

The Page

'I write in order to peruse myself'

Henri Michaux

1

I write . . .

I write: I write . . .

I write: 'I write . . . ?

I write that I write . . .

etc.

I write: I trace words on a page.

Letter by letter, a text forms, affirms itself, is confirmed, is frozen, is fixed:

a fairly strictly h

o
r
i
z
o
n
t
a
l

line is set down on the blank sheet of paper, blackens the virgin space, gives it a direction, vectorizes it: from left to right

f
r
o
m

Or again:

*In Paris, there is a street;
in that street, there is a house;
in that house, there is a staircase;
on that staircase, there is a room;
in that room, there is a table;
on that table, there is a cloth;
on that cloth, there is a cage;
in that cage, there is a nest;
in that nest, there is an egg;
in that egg, there is a bird.*

*The bird knocked the egg over;
the egg knocked the nest over;
the nest knocked the cage over;
the cage knocked the cloth over;
the cloth knocked the table over;
the table knocked the room over;
the room knocked the staircase over;
the staircase knocked the house over;
the house knocked the street over;
the street knocked the town of Paris over.*

Children's song from Les Deux-Sèvres
(Paul Eluard, *Poésie involontaire*
et poésie intentionnelle)

t
o
p
t
o
b
o
t
t
o
m

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso.

2

The space of a sheet of paper (regulation international size, as used in Government departments, on sale at all stationers) measures 623.7 sq. cm. You have to write a little over sixteen pages to take up one square metre. Assuming the average format of a book to be 21 by 29.7 cm, you could, if you were to pull apart all the printed books kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale and spread the pages carefully out one beside the other, cover the whole, either of the island of St Helena or of Lake Trasimeno.

You could also work out the number of hectares of forest that have had to be felled in order to produce the paper needed to print the works of Alexandre Dumas (*père*), who, it will be remembered, had a tower built each stone of which had the title of one of his books engraved on it.

3

I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it.
I incite *blanks*, *spaces* (jumps in the meaning: discontinuities, transitions, changes of key).

I write
in the
margin

I start a new

paragraph. I refer to a footnote¹

I go to a new sheet of paper.

1. I am very fond of footnotes at the bottom of the page, even if I don't have anything in particular to clarify there.

There are few events which don't leave a written trace at least. At one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper, the page of a notebook, or of a diary, or some other chance support (a Métro ticket, the margin of a newspaper, a cigarette packet, the back of an envelope etc.) on which, at varying speeds and by a different technique depending on the place, time or mood, one or another of the miscellaneous elements that comprise the everydayness of life comes to be inscribed. Where I'm concerned (but I'm no doubt too choice an example, writing being in fact one of my principal activities), this goes from an address caught in passing, an appointment noted down in haste, or the writing-out of a cheque, an envelope or a package, to the laborious drafting of an official letter, the tedious filling-in of a form (tax return, sickness note, direct debit for gas and electricity bills, subscription form, contract, lease, endorsement, receipt etc.), to a list of urgently needed supplies (coffee, sugar, cat litter, Baudrillard book, 75-watt bulb, batteries, underwear etc.), from the sometimes rather tricky solution to a Robert Scipion crossword to the fair copy of a finally completed text, from notes taken at some lecture or other to the instant scribbling-down of some device that may come in useful (verbal play, verbal ploy, play on letters, or what's commonly known as an 'idea'), from a piece of literary 'work' (writing, yes, sitting down at the table and writing, sitting at the typewriter and writing, writing right through the day, or right through the night, roughing out a plan, putting down capital *Is* and small *as*, drawing sketches, putting one word next to another, looking in a dictionary, recopying, rereading, crossing-out, throwing away, rewriting, sorting, rediscovering, waiting for it to come, trying to extract something that might resemble a text from something that continues to look like an insubstantial scrawl, getting there, not getting there, smiling (sometimes), etc.) to work full stop (elementary, alimentary): i.e. to ticking, in a journal containing a summary of almost all the others in the field of the life sciences, the titles that may be of interest to the research-

workers whose bibliographical documentation I am supposed to provide, filling in index-cards, assembling references, correcting proofs, etc.

Et cetera.

5

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?

Space as inventory, space as invention. Space begins with that model map in the old editions of the *Petit Larousse Illustré*, which used to represent something like 65 geographical terms in 60 sq. cm., miraculously brought together, deliberately abstract. Here is the desert, with its oasis, its wadi and its salt lake, here are the spring and the stream, the mountain torrent, the canal, the confluence, the river, the estuary, the river-mouth and the delta, here is the sea with its islands, its archipelago, its islets, its reefs, its shoals, its rocks, its offshore bar, and here are the strait, the isthmus and the peninsula, the bight and the narrows, and the gulf and the bay, and the cape and the inlet, and the head, and the promontory, here are the lagoon and the cliff, here are the dunes, here are the beach, and the saltwater lakes, and the marshes, here is the lake, and here are the mountains, the peak, the glacier, the volcano, the spur, the slope, the col, the gorge, here are the plain and the plateau, and the hillside and the hill, here is the town and its anchorage, and its harbour and its lighthouse . . .

Virtual space, a simple pretext for a nomenclature. But you don't even need to close your eyes for the space evoked by these words, a dictionary space only, a paper space, to become alive, to be

populated, to be filled: a long goods train drawn by a steam locomotive passes over a viaduct; barges laden with gravel ply the canals; small sailing boats manoeuvre on the lake; a big liner escorted by tugs enters the anchorage; children play ball on the beach; an Arab wearing a big straw hat trots down the shady paths of the oasis on his donkey . . .

The streets of the town are full of cars. A turbaned housewife is beating a carpet at her window. In small suburban plots, dozens of nurserymen are pruning fruit trees. A detachment of soldiers presents arms as an official wearing a tricolour sash unveils the statue of a general.

There are cows in the pasture, winegrowers in the vineyards, lumberjacks in the forests, climbers roped together in the mountains. A postman on his bicycle pedals laboriously up the hairpin bends of a lane. There are washerwomen beside the river, roadmen beside the roads, and farmers' wives feeding the hens. Rows of children are coming out in twos into the school yard. A *fin-de-siècle* villa stands all on its own surrounded by tall glass buildings. There are little gingham curtains in the windows, drinkers on the terraces of the cafés, a cat warming itself in the sun, a lady weighed down by parcels hailing a taxi, a sentry mounting guard in front of a public building. There are garbage-collectors filling refuse trucks, decorators putting up scaffolding. There are nannies in the squares, second-hand booksellers along the quays; there's a queue in front of the bakery, one gentleman walking his dog, another reading his newspaper sitting on a bench, another watching workmen demolishing a block of houses. There's a policeman controlling the traffic. There are birds in the trees, sailors on the river, fishermen on the embankment. There's a woman raising the iron shutter of her haberdashery. There are chestnut-vendors, sewer-men, newspaper-sellers. There are people doing their shopping.

Studious readers are reading in the libraries. Teachers are giving their lessons. Students are taking notes. Accountants are lining up

columns of figures. Apprentice pastry cooks are stuffing cream into rows of cream puffs. Pianists are playing their scales. Sitting deep in thought at their tables, writers are forming lines of words.

An idealized scene. Space as reassurance.