

Beyond Words – Paperback Preface

I dislike the saying “You know, novelists are master wordsmiths.” It gives far too little concern to things like the restrictive and coercive powers of words, or their power to exclude what lies beyond the things they name.

Recently, for a number of reasons, I’ve been thinking back a lot on the period from when I attended kindergarten to around the time of my adolescence, and when memories of certain associations with words come back to me, it feels like my body, which had been moving freely, starts to resist, as if hands were being placed on my shoulders and they were being held down forcibly.

Are the notions that *If we didn’t have words, we couldn’t communicate* and *If we didn’t have words, we couldn’t leave anything behind* even correct in the first place? Ever since I was a child, when I’m speaking as well as I know how, people have told me to “Speak in a way that’s easier to understand.” That doesn’t make sense. I’ve given it my all, using my entire body to produce what I want to communicate with my words, my voice, and my actions. Why does the other person respond by saying they “do/don’t understand” as if they’re arrogantly judging the person before them? Just as you don’t say “Show me in a way that’s easier to understand” when something is happening before your eyes or when a landscape stretches out in front of you, a person who is putting all their effort into trying to communicate is a phenomenon in itself. You don’t understand phenomena; you observe them and record them in your memory.

When a novelist writes a novel, the premise is that the novel teaches them that experiences such as “understanding” and “knowing” are superficial things which only use part of the human brain. If they were to write novels with this as their only objective, the novels would be awfully petty, but because it’s assumed, even if you try to explain a novel you’ve finished reading in words, it becomes something completely different.

The sounds a musical instrument makes, the lines and colours of a painting, the texture of the material used in a sculpture, the movements of a dance and the physique of the dancers. This is what words are to novels; they’re not there to explain or convey something. Well, I guess it’s impossible to say that they lack that function completely, but one of the ideals I imagine is that there’s a gooey body of air about the size of a balloon that I’m currently holding in my both my hands, and I’m attempting to rotate it slowly with both my

hands and knead it to change its shape. When I do this, another relatively similar gooey body of air which another person is holding in both of their hands rotates and changes shape in a similar way to what I'm doing with a slight time lag...

No, this won't work – it makes it sound like a new religious sect. I do something myself, and something which at first seems unrelated to what I'm doing, which seems to have no corresponding relationship, happens inside the reader's mind.

I wrote about *Glorious Days* in this book, but when I read Nobuo Kojima's novels, especially *Allegory*, I experienced an intense emotional uplifting and I wanted to hurl the book away and break into a run. In *Allegory*, the words on the page go beyond the narrow functions of communication and explanation; they surge with a power which rings out with the sound of anarchy.

This is how Kafka's novels were written in the first place. When you take your eyes off his series of sentences, you can interpret them as “anxiety lurking deep within the hearts of modern people, and so on,” and “every nook and cranny of modern society being controlled by bureaucratic organisations, et cetera,” but while you're reading them, it's not this they communicate; the first thing Kafka tells us is how thrilling and delightful it is to read as if you were his co-writer, as if you're the one writing.

Kafka himself probably didn't write like this intentionally. Or rather, I don't think Kafka had any sort of “intention”. A certain opening scene would come to mind, and Kafka would simply write without knowing himself how far ahead the sentences, characters, spaces, and thoughts would advance, and that's why the amazing thing about novels and pieces written in this manner is that they end where Kafka the writer feels he can't go any further. Fortunately, there are some novels which do finally reach the end, but for Kafka, writing until something was finished was not the ultimate goal, so the reader doesn't have to go along with calculations based on the writer's obligations to “complete this novel” and to “leave it like this, rather than doing that, to complete this novel (and prevent myself from getting stuck partway through).” That's why you can't memorize the storyline of Kafka's novels.

Naturally, the reason why *The Metamorphosis* is the most widely read of Kafka's novels is probably that the story, in which the protagonist transforms into an insect, is easy to understand, easy to communicate to people, and shocking, but it may also be in large part because it's a novel with a storyline that can be memorized, which is unusual for Kafka.

Even if you read something like *The Castle* two or three times, you're left with almost

no mental orientation of the story – a sense that this sort of thing was written at around this point in the book, and it was followed by that sort of thing - like you would usually have to some extent after you'd finished reading a regular novel. "Orientation" refers to the most fundamental grasp of one's situation – what day, month, and year it is today, and where you are right now – but if you expand this to include the ability to have an overview of a work, readers who "want to know" and "want to understand" attempt to get an bird's-eye view of the work, but Kafka himself is completely lacking in this ability to look down.

Kafka, the writer, doesn't actively approach his work from an overarching viewpoint. In other words, those who interpreted it as "anxiety lurking deep within the hearts of modern people, and so on" – how should I put it? – they weren't completely off the mark in this respect, and the critics who got the message from the series of sentences not to read it from an overarching viewpoint couldn't help but be anxious, but so long as the reader is a critic, isn't the fact that the writer doesn't actively approach his work in progress from a panoramic point of view a serious issue which changes what we think of him as a writer?

Could the assumptions that the author has a blueprint of what they are going to write and that they actively change it as required through the writing process be even more essential to the readers' image of the author than to that of the creators? The author has the deepest understanding of the work. It's best to ask the author about the work. Could this stable author/work image be more essential for the reader than having a protagonist at the centre of the novel?

This becomes quite obvious when you put yourself in the reader's shoes, but in both novels and films, I can't overstress the weight of the psychological burden when the introduction doesn't explain much about the fictional universe. If there's no guarantee that you will eventually see the fictional universe you are entering clearly like the author does, crossing the threshold can be painful.

For example, I wonder if, after reading it, there is anyone who can explain how and where the story at the beginning of the relatively long fragment called *At the Construction of the Great Wall of China* - which is not exactly incomplete but which Kafka stopped writing before he reached the end and which begins with a description of the construction of the ramparts of the Great Wall of China - changed and ended up becoming toward the end a story about an emperor living in Peking and about "you" sitting by the window, waiting for a messenger sent by that emperor. Surely nobody can. First and foremost, I don't even

remember the conclusion – or rather, the final part where he gave up writing - of this story. Somehow, this story continues after the tale of the emperor’s messenger and becomes a story about the narrator’s father.

If the reader starts describing their interpretation by saying “To sum it up, *The Great Wall of China* is ...” despite the fact that they can’t recite the storyline after reading it, doesn’t it mean that they’ve avoided the movement of this story? Readers who say things like this want to behave actively toward the work. This is based on the premise of an author-work image in which the author behaved actively toward the work, but speaking from a broader perspective, this was how people in the 19th and 20th centuries behaved toward the world: the idea that humans should be active toward works of art in the same way that they are active toward the world; that humans control both the world and works of art, and they must not allow themselves to be swayed this way and that by either of them.

Kafka really is an extraordinary person, or rather, writer. When you read the letters he wrote to Felice and Milena, Kafka was a torrent of words. If converted to manuscript paper, he wrote the equivalent of ten to twenty pages each night, almost on a nightly basis. I don’t know how many days he wrote both letters and novels, but he also wrote diaries in addition to that. Although I’m calling them diaries, he didn’t include many factual elements about his daily life, and there were many fragments of novels, and in Kafka’s case, the distinction between what was diary and what was novel is almost irrelevant; he simply wrote.

Kafka called his own works “documents” rather than “works” or “novels”, and he called writing “scratching”, as in scratch marks, rather than “writing”. What I mean to say is that Kafka made words sing and used words to make beats rather than writing. His works were traces and vestiges. They’re like the afterimage of a dancer.

He didn’t recreate something that had happened before he wrote; he wrote so that he could hear the things that became audible to him as he wrote. I’m not trying to insist on Kafka’s “novelty”. Kafka is decisively disconnected from other writers. That’s what I want to capture, but I grew up reading the sentences of writers other than Kafka myself, so I can’t fully grasp it. Even so, I occasionally feel a definite tug, but it slips away immediately like the enlightenment Dōgen (apparently) spoke of. Athletes say the same thing. They practise again and again, and at some point, they feel that “This is it!” but it recedes immediately.

When you read Kafka’s diaries, in some passages, he writes, “Things have been

coming along well these past few days.” However, lately I’ve started to think that things coming along well is not the point. It’s the fact that day after day, whether it was novels or letters or diaries, Kafka simply continued to make words sing. It’s devoting yourself wholeheartedly to moving toward that special moment, just like athletes practise again and again, and in the same way that Dōgen devoted himself to Zen meditation.

The extraordinary accomplishments of these remarkable people teach us the amount of time and the accumulation of acts required to attain them. If extraordinary accomplishments were not left behind, they would disappear into the darkness of time without anyone knowing the enormous amount of time it takes to reach them (to surround them). Could this view of the world be mistaken in the first place and have led people’s perception in foolish directions?

I may have started thinking this way because I have devoted all my time to taking care of cats inside and outside of my house. People may leave something behind, but cats do not. That’s part of the reason too. Or rather, it was at first. I boasted about things I didn’t even do myself as “the history of mankind” and drove away people who didn’t accomplish anything. As a result, I forced myself out. However, the cats, which were all young and healthy and didn’t take much looking after in 2003, started suffering from various ailments as they aged. It was extremely unlikely that I, looking after them, would achieve visible results, and most of my efforts produced no results, but rather than leisurely lamenting that fact, I had to think about what to do next.

The process by which novels are created is the most difficult thing to see. You can see music and dances taking shape at rehearsals, and even though mistakes are made at public performances, both the creator and the audience understand that this is the nature of a piece of work. For paintings, if the process of colour being applied to a canvas is recorded as an image, anyone can see it, and when you look at a completed painting, the order in which the colours are layered and the brushstrokes are visible, enabling those who don’t paint to imagine the process by which pictures are painted. What I mean to say is that paintings are vestiges of the movement of hands.

As an author, I’m not sure if I should say that novels feel the most alien to me, but if I’m only thinking about their content, I may indeed have thought solely in terms of “well-written novels and poorly-written novels”. For me, the stimulus created by connecting with music, dance and paintings was bigger than the stimulus created by reading a novel; from the

outset, I was more interested in the process by which that “stimulus” is created than by the completed state.

In the case of a completed work, the creation process is literally “the process by which it is created”, but for the person who is actually creating it, the creation process is “a process which may not be completed.” Everyone must have experienced abandoning a book they started writing partway through without completing it, and the first hurdle an aspiring writer must clear before making their debut as a novelist is completing their work; writing it to the very end.

They write their work to the end for the first time, repeat this process several times, and make their debut as a novelist. Even after they make their debut, they remain anxious for a while that they “might not finish writing.” Many people probably think that novelists have “learned the secret to completing their writing.” However, it’s not actually “the secret to completing writing”; they’ve simply grown accustomed to the obligatory process of constructing a work by working backwards from the conclusion so that it doesn’t collapse.

Many people will probably ask whether that isn’t ultimately the “secret to completing writing,” but it’s not. For a start, the phrase I used, “the secret to completing writing”, contradicts my idea of writing a novel. “Completing writing” means to start writing and be intent on continuing to move forward, and “secret” refers to a process based on working backwards and constructing, rather than this clumsy, incompetent method. I’m the only one saying this sort of thing, so I inadvertently slipped into using a ready-made word like “do” again, and I found myself in deep trouble for a while. That’s why there was a delay of a day and a half from the previous paragraph to this point.

Writing a novel by devoting oneself solely to moving forward rather than working backwards from the conclusion brings me back to Kafka again, but I don’t mind at all. The notion that words can be communicated by writing them once suggests the concept of them being recorded by a computer, and because humans’ brains are a part of their bodies, the word “write,” in which something won’t be stored unless it is repeated many times, gives the idea of entering them into a computer as it is.

When it comes to the act of writing a novel, devoting yourself to moving forward alongside the uncertainty that you “might not finish it” without first deciding how the work will end is on a completely different level to writing backwards, and eventually it renders the issue of final form irrelevant and restores the novel to the act of “writing,” or rather diffuses it

within the act of “writing,” or perhaps I should say makes it the act of “writing” itself.

It is not a matter of form anymore. One day, a guitar player and a soprano sax player happened to be in the same room, and for the entire day from dawn until dusk they improvised back and forth. A friend who learned of this the next day says, “How nice. I wish I’d been there too.” You don’t need anything more than that.

My friend tells me, “I worked on my novel all day yesterday,” and I say, “Oh, that’s great. Days like that are good, aren’t they?”

If you think in terms of the day the guitar player and the soprano sax player improvised back and forth, it’s not altogether impossible to imagine writing a novel like this. Or rather, if you simplify what Kafka did, isn’t this it?

Writing like a musician plays an instrument, or like a dancer dances. The act of writing, which had been governed by “recording”, finally escapes these restraints and moves around freely. What I mean to say is that it’s not true that we only know that Kafka wrote because his friend Max Brod betrayed Kafka’s wishes and kept his manuscripts instead of burning them.

Even if Max Brod had burned Kafka’s manuscripts and nothing Kafka wrote had spread out into the world, the world would have known of Kafka someday.

Why is something like this possible? Because writing is not about completing something and leaving it behind; it’s about the act.

By being hung up on perfecting and leaving something behind, you get caught in a trap of words. The governor isn’t the people or organizations that exercise authority and political power; it is the words themselves. That’s why the ‘supreme leadership’ described in *At the Construction of the Great Wall of China* might just be the words themselves. It’s the unnameable sense of reality you get as you read them, rather than an interpretation. It might be an exaggeration to say that having a thorough knowledge of words binds you rigidly to their standards and ends up creating Foucault’s panopticon (a one-way surveillance system) inside your own body, but I certainly feel this. The subjects are limited to what lies within that sphere.

There are many crafts which are no longer what they once were, and only examples (form) of former techniques are left behind. Celadon porcelain, mother-of-pearl, Japanese swords, Meissen porcelain, Jumeau dolls... these skills can never be mastered again, not because those who mastered them were gifted, but rather because we were under the

mistaken impression that they were form. Or actually, it is possible that skills which reached certain levels were misunderstood as skills that could be mastered through practice. It is by no means a coincidence that groups with advanced techniques were offered protection by kings and emperors. In order for techniques to always continue as acts, don't they need to continue to be moderate without being seduced by beauty?

I mean, isn't it the nature of techniques to keep evolving (or, in the case of novels, to keep being written) before being refined and condensed into beauty (form)? The guitar and soprano sax players I mentioned before were Derek Bailey and Steve Lacy, and I'm still only occasionally able to tune in properly and experience the sensation of floating and the whimsical feeling of playing like a child in their performance, but as I get better at listening to their performance more spontaneously, I think I'll be able to employ words in a way that makes them vanish like mist while I watch the natural world.

Autumn, 2012

Kazushi Hosaka