

# *Ordinary Walking, Ordinary Writing*

Some Thoughts in Preparation for an Essay  
as Yet Unwritten

Naomi Stead

Introductory reading compiled by Robin Wilson

# Reading of Naomi Stead's Ordinary Walking, Ordinary Writing

Compiled by Robin Wilson

## Beginnings: Judgement and Genre

Starting with an incidence of judgement (of anonymous, academic 'peer review'), prompting a consideration of this text in the light of Naomi Stead's wider reflections on criticism and of the role of genre and institution in defining the possibilities or limits of judgement.

The peer reviewer: the incorporation of 'on- and off-screen' voices in the production of the academic text (to 'render it less opaque'). (A curiously strong convention of institutional propriety within academia that we have challenged through the methods, format and intentions of Transversal Writing but, in doing so, encounter different layers to 'anonymity' and its construction).

The 'opacity' of the scholarly text – a core object of critique for the transversal text?

Naomi Stead gives consistent attention to genre, sub-genre, counter- and in-between genres, in a 'mashing of genres'.

## On Spatial Stories, 'Watching' and 'Loiterature' . . .

Walking and thinking get tuned to a bodily rhythm of pace and breath in an invitation into the writing process, and as an invitation to *inhabit the body of the writer for a while*.

To work on foot: The sensuous mobility of a slow commute. The ordinary, habitual walk to work; the ordinary affect. These hyphenated possibilities of walking-writing, walking-thinking.

'Ambulatory thinking' (David Andrew), thinking on the move.<sup>1</sup>

Walking as a way of reading the city and/or writing about it, escaping the 'I', becoming another, one of the many

moving bodies . . . However, for me, the related acts of walking and writing bring me closer to 'I', even if in strong relation with the places, the paths, the rhythms of walking. Is it then through walking that the 'I' becomes exposed, fragile?

*it is when I walk*

. . . *my voice between*

Roaming the streets of the ordinary, sensation analysis . . . a radical empiricism

. . . the root shooting out forming *entanglements* . . . But tamed through reflection, and recoding, and the meta account.

Here is a writerly performance of the body's disposition that is also a space and time of gestation: This is a text about a text to come. About *the not-yet*.

'The desire to produce a fragment of a text that is yet to come into existence.

A thought about the not yet, the thing to come.'

Evoking the unwritten. And the ending as beginning.

This peripatetic text (peripatetic across the city, across time and through writerly genres) conjures an as yet absent text. It desires the 'new' from the 'bog of reality'. Knowingly, it does not simply

rely on 'newness' to spring from the raw material of urban space and from found things chanced upon in the narrative meander. It values perception/expression in the encounter with the 'real', but desire is invoked/captured through a redrafting of writerly disposition in a reflexive questioning of genre and subjectivity, tested out in a re-evaluation of the 'ordinary'.

'Expanding the particular to the universal' within this mode of peripatetic attention. Scale and the architectural; the loss of determinate scale and the invocation of the utopic: 'to have no scale is to have *no place*' (Eric de Bruyn on the work of artist Mel Bochner).<sup>2</sup>

'A boring walk', often ugly and uncomfortable.

(Could this discomfort/malaise also be a sign/symptom of living in the present with the yet to come?)

The 'shame and exhilaration' of assuming the role of the tourist, albeit a 'reflexive' tourist.

Reflexivity and shame: perhaps 'shame' functions here as something like an afterglow of an older, modernist drive to 'negation' – a (reflexive, self-questioning) form of antithesis and revolt as the precondition for innovation/the radical?

'The most ordinary forms of watchfulness.'

(Clarity . . . carrying knowledge lightly through the everyday . . . spare precise gentle grasp.)

This 'watchfulness' is different to the act of simply turning one's regard towards the overlooked and or the otherwise trivial, as it suggests something more insular that requires protection: the 'watch', guardedness, not simply a 'free' regard onto that which intrigues or that which is desired in a fluid passage of encounter. Here the walker is also seemingly 'beating the bounds' (ancient practice of walking the boundary of a parish – but here perhaps of a conception the self); 'on watch' for change?

### **The Necessity of the 'I' and Its 'Rogue Intensities' . . .**

Paying attention to the 'ordinary', 'overlooked' and the 'trivial' in order to assert the 'I' of the text, the autobiographic mode – but that 'ordinary' context is ultimately a *stage* for the I's work with 'entanglements' (past and present relations, professional and personal) and an uncertain temporality. A 'thicket' of entanglements lies behind the ordinary (the veil of the 'spare precise'), where the 'I' risks dissolution in a search for greater definition (?)

*Through your words, I get a clearer understanding as to why the personal needs to be written: because it is always another story, the particular one . . .*

'Rogue intensity': can an 'I' ever be a rogue intensity?

*when no one else*

*that time disappears*

*that I taste words . . .*

*unripe. bitter, sweet. repeat.*

Walking . . . is where the 'I' dissolves? Or perhaps oscillates between being outlined against the background and merged with it.

Re-calibrating figure-ground.

What are the limits of subjectivity when written from the 'I', as subjectivity clearly delineated, embodied? I think back to the text's polyphony: to the 'you' of the author's Stockholm walk, to the non-human, and the non-particular voice.

The dissolution of the subject: desirable, achievable, if only for a moment? What would happen in that moment? Would the walker become the highway she is walking by, in a way that reveals something about the world?

Why is it that I always feel guilt aside the trodden path?

Your clear positioning as queer, as 'other' than a universal male, and the obvious necessity to seek the first person to be

able to take part in what is called 'dis-course' came as a revelation to me. 'Pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you.' – So where does shaming start inside the overwhelming presence of male discourse? Reading those lines, I immediately situate myself in the uncomfortable position of jumping in and out of a male discourse, claiming, as you say, 'an unmediated access to truth' – and simultaneously, violently rejecting it. Being at the same time radically estranged from it and granted the offer to inhabit it.

I inhabit a voice that seems to include or exclude me at will, depending on the multiple stages of academic encounter where I perform. This awkward position at the edge is, in fact, rather solitary as it involves being simultaneously 'othered' and normative. But what Donna Haraway explains as 'situated knowledges' never occurs by oneself, it always occurs together, as all those particularities come to resonate, to produce what she calls feminist objectivity. *I never understood something so clearly about myself, and that was an immediate reaction to your text.*

Vulnerabilities we induce through our writings . . .

A slippage between 'I' and 'you' and the unwanted curiosity of an audience about the identity of the 'I'. In proffering the first

person through recourse to the 'peripatetic' mode of reflexive, watchful writing, the 'I's presence in discourse is also made complex through the ambiguity of the you that accompanies it. (Suggesting the critical structuring of the text's notion of 'weakness', perhaps?)<sup>3</sup>

### Endings: From Forestalling to 'What's Happened?' . . .

To forestall the next walk . . . putting off the walk, intending to go out on that walk . . . goes off finally on that walk . . .

Forestalling and anticipation/ forestalling as anticipation. Writing, as the act/ gestation in the present, as forestalling/ anticipation:

*right here: is language*

*here and now. my language is*

Forestalling events to one's advantage – hesitancy or strategy?

An understanding of how writing yields time: understanding the difference between 'what's happened' and 'what happened'; inscribing present experience into past and future.

We conclude with the promise: Or the ambulance dispatch answering service, not 'what happened', but 'what's happened': this in place of a Melbourne walk, produces, perhaps unintentionally a state of emergency . . . don't give me your nar-

rative, lest a life be lost, give it straight up, the important details.

Again, the demand for brevity, clarity, no extraneous details, for life depends on this . . .

- 1 See: Kim Gurney, *The Art of Public Space: Curating and Re-imagining the Ephemeral City* (London, Palgrave, 2015), 58
- 2 Eric de Bruyn, 'Alfaviile, or the Utopics of Mel Bochner', *The Grey Room*, no. 10 (2003), 76-111: 87.
- 3 See: Louis Marin, 'Critical Remarks on Enunciation: The Question of the Present in Discourse', in: Werner Hamacher and David E. Welbery (eds.), *On Representation: Louis Marin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 373-387.

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## **Tell Me What's Happened?**

In March of 2018, a small article appeared in the daily newspaper in Melbourne, Australia. It seemed an item motivated by public benefit and education, but perhaps also fell into the category of the curio. It described the effect of different linguistic formulations used by phone dispatchers at ambulance stations, when someone telephoned in need of urgent medical attention. The story was about the difference between the dispatcher asking 'what happened' – which tended to send the caller off into a long-winded narrative account with much extraneous detail – and the dispatcher asking 'what's happened' – which caused the caller to report, quickly and directly, the sequence of events that led to the medical emergency. The difference between these two modes of communication – the division of 'what' and 'what's,' the single letter, the contraction of 'has', the tense of this – was measured in long seconds, even minutes, and could easily be the difference between life and death. Accordingly, the dispatchers were now all saying: tell me what's happened.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about this article. I have been struck, even obsessed, at the potency of this seemingly tiny linguistic shift. There

you are, lying on the side of the road, the lights all gleam and dazzle in your half-closed eyes, colours blurring one into another as your life bleeds away across the bitumen, while the person who is supposed to be saving you stands there with the phone pressed to their ear, looking up at the sky and down at their feet, shuffling about, waving their arms and searching for the right word as they range back to their childhood, reaching deep into the past to fully and properly tell the story, the narrative, of how things got to be where they are, here, this instant, while you lie on the ground, departing for the next life even as they speak. That added apostrophe of contraction, that shift in tense from simple past to present perfect. So: tell me what happened?

### On Walking and Writing

The topic on which I have most focused my experimental writing practice is walking. Walking and writing, writing on walking, a walking-writing. The literary precedents for this are well known: Wordsworth was a famous walker, and his poems full of walks. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)<sup>1</sup> and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)<sup>2</sup> both feature protagonists undertaking an observant, evocative, memory-filled and ruminative walking tour around a specific, actual city – Dublin and London respectively. More recently, Iain Sinclair and W.G Sebald have produced books structured entirely around walking, with Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997)<sup>3</sup> and Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (1998)<sup>4</sup> full of descriptions of the experience of walking, and places seen on foot. Meanwhile, the connection between walking and literature is theorized via concepts such as the 'spatial story'<sup>5</sup> and 'loiterature'<sup>6</sup> – a literary-critical mode of thinking and writing that wanders, is digressive and discursive, that writes waywardly from the margins, and pays close attention to the overlooked and trivial.

Meanwhile, Francesco Careri has described the various incarnations of 'walking as an aesthetic practice' in twentieth-century art and architecture, tracing the performance and significance of walking through Dada and Sur-

realism, via the Lettrists and Situationist Internationale, and on to Land Art and the work of Stalker, among others.<sup>7</sup>

Urban walking, in particular, has both freedom and the charm of disrepute. Rebecca Solnit, in her magnificent book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, writes that:

*The history of both urban and rural walking is a history of freedom and of the definition of pleasure. But rural walking has found a moral imperative in the love of nature that has allowed it to defend and open up the countryside. Urban walking has always been a shadier business, easily turning into soliciting, cruising, promenading, shopping, rioting, protesting, skulking, loitering, and other activities that, however enjoyable, hardly have the high moral tone of nature appreciation.*<sup>8</sup>

Solnit has started a list here, and I can't help but think of more synonyms for walking (skip wander plod sidle gambol stride march mince saunter mooch stalk amble) and of how walking becomes a performance and bodily attitude, a mimetic response to both internal mood and external terrain. So what then is it for a woman to walk in the city, a queer woman, a queer woman essayist and architecture critic? What is the role of judgment here, of evaluation, of description, of narration? These are things I seek to discover, in a series of walking writings that meander, pulling things in my wake (books, ideas, images, people) in an ongoing project, a continuing fascination, of which the essay that is promised though not yet written here is another instantiation.

### **On Being 'Brave'**

A disquieting moment: I receive the comments back on a paper I have submitted following an open call for contributions to an edited book. The call has asked explicitly for speculative, experimental, open-ended texts, perhaps even radical ones, and I have taken the opportunity to submit something rather windy and loose, not heavily embroidered with footnotes, just

referential enough to establish its own credibility without being weighed down by scholarship. The essay is, as usual, written in the first person, and reflects on my own experience, and that of others of my acquaintance, as they live variously unconventional family lives within conventional housing stock: the accommodations and constructions that this brings, the effects of normalization on various modes of 'queer' subjectivity and elective family, of our lives within buildings.

None of this is in itself disquieting – I am not worried about my own paper, which to my eye is a fairly commonplace exercise in reflexive academic writing, taking theoretical ideas and locating them in the minutiae of the actual life of actual people. But I am disturbed by the referee's comments, which describe the paper as 'brave, autodidactic, insightful and very well written'. Why autodidactic? What aspect of it seems self-taught? But more importantly, why 'brave'? To my eye, it isn't brave at all – it's one of my more tame efforts, and nowhere near the level of risk or self-exposure that other writers are willing to advance. The fact that it seemed not brave to me, and yet brave to the reviewer, is alarming – is there something I am not seeing here? The corollary to courage is foolhardiness. Am I being brave, or stupid?

I do not think of such work as brave, nor do I particularly want it to be, or at least not if this 'brave' is, as I suspect, a synonym for 'exposing' or 'confessional'. Writing in the first person, and with a certain presence of the authorial persona in the text, might be described as 'brave' in the sense of bending the conventions of scholarly writing – but only to someone for whom that was risky to the point of problematic. 'Brave' might also be used here in a murkier sense – it might be brave to 'out' myself as part of a sub-altern group, to undermine my own authority or status, to damage my own credibility as a scholar by being overly partisan, overly personal. This would be brave in the eyes of one who did not share that same status, or one who wouldn't dream of relinquishing their 'higher', normative status within a text – which is, in my books, not brave. I've been reading Maggie Nelson, who

quotes Sara Ahmed: 'The moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you.'<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore: 'well written'. What greater condemnation could there be? All style and no substance; pretty words and no content; a confection. The icing without the cake.

### **Something Afoot**

I have written three papers about walking over the past ten years, three essays about walking, writing, place and subjectivity, each of which can be seen as a prelude and promissory note for a fourth essay, as yet unwritten, here being conceived.

The three existing texts each explores a distinct urban context: respectively Stockholm, Sydney and Brisbane. They build upon one another, quite explicitly, each addressing a different set of ideas within a larger constellation examining walking as a critical-aesthetic practice, how this intersects with a queer feminist embodiment and subjectivity, and hence also authorial position and voice; how the sensorium and human body can be framed as a perceiving instrument, taking account of the built and natural environment and their entanglements; and how an author can register such experience in writing – as craft and literary art, as well as scholarly argument, framed within genres, tones, styles, voices and conventions of its own.

In all this I follow Jane Rendell, and her exploration of 'spatial stories' as the 'kind of thinking that corresponds to walking, one that follows an itinerary, keeps up a certain pace and remains in constant motion, moving from one thing to another, engaging only in passing'.<sup>10</sup> Rendell links this to historical movements in art and philosophy, theory and architecture, seeing the spatial story as 'a theoretical device that allows us to understand the urban fabric in terms of narrative relationships between spaces, times, and subjects'.<sup>11</sup>

Each of my three texts is a narrative, yet falls very distinctly within the essay form. They assay, try out, go forth, come back. They are works of creative non-fiction; they are experimental (to varying degrees); they are personal, while trying hard to be neither sentimental nor confessional; they seek to locate ideas and insights (both theoretical and experiential) within space and time, and string it all together with the enforced linearity of a walk – a circuit, a loop.

The three essays are in various degrees of completion – the first two already published (one in a journal of architecture theory, the other in an interdisciplinary journal of feminist and gender studies research), the third a complete but arguably failed draft, as yet unpublished.

### **Three Walking Essays**

The first of the essays is about a Stockholm walk. Titled 'If on a Winter's Day a Tourist',<sup>12</sup> it is an account of being a stranger and a tourist in Stockholm, of the experience and novelty and thrill of walking, throughout the course of a single day, through the city in the cold, and also (perhaps incongruously, perhaps not) a kind of emplaced erotics of urban space, enacted via homage to a different scholarly essay and its authors – Eeva Jokinen and Soile Veijola's essay 'The Body in Tourism', and particularly their device of a dialogical conversation between an 'I' and a 'you'.<sup>13</sup> Part of the pleasure of the essay is its bending of genre conventions, its quasi-fictional, semi-magic-realist weaving of scholarship and quotation into story, as the scholarly literature was integrated into the experiential account, quite literally emplaced in the landscape as described.

The second essay is about a Sydney walk. 'Writing the City, or, the Story of a Sydney Walk' is, as the name suggests, an account of a walk around Sydney, but this time as a prodigal return – of one who has lived in the city but then left and returned, noticing the changes, in a narrative suffused with melancholy and loss.<sup>14</sup> In the essay this walk, too, took place in the course

of a single day, and was equally threaded through with interpersonal affect – as the narrator walked a circuit of the places she had known and lived, going to visit her former girlfriend while waiting for her new girlfriend to finish work. At the level of structure, the text followed a pattern of alternation – flipping or stepping between descriptive (theoretical) and discursive (radically empirical) modes. The meta-narrative was a reflection on the previous, Stockholm essay – on the process of writing and producing it, on producing and performing experimental writing and the effects of this, on feedback from friends and colleagues and audiences and also, crucially, from editors and anonymous referees, as it was stitched and re-stitched into a scholarly paper. This second paper was thus an instance of ‘research on research’, an abstracted methodological reflection, which was nevertheless grounded in the specific details of a later, specific walk.

The third essay is about a Brisbane walk. Titled ‘To Work, on Foot: The Sensuous Mobility of a Slow Commute’, it addresses a different city again: Brisbane, a sub-tropical city in the north of Australia, where I was living at the time of writing in 2014. While adhering to some of the structures of the other two papers (a single walk, presented as an account immersed in the minutiae of the city, thickly described, reflecting on other theoretical and conceptual questions in the space and time of a pedestrian journey) it was also an important departure. For one thing, it deliberately addressed what I called serial walking – a commuting walker’s path, retracing the same track, or deliberate variations of it, to the same destination, day after day, hence opening on to questions of familiarity and habit and, importantly, the *ordinary*.

The first two papers met with some small degree of success, or response, or at least to the extent that most papers meet success these days, when dropped into the void of academic publishing. But I have come to think of this third paper as a failure, and as potentially revealing in this failure, since it is unclear to me still whether it failed because of an impossibility in

the conception, an incompatibility in the proposed venue of publication (a scholarly journal of geography – not foregrounding the artifice of research and writing per se – focussed less on form and more on content) or perhaps an inadequacy in the writing and the writer (the inability to trans-mogrify such ‘ordinary’ material into something transcendent) or perhaps a simply insufficient amount of observation, not enough empirical research in the form of walking and looking – to provide the necessary ‘material’ that would make the essay succeed. The consideration of these questions may, indeed, form the basis of the fourth and succeeding paper, which is yet unwritten, and is here promised, elided, absent.

### **The Third Person Is Not I: The Queer Author, Queering Authorship**

To write academic essays in the first person is to be political. As a matter of principle and also politics, I make a point of framing my authorial voice as subjective, and my knowledge as particular to a given place and time and circumstance, interpreted quite openly and explicitly from a given standpoint. This is an ethical stance – making transparent the construction of knowledge, its specificity and individuation, its particularity. Also it is a feminist stance – writing women, or a woman, or a *queer* woman, into the corpus of architectural knowledge. But it also implies a particular mode of connection with a possible reader or audience: a collapsing of the cold disembodied distance of the third person universal, instead inviting the reader in, deliberately inhabiting the live body of the author, projecting the timbre and tone of a particular, intimate, authorial voice.

This has me wondering about queer authorship, and the possibilities of queering authorship, and the ways in which intellectual work and scholarship in architecture might (continue to) be queered through authorial register, which is to say writerly voice, or style, or perhaps even *orientation* in relation to disciplinary conventions. Such a mode might value the experiential and fleeting, the subjective and affective, the material and erotic, the trivial and radically specific, the incursion not only of the author into

the text, but the circumstances of the writing, the *now* of writing intruding into the *then* of the text. It might embody a certain scholarly polyamory, a certain promiscuity of genre, a bending of scholarly conventions – not as an outright rejection of them, but as a stretching and deformation, almost but not quite to the point of rupture.

Such a mode might imagine scholarly writing as itself a kind of flirtation (as per the work of Brady Burroughs) – using quotation and citation and reference and concepts of influence as a kind of elaborate mating dance, like that of the crane or flamingo or some other tall and stately bird, bending and flexing, its state of frolicsome excitement sublimated to the rituals of the form. It could be a romance, it could be a means of solicitation.

Such a method might be idiosyncratic. It might take the feminist dictum of the personal being political to a foppish level of exaggeration. More than merely seizing first-person subjectivity, such a mode might revel in the personal, shuttling between the genres of essay and memoir, fiction and non. Furthermore, it might present a very particular kind of first person – a snuffling, stuttering, curious, amorous, embodied, highly specific kind of character, part fact, part fiction, all construction. It might mean a certain inhabitation of the authorial persona, perhaps even an *occupation* of the first person, a camping out, a demonstration, a seizing of that place for the queers, for those of us on the margin, those who look askance.

Because: just as I myself have never been 'normal', likewise I have never presumed to occupy the scholarly third person as an authorial voice or stance. I was never normal, I was never universal; the third person never spoke for or through me and I never presumed to speak in and for it. I did not presume to represent others, but only and histrionically myself: with a radical (perhaps self-absorbed? perhaps narcissistic?) degree of subjectivity. I always stood outside the implied 'we' of the scholarly text – that we was not I. The third person universal is more than a voice, it is an autho-

rial position, a position of authority, from which the non-universalist person (the queer person, the woman) is always already excluded, or begrudgingly included.

Normative scholarly authorship, standard scholarly conventions, the universalist authorial position, is challenged by the queer individual and her always already 'other' authorial voice or persona. Queer subjectivity seems to lend itself to the contravention of conventions – writerly and otherwise. Perhaps there is something interesting in that: in the very weakness and contingency and specificity of a particular, single voice, telling stories. The trivia of it all. That's enough.

- 1 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, edited with an introduction by Jeri Johnson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993 [1922]).
- 2 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1996 [1925]).
- 3 Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (London: Granta Books, 1997).
- 4 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, translated by Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998).
- 5 Alison Stenton, 'Spatial Stories: Movement in the City and Cultural Geography', in: Clare Bryant and Susan E. Whyman (eds.), *Walking the Streets of Eighteenth-Century London: John Gay's Trivia* (1716) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 62-73.
- 6 Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
- 7 Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2005).
- 8 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2001), 173-174.
- 9 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2015), 22

- 10 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 188.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Naomi Stead, 'If on a Winter's Day a Tourist: Writing the Phenomenological Experience of Stockholm', *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 14 (2009) no. 2, 108-118.
- 13 Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen, 'The Body in Tourism', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 11 (1994), 125-151.
- 14 Naomi Stead, 'Writing the City, or, The Story of a Sydney Walk', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 18 (2010) no. 4, 226-245.