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## Writing drawingly: A case study of multimodal translation between drawing and writing

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<http://www.routledge.com/9781138324435>

PUBLISHER

Routledge

VERSION

P (Proof)

LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Norwood, Tamarin. 2019. "Writing Drawingly: A Case Study of Multimodal Translation Between Drawing and Writing". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/10320611.v1>.

# 8

## WRITING DRAWINGLY

### A case study of multimodal translation between drawing and writing

*Tamarin Norwood*

#### Introduction

This chapter offers an anecdotal account of a particular method of “half-blind” drawing (part i), from which a novel method of writing is derived (in part ii). This process of derivation can be understood as a form of multimodal translation in which a drawing method (the original “text” being translated) is extracted from its original mode of drawing and reconstituted in the mode of writing, producing a method of writing “drawingly.”

The writing that results from this method is, for academic writing at least, formally and structurally unusual. Vertical ticks appear in the body of the text where digressions present themselves during the act of writing, and the possibilities of these digressions are drawn out and explored further along the text, creating linked lines of textual fragments that feel their way down and across the page. As they feel their way, these lines closely probe the object of the writing so as to gradually reveal its contours, in much the same way that the tip of the pencil probes the page and the eye probes the object in drawing. As Jean-Luc Nancy observes, the object of a drawing is sought and gradually found through the gradual formation of its image on the page (Nancy 2013, 10). Through this process, he writes, one arrives at an idea of the object that one had not formed and could not have formed before the drawing began (10). This enquiry and gradual encounter is played out on the surface of the page, the “formative force” of each exploratory venture leaving on the page a visible record: a material concretion of the process that formed it (Nancy 2013, 12). I propose that writing produced drawingly can likewise be read as the material residue of the search it has undertaken; a residue produced almost incidentally to the process of writing but kept nevertheless, rather like the gestural line kept on the page of Tristram Shandy after the flourishing movement of Corporal Trim’s

stick (Sterne 1978 [1762], 743).<sup>1</sup> Here, process – in writing as in drawing – takes precedence over product.

Can the same be said of the particular process of multimodal translation I have employed? Has the translation process taken precedence over the text it has produced? Reflecting on his approach to translating Derrida's *What is a 'Relevant' Translation?*, Lawrence Venuti chose to adhere "as closely as possible to his French, trying to reproduce his syntax, lexicon, and typography by inventing comparable textual effects – even when they threaten to twist English into strange new forms," while balancing this strangeness against the need to maintain "a level of intelligibility and readability" for the English-language reader (Venuti 2001, 173). Committing to a process of writing drawingly demands a similar balance between writerly intelligibility and close adherence to drawing praxis – only the prospect of twisting the writing into strange new forms presents itself more as an opportunity than as a threat. Open to this opportunity, my approach to translating between drawing and writing shares the myopic and closely probing perspective of the pencil tip that Derrida associates with the movement of the blind man who, in order to move at all, "must *advance*, advance or commit [himself], . . . run through space as if running a risk" (Derrida 1993, 5). Once I had identified the character and features of the half-blind drawing method, and established the methodological parameters they implied for writing, what remained was to *advance* – to run the task of translation as though running a risk – and thus, returning to Nancy, to arrive at something that could not have been formed before the drawing (or the translation) had begun. In this way the text in part (ii) is not only the residue of a myopic writing process but also of a myopic translation process too: a process of translating "drawingly."

Through this process the form of the writing, adhering as closely as possible to its origin in drawing, is indeed twisted into strange new forms. The experience of writing the text, which I hope is mirrored by the reader's experience of reading it, was an effort of concentration not unlike my pencil's close pursuit of the life model's contours as they were interrupted by the junctions of his fingers, knuckles, and forearm in the anecdotal description that follows. Every detail of these interruptions needed following along their length until they gave way to the next digression and the next, and only in this way did a picture of my object – in drawing as in writing – gradually take shape on the page.

If the example of multimodal translation in the present chapter is a process of translating "drawingly," can we look further into the praxis of drawing for new ways of analysing the translation process? As the writing in part (ii) myopically felt its way across the surface of the page, questions of multimodal translation were not in sight and were never explicitly addressed. But the reader interested in the subject of translation will no doubt encounter junctions of my text that draw her attention towards digressions of her own, and by following the path of such associations that "arise in the mind unbidden," she might arrive at a picture of translation that, following Nancy, had not formed before her reading had begun.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, the body of the life model might be imagined as an original "text," with the pencil sketch its translation into drawing. Following the path of this

association, one might consider whether, by presenting his body in multiple poses, the model is offering multiple readings of his body, and whether each view of his body is a new reading of the same text or a new text altogether. One might follow the path further still and ask whether the eye of the artist moves across the body of the model as the translator's eye moves across the body of the text; and further still, to ask whether artist and translator similarly aspire to a perfect correspondence of eye and hand, rendering their intervention perfectly imperceptible and their translation, or their drawing, perfectly equivalent to the original. And given that perfect equivalence is unattainable in drawing as in translation, one might probe further still, to seek in examples of translation practice the crisis point John Berger so often encounters when his drawings near their completion, when he "begins to draw according to the demands, the needs, of the drawing" (Berger 2005, 8). If at this point the drawing is "in some way true," he goes on, "then these demands will probably correspond to what one might still discover by actual searching. If the drawing is basically false, they will accentuate its wrongness" (8). Can the same be said of a translation?<sup>3</sup> One could go on, creeping further and further along this and other wandering paths that present themselves in the analogy between drawing and translation.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, what emerges from the writing process is a depiction of this point of contact as a myopic, wayfaring, and pathbreaking movement provoked above all by a desire on the part of the person drawing to draw up, use up, or consummate her object in the laying down of a graphite line. It is a movement depicted as slow, sensitive, yielding, and almost caressing, but also duplicitous in the way it approaches its object, seeming to caress it with the closeness of its touch only to capture it and, in capturing and pinning it onto the page, to obliterate whatever had been so uniquely ungraspable about it.<sup>5</sup>

If drawing is indeed an embodied impulse to caress and capture its object, taking in the risk of obliterating that object's uniqueness in the process, can the same be said of translation, or at least of the example of translation offered in the present chapter? In translating it into a method of writing, have I approached my original text – the method of drawing – with the softness of a yielding caress that conceals the threat of obliteration and, if so, what is left of the original text? To these questions I would respond by returning to Derrida as he dramatises a personal account of drawing: "it is as if, just as I was about to draw, I no longer *saw* the thing. For immediately it flees, drops out of sight, and almost nothing of it remains. . . . It blinds me while making me attend the pitiful spectacle" (Derrida 1993, 37). The object's flight at the very moment of its capture is, in the pitiful spectacle of drawing and perhaps also of translation, what guarantees the life of the original even after its contours have been captured (always imperfectly, if caressingly) onto the page. Left unconsummated at the conclusion of the drawing process is the "ineluctable presence – the thingness of the thing" (Schwenger 2001, 102) that remains untranslatable but is described by the search left behind on the page by the myopic and committed advance of the tip of the pencil, the tip of the eye, the tip of the translator's task.

## i

Rolled up on my desk lie several scuffed sheets of cartridge paper holding the drawings and notes I made over a couple of autumn months four years ago. I had joined an evening life drawing class because I never seemed to draw anymore. I have not looked at the drawings much since, but I remember the class well.

Each session opened with a couple of very quick poses, then some five- or ten-minute exercises focusing on light, tone, or line, and then work would begin on a final half-hour pose. Before embarking on this final drawing, we were reminded of how to mark up our pages to avoid making errors of measurement or composition that might only surface when it was too late to correct them. We should hold out our pencils against our view of the model, horizontally and then vertically, and use these impromptu rulers to measure with our thumbs a set of relative heights and distances between landmarks about his body: shoulder to knee, for instance, shoulder to toe, and head to navel to hand. The task was to plot this network of points onto the page and elaborate them into a composed and proportioned image that should resemble, in the end, what each of us saw of the model from where we were standing.

The drawings I produced in this way always seemed to lack something, and it took me a while to understand what. Certainly I was out of practice, and to look at, the drawings were not all they could have been. But it was not a problem of looking; it was a problem of touch. The drawings lacked what I realised I must have come to the class to enjoy: the soft fur and scratch of the lead with the grain, the time spent against the page, the tugging and coaxing and scraping of form – there was none of this. Instead, before the encounter had even begun I had constructed an invisible apparatus of sight-lines to articulate the gap between the model and my eye, and between my eye and hand and page: an apparatus that hardened the network of landmarked points and the features between them, extracted them, shifted them through the air and delivered them onto the paper. The apparatus seemed to get in the way, or seemed to thicken the air and make that get in the way, with the effect that the model's body and my drawing were held apart by the very lines of sight that were meant to bridge them. The pencil darted about in the air like a scalpel or a beak, pecking at the paper rather than burrowing into it, and without those sensitive and spontaneous excavations, drawing with a pencil didn't seem such a compelling thing to do.

When I went back the following week, I drew in a different way. I looked only at the model, and never once at the page, until the drawing was done. I continued to work in this way, half-blind as I thought of it, for the rest of the drawing course. It was engrossing to draw like this. It seemed to seal up the gap between the object and the page and the eye, contracting all the imaginary apparatus into one point of contact that sees, measures, and marks in a singular probing act which, best of all, is always only the burrowing activity that engages me most about pencil work.

The way I worked was to plant my eye at some point on the skin of the model and at the same time plant the tip of my pencil at some point on the empty page, which from then on would refer to the corresponding point on the model's skin.

Now paired against their surfaces, the eye would begin to root its way across the skin as the pencil began to root its way across the page. The tip of the pencil became the tip of the eye – a groping proboscis feeling its way about the soft form of the object and seeing only the little dot of its surface presently under description by the very end of the lead. As the eye moved, so did the pencil, as much as I could manage, and in this way the eye navigated the page by means of the blind point of the pencil, and drawing proceeded without my ever looking at the page nor ever losing contact with its surface.

Some weeks I would try to make the drawing resemble the model, and to do this I needed to be more strategic. Once paired against the page and the model's skin, pencil and eye had to move exactly in time with one another, because if either temporarily slowed down or sped up, inconsistencies of scale tended to be introduced. If they both moved too quickly, details might be missed that could not be revisited for correction later on, because I would be unable to find the place again. Every detail needed attending to at the very place and time it was first encountered. Burrowing about the surface of the page, the tip of the pencil maintained contact with the model's body only by the contact it maintained with the paper, so if it came detached from the page, the body and the drawing would drop out of sight and could not be retrieved.

Sometimes I was able to adjust marks laid down very recently and very close by. It turned out to be possible to retrace a route just taken provided the muscles of my hand could remember the last few flexes of the fingers or the last adjustment of the wrist, and were able to repeat this sequence of movements in reverse. The memory of the hand offered a couple of inches of revision – a second or so – and this redress could be put to use strategically. For instance, I might find the junction between the model's knuckle and fingers comprises five paths short enough that each finger can be traced onto the page with each return trip to the knuckle brief enough and swiftly enough that the muscle memory of my drawing hand can render it all quite well. But it would be a different matter at more complex or multiple junctions of his body. What would happen when the forearm intersected the collarbone, escalated into a hand of its own and then needed returning to the collarbone to intersect it a little further along, such that the positions and angles of the arm and the remaining length of collarbone looked uninterrupted by my foray through the hand and back again? The muscles of my drawing hand would fail to remember a procedure as complex as this, and tides of error would be introduced. The form would end up flayed across the page, elements pivoting through one another at every junction. I would try alternative strategies: crawling the pencil along in a series of branching advances and retreats, or choosing the routes that might be salvaged by muscle memory and attending to them together, then accepting as inevitable that regions with sparse detail will disorient the pairing of pencil and eye, creating regions and contours that are irregular or indistinct; and that any route I choose might leave whole islands altogether unreachable and corresponding gaps on the page.

I began to bring thread and masking tape with me to the classes, and later on bluetac and drawing pins, too. With these I would construct lines, regions, and points to

guide my hand as it moved blindly about the page. It meant I would spend the first few minutes of each pose preparing the paper, estimating the centre point and marking it with a drawing pin, or taping thread onto the drawing board to bisect the page horizontally and vertically and give me four quadrants into which I could divide my composition. Sometimes I would measure the model with my thumb held out against my pencil, as we had in the first class, and plot certain landmarks on the page in blutac before I began to draw, so I could elaborate the reference points later on by touch. The more intricate the apparatus, the more accurate a picture I was able to draw, and with practice I learned to obtain a drawing that quite closely resembled its object. The tip of my eye and the tip of my pencil were still paired as before, and they would still move about their respective surfaces in time with one another, but now my hand was obliged to the guides as well and had to get used to subtly stretching time or stretching space by speeding or slowing its movement. The correspondence of hand and eye had lost its closeness. It had become only one of a complex of correspondences that included the skin of the model and its relation to the flatness of the page, my memory of how I had divided up the page and its relation to my view of the model, and how all of these related to the feel of thread or other apparatus that would sometimes, unexpectedly or otherwise, cross my path. By this stage I had noticed I was losing interest in assembling these ever-more complex guides. There came a point, I felt, that I might as well just be looking at the page.

★

Throughout the life drawing course I was engrossed, I believe, in the experience and sensation of drawing. But at the same time I was gripped by the detail of the drawing process. Every little aspect of the process seemed to me a completely new invention, and moreover seemed to bristle at every turn with obscure significance, as though every aspect were a metaphor for something unknown, or at least not visible from where I stood. Perhaps if I could stand somewhere else I would be able to see. Perhaps this is why I was so anxious to store in my memory every peculiarity of the process: the strategies, restrictions, and obligations, the precision of the matching of pencil and eye and surface and skin, and the ranging of touch and sight – what was missing and what was there in excess. Perhaps I wanted to store them so that I could be among them again at another time, from another vantage point. Whatever the reason, these reflections nagged and nagged at me until the effort to remember them, and the anxiety that I might forget them, began to distract me from the drawing altogether.

When this happened, maybe two or three times in the course of a half-hour drawing, I would stop work, scribble a note at the right-hand edge of the page, and then resume drawing. *Braver lines*, reads one note: *through space, | launching forth, | not blind | in the dark*. Coming across such notes now, a few years after they were written, it is difficult for me to recall what I must have meant. In some of the notes, this difficulty is compounded by the handwriting, which is scrawling and ambiguous: was it *launching forth*, or *launching form*? *Not blind*, or *not island*? In any case I remember how these scrawls were put on the page. When I needed to write something down,

I would fix my eyes very keenly on the model's skin and, without moving the pencil from its position on the page, I would feel my way towards its tip with my left hand, which until then would generally have been propped at the top edge of the drawing board to keep it steady. The left thumbnail would press against the tip of the pencil, oriented in the direction of its movement, and then, eyes still fixed in place, the pencil could be lifted up from the thumbnail marker and away from the page. From here it was easy enough to feel with my right hand the right edge of the page, scribble the words, locate the thumbnail again, and go on with the drawing in the direction indicated by its orientation. It took a greater effort of concentration to hold my eyes exactly still throughout the operation, and perhaps they did wander a little without my noticing. Little gaps or interruptions in the line were no doubt also introduced when I made these notes, but these were a small price to pay if I could shed the distraction of trying to keep everything in mind.

But it would accumulate again, and more than once I stopped drawing altogether and left the studio early so no more would come. On the walk home, drawings rolled up under my arm, I would try to go through everything that had happened, and once home, with the drawings laid out across the table, I would consider everything at a pace I found acceptable: slowly and uninterrupted by the generation of even more.

★

Of course more comes anyway, even now that no drawing is going on. It seems to me that all this work has yielded two kinds of forms: the visible forms marked in pencil on the page and the invisible forms of the processes that had created those pencil marks. Both kinds of form tend to germinate and become increasingly proliferate the more time I spend with them. I can look at the marks on the page and identify the body parts I have drawn, even if some are ambiguous or sparsely described. But if I study patches of pencil marks close up, or squint and take in whole compositions at once, I can also see resemblances of things I had never knowingly drawn, like seeing particular pictures in clouds or blots of ink, but more concerted somehow. If I look at it long enough, the scribbled joint of a knuckle, for instance, resembles a copse of trees, then a root system or a junction of roads, then a clump of eyes or mouths or parts of ears, and now foliage again. One image shifts into another, sometimes swiftly and sometimes gradually and partially, so that distinct pictures might coexist or temporarily borrow one another's parts. But the same is true of the other kind of forms – if form is really the right word to use – the invisible impressions and ideas that have collected around the drawing process. Although I cannot see their forms, they are palpable enough to grip hold of in my imagination, and I can spend time with them. As I squint and scrutinise them, I have found they bristle with resemblances in just the same way as the configurations of pencil they left on the page. The moving tip of the pencil becomes the tap of the seeing eye of a white cane, for instance, which taps a line or taps a reservoir that leaks and spills, or it grazes the surface of the ground at the risk of harming its ocular membrane, which becomes the scratched tip of the pencil again,

and so on. These invisible forms and their analogues move through and across one another in my mind, coexisting, borrowing one another's parts, reinforcing, changing, and tempering one another as I watch. As they continue to proliferate, the bonds between them multiply and thicken and spread out, attaching to one another at the edges and from inside. One idea splits into many more, each of these diverting through paths of their own, some closer, some further away, some vanishing only to reappear, strange and familiar, later on.

It seems to me, as I write, that these resemblances are to be taken seriously. If I can follow their proliferation I might hope to approach whatever kernel they circle around. There is no directing the course of their growth, but there is something familiar about the way they grow that leads me to the looming impression – a kind of heavy inkling – that they are all describing the nature of the very tip of the pencil and the particular kind of contact it makes as it moves about the page. Just this tiny thing. A dot. I am surprised it has enough mass to pull me towards itself.

## ii

A theologian loses his sight |. He learns to make his way | to work |. By sound, smell, the movement of air on his skin | and the tap of the cane against the pavement he learns to track his position on the ground with some precision. Meanwhile, his mind is in the air, so to speak, picturing himself as a moving point on a memorised | map of the route. As long as he can keep his movement along the ground and on the map in time with one another, he knows where he is. It becomes difficult when the two topologies suddenly cease to correspond. An obstacle on the pavement can throw him off course completely. With the white cane, he can move around small obstacles without losing his bearings, but with larger or more complex obstructions it is a different matter. A car parked across the pavement, or worse, one car after another parked at unexpected angles, are structures that risk introducing tides of error into his course as he tries to follow their perimeters back to the route he is taking. Turned through all these angles, he might still know more or less where he is on the memorised map, but not which way he is facing | (Hull 1990, 90–91).

**Loses his sight.** His story reads like a parable, although the lesson it teaches is unclear.

**He learns to make his way.** I imagine he *makes* his way more than I, who can see, make mine.

**To work.** The object(ive) of his drawing. His walk produces not the line of his movement but his arrival at work.

I wonder if his account sounds the way it does – conversational, open to possibility, feeling their way – because it is composed in the moment of speaking.

Then again, perhaps I hear these qualities in his account only because I know he spoke it into a tape recorder.

I would like to know if he spoke to an imaginary listener as he recorded, or just to the tape.

**Memorised.** I watched a film once of a child's sight being restored. While he was blind he would race around the house, every orienting marker – doorknobs, lampstands, the plant pot on the windowsill – landing at his fingertips just as he expected. These were his pivots, and he would ricochet from them and navigate his home with reckless precision. The film showed him running down the stairs and out of the door, excited to get to the hospital for the procedure.

Once home from the hospital, his restored sight seemed to blank out what he knew about his surroundings. He stumbled and tripped, his turns were miscalculated, his feet and fingertips weren't where he expected them. He had to learn to make his way around all over again.

Blind, bind

Many years ago I heard a woman on the radio telling the story of her grandmother leaping and dancing arabesques through the fields as a little girl, delighted that the proud day had come for her feet to be bound. The irony is so concise I now find myself wondering if I had misremembered, and it was fiction after all.

Was it Emily Prager's short story "A Visit from the Footbinder" (Prager 1999)? It describes much the same thing happening, only it was set in the China of 1260 and the child scampers around a palace, not the countryside, while her elder female relatives shuffle and walk with canes. Her story was criticised for perpetuating "the opposition between Western observer and Eastern 'object,' reinforcing a readerly politics of domination" (Newman 2007, 6).

Exotics, erotics, "visual erotics allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable" (Marks 2000, 184).

"The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This 'not knowing,' this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come" (Levinas 1989 [1947], 51).

**Which way he is facing.** There is a game children play. One puts on a blindfold and is spun around and around by the other children, slowly to begin with and then more quickly until she no longer knows which way she is facing. As she begins to stumble, the other children flee and she runs after them |, hands outstretched, following the sound of their voices until she has caught each

one – or else gives up, unties the blindfold, and restores herself to sight. She knows that the knot is within her reach and she can untie it at any time |, but she also knows that if she does it will bring the game to an end.

***The other children flee and she runs after them.*** Imagine all the children leaving traces of their movements on the ground, or a video camera set above them and the aerial view of their movements faithfully transcribed onto a page. The task of translating movement into mark would demand not only copying the lines of each child's path but drawing something about their speed, the certainty with which they place their feet, the work of their hands and eyes. It would be easy to identify in such a diagram which child wore the blindfold and which were free.

***She can untie it at any time.*** “*Naturally his eyes would be able to see. But they are blindfolded . . . not naturally but by the hand of the other, or by his own hand, obeying a law that is not natural or physical since the knot behind the head remains within a hand's reach of the subject who could undo it. . . , as if he chose it, at the risk of a fall |*” (Derrida 1993, 13, emphasis original).

***Fall.*** I have wondered whether he means “fall” in the biblical sense too, when things were first lost to words.

One of my half-blind drawings troubles me. It's not the fact that the leg looks mauled and out of joint that offends me (after all, the jaw looks fractured and pulled away from the skull and I don't mind this); it's that the leg looks wrong in the wrong way. The rest of the body is compelling, precise, sensitively explored, and the many anomalies resulting from my blindness on the page coax from the body a heightened sensitivity of its own. She seems to be lost in thought. Then a leaden foot is planted, her only contact with the ground, the pencil ragged now and nearly blunt. It gets the spacing wrong, and the spacing looks all the more wrong because the angles are fairly right. I know I drew the legs last. Perhaps I had lost interest by then. Perhaps I knew by touch or sound that the lead had got too thick and its lines would be bad for the body, but I wanted the body complete, so I went through the rest without much care.

Then again, perhaps the trouble is not the drawing but the fact that I'm looking at it. Perhaps the trouble is that I'm looking at it and wanting it to look good.

The tip of the pencil is something like an eye moving along the surface of the page |. With a focal length of nil, it watches the black deposit of graphite dragging | from its tip and adhering to the page, seeming all the blacker because there is no light to see by at such close range. There is always only this | black. Whatever it draws | onto the page, however the speed and orientation of the line might change, the little spot under the scrutiny of the pencil's eye varies very little at

all. The surface of the eye collects scratches | and marks as it grazes | the page, of which some must surely damage its sight | – sight so blunt it is nearly touch |, sensing nothing of the ground behind it or ahead |. To see what lies ahead it must commit to drawing forward into the dark, to running through space as if running a risk |.

**An eye moving along the surface of the page.** Derrida imagined what the pencil might see, pressed so close to the page, and he found it deeply myopic. From the “aperspective of the graphic act,” the stylus is blind both to the form that precedes it (the thing it sets out to draw) and the form that follows it (the drawing that will appear on the page) with the result that it sees nothing but the immediate present of its “originary, pathbreaking moment” (Derrida 1993, 45).

**The black deposit of graphite dragging.** “Here |, to trace is to find, and in order to find, to seek a form to come (or let it seek and find itself) – a form to come that should or that can come through drawing” (Nancy 2013, 10).

**Here.** Here, on this page, too.

**This.** This, the black of this ink, too.

**Whatever it draws.** Or writes. Imagine that when you write there is always only this black: the myopic tip of the pen, or the short-sighted eye of the I-beam cursor, blinking (I . . . I . . . I . . .).

**The surface of the eye collects scratches.** I wonder if it hurts.

And if it hurts the page as it grazes the surface.

**As it grazes.** “Consider the cows, grazing as you pass by; they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, they eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so on from morning until night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see; for he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, but he cannot help envying them their happiness – what they have, a life neither bored nor painful, is precisely what he wants, yet he cannot have it because he refuses to be like an animal” (Nietzsche 1997 [1876], 60).

### **Some must surely damage its sight.**

“Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur  
das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind  
wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt  
als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.  
Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers  
Antlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind

wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts  
Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das  
im Tiergesicht so tief ist.”

*(With wholly open eyes a creature sees/the Open. Our eyes alone are as if  
turned about and wholly ranged about/as traps that shut its clear way out off.//  
We sense what lies outside from animal/countenance alone; newborns even/we  
turn about and force them on their backs/see artifice and not the Open, set/ deep  
within the animal.)* Rilke 1997 [1923], translation by Anton Viesel

**Sight so blunt it is nearly touch.** As he constructs an analogy between drawing and blindness, Derrida writes less about the absence of sight than the presence of touch. The stylus is a staff of the blind that feels its way, providing a tactile proxy for sight, and the fingertips grope about the page “as if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had grown right next to the nail, a single eye, the eye of a Cyclops or one-eyed man”; this lidless eye is “a miner’s lamp” whose light makes inscription possible. Throughout his account of blindness, the conflation of movement, touch, and sight is never out of reach (Derrida 1993, 3).

**Sensing nothing of the ground behind it or ahead.** “Proceeding on our way things fall into and out of sight, as new vistas open up and others are closed off. . . . Thus the knowledge we have of our surroundings is forged in the very course of our moving along them” (Ingold 2007, 87–88).

**Running through space as if running a risk.** Derrida describes the blind men in the drawings of Antoine Coypel. “Like all blind men, they must *advance*, advance or commit themselves, that is, expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk. They are apprehensive about space, they apprehend it with their groping, wandering hands; they draw in this space in a way that is both cautious and bold; they calculate, they count on the invisible. It would seem that most of these blind men do not lose themselves in absolute wandering” (Derrida 1993, 5).

Of the many allegorical drawings of blind men | in *Memoirs of the Blind*, some move forward alone, with no cane and with arms outstretched, fingers groping ahead | of themselves. They are deeply closed into the dark, into the touch of the immediacy of the place: a picture of exquisite closeness | and excess of sensation |. This must be a kind of wandering, and it is portrayed as nothing good |. The blind men in these pictures have in their minds’ eyes not a map of their surroundings but a hope of sight restored. This is why these men are drawn: to show the miracle of vision, coming into the light, the salvation of enlightenment |.

**Allegorical drawings of blind men.** There are many such drawings printed in *Memoirs of the Blind* (Derrida 1993, 5).

**Fingers groping ahead.** Ahead. “To anticipate is to take the initiative, to be out in front, to take (*capere*) in advance (*ante*). Different than *precipitation*, which exposes the head | (*prae-caput*), the head first and ahead of the rest,

anticipation would have to do with the hand. The theme of the drawings of the blind is, before all else, the hand. For the hand ventures forth, it *precipitates*, rushes ahead, certainly, but this time *in place* of the head, as if to precede, prepare, and protect it. . . . Anticipation guards against precipitation” (Derrida 1993, 4).

**Exposes the head.** Sometimes, wearing a scarf on cold days, it occurs to the blind theologian that he could equally go about with his whole head covered, not just the lower part of his face (Hull 1990, 53).

“And so with my forehead I ran against the wall thousands and thousands of times, all day and all night long, and I was glad when I banged myself bloody, for this was proof that the wall was beginning to harden” (Kafka 2007 [1931], 165).

Vertiginous somersault, perilous freefall, bang your head bloody, graze your eyes.

**A picture of exquisite closeness.** For example, Antoine Coypel, *Study of the Blind*, Louvre Museum. How wide open is his eye, how much surface it has.

**And excess of sensation.** “I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details” (Borges 1985, 104).

**Portrayed as nothing good.** The blind lead the blind into a pit: underground. Luke 6:39.

**The salvation of enlightenment.** Laura U. Marks writes about touch and the occlusion of sight and points out that lacking sight does not mean lacking insight. She writes that the analogy between seeing and knowing depends upon a conception of sight roundly questioned by the feminist and phenomenological lines of thought that support her account (Marks 2000, 133). Because it can perceive over distances, she writes, sight has come to be understood as the sense most separate from the body, the most cerebral and the most suited to objective observation, in contrast to non-visual senses consequently thought of as natural, prediscursive, or not cultivated (132). And from there, the disembodied, all-seeing eye of vision has become associated with the objectifying gaze that propagates a separation between subject and object (162). There are other ways to attend to this separation, Marks writes, if we can approach it by means of insight brought about by the occlusion of sight (191–93).

No roots are put down when moss grows |, so patches can be lifted up and gathered with the hands or by sliding a trowel just underneath the surface of the soil. It is sometimes possible to pull it up in handfuls, like pulling hair, though this is a delicate manoeuvre which must be done slowly so that you can monitor the many resistances of the rhizomes it nests in the soil and vary the direction of your movement so you tear as few as possible. You can hear the low sound of fibres breaking in the soil as you

tug. Once collected, the fragments can be held in the palm of the hand | and carried to the garden |, where they can be arranged on ground prepared in advance |. Once positioned, the surface must be watered deeply and pressed down by treading over it with your feet, and if necessary, patches should be held in place with vertical metal pins |.

**No roots are put down when moss grows.** Moss is a rhizome. “Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point. . . . It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills. [Its] lines, or ligaments, should not be confused with lineages of the arborescent type, which are merely localizable linkages between points and positions” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 21).

**The fragments can be held in the palm of the hand.** Held in the hand, a tuft of acrocarpous moss resembles a small rodent |, and can be stroked from nose to tail.

**Resembles a small rodent.** “A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog” (Schlegel 2002 [1798–1800], fragment 206).

Appraising the way the fragment was used by the Jena romantics, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy expand upon “what should be called the logic of the hedgehog” (1988, 44). Fragment 206, they write, compares the fragmentary work to a “*small work of art*,” having an individuality and totality of its own, but being “neither directly nor absolutely the Work” (43). Because it is a genre of plurality – that is, “to write the fragment is to write fragments” – an individual fragment is both complete in itself and indicates the completeness of the whole of which it is part (43–44).

**Carried to the garden.** You could leave moss where you find it on the forest floor and still cultivate it. I wonder, then, whether it would still be the forest floor or a garden.

**Ground prepared in advance.** To cultivate a moss garden from scratch, the area must first be cleared of all vegetation and plant debris, the land smoothed to encourage branching and rhizome attachment, and contoured if necessary to eliminate any small depressions that might collect water. The surface soil must be loosened slightly with a rake just before the moss is laid down, to help it make contact with the ground.

The area cleared and smoothed, and lightly raked: I think of the presuppositionless starting point Edmund Husserl described when he began to work on phenomenology (1970, 263). Imagine lightly raking the surfaces of certain phenomena and lightly raking the surface of the mind that might brush against it.

Imagine these surfaces bristling warmly in a manner that is almost feline, the way a cat presses the arch of its back against your hand to redouble your caress as you stroke it.

**Held in place with vertical metal pins.** The “logical and organized garden,” writes Jyrki Siukonen, is an enclosed place, familiar and cultivated – the place before the Fall – and it stands in contrast to the unorganised, hostile, even sublime forest with its limits unknown (1996, 2). “Attempts to understand the forest with the logic of gardening,” he writes, “are doomed to fail. Gardening is, especially in its domestic forms, something that can be learned from books, while in the forest you need knowledge that can only be learned by *living in the forest*” (2). In the forest “lies the root of poetical knowledge,” something which, like intuitive knowledge, resists being clearly understood by logical thought (2). He describes one such effort as an attempt to “clear away all obscurity and create an organised and reliable system of knowledge . . . by cutting off all ‘overgrown’ branches and end[ing] up with a tree of knowledge pruned into exact mathematical shape, like those seen in formal gardens” (3).

A film by Shauna Beharry, *Seeing is Believing*, shows a photograph of a piece of fabric, shot | at very close range (Beharry 1991). The closeness means the shot is often out of focus, and is very dark indeed when the lens makes contact with the photograph. When the image is dark, it becomes grainy and even harder to see. | Watching the video, most of all you are aware of surfaces: the surface of the lens, of the photograph and of the fabric, of the screen upon which the video plays, even the surface of your eyes. | Of watching the film, Laura U. Marks writes: “I realize that the tape has been using my vision as though it were a sense of touch; I have been brushing the (image of the) fabric with the skin of my eyes, rather than looking at it” (2000, 127). Each surface is pressed so near to the next that there is never enough distance to see the whole of any object, to understand its geography, to understand the route being made across the terrain. You see it so closely that it evades your vision, but neither is there anything to touch. |

**Shot.** Words also murder things (Schwenger 2001).

**Grainy and even harder to see.** Beharry is “using video to show the limits of vision” (Marks 2000, 112).

“The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle, and the sensation is so bizarre it has something of a rooster’s horrible crowing” (Bataille 2001 [1963], 66).

**But neither is there anything to touch.** Marks writes about haptic visuality in the context of diaspora film and video, where the haptic answers a longing to return to the sensual experience of inhabiting an environment you have left behind. Where you can no longer touch the skin of a loved one, she argues, you can use the lens to engage with the touch of skin while engaging with the absence and incommunicability of that touch. The touch of lens against fabric is what makes the fabric inaccessible to sight: it is “so engaged in the present that it cannot recede into cognition” (Marks 2000, 191). Meanwhile, as much as haptic images “might attempt to touch the skin of the object, all

they can achieve is to become skinlike themselves” (192). In this way haptic visuality affords a way of knowing that “implies a fundamental mourning of the absent object or the absent body, where optical visuality attempts to resuscitate it and make it whole” (191).

The films and videos she describes create the conditions for haptic visuality in order to inspire “an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision”: to acknowledge its unknowability, and keep its unknowability intact by establishing a relationship not of mastery but of mutuality (191). In this “bodily relationship between the viewer and the image,” “it is not proper to speak of the *object* of a haptic look as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image” (164).

Our neighbour had always been blind. He knew the roads around us very well. I believe the maps in his mind were drawn not from the air but from the ground: a series of memorised cues that told him the story of his route as he encountered them one by one. On the way home he would arrive at his gate, walk half a dozen steps further to our gate next door, tap it with his cane, and then turn back to his own gate and push it open. It was a habitual gesture, as practised and perfunctory as turning a key in a lock, but however briskly he seemed to execute the move, he would never omit it. Our gate must have been the final orienting cue.

On a page of *Tristram Shandy* a fictional | Corporal waves his stick in a flourishing gesture of freedom and spontaneity (Sterne 1978 [1762], 743). The gesture itself is not quite free nor exactly spontaneous; it is an expression of these qualities, exerted upon the air to complete a spoken utterance about how freely a man can live outside the confinement of marriage.

**Fictional.** Ingold’s description of the line indulges the fiction of the novel, imagining Corporal Trim’s gesture really to have preceded that of the author who simply copies it: “Like any other gesture, the Corporal’s flourish embodies a certain duration. The line to which it gives rise is, therefore, intrinsically dynamic and temporal. When, pen in hand, Sterne recreated the flourish on the page, his gesture left an enduring trace that we can still read” (Ingold 2007, 72).

But Trim’s flourish is not like any other gesture. It is imaginary, and at some point in the process of its being imagined it is drawn over with the near-identical gesture of the one who imagined it. I wonder which is more real, the imaginary line of the flourish or the visible one on the page? I wonder which came first: whether there really was an image of the Corporal’s gesture in Sterne’s mind first of all, which he faithfully transcribed onto the page; and if so, whether it was an image of the line he was to draw, or an image of the movement he was to make. When he saw the line on the page, was it new

to him? Otherwise, perhaps the author slipped through the surface of the fiction for a moment, so to speak, and embodied his character, and the pen embodied his stick. He might have propped his manuscript upright on an easel, adjusted his grip on the pen, readied himself, and then struck: a performance.

In any case, once the line was on the page: then, afterwards, that was how the Corporal had moved his stick.

But which way around are we to imagine it? Are we to imagine Trim standing on our side of the paper, facing away from us towards the page; or facing towards us, in which case he is behind the page, or within it, so that the page contains him?

What about the inhabitants of the empire depicted in Umberto Eco's imaginary map on a scale of one to one (Eco 1995)? If such a map should be spread out to cover the entirety of the terrain it depicts, are we to imagine the inhabitants of that terrain walking about underneath the map and consult it by looking up, or walking about upon the surface of the map, consulting it by looking down? In the latter case, as Eco points out, they would "in reality, inhabit the map" and not the terrain at all (98).

Imagine the impossibility of producing a translation on a scale of one to one, its surface so similar to and so closely overlaying the terrain of the original text that the two are all but indistinguishable. A translation so perfect it need barely exist.

What would be left of the original text? Would it degenerate, or at least be altered, by so close a translation, just as a terrain closely covered by the surface of its map would gradually deteriorate for lack of sunlight and precipitation (Eco 1995, 98)? And if so, just as the map would cease to faithfully represent the terrain as its ecology of adapts to new conditions, would the translation likewise begin to fail?

I imagine tapping a gate as you might tap a tree: drilling a hole into the surface until the sap begins to bead and drip, and then inserting a spile to direct the fluid down the line. Or tapping the skull to alleviate pressure, or tapping a line to listen in. He taps the gate, extracts from it his route and takes it home.

## Notes

- 1 Indeed, might all writing be read in this way, to varying degrees?
- 2 Peter Schwenger explores the generative potential of "pay[ing] attention to images that flicker so briefly at the borders of reading that we are scarcely aware of them" and his reminder that "associations arise in the mind unbidden, so that it is almost never possible to read at the denotative level alone" (2012, 25, 30). His account of reading, here informed by jazz improvisation as much as literary theory and cognitive science, has much

- in common with the tensioned myopia and digressive expansiveness of writing (and reading?) drawingly.
- 3 Can the same be said, indeed, of analogy between drawing and translation, of which certain paths of association might be “in some way true” and others “basically false”?
  - 4 Developing the possibility that certain lines of enquiry might be more “true” or more “false” than others, Schwenger provides an insightful discussion of the “uses” and “pleasures” of any reader’s “superfluous associations” in the reading of any text (2012, 27).
  - 5 This characterization of drawing bears resemblance to the Biblical story of the origin of language, in which Adam’s first act of naming transforms a thing into the object of a speaking subject. Naming the animals of Eden “nullified them as beings on their own account” (Hegel 1979, 221) and assimilates their being with the human conception of that being. Schwenger outlines the tensioned relationship in literature between the desire to capture and the risk that capture might “murder” its object (2001); alternative strategies for keeping the unknowability of the object intact by establishing a relationship not of mastery but of mutuality through the caressing look of “haptic visuality” in film and video are considered by Marks (2000).

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