

Beyond Words – Foreword to the Paperback Edition

I don't like when people speak of writers as having some sort of mastery over words. That notion glosses over the power of language to, among other things, constrain, compel, or exclude anything beyond what is explicitly put into words.

For various reasons, lately I have often found myself thinking back on my life from early childhood to adolescence. When I recall that relationship with language, the reaction is physical, as if my body is resisting a hand that had suddenly been placed upon my shoulder, pinning me down against my will.

To begin with, do we really need words in order to convey, or to create something that will outlast us? Since I was a child, despite trying my best when speaking I've often been told to make myself "easier to understand." What nonsense. There I would be, exerting every effort, using my entire body to convey my thoughts through words, sounds, and gestures. Why does the listener then get to judge from on high whether I am worthy of understanding?

When we witness something happening, or scenery unfolding before our eyes, no one demands a second take that's easier to understand. In the same way, the person doing their best to communicate is in themselves the phenomenon, to be witnessed and etched in memory rather than understood.

A writer of fiction knows that, when it comes to novels, "understanding" or "comprehension" are no more than trivial considerations in the back of the mind. This much is in the novelist's DNA, a prerequisite of the job. If we wrote fiction solely for such purposes, literature would be a meagre thing indeed. This precondition also means that any attempt to describe a book you have read is bound to miss the novel's essence entirely.

Words in a novel are as lines and colours in a painting, the sounds of instruments in a symphony, the texture and form of a sculpture's material, the movements of a dancer's body. They do not exist to explain or impart. Alright, it might not be possible to claim that words lack this function altogether, but here is an ideal I have in mind:

In my hands I hold a balloon-sized orb of viscous gas that I gently try to turn and mould into shape. Then, across some span of time, another person holds in their hands a substance of similar consistency, which turns and transforms in much the same way as mine...

Hang on, that's sounding a little too cultish. The point is that I do something on my end, but that something seems to have no immediate relation, no correspondence, with what happens inside the reader's mind.

In this book I write about Nobuo Kojima's *Uruwashiki Hibi* (Beauteous Days), but of all his novels it was *Gūwa* (Fables) which brought such a surge of exhilaration that I wanted to hurl the book and dash outside. The written words that form the language of *Gūwa* transcend the narrow function of conveying or explaining, instead roiling with a power that makes the bells of anarchy toll.

It was Kafka who once wrote such novels. Our interpretations of his texts, about "the anxieties lurking within the modern psyche" or "the bureaucracy ruling every corner of modern society," are what we come away with after closing the covers on Kafka's passages, not what we feel in the midst of reading. Above all, Kafka shows us what a thrill and pleasure it is to read as though writing, as though we are joining him in the very act of writing.

I doubt Kafka himself wrote with such intent – or rather, he would not have written with anything like an intention at all. Starting with an initial scene, Kafka wrote to see how far the words, characters, spaces, and ideas emanating from that scene could be pushed, something he himself did not know. The striking thing about the novels and pieces so written by Kafka is that they end at the point where the writer felt he could go no further. While some of his novels are fortunate enough to find their way to an ending, for Kafka writing to a conclusion was not an overriding concern. This spares his readers from being subjected to the calculations that writers usually feel obliged to perform: "I have to finish this novel, and to finish this novel (to make sure it doesn't stall mid-stream), at this point I should do A instead of B." It's also the reason why you can't remember the plot of a Kafka novel.

I dare say that *The Metamorphosis* is Kafka's most widely read work not only because of its protagonist's transformation into an insect, which is both captivating and accessible to readers, but also thanks to a memorable plot that spans the entire book, an exception among Kafka novels.

For a work like *The Castle*, even after two or three read-throughs we are left with precious little to orient us within the book's content – namely, a rough idea of how things fit and follow each other – which we would expect to possess in some degree after finishing a regular novel. Orientation is our most basic grasp of a situation, the awareness of where you are right now on this day, this month, this year. Stretching this faculty across a work of literature, the avid reader

tries to see the bigger picture; unfortunately, this is a perspective that Kafka himself simply did not have.

As a writer, Kafka did not actively approach his works with an all-encompassing view. To look at it another way, the person who reads these works as being about “the anxieties lurking within the modern psyche” is not entirely off the mark, for “anxiety” would well describe the state of critics who hear the text’s call not to be read from such a lofty perspective. More than an ordinary reader, wouldn’t the critic feel their image of what an author should be profoundly shaken on finding that a writer doesn’t work with a sweeping view of their creation?

The concept of an author holding blueprints for the book they are about to write, and actively adjusting those plans as necessary throughout the writing process, was surely more important for audiences than creators. The steadfast notion that the author of a work best understands its meaning, and is its ultimate point of reference, may have been more essential for readers than having a protagonist at the novel’s core.

From the reader’s perspective, I can understand that. Whether in novel or film, the introductory sections are the most mentally taxing, so to speak, as we try to figure out the workings of their fictional worlds. As readers, we expect at some point to see this unfolding universe with the same clarity as its creator; without that guarantee, our initial efforts come to feel like fruitless toil.

Take, for example, the opening of Kafka’s *The Great Wall of China*, which is not so much an unfinished novel as a rather long fragment abandoned before reaching a conclusion. Is anyone able to explain how the story, which begins with a description of the Great Wall of China under construction, manages to near its ending with “you” sitting by the window waiting for a messenger from the emperor in Beijing? Surely not. I don’t even remember how the narrative concluded, or rather, where Kafka left it. Inexplicably, the story doesn’t end with the emperor’s messenger, but carries on to talk about the narrator’s father.

If, despite being unable to recount the plot, a reader starts giving their take on what it says about the Great Wall of China, aren’t they ignoring the story’s progression? Such a reader is trying to actively engage with the work, based on their assumption that the author did likewise. In a broader sense, this was the way that humankind engaged with the world in the 19th and 20th centuries. Just as human beings are active agents in the world, the thinking went, so too should they engage actively with works of art; people should be in control of both artworks and the wider world, rather than allow either to hold sway over us.

Kafka was a truly remarkable individual, at least as a writer. His letters to both Felice and Milena reveal him to be a torrent of words. Almost nightly, he would write letters that might run to a dozen or more pages, and there's no telling how often he combined letter-writing days with work on his novels. On top of this he also kept diaries, albeit filled mostly with story fragments and few records of daily life. In Kafka's case, the distinction between journal and fiction was largely irrelevant – he simply wrote.

I recall that Kafka referred to his compositions not as “works” or “novels” but as “manuscripts,” and to the act of writing as “scribbling,” making scratches on the page. In other words, Kafka did not so much write as let the words ring out, pulsing with the rhythm of the language. His writings were the traces or vestiges of that process, akin to the afterglow of a dancer's movement. Kafka wrote not to reproduce some vision that existed before putting pen to paper, but to listen to that which only made itself heard through writing.

I'm not trying to talk up Kafka's novelty, but there is a definite gap between Kafka and other writers. This is what I hope to grasp. Having grown up reading the prose of those other writers, however, I find it ever elusive. Occasionally I find myself on the verge of something almost concrete but, like the state of enlightenment as (allegedly) described by Dōgen, it moves quickly beyond reach. Athletes speak of a similar sensation – practice upon practice one day brings them to a “Eureka!” moment that all too quickly slips away.

Similarly, on several occasions in Kafka's diaries he mentions “making good progress of late.” But the crucial point, I have recently come to believe, is not the progress; it lies in the fact that, whether as novels, letters, or diaries, Kafka's pen continued to etch out words day after day, chasing that elusive moment with the single-minded dedication of an athlete in training, or Dōgen during Zen meditation.

It is through the extraordinary achievements of these extraordinary individuals that we learn how much time and effort lies behind them. Some may also believe that in the absence of said achievements, this tremendous outlay vanishes, in complete obscurity, into the shadows of history. Surely such a view of the world is not only mistaken, but also detrimental to human understanding.

Perhaps I have come to think this way on account of spending my days taking care of the cats in and around my home. After all, while people may create something lasting, the same cannot be said of cats. That was part of it, at least in the beginning. We extol work we had no hand in

as “humanity’s heritage,” while condemning those who accomplish nothing. In the process, we condemn ourselves. For the sprightly young cats who had little need of me back in 2003, age has brought all manner of ailments. As their carer, I’ve very rarely accomplished anything tangible; most of my efforts have yielded little, but rather than wallow in that lack of output I need to keep figuring out how to move forward.

More than any other form, literature withholds its creative processes. Music and dance can be seen taking shape through rehearsals, with both artists and audiences accepting any missteps or wrong notes in the final performance as part of a work of art. Similarly, a painter’s work can be shared with anyone by simply filming the process of a canvas being transformed, while a finished painting reveals the brush strokes and layering of colours, giving even the uninitiated some idea of how it was created. A painting is, after all, a chronicle of hand movements.

One might say that as a novelist I have a particularly strained relationship with literature. If I thought about literature solely on its own terms, perhaps I might have viewed it simply in terms of “the good novels and the not-so-good.” Yet I found that music, dance, or paintings offered me greater stimulation than reading fiction, and that stimulation stemmed from being interested more in the process of creation than the finished pieces.

It’s easy to speak of a “process of creation” when a completed work has already been created, but for those engaged in the process it may be something of a “perpetual work in progress.” I suspect all of us have had the experience of abandoning a story midway through writing, never to finish; indeed, the first hurdle that any aspiring author must clear is seeing a work through to completion.

Only by writing a story to completion, then repeating that process several times, does one become a novelist. Yet even after making their debut, a novelist will for some time live with the fear of not being able to perform the feat again. Many people will assume that novelists have “cracked the code” or mastered the art of seeing a story through to completion. In reality, this simply means accepting the necessary evil of constructing a novel by working backwards from the ending to ensure it doesn’t fall apart.

But then, some might say, isn’t that the secret behind writing to completion? Not so. To begin with, that very idea contradicts the way I view story-writing. For me, “writing to completion” means always moving forward, whereas the “secret” refers to abandoning this crude, unproductive approach and constructing stories by working in reverse. Since no one else has said this in so many words, I again found myself in up to my neck when trying to reach for a

handy ready-made phrase, so that getting here from the previous paragraph took me a full day and a half.

To talk about novel-writing as a constant forward motion, as opposed to working backwards from an ending, we once more return to Kafka, which I'm happy to do time and again. The idea that writing something once is enough might make sense in terms of recording something on a computer, but to store a concept in a flesh-and-blood human brain requires repetition (even if the word "store" likely conjures up images of a digital process).

Writing a novel by always moving forward, accompanied by the uncertain prospect of completion, is an undertaking of an entirely different dimension to working backwards from the ending. It frees us from the problem of a finished form, restoring literature to an act of writing, allowing it to flourish within the act of writing, to become the act of writing itself.

Now we're no longer talking about form. A certain guitarist and a soprano saxophone player once spent a day jamming together in the same room, improvising back and forth from morning till night. Upon hearing about it the following day, a friend of the pair remarked, "Oh man, I wish I could have been there."

Isn't that how it should be?

If we view story-writing through the lens of that guitarist and saxophonist's improvised day-long jam, the following scene comes to seem not entirely far-fetched: when a friend says he spent all of yesterday writing a novel, you respond, "Oh nice, what a great way to spend the day."

Indeed, it seems to distil the essence of what Kafka was doing – writing as the musician plays his instrument, as the dancer dances. The act of writing, long the servant of "record-keeping," finally casts off its shackles and runs free.

What I mean to say is: the idea that we only know of Kafka's writing thanks to his friend Max Brod, who defied the author's wishes by not burning his manuscripts, is mistaken. Even if Brod had torched those manuscripts and stopped Kafka's writing from ever flowing out into the universe, the world would someday have come to know Kafka. How is that possible? Because writing is not the completion of works for posterity, but an act.

By fixating on completion we become ensnared in language, subservient not to individuals or organizations who wield power and authority, but to words. Perhaps the "leadership" Kafka refers to in *The Great Wall of China* is language itself. This is not my interpretation, but rather an indefinable realization that dawned on me in the midst of reading. While it may be going

too far to claim that acquainting yourself with language means becoming bound by its norms – erecting Foucault's panopticon within yourself – that is certainly the way I feel. Any entity is but the product of its surroundings.

Countless bygone crafts – celadon pottery, *raden* pearl inlays, Japanese swords, Meissen porcelain, Jumeau dolls – endure only through their tangible products, while the actual skills involved fade away. We view them falsely as objects, rather than as pinnacles of talent that will never again be attained.

More to the point, it strikes me that by reaching such lofty heights, these crafts were undermined as activities. It was certainly no coincidence that outstanding craftsmen enjoyed the patronage of kings and emperors. For these crafts to continue being practised, they may have done well to avoid the trappings of aesthetics and remain more grounded, more down-to-earth.

That said, it is the nature of craft to keep branching outwards (or in the case of a novel-writing, keep moving forward) before being refined and restricted by form and aesthetics. The guitarist and soprano saxophonist I mentioned earlier were none other than Derek Bailey and Steve Lacy, performing together with the free-floating, wandering feel of a child at play. Even now, I rarely find myself able to tune into that wavelength when listening. If I could hear their music more naturally, I imagine, perhaps I might see the world more naturally too, and come to use language in a way that makes the words melt away.

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