

# Loving Art

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“The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means [...] In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 1964

The primary directive of Irish art criticism at present seems to be to launch artists, works, and critics onto the high seas of legibility, legitimacy and exchange. This puts interpretation in the service of promotion and general arts management, certainly, but rather than seeking to counter this with belaboured wrangling over meaning, the time is ripe for a little love, perhaps. Insofar as it stakes a claim to meaning, criticism continues to engage in the broadly hermeneutic process of recovering and disclosing for an interpretive subject the latent meaning of a complex of significant qualities. The task of interpretation is to cast a net across these qualities, then to describe and decipher what is brought ashore. Such a method of intellectual labour, whatever the flag under which it ventures out, finds meaning only in the depths.

Some time ago, Susan Sontag lamented “the revenge of the intellect upon art”, for laying siege to the sovereignty of the sensuous and immediate: hence, her call for an erotics of art, which would begin with “a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of the work of art ... [revealing] the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it”. Writing must therefore become *transparent* so that through it we might experience “the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are.”<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, the assimilation of Art into Thought would only further atrophy our sensory correspondence with the world.

Sontag rightly objects to interpretation that chases after some originary experience from which to proceed, but her own recommendations remain entangled both within her phenomenological prejudice for the “luminous” origins of things, and the more general hermeneutic project of resuscitating “the living spirit from the tomb of the letter”<sup>2</sup>, which most often entails the reconfiguration of a dissolute subjectivity irreversibly detached from and through writing. Nevertheless, however confused and reactionary her case against interpretation might be, her call for erotics is germane to the problems of artwriting in its encounters with the current array of art pleasures.

But first, transparency. To demand transparency of writing, to demand that it become merely a deficient conduit for the evidence of the senses, and that it encounter something latent to which it does not and cannot contribute, is once again to assume that the world already murmurs with meaning that our statements about it make more or less audible, as well as to further corral the movements of writing within the propositional and descriptive. However much these latter might more vigorously attend to sensuous surfaces, it would be foolish to imagine that such operational and vehicular uses of writing could be anything but inadequate to the intricacies and intense peculiarities of the sensory. But the statements of which writing consists are also speculative, agitating what is unwritten.<sup>3</sup> Agitation is not the same as criticism, and much more like those crises upon which criticism nourishes itself, a crisis being, after all, neither more nor less than a moment of decision.

Such a demand also suffers from an aversion to a number of rather important things about writing. Firstly, as much as it compels, and courts authority, writing is anarchic and duplicitous, inescapably so. Secondly, writing too is a sensuous surface of inscription: when Sontag calls for the writer’s body to become an open, yielding

surface for the inscription of sensory data, she simply transfers the origin from artwork to body, thereby disavowing those more or less automated operations that constantly inscribe upon this body and distribute its sense-making functions across a multitude of technological sub-systems, writing being one of them. Thirdly, writing dramatises knowledge, making it festive.<sup>4</sup> As writing wriggles away from the grip of legislation and power, it approaches theatre, and so too approaches the object of its musings and desires, its beloved, so to speak, with a performance – parades of masks and gestures, games of hide-and-seek:

“*Larvatus prodeo*: I advance pointing to my mask, but with a discreet (and wily) finger I designate this mask. Every passion, ultimately, has its spectator ... no amorous oblation without a final theatre ...”<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, whilst there is no homology between the sensible and the articulable, whilst visibilities and statements, for example, are heterogeneous, both exceed the conditions from which they derive: as Gilles Deleuze suggests, one cannot open up words without visibilities emerging in response, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> This opening up and proliferation of statements is precisely the literary quality of writing from which the guardians of transparency seek to distance themselves, in order to strike the pose of criticality.

The previous points are by now almost poststructuralist commonplaces, of which, of course, Sontag can have been only dimly aware, if at all. But again, Sontag is not really the target here: transparency, interpretation and criticism remain inseparable for many. An aversion to literariness – often conflated with the belle lettriste – prevails, still, even where aspirations surpass the lacklustre treadmill of promotional stock. The demand for transparency is persuasive, and commonly a default option. It is timely and efficient. It works to deadlines. It uses predictive text formations, but in doing so makes language redundant at the moment of writing. Whatever declarations such texts might make concerning their exegetic function, they foreclose the movement of text, measuring out the rhythms of syntax according to representational dictates. The generally muddled thoughts and grouchy admonishments that accompany this hangover from the politics of representation seem unwilling to entertain the possibility that art is representative only in a weak sense, if at all, and as a means by which society represents itself it is largely irrelevant.<sup>7</sup> If this is the case for the presumed objects of criticism, then why attempt to institute representation at the level of the text? This seems a rearguard action, a commitment to circulate words according to the Law, and not according to the perversities of writing itself.

The demand for erotics is more difficult, and strictly incompatible with the demand for transparency, implying as it does the perverse act of making what is intimate public, with all its inexplicable associations and pleasures intact. It has found its most sustained response, so far, in various appeals to beauty.<sup>8</sup> However, such appeals continue to depend uncritically upon a hermeneutic subject (as well as an uncomplicated distinction between the ‘truths’ of the body and the tall tales of the text); and besides, erotics begins in the vicissitudes of pleasure, not in the placatory certainties of beauty.

Lovingly following the contours of the body that arouses its desire, allowing its pleasure to accumulate upon the body’s surfaces until it becomes visible, writing approaches intimacy with that strange, chimerical body. The “thing itself” is a fantasised origin that is just a place from which to begin. It is already dense with words, a glut of quotations, but reading and writing this surface is quite unlike the linear conventions of the page:

“It starts at any point, skips, repeats itself, goes backwards, insists, ramifies in simultaneous and divergent messages, converges again, has moments of irritation, turns the page, finds its place, gets lost.”<sup>9</sup>

So again, it is not a case of poetic evocation, of chasing language away from that phantom thing called “immediate experience”, or of laying down a text before the non-conscious, and piously backing away. This is where the merchants of beauty have it wrong, of course, allowing no prospects for writing other than as the allegory of its own failure – “the beautiful and maddening ... failure of language in the face of anything but itself.”<sup>10</sup> At the irregular limit where blind words encounter mute visions, a lover’s discourse does not respect the integrity of bodies. Instead, it takes its failure for the beginning of an affair, elaborating another sensuous surface and forming statements comparable in intensity and singularity to the enigmatic rhythm that holds it captive, impatient to move towards and prolong the intensity, if not the primacy, of such an encounter. It takes the singularity that emerges from a breakdown in communications as the only reliability; “everything else is deceptive”, K is told in Kafka’s *The Castle*. Such is its catastrophe, and the scandal of its pleasures: that it is constantly disturbed and impassioned by singular, irrevocable encounters that haunt it but which it fails to address directly. It finds only uncommunicative traces of other bodies inscribed within its own, and thereby becomes a stranger to itself.

However, writing’s failure becomes fatal at those points where it seeks to be representative of something quite foreign to it or where it functions only to signpost the proprietary rights of meaning. These are both acts of possession quite inimical to those of love.

Without doubt, there are obligations for artwriters, but beyond these, they should risk greater ambition, and greater intimacy, than the narcissism of magnificent failure: this only leads each party to fall back into itself, whereas erotics, after all, requires the opening of two bodies to each other. It requires a gift, and the “right density of abandonment” that entrusts one body to another and vice versa, and that animates both outside any particular frame of interpretation, “as if the [erotic] image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see.”<sup>11</sup>

Writing not contracted to the laborious recovery of meaning might engage instead in something akin to an overseas correspondence. As Maurice Blanchot famously wrote long ago, if there were not this interval, the remoteness and enigmatic silence of one correspondent to another even as they face each other, nothing would pass between them.

“We should renounce knowing those to whom we are bound by something essential ... the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even in the greatest familiarity, an infinite distance, this fundamental separation from out of which that which separates becomes relation.”<sup>12</sup>

The generosity of such an attempt to exchange addresses is a consequence of writing’s aforementioned failure to reach its address. There never is an amorous encounter through writing: hence, for Barthes, there can be no “amorous” text, only writing “amorously.”<sup>13</sup> But, failure is the source of generosity, as it sends writing beyond mere autoeroticism and into the mutual vulnerability of erotics: masturbation, the augmentation and bringing to climax through writing of a previous encounter is much too authoritative – it short-circuits erotics and introduces some retrograde voluntarism into affairs. One does not choose to love, one falls in love: love is something we are in rather than something we do, a by-product of our well-laid plans. A lover’s discourse gets carried away in the

movements of Eros:

“Straining towards something different from ourselves, we had been penetrated by something we already carried within us. But it was also as if it were only by entering us that the work could know itself ... These are hardly attributes of a personality; we are pregnant with what doesn’t exactly belong to us, and self-delivery (self-reproduction) turns out to have nothing to do with self-expression.”<sup>14</sup>

To conclude, a few requests. Firstly, that artwriting attempts not to recover some present prior to writing but to live restlessly in the present *through* writing. Secondly, that it transcribes the incomprehension that engenders love. Thirdly, that it takes its motivation from the voluptuous density of relations between lovers and seeks knowledge neither in the lover nor the beloved but only in what passes between them. And lastly, that it does not engage in gossip: loving consists of believing that one knows the secret the loved one holds back, even as one knows that such secrets only come into being in response to one’s probing. Can we think of a writing that keeps that secret rather than attempts to spread it around? For how can we love if we cannot keep a secret?

“And this secret that we take by surprise, we do not speak of it; we keep it. That is to say ... we do not touch it ... we leave it intact. This is love.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, one should not write *of* an encounter, for fear of betraying its secret, or worse, revealing

that it has no secret. One can write *to* this encounter, but at the expense of clarity for those who are not party to it. Hence the use of opaque jargon, the distribution of the vernacular in the midst of the vehicular, which lacks clarity only to those who perform the ablutions of legitimate and/or critical discourse.

If artwriting cannot trade in silences and secrets then it can only trade, i.e. become a mere function of logistics; and it certainly cannot love.

#### Notes

- 1 Sontag, Susan, ‘Against Interpretation’, in *Against Interpretation and other essays*, London: 1987; reproduced in Eric Fernie (ed), *Art History and its methods: a critical anthology*, London: 1995, pp.214-222
- 2 Wellbery, David, ‘Post-Hermeneutic Criticism’, *Foreword* to Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, translated by M. Meeter and C. Cullens, Stanford: 1989
- 3 Nicholas Davey, J.R., ‘Writing and the In-Between’, *Word & Image*, volume 16, number 4, October-December 2000
- 4 Barthes, Roland, ‘Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, 7th January 1977’, *October* 8, spring 1979
- 5 Barthes, Roland, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 2002, p.43
- 6 Deleuze, Gilles, *Foucault*, translated by Sean Hand, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp.66-67
- 7 This point is made by Jean Fisher in ‘The Work Between Us’, *Vampire in the Text: Narratives of Contemporary Art*,

London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2003

- 8 See Perling Hudson, Suzanne, ‘Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism’, *October* 104, Spring 2003
- 9 Calvino, Italo, *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, translated by William Weaver, (London: Everyman, 1993, p.151
- 10 Morton, Tom, ‘Critical Timing’, *Frieze* 106, April 2007
- 11 Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, translated by R Howard, London: Vintage, 1993, p.59
- 12 Blanchot, Maurice, *L’Amitié*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, cited in Derrida, Jacques, *The Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins, London: Verso, 1997, pp.294-5
- 13 Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p.78
- 14 Bersani, Leo, and Dutoit, Ulysse, ‘The Pregnant Critic’, *Artforum*, November 1999, pp.124-5
- 15 Cixous, Hélène, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, London: Routledge, 1997, p.17