

Strange Ritual: The Shared World of Reading

A talk given at *By Leaves We Live*, 27th September, 2008, Scottish National Poetry Library.

When we walk across the threshold of a library such as this one, we walk into the midst of an ongoing conversation that has been going on for several thousand years. We are here today celebrating the continued relevance and power of a form of communication that is not innate to us in the way that language itself is, but which nevertheless has the power to move and inspire us.

The written word, as I say, is NOT innate. It is a learned faculty, and while there are many parts of the world where illiteracy is still the norm, there are few of us, barring pathology, who lack competence in our native languages. But, even with the communication tools our bodies provide us with, there is a question of trust. Even with the communication abilities we evolved to have, there can be doubt and confusion.

To illustrate this, I want to read a quotation from a book - "Strange Ritual" - by David Byrne, the singer with the band Talking Heads, (who incidentally, was born near Dundee) :

“We spend years learning how the wires are connected. We must eventually learn, by rote, that pulling on this particular string, as odd as it seems, will connote happiness, and this string, which our guts tell us denotes fear and anger, will, to the contrary, signal to the outside world a sense of well-being. I often sing with all my might, and I find that all I've accomplished is to convey a sense of energy being expended and a desperate need to communicate something. Often, no one is able to figure out exactly what it is I'm trying to communicate. I myself often feel that I've touched

something deep as my voice rises into a sudden, painful, sharp edge and I assume and hope that the exact same feelings are reconstructed inside the minds and hearts of the listeners, but it isn't always true. The audience often only watches in puzzlement as I produce a series of nonsensical, confusing, conflicting sounds that somehow they know denote intense emotional states, but they don't know which ones they are. Just like all our facial expressions, my strings are attached in all the wrong places.”

In different cultures, different gestures and objects have different values. You have probably seen the adverts for a worldwide bank that plays on their knowledge of these differences. One example is the reversal of the usual nodding/head-shaking gesture in Sri Lanka and Bulgaria. We mean to say one thing, pull on the wires, and end up saying something else.

The written word, by contrast, SEEMS on first glance to be the very model of clarity: it is black and white. David Byrne gives us an image of a physical puppet here, controlled by an inner homunculus who pulls at the strings to try to communicate to an outside world what he thinks and feels. How like bits of coiled string our letters are, and how like that puppeteer we are when we tap away at the keys of our keyboard. The written world is potentially no clearer than the world of expressive gesture that Byrne talks about. It is fluid, consensual, shared.

What we are walking into in that imagined library I mentioned earlier is of course not just a disquisition on the part of the authors, it is a conversation in which we take part as readers, and the reality of reading does not exist on the page itself, but in

the relationship between writers, readers and their medium.

When we think of the history of books, we are thinking of a circuit - a pathway - that connects those who take part, writers, readers and publishers, and over the hundreds of years of the printed word's history they have become a crucial part both of our consciousness and of the societies we live in.

One thing I think all the book artists here might share would be their willingness to enter into this conversation. They are willing participants in a field of human cognitive experience defined by reading in its various forms, visual, tactile, textual. It is, though, a world conjured from thin air.

From thin air? Is *that* why big libraries need specially strengthened floors?

Well, the books are just a means to an end. The book... is not the book. The book exists in your mind. The book exists between us.

When I see an artists' book, I see an artwork that issues a fitful promise to open the door to that world. Very often I am right, and there are pages and words and some kind of structure that takes place in the world of reading. Here there are often further augmentations where the images conveyed by the text are paralleled by visual images. There is counterplay and cross-fertilization and the world of reading is invaded by worlds of print and gesture and photography.

Sometimes the door to that shared world is opened through image alone: I read from one image to the next, across, through,

over the stretch of pages and back again. The book fuses into one object the play across several dimensions.

Other books are unique. They mark a special place on the globe of reading. This book is the only point at which this space unfolds. It is not possible to get there from anywhere else. More than other books, which in their multiplicity, could be simultaneously accessed all over the world, such unique works stand distinct from the reading experience we can have on the internet, whose spaces open up simultaneously from as many angles as there are viewers. But such unique books are still part of the promise of reading. The promise they make to us is that the way this object functions is - however obliquely - through reading.

Or elsewhere there is a withholding of reading, a promise made to be broken. The object is a book, it says. It takes up my attention and I engage with it, but it tells me that no, it isn't to be read. Sometimes the pages are glued shut. Sometimes the book threatens to explode when I open the pages. Or the book is encased in concrete or soaked in blood or radioactive or exists only as a string of sausages made up of the masticated remnants of its printed self. But their attraction to me is still because they claim the world proper to books. The play between me and these books features the shared world of reading as something beyond this experience, something which can't be reached. Perhaps, they say, those other books you've been reading don't get you any closer to other people either. Perhaps you need to look harder at those things you have taken for granted in that world you think you share.

Some - part - of the work of being an artist or a poet consists in trying to work with that process David Byrne described as "pulling on strings". Seeing what can and cannot be communicated, noticing that there ARE strings being pulled in the first place and trying to make other people see them too. Sometimes we want to try to go the edge of what can be

accomplished in the expressive forms open to us, whether these are physical, linguistic, printed or visual. What constitutes the end of what I can say, dance, write about? To limit the question to the expressive power of books alone, what are the limits of the book? The book is a trusted vessel that we have freighted with meaning, but there are things it cannot carry, and sometimes there are things it can say that seem to point to a world beyond reading, textual or visual.

We're lucky enough to have an exhibition featuring a copy of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, and the presence of that book makes me want to draw another comparison:

The shared world of reading is not identical to the ideal world contained, or rather invoked by Mallarmé's notion of *The Book*.

But they *are* in some ways similar.

Print's ability to render textual experiences reproducible multiplies the shareability of the author's world to include anyone literate with the wherewithal to access a copy (and libraries are great helpers in this project).

Mallarmé's project on the other hand, tries to assemble or perhaps discover *The Book* wherein a poetics is at work that can truly *be* - in some sense- the world; it enacts the ideal world through the constellation of the type that makes up its text. This is somewhat different from the idea of a shared, human world of reading which really requires us, as readers, to take an active part in its constitution. We must 'vote with our eyeballs' that the book is worth being shared. Mallarmé's conception is ideal, however; the book alone suffices.

Nevertheless, Mallarmé considered the reader's part to be of importance,

"Our consciousness... joins the book now here, now there, varies its melodies, guesses its riddles, and even re-creates it unaided."

Our work as readers, then, does two things-

First, it allows us to take from the essential components of the printed world, those components being the movable type alphabet that Marshall McLuhan tells us rendered the world reproducible and quantifiable, a starting point for our own relation to the book. In such a way we create the shared world of reading using the atomistic letters we use to describe it.

Secondly it allows us an approach, in Mallarmé's conception, to another, eternal version of the world, realized, likewise through typographic elements. If the alphabet itself is a sort of 'democratic multiple' to evoke just one of the many themes of the artists' book, then it, (the alphabet), and the Book (in capital letters) to which it belongs are the key to a poetic reality.