writing that enhances the corporeal, the flesh and more—a language, words, writing, that brings fullness yet not closure to the self in coming forth from within to the flesh of the world.

We begin with writing, with the experience itself, veiled in the dark, subtracted from the visible, multiplied by touches from within, without words at first, so words can come. Max van Manen (2002) speaks of the difficulty of this kind of writing, of words “killing what they name” (p. 244). Yet we write, “to make contact, to achieve phenomenological intimacy with an object of interest” (p. 245). He speaks of a text before writing or speaking, a text before language. It resides in the movements

within, in the interstices between the tender tissues that coil around the spaces inside of my body, between the diaphragm and the lungs, between the heart and the arteries that feed it with blood. To shape the experience in words, as van Manen suggests, to write, one has to write already. This writing comes even before we write.

Beyond the skin, “the sack in which I am enclosed,” as Merleau-Ponty (1968, p.134) called it, resides the multiplicity of language spoken before words, inside and outside the paperthin membrane, where the unspeakable dwells, gathers and seeks to move through. This first writing, before words, like a primary movement of kinesthesia, is not intentional in a sense of conscious purpose, although there is a proprioceptive intentionality that I call *eros*. *Eros*, the force that wakes the flesh in movement forth, marries with the kinesthetic sense of orientation toward a meaning. Upon reflection, words continue to shape, to open up, to embrace the self, which can then move into the world in search for more. Meeting of experience and language, consorts of flesh, is a fleeting embrace of reciprocity of proprioceptive intention. It is this corridor of flesh, of skin, bones and fluid, that allows language an access to the direct experience of writing as well as what one is writing about. Like a page on which words spill from an inked pen, coming forth, slick with movement. Voracious, voluptuous, volatile. Unstoppable.

Many narratives converge in the text of the inscribing self. Layers of meaning and layers of self are generated by sensual experience that can only come about within the body. Hélène Cixous (1990) equates body and text, since the pleasure of writing is also a pleasure of sexuality/sensuality. Reality shifts constantly towards fiction. Writing arouses certain sensibilities that bring about a way of knowing about what goes on inside this body and outside it as well. Writing through the body, writing words that please my sensibility not just aesthetically, although aesthetics cannot be entirely discounted here. Part of my sensibility has to do with aesthetics.

Some words are beautiful the way they are. Like *poise*, *moist*, *sluicing*, *pomegranate*, or *contemporaneous*. *Plum* is one of my favorite words, it connotes body in skin, in the sticky, soft texture of vein-riddled flesh, purple skin leaving stains on skin; the word *plum* brings inwardly and carnally a memory so real I get lost in its flow.

A tree in a garden, summer day, sky so blue it eats my eyes, juice of the sweet fruit dripping down my chin. It is a memory, but the moment is real, it is now. If just this one word can do that to me, imagine many, a poem, a

novel, a self inscribed with flesh on flesh. A word, pronounced or written, can involve different parts of the body (even dry linguistic science uses words like labial, fricative and glide that connote the body)—tongue, lips, throat, lungs, you can feel the body's gestures as it expels the air in uttering the sounds, breath flowing in and out, warm going out, cool coming in, over the tongue, teeth, the quivering glottis; or as the hand moves the thin line of ink across a page, the face flushed in the rush, the reciprocal engagement of body and mind.

This writing, in the landscape within the flesh, inside and outside of the body, can be experienced as a kind of pre-reflective intentionality, where the bodily motions are attuned to the materiality of the flesh of the world. These gestures not only connect the body to the world outside, Merleau-Ponty's flesh of the world, but are experienced as movements within the body itself. Sheets-Johnstone (1999) points to this primary kinesthetic spontaneity: "when we turn our attention away from the everyday world—from external perception—and toward the movement of our own bodies, we experience ourselves kinetically; we perceive our own movement" (p. 149). We can perhaps evoke memories of such primary motile "rushes" while observing childrens' spontaneous pleasure of movement in play, as Stephen Smith (2003) intimates in his writing. Yet as individuals always in the process of becoming, unfinished and coming forth into time, space and meaning, we are, even as adults, implicated in these gestures, even if perhaps not as vibrantly and spontaneously, less aware.

Writing is such a gesture, both a pre-reflective textuality which resides in the intentionality of direct experience as well as a phenomenological investigation of relationship between experience and language.

Merleau-Ponty writes about phenomenology's concern with the pre-reflective world, which is the background of all reflection (Langer, 1989), the world in which human beings are already engaged prior to reflection, proprioceptively. He points us toward the possibility of ideas coming from the flesh toward things that *mean* before language, where language can emerge. Prior to engaging the physical senses in the experiencing self, the impetus for all knowledge is the movement, born within the body, an animation that is, as Sheets-Johnstone (1999) writes, "at the core of every creature's engagement with the world because it is in and through movement that the life of every creature 'acquires reality'" (p. 135).

Before even the first awareness, before reflection, before language. Before we know we are moving, the body moves. Sheets-Johnstone (1999)

talks about movement as the very condition of all forms of perception, and movement being as a perceived phenomenon is in and of itself a source of knowledge. As we perceive the movement, we live phenomenologically. I recognize this movement as eros and for me writing comes from that.

Eros dwells in a possibility of a sensual contact, a sensual wandering that moves beyond the pleasure that in our culture is defined as sexual. Eros is love not *of* flesh, but love that comes forth *from* flesh.

While eros, that which David Steinberg (1992) calls “the movement we feel as erotic impulse” (Steinberg, 1992, p. 4), clearly relates closely to the world of sexuality, it equally clearly extends well beyond the sexual act itself (p. 4).

The tremulous rapture of touching across the text is a kind of ‘reading’ the absent other whereby the distinction between somatic and symbolic, or language and experience, has not yet been made. Sensual experience expands sexuality beyond the moment of physical pairing. It belongs to a family of experiences that are normally categorized as sexual because the feeling can be described as orgasmic, a kind of tugging when the eros penetrates flesh with tendrils of desire, an energy that allows for a movement of self into space and time, a forthcoming.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) wrote, “in between [the alleged colors and visibles] we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (pp. 132–133). The possibility, gathered within an absence, is the challenge of the chiasm for Merleau-Ponty to reap what “comes of nothing” (Vasseleu, 1998, p. 30). In the crisscrossing between the self and the world, in the chiasm, the void, the absence, there is a potentiality for interiority that comes out of nothing, at least seemingly. In this folding and re-folding of the seeing and touching, the self comes forth within and without in the act of concatenation and reversal.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) finds the body a membrane that permeates the tactile, sonorous and the visible within the chiasm, “an intercorporeal being, a presumptive domain of the visible and the tangible, which extends *further* than the things (I) touched and see at present” (p. 143, italics mine). The folding and reversibility of the visual moves across a texture, blending vision and touch. Vision enters a realm of touch which no longer requires a human eye, but involves the whole body, all of the senses and *more*, the flesh and the flesh-of-the-world. And this body, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, contributes more than it receives. The ‘more’ is defined through absence.

The flesh of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is not only matter or the biological body, it is “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body ... as though the visible body remained incomplete, gaping open” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 146-147). Within the coiling or folding over, the body contributes more, and it seeks out more as well, in nothing, in absence, that is eros.

Eros is akin to this kinesthetic cognition that is pre-reflective, before language, or as Sheets-Johnstone (1999) elaborates, “movement forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement” (p. 138). But eros is more than a proprioceptive kinetic mobilizer. The kinesthetic movement originates, according to Sheets-Johnstone, in everyday “tactile-kinesthetic activity: chewing, reaching, grasping, kicking etc.” (p. 134). It is “I move” before “I can do” (p. 134). If the experience ‘I move’ precedes the conceptual realization ‘I can do,’ where in this sequence can we locate eros, the ‘I want,’ ‘I desire’? And, furthermore, can we even speak of a ‘location’ of eros in spatio-temporal terms? Eros is a pulse that is born within the body somewhere between the somatic ‘I move’ and the discursive, reflective ‘I can move.’ The body moves kinesthetically, spontaneously, prior to description, and eros oscillates in between, it holds with ‘I move’ while it drives towards the ‘I can.’ Eros posits ‘I want to move,’ but it moves even before that. Eros infuses both, the pre-reflective originary kinesthesia and discursive reflection, with a drive across the absence that resides within the self, in between self and other; it infuses the movement with meaning that is a drive toward, forth. While the meaning of the kinetic experience is in the movement itself, the movement of eros *means* as a desire to move.

Absence is a thing of its own, filled with lack that cannot be encapsulated, replaced with something. This lack is like a storm cloud collecting, building, never discharging. Absence is part of the palpations that take place between self and other. Like the moment between inhaling and exhaling, when for a fraction of a second we are not breathing, without this stop, this absence of breath, breathing/presence could not take place. The stop/absence facilitates breath/presence in the continuum of existence. It is a gesture of desire in time and space. Eros moves the self into becoming. But wait, I don’t want to call it becoming. Not something that comes to be, like a singularity, as if there was something final to come to.

No, I return to the coming forth, which suggests movement, unstoppable, always coming into, merging with flow, toward. I do not become, I am forth-coming.

If everything was presence—why move, could we even move, it would be too dense with presence. Sometimes we say about a person, “he or she has presence.” But it is only because of certain absence about them. A certain mystery that calls us forth to investigate.

We need absence to allow for space across which we can reach to discover more. This reaching, this gesture of invitation across absence, is eros.

Writing from the body, I wait at the edge of absence. Writing, I attempt to salvage the temporality, living from moment to moment, between breaths, between lines. I am no poet in any language I know, but in this landscape of ink sky, words keep rushing in. I am the longest sentence, a question unanswered. My skin is just paperthin.

In writing I don't mean to fill your absence. I mean to provoke it. Into more.

Your skin is just paperthin.

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