

Strange Meetings: The Manure is Leaking into the Text

Sanna Samuelsson

Abstract

When writing about places deemed irrelevant by society, one is blessed with a certain aesthetic freedom. Instead of viewing the pastoral as an abstract, a standstill, one can explore the crawling details, abundance and totality of that landscape. This text combines theoretical reflections, drawing on Édouard Glissant and Joyelle McSweeney, with prose excerpts by Sanna Samuelsson. The text is written from inside the pool of manure, from within the writing of a novel and its associations and connections between fictional and false, language and knowledge, sexuality and power.

The novel—its ends and beginnings—is a mere notion invented to force novelists to stop writing at some point, which saves them from exhaustion as well as social and financial death. But the text and the world in which the narrative takes place have no final form, no essential concept that can be easily framed. Thus, it is up to the writer to shape a constructed story, to force a frame onto the text in order to make it digestible and in the end sellable and marketable.

The text in itself is endless, has no edges. It is a pool of manure, leaking, trickling through the layers of the earth, fertilising the roots of the wheat and the weed, but also, at some point, poisoning the ground water.

While initially I was working intuitively with these subject matters, gradually I have found theoretical concepts to be important tools in the editing process. To turn and look back at the body of the text with the eyes of theory somehow makes that body seem less lonely, less insane. Thus, I came across the term “necropastoral”, coined by the poet Joyelle McSweeney, who writes:

I give the name “necropastoral” to the manifestation of the infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral.¹

The necropastoral is the antithesis of the pastoral landscape imagined by Marie Antoinette at her fashionable mock farm, *Le hameau de la Reine*. There, the queen fashioned the village and the farm to replicate the ideals of classical painting. But parts of the courtly village were indeed burned down during the French revolution, which complicates the idea of the pastoral as a place where nothing changes or “happens”. The necropastoral, as McSweeney describes it, has to do with endless beginnings, eternal endings. She sees this as a zone where

exchange takes place, rather than as a standstill:

Never inert, the necropastoral is defined by its activity, its networking, its paradoxical proliferation, its self-digestion, its eructations, its necroticness, its hunger, and its hole making, which configures a burgeoning textual tissue defined by holes, a tissue thus as absent as it is present, and therefore not absent, not present—protoplasmic, spectral.²

The above brings to mind what Édouard Glissant writes about the periphery, the archipelagos, and locality: how the totality is made up of smaller parts, of details, and how the details can be divided into even smaller parts.³ Influenced by Glissant, I also want to insist on the specificity of every identity and place. I want to delve deep into details, into the dissonances of the story, insisting on the places and people that the centre (meaning those in power) has deemed irrelevant.

As a writer I'm concerned with the connections between fictional and false, fact and fantasy, invention and lie. The sheer impossibility of certain lives in certain places creates a certain freedom for the text, where I am able to play with weird connections and associative states. Thus, I am trying in my writing to create a queasy and uncomfortable rhetoric on sex, power and capital, on the rural and the periphery.

While walking by a wheat field I can see rows of rolling wheat, heads nodding in the wind. Every head has its grains. The grain consists of several parts: the bran, which protects the endosperm, which contains the energy, and the germ, which stores the nutrients. The root of the plant contains a zone of elongation, which is protected by a thick root cap. The zone of elongation grows by mitotic cell divisions and cell elongation. And each cell consists of smaller parts, like the membrane, the cytoplasm and the nucleus.

Similarly, each text has an endless number of layers, which are all divisible into endless fragments and smaller parts. Thus, the text has no end and no beginning. We can only decipher parts and variables, sample the polluted ground water.

However, the narrative is also a merger of details, the totality to which Glissant refers.⁴ The totality is necessary for these details to meet and merge, to encounter each other and sprout.

The activity in the pool of manure might not be visible to the eye, but is as matter of fact as language. The manure creates fumes from the heat of the fungus and bacteria that are processing the tiny particles. In Swedish this natural process, the thermophilic stage, is simply referred to as the manure "burning" (*gödslet brinner*). Slowly this process transforms the heap into something more solid, something like a novel.

The Milking

(excerpts)

Aphids can gather on a beautiful brush of thistles and just sit there, in colonies. They latch onto the plant's nutritional system and feed. They don't need men. They can produce twelve offspring a day by cloning. The children immediately seat themselves beside their mother and begin to suck as well. Some of them are born with small babies already inside their bodies. They carry themselves, in themselves, outside of themselves. Hold each other's paws when the downy thistle roars disgruntledly in the wind, purple, thorny. But the aphids stay where they are, they don't know any better. They cling on, always, more than anything. They don't have time to move.

They may have understood something inside their tiny downy aphid heads that we don't understand.

*

My breasts swelling beneath the palms of my hands, I feel the glands thicken, the nipple widen, the ache. This is what happens when you are ready to suckle. When you are ready to put your teat into someone's oral cavity and accept that need.

In the lavatory of a job I once had there was a sign saying to feel one's breasts often, to do it in the shower, to lather up and look for lumps. The cancer can come at any time and one of the symptoms is redness, swelling, pain. Many lop off their breasts and go without, and it's not the end of the world. Maybe it is for them but that is their private world, and there is a difference between outer and inner worlds. They can be separated, at least in theory.

If one breastfeeds with cancer, the child's saliva can have a healing effect and make the cancerous cells wither and die. But the cancer can also plant itself in the child's mouth, become a shared cancer, from mother to child, and back again.

The milk seeps from my breasts, wetting the sheet underneath me.

*

These days hand milking is only done when the cow has mastitis. When this happens the udder becomes

ulcerous and the milk cannot be sent to the dairy. They measure the bacteria in every shipment of milk so there is no point in cheating. But you still have to milk the cow, or it falls ill.

In the course of conventional dairy farming you can fill the cows with antibiotics to prevent the recurring cases of mastitis. With organic farming other solutions must be found, as the use of antibiotics is limited by law. But you still have to milk the cow, or it begins to howl. But the constant milking also produces infections. The cow is overmilked, it never ends. Calf after calf, litre after litre of sweet white frothy milk.

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Aphids, also known as ant cows, can get lucky and be adopted by ants. The ants watch over the aphids in exchange for milk, or honeydew. The contracted working ants patrol the colonies of aphids like real farmers. If an animal of prey, like a ladybird, shows their ugly face the ants attack and chase her away. Then they continue to milk their cows.

If the plant that the cows are sitting on begins to die, the ants lift them onto their strong backs and move them to a healthy plant.

When in the fall the aphids grow tired of cloning themselves and lay eggs, the ants carry them into the anthill to hibernate. Then, in the spring, when the brook trills and the blackbird bellows its hello they carry them outside again and place them on a newly sprung plant.

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I am out walking again with my restless legs. I stop at a meadow belonging to one of the neighbouring farms further off. A cow is lying down in the mud, alone; the herd has already left her and moved on out into the pasture.

When I get closer I notice something remarkable. The cow is sipping on her own teat. Her knees are sunk into the ground and the thick udder is white, veiny and downy, leaning against the gravel. She bends her neck at an

unnatural angle and is just able to reach. She is an eternal figure eight, closed, the system perfected. She no longer needs to move, but can just lie there and suckle, digest, produce milk forever. She has cracked the code.

She doesn't look up at me as I stand there watching her. Doesn't even react to the dog, standing agape. Heavy cow-eyelids shut, lashes fluttering. The cow looks occupied. And suddenly it feels too intimate to stand there watching her, so I walk back home.

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Some ants have systematised it to the point where they simply move the aphids into the anthill. There, in the ants' barn, they are milked heavily while they feed on roots in the ground. They stay there for their entire lives. The ants comb their tousled fur with their hands and lick their heads the way they prefer.

And when the aphids want to transfer to their winged phase and fly off, the ants tear off their wings and throw them on the ground. The ants know they are better off inside the anthill. And the aphids cry with gratitude and shame.

Excerpts from *The Milking (Mjölkat*, originally in Swedish) translated by Kristina Hagström-Ståhl.

Footnotes

1. McSweeney, Joyelle. *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2014. p. 3.
2. McSweeney. 2014. p. 4.
3. Glissant, Édouard. *Relationens filosofi: Omfångets poesi*. Christina Kullberg and Johan Sehlberg (trans.). Göteborg: Glänta Produktion. 2012. p. 28.
4. Glissant. 2012. p. 29.