

Paper and Burlap

[Paper]

Creating on Paper. Leaving traces. I think of paper as a snowy landscape---the newly born one after an entire night's snowstorm, full of potentialities. Making the first mark on this snow-covered landscape of the tabula rasa is the greatest challenge.

How to create something that possess life? Grab Medusa's head and transform the lively subject full of its innate inner turmoil and memories into stone, a crystallization, so that it could be revealed, presented? The attempt to capture life, to eternalize it, also kills life in various degrees during the process. Perhaps, the writer's ordeal and innate duty is to fight against forgetfulness, the kind and equally cruel snow, that attempts to numb and cover our inner landscapes. Paper is that battleground. It is also the material that emancipates us from isolated experiences, as it specifies the afterimage of our experiences and fixes it as a permanent record, to be shared with other---consisting of both facts and data that are firmly anchored in memories, and the *Memoire Involontaire* (involuntary memory), beautifully expressed through Proust's example of the madeleine. Paper collects the tiny and almost neglectable drop of essence within the vast structure of recollection, waiting for their moments. The paper metaphor appears again, when Deleuze talks about the Japanese paper metaphor in Proust, that opens under water and releases the captive form and the sensuous impression.

Related to our discussions is the science fiction by Marlen Haushofer *The Wall*, which chronicles the life of the last surviving human on earth, who awakens one morning to find that everyone else has vanished. Being the last human on earth, her first impulse is to record her experiences since the day of the mysterious catastrophe, despite naturally assuming that there will be no readers. At one point, she finds the pencil and paper to be insufficient materials to carry this experience of abnormality. The I-narrator has remarked on the estrangement when she writes down her report in human language and human words. She dreams instead of a more perfect writing such as tracing her dreams in the moss or the snow with a stick or a stone. She has also commented that “Writing is all that matters, and as there are no other conversations left, I have to keep the endless conversation with myself alive. It will be the only report that I shall ever write, for when it is written there won’t be a single little piece of paper left to write on in the house.”

The discrepancy between the most traditional medium of writing on paper and the idea of tracing dreams in the moss or the snow with a stick or a stone demonstrates a certain genealogy of language, which is also the genealogy of the world. The “thing-in-itself” can be captured through the most direct form of writing with the moss or the snow, the stick or a stone. While the later process of writing things down with paper and pen embodies the “standing for” relation, a series of imitations that modify the original in modality.

As Caroline Fowler tracks the paper routes across the early modern world, to the point that we are so accustomed to it as if it’s the air we are breathing—crucial yet easily neglected, the Wall

imagines a reverse history tracing back to when paper is no longer the sole material on which the narrator depends. The fact that paper and narration matter so much even in a post-human world shows exactly how they mark the boundaries of what it means to be human.

Personally, paper means a lot. Sincerely speaking, reading and writing, holding paper, inhaling its unique odor, and touching the subtly different texture have always been my saving grace. My grandpa practiced calligraphy and would mail me a piece of poetry written in ink calligraphy each year since I left home back in 2016. The paper is XuanZhi, or rice paper—soft and fragile, like a veil. I have always been extra careful with this type of paper, afraid to leave a tear or a mark. It's mesmerizing how something so gentle and fragile as paper could potentially change the world.

[Burlap]

Metaphors and things in themselves. The paragraph that I love the most this week is the following “The rough hands meeting rough material is a skin history: a history of campesinos and illiteracy and dispossession and conversions and assimilations and impoverishment written into the hands weaving a bed, a blouse, a life. My grandmother weaves my father's petate.”

Just for a second. Forget the big words. Concepts. Literary analysis. Menacing philosophical terminologies. Metaphors that tempt the senses and offer false truths at times. Burlap could narrate history on its own, and it is a method of doing history in itself: the history of the rubbing -clout, linen. It tells a history of the campesinos, the neighbors, the people that the author loves

deeply. It tells the history of the petate that's tough and sturdy, like the body the sleeps on it and the hands that weave it. It tells a bigger history of hurt, of clothing fashioned from roughly hewn sacking that the enslaved Africans wore. It's in the sandbags during storms and hurricanes. It is also a scent, an atmosphere that the author is worried about. It's associated with violence and burlap hoods.

Though not an architectural memorial, burlap may serve similar functions, located at the intersection of personal and collective memory of generations. At once natural and artificial, simple, and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are lieux---places, sites, causes---in three senses----material, symbolic and functional.” (Pierre Nora) It's a site simultaneously transmitted the emotive dimensions of memory and inspires us critically.