

Carlos GAMERRO

Writing and the Body

Before getting started on writing and the body I'd like to say a couple of things about *reading* and the body. Vladimir Nabokov located the organ of aesthetic delight in those tiny little hairs at the back of our necks: when we read something really good they stand up, even against our will.

Alternatively, he offered the chill that runs down our spine. Allen Ginsberg suggested that a line of really good poetry alters the chemistry of our brain forever. "No iron can pierce the human heart as chillingly as a full spot put just at the right place," Isaac Babel famously said, famously quoted by Raymond Carver.

Nabokov didn't say, to my knowledge, where the organ of *perception* of bad writing resides—in my case, I suppose it is somewhere around the pit of my stomach: that sinking feeling is unmistakable. It's just as painful as eating bad food, and equally as lethal. Even reading something really good afterwards doesn't quite purge the sensation, just as treating yourself to a gourmet dinner after eating junk food won't save you from gastric despair.

The thing is that we read with all of our bodies, not just our minds, or even our minds and hearts—we read with mouth, stomach, thighs, genitals, fingernails. Every one of our cells is involved in the process not only of enjoyment and appreciation, but also of understanding: meaning explodes within us, expands our solar plexus; not "getting it" brings us down, like a miserably wet day or a bout of depression.

This may be one of the reasons why, when I write fiction, I still put pen to paper. Watching, feeling the way the ink flows, the way the letters shape themselves, I can tell if one or another of the Muses are inhabiting my body or if they are away shopping somewhere. Even before I reread the sentences, even before I consider their meaning, the stroke tells me whether I'm in that world—the world of my characters, their language, their feelings—or still trapped within my own. But even better than strokes are sounds. In the final stages of correction I read my text out loud, into a tape recorder, and then listen to it. This is, somehow, the final test: many things that looked wonderful on the written page suck big time when read out loud. This led me to coin a useful maxim, at least for myself: whatever works on the written page will not necessarily work in an oral rendering, but whatever works orally will also work on the page. Literature began as recitation and music, and has never

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become quite divorced from it – we should remember that silent reading, reading without speaking out the words, had to be invented: in one of his essays, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges recalls a passage from St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, where the church Father remembers with perplexity how Bishop Ambrose would “gaze at the pages, penetrating their soul through their sense alone, without moving his tongue or uttering a sound.” Silent reading, the printing press and computers have somehow distanced reading and writing from the body, and might mislead us to believe reading and writing are primarily mental acts. They are not.

We associate certain writers with certain bodies: the starved prose of Kafka with tubercular emaciation, Hemingway’s muscular prose with buffalo hunting, Whitman’s exuberance with good health and lots of organic food and open air. But this might be misleading: after reading *Gargantua and Pantagruel* one can only imagine Rabelais as fat, but the existing portraits show a rather lean, scraggly type. There is nothing particularly emaciated about the prose of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, yet his biographer describes its dying author as a “tubercular skeleton.” And if a certain kind of writing comes from a certain kind of bodies, how many bodies must Shakespeare have had? All the bodies in the world. Perhaps it is better to think not of how the body affects writing, but of how writing affects the body: what virtual body or bodies the writers create for themselves, and for their readers, through the materiality of their style or styles.