

Not A Case of Writing

Steven Connor

Out of a clear sky, somebody called Mark Waldman emailed me to ask if I had anything I wanted to contribute to a book in which writers of various kinds wrote, for nothing, about what writing was for them. He had obviously got hold of the wrong Steven Connor, but I decided to take the case anyway. What follows is an expanded version of what I came up with, and which appeared in *The Spirit of Writing: Classic and Contemporary Essays Celebrating the Writing Life*, ed. Mark Waldman (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001), pp. 298-300.

I remember once reading the results of a life-style survey which asked people what job they would ideally like. It turned out that by far the most desirable job, some way ahead of being queen, movie-star, or sound-mixer for Tori Amos, was being a writer. What the?

It seems that we just cannot believe that writing cannot give the same pleasure and as much pleasure as reading. Writers tell us in response that we wouldn't want to write if we knew what it involved, emphasising how ghastly the whole business is, how bleak, how lonely, how many nights and days of flogging blankness there are for every printed page, what torments of aridity crowd every inspiration.

One of the reasons that people are not fooled by any of this, and continue to think of a life of writing as the ultimate voluptuous pleasure, is that they are quite right. Writers have long ago been comprehensively rumbled: nobody is going to put up with having their taxes spent on schemes to encourage, support and reward writers, because everybody knows that most writers would pay us good money to do it anyway. Writing is in as little danger of withering away as self-abuse, and for mostly the same reasons, so that, again for mostly the same reasons, discouraging it is probably the best way of propagating it. And yes, of course writing is an ordeal, for many of the people who do it, but that's the whole lovely secret point. In a world in which the possibilities of ordeal seem to be shrinking so alarmingly, the so-called agony of writing is the most voluptuous part of its temptation.

I promise never to be a writer. This is an odd thing for me to say, because I am, of course, a career writer already, of a pleasingly minor kind. I am encouraged, or at least allowed to do it at regular intervals because of my job. This is as well, because I write all the time, and have to do it in order to keep in being as the person I currently am. A day when I don't write something (I mean anything, a letter, a report, a course outline, a bit of a website) is like a night without sleep, or a day when you are kept in at playtime because of the rain. It is useful that this writing coheres in a queerly systematic way with the routines and requirements of my professional life. But what I mean when I promise myself never to be a writer is that I intend to avoid going in for writing, or wanting to become a Writer, the kind of writer who writes 'writer' on their passport, who does readings and public book signings, has photos taken of them trying to look as pretty as they were before they succeeded in becoming a writer, takes part in fatuous TV discussions about 'the art of writing', or the condition of 'the writer' and so on.

Obviously, all these things would be nice in and of themselves, but would inevitably stymie the chance of doing the kind of writing I want to be able to. Being a professional writer would be like being a porn star, compelled to be on set at 9.00 sharp every morning, oiled and pointy. It is a great advantage to me not to be a writer. If I were a writer, I should be worrying all the time about how to live up to the condition, and how not to get found out, fretting about whether this or that was the kind of thing a writer should be doing. I would have taken myself, or the bit of myself that did writing, into custody. 'Being a writer' would barge its way loudly into the path of that being-anything-at-all, or, same thing, not-being-anything-much-at-all, which is what writing, for the moment, is for, for me, when it is.

There is a motto that sky-writes across my screen whenever I leave off typing for too long. It is from the great philosopher of conjugations and adjacencies, Gilles Deleuze, and reads 'Why does one write? Because it is not a case of writing.' Deleuze means that writing is a kind of itinerary, which is always being poked at, impelled, or pulled along by something else entirely, which has nothing to do with the activity of writing as such. Really there is no as such of writing, and there's nothing to be said about writing - not even that. Writing is a way of taking leave of writing, with all its routines, protocols, obsessions and professionalisms. If you are someone like me, as soon as you start wondering what writing consists of in itself, separated from all the many motives and pleasures with which it is connected and to which it conducts, as soon as you take yourself to be a Writer, you make it hard for yourself to do it. You become stuck with having to produce Writing. It is much easier to write to order, or for money, or to make someone fall in love with you, than to write in order to be a writer. Here's another motto from Deleuze, nearly as good as the last: 'To write is also to become something other than a writer.' Writing is not special in this, how could it be, when writing is not special in anything? It is not the only way of outwitting or surpassing or being beside yourself, but it is perhaps one of the ways in which we can most intensively agglomerate all the many other ways of taking leave of our senses of which we already have inklings. And, for me, writing is a particularly effective way of putting things into connection with each other. (Writing is perverse, because it will go with anybody and anything.)

I write selfishly, and for entirely selfish reasons. I write in the same semi-addicted delirium as the computer gamer or internet surfer. Me me me. But the medium through which I move, as I exude it, is no pool of Narcissus: it is the pull and press of other lives, other ways of getting a life. When I do certain kinds of writing, I am able to slip the noose of me, to taste something other than that old sour mash.

Like lots of other people who have done writing, I write partly out of the desire for there to be a kind of writing in the world that I can't currently find. I've realised that, if pork and chocolate pie is my thing, then I am going to have to rustle it up myself. Even so, reading the stuff is much less important than writing it. I have taken to putting things on to my website the moment they are finished, even before they are finished, since the main thing seems for me not to stockpile this stuff, but to get it out of my sight.

Most of the time, when I am doing the work of docile compiling and copying out of which much academic writing consists, I write on a full stomach: I am crammed with

ideas, information, theories, examples, images, idioms, transitions and turns of phrase. But there are other times when I am allowed the enterprise of going without, of setting out famished into the blizzard. A mirage, for one is never entirely without means, there is always something to go on, or live off, always a tanner that turns up at the bottom of a pocket. But it is the assumption of destitution which seems to weigh, the way of living as if in penury to which writing can sometimes lend you (me).

The discovery of all of this came about for me in the middle of the way. One morning, I just started writing a sentence that I saw would, by the time it was over, already have become the first of a new kind of writing for me, one that would permit a different kind of thing to come to be done. It was like a shifting about of weights inside me. It wasn't the discovery of a new kind of manner, or method or vision, so much as an intuition about how what I wrote might from now on be able to get me into the vicinity of a whole range of ordinary things in which I remembered to be interested. From now on, I would have to take time off to find out how to write about magical objects like sweets, wires, bags, screens and cards, about the tender madness of mundane actions like counting, folding and falling over, about the secret life of substances. I was going to have to write amid things, rather than getting on top of them, especially the strangeness of intimate feelings and conditions, like embarrassment and fatigue and envy and itch and shame. This was to be my underworld, a world of things retrieved from the back of the sofa. In that instant, I knew that I already had a curriculum of things of this kind to invent ways of writing about that would comfortably see me out.

And, in that same, spreading moment, I also knew, at sweet last, that I would have at all costs to avoid writing a novel. Writing novels, which used to be a rather furtive occupation indulged in by women with overheated imaginations and no proper jobs to do, and therefore easy to despise, and therefore largely overlooked, and therefore with possibilities of glory, and even in the late nineteenth century seemed like a job that was in considerable need of justification and dignifying theories, has now become identical with Literature as such. I like reading about and writing about novels, it's part of what I do professionally, I had almost said for a living. But if I am granted one wish, let it be never to have written one. To write a novel would be to come into a huge, asphyxiating inheritance, a vast all-seasons wardrobe of costumes and plots and styles and themes and twists of the tale and tricks of the trade, a bulging hoard of accomplishment. It would be to plate myself over with all that clanking opulence of purpose and means, when my aim is, here and there, when I can, to break open the chance of becoming poor beyond my wildest dreams.

And so I mean that it is becoming possible, perhaps, just, for me to write as I want, because of coming into the legacy of a host of poor, unlighted things to be written about, and therefore being able to set writing to one side in writing. Henceforth, I am, I seem to know, to find what occupation I can amid the implicit, the orphaned, the omitted, the obvious and the overblown, the approximate, the abortive and the also-ran, the negligible, the nonsuch, the infant, the sorry, the worse for wear, the incipient and the ruined. I am resigned to becoming an addict of this endotic. I am going to forgive everything, and anything in the whole rag and bone shop will do for me, from now. The point is not to redeem or transfigure any of this, only to think up ways for it to scrape a living from me. Nothing demands that anything of the sort should be done,

except the dim, coercive hint that it just might. I mean in any case to consent to its gratuity, and for free, for I have been paid already, with an embarrassment of pittance. It has taken me the worst part of a lifetime to get to so queer a pass, from which I can scarcely imagine wishing again to stir. I shall be taking more and more to truancy; school is indeed out completely. A kind of ordinary glory has made a stay in my life, by which I cannot any more for the moment imagine that I am to be let be. I have been put to all this as to a task or, gentle saying, to death, and intend staying put.

Writing doesn't come into it, it's not a case of writing.