Travel Notes: On Writing, Surprise, and the Self Through Time

Reading Plato's *Phaedrus*, we learn that Socrates disapproved of writing. The funny thing is that Plato, who was his student, felt it appropriate to write that down. Socrates saw philosophy as a living practice, an unending journey towards truth in time. For him, the written word can make you think that knowledge is fixed and unmoving, as if dead. This distracts from the philosophical journey, which never arrives at a fixed destination (not least because the highest truths are transcendent, divine, and only ever caught in glimpses). Socrates wanted to 'write' only on living souls through dialogue; he did not think there could be a living writing for the page. The irony is that we know this only because we can read it, thanks to Plato, who wrote it down.

We will return to this tension between Plato and Socrates on the status of the written word below, but it raises the broader question of the relationship between writing, life and the search for truth. For writers, who might be academics or poets or journalists, there is always pressure to produce work for instrumental reasons. Whether this is to develop a career, build an audience, or simply be able to eat, that one does so is often understandable: to write as a means to other ends can be a way of securing oneself in the world, against the vicissitudes of time. But what might it look like to write more truly, in a way that matters inherently for itself and for *oneself*, rather than just going on adding to the noise?

This kind of question has troubled philosophers, particularly those who have seen philosophy as a way of life not far removed from, or opening onto, religion (as was true of Plato). There is an Epicurean sentence that reads, 'The discourse of philosophers is in vain, unless it heals some passion of the soul.'[1] It was said of Henri Bergson, 'The

[1] Cited in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 282.

only thing that he wanted in the end was to write books that would *live*.'[2] Here I will try to understand the journey of a true or living writing and how it differs from the instrumental creation of "content." Using a sequence of quotations from philosophers and philosophical theologians as pointers, I will argue that this has to do with how the self relates to time. These reflections are relevant for artistic creation in general, for how artistry connects with faith and for how artistry connects with philosophy when the latter is understood as concerned with the "art" of living, rather than simply abstract discourse.

I. Path

Philosophers, one hopes, seek to understand reality, which means they seek what is living and true. Artists may do the same. Genuinely to seek what is living and true is to embark on a journey where you cannot know in advance precisely what it is you are looking for, and so your destination is uncertain and the journey full of risk. Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, 'Take it or leave it, we cannot have truth without danger. It isn't philosophy if one thinks first of the conclusions. The philosopher does not look for shortcuts; he goes the whole route.'[3]

To go the 'whole route' is to give oneself over to the journey rather than being preoccupied with the destination. You cannot guarantee the answers at the start because they emerge with the journey and may surprise you. Ludwig Wittgenstein, who published one significant thing in his lifetime, wrote (in his notebooks) that 'Ambition is the death of thought.'[4] I take his point to be that the philosophical task cannot be instrumentalised or made subject to an extrinsic goal—success, fame—without losing one's grip on it. The task must be lived out and carried through.

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[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'At the Sorbonne', in *The Bergsonian Heritage*, ed. Thomas Hanna (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 135. My emphasis.
[3] Merleau-Ponty, 'At the Sorbonne', 134–135.
[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* Revised Edition, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch, rev. Alois Pichler (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 88e.

There has to be the risk and the seeking for itself, a seeking for oneself, for one's own sake, first, before anything else—as a *prerequisite*. The ends are bound up with the means, or as Søren Kierkegaard puts it, 'The thing sought is in the seeking which seeks it.'[5] The search for living truth is a journey of the living self. Similarly, Henri de Lubac writes, 'He who will best answer the needs of his time will be someone who will not have first sought to answer them. It is what is found in the depths of ourselves, for ourselves, which has the chance of becoming the topical remedy and the essential sustenance for others.'[6] You have to go inward to go outward, as it were. There are no shortcuts. This demands patience and an openness to time and change.

II. Time

Patience means waiting upon time rather than seeking to control or use it, letting it carry and change you. One reason you cannot predict where a philosophical journey will lead, if you are waiting patiently upon time in this way, is that you do not know who you will have become further along the path. After some time has passed you may find that you are seeing with new eyes.

Socrates understood this. *Phaedrus* is concerned with the journey of philosophy but also, and in a related way, the journey of love or *eros*, and it addresses the dangers for both of seeking to control rather than inhabit time. Socrates gives a speech in this text in which he says that to be overtaken by *eros*—to fall in love—is to suffer a divine form of madness. Conventional wisdom saw erotic madness as a dangerous proposition and best avoided. Socrates rejects this and argues that, in spite of the risks, you should sink yourself into the moment of desire and follow the unpredictable path it reveals, allowing yourself to be changed by it. In his mythic imagery, if you handle the journey

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[5] Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 248–249.

[6] Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Paule Simon, Sadie Kreilkamp and Ernest Beaumont (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1987), 111–112.

right, your soul will grow wings that will draw you up towards life and truth. You will be transformed, but for the better because you have come into contact with something real.

Falling in love is, according to Socrates, what philosophers do, and it is akin to the journey of philosophy. This journey, of the understanding towards truth, can be denoted by the Greek word *logos*.[7] Anne Carson observes, 'In Sokrates' view a true *logos* has this in common with a real love affair, that it must be lived out in time. It is not the same backwards as forwards, it cannot be entered at any point, or frozen at its acme, or dismissed when fascination falters.'[8] So one has a choice: there is the letting go, giving yourself over to the journey, to risk, time and change; or there is the attempt to manipulate time in order to reach a predetermined destination, to use time to get you where you have already decided you must go. The first is philosophical patience, which is receptivity to the moment, an openness to surprise and danger—a kind of madness. The second is escape from time and closure of the self—a controlling cleverness. These lead to different kinds of writing.

III. Quiet

The closed self, knowing where it wants to go, churns out content for instrumental reasons, adding to the noise. Gilles Deleuze remarks on the difference between this and the patient quietness that precedes the discovery of something worth saying for itself. 'We sometimes go on as though people can't express themselves', he remarks, 'In fact they're always expressing themselves…we're riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images…it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing

[7] *Logos* is often translated as 'word', 'reason', or 'discourse' and traditionally describes divine reason that implicitly orders the cosmos.
[8] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 165.

to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying.'[9]

Given the pressure to produce "outputs," a period of quiet will likely seem impractical. But according to Deleuze it is essential for any journey towards a truer writing and saying, now more than ever, that one invites this quietness in. It can be difficult to hear if you just keep making noise.

Teach me now to listen,[10]

Jean-Louis Chrétien says about true listening: 'We cannot be sure that we are truly listening; we can only say, we will only be able to say that we will have listened—if listening has transformed us.'[11] Once again: patience, time, and change—to wait and to listen in the hope of finding change that counts, of discovering later that one has listened. To submit to this journey is to risk having nothing to show for it at the end, no "output." It is not clear that this would constitute failure, given that everything that has been said so far suggests that the essential thing is not the *words* but the *life*, that you yourself are not the same at the end as you were at the beginning. Failure would be to take the shortcut, to keep adding to the noise only to find later that you are the same as you were before, just older, seeing with the same eyes.

IV. Movement

What then of the unbridgeable gap between Socrates and Plato on the status of writing, the fact that the student committed to the page his teacher's rejection of the written word, as if playing a joke on his old master? If, as just indicated (and as both

[9] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 129.
[10] Seamus Heaney, 'Clearances'.
[11] Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, trans. John Marson Dunaway (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) 25–26.

Socrates and Plato would agree), the crucial thing for philosophers is not the words but the life, then perhaps in the gap between them on this matter we can observe a simple principle: for there to be a living writing the writing itself cannot actually be the point.

True writing will be what happens when you are busy looking elsewhere, immersed in the journey, and only later discover that all along you were listening and being transformed, and that this vitality somehow found its way into your words. If so, this follows a paradoxical movement that has long been associated with faith. There is a saying of Jesus found in all four gospels, 'Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.'[12] Likewise, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'[13] The letting go precedes the getting back. First, a sort of death is necessary. As in *Phaedrus*, that letting go is essential, even though it looks a bit like madness, as it makes possible the 'return', which can never be guaranteed and so will always come as a surprise: return 'by virtue of the absurd', as Kierkegaard had it.[14] Christianity calls this surprising return grace or gift.

Writing here might be a bit like keeping travel notes: writing in drafts, attempts and asides as you inhabit time, with a sense for the lightness of this task, its transience, resisting the pull towards artificial closure, which is the will to escape time (and perhaps refuse grace by attempting to autogenerate it). Some written forms lend themselves more readily to this refusal of closure—dialogue, poem, aphorism, meandering essay—but again this has to do first with ways of living.

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[12] Luke 17:33 (ESV); cf. Matthew 10:39 and 16:25; Mark 8:35; John 12:25.
[13] John 12:24 (ESV).
[14] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Theodor Adorno says, autobiographically, that for someone who 'no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.'[15] This nomadic picture suggests the writer as a wanderer and their writing as a tent perpetually being pitched and taken up again. This is writing as movement, writing *with* rather than *against* time. Writing knitted into living, searching after truth but with no predetermined destination, not distracted by any instrumental purpose, imposing no static, abstract vision. Writing that tarries with and witnesses to the present—patiently, truthfully, provisionally, as the occasion demands—in a way that will be open and unfinished, since we are ourselves always unfinished.

bell hooks says, 'Any writer who strives to be true to artistic integrity surrenders to the shape the work takes of its own accord. Work comes to a writer differently depending on our circumstances at the time of writing.'[16] This gets at the fragility of any true or living writing. It will never be possible to secure this kind of writing in advance because it is intimately connected with the contingencies of a particular life, which must be lived out in time. Attempts to secure it will only yield what Socrates feared: the artifice of dead letters. Writing of this sort will share deeply in the vicissitudes of its author, but for this reason may, as Merleau-Ponty says, have a paradoxical chance of being alive to readers: 'We will arrive at the universal not by abandoning our particularity but by turning it into a way of reaching others.'[17] If this ever happens it can only come as a surprise.

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[15] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2006), §51.
[16] bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 9.
[17] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Metaphysical in Man', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 92.