

Notes toward an essay on the unspeakable

That which we cannot or have not or will not or may not speak: what may be said about it? It ranges from the discreetly unspoken to the unspeakable, from the known and unspoken to the unknowable, if it exists.

If it exists, why can't we know about it? And then speak of it? Already I have run into problems and I have not written seven lines. We know that we may know of something and recognize that speaking of it may not be an adequate medium for communication of the thing. Dance, for instance, is usually without speech. Anyone remotely familiar with the eloquence of the body will grant its capacity to communicate differently than words do. Words on a page fail me if I wish to speak the presence of the body. I may speak *of* it. But I may not speak it. It is an unspeakable eloquence. So we distinguish between the unknowable and the unspeakable though we suspect that if a thing is unknowable then it is probably unspeakable. But if it is unspeakable then it may yet not be unknowable. I am already over my head within the realm of the unspeakable. Let us at least limit the discussion to that.

Obviously we can speak *of* the unspeakable but cannot speak it. Poets sometimes contemplate the speaking of the unspeakable. Yet they must settle, apparently, for the speaking of the previously unspoken. Or gesture toward the mystery of the unspeakable with faith in the imagination and ingenuity of the reader to divine for her or himself the presences/absences towards which the digits are wiggling.

I can remember the first time I became consciously interested in writing poems. I was in grade five. We had a little red reader with a big 5 on it, in white. William Carlos Williams's poem *The Great Figure* was in it.

I remember running down the street (when I was even younger) half thinking that I was flying. Whatever else is true, I knew what it felt like to fly. Yet I knew I wasn't. I found it tremendously exciting that I could feel such an exhilarating rush of flight and yet not really be flying (though there were moments when I was convinced I was). And so I wished to tell my parents about this epiphany of sorts that involved both the adventuresome careening and the knowledge that I wasn't flying and how is it that the world is this way and isn't it exciting? But I couldn't tell them of it, had no idea how to begin to describe either what I was feeling or the analytical tools of language to clearly make the sort of distinctions that I've just made. Very frustrating. And so I wondered if there were just some experiences and feelings and knowledges that by their nature were fated to be mine with no possibility of telling anybody else in a sufficiently expressive way as to convey the combination of feeling and thought.

I also recall sitting in the front seat of the car and watching the yellow lines in the middle of the road. If you concentrated in just the right way, you could momentarily pick out one of the broken yellow segments. Just for a split second. Or if you looked at them in a different way they would all just be

a blur. Again, I found it quite magical that what you see depends on how you think about it. To be able to distinguish in the blur of things something particular. This was a little bit more approachable, and you could say “See how you can pick out one of the yellow lines just for an instant?” And “Isn’t that amazing?” But again there was the frustration of not being able to convey or even clearly pick out what it was that was so amazing.

And I remember being in the back seat of the car on our trips home Sunday evenings, lying down on the back seat and being lulled by the sound of the motor. And watching the power poles and the lines between them fly by the window as a sort of visual music or rhythm. And thinking that there were probably conversations being passed along in them too. This was yet another experience that was important to me but seemed to dissolve into the air should I try to speak of it.

So when I read “The Great Figure” by William Carlos Williams in grade 5 from the red reader with the white 5 on the front of it I felt that I’d encountered a kind of friend. The poem is short:

The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

It came as a revelation that you could speak of these experiences with the sort of clarity and depth that I’d perhaps given up on as being impossible, unspeakable. That he should call the poem “The Great Figure” was an affirmation to me that this sort of perception or bearing witness, perhaps, was important to him too. At the time I may have thought that he had captured it. But, of course, I understand now that there is much left out and that is necessary, that there is more suggestion and gesturing toward than capturing the thing like a lion in a cage. The poem is so small it’s hardly even there. And to a large extent it is a *talking about* the experience rather than a *talking* the experience, and the excitement is real but quiet. But I can appreciate now the ways in which we can sometimes talk about things or experiences or feelings and *must* trust others to fill in the gaps in which the secrets reside. That trust is in itself a kind of strength that you can feel in someone’s writing. It becomes not only a kind of inner strength but a necessity in the writing of things like poems where the language is pushed beyond its usual circles.

And in the reading of them too, if we are to follow to the secrets the author can gesture toward. Or discover them for ourselves. Or some combination of the two. Presuming that they exist in the first place, that the author really is driving toward something worth finding out.

Much later, as a young man in my early twenties, I took to books like *Heart of Darkness* and *Death in Venice* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Henderson the Rain King* and *Jude the Obscure* as novels that ‘made visible the invisible,’ and were ambitious enough to attempt to speak the unspeakable. And the unspeakable, by now, was shrouded in darkness and “the horror” and a concentrated intensity that suggests the awful but magnificent presence of the gods of Greek tragedy.

Now I have become less interested in lightning and instead find that I am in need of pursuing the mystery of how this writing, less concentrated but more meta-minded, is the thing I am doing. Just as, although you are reading, there are several things on the burners of your mind, possibly, and this will join them. It may simmer there for some time. Or simply be forgotten, whatever. Meanwhile, there is a day-to-dayness that itself comes to hold a certain fascination. As though I had been looking to arrive for a long time and spent too much time on the road simply waiting to arrive. But, of course, it was the trip itself that I was missing. Unlike childhood.

I flip open a book totally at random and read what I have never read before:

And the landscape you saw from afar, from the tower
 really is miniature, it wasn’t the laws of perspective that made it seem so,
 but for now one must forgo it in the interests of finding an open, habitable space,
 which isn’t going to be easy. In fact it’s the big problem one was being led
 up to all along under the guise of being obliged to look out for oneself
 and others: the place isn’t hospitable, though it can support itself and one or two
 others, but really it would be best to start all over again from the beginning
 and find some really decent area that reflects a commitment to oneself.
 But where? In a bubble under the surface of the ocean? Isn’t it all going to be a
 fiction
 anyway, and if so, what does it matter where we decide to settle down?

Somehow, once again, Ashbery has managed to be relevant to the moment. Whether this is through some inter-dimensional subterfuge I saw on a movie Hallowe’en night or through a more simple insistence on writing about concerns that pop up more or less every day—not necessarily this one in particular, but I have had this experience often reading Ashbery—or perhaps a meta-mindedness on his part which involved him having noted where he had been so much without having noticed it before as something to write that he finally accepted it was coming back too frequently to be unimportant and so found his way to an every-day practice of writing that is an amazement and constant source of insight to his readers about their own lives.

Though, of course, the territory a writer chooses is never all that hospitable and keeps disappearing under one’s feet. And maybe his has kept him from seeking abroad too far but it’s an invention that the world is better for, all the same. Or mine is, anyway. Neither will mine span the universe. Nor will yours, perhaps.

But we want it to. One gigantic roar will not do it, however. It isn’t the lion in the cage but out on the plains roaming around at large. He doesn’t talk about it. He talks it. He talks the talk and he walks the walk.

But I am a Virgo not a Leo and don't really want to move in with John. Though I have encountered his writing with a certain sudden romance toward it currently. I open up *Flow Chart* again at random: "The lion stood by the bridge/ so long it might have been a sculpture, but in the end loped sheepishly away. And we have to figure out what these coins mean, not knowing the language." John, stop it! You're driving me crazy! I say lions and then *he* says lions. He seems to read my mind as I read his books. I suppose, instead, that I read my mind in his books. But is it *really* that way? Altogether? Flip a coin and open it up. In it is the every day disappearing rather quickly into a strange meeting place: "I was appointed to meet you/ and bring you to this place, locus of many diagonals/ without beginning or end except for the sense of them a place of confluence provides."

I swear I've just been opening this book up randomly! Well you can see how these things can happen when you encounter a writer whose wavelength you seem to share (can't you?). Or a friend, for that matter. There is much that needn't be spoken between you. That sharing of the unspoken wavelengths is all around like radio.

But what does this have to do with the unspeakable, you ask, wishing I would get back to the sort of coherent development of the theme that you have come to expect from me? Well I have done my best.

In the meantime let us acknowledge the usual connotation of 'the unspeakable' which eddies darkly about the abominable and the inhuman or the despicably human. Often the phrase is used as a substitute for speaking of acts that one would prefer not to mention. But it is sometimes spoken with conviction and is meant to acknowledge the existence of perhaps both the unspeakable and the unknowable. Doris Lessing has said that we usually call something evil when we want to have done thinking about it. William S. Burroughs identified evil with "the algebra of need," with the obdurate logic of survival and competition foisted on us, to some extent, by our needs. This algebra is plainly explicable. Conflicts that arise out of competition for survival or abundance are hardly in the realm of the unspeakable. The lengths to which we are willing to go, however, are another matter.

As Velleho says in "Black Messengers," "Life has blows, and such harsh ones... I cannot tell!" The pain that opens on a long fall and the vertigo that issues from it.

Life has blows, and such harsh ones... I cannot tell!
 Blows like the hatred of God, as if before them
 The tidal surge of all suffering
 were to well up in the soul... I cannot tell!....

And man... Poor wretch... poor wretch! He turns his eyes, as
 When we are summoned by a tap on the shoulder;
 He turns mad eyes, and all experience
 Wells up like a pool of guilt in his gaze.

Life has blows, and such harsh ones... I cannot tell!

