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Robert Kelly
Bard College

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M A R K S

A mark in the sand. Shaped like a scorpion.
Pale mauve line or feint in paper,
piñata with who knows what inside?

Who knows what is hidden in the paper?
Hot pepper. A dry old bone
someone fills up with sweet cream.

Don't you know the writing hand just finds
the words embedded there
in the paper like clouds in the sky

and traces them carefully, a slow child,
before they have a chance to float away,
that's all that writing is,

all that's thinking.
Fermat found that enigmatic promise
in the margin and just wrote it down,

we write the insubstantial,
of course we are flowers,
finches, Menschen, martyrs,

but all the creeds we die for
are just some words we
found in the grain of the paper.

We let our hands loose
and they lasso gods
from all that blank cloudwork,

close up you see the rough pearl crust of it
trapping our poor ink

the ineradicable propositions,

sad valleys of what we think we mean
we have to live with ever after,
spontaneous geography of mind.

1 November 1995

I borrow a pen and draw a line
it's red, a long thin pale red line,
some Baltic sea at sunset,
where I could watch a whole country like Denmark
disappear in scarlet light, just a skinny
line of scarlet light between me and the end of the world.
All this is locked inside the tube.
What is in the borrowed instrument?
Something is always waiting. When I was a kid
they took me to the circus and I saw
a little tiny car, red car, drove
around the middle ring and stopped
and out climbed clown after clown, dozens
of them, midgets and pagliaccis and finally
one giant of a clown on stilts, how could
a little car or any car hold all of them, the circus,
the magic of things inside things, the magic of watching,
the way a face holds history, how a smile
holds the future of the man who sees it, future
of the whole world, how
one small car holds the whole
Adirondacks mountains,
all their granite locked inside the car I drive up
any fine day to see them. There they are,
here they are, peak after peak and the Baltic
flat as a red line on the back of some paper,
and that is borrowed too, nothing my own,
nothing but what I say, and all my words are borrowed too.

2 November 1995
(6 November 1995)

NOVEMBER

This time of year by time is just delight,
by air Brumaire, a misty coup d'état
where greyling clouds swim over all the colors
and this time is all opening. The woods
unclench their greenness, and light
walks with us again, inside is outside
again, all ancient Privilege revok'd,
we bear mild weather in a common dare,
all this is happening to just us. This time
we know the time means us. No gluey
flowerings or sighing birds to whisper soft
lies of springtime and busy summer.
We are the target now, and that is peaceful,
even sweet, in the long war. To walk
in scant woodlands and know yourself mortal—
what fantasy could be as rich as this?

3 November 1995

Ζεὺς εἶπατ’

The important thing is not to laugh.
When you're entreating me, you clasp
my knees, you mention my known
and hoped-for powers, you implore
remedy or artifice of simple grace.
All such commodity is really yours
for the asking, as men say, as long
as no laughter happens
to make either of us doubt
this sweet transaction of our trick.
Magic falters when rhetoric decays—
when unctuous orators smirk inly
at their secret thoughts, then all prayers,
praises, senate houses, litanies and poetry
fall on the deaf ears of the world.
I answer you and all your prayers
out of the fullness of those powers
we inherit from the decency of speech.
For word came before everything,
even before my famous will, which was,
which is (as to you now crouched
pliant before me), will is all listening.

3 November 1995

She dreamed of me. Now
there are two of me around.
One in a boat with a backpack,
watching the enemy sea walk close.
Ignorant, lacking counsel, prone
to terror and to trust. Being young
of water. And the other one on land
being what I suppose myself to be,
my me, not the dream-drenched
fearful virgin in stormy crossing.
Me if by land and me if by sea,
through the inconveniences of dream
I struggle to be one. Can't swim.
Can't sail. Won't bail. There is a hostel
where the twain will meet,
in some strange old country, old enough
for names not to make much difference.
Or a hotel with orangerie and piscine
and khaki guards proclaiming unity.
Distant gunfire. Mountain shadows,
books fluttering in a winter rain?
And there I am at sea again
drowning in anecdotes till she wakes.

3 November 1995

It does the land some good
to close the gate once in a while

I spend my life lovingly
mapping such frontiers

the kind you want the wind
your only immigrant

for the soul of a place
also has to sleep.

4 November 1995

NEW DINNER

The shadow of the ceiling fan's
torpid flurry
makes waves on our table,

the corner of my eyes
keeps announcing flies,
rats, some kind of dark scurry,

whatever we dread
in restaurants or anywhere,
and it's only reflection,

only the interruptions of the light.

4 November 1995

BELIEVER AND UNBELIEVER

You see him take his strength from something close,
the poor box on the church wall
where he slips a copper coin in
and extracts a golden consolation or

mornings when the sun sheens on the greasy cup
a priest lifts up
and he drinks the light in, all the light,
his body in a pew racked with taking in

and that's the face of him, the old neighborhood
saying itself through his teeth, the jolt
of pool halls and the lost drugstore
your Jewish uncle ran on Glendale maybe

corner of Crescent, do you believe me yet
who tell you the lies the trees told me
when I asked them what a city meant
and what happened to the dream that bore me,

many-millions, masoned with deep longing?
Never stronger than what the body can bear to hear
I peer through daylight for a glimpse of dark,
where he got his power, a bad church,

a drunkard priest, no one knows
the things he knows, the whole shabby history
sealed in his face. He rode
his ancient donkey into your messy marriage

to make you agree that stone is hard,
fish smell odd, men lie, women weep

and all the moony excrement of yore.
Whereas the contrary is true,

and always and all ways only the contraries are true.
It was weakness he took from the stone wall
and you took strength from the weather
knowing the poverty of permanence.

5 November 1995

IN THE OTHER SWITZERLAND

In Waadt
it gets very hot.
Remember
that time
we ate döner
kebabs under
palmettos
sweating
among jasmine
and hibiscus
in Montreux,
all we said
was Öh, öh, öh.

5 November 1995

σπαραγμὸς

Maybe I am me most in dispersal,
maybe some of us are like that,
our greatness not in concentration but in scatter

and all my life that fear of single focus—
that also I must experiment
if only to throw away the last piece not yet scattered.

6 November 1995

AUTHORITIES

The only technician is the plumber of touch
—he comes to the house of the body early
but already you've been up for hours
waiting for him for years. The only scientist

is the scientist of skin. You need the cheery
things she tells you in her crisp white lab-coat,
with instruments jangling in her deep pockets
after all the weary years you waited

without a single slap of information. The only
philosopher is the explainer of the intimate
who hints why we always think of skin
when we think of each other and why

we have no other way to feel. The only analyst
is the body you walk around in, and it's only a little
bit smarter than you usually are
and it doesn't always answer the phone.

Because there is no end of calling, and the only
expert is the feel in your fingers
when you walk down the hall in the morning
and you have to get ready for even the light.

6 November 1995

He's worried about being pompous
so he starts talking about bearshit—
how it's the hottest and the strangest
and used by alchemists for this and that
but mostly to keep the Vessel simmering
sealed well and buried deep in it, in dung,
and to get that dung they send the she-dogs out
to worry the hams of bears in local forests
and scare them into dropping. Bears
run away. Alchemist scrapes up dung,
brings home, sets deep in a brick oven
and into it shoves the Vessel home.
Then there's waiting to be done
with your mind on something else
a long time. Never think of bears, heat,
or what is ripening inside the Vessel
like a sailing ship hurrying towards
your coastline in the dark.

And so on,
as if he knew all about the woods or anything,
scientist of the least scat. It's terrible
to be born with a mouth full of jive,
omniscient semblances, the words
can hardly keep up with the bumptious
rhythms of his certainties.
As a kid he got the idea the birds actually owned the sky
and bought it from them with crumbling little pieces of white bread.

7 November 1995

EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE

Prepare
the coup d'état.
The miracle
of light
behind the cloud
& the crows
rattle.
Finches
karaoke.
Every day
is the cold,
we have come
to the winter
of the text,
the rage to speak
& nothing to say.

8 November 1995

THE ETERNITY OF THE BOOK

Soon after the beginning of this century, William Hope Hodgson wrote a remarkable novel called "The House on the Borderland." It is fantasy and time-travel and philosophic fable, strangely written in an awkward style. No one who reads it seems able to forget it. Just as its characters pass in and out of reality, the book itself goes in and out of print, but despite all the power and sheer strangeness of that work, there's very little by Hodgson to be found nowadays, and I have often been listlessly curious to read more of the man.

Recently while nibbling at random the unbelievably copious hodgepodge of anonymous egotisms and unnecessary lore called the Internet, I came across an earnest Canadian list called Gaslight, devoted to late Victorian genre stories. I was happy to see several Hodgson stories listed as available on line— someone had carefully (scribe blowing on cold fingers at the console) retyped the stories from their long-ago appearances in English periodicals. Soon I sat reading ghost stories on my computer screen, irony piled on irony, ghost after ghost in the machine.

Strange sensation, reading cozy Victorian tales scrolling down in the workaday light of the monitor. The characters in Hodgson's stories are scarcely that, mere names appended to puzzling and spectral happenings. The cycle follows the ghost-finder Carnacki, whose name reeks of Karnak in Egypt and mysterious Central Europe at once. He is voluble about magic of various kinds and is full of barbarous names, but he knows his physics too, and has invented an electric-powered magic circle to protect his operations — Tom Swift meets Aleister Crowley. The Hodgson stories are poised on many borders, between Victorian and modern, magic and science, literature and trash, shiver and giggle. The blend is not much different from mad-scientist horror films — but the execution is swift, the settings picturesque. I enjoyed the stories very much.

But where was the book?

2.

Many people I know will read what I have written and enter into some article of grief, lifting their empty hands and bemoaning the obsolescence of the book, the death of reading (as if of "Learning, late deceas'd in Beggary"). They may feel me a traitor to the tome, and too soft on the maggot swarm of e-mail and networking and audio-books, video games, television, in-line skating, all the rest of the leafless culture of our days.

I do not feel I have been abetting some hostile Zeitgeist when I 'browse' the World Wide Web or read mediaeval texts sent through the air from nowhere to here. I love all this stuff, and love to use it. It is new, and new things have the gleaming dew of maybe still on them. There are undreamed-of possibilities in all these silent, swift transferences of alphabets and signs. If we're lucky, we'll enjoy not some diesel-stinky information highway, but a sort of vast, crowded and copious Museum of Everything, like the Victoria and Albert in cyberspace.

Meantime, safe among the gizmos, I compose at the computer keyboard, or at the typewriter (an old Olympia manual) or in fountain pen (early morning, before a machine wants to wake) or pencil, it doesn't matter. I mean it does matter. Every instrument has its story, each way of inscribing language has its own measure or speed it is best at marking.

My point here is not to defend the electronic media (as they are pompously called). They defend themselves, by sheer convenience, oddity, utility, sometimes even beauty. We know all too well that every amenity bears with it new joys and miseries, gunpowder and fireworks, printing presses and hate literature, Waikiki and Noah's flood.

People are upset about e-mail, about strip-mall super-bookstores identical as airports, about audio-cassettes blithering best-sellers into the ears of joggers, or motorists ambered in the sludge of traffic on the Long Island Expressway. consoling themselves with taped lectures on Schoenberg or self-esteem.

I don't want to defend all that or excoriate all that. I want to speak softly, apart, in hope and consolation to those who begin to fear that the book is lost.

I come to proclaim the eternity of the book.

3.

The late Tibetan meditation master Kalu Rinpoche was once asked by a student: now that we've memorized the liturgy, we don't need to chant from the books any more, do we? Rinpoche answered: Give your eyes a chance to pray too. Whatever you do, do it with as much of yourself as you can. Meditation is about body, speech and mind.

Body. That is why the book is eternal. It rests in our hands. What I have been feeling lately is that whatever forms of storage and delivery the electronic media may develop —goggles, implants, crystals, fibers of our being drilled by bits of information — whatever happens the book will always want to be with us. The book will come again.

A book is simply the most elegant, comfortable and friendly disposition of a text towards a reader. Because a book is physical. A book is in your hands, dances on your lap, lies next to you in bed if you read on your side, stands on your chest and lectures you if you read on your back, casting weird shadows in the glow of the reading-lamp. It lies north of the pillow shyly if you read on your stomach. A book is physical. A book is about bodies. A book lies open before you on the table like food.

Whatever happens, e-texts, e-mail, crystal texts, optical displays, semaphores, even whispered campfire recitations, Balkan guslars chanting their chained improvisational epics (ten syllables a line till the cows come home), eventually the book will come to hand again.

Because we have hands we will always rediscover the book. The Romans had them. Codex, a bound book, with pages, just like ours. Not a scroll— a scroll is for the herald to read from to the people assembled, *de haut en bas*, the scroll is the word of the Lord read out in the temple: a scroll is one speaking to many. On the computer screen, the text is said to scroll down. Briefly, perhaps even willingly, one becomes part of a crowd.

Whereas a book is in your own hands. One speaks to one. Whitman says it so amazingly, addressing his future readers, us, in the most vivid way he can: "You, who are holding me now in your hands." This profound and at the same time naive optimism, this ardent erotic implication, the modern double entendre of author with text ("me" = me myself and my work), are all part of our sense of the book.

The book is there. Night and day it rests, even lying open if we wish it, like a Bible in a church or a phonebook on the counter in a diner. It does not have to be turned on.

4.

I am not talking about the advantages of books. I am asserting that however far we come from them, we will come back to that specific form. Something we hold in our hands, and that talks to us in eloquent silence.

Something with weight. You who are holding me now in your hands: that is essence of the promise a book makes. This is something I gave you. Hold it. Hold the thought.

The French say “livre” for book. The same word means a pound weight, and in earlier times also a pound as money. Livres d’or: gold pounds or gold books. Even after the Europeans gave up their customary measures (inches, furlongs, ounces), the unit they chose for weight was “gram” which is a Greekish element meaning: something written.

Our word “book” seems to be from “beech,” the tree that gave the bark our rude runic imaginary forebears scratched magic verses on, their riddles, their life-enhancing jabber. Trees have leaves, and sure enough books used to have leaves, and still do when we’re being a little pompous. Turn a new leaf, we say. When the page turns, who knows where the reader will be?

That is the essence of the book: its pages. You turn in space from one part of the text to another. Your fingers do the walking — you turn to a new page.

What you see there is as much as there is to see. There are books (like Tom Phillips’ “A Humument”) so profoundly visual as to be all text — text and page so totally coincide that the only paraphrase would be a color Xerox of the open book.

And there are books that place in the reader’s hands the time of an author’s life. Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” grew from a slim green volume larger and larger by successive additions/editions through the rest of the years of his long life. It is not a long poem, it is a book. In our own time, books like Louis Zukofsky’s “A” or Gerrit Lansing’s “The Heavenly Tree” represent formal and splendid enlargements of the genre of poetry — the life-book of the poet accommodating the discoveries, revisions and explorations of his life: the book then is the agora or forum to which the poems come to speak. The book is what life grows using the poet’s words.

5.

Why do I think the book is eternal? There are those who dread the coming of electronic (and others more abstruse to come) media. They dread the day of retrievable but invisible information. A book is in the morning what it was in the night, but who knows what changes are wrought in the electronic files in the night time by cabals, anarchists, stray magnetic fields, Illuminati? They may dread the loss of some massive Library of Alexandria sent up in flames by zealots.

I worry too about those lost books. But I have a faith that when we write, we are not just writing onto paper. But that the very act of writing inscribes a text into a people, changes the language, sways the air, changes the place. Orpheus making the beech trees dance must mean something like this — the music once sung in a place lingers there ever after.

So that we are the Alexandrian Library. In us everything ever written endures, waiting to be resurrected by our frantic, lovely, formal measures in the act called writing. And what we write comes back to be the book.

In a story I wrote a few years ago, an emigre Lithuanian physician has used the endless hours of his private life to compile a strange book. He describes it to a patient as a “book where only language exists, and language tells. It says everything by itself, without our intrusion and our interferences...” The patient glances at the book and it seems at first glance a farrago of run-on non sequiturs, solid text with no spaces. But when the doctor reads from the book, the patient “began to see. A peacock came first, and walked unconcernedly across the room, through the doctor’s legs, and vanished in the spray of a fountain that appeared just in time to receive the bird. Then itself disappeared just in the spot where three women were coming toward me till a ship in sail obscured them as it passed...A small city grew in the distance between the doctor’s shoulder blades, and was wiped out by fire while two dozen schoolgirls in straw hats and grey uniforms scampered by holding baskets of flowers — lupines and phlox.”

What is important is that the book opens on a world set up by language, a world that is only language. A world that hides in the book and opens when it does. And to know this world, we take it in hand.

Of course we are subtly thrilled by the cosmic arrogance of these arrangements.

6.

In recent years, Gallic critical playfulness has abstracted the text from the clutches of its author (even if only to trap it at once in that unsavory mess called the Historical Conjecture). Theory proposes to give the text a life of its own. This lovely liberation soon becomes, as things do, a matter of knot-browed earnestness, especially in Yankee academic life. One has heard a good deal too much, perhaps, about The Text. The metaphor of weaving and woven (textilis) and the metaphor of the tree with its leaves/livres, have interestingly clashed.

And when the text becomes a book, it endures the interruptions of structured attention. The reader comes to the end of the page, the reader turns the page.

Turn the page begin again. The short chapters of late Melville —probably he got them from The Bible, ‘the’ book — begin to redefine the nature of passage, episode, the bite of the actual, in modern fiction. Vonnegut makes the snappy chapter a part of our literary norm. When experimentalists come upon it, they develop this recent genre some call “sudden fiction.” The very short story, whatever else its pleasures and its worths, tends at best to be a story on a single page: the scope of the page becomes coincident with the scope of the story. We seem less to be writing stories than writing pages. Phyllography? The page is a dynamic unit of time, the pulse of telling.

The book is eternal because we are part of space, not merely of time. From the one-way street of time we are rescued by space — even though some might reason that time itself is only a metaphor to express the experience of unpacking space of all its myriad contents. From the remorseless passage of text in time — in the earphones, on the monitor — we are rescued by the book.

The book has sides. You can stop and go back. You can re-read. The book is eternal because you can read it backwards.

The book is eternal because it rescues us from time. Not from history, because that is where we sit as we read, as we write. But from the idiot imperious forwardness of time. The book is outside time until we pick it up, and then it is inside history — the place where meaning lives.

9 November 1995