

still writing

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Andrew Benjamin's *Writing in the Still* is the first volume of poetry from a prolific and influential philosopher who has worked across relationality, architecture, care, visual art, translation, myth, and injury — or, rather, not the violence of injury itself, but the temporal interval which might open up and allow us to defer or refrain from violence. This kind of advocacy for ethical and aesthetic space-making, pausing, mediacy, also marks the poetry gathered here. *Writing in the Still* is therefore important for the counterpoint it offers to Benjamin's philosophy; but also because of the importance it affords to words: to the "intertwined paths" of reading and writing poems, and to the poetic word that is always singular and yet

plural, with its own portal-like space or inscape of sounds, meanings, translations, and intertexts.¹

To those who know Benjamin's way of confronting the traditions of philosophy with those of philology and translation, it will be no surprise that this is a collection where every word counts: not in the sense that we are set counting beats or feet (this is mostly free verse and prose poetry), but in the sense that each word is given its own weight, its own potential to be weighed, contested and turned over, and its potential to overturn, to make us double back and reread. The title of the collection is no exception. To give some sense of the book's concerns and modus operandi, I have ventured to offer a gloss on those title words.

Writing: The collection stands in a long tradition of writing that worries at writing, make texts out of this worry, and manage to side-step the difficulty of writing by doing so. Benjamin's take on this, his poetry's insight, is to recognise the particular generative side-stepping potential offered by an approach to writing as translation, and especially translation between media and senses. This translational possibility is one of the allures of ekphrasis, a key mode in the collection. Accordingly, the book's longest reflection on writing is titled "Looking" (76-98). Its first section is "Looking. Writing". And its opening self-scrutiny about the impasse of writing gratefully digresses into sections on "Looking in Tours" (home to a Mantegna canvas which Benjamin's narrator has travelled to write about), "Looking at Poussin" (and his image of the philosopher Diogenes the Cynic), "Looking at Her" and the retrospective "Looking Back". "What would it mean to lay a claim to writing?", this section opens. "A claim to be made after what is now decades of work. Hardly singular", he reflects, but "Where was he with it? [...] The question took him elsewhere", as he observes, since "Writing", although his own action, "directed him"; perhaps what keeps writing from being merely circularly self-reflexive (that is, simultaneously introspective and evasive), is the admission of the "prompt" of "looking" (76).

Looking — or what we might call "writing looking" — is one way of making words

relational, dramatizing their interactions with people, places, and artefacts which others have attended to and loved, sometimes puzzlingly. Thus looking at Andrea Mantegna's *Christ on the Mount of Olives* means, among other things, wondering what Dürer saw in the Italian artist's curious carvings up of space and changes in perspective — a visual stage-management mirrored by Benjamin's switches between ekphrasis in the gallery, semi-didactic reflection, and a subliminal drama of gazes between travellers set in the mirrored elevator and breakfast room of his pension (and turning on a texture Dürer would have loved: the look of damp hair). "Moving between looking and writing had always defined forms of relation", that vital term in Benjamin's philosophical writings (76). Perhaps the happiest thing about that kind of movement is when it invites in other, future viewers and writers, as this piece originally written for the literary theorist Werner Hamacher seems to do.²

In: Historically, one concomitant of a focus on relationality has been attention to prepositional thinking: the *in*, *from*, *at*, *by*, *with*, or *against* which choreographs relationships and locates agents, not necessarily on a homogenous plane of empirical or mathematical space, but in relation to each other, in distances and collocations that themselves create "opening[s] that seem[] to be space" (37), as we hear in the opening poem, "The Angel Stayed".

Although this collection has many strains of reflection and retrospection, it also places its subject in the thick of things, often disorientingly. That question about writing, "Where was he with it?", echoes in the first poem, an extended encounter with angels and the myth of the fall of the angels. Here, after several floaty stanzas describing or evoking angelic action, the narrator asks, disconcertingly: "Where was I in all of this? / What would I have been?" (36) The poetry at such moments takes on almost the quality of a Jesuit contemplation, where the self is imaginatively positioned within a scriptural (here, apocryphal) narrative as if in a drama. Perhaps the impression is less surprising, since Benjamin's questions appears in a subsection of the poem called "*non valde boni*", the not wholly good. This was Augustine's phrase for those who fell into a middling category between

the wholly good and wholly bad: mediocre, but the best category to which most humans could aspire.

The: Perhaps the mediocre definite article could be left out. Yet this collection does prompt questions about the definite and indefinite in a larger sense; the abstract and concrete; the general (even universal) and the particular, meaning not the merely empirical but the historically particular. These contrasts matter philosophically, but they also matter generically and stylistically. This shows up in the shape of the collection. It is tempting to describe the arc of the book as moving from more poetizing to more prosy pieces, from the lyrical short-lined stanzas of “The Angel Stayed” to the prose meditations of “Looking” and the thetic “Notes on Poetry”. A better way to describe this sweep, I think, is the tendency to move from the general to the particularised. The formulations of the opening poems may be painstakingly precise and refer to a definite “I” and “you.” But they are nonetheless stylistically de-localised, de-identified, presenting a play of abstract nouns, iconic elements and processes: unnamed “angels”, “a cheek,” “a face,” “treetops”, “the sun,” “the dark”. This makes it almost shocking to meet, almost exactly half-way through the book, the comparative particularity of these lines:

One of his greatest fears is that he would not be able to hear his father’s voice.... He could recall the sound of his father reading. In the synagogue, on Saturday mornings, his father was often called to read the Haftorah. It was the power of his voice.... its remarkable timbre.... When his father read in either Hebrew or English, they... sounded filling the space. (“Within the Still, Silence”, 55).

To be sure, this evocation of “Jewishness” is not anecdotal and concrete *rather than* philosophical or abstract. Jewishness has, of course, been made to play an iconic role in the history of philosophy and theology, figuring the resolutely literal, the blindly over-particular, the non-spiritual. Benjamin’s commitment to rethinking the relation of particular and universal in the wake of this history goes with the grain of this collection as we move from an allusively and intertextually

invoked engagement with Milton, Augustine, and others in the early poems to the named interlocutors of the pieces “After Hearing Ibn Gabirol” (the medieval Jewish poet and thinker), “Rembrandt’s Homer” — a tribute to another great reciter, which homes in on the details of “Cap, shawl, beard / Each — their own way”, “The shawl’s gold, face and nose.../ Illumined” (74) — before the novella-like particularity in parts of “Looking”, and finally the “Notes on Poetry”, addressed to a named, living other, the poet Karen MacCormack, and date-stamped with day, month, year and suburb.

Still: Finally, there is the polysemous “still”, with its temporal sense of persisting, waiting; the kinetic sense of composure or calm (which also gives us “still” as a visual freeze-frame); and the related sonic sense of the still, small voice, or *stille Nacht* (a sense in German clearly connected to assuaging and care, with *stillen* being a verb for breastfeeding a baby). “Silence solicites [sic] care”, the collection suggests (56); yes, but silence can also be a mark of care. And, then again, as a sleep-deprived new parent might remind us, sometimes no amount of care brings a still. Then all we can do is *stay* — a keyword intimately connected with stilling in this collection.

As John Philipps notes in his helpful introductory essay, Benjamin’s opening poem, “The Angel Stayed”, writes back to Milton’s vision of sin and justice in *Paradise Lost*, working with the moment when the Archangel Michael cleaves Satan’s shield with a single stroke of his sword, “nor staid,” but with his upstroke “shar’d” or sheared “All his right side; then *Satan* first knew pain” (*Paradise Lost* 6.325-7).³ Duplicitous Milton: this is in fact not the first time Satan feels pain. That came several books earlier, and before the war in heaven, when Sin forced her way out of Satan’s head as he first contemplated rebellion (Sin at first horrifies Satan’s angels, but grows attractive in their eyes as war approaches (*Paradise Lost* 2.752-65)).

Benjamin’s probing of Michael’s double blow to Satan opens up the contradictory senses of staying as *pausing*, *stopping*, *refraining* (what Michael did not do), and as

keeping it up, the agonism of staying in the fight. Between them lies the sense of *staying or remaining with*, where agonism as hostility becomes harder to distinguish from genuine relationship and community. While the term “staying” is most prominent in the first poem, parallel scenarios surface through the collection, particularly in Mantegna’s *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, which depicts the scene where Christ repeatedly charges his disciples to “remain here, and stay awake with me” (Matthew 26:38). They fail, of course, and Mantegna makes much of their prone, sleeping forms as Christ prays, if it be possible, to be spared the pains of death.

For Benjamin, as I understand it, angelic action would constitute a paradoxical staying with and refraining from; hence his interrogation of Milton’s Archangel Michael and his tendency to dissent from Milton. Perhaps ironically, for Milton it was the Father who “suspend[ed]” Satan’s “doom” (6.692), and Christ himself who stayed ceaseless violence. After three days, he appears to end the war, whose immortal parties otherwise “in perpetual fight... must last / Endless, and no solution will be found” (PL 6.693-4). This is his Father’s story, at any rate, in justifying the decisive blow Christ will give to Satan’s forces. “Stand still in bright array”, Christ calls to his army, “here stand / Ye angels arm’d, this day from battle rest” (6.801-2); the angels are to refrain and remain, as witnesses. William Blake famously diagnosed Milton as being of the devil’s party without knowing it. Might one wonder to what extent Benjamin’s poetry is of the angels’ party, and how far it knows it?

Milton, of course, is just one of Benjamin’s many interlocutors, implicit and explicit. Although the German lyricist Rilke is not obviously invoked, the “still” in this collection, with its interest in joining voice and space, might put readers in mind of the first of his *Sonnets to Orpheus*. At the singing of Rilke’s Orpheus, beasts throng from their lairs and dens “*aus Stille*”, *from or out of* silence; quiet “not from cunning” and “not from fear” but “from hearing”: unlike in the traditional myth, Orpheus’ music doesn’t force animals to follow him, but it does transform them, and does so through a spatial opening or amplification that recalls a clearing in

the forest. Where before there was hardly a hut (with trembling posts), Rilke tells us, Orpheus creates for the animals “temples in their sense of sound” (*Tempel im Gehör*).

The poems in *Writing in the Still* are rightly cautious about many kinds of silence: enforced, peremptory, and deathly (like Niobe’s silencing when she is turned to stone, a recent focal point in Benjamin’s philosophical writing).⁴ But the poems also advocate for the kinds of stillness that allow attentive and recollective listening, and for past voices that “only survive□ now because of that silence”, and, at times, survive because of the continuing work of poetry (54). We find, then, more than a trace of a classic vision of the aesthetic as a “thinking space”, held open even after the collapse of traditional “devotional spaces” like the one modelled in Mantegna’s canvas.⁵ Credible or not, this is a promise of poetry, too, stretched out between the ends of its lines — as it is between poetry’s grounding memory of “what is already there” (a declarative “*There is poetry*” with which individual poems enter into “relation”) and the expectation that “[e]ach poem, every line begins poetry again” (“Notes on Poetry”, 100, 102, 105).

NOTES

1. Andrew Benjamin, *Writing in the Still*. Melbourne: re.press, 2023, 105.
2. Andrew Benjamin, "Looking in Tours", in *Babel. Festschrift für Werner Hamacher*. Ed. Aris Fiorestos, Weil am Rhein: Urs Engeler, 2008, 34-40.
3. John W. Philipps, "The Place of Poetry: Andrew Benjamin's Writing in the Still" in *Writing in the Still*, 9-33, here 9-13.
4. Cf. Benjamin, "Justice, Love, and Relationality: The Figure of Niobe in Hegel's Lectures on Fine Art", in *Towards a Relational Ontology* (Albany: SUNY, 2015), and "Countering Injury: On the Deaths of the Niobids", in *Niobes: Antiquity, Modernity, Critical Theory*. Ed. Mario Telò and Andrew Benjamin. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2024.
5. Cf. the *Denkraum* and *Andachtsraum* invoked by Aby Warburg, *Schlangenritual: Eine Reisebericht*, 5th edn. Postscripts by Ulrich Raulff and Claudia Wedepohl. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2011, 75.