

Transcription

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At times I get like some Bartleby in reverse and type out the work of other writers. I do it both for pleasure and to practice, somehow or other, the craft.

At the very least, it's typing practice, which I always need. I have a fantasy of typing quickly, accurately, effortlessly, with the fluency of someone like Kerouac (120 wpm), the impossible ego-ideal. To have no conscious interference, but simply to allow the incipient impulse to be articulated in sequentially appearing letters on the screen, the words gathering to say what they, unbeknownst to me before that extending moment, actually wanted to say—the analogy is with music, feeling it under your fingers as you're hearing it. The scratchier truth is that, after all these years, I'm a fairly lousy typist, better than I was back before there were computers, but hardly reaching mediocrity in my better stretches. This forces me to think and rethink, assert and reframe, typing a few strokes then lifting my fingers off the keys as I stare at the cursor blinking from its little rut of error. It's a toss-up whether I then abandon incipient formations whose beginnings lie on the screen in mistyped botches, or delete a bit, back up, and soldier on. The overall activity of my typing/writing is a mix of keystrokes, staring, thinking, deleting, starting over, getting frustrated, giving up, printing up the offending half-baked draft onto the distancing, objectifying paper, which I later hover over with a pencil or pen, correcting, amplifying, beginning, at best, to find something of interest, which I then go back to the keyboard to continue shaping.

It suddenly strikes me that such a practice makes me rather closer to Neal Cassady than to Kerouac. Cassady, I read somewhere, would never correct typos (we should remember that this was before computers), but would change what he was writing to match the typed letter. It's not an account that makes perfect sense, but schematically it makes for a useful pairing: at one end, Kerouac the perfect, fluent typist whose keystrokes disappeared into a blur of nearly instantaneous transcription and at the other the lunging, stuttering Cassady, for whom each crash of the key onto the paper was a blow of fate which changed the import of what was being said. I don't give over the initiative of my writing to typos to that extent, but the instability of my typing is a formative cause of what I write.

Beyond this literal (letteral) level, typing out the work of others is a kind of old-fashioned compositional practice borrowed from painting where it used to be a standard part of the initial curriculum. Even now, I occasionally see people in the more relaxed, old-fashioned museums with their easels, copying an older painting. But I would not have thought of applying such a procedure to writing except that I read somewhere that Robert Louis Stevenson, in the limbo between rejecting the family business (making lighthouse lenses) and becoming a published au-

thor, copied out passages from other writers that he admired. In a commonsense way, this sounds rather hopeless: yes, copying is “writing” in the purely physical sense, but isn’t it exactly opposed to “writing” in the sense of writing-something-new?

Robert Louis Stevenson wanted to be a writer (originator of what typesetters would then copy, printers then make copies of). He didn’t want to merely write (copy, secondarily, the original writing).

Copying can have drastically different imports. Certainly it is drudgery: think of the outsourced keystrokes that underlie much published writing. Farrington, the copyist from *Dubliners* (“Counterparts”), provides a visceral sense of the rage copying can provoke. First, via the copyist’s torporous attention (he really needs a drink), we get a glimpse of the little pleasures of textuality:

The man returned to the lower office and sat down again at his desk. He stared intently at the incomplete phrase: *In no case shall the said Bernard Bodley be...*and thought how strange it was that the last three words began with the same letter.

But quickly the onus of the business reasserts itself:

The chief clerk began to hurry Miss Parker, saying she would never have the letters typed in time for post. The man listened to the clicking of the machine for a few minutes and then set to work to finish his copy. But his head was not clear and his mind wandered away to the glare and rattle of the public-house. It was a night for hot punches. He struggled on with his copy, but when the clock struck five he still had fourteen pages to write. Blast it! He couldn’t finish it in time. He longed to execrate aloud, to bring his fist down on something violently. He was so enraged that he wrote *Bernard Bernard* instead of *Bernard Bodley* and had to begin again on a clean sheet.

He felt strong enough to clear out the whole office single-handed. His body ached to do something, to rush out and revel in violence.

Thus alienated copying. It’s a spectre whose all-too-physical manifestations (ennui, rage, carpal tunnel) the contemporary environment for writing is designed to banish, thoroughly, and at the smallest level. The cut and paste functions in word processing, macros, the utterly unremarkable correctability of computer files—anything to reduce the horde of keystrokes.

But at the other extreme there is reproducing the sacred text, where, in theory at least, the copyist is transmitting and thus sharing the verbal embodiment of divine power. Stevenson, in his apprenticeship, was involved in a secular version of this.

A distinction that is intriguing to apply here comes from the historian of rhetoric Mary Carruthers who begins *The Craft of Thought* with Paul Gehl’s contrast be-

tween orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Orthodox believers seek orthodoxy, which is “to reproduce the experience of learning from the teacher, whose teaching lives on in authentic texts”—letter-perfect copying of the Torah, say. With orthopraxis, on the other hand, the believer wants “to achieve an immanent experience of the divine equivalent to that of the founder, usually by following a devotional practice presumed to be similar.” Carruthers goes on to elaborate the subtle interplay of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, noting that they “often co-exist in the same religion.” But we can also consider these notions without nuance so that they become polarized, highly portable emblems: spirit vs letter, writing vs copying, originariness vs secondariness. When we move from religion to art, we can see that orthodoxy with its stability and familiarity is very often exactly what needs to be overcome to achieve orthopraxis. Make It New. And then again, orthopraxis is firmly attached, moebius-strip fashion, to orthodoxy. (“Make It New”; Make “Make It New” New.) Stevenson could be imagined as engaged primarily in an orthodox pursuit when he was copying something out, getting the words right, like learning a scale, a passage, a bit of doctrine. But it also seems plausible that he was hoping things might become orthopractic, that he would partake of some kind of direct transmission of the authorial spirit whose letters he was reproducing.

I write you. Lineage, tradition. Who touches this book touches a man.

At the beginning of this note I wrote that I copied (occasionally) to practice, somehow or other, the craft. But much of the craft in my case seems to involve interruptive thinking. Reading spilling over into thinking and re-hearing in the midst of serviceable clumsy typing.

What follows is what happened when I read (tried to read) and retype some half-good thing from a writer I care about permanently: the last section of Whitman’s “Passage to India.” I’m editing it (interrupting the interruptions, retyping the thinking and rethinking the retyping—usual reconnoitering), but aiming for the whole flavor of what happens when reading and writing mix. Both are irreplaceable motions of any transcription; but they’re different.

Transcription goes between things, but what of the trans-? Re-scribing goes across what? Via what? Doesn’t the trans- invoke some continuum, or condition bordering both things, but common to neither?

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Okay. Now to type out whole thing. Section 9 of “Passage to India,” type out the monstrous koan all the way to its ignoble end. Material progression to immateriality.

Passage to more than India!

are thy wings plumb indeed for such far flights?

O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like these? “Voyagest thou indeed on voyages” nobody but Whitman. Vietnam. Whitman. Whitnam. Vietman.

Disportest thou in places like these?

I got it wrong. It's not "these," not "O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like these," it's "O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those"—

"Those": i.e., it's not currently felt in his mind, he's just thinking about feeling it. Lots of poetry is like that. Thinking about feeling something.

[Really finally read those Critical Theory compilations. Scalinger, etc. Why? Because you like playing with the categories. Setting up those antique spaces. At least you think you do. If you copy those enough times they become these.]

Soundest below the Sanscrit [sans crit, poesie pure], and the Vedas?
Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Type that to get into head:

Then have thy bent unleash'd.
Then have thy bent unleash'd.
Then have thy bent unleash'd.
Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Then have thy bent unbent –
Then have thy bent unleash'd.
Thy bent, have unleash'd.
Then have, then have.

Unlearn'd, thy bent has thee. Learn thy bent. Learn, unlearn, unleash. Unleash'd when unlearn'd. When? Learn. Have.

Learn thy bent lest thy leash stay taut.

Type that to get into head.

Whitman, walking Basket, decides to let him off his leash. The large poodle immediately runs away. Stein, furious, has to get another Basket. All of this is in the continuous present, but still, it's very annoying when it happens **over and over again...**

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!
Passage to you, to mastership of you [Whitman's writing takes place during the transition from slavery to post-slavery. Think of other infamous gestures of reconciliation. Todorov, the love the conquerer must feel for the conquered. Rape, conquest, pillage as history's Happily Ever After, dear dear Other, will we ever reach post-slavery?]

Passage to more than Whitnam.
Passage to Afghanistan. A package from Pakistan. For you.
Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems! Ye fucking in-

competent parallel parkers taking up two spaces! Ye goddamn Verizon voice-outsourcing, throwing up verbal baffles from India under the nom de voix of Frank Fernandez!

Passage to India!

Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!

You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reach'd you.

Actual other dead bodies. Whole lives, trained sensoriums, gene pools, bad habits, loving aspirations and just shouldering the load, dig the graves and you have to find someplace to put the dirt, the tree-names of streets supposedly reminding you of home. Actually dead. Got nowhere. Never reach'd.

Passage to more than India!

O secret of the earth and sky!

Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers! [Whitman the materialist: all water is water.]

Of you O woods and fields! [Whitman the autobiographer. Real woods. Real fields. Not "Elegy in a Country Churchyard."] of strong mountains of my land!

Of you O prairies! of you gray rocks!

O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows! [Well, the Of/O is interesting. When the secret is most salient, it's Of. When the surface sense is, it's O.]

O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!

Passage to you!

Passage [This isn't the vocative, it's a demand for immediate access. Give me my ticket. My language is my credit card. My language is worth the world.], immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins! [Whitman is writing with his *body* again. That's why we like him.]

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor! [Consider instantly Whitman and word order. What is problem his?]

Cut the hawsers – haul out – shake out every sail!

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?

[THOUGHTS UNDER AN OAK – A DREAM

...But my great oak – sturdy, vital, green – five feet thick at the butt. I sit a great deal near or under him. Then the tulip tree near by – the Apollo of the woods – tall and graceful, yet robust and sinewy, inimitable in hang of foliage and throw-ing-out of limb; as if the beauteous, vital, leafy creature could walk, if it only would. (I had a sort of dream-trance the other day, in which I saw my favorite trees step out and promenade up, down and around, very curiously – with a whisper from one, leaning down as he pass'd me, *We do all this on the present occasion, exceptionally, just for you.*) [Whitman (Library of America), 816]]

Have we not stood here in the ground like trees long enough?

Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like mere brutes?

But has Whitman not been the poet of happy eating and drinking?
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough? writes our author

Sail forth – steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go, to go boldly where no man has gone before
And we will risk the ship, ourselves, and all, even the ratings because all literature is reruns eventually!

[540] O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

So we reach the bad stuff at the end, bombast, bombs bursting in air still the goddamn national pastime. Jets and smart payloads—but what are a few civilians between allies?—cheaper than ground forces, and no hometown casualties to fill the withering small-town papers.