

When You Are a Writer

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When you are a writer you sometimes play roles; as a writer you attribute yourself the role of a character you have given rise to in a work of literature.

The reason might be that you need to test the lines. In order to sense what the character says. To hear the sounds of what you write when you put the words in your own mouth, as opposed to when you vaguely form an idea of how the written might be staged on a scene, or in a film.

As a writer, therefore, you are, at times, an actor lacking both stage and audience, but having immediate access to the text with its narrative, dialogues and possible surfaces for reflection.

It all might be about managing rhythm, intonation, or similar linguistic flows appearing in the author's mind during the writing process. The actors too might enter the text, be devoured by it, lose or find themselves in it.

But when you are a writer you don't give a damn about your surroundings. Context does not even exist when you are devoured by writing. Or you just take for granted that the world outside understands that a process is at work. People in your most intimate vicinity have, after all, got to know you as a writer. For other parts of the surroundings it is possible you appear as nuts, psychotic, but this can happen to anyone at any moment: among people you can appear as something you are not.

Nobody cares, as long as you have not become a real menace, for yourself or others.

When you are a writer you can no longer be exploited. I think I got this idea from James Baldwin. A writer cannot as we have learnt from several intellectuals let themselves be controlled by any state, religion or family in the writing process. This does not mean that a writer must fall into a position of a lawless outcast.

However, in order to be able to write we must be able to imagine people, and relations between people, who transgress lines for what is seen as fitting (appropriate) within a particular configuration of power.

The voices that are activated in writing must be explored in solitude, something that may be thought of as impossible (as long as you don't interpret that idea as needing to be explored with a certain distance). The voices need to flourish and be incorporated in the text on their own terms.

As a writer, when you write about someone maybe about a diabetic falling in love with his own disease, a son of an international con priest, an intellectual visiting his dying brother, or a refugee who is trying to convince an author to write his story who has certain similarities with yourself, it is quite difficult for others to understand the difference between fact and fiction, truth and fabrications, between the writer and the portrayed (fictional) writer's life. Sometimes it is not only difficult for others to understand the difference, it might be difficult for the

writer to know when he is himself (the same old person he used to be before he started to write), and when he inhabits the fictive character's role.

Think of Marguerite Duras' famous words in her essay "Writing"^[1]

To write.

I can't.

No one can.

We have to admit: we cannot.

And yet we write.^[2]

So what is it in writing we are not able to do when we are writing? Obviously we are writing. We are writing, but we know it is not possible. And when it happens, we don't understand how things fall into place. We don't know what it is and why (which is felt in writing).

The impossibility of writing consists of an inability to say what we are writing. We can't say what it is we are writing when we are writing it. Not even when we have finished writing, as writers are not the best readers of their own work.

Contrary to the kind of "truth teller" who always make themselves appear as if they know what they speak about, a writer works on things active in a clandestine, hidden, or subterranean world things we do not know, or things we do not know yet.

"It's", according to Duras, "the unknown one carries within oneself: writing is what is attained. It's that or nothing. [...] Writing is the unknown. Before writing one knows nothing of what one is about to write."^[3]

Well, you might know something but what you know is not what makes you write.

In "The Art of Fiction", an interview from 1984, James Baldwin speaks about the distinction between being a writer and a preacher (having experience of both):

The two roles are completely unattached. When you are standing in the pulpit, you must sound as though you know what you're talking about. When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.^[4]

What we, according to Duras, are not *able* to write, things that yet makes us write, turns in Baldwin's words into something we do not want to write but which forces us to write. It may be external conditions or an inner urge; both have to do with a process of emancipation.

Susan Sontag too has attested to this experience of fiction as a place where you are at risk of being in contact with painful feelings and things you do not want to discover and experience. Fiction, she claims, is, in contrast to writing essays, something very dangerous.^[5]

The Dangers of Writing

But in what way is writing novels or fiction writing in general dangerous? What kind of violence does the art of fiction harbour?

I have often attempted to understand such lines of thoughts in relation to my own work of writing.

There is, for instance, a scene in *Broder*,^[6] in which the first-person subjective narrator or, more exactly, one layer of the subject that is made present in scenes and memories, reflections on writing scenes and memories, transcriptions from the divan, and, finally, in graphic black block pages intertextually reflects on a passage I wrote in a previous novel, *Svindlarprästen*,^[7] in which certain truth claims are made regarding the portrait of my father.^[8] The narrator in *Broder* recounts an experience of gaining insight in, and a view on, something horrible, which is traced in the portrait of the father. It deals with a hit-and-run accident in Kenya: the father hits a cyclist and drives away from the accident as his mistress, fearing consequences, urges him to do so. In the scene in *Broder*, in which the subjective narrator reflects on what he wrote in his previous novel, it is confirmed by the brother (Kimo) of the narrator (I) that the event was not merely fiction; it really happened. The only difference was that it was not the son (Haqi) but his brother (Kimo) who sat in the back of the car when it happened.

“Yes,” says Kimo in *Broder*, “it sounded as if he drove over a stone, do-donk, ‘don’t stop’ she screamed, I guess he turned into lion or hyena meal.”

Is this the kind of violence that is at stake here? Is it the fact that a writer of fiction is at risk of becoming aware of painful life experiences that is the danger here? Who wants to know that your own father hit a person with a car and leaves him to die? Who wants to hear from his brother a detached reflection that the guy probably ended up as food for wild beasts? Who wants to realise when you least expect it that what you write is not fiction but the truth?

One of the dangers with fiction is that you can become aware of things you did not know, things you do not want to know. But there is also another aspect of the danger of fiction that needs to be addressed here: the violence of writing. One of the dangers of writing is its inherent violence.

To write is to be violent. Writing is violence. There is no literary writing that leaves the world as it is. Writing is even more violent when it makes truth claims, literary claims of describing the world in forms of autofiction, or biofiction.

Feelings of discomfort, disgust and nausea over the power of words are all symptoms of this sort of violence. The truth claims even in form of thick descriptions can be questioned. As they are not doing justice to things. After all, justice is what we seek.

The fact that writing ends in violence is not incompatible with our quest of doing justice. It is only that we know that we when it comes down to it will be able to do anything but justice. No matter how dear truth is, there are other things we love: fiction, the art of writing, and, even more so, the secrets we hide in our hearts.

The violence that resides in writing consist of a playful game between truth and fiction. It consists of a struggle with the unknown, what we do not want to write, something of which we are always reminded in writing; something that explains why we write even though we do not understand it ourselves, before it is too late.

A writer's fundamental question is: is violence inescapable in every attempt of doing justice?

Is this not the question writers such as Duras, Baldwin and Sontag struggle with? Duras says she has never lied in her writings. If this was not meant as a joke, she might be speaking about a form of truth that is only possible in literature.

Is there such truth? What is the form of this truth? How does it differ from other kinds of truths? How does it enter our lives?

Who Are the Unreachables?

In my novel *Onåbara*^[9] the fictional subjective narrator (Lateef) is a homosexual refugee from Damascus hoping to convince a nameless Swedish author to write his story of (what he describes as) a glamorous gay life in the Middle East.

When I wrote this book, at Hôtel Chevallion in Grez-Sur-Loing, I long thought the title should be *The Writer*, as it is more focused on aspects of writing than on the refugee, or the idea of giving voice to an experience of gay life in the Middle East. The fictional writer *in* the novel who is not to be confused with the author *of* the novel is only seemingly interested in writing the story the subject is carrying, hoping to be brought to light.

In the novel the reader can follow the refugee during his first period in the new country, which orbits around how to convince the author to write his story, but is also about memories, loss and love.

(Modification: in fact, it is only on the surface that he tries to convince the writer to write down his story. On a deeper level it is activating the question on how he can urge himself to write, to become an author.)

After a seemingly infinite time of waiting, towards the end of the plot, the refugee gets in touch with the writer again and he regains hope that his story will be written. However, things do not develop as expected, there is no happy end. Without saying too much, I can say that the novel ends with a betrayal. Despite the fact the writer has shown interest in the refugee's story of love in glamorous gay communities in Cairo, Damascus and Istanbul, he has to Lateef's disappointment initiated another writing project in collaboration with two other informants, two refugees who carry more sinister and violent stories on their flight from Syria. The writer is hoping they will give him information and inspiration for a more marketable novel on returning IS warriors.

This is all part of the fiction. Writers often lie when they speak about their writings. Or they do not always remember things they wrote. I do not lie when I say this is fiction. Let me say something about what is not fiction.

During the work process in the pre-fictional reality I have as a writer often been inspired by people I have met over the years, some more than others. I have also been inspired by other writers, artists, filmmakers, philosophers, poets, or just things that occur in life. As happened one day when a refugee from Syria came to my office with the proposal that I write his story, an offer I had to decline, knowing that he must tell his own story in the way he wants to tell it.

Once, on another occasion, I was observing a woman at a local restaurant in a church frequented by retired seamen. She was obsessed with a porcelain horse figurine rearing itself at the top of a shelf. Her fascination was material (stuff, *stoffage*) for a character in *Pappersgudar*^[10], a play I wrote for Angereds Teater. Another play I co-wrote with Johannes Anyuru, *Förvaret*^[11] is also partly based on stories people working or living inside a detention center have shared with me.

A few years ago, I started to work on a children's book with my then four-year-old son. Sami comments on what I write, and I write what he comments on. He has also created lines in the narrative not fully aware of the context in which they are situated. One night he told me he had dreamt about a conversation he had with a friend, Lykke, about who owns the beach.

Stories that I have been told spawn new ideas that are inserted and modified in my fictional texts. In some cases I do not modify the narratives; letter and other documents, for instance, are often left as they have appeared to me, verbatim. Sami said he had dreamt:

"It is not the lighting house who owns the beach, but the sea. It is the sea who owns the beach."

I will provide no more quotes here, as there is no need for confessions in literature. However, in *Svindlarprästen*, the novel on my father, his voice was not only documented through letters and interviews with journalists, but also written down in police interrogations that took place even long before I was born. In *Broder* I was working in a different way, with a high degree of writer's presence moulded through different layers of the subjective narrator.

When you are a writer you are not interested in truth on the level of commentaries, reports or documentaries. Writers care even less about news value. It is the unknown that bothers us.

And in my case, as far as I can see, it seems as if I try to seek out a deepening understanding of the nature of fraud, deception and betrayal. Many of my stories take their point of departure in other people lying, in fabricated stories and self-delusion.

Is there anything in our time that has been given as much attention as the refugee crisis the lies about it, and the alleged lies that refugees are guilty of themselves in order to obtain privileges of the West?

Quite naturally, in opposition to contemporary xenophobic currents, many artists, writers and activists have taken the role of giving voice to the wretched of the earth, to speak out on their behalf.

Is there a sort of industry for victim narratives in which violence and affliction are at the core?

The fictional writer in *Onåbara* is obsessed with the need for stories of violence, misery and similar narratives surrounding affliction. In a way I understand him, that writer: I share his impulse that when you hear about the violence there is a need to narrate.

The other day I met a beggar from Romania who was set on fire while asleep in his tent. I was reaching for my pen. And now it is noted here, many months after it happened.

However, the idea of the writer as a fire detector, or smoke alarm, is alien to me. The problem is not that this kind of alarm sounds far too late, after the house has been set on fire. The problem is also that the signals drown other voices, the minor narratives that might not extinguish fires, but contribute to the fire not spreading.

Footnotes

1. Duras, Marguerite, *Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2011.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.
4. Elgraby, Jordan, "The Art of Fiction. An interview with James Baldwin". *The Paris Review*. Issue 91. Spring 1984. Available online at <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/james-baldwin-the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin> (Accessed 2020-01-06).
5. Susan Sontag quoted in Motturi, Aleksander. *Broder*. Stockholm: Norstedts. 2017. p. 190.
6. Motturi, Aleksander *Broder*. Stockholm: Norstedts. 2017.
7. Motturi, Aleksander. *Svindlarprästen*. Stockholm: Norstedts. 2012.
8. Motturi, *Broder*, p. 263 and further.
9. Motturi, Aleksander. *Onåbara*. Stockholm: Norstedts. 2018.
10. Motturi, Aleksander. *Pappersgudarna* [The Paper Gods]. Angereds Teater, Gothenburg. Premiere 2011.
11. Anyuru, Johannes. Motturi, Aleksander. *Förvaret*. Göteborg: Glänta Produktion. 2007. Premiere, December 11, 2009 at Stadsteatern, Gothenburg.