

A passage towards death, or the phenomenology of no longer reading

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Abstract

This article examines the interruption of the phenomenological experience of reading caused by an encounter with a particularly striking sentence or passage. More specifically, the text interprets the passage of language from text to reader as a moment of quotation whereby language is inscribed within the register of biological life. Drawing on the work of Blanchot and Benjamin the article suggests that this capture of a textual fragment, its transfer into the reader's memory, simultaneously challenges and reaffirms the violence of conceptuality Hegel identified at the heart of language.

Keywords: phenomenology; Blanchot; Poulet; Hegel; mythology; Benjamin

But what is the substance of time, and how can it come into being, if everything is fixed, unchanging, one? At night I gaze at the spaces between the stars, I see the boundless void, and what overwhelms you humans and sweeps you away is only one fixed moment here, without beginning or end.

Oh, Odysseus, to be able to escape this eternal green! To be able to follow the leaves as they yellow and fall, to live the moment with them! To discover myself mortal! I envy your old age and I long for it; that is the form my love for you takes. And I dream of another Calypso, old and grey and feeble, and I dream of feeling my strength dwindling, of sensing every day that I am a little closer to the Great Circle where everything returns and revolves, of scattering the atoms that make up this woman's body I call Calypso. And yet here I remain, staring at the sea as it ebbs and flows, feeling no more than its reflection, suffering this weariness of being that devours me and will never be appeased – and the empty terror of eternity.

– Antonio Tabucchi
*Letter from Calypso, a nymph, to Odysseus King of Ithaca*²

The chair has fallen away from beneath you. The room has disappeared. You are flowing, floating once more between the word and the world, lost in the dispossession of reading. It is a strange feeling and a familiar

one. Another mind, another voice, is unfolding alongside your own. Interior and exterior can no longer be distinguished. Another existence, one composed of words and ideas, is being formed. Transparency reigns. The thoughts and feelings of some other being are now your thoughts, your feelings. Yet you are no longer yourself. You

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² From Antonio Tabucchi, *Vanishing Point* (London: 1993).

are being carried, carried by your mind as it deciphers one sentence after another, as you turn one page after another, borne aloft by a vanishing motion. Then something unexpected occurs: as your eyes move over the lines of text a particular word or group of words sparks a physical reaction, a tingling sensation that moves through your body, perhaps on the back of your neck, or your stomach or up into your mouth. It is a feeling of attunement and of loss, as though a loose thread located somewhere deep inside you were being pulled by an unseen hand, the simultaneity of unravelling and gathering, unspooling and rewinding. You do not know how to go on. The tension being released and re-structured opens you up, connecting you to currents and shapes all around you and over the horizon and out across the whole world. The emotional response: beauty, sadness, anxiety, or something else, is difficult to pinpoint. These words that are not your own seem to be speaking to you directly and at the same time make you feel immersed in something much greater. Closeness and distance settle on your skin. This sensation breaks the rhythm of reading. The sequence of images and ideas is disrupted and the book, which during your usual reading practice had disappeared in your hands, appears from nowhere. The paper and the cloth regain their materiality. The second existence you had been leading dissolves leaving a material trace, a remnant of a past life, inscribed upon your brain. You set the book down for a moment. You copy out the words yourself, perhaps writing them in a journal or commonplace book, and recite them in your head. You hold the text aloft for your partner to read, or else utter the sentences aloud. Your loan to another has been recalled, the one who dwelt within your mental world returns to their textual form. The external objects re-appear in the room and the close *rapport* that the interior world held with your consciousness is severed. Only a strange afterglow remains. You emerge from the black world of the text's interior, carrying with you a small scrap of darkness back into the light.

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This phenomenological account describes a moment where the reader receives an impression from the text, a message from a passage or phrase that seems to resonate across their whole field of experience. The fragment changes how they considered a particular event or changes the importance of some minor detail of their own biography, or else renders them speechless at the beauty or horror it reveals. Whatever the feeling produced, these words are now part of them and they make the effort to remember them, holding them close to be called upon when needed. The intense feeling produced by such an encounter with a text, and the act of 'no longer reading' that accompanies it, warrant further reflection. It reveals something more than the emotive force which a text may impart, something deeper than the beauty of language though inextricably bound up with it.

The encounter is one of re-possession, not merely of those perceptual faculties elided by the practice of reading, but a capture of something from the world beyond, a world that, with the book closed once more, no longer exists. Rather than the reader opening the book, the book has opened the reader. This reciprocity is part of what makes the experience so moving. Instead of the opening Poulet beautifully describes in *Phenomenology of Reading*, the one the book presents the reader with as it sits on the table surface waiting to be read, here is the *second opening*, the other end of the tunnel, the passage *from* the book back into life.

The paragraph quoted above which opens this text is one such passage that has re-coded itself with my DNA. It is taken from a collection of fragmentary stories by Antonio Tabucchi, grouped under the title *The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico*, which I came across in a paperback omnibus of his work translated by Tim Parks and published in English under the title *Vanishing Point*.

The story it is taken from is one of doubling and re-doubling, of shifting boundaries and overlapping forms. The Homeric text, *The Odyssey*, an epic poem, passed down from the oral tradition and one which is not strictly fiction but belongs to myth. The poem is, some claim, one without an author, without a single voice speaking. Tabucchi's re-casting of the myth gives voice to the nymph Calypso, abandoned by Odysseus on her island of Ogygia after she sets him free to continue his long journey back to Ithaca. In the letter Calypso dreams of her mortal doppelganger growing weak and old, of the destruction of her body and her return to the earth. It is not that her longing for Odysseus after his abandonment makes her wish for death but that her love itself *is* this wish for mortality. She is weary of *being*. What Calypso longs for is to participate in history. For her the past present and future can have no meaning, she is disconnected from them. The paradox of fiction of course is that, as mythical

figures, both Calypso and Odysseus are condemned to the same immortality, their inscription on different planes of existence is only metaphorical: a problem of language.

Looking at the form of the passage more closely one is undeniably struck by its motion. It has a powerful, flickering rhythm, one that burns softly at first before it roars into flame, raging and raging against the un-dying of the light before it collapses back into an endless stasis. This movement, like the falling of a leaf or the pulse of a star, is bookended by the horror of immortality and the impossibility of change that Calypso, for her divinity, must suffer. The formal structure of the text, its epistolary framing, accentuates this rhythm and the feeling of distance and temporal separation it precipitates. The recipient of a letter is always one who is absent. Their absence is itself the necessity for the epistolary form as such. It is also a form aligned to a journey: it *takes time* to reach its destination and may, as both Odysseus and anyone who has regularly used the postal service may attest, become lost or delayed *en route*. The letter is a one-sided form, one whose intended reader may remain in silence. Like the soliloquy it allows the one who composes it to reveal their innermost secrets and deepest feelings, yet, it is rendered all the more emotive by the absence of the one to whom it is addressed. It also contains a sense of permanence, the written record of an outpouring.



The passage from Tabucchi then is one full of openings and doublings, of myth and time and language and death coming together, but what about its use in understanding the process itself, the one with which we began? Part of this process, of *bringing a piece of text to life*, is one of quotation. It is an act of de- and re-contextualisation, dismantling the bonds around that particular fragment so that it may be segregated and drawn up into the present text, the organic realm of biological life.

Walter Benjamin writes about quotation, and ‘literary montage’, as an interruption in the continuum of history which severs the text from its context, unmooring it from its surroundings so that it may form part of a new constellation. This rupture, that occurs when placing a citation from one text inside another, allows the original text to speak in a new environment, both a mode of repetition and a mode of transformation. In doing so it is able to actualise a change, or the absence of a change, in meaning spanning the distant years that may reside between one text and another.

The transplant both saves and destroys the original text, tearing it from its original meaning but revealing a truth that was obfuscated in its former context. The act of quotation is a process of rupture and fusion between two histories. The outcome of this process always contains a dimension of *longing*, a juxtaposition of what is with what could be. Writing about the method of quotation and montage used by Karl Kraus, Benjamin states that:

summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin. It appears, now with rhyme and reason, sonorously, congruously, in the structure of the new text [...] In it is mirrored the angelic tongue in which all words, startled from the idyllic context of meaning, have become mottoes in the book of Creation.³

Though sharing much in common with this understanding of quotation, the one generated by the lightning bolt of resonance that fixes the words in the reader’s memory differs in that the text in which the words become lodged is organic. The text is the plastic structure of the brain whose narrative is the mental conscious existence of the reader themselves. A different mode of repetition occurs, one inside the bio-chemical activity of the memory – “this piece of text becomes part of the very make-up of the reader, its meaning recurring and re-presenting itself intermittently throughout their life. The continuum of reading is blasted open, fusing the fragment with the historical unfolding of mental activity. The dialectical image gains biological force.

One of the key differences between the written text and the organic mind is temporal. Though its ink may fade and its pages may fray, the book on its own is incapable of *experiencing* the passing of time: it is only through citation that its language, its history, may be re-configured. However, this operation entails the mediation of human activity: a

³ Walter Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” in *Reflections* (New York: 1978), 269.

translation through contemporaneity between one text and the other. This moment of reception and re-transmission is what the 'capture of the fragment' draws our attention to.

This phrase the reader has inscribed within their mind can be re-excavated, glittering from deep down in the strata of memory like a seam of precious metal. It can affect moments and decisions that extend beyond the boundaries of the word's conceptual meaning, changes that alter the course of a human life but which are ultimately forgotten. These events vanish like the leaves of autumn as the winter sets in. The seasons go on unperturbed and the ground continues to spring forth with new growth but somewhere on the surface the composition of the soil has shifted.

Hegel wrote of the violence which naming an object carries out on its individuality. The idea being that naming an object destroys it by subsuming it within the conceptual structure of language. The retrieval of the fragment here is a moment of resistance in this transformation. The piece of language is given materiality, and will be brought down into the grave. In the moment of 'no longer reading' language displays its omnipotence by becoming matter: by rendering itself mortal in the synapses. We can take these words with us, shape them and be shaped by them, resisting their forces and re-forming them. And in doing so we offer them the same release we ourselves get. Ultimately, it is only through participating in this finitude that language can ever *mean* anything.

This is the *other* biographical interpretation: the text is that which reveals the reader to themselves. The thought no longer passes as a coin, from hand to hand, rather it ceases to be exchangeable at all as a result of its mortal degradation. The speck of language ingested by the reader gives them sustenance by partaking in their finitude. In this way the memorialisation of a fragment that fuses with the reader's life goes beyond the periodic resuscitation that each reading gives to the work, reanimating, if only fleetingly, its existence. The mechanical and the animate, the written word and the electro-chemical current have been re-fused. By tying these words to ourselves we sentence them to uncertainty and temporality. The violence of the conceptual is soothed by this resistance and, though it ultimately serves to draw attention to the wound, the meaning generated by this recapture can never be taken from us.



The spectre which has been haunting this text is a familiar one. It is a spectre which haunts the reader and writer in equal measure; it haunts Calypso and Odysseus, and it haunts Tabucchi too. It is the most familiar and most foreign of all. It is death. Death is the spectre which looms over language and history: indeed it is their very constitution. Both Heidegger and Calypso remind us of this. Writing is a dying art form. In fact it is the dying art form *par excellence*. It is only through its continual death, its death sentence, that it can be said to be truly alive. This continual death is both a re-presentation of human mortality, of finitude, and that which cheats death, by being de-composed only of language.

This presence of death is perhaps what lies beneath the triumphal and beautiful aspects of the moment of 'no longer reading'. To seize the phrase is to be burned by its conceptual horror. The holding of the fragment uncovers the gaze of the uncanny. The reader hears a voice which is not their own. This brief jolt into the world of portent, madness and conspiracy is intoxicating. It reveals something which should remain hidden, opening up a segment of the secret that should stay buried in the printed tomb of words. The *lust for life* (and therefore death) hidden in language's crypt has become visible, has come-to-light. One is no longer sure of the book's status as animate or inanimate. There is a disturbance of the planes of mental life.

The longing for historical change brought about through quotation is mirrored by Calypso. Her longing is that of one for whom 'what is' and 'what could be' are, without death, compacted into one and the same thing. Like language she calls out to be read. In this way Calypso's envy is far more basic than any that might cause the gods to wish harm upon Polycrates: for fortune, however boundless, is meaningless once it is severed from life by escaping death, once it is crystallised in the empty terror of eternity. Who is Odysseus? He is, above all, the last of the heroes. With his death the lives of the gods and men are forever separated. For the Greeks, the passing of the heroes is what sets human history in motion. Odysseus is the one who must die in order for time itself to get going. After him, intermingling of divine and mortal comes to an end. Or does it? For is the 'moment of no longer reading' not an heroic (if futile) moment? It recaptures a shard of divinity and takes it down to the realm of the living. The purple

phrase that stops the reader in their tracks is a ribbon fluttering in the dark, a sash held in the beak of a soaring gull. Through this encounter, this moment of chance, we fulfil Calypso's wish. A forgotten fragment of the divine, like her herself, is given life, and so turns grey with age, feels itself weakening, finally ready to be scattered back inside that great circle to which all things return.

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By tracing the edges of this fragment I have exposed myself to the dizzying infinity and nothingness that everything broken contains, pulling at the threads from which my whole life is woven, threads which, for you, mean little or even nothing. You don't need them: you have your own. In doing so, I have potentially opened this fragment, this discussion, up to its own cycle of un-dying and re-dying, but that cannot be helped. Time will tell, whilst I, like a leaf, yellow and fall.

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