

Coenaesthesia

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On Writing

“Writing” is a verb and a noun and I don’t want to lose the verb in the noun or vice versa. Writing is the activity of creating written words and writing is the written material created. The word refers to a creative process as well as the enduring results of that process. The creative process itself is a marvel of physics (and neurobiology), being the process in which a swirl of vagueness that we traditionally locate spatially in our heads gets converted into a linear stream of conventional symbols clumped in little packages. Forced to point to where the writing comes from we’d most commonly place index finger to the head, yet the feeling of writing, the magical act, might shift our identifying finger more vaguely to the general area of our below-the-neck bodies; certainly our arms, hands, fingers are most commonly involved in the process. And furthermore, the writing process that engages our bodies more generally often feels creative in a vague-ish way as we read, often with some surprise, with our eyes what comes out of our bodies. “Where did that come from?” “Hmmm, didn’t know I knew that.” Once written, writing takes on some other qualities. It stands. It endures. We learn this in grammar school the first time we get caught passing a note to a friend. We are reminded of this as an adult when we push the “send” button on an e-mail before we check to be sure we are sending to the intended person. Somehow, things written carry the connotation of “authenticity,” even “truth.” Another word for writer is “author,” a terms that shares roots with “authenticity” and “authority.” Writing in this sense accumulates for the writer, as when we indicate an author’s writing on a given topic.

There is presently an acceleration of the speed and ease with which anyone can produce writing and other forms of expression instantly accessible to the bulk of the rest of the folks on the planet. The instant and remarkable popularity and ubiquity of Facebook and YouTube are evidence of this. Last summer was the fiftieth anniversary of my high school graduation and I have received numerous requests from Kansas farmers, once my classmates, to be their friend on Facebook. This suggests to me new meaning to the phrase “see the writing on the wall.” And while placing personal writing in the perspective of the past, my past, I have read letters of my grandparent’s generation written with a fine pen both horizontally and vertically on the same surface, overlapping, because of the relative high cost of paper. Now, my eight year old granddaughter has had an email account for a couple years and writes long and interesting messages and she chides me when I don’t write to her often enough or in sufficient length. I didn’t learn to type until I was in high school and that was a long laborious process on a heavy “office machine.” She also has a NookCOLOR (far superior to my Kindle) and reads voraciously. Clearly, much of what is written today is daily chat which is irrelevant before it is electronic, yet even this is in some sense a gesture that reaches out to touch, to say “I’m thinking of you.” There is much about all this world of high tech writing that I like. The energy of the output is shifting the emphasis of writing from the product, the writing, to the process, the writing. Writing is a way of being in the world; it is a way in which we realize our identities (our faces, but also our bodies). Writing is a creative enterprise in which we can explore identities through writing and written social intercourse. It is processual and

interactive; permanent, yet not. E-media have democratized writing, giving voice to the many, even to the oppressed.

Language is often identified as the marker of being human. We are the speaking animal. Writing marks a remarkable advancement in human culture. André Leroi-Gourhan saw this as externalizing our memories. The printing press marks quantum advancement in democratizing writing and reading to the masses which transformed the world (Marshall McLuhan, *The Guttenberg Galaxy* (1962)), surpassed in impact certainly only by the recent e-media explosion. I believe the future will identify the developments in the communications of the first decade of the twenty-first century as equivalent to Guttenberg. There is much discussion today about whether or not books, meaning I take it as those bound paper things, will survive in the future. This is not an issue for me. Of course books as paper things will survive, just as handwritten documents have survived, just as speech has survived (and is thriving via the ubiquitous use of mobile phones). Yet, will e-media transform the world as much as did the printing press? Absolutely (it already has) and far more quickly and with results, even over the next decade, that I think today we cannot even imagine. We may be frightened by this (an emotion that I think is acknowledged mostly by those over 25), but we must also be excited and creatively challenged.

The qualities that characterize and distinguish e-media writing center, I think, on ease and speed of production and distribution (the verb part of writing) and on the plasticity of the product (the noun part of writing). What I am writing at this moment, I could post to a blog (a web log) in about 30 seconds time, making it potentially instantly available to anyone anywhere who might not only read it, but each would have an opportunity to immediately comment on and interact with it. There is potential for much silliness and uselessness (and there is nothing so bad about either), yet there are advantages as well. I have published many books and articles in the paper media form. This is a long and arduous process that often takes years to complete. Some of the most “flat” experiences I have had have occurred on that day when a cardboard box arrives containing copies of a finally-published book I had written perhaps years before. “What is this?” I ask as I open the box. Typically I then wait months, even years, for published reviews and responses. Responses typically come at a time long after I have moved on to other projects and maybe don’t even still agree with myself as published. Of course, this time-sequence can be much shorter for more popular types of publications, yet for the world of academic writing, little has changed. It can well be argued that the process assures quality through peer-review and the measured process of careful publication, yet, I think this is a stretch. Most academic publications are peer reviewed by a rather limited cadre of colleagues making the politics of the academy perhaps as fundamental, if not more so, than solid judgments of academic worthiness. Better, I think, to make all these works available immediately, complemented by peer evaluations, and cheaply so that they may be ignored or upheld as quickly as possible. Google teaches us that it is important to recognize failures as quickly as possible. We have much to re-think in this area. And then there are those works that the establishment would never allow to be published, that are suppressed for generations, that would be read and considered much more quickly.

The advantages of more broadly embracing e-media, even for academic writing, are many. While I recently heard that more than half of those who “post” to some social media have experienced

“poster’s regret,” these postings can be quickly pulled down or modified, not so easy with a printed book or article. Many authors likely experience “publisher’s regret” in eventually recognizing that what they wrote and published is not something they actually want to live with or that they continue to agree with. Should we not be encouraged to continue to develop our study of, research on, and writing about a topic of great interest to us? Why not encourage authors to write periodic comments on their own work in light of further research. This could easily be done in an e-media. I have known plenty of scholars who actually fear to publish what they know because they cannot assure themselves that they won’t change their minds, or that they fear they haven’t read every relevant source or thought exhaustively about the topic.

Our educational process is currently largely focused on the same values. Students are required to write papers for academic courses. A deadline forces them to print (“publish”) their papers. I have yet to meet a student who didn’t think that this process leads to the equivalent of poster’s remorse. I think that many forms of research/writing/reading/responding should be interactive and processual. While I’d hope that we would avoid writing for immediate public consumption the trivial thoughtless half-baked uninformed reactionary stuff that characterizes the comment of many blogs and even public news commentary today, I believe that there is much to gain from reframing our serious work so we consider it as always, or fairly much indefinitely, in process. A recent article “Inside Google: The Company’s Daring Plan to Save the News (and Itself)” by James Fallows in *The Atlantic* (June 2010) analyzing the success of Google noted that Google’s presentation of their products and services for extended periods; what might be called the “permanent beta” culture of Google. Google’s wisdom is to understand that the success (or failure which they want to know as quickly as possible) is something that occurs through use and interaction over time. Gmail for example was in “beta” version for five years while serving tens of millions of users worldwide. Had Google awaited the certainty that Gmail was completely done (can such a state even be imagined for much of anything?) Gmail simply wouldn’t exist. I propose then that serious writers and thinkers and doers write seriously and thoughtfully for e-media or some media only imagined, yet with the clear sense that they are writing “beta” versions that are subject to revision, refinement, and development based on the responses that they receive and the continuing efforts they make.

Writing/reading. I teach an advanced writing course in my department at the University of Colorado. There is no reading course, not even an elementary reading course. Why not? It is unfortunate, I think, that we conventionally characterize writing as active, productive, and authoritative and reading as passive, receptive, and increasingly optional. These evaluations are captured in our common gestures and postures: we sit up and lean over a keyboard or pad of paper to write; we lie or slouch back and put our feet up to read. Critical theory has long noted that reading is as creative and active as is writing, yet, as obvious in so many senses as it is, we have yet to incorporate this evolution into our *habitus*, much less our understanding of writing. If writing is meant to be read in the sense of actively created, interpreted, engaged, then it seems that writing should be directed towards this interactive process, providing readers with rich tapestries of possibilities and provocations; that is, writing should give readers something to engage their creativity, their resident knowledge, their interests, their values, their

agency. And should writing be understood as writing/reading, then the writing/reading ought to be understood as continually interactive, an ongoing “beta” experiment.

On Writing and Movement

In *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), Brian Massumi outlines and explores the implications of a position, or “revolution” to use his term, he attributes to early twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson, seeing the primacy of movement rather than position, process rather than product. While I’ll certainly want to engage Massumi’s ideas in much fuller detail later, it is here important to think about the implications of this position on writing. Passage is primary in relation to position; processual indeterminacy is primary in relation to social determinism. Passage precedes construction. Writing as a verb, a process, is commonly understood as directed to producing writing as a noun. It is the thing, writing, that endures; while the process the movement of writing is often ignored and hidden from the resulting thing, the written. It is clear that writing as action is ontogenetic, producing the thing writing, and the movement is necessarily prior to static product. While understandings of reading as a parallel ontogenetic process, that is, that in reading a writing one creates its meaning, relevance, value, message, it is broadly held that the writing is a static, immobile, fixed, reliable thing; a text. Perhaps not all things written are quite so limited. Surely poetry as thing written is often understood as holding a high potential for engendering the movement of interpretation through its potential to be endlessly variously read. Still, writing is strongly identified by positionality. It is in reading what someone has written that we understand their position, their point of view, their take on the subject presented. The subject becomes object in writing, captured for examination.

Still, I see no real reason why we might not shift both our writing conventions as well as our expectations of writing the thing in the attempt that they retain the primacy of movement. This may be done through careful use of “active voice,” through more fully “bodied” writing, through adoption of and experimentation with “mixed reality” writing (print, media, interactive media, real time interaction, etc.). It is noteworthy in this respect that we identify writings that we find particularly engaging and meaningful by the term “moving.”

Brian Massumi has some challenging and provocative things to say about academic writing (which is, perhaps unfortunately, the strongest influence on my own writing). He is reflecting on what he is attempting in the writing of *Parables for the Virtual*. And he extends this to others in a bit of a manifesto on academic writing. His understanding of his writing is essential not simply to communicate what he is writing about, but to exemplify it. His comments capture something of the flavor I am exploring.

The writing tries not only to accept the risk of sprouting deviant, but also to invite it. Take joy in your digressions. Because it is where the unexpected arises. That is the experimental aspect. If you know where you will end up when you begin, nothing has happened in the meantime. You have to be willing to surprise yourself writing things you didn’t think you thought. Letting examples burgeon requires using inattention as a writing tool. You have to let yourself get so caught up in the flow of your writing that it ceases at moments to be recognizable to you as your own. This means you have to be prepared for failure. For with inattention comes risk, of silliness or even outbreaks of stupidity. But perhaps in order to write experimentally, you have

to be willing to “affirm” even your own stupidity. Embracing one’s own stupidity is not the prevailing academic posture (at least not in the way I mean it here).

The result is not so much the negation of system as a setting of systems into motion. The desired result is a systematic openness, an open system. ... The activity of the example will transmit to the concept, more or less violently. The concept will start to deviate under the force. Let it. Then reconnect it to other concepts, drawn from other systems, until a whole new system of connection starts to form. Then take another example. See what happens. Follow the new growth. You end up with many buds. Incipient systems. Leave them that way. You have made a systemlike composition prolonging the active power of the example. You have left your readers with a very special gift: a headache. By which I mean a problem: what in the world to do with it all. That’s their problem. That’s where their experimentation begins. Then the openness of the system will spread. *If they have found what they have read compelling.* Creative contagion. (Massumi, pp. 18-19)

Yet, Massumi’s writing is somewhat truncated and limited simply by being a published text rather than an incipient system. The incipience must come from the readings and responses, such as mine. Marshall McLuhan style, my experiment is to select a medium, rather a collection of interconnecting and interactive dynamic media that exemplifies the message while continually presenting and refining it. The body of writing must be as moving, as progenitive, as is the human body.

Coenaesthesia

I am interested in the human body (including the brain), the senses (especially touch and proprioception), gesture (techniques of the body) and agency, dancing (I teach salsa dancing and have taught dance theory and history for many years at the university), and movement (especially its primacy and its constitutiveness of our distinctiveness) as fundamental to our existence. I’m thrilled by all the scientific and philosophical sources and am constantly excited about every aspect of these intertwined and interrelated topics. In other words, I am an academic and love the world of thought and ideas and writing in the traditional and conventional sense (even while I want to modify or reject many of its assumptions, conventions, and practices). Yet, I am also charged up by how all these ideas and all this information might be shaped to contribute to very practical aspects of how all people might live richer, fuller, more creative and vital lives. I can’t specialize and limit my interests, never have been able to do this, and it is the intertwining of all these topics that interests me most, the cross-fertilization. And, while it has long existed as a hunch, a feeling, I believe that it is in the common fabric, the interweave of these topics, that we might find the greatest insight to those elusive notions/feelings on which human life depends; we have groped our way along focusing on such terms as self and sentience, even consciousness.

Another insight into the long and rather continuous inquiry into this system (or sense of whatever one might call it) behind all the other systems has come to me via Daniel Heller-Roazen’s book *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (2009). Aristotle, Heller-Roazen shows, posited that we have a sense that we are sensual beings and that our sense of sensing is not simply accomplished by one of our quotidian five senses; that is, that we sense that we see (even when we are unable to see) and so on. In

his *De anima*, Aristotle considered the “common sensible qualities” (*koina aisthēta*): motion, rest, figure, magnitude, number and unity. Through his analysis he concluded that there is a sense of sensing, a common or total sense, the mere feeling that something at all is felt. He did not mean what is the common understanding of this term today, that is, having practical and uncomplicated reasoning. Rather, he sought what it is that makes us human, have a feeling of self, an awareness of our sentience. Through amazing erudition and marvelously clear writing, Heller-Roazen, digs through the history of western philosophy and medicine to show a persistent engagement with Aristotle’s concern with understanding this “common sense.”

Heller-Roazen introduced me to another term, “coenaesthesia.” He traces this term to a 1794 publication by the title that was the Latin language doctoral dissertation of Christian Friedrich Hübner. It was soon translated to German and published. The term “coenaesthesia” is the combination of two Latinized Greek terms, the prefix *coen*, meaning “shared,” and *aesthesia*, meaning “common perception,” designated the shared faculty of sensation, indicating an investigation of the classical concern with “the common sense.” Hübner complemented the “external sensations” and “internal sensations” with a third power of perception, a third faculty, a “feeling” that he identified as an inner touch. Coenaesthesia gained considerable and regular attention from the middle of the eighteenth century throughout the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. It was clearly distinguished from synaesthesia, the psychological designation of sensory associations such as the perception of sounds or smells as colors. Under the coenaesthesia rubric were various studies that focused on the sense that is common, by which we sense, as an inner feeling or touch, that we are an integrated organism. A variety of renderings of coenaesthesia provide some sense of this: “organic awareness,” “general sensibility,” “fundamental feelings,” “feelings of sensitive existence,” “muscular sense” (proprioception). “internal sensibility,” “general perception,” “permanent sensation,” and “inner touch.” Coenaesthesia aligns closely with concerns with “self” and “consciousness” yet it is thoroughly grounded in the body and known as an “inner feeling.”

So the question I need to deal with here is why I was abducted by this term “coenaesthesia,” which was apparently a rather technical consideration from the mid eighteenth century up through the early twentieth century by medical philosophers adding to the long tradition dating from Aristotle that concerned itself with a “common sense.” I need also comment on why I have elected to use “-ia” rather than “-is” as the ending of the term.

The best reason is that in reading Heller-Roazen on coenaesthesia I experienced a powerful “inner feeling” that this term, and the various valences it seemed to evoke over the history of its consideration, labeled something about which I have long been concerned, the subject of frequent rumination, and an elusive quality of many things about which I am interested. First, I am excited that this term is grounded in the senses or as a kind of sense, thus is thoroughly bodied. Second, it seems to address that issue of how so many complex bodied human systems, each with infinite variables and combinations, nonetheless is felt to be and operates as an organism, that is, as an integrated whole with unity and singular identity. Beyond the human being, the world (ecologically, socially, politically, economically, all separately and together) has the same characteristic, that is, infinitely complex and fully beyond

comprehension, while at the same time, functioning as an entity. We sense that the world is coherent, has identity, is an organism and we know this as a feeling, a feeling kind of knowing, rather than as information or deducible knowledge based purely on observation and description.

In terms of my present concerns with writing, I acknowledge that the act of writing, writing as a verb, energizes a large number of interacting and infinitely complex systems all at once. To write is to be guided by an “inner feeling” that the direction we are heading is somehow towards coherence, resolution, conclusion even when it often doesn’t amount to that. Even speaking is like this. Should we even momentarily doubt the “inner feeling” that directs speech, we would be afflicted by a breakdown, a stutter that wouldn’t allow us the advancement to the next word because we rarely know why we select that particular word, only that it is in service to some fictive sense, inner feeling, of coherence. In writing, such occasions of hesitation or doubt are referred to as “writer’s block.” Coenaesthesia seems to me to indicate that interplay between the many and the one that is viscerally grounded. Much more to follow.

Now why “-ia” rather than “-is”? This isn’t that complex. I simply want to keep the verbal qualities of “coenaesthesia” to the fore. Thus, by “coenaesthesia” I intend to refer to that processual aspect of the “common sense,” the ongoing “inner feeling” that both reflects and constructs the organismic character of human beings, or, extending the idea, any other complex interactive system about which we have a sense that it has identity and agency. By coenaesthesia, I direct attention to the ongoing negotiation of complexity and organic coherence as well as this interdependence. I want to avoid any sense of simplifying anything into a “totalizing” sense. Coenaesthesia, in this verb form, also seems to demand that movement is fundamental. I need to explore this idea much more fully as it is at this time more a hunch (a feeling) than anything very articulatable, yet no sense can function without movement and it seems to me that we’ll find coenaesthesia to be virtually identical with movement, movement as such.

Coenaesthesia, as it might inspire thinking about writing, demands the interplay of many extraordinarily complex systems of meaning and creativity and sensibility and emotion as well as the sense, more associated with writing considered as noun or object, that writing is an entity with an identity with a subject, that promises coherence and completeness or accomplishment or something. Coenaesthesia is the process in which the noun and verb of writing operate together organically.