

## The Kathartic Pen: Writing and Painlessness

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### Abstract

The creative writing process with its pain and pleasure coalescing one into the other is captured as symbolized in the pen that creates both the opportunity for pain expressions as well as pleasurable narrations. In this short outline of a presentation the author hints at the double intent as it worked out in the case of Shakespeare, Joyce and Keats as he draws parallels and nuances across generations and sensibilities.

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### I

In the famous sonnet 18, the lyric-speaker *qua* Shakespeare instills and installs a hole in the cogito, by the *res cogitans* of the writer, when the primary mortal poet synchronizes his identity and creativity with an immediate but universal, particular but durable – “this”.<sup>1</sup> A mirror, as it identifies an I with a ME. But not just any mirror. More a “portrait” in the sense Joyce names his updated schemata of *Stephen Hero*, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”.<sup>2</sup> What is the junction, in and through which, the mirror of the writer becomes the portrait, assuming or acquiring a relative fullness, a relative parenthood or possession, and, at the same time, a hole in the selfhood of the writer? In my opinion, it is the kathartic as well as jouissant, Pen.

The metonym of the writer, and the intensity of writing! Shakespeare writes the entire sonnet 18 sans the final couplet like a sine-curve, just as Keats also did in his equally famous “Ode to the Nightingale” ..., with the pen going descendit and permeable, in excess of inertia and dispossession, now, and, *autem* and *rectus*, in excess of pleasure and power, then...on and on.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare has already claimed superiority of the fair youth to the cosmological signifiers of beauty that he could find in nature, and, *equally already*, thereby and therefore, however ironically, has conceded the inferiority of the fair youth on the scale of *time*; but “this gives life to thee” – not only does he imply that art immortalizes beauty and love, but also that the work of art [*this* script he is composing] is a mirror that gives an artistic sense of the self to him, while the act of writing also names death of the alive-in-life itself as a fresh *vitae* is offered to it [“... gives life to thee”]. It/he/fair youth is summarily made into a Yeatsian golden bird, ‘alive-in-art’ now onward.<sup>4</sup> Too funeral-like and too gestational at once! And it is also auto-congratulatory and ejaculatory, like the archetypal moment of becoming father, and auto-erasing, by the death of the author hypothesis to come after more than three and half centuries. “I “will not, and cannot, give life to thee; *this* gives life to thee!

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Delhi: Thomson Publishing Company, 1997), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Keats, John. “Ode to a Nightingale”. *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 18.

### II

The questions of the relationship between art and life, or between the author and the text, or the author and the reader are all well-debated, well-speculated upon, ones. From Platonic disparagement of mimesis as unworthy exercise for the polis to Blanchot’s *il y a* and beyond, is quite a peregrination. A more radical question surfaces as the pen writes, regarding the pathologia of the pen, or, more specifically, regarding the pleasures and pain of the pen: does the writer suffer the arrival of the text, and does that suffering get adequately into the *text*, woven into the *sutra*, so to say? Or does the literary act katharsize the uneasy feelings? Does it delve and induce into an overwhelming eruption of pleasure? There is something frenzied, intense and not “ordinary”, so to say, in the literary act. At the same time, there is something durable in the products of that act, that would negotiate with the politics of circulation, culture of readership and modes of canon-formation – something that is “suitable”, “ethical” and “public” in the most ancient senses of these terms – that gives us the idea of a stability, a calm, and a distance, existing between the pen and the *book*. In this paper, I intend to name, and briskly situate, the material engine operating between the pathology of the literary and the *in libro de nativitate*, that **buffers** [to make a sound when the body is *hit*, as well as to open up, as well as resolve a contrary].

Let us reach Keatsian fantasies in the “Ode to A Nightingale”, to see the matter. Initially, Keats is drowning in aches and envenoming. But he names its maxima as too much joy, not pain. Then he soars into delirious heights of joy. But he names its maxima as thanatological desire, not beatitudinal. Again as he tends to delve into the eschatological, he reaches the zenith of Mediterranean [in today’s MakeMyTrip discourses, it would have been the tropical] passions and practices of sunburnt mirth and Provençal songs, warmth, enjoyment. In a sweeping usurpation of all mythic, historic and fantastic modes of narrativizing the past, Keats reaches as much into the authentic density of collective memory as to synchronize these disparate axes of diachrony [Bible, historiography and fairy tale] in and through his singular experience of listening, to one song-bird, one evening, in one garden. As he is about to pick up the authority and the authenticity of writing himself as, and, as if as, and into, the nightingale, he is summarily recalled into the non-literary status of an earthling, and that too a darkling.

What is intriguing in the trajectory is that, exactly at the same instance pain is written, pleasure can be named. And exactly at the limit that a jouissance erupts, suffering is open to be and become. It is as if the pen is the precise instance whereby the retreat or recession of pleasure [by the accounts of pain that it names] acts as the only moment when pleasure can be re-treated, or recuperated, and that too as the sole and the sovereign moment of pleasure. This is not the Sadean sovereignty, or the Bataillesque sadomasochism. It is rather that pleasure can be drawn, truly, only at its own withdrawal [namely, the pain]. In Indian epistemologies [whereby *vidya* or wisdom and *vedana* or suffering share the same root *vid*], as well as the Eucharistic enthusiasm [whereby the *last* supper is the only and the most sovereign instance of thanksgiving, and of, holy communion], such *retrait* is acknowledged or recognized as *normative*, though not *normal*. Think of a railway level-crossing. As long as it is not closed, it does not exist on the road. It can be, it can open up into being, it can be named or inscribed, only if it is bunged up: *aperire clausa est*.

This is however not a new story, at least not as new as Lacou-Labarthe and Jean Luc Nancy would like it to be. It bears the signatures, in terms of Western lines of thought [whether unified or cut is a different intellectual debate and does have no impact on this observation], of Aristotle, and that too the Mona Lisa of literary theory: the *Katharsis*. It also bears the freshness and zeal of Barthes inflected by Cixous in the orgasmic. If categorically formulized, it would be something like the following:

1. The Literary is an instant.
2. This instant is the instant of pain, i.e., withdrawal or vanishment of all pleasure. This retreat or withdrawal draws into opening the intensity of pleasure.
3. The PEN, or the *stift*, is thus the implementation of this instance of *volta as vollen*. ("I am Heathcliff" utters a vanishing Catherine.<sup>5</sup> It is also the synecdoche of the literary instant. Keats for example, writes, in the most impressive repetition of nineteenth century literature, "forlorn" twice, to engage and disengage the song-bird and the song-writer).<sup>6</sup>

The act or event of writing folds within it a cognition of alterity. This alterity is not just simply 'out there' but is produced by the those very operations which constitute the familiar. This alterity, otherness is not a given to the would-be creator, to be simply taken hold of as an idea, as a formal possibility, an aesthetic equation situated beyond aesthetic framework. In ecriture, creation must be understood as a private event. As Attridge holds it "To be original, however is to create something that marks a significant departure from the norms of cultural matrix within which it is produced and received.."<sup>7</sup> Alterity always situated outside the horizon of cognition, perception and feeling haunts the text as spectre.

Writing carries within it the experience of the impossible. The cartographic operations get suspended during the act of writing and the pleasure principle evoked during the act pushes pen towards a realm of "beyond". The conditions of destabilizations are always induced in an act of creative writing, as PEN, discursively generates a system of re-engagement. Barthian idea of pleasure which is a state, and jouissance which is an action, both are held unspeakable.

The event of writing occurs with a recognition of this alterity and the impossibility of its utterance. Writing functions with a foreknowledge of this failure - a frustration which is epistemic as well as sexual. But with this recognition writing moves into a state of post ejaculatory painlessness. We must understand, through the writings of Blanchot that writing in literature does not strive to further life but its quest is to arrive at the point of origin of language; it is :

"The eternal torment of our language, when its longing turns back toward what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labours of being a lack of what it would say."<sup>8</sup>

Literature is not mere imaginative exploration of possibilities and conceiving it thus is to have very superficial idea of reading and writing literature. Rather the question which literary

<sup>5</sup> Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Keats, John. "Ode to a Nightingale". *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Attridge, Derrek. "The Singularity of Literature". (London, Routledge, 2004), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. "The Infinite Conversations" tr.-Susan Hanson. (Minesota: University of Minesota Press ,1969) 36.

writing raise is 'How can I, in my speech, recapture this prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak, in order to speak it?'<sup>9</sup> Writing then is to experience death as it also marks a passage into a world of alterity. The literary language functions similarly, giving birth to a world simultaneously making any experience of that reality unapproachable. It is at this point that with recognition of the other always present absence, that writing slides into a painless death.

<sup>9</sup> Blankshot, *infinite conversation*.