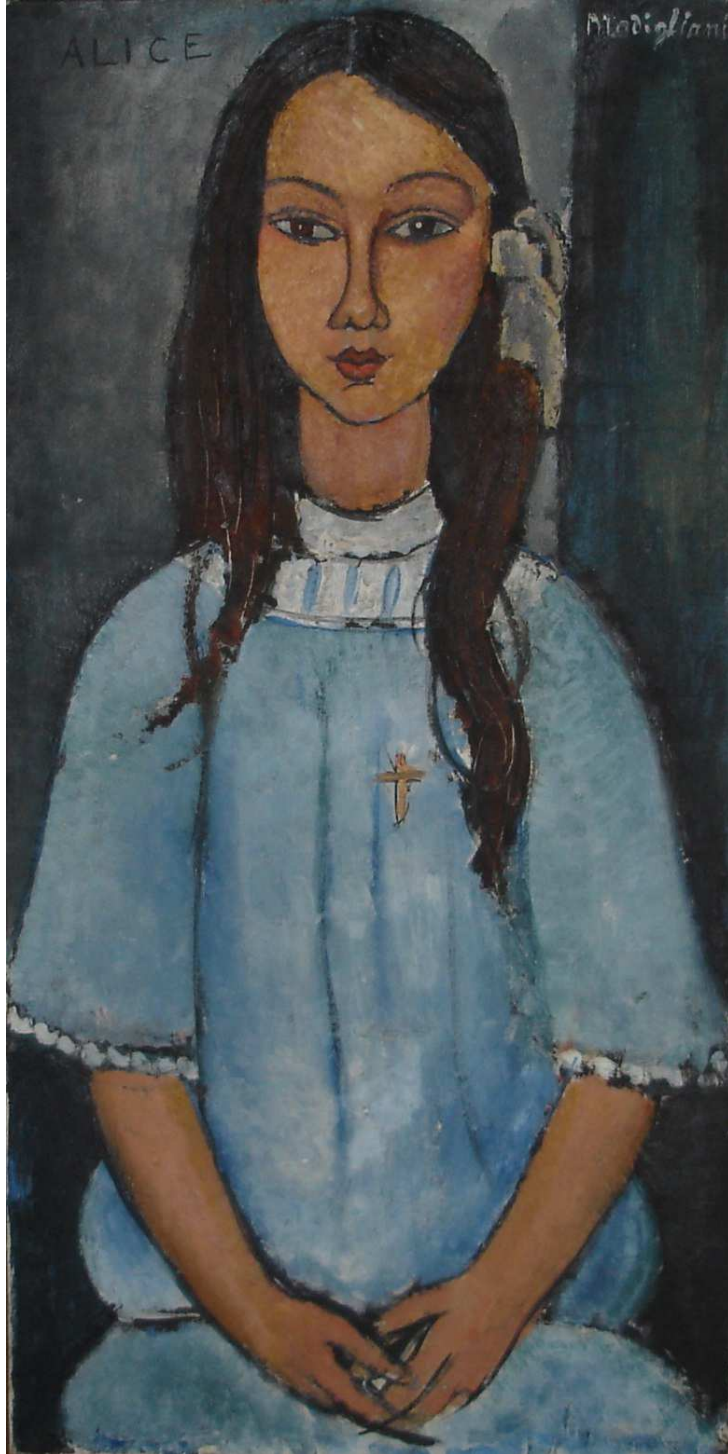


Writing and Memory: Putting on the Body

(for Rachel Gavrielah Pearl on her first Rosh HaShanah, 5774)



Lisa Grunberger

My mother hands me a small mint green journal, on a 12 hour flight to Israel, in 1976 (I was ten years old) and says: “You will see many new things on this trip, go to beautiful places – the Negev, Jerusalem, Haifa – you will hear Hebrew, meet your cousins aunts and uncles, and see the house I grew up in. I want you to write it all down. I don’t want you to forget anything.” My mother gave me the gift of twins: writing and memory. She dressed me, for better or worse – blessed me – with this dual gift/burden. When, to use Virginia Woolf’s delicious phrase, I “put on the body” of writing, memory came alive.

They are inseparable, Writing and Memory ; they midwife into this world, what can only be called, words-incarnate, first conceived, then wombed, in the vast proto-verbal interiority of the writer’s body. Woolf herself used this alchemical, mystical language of birth and marriage in her writing on craft, for she experienced the inseparability of a woman’s body and her writing. Life and language mutually arise, each within the other, in my awareness: any moment, any event is both, the body a privileged locus for both. Words are ontological, sublimely physical, sensuously metaphysical. It is in words that a “union of opposites” is “consummated”, as Woolf writes, referring to both an alchemical process and a carnal act.

Woolf inveighs against exploiting words to be “useful”. This is the nihilist practice of the coming reign of “specialists, word mongers, phrase finders,” who emphatically are “not readers.” She saw the murderous future, the deluge of Madison Avenue advertisers who, precisely, “use” words to ‘commodify’ reality, if the neologism may be permitted, or, more simply, to buy and sell things. “But in reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to

remain sunken,” she writes, “like reeds on the bed of a river.” Writing, like reading, means just this: my body, all of me, sinks with the words, submerges deep into language, memory and history, and then, arisen, I walk across the waters to tell thee the tale.

Writing is an erotic act, an act of union, wherein the *materia prima* of meaning and existence perceived or imagined “put on the body” of words to unite and produce...a story. Storytelling, whether the story of the DNA helix, stories of the Beginning or the Big Bang, Odysseus’ story or Mrs. Dalloway’s story, is the central human vocation which allows us to beget meanings for this world, at once so potentially full of purpose when meanings are begotten and so empty of it when they are not. This is not solely a mythological tale of ideal spiritual union. It is flawed and bloody, a wrestling with the angel through the Night, a struggle to become ourselves and ourselves with an other.

The marriage of self with words to create stories worth telling and remembering is a craft that, as Woolf argues in her essay on *Craftmanship*, is “useless”. Why? Because: word and world are not to be a counterfeit, utilitarian ‘one’. The world is not—or not only, what it seems, words are not only what they immediately ‘mean’. Words live, Woolf writes, “in the mind. Various and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and hither, by falling in love, marrying together.” This is an outlaw marriage, subversive and dangerous. Words are “irreclaimable vagabonds” that cannot be owned, domesticated, bought and sold. Writing means wholly digesting this impure stew of words to combine the “old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so they tell the truth.” I do not choose words and writing, they choose me, “variously and strangely.”

In writing I body forth this space of meaning, this gap, where words and world do not quite connect. It is an almost love affair, isn’t it, between word and world. The write-her

must re-describe the world in her own image (the hubris, the narcissism and for a woman to assume such a task!). It is an incomplete world, it is a “confusion” of the word, we inherit. But ever since Wallace Stevens taught me to play his blue guitar, things have not been as they appear, nor are they otherwise. In the in-between is how meaning gets in.

A writer apprentices with what writing may mean for her in the company of those writers who are essential to what she reads. For French writer Stéphane Zagdanski, the writer “is at war against reality” (that is, against the collective, consensual illusion of ‘what is’). When I write, I go to war, carrying out, what Thomas Merton called, raids on the unspeakable. Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert has his alter ego, Mr. Cogito, proclaim he “wants to stay true to uncertain clarity,” which, for the writer, is also to abide in what Keats called “negative capability.” In all this, writing, as Adrienne Rich taught us, is to dive “into the Wreck,” a way to recover lost time, but a way also into terror and the labyrinthine coincidence of life and death. Writing, in this sense, is my daily bread of “not by bread alone.”

I cannot remember not writing, and I cannot remember not wanting to have a child. These two imperatives of creation are, in many ways, dispute with each other. They have contended inside me for decades. O.k., they are at war. And, as I said, when I write, I go to war, carrying out raids on the unspeakable. Hence, again, the gap between word and world, this abyss, this longing, the writer dares to look into; she writes from it and toward it.

That I twin together writing and giving birth, actually and metaphorically, is deliberate. One means the other. *Means*, that is, “intends, have in mind,” from Old English, *moenan* “to mean, intend, signify; tell, say; complain, lament.” When you ask what writing means, you are asking about “wish” and “desire” and from the Welsh, *mwyn*, their

“enjoyment”. Writing means lament. Complaint. I want to have a child. I want to be published and successful. I want a room of my own. I want a partner, I want to remain single. I am divided against myself. What does this all mean? Open your journal, my mother says, and write about it.

Writing means to be “split at the root,” in Adrienne Rich’s oft-invoked phrase. Because she is so split, the writer lives a counterlife; she uses all her wit and cunning to constantly elude the seeming finality and self-sufficiency of her and others’ carefully guarded identities. Elias Canetti said the writer is the privileged and necessary “keeper of metamorphosis.” The writing life is one of constant metamorphosis, perhaps also of hide-and-seek. The word and the world become all allusion and allegory, lapsing and flowing into each other, irrespective of place, time, or sex.

The writer alchemically changes the word into world, and world into word. Rose into lily into daughter into death and back again endlessly rocking. I sing the body alembic, a body no less charged and conductive than that of Whitman’s. It too is the body “so often laid down,” to the fatal loss, as Woolf intimates, of a human being’s multi-dimensional, liberational openness to reality. I write to lose this “too, too solid” self and to allow the submerged other, my double, my doppelganger, to emerge. She often knows far more than I do. The writing is always wiser than the writer.

There is nothing stranger than the stranger one becomes in writing. I write so I can body forth this stranger word by word, page by page. “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” asked the novelist E.M. Forester. Correlatively, how do I know what is my self until I know what is my other? This is something of the reason to why I say to write and to want a child mean one another for me and why I call blessed the very contention within

me of these two imperatives. Writing is the womb, and the room, of my own existential question. And, if I can be the other to myself, as Orlando was for hundreds of years, I can better understand the other when I see her on the subway, or see her, the neighbor, next door.

If word is embodied, body is equally en-worded. “The book has somehow to be adapted to the body,” Woolf instructs. We labor to craft “the sentence” which, Hemingway said, has to work as poetry in prose; it too must “put on a body,” individual, millennial, generational, gestational, mother and father both. Which is to say that to me writing is an ongoing act of storytelling about the generations of my own intellectual preoccupations intimate in union with the body as vessel, as socio-cultural construct, as house to the soul, as locus of laughter, pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, language and memory, birth and death.

Writing, then, gives me, not through a direct, clear path, but through a tempestuous wilderness of circuitous switchbacks (the ones Mary Carmichael forged and traversed) access to *communion*; a pathless path, a way from lost origin toward unknowable end, to better humanly inhabit this “very erratic, very undependable” reality and myself within reality and others within myself within this reality. We are not one, not two. A de-estrangement ensues. A space. An expanse. It is a Place for the world and words, though the world and words are not its place. And it is good.

Writing means, finally, what Franz Kafka named it, “a leap out of murderers’ row”. In this time of murderers—who de-eroticize words, for whom language is a weapon to kill Time, and to ‘pacify’ our life’s need for metamorphosis in meanings and stories, who better than for one’s own child to make this leap? A child teaches best the writer her words are “useless”. My daughter will make all that I have written, all that I am to write, all that remains in me unwritten, uselessly meaningful beyond any meaning I could intentionally

produce in writing. “What is a baby like in its mother's womb?” the Talmud asks. “She is like a folded notebook...When she emerges into this world, what was closed opens, and what was open closes.” Whether and how writing and words open or close their access to me, the open book in which I am written, my daughter's book of Life, not the books I write, is ultimately what writing means to me.

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