

SVEN BIRKERTS

Pensées

Reading Oneself

A former student asked if I would read her book manuscript and I agreed. I wanted to honor the friendship, the faith, all that work we had done together. She had been my student years ago, so many years that I can barely remember the rhythms of our correspondence or what kinds of things I was then commenting on, but I remember the feeling of the work clearly enough, and now she's brought it all around, finished she hopes. We meet in a Starbucks in Cambridge. She greets me clutching a big black cardboard box in both hands, and my first reaction is a suppressed wince. Before I've really even looked at her I've taken in the thickness of the box, I'm already wondering if it's packed to the top. "Oh, it's not all the way up to the top," she laughs. Have I given myself away? "No, no," I say. Then, a chuckle, "Think of *Moby Dick*." She sits down. We think of *Moby Dick*. I give her an inspecting look, tap my fingers on the lid of the box now between us on the table. We smile real smiles. All that work. "Hey," she says, taking off the lid. "I want you to see this." On top of the manuscript is an old college evaluation form--my final comments on our semester together. Typewritten. When M and I worked together I was still using a Selectric II. Seven or eight years, an era. She wants me to take out the page and read what I wrote. "This is what helped to keep me going," she says. I nod, but in truth I never believe anything I say can have that kind of effect on a person. But how wonderful if true. As I start to read, slowly, aware of her watching me, I'm also aware that I'm preemptively flexed against something. The return of my own rhetoric? I don't know. I work to connect with the slightly strange-looking typed sentences. And suddenly there's this feeling, I've had it before--more and more in recent years. I am reading something I've written and I not only don't recognize the sentences--they've gone from me--but I don't quite map to the mind that produced them. It's very much like catching your reflection for a split second in a store window before you realize it's you. Though there, almost always, the shock is negative. I look like that? With these sentences it's the opposite. My eyes catch sight of what my hand did. I actually admire the image, the figure of speech, the confidence of the rhythm. Not the rhythm I would write in now. But I feel it as distinct. And with that comes the dim--because still mainly suppressed--question: was I better then? Was I sharper, more concise and edgy? I suppress, but not because I have an answer. I don't know, will never know. The fact is that we write as we are. You can doctor up a thought, change or improve an image,

but you can't really impersonate a style. Visiting an earlier prose version of yourself is like facing an old photograph, the looking is mainly about taking in the differences. But then we also change how we judge, don't we?

Contemplating the photograph, I retaliate against my younger, sharper face by finding it naïve, without character. Reading myself, I recognize an obviousness that I like to think I've been getting past. I'm think I'm better now, further along in hacking away the approximations, more confident of what a sentence can do. All that. It's the necessary logic of the inverse: that as we lose our best youth, we get closer and closer to real expressiveness. It's sad, though, that we usually attack our best subjects before we know what to do with them, and attacking them wears them out for our later purposes. What to do now with all this style?

Failure

I'm reading the bound galleys of a book called *Failure*, a memoir pitched around its title theme. In one chapter, the writer, Josh Giddins, remembers being at Exeter and falling under the sway of a smart and sardonic classmate, sees it now as another of the ways in which he didn't come up to scratch. This wasn't my first strong recognition. Just pages before he was featuring himself as an aspiring intellectual, a pipe-smoking poseur whose most vivid literary attachment was to the character of Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love*, the very same fixation I'd recently written about. He was even writing about the same line in the novel, Birkin's saying to Ursula Brangwen, "I don't believe that." She has just asserted that love between a man and woman is absolute, admits no others. Birkin we know is thinking about his great friend Gerald Crich, which I mention because friendship is such a part of this other thing, this 'falling under the sway' business. For me it was my friend of late high school and then college years, David Berthune, who christened himself 'Reddog' in 1969 after we went to Woodstock together, and who has never been anything but Reddog since to me. What struck me this morning was the fact that I've gone for years now without giving my old friend, the whole life of our friendship, more than a passing nod. For so long he was the very center of things, the constant reference point in my inner life, a figure of--I knew it even then--disproportionate influence. It's been decades now since we've seen each other, and though I know he lives in New York, I'm never really tempted to look him up when I visit the city. This is not just because we would have little besides the past in common--I'm sure we're very different--but also because I like to think I'm psychologically done with him. I don't really want to be reminded of the times, of myself in those times, when I wasn't.

I find this a hard story to tell in strict sequence. What I have now are impressions, memory's quick jump-cuts from first contact, when he was the short-haired new boy just arrived at Cranbrook from a military academy in Indiana (where his father had been dean), to his quick entry into our self-consciously artsy little group of smokers, to my going over to his house for some reason after school, sitting on his narrow attic bed while he played me his Buffalo Springfield and Velvet Underground albums. We started spending time together, and somehow he became, along with Will Farr, my great friend for that whole long period--senior year and then on into college when we all went to Ann Arbor together. Though he and Will never clicked, there was a pretense of trying, part of my early schooling in the endless shuttle diplomacy of friendship.

Reddog was thin, fairly tall, flat-bodied, and people were always remarking to me how good-looking he was, as if I needed to know. I got that, but only later, only technically. When he first joined our group he hadn't grown out his short military hair, and his features seemed strangely prominent to me. That all changed with long hair and then, in college, moustache and beard. He really was good-looking. I saw how girls--women--turned his way when we were out somewhere. But I still couldn't get all the way past that first impression. The other issue was intelligence. He was smart, got good grades, did his work, but I never felt that he was a serious thinker, or wanted to be. His way with ideas was straightforward, I thought. Though more likely I was just looking for some point of advantage. I start with these negatives, these reservations, because I'm trying to figure out where his power came from. I'm ruling out the obvious force of looks and smarts, even though he had both. But it was more a psychological business. There was some way he *enlisted* me almost right away, and from that time he had power over me. I mean that in some deep-down, mostly concealed way I capitulated to him. I wanted to please him, I feared his scorn, and maybe I sensed some brittle fragility in him that I always tried to protect. This same reflex, I realize, defined much of how I acted around my father during all my years of growing up. There's no sorting it all out, not past a point, not here. I'm more focused right now on the influence, its duration, how it was there in my life like a given from senior year, through the first years of college, and how it only faded in my junior year when I got involved with Sally. But all those days and nights when Reddog and I hung out together, he at my place, me at his, stoned or not--it was all like some test I was trying to pass, an admissions exam for I don't know what. That was what it seemed to be about, at some level, our jokes and doings and conversations aside. If I could stop playing to Reddog, stop caring about his reactions, if I could somehow get to where he had no power over me, then I would know I had finally arrived. But why? This fascinates me. Did I see him as the holder of the keys to some ultimate property? I don't think I did, not

really. What makes all this so strange is that I saw his flaws and fallibilities and weaknesses, but relented to him anyway.

There were two things in combination in Reddog's character. One was a deep, maybe complete nihilistic alienation, which makes perfect sense given how he began to act later, and the other, maybe connected, was that he had the courage of his singularity, his absurdity. In a time when so many of us were self-cowed by our ideas of what was and was not hip, Reddog took the high ground. He proclaimed himself the arbiter of his own attitude, and that was that.

I start to remember things: his high crazy laugh, something you might hear echoing in the corridors of an asylum, and then the way he would get giddy and start hammering the table with his palm, people in bars or restaurants turning their heads. And I can see his big hoop earring (I had never known a man to wear such a thing), and his long camel-colored overcoat and lace-up combat boots--the manic way he would stride along the streets of Ann Arbor. And beautiful Anna, his tall, dark-haired Polish girlfriend freshman year--for a while I was so jealous it hurt. Then at a certain point, right after that year, he moved away from the rest of us, took a room in the Downtown Club, Ann Arbor's transient hotel. I would drop in afternoons to find him reading Lawrence Durrell, smoking his Camels, his pot. Always the Camels, the pot. But then, later, things got edgy. He didn't get on with Sally. Or any woman I was with. Laughing, but not really, he would start using words like "bitch" and "cunt," aggressive throwdown words that cut between us, always putting me in the position of having to somehow spin what he said, or joke it away, or explain later to whoever I was with that he wasn't really like that.

But he was. At some point, mid-college, he decided that he would become a painter. He stayed with it, sketching and sketching in his room. And then as soon as he graduated he rented a garage on a side street away from campus and bought rolls of canvas and spent every day in his t-shirt and torn jeans, making his huge paintings. He imitated Oscar Kokoshka at one point, I remember that. Big blotchy portraits. He also started drinking more. Whenever I stopped by the garage to visit he would be putting paint to canvas or taking it off with his palette knife, or stepping back in a self-conscious squinting mockery of the possessed painter, holding up his thumb, appearing to be weighing proportions, studying lines of force. The Camel was always burning, there was always a beer somewhere nearby. I felt it was my job not only to take the painting seriously, to walk back and forth and comment, but to endorse the whole enterprise, to convey my admiration and envy for this mighty romantic splurge. I did my best, but I also stopped going every day. And then? I must have begun relocating the deep center of my life, because things get blurry and I lose track. At some point, I know, Reddog closed up

shop and moved to Florida. To earn money, to work, to be with another of his women. The name 'Sandy' suddenly comes back to me--twenty years and I suddenly think of Sandy. She was another of his tough beauties, and I know from stories that she gave him a run for his money. They rented a trailer in Florida and, the way Reddog told it, drank and painted and fought. When did I first realize what the whole business was about? That Reddog was living a movie, screening himself: the mad unpredictable bohemian, the beatnik pirate (he had studied his Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Bowles); then the painter, the madcap Rothko, Pollock, DeKooning...? By the time he got to Florida the painting reel had begun to run out, and the drinking was ready to follow. I wind forward. I'm back from Maine--Sally and I are long broken up--and I'm living with Pam in that hot upstairs place with the fire-escape. I'm doing my own movie, but of course I don't see that. And then somewhere out of the historical blue Reddog shows up. He's in town, passing through. He still comes on with his bravado, carrying himself like he's full of legend--but he's more tired-looking. 'Rough,' as my mother would say. I have enough perspective to think that it's starting to get late for him, that he may not be able to pull off whatever trick he's trying. The drinking is something he walks around in now. One time comes back clearly. Pam and I have some people over. A summer night and we're all crowded out on the fire escape. When Reddog arrives he's already drunk, fired up. He fixates on Pam's friend Sarah and starts up his routine, an exaggerated kind of sweet-talk with a feeling of something dark just under it, like Treat Williams in that movie *Smooth Talk*, which I realize I remember only because I got such a strong sense of Reddog when I watched it a few years ago, right down to physical resemblance. But Sarah is not falling for whatever he's up to and Reddog is getting more outrageous, shouting out things in a way that makes even party people stop their conversations. What then? I don't know. I just remember that he was out of control, screaming, throwing bottles, and that my feeling about him changed in a way that I knew could not be changed back.

But I don't want to end on such a bleak note. Memory loops around and around and good things aren't that easily erased. Also, there were a few contacts later that made me think his life had gotten better. He called me one night when I was living in Cambridge to tell me that John Lennon had been shot (we used to sit in one of his apartments getting high and putting the needle back and back on "Working Class Hero," imitating Lennon's nasal way of saying 'fucking peasants...'), and I got from him that he was married and working as a high-class waiter (I could picture him that way, cleaned up, standing straight, he *was* a good looking guy, with a Jack Nicholson smile he could turn on when he wanted). Another time, I got a picture in the mail--his daughter, born at about the same time my daughter, Mara, was born. He

wrote that he was a maitre'd at a classy restaurant and making good money. No more painting. That's where the thread breaks.

But even as I write that other images come back, scenes: the two of us hitchhiking through England, having a wild, ungoverned time, playing for days on end that we are these characters from some movie he remembered. It made no sense but we laughed and laughed, across England and over to Amsterdam, where he fell in with a hard-faced blond beauty and left with her on a train bound to India. And one last thing. There was a thing he could do--for years--to get me going. It dates from that trip, as senseless as anything else. He would push his finger into his chin and dip his head and somehow fall into the voice and manner of Robert Mitchum. He knew he could always knock me over with that, no matter what was between us. After a while he didn't even have to do the act--he could just touch his chin with his finger. To me it was just as funny.

Indiana

Well, this is what traveling does, especially when it's traveling not for pleasure but out of duty, to give a talk or a reading: it puts you at the whim of a place, strips you of the control you might have as a tourist, and instead fits you to some other kind of design. For me it's never not strange. The unreality of flight sounds the theme--of disconnectedness, of being taken up in a narrative of someone else's devising. And if I feel anxious in some core place, I also savor some of the freedom (rare for me) of just letting go. Both anxiety and savoring were stirred together Wednesday night when I flew to Indianapolis, though the actual flying was the least of it. There were the hours leading up, watching the departure postings on the monitors, aware of the huge discrepancy between the fluorescent hush of the waiting area and the sleet I could see slashing through the various lit spots outside. There was our plane, snout tucked into its extended boarding ramp, one single red light pulsing to show it was still alive. A literal handful of us waiting, staring at the empty counter. No one, I'm sure, believed we would be getting out that night. And we almost didn't. A seven thirty departure, delayed for gate change, delayed again as we disembarked while the airport closed, re-boarding an hour later, only to wait while the wings were once again de-iced. But at 10:00 o'clock we wobbled up into the gusts, and a half hour later we were sailing calmly, and I was savoring the completion of that page of nervousness, flipping my unease over to connect with what I imagined were those larger currents, the forces

that exist to overrule mere contingencies like weather and schedules, feeling some of that power that at least hints at scales of intentionality we know nothing about. And by midnight I was hustling along the deserted corridor in the Indy airport, looking for my student-driver, who I finally spotted in the baggage claim area sitting with his long hair hanging in his face, holding a take-out cup. Soon after we were moving in his low-slung car along the flat straight highway through what I knew without asking were cornfields on either side. We talked writing and books--he had read an interview with me somewhere and had questions about the literary life. When I asked him about the college he chuckled and said it was pretty pious. As I would find out.

Guest house--a one-story white building, snow all around, thigh-deep. I sleep in a motel-styled guest room on a narrow single bed, cocooning myself in the thin blankets, too tired to think, aware of nothing but my awkward position changes, this way that way, sparing the right leg, the sciatica, dreaming who knows what, there was something, and then suddenly delighted--it's that rare for me--to realize that clear bright sun is cutting through the louvers of the side window.

The day, the sequence, the solace of being away from every prop and having a schedule to follow. And thoughts and gestures to prepare. I sit in the auditorium after a quick breakfast in the campus dining hall, watching the first speaker sitting near the front, looking over his notes, thinking as I watch him that I want to write about this too, all those moments in life when we are just waiting to go on, to talk, or read, or do whatever in front of an audience. How they comprise, like the moments of flying, another kind of time: unused, expectant time; hypothetical time. The looking through the papers is all pretense, a show put on to keep people away, and to send a signal to anyone who might be looking that the task at hand is being taken very seriously: a gesture of respect. And I'm thinking that in a few hours I'll be doing the very same thing, as in fact I am, it's almost as if the intervening were banished with a clap of the hands, that's me now leafing through my pages while the woman who is to introduce me flutters around in my peripheral vision, once or twice asking me about some fact in the bio-note she has put together, and I dumbly turn my pages, but in fact I'm listening to gauge whether people are coming in to fill the seats behind me. After all the waiting, the preliminaries start up quickly. I hear myself hyperbolized and feel a detached and cynical bemusement, and then always before I expect it, I'm up the small set of stairs, the universal set of three or four, then left to the lectern, water bottle, a plastic glass, the clutching sense--it almost never fails--that there's too much to present, that they, the people out there, are already looking for signs that it will be short, that they can have the credit for having been without doing that much time. I assume that's what they feel--it's almost always what I feel,

though this morning, I confess, I was hoping the lecture would go long, set a precedent.

Time falls away for me while I read my talk. It might be the closest I can come to that cinematic cliché of the clock hand spinning around, the event coming to a close. Except that even as I feel mired in that timelessness I am also excruciatingly aware of the speed or slowness of every sentence, at some points thinking 'yes, good, they'll like this, it's casual and anecdotal' and at others 'just get through this, it's hard, say it the right way, don't hurry it...' So when I reach my 'thank you' and look up, and try not to measure the sound of applause against the size of the audience, I feel drained, not at all keen to launch the obligatory question-and-answer, but not ready to just walk off either. This is when the thirst comes, the wanting of drink-as-reward, and this is what I don't quite understand won't be happening, even though I have mainly taken the measure of these good Christian people. I have never been anywhere where the dinner is not the long-awaited pretext for drinks, for loosening the bands. But when my student driver and I arrive at the home of our host, when I walk in and see the Christian mottos on the wall and the pictures of kittens all over the bulletin-board, and worst, when I look through the living room to the dining room and see the table set with only water glasses, well....

What Do You Work For, Daddy?

Though it probably never happened exactly like this, it came close enough, with Liam or Mara sitting with me on the front step in the afternoon, watching as the neighbors come home from their jobs. Dave Allard with his big welding truck, John Hickman hurrying right past us on his walkway in a straight-looking suit, briefcase in hand, Marie across the street in her clean car and office clothes, and with a flourish of my imagination I make the camera pan all the way back around to the big man in his jeans and t-shirt, barefoot, and I hear the obvious indicting question: "What do you do for work, Daddy?" Of course, I pause before answering, create my defensive cloud of self-irony. What do I say? The easiest answer, the one I give to outside people in need of some reassurance, is that I teach. Some of them do wonder. My hours and clothes are different. I work at home, I say. I take a lot of time to prepare classes and grade papers. That usually satisfies whoever is asking. And depending on my mood and my energy it's what I probably would tell--

and have told--my kids when they looked at me in that way, wanting to understand not just what I did, but who we were. Alas, my answer doesn't begin to satisfy me, though my life would be much simpler if it did. For me teaching is an add-on, or better, an off-shoot, something that both taketh away and giveth. It draws energy from the main thing, the writing, though it supposedly then compensates me by buying me time and making the writing possible. And while it's true that a certain number of hours a week--mental hours, I mean--are given over to thinking and worrying about the teaching I do, I don't count those as part of my legitimate work. In fact, I barely even count as legitimate the hours spent conducting classes or meeting with students or grading papers. I don't write them off as waste, of course, but they're not the real work. Whether I fill them matter-of-factly or with inspired associative flights, my core sense of self-worth is unaffected. The only thing that matters in that other--real--economy is whether I feel I have put together words in a way that means something to me; whether I have advanced my private cause of writing. And on this one score I am impossibly harsh and unforgiving and impervious to any excuses or arguments about mitigating factors. Either I am writing--in the deeper sense of the word--or I'm not. I want to pause on this distinction, for to say that I have worked at putting words on paper is not the same as saying I am 'writing.' In fact, there is a world of difference. The participle is everything. To be writing is to be in a particular relation to the world; it is to be linguistically in process, not waiting for a wave but engaging it, instincts and reflexes on high alert, whereas simply fulfilling the outer demand to be putting words on a page toward some intended end is never more than waiting for that wave. The former redeems. The latter, merely dutiful hopes for redemption, and when it won't come feels its possibility mocked. 'What do you do for work, Daddy?' Honest answer? I wait for signs, for the faraway shift of the surface water that signals the approaching wave. But I can't say that to anyone, except maybe another writer. Any sane person would want to know 'where's the work in that?' And I wonder, too. Is it in the waiting, getting into the right responsive condition? Or is it in whatever happens when things finally click? Both, of course. Though they are not to be compared.

I often imagine the cinema verite version of the writer at his desk. Like Andy Warhol's "Blow Job"--it would be a film centered on an essentially expressionless face. The writer's gaze, like that of the oral beneficiary, is turned around inward, with all concentration being directed to a very specific end. Even the most intuitive and sympathetic cameraman would have to scramble to find his occasions of drama, catch the moment when the fuse inside the fingers suddenly burned down and released an explosion--words, words, words--and then initiated the maddening irregular stop/start. His close-up shots would work to convey the tension that underlies this special act

of expression, the camera zooming in on the outer cues, fingers hovering over the keyboard, a thumb and forefinger pinching the moustache hairs right below the nostrils, the mic picking up the sound of a slowly indrawn breath, then maybe another flurry of typing--these bits are as close as the film could get to what happens inside, which is not--for me at least--any orderly sort of voice-over dictation, but more like a slow garbled churning of word-sounds with the keyed-up, tensely-auditory self listening for combinations, willing them, searching for the best way to get at the basic line of sense. Looking to find the saying that tells me only in that moment a vital part of what I'm after, the actual expression. "What do you do for your work?" If I'm honest: this. I go way deep inside myself, though who will accept that as an answer. But it 's real--it matters more than anything. And how well it has gone minute by minute, and sentence by sentence, then has everything to do with the rest of my day, whether I carry grocery bags to the car with a light or heavy step, whether I can make myself stand face to face with people in conversation, whether I hum or not when I walk around the block. But again, which part is the work? Is it in the typing of words, or writing of words, or in that strange suspended listening that doubles as thinking, or is it in whatever I do--and I don't even know what that is--to get myself into a mood that has to be there for the listening to happen? And what is that work in relation to the rest of life? Who knows? But the answer starts with the sense I get when I put my paper away and stand up of having traveled somewhere very far, some place where they have different currencies, where the water swirls counterclockwise down the drain. If I have been working in public, hunched over in my neighborhood Starbucks, I very often subside into the day like an astronaut stepping out of an anti-gravity chamber. Everything is strange. My car is a Claes Oldenberg sculpture of a car, those people walking by on the sidewalk are character actors hired to play people I might see in my town. I have to buy vegetables on the way home, but all I want to do is roll down the window and have a cigarette, because the smoke so nicely eases the ache of strangeness, filling the terrible vacuum between there and here. It joins things, makes a filmy stitch between the nothing and the something. Though since Daddy mainly hides what he does all day--because he is afraid he can't find the words to say it--Daddy hides this, too.