

Beyond Words—A Preface

I hate the phrase “words are the author’s profession.” It ignores the power to constrain and to enforce that words possess, and their power to exclude what lies beyond that to which they refer.

I have recently had various reasons to reflect on the time of my life from kindergarten through puberty, and felt my body start to resist, as one may resist an unseen hand pushing down on one’s shoulders, when I recall memories associated with words.

It is said that without words, you cannot communicate anything, or leave anything behind—but is that really true? It has been my experience, ever since I was a child, that when I do my best to talk about something, the reaction I get is “speak in a way I can understand.” That doesn’t make sense. Here I am, trying as hard as I can to speak with my whole body, using words, sound, and gestures. Why should anyone get to pass judgment on the person in front of them by haughtily declaring whether they “understand” them or not?

When an event transpires or a scenery stretches out before your eyes, you wouldn’t say, “show it in a way I can understand.” In the same way, a person making an effort to communicate something is a phenomenon in and of itself. A phenomenon is not something to be analyzed and understood, but to be witnessed and remembered.

An author writing a novel is acutely aware from the outset that any attempt at analyzing or understanding it is a shallow endeavor that only engages a small portion of the mind. If that were the only purpose behind writing novels, then what petty things they would be! And yet, were we to attempt to use words to explain a novel we had finished reading, that would no longer be that novel at all.

Rather than serving to explain or communicate something, the words in a novel are like the sounds made by musical instruments, the lines and colors of a painting, the texture and shape of the material of a sculpture, and the movements of a dance and the figure of the dancer. That is not to say that they do not also serve that function, of course. In my ideal world, the writing process goes like this: I am holding in my hands a malleable lump of air roughly the size of a balloon, which I slowly rotate and knead, altering its shape. Then, another lump of air the same size as mine, held in the hands of

another person, starts to rotate and change shape in a similar way, mimicking my motions...

No, wait. I'm starting to sound too much like a deranged cult leader. Basically, I am doing something on my own, and something seemingly unrelated, with no apparent connection, happens in the reader's mind.

In this book I discuss Nobuo Kojima's *Uruwashiki hibi* ("Glorious Days"), but of all his novels, it was especially *Gūwa* ("Fable") that sent my heart racing so fast I wanted to toss the book aside and run. The words written in *Gūwa* churn with power, playing an anarchic symphony that goes beyond such narrow functions as communication and explanation.

This is the kind of novels Kafka wrote. He is known for writing about the anxieties that lurk within the heart of the modern person, or the stifling chains of bureaucracy that fetter modern society, but those are interpretations of his works that only come once you have stopped reading the words Kafka wrote. While reading, however, Kafka's works are not about that at all. Instead, they show you what it is like to read the words as Kafka wrote them, sharing his writing experience, and how immensely thrilling and enjoyable that experience can be.

Kafka himself probably didn't have that intention in mind when he wrote. Truth be told, I'd go so far as to say he had no *intentions* whatsoever. An opening scene would occur to him, followed by words, characters, places, and concepts he could derive therefrom. How far he could take them, even he himself didn't know. He simply wrote on as far as he could. That is the most amazing thing about the novels and fragmentary passages Kafka wrote in this way; they end at the point where Kafka felt that they could not continue any further. Although he was fortunate enough to see some novels through to the end, he did not feel an absolute obligation to finish a work. Because of this, he never found himself having to do all the plotting and outlining and other busywork to finish a novel (or ensure not getting stuck along the way) that many authors end up doing out of that sense of obligation. This is why it is impossible to remember the plot of a Kafka novel.

A big reason why *The Metamorphosis* is Kafka's most widely read novella, aside from its easily understandable and shocking premise of a man being transformed into a bug, is probably that its overall plot is easy to remember, which is an exception among

Kafka's works.

After finishing a novel, you can usually recall bits and pieces of passages in the book and what happened next. Not so with Kafka's novels, such as *The Castle*, which even upon repeated readings does not give the reader the sense of orientation that most ordinary novels do. The word "orientation" refers to the most basic grasp of one's current situation; what year, month, and day it is, and where one is at the present moment in time. Expanding the definition to include the ability to take a bird's-eye view of a written work as a whole, this is precisely what a reader who wishes to know and understand the work will do. Kafka, on the other hand, completely lacked this ability.

As an author, Kafka did not actively engage with his works from a bird's-eye view. In this regard, then, those who interpret his works as dealing with the anxieties that lurk within the heart of the modern person are not entirely off the mark, whereas those critics who from Kafka's words got the message not to read them from a bird's-eye view ought to worry. For if the author himself engages less with his works from a bird's-eye view than the critics who read him, how greatly does that not affect the image we have of the author?

The image of the author as possessing a blueprint of the work they are about to write, and dynamically writing out of chronological order when it becomes necessary to do so in the writing process, is one that the readers need even more than the author themselves. I think this conception of the author and their work—that the author understands the meaning of their work better than anyone—provides readers with a sense of stability that is essential, even more so than the presence of a central protagonist in a novel.

When reading a novel or watching a film, the introduction, when one is still unfamiliar with the fictional world being described, is always the most mentally taxing for the reader or viewer. Without an expectation that the fictional world one is about to enter will eventually reveal itself to the reader in perfect clarity, as it must once have done for the author, the effort of stepping inside becomes a chore.

For example, look at Kafka's *The Great Wall of China*, an unfinished story, or perhaps I should say a fragment that he stopped working on before reaching the end. As fragments go, it is rather long, starting out by describing the construction work on the Great Wall of China, only to at some point near the end shift into a tale of the emperor, and how "you" sit at your window, waiting for the emperor's messenger to arrive. Is

there anyone who after reading can explain how and when this shift occurred? I doubt it. Even I can't remember how the conclusion—that is, the last paragraph Kafka wrote before he stopped—of this story goes, but for some reason, after the part about the emperor's messenger, it goes on to talk about the narrator's father.

If the reader, despite not being able to remember the plot, starts discussing their interpretation of what *The Great Wall of China* was all about, I feel like that would be running away from the essence of the story. Readers who do this probably want to actively take charge of the story, because they have a conception in their mind of the author having done the same before. In a broader perspective, this conception is symbolic of how humans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries related to the world; just as humans actively took charge of the natural world around them, so should they take charge of their works of art. Humans were supposed to be in control of both the world and the arts, not forced to adapt themselves to their whims.

Kafka was indeed a remarkable person, a remarkable author. Reading his letters to Felice and Milena shows what a wellspring of words he was. Every night, he wrote enough words to fill ten to twenty pages of standard writing paper. I don't know how much overlap there was between his novel-writing and his letter-writing, but in addition to that he also kept a diary. If it could be called as such; it was all but devoid of the usual records of day-to-day life, instead full of fragments of stories, so that it was almost impossible to tell where the diary ended and the stories began. Not that such a distinction would mean much when it comes to Kafka—he simply wrote.

As I recall, Kafka referred to his works not as “stories” or “novels,” but as “documents,” and to the process of writing not as “writing,” but as “scratching,” as though leaving scratches in his skin. He did not so much write as rattle and drum with words. His works were like traces left behind, like the afterimages of a dancer's movements.

When he wrote, he was not trying to replicate something that was already there, he was writing to hear what he heard while he wrote. I am not trying to laud Kafka for his novelty. There is a definite divide between Kafka and other authors, and that is what I am trying to capture. But, because I grew up reading the writings of these other authors, I am unable to do so completely. Even so, I sometimes feel a sense of certainty

approach, but, like the elusive enlightenment that Dōgen spoke of (or so they say), it quickly slips out of reach. Many athletes speak of the same thing; after countless hours of practice, they have an epiphany, a certainty that “this is it!” which then immediately slips away.

Kafka, too, writes in some places in his diary that things have been progressing well in the last few days. Lately, however, I have begun to think that the issue is not whether or not things are progressing well. Every day, be it in the form of stories, letters, or his diary, Kafka kept rattling his words. Like the athletes practicing or Dōgen meditating, he kept on going, seeking that precious, special moment.

The prevailing world view holds that it is through the special achievements these special people left behind that we can know the time and effort they put in to get there. Without evidence of such special achievements, the vast amount of time involved in making them go unknown to anyone, lost to the fog of history. I think this world view is fundamentally wrong, and has pushed human perception in a regrettable direction.

Perhaps the reason I started thinking this way is because I’ve spent a lot of time caring for cats in and around my house. People might leave something behind, but cats certainly do not. I rejected all those who took pride in the history of humankind, even though they themselves had never achieved anything, and, as a result, ended up rejecting myself. But in 2003, when the cats, once so young and healthy and easy to deal with, were getting old, and their health started to deteriorate. And I, their caretaker, found that even I rarely produced any notable results, and that most of my efforts came to nothing. But rather than lament the fruitlessness of my labors, all I could do was press on and think of the next step.

The least visible aspect of a novel is the process of its making. With music and dancing, you can witness the final work take form through rehearsals, and while the performers may slip up here and there during the performance, both the creators and the audience concede that such things happen. As for paintings, the process of paint being applied to a canvas can be recorded on video for anyone to see, and with the order in which colors are layered on the canvas and the movements of the brush thus laid bare, it is no hard feat even for those who do not paint to look at a completed painting and imagine the process of its making. In a way, a painting is a trace left by the artist’s hand movements.

As an author, I find novels to be the most distant artform. That is to say, had I considered novels only in the context of novels and nothing else, I would probably have thought nothing more of them than whether they were well-written or not. To me, the thrill of listening to music, watching a dance, or looking at a painting is far greater than that of reading a novel, and rather than the finished work, I am fascinated by the process by which it was created.

When a work is already complete, the process by which it was created is just that—a “making of,” if you will. But for the person actually creating something, it is a process that may never be completed. I’m sure most people have tried their hand at writing a novel, only to give up along the way. Before you can make your debut as an author, you must pass that first trial by fire, namely completing a novel—writing it until the end.

Even after an author has written a novel until the end, repeated the process a number of times and successfully made their debut, they still live with the worry that they may not be able to write the next one until the end. A lot of people probably think that authors have discovered the trick to completing a novel, when the truth is that authors have simply gotten used to the process of constructing a novel backward from the ending, to keep the plot from falling apart.

Here I am sure many would say, “Isn’t that the trick to finishing a novel, then?” It is not. In fact, the phrase “the trick to completing a novel” as I’ve used it here contradicts the conception I have of what it is to write a novel. In my mind, to “complete” means to start writing and keep moving forward, while the “trick” means to abandon that unrefined way of writing and instead meticulously plot and construct the novel with a clear ending in mind. I ended up making a fool of myself by borrowing a stock phrase without giving any thought to its meaning. As a result I was stuck after the last paragraph for a day and a half.

The idea of writing a novel one word at a time, constantly moving forward without planning the ending in advance, once again brings us back to Kafka, which is fine by me. Seeing a text only once might be sufficient for a computer to memorize it, but the human brain is a part of the body, and therefore requires repeated input to remember all the words. And even then, the word “input” itself brings computers to mind.

In the act of writing a novel, writing without planning the ending in advance, with the uncertainty of not knowing whether or not the novel will be completed, is on a

whole other level than planning. Without concern for whether the novel will eventually be completed, this style of writing takes the act of writing novels back to its roots, diffusing the essence of the novel into the act of writing, transforming the “novel” into the act of “writing” itself.

Art transcends form. One day, a guitarist and a saxophonist found themselves in the same room, and ended up jamming together long into the evening, making it up as they played. When one of their friends heard about it the next day, he simply said, “That’s great. I wish I could’ve been there.” And isn’t that enough?

If a friend said to me, “Yesterday, I spent the whole day writing,” I would reply, “That’s great. Gotta love days like those.”

Considered in the light of the guitarist and the saxophonist jamming together all day, the idea that you could treat writing in the same way doesn’t seem altogether unreasonable. Slightly simplified, you could say that is exactly what Kafka did.

By writing in the same way musicians play their instruments or dancers dance, the act of writing is finally liberated from the rule of the conception that words merely record events, and can move freely.

We believe that the world only knows that Kafka wrote because his friend Max Brod didn’t burn his manuscripts, even though that was what Kafka wanted. This belief is mistaken.

What I’m saying is that even if Max Brod had burned the manuscripts written by Kafka, so that nothing Kafka wrote ever made it out into circulation, the world would still have known Kafka eventually.

How can that be possible? Because writing isn’t about completing and leaving something behind, but the act itself.

By obsessing over completing a work for posterity, we allow the words to rule us. In the end, our oppressor is not a person or organization exercising its power, but the written word itself. As such, the “leadership” mentioned in *The Great Wall of China* may be referring to the written word. This is not so much my interpretation of the story as an unnameable feeling I got while reading it. To master the written word is to be fettered by its norms, like constructing a panopticon within oneself. It may sound a bit overblown, but that is how I feel. All your actions are limited by that scope.

There are many arts of which only the results (form) remains, while the current level

of skill falls short of the artisans of the past—celadon pottery, *raden* inlaying, Japanese swordsmithing, Meissen porcelain, Jumeau dolls, and so on. We fail to reach the heights of the past not because these arts were mastered by unparalleled geniuses, but because in our admiration of the form, we lost sight of the process. In a sense, I think pushing an art to greater heights is a step in the wrong direction for the art as a process. It is no coincidence that groups of highly skilled artisans enjoyed the protection of kings and emperors. Maybe what these arts would have needed to continue existing as processes was to stay moderately impressive, without producing the beautiful results that dazzle us to this day.

Perhaps moving steadily sideward (as one would write steadily forward when writing a novel), before being refined and concentrated into a result (form), is what art is all about. The guitarist and the saxophonist I mentioned before were Derek Bailey and Steve Lacy, whose freeform, discursive musical style I still only rarely find myself able to approach with the right mindset. But who knows, if I can learn to listen to their music in a more natural manner, then maybe I can learn how to set my words free, letting them disperse like mist in the light of dawn.

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