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Embodiment, Virtual Space, Temporality and Interpersonal Relations in Online Writing

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss how online seminar participants experience dimensions of embodiment, virtual space, interpersonal relations, and temporality; and how interacting through reading--writing, by means of online technologies, creates conditions, situations, and actions of pedagogical influence and relational affectivities. We investigate what happens when seminar participants (mostly doctoral and postdoctoral level students) reflect phenomenologically on the meaning of a human experience (phenomenon) that fascinates them. In writing online, participants are engaged in a spatial complexity of virtual experience: the space of the text and the space of the computer screen--these yield access to a non-physical space lying somewhere between the here and the there. We propose that Blanchot's early work on the imaginal space of the text provides a way of perceiving and raising questions, and a new way of understanding the nature of scripture and orality in technologized contexts and relations of teaching and learning.

"Anyone writing on a fully equipped computer is, in a sense, directly linked with the totality of symbolic expressions…. Digital writing, because it consists in electronic signals, puts one willy-nilly on a network where everything is constantly published. Privacy becomes an increasingly fragile notion." (Heim, 1987, p. 215)

We examine the phenomenon of online writing, not to advance the cause of online writing but ultimately to better understand the experience of writing itself. Here we use the term "online writing" to refer to the experiences of participants of international online seminars dedicated to exploring the nature of phenomenological inquiry. All the seminar interactions were conducted through online technologies: we were only present to each other through writing and reading each others' words on our computer screens--using media such as webboard and email. In this paper, we use the term "webboard" to refer to any private (password protected) online message board environment that allows participants to carry on asynchronous, threaded discussions. In fact, we used a collaborative message board system called WebBoardTM, but we could have equally used the discussion facility of BlackBoard, WebCT, or Moodle. Thus we employ the term webboard generically, much as we use terms like "email" or "web browser." Email refers to sending and

receiving messages over the Internet regardless of whether we use Eudora, Outlook or gmail; we may similarly speak of accessing the Web relatively indifferent to the browser we use as interface.

Since phenomenological reflection proceeds largely through writing, we decided to take a reflexive course on our aim to explore writing. By the end of the seminar we presented the participants with a list of prompts that provisionally thematize the experience of writing. The prompts included statements such as:

1. The domain of writing is multi-spatial: my desk, office, thoughts, words, textorium, cyberspace
2. One writes for (no-)one (Cixous)
3. The space of writing is not an originarily intelligible space (Derrida)
4. The space of scripture is there where reflection goes to find itself
5. Writing turns the glance toward the unnameable, the 'there is'— the il y a (Levinas)
6. The "I" of the writer loses interiority, becomes exteriority
7. The space of the text (writing) is the "dark" (Blanchot)
8. There is darkness before the dawn of (in)sight
9. Writing lets no-thing (experience/meaning) appear as some-thing (words/text)
10. Writing is proceeding without a map: darkness is method

These prompts were partly derived from reflections on our personal experiences of writing and partly from phenomenologically relevant literature that we explored or that we referred to during the seminar. We asked the participants to select from the roll any theme that resonated with them and to write an account that captured a writing experience. This paper is a reflection on the experience of the space of digital writing, including the sense of self, other, text, and such phenomenological dimensions.

How do people develop a sense of the identity of the other online participants when almost all interactions or conducted through writing and reading words on the screen? As a beginning, all online participants of two online seminars (who were scattered across countries such as Japan, Greece, Sweden, China, Australia, Denmark, Canada, and the US) were asked to describe their writing space. This request served as a means for the participants to introduce themselves by describing aspects of their immediate landscape and personal world. And it provided us with a means to open up the question of the space of writing online. Almost without exception, all seminar participants initially interpreted this request literally: they described their immediate physical surroundings. For example, Kenji writes,

I am sitting in my kitchen. Things (objects) are less orderly than I would prefer, especially when I stop to notice. But at the same time, the lighting is 'just right' for me right now. The late afternoon sun,

reflecting obliquely off the forest edges from behind me, brings in an aqua-like hue, while from the window of the adjoining living room, a soft pink glow—- from the same sunlight filtering in through the pink bed-sheets I hung up as curtains-— suffuses the room.

I can smell my next-door neighbor's cigar smoke. At first, I thought it was a barbeque. In either case, I enjoy its contribution to the mood of the kitchen, and to my writing.

I take a few gulps of warm white tea—- not yet bitter.

Sonically, the steady swoosh of an air purifier, the deeper reverberations of the refrigerator, and the occasional screams and yelps from nearby children, mixed in with chirps and chips from sparrows and finches all fill the room.

I am happy to be writing again… And I look forward to getting to know you all.

Jacob writes a long paragraph about the US hospital surroundings where he normally works and where he accesses the online seminar. But then he ends with words that remind that the computer itself constitutes a writing space as well:

My office is a little closet without windows. I have decorated it as much as I can with pictures of my family and a drawing of one of my favorite places in Amsterdam.

During this course I will be working from many different places my office at work, my office at home, the University library and the coffee shop on campus that has wireless access for my laptop. I will also be overseas a couple of times, but my laptop will keep me connected to the rest of you.

During the progression of the seminar we regularly attempted to have the participants reflect on the phenomenological nature of the online phenomenology seminar itself. Eva posted on the webboard a humorous account about her family in Sweden.

I often find myself wrapped in thoughts of your postings and my family frequently find me staring into the distance. By now, they know why. "Mom, you are in Canada now, aren't you. When will you be back? I really need to talk to you," my son said yesterday.

The fact that I feel so closely related to you, that I think of you as my friends is both remarkable and highly treasured – an unexpected effect of "techne."

Eva staring into the distance is evocative again of the question of the nature of this space where we go when we write or where we meet others online. Our online participants often wondered and were

amazed about the fact that mere words on the screen could bring such seeming sense of closeness amongst the members of the seminar. And these sharings seemed to help create a kind of person able atmosphere amongst the online writers. Sometimes the responses were mere platitudes; sometimes they led to further probings. For example, Kate wonders where are we really when we are writing "online"?

Sitting at my computer, I have several windows open. One window is a page from Wikipedia. Another lists Google News; beneath it, another window displays and occasional updates my incoming email; beside that is our webboard. I am composing this entry. It is also a window on my screen, as are two related articles, pdf documents, previously downloaded from library databases via the Web. I am writing "online" but where am I really? I notice my actual desktop has, besides coffee cup, lamp, and telephone, several books open, laying one on top of the other, scattered and shuffled amongst other relevant papers and marked up print-outs. All of these are part of my writing space. I experience them seamlessly, without struggle or sensation of shifting between real life (RL) and virtual life (VL), nor with reference to some place called cyberspace.

Kate raises the question of the nature of cyberspace. Indeed, some commentators such as Michael Heim refer to the entire screen of open windows and icons, as well as the "total electronic environment" as cyberspace. Others, such as Bruce Sterling, a cyberpunk novelist and theoretician, describes cyberspace as "the place between", a vibrant, but non-substantial world -- a matrix of multiple realities. Much of the cyber literature is admittedly imaginative, speculative and often fascinating, but while it is conceptually challenging it is not necessarily sensitive to the way we actually experience this space.

The space of writing

So, consider Kate's question: "Where are you when you write while using a computer?" You look at your present space. This office space in the home. This coffee shop. This desk. Or this kitchen table where you have parked your portable wireless laptop computer. This is where you may feel you work best. This is where you write. So is this then the space of writing? Yes and no. When you are actually writing, typing on the keyboard or writing mentally while staring into space, then you seem to be somewhere else. So, where are you then? You might answer: "Inside my thoughts." The writer dwells in an inner space, inside the self. Indeed this is a popular way of spatially envisioning the self: an inner self and an outer self. But phenomenologically it is probably just as plausible to say that the writer dwells in the space that the words open up. In this sense writing is not unlike reading a story.

To read a story, you have to find a space that is good for reading this or that book, fictional or nonfictional. It must be a space that is

comfortable for the body, but not too comfortable. It does not need to be quiet as long as the sounds or people do not draw attention to themselves. Some people may be able to read in spaces where others cannot. But many readers would probably agree that some places are more amenable to reading than others. In a phenomenological sense, we may notice that even this physical space is already multi-aspectual. We have to make the physical space our own by positioning ourselves bodily, and mentally too, claiming a certain privacy; and then we have to claim a certain temporal space as well. We need an undisturbed space of time that where we can dwell in the timelessness of the space of reading. And the space of writing.

So, once you have found this phenomenological space conducive to reading or writing, you are ready, so to speak, to enter that other space, the space of the words that transports you away from your everyday reality to the reality of the text. When you have entered this world of the text then you are somewhere else. So there is a complex space experience here. The physical space of reading or writing allows us to pass through it into the world opened up by the words, the space of the text. The actions of picking up a book, opening it, and sitting down to read it, or turning on the computer, opening a blank document, and beginning to type, all involve the body orienting itself in physical space. But this space includes more than bodily movements. The sense of space constantly seems to shift in the transitions of picking up a book to read, or in opening the text document on the screen.

But is this not a misleading way of speaking? After all, the space opened up by the text is not physical dimensional space. Is the idea of textual space not just a metaphor and therefore a gloss for how we actually experience the process of reading and writing? This seems to be true. We are using a spatial-temporal phenomenology. But the term space itself possesses rich semantic meanings. Etymologically space does not just refer to physical extension and perspective. According to the Oxford dictionary the term space possesses the meaning of lapse or duration in time. It refers both to the time and the distance between two points.

Space carries the meaning of temporal and physical expanse as well as the time spent in an experience. When we open up a book or when we open a new page on our word processor and we enter the perspectival space of the text we enjoy a temporal experience of opening ourselves to, and an opening of, the world evoked by the words of the text. Perhaps the experiential meaning of the space of the text lies in this "opening" that we seek but never quite find (see Blanchot's The Space of Literature for a rich discussion of "opening").

Type-writing in Cyberspace

Online text is not a hand-written, calligraphic "signature of myself" (McCorduck in Heim, pg. 193) on paper; rather it is type-

written, windowed document on the screen. Over a century ago, Nietzsche, inspired by his new typewriter, wrote, "Our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts." (Kittler (1990) translates this from a footnote of a typed letter from Friedrich Nietzsche to Peter Gast, dated February 1882, found in Briefwechsel, ed. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and Peter Gast (Berlin-Leipzig 1902-09), IV, p. 97.) Indeed, typewriting, and more particularly writing with keyboard and mouse, changes how we write, and the way our words look as we write. Some of us still remember how it was when papers were written exclusively "by hand"—scrawled, crossed-out, scribbled, with numbered pages, penciled arrows and occasional taped-on sections. Only the final draft would be laboriously and carefully typed.

And too, you may recall the first time you ever used a word-processor to write. Having typed just a few sentences, perhaps using the delete key or even the mouse to make a change, you may have sat back amazed. Suddenly, with these magic tools, the words verily invited you to edit them, to try out new possibilities. At the same time, the text already "looked" so perfect, so clean, so published. It was once a revelation. Now it is how we write online.

Typing or keyboarding removes the handwritten word of its visual uniqueness, its idiosyncratic, personal qualities, and casts text in the presentable type-face of public font. On the screen, authored words look back at their writer in a new and unexpected way. They are strikingly clean, professional and "published" but still remain supple, open and unfinished. In this online writing space, words seem to invite rather than resist revision and authorship. At the same time, ambiguously, the words already appear somehow perfect and finished.

In the paper-and-ink days, the editing evidence of our writing was right there in the waste paper basket filled to the brim with crumbled up paper. Nowadays the messiness of our writing is temporarily saved as a history of undo-redo moves accessible through the edit menu, or is simply removed with a stroke of the delete button. But finally, when the text seems done (however incomplete or imperfect) we have to let go of it. From now on it will lead a life of its own. It will constitute a textorium, a space for others to enter—to gaze at what may reveal itself.

As authors, we may feel sometimes that our written text is misinterpreted or over-interpreted. We may regret a thoughtless phrase. We may wish that we had not sent a letter or email, that we had not published a premature manuscript. Once a text is public, it is beyond our control. There exist obvious political and personal implications in this autonomous life of the text that we create. Furthermore, a written text can make a plea for its own immortality, in spite of its author's intentions.

The moment of writing is extremely consequential and differs from the moment of speaking in that we can rewrite while we write. In

rewriting we can try to weigh our words: we can check their semantic values, we can clarify their meanings, we can taste their tonalities, we can measure their effects on the imagined reader, we can explicate and then try to bracket our assumptions, and we can compose and recompose our language and come back to the text again and again to get it hopefully "just right," drawing meaning from the dark.

We tend to think that written discourse is irrevocable. And, of course, this is true once a text has been posted on the board, sent by email, put into printed out in hard copy. Written texts can be subject to forms of scrutiny: they can be subjected to destructive, constructive and deconstructive critique that goes far beyond spoken discourse. Once we have put our word in print we have lost control over its fate. William describes how, "in-person" he is intimately involved in and only subjectively experiences his own words. But on the screen, his words are otherwise. Even his name appears separate from him, perhaps not quite his own.

In a regular, in-person class, I can never experience what I say objectively, because I am the one saying it and the words are embedded in specific social and physical moment. But when my words are up there on the screen "objectively", even my own name and writing seem separate from me, like they are another person's. It is as if the writings themselves are interacting and bringing forth ideas, while I am just an eavesdropper, listening in on others' conversations.

For Anne, the online writing experience compels a kind of quiet thoughtfulness, a very different quality of being than her more gregarious in-person self. She too experiences her online texts as strangely unfamiliar and foreign.

This is my first online course and when I use the webboard I have the feeling of writing undercover. I feel quite anonymous and take the part of "the quiet girl in class". Actually, in real life I am neither quiet nor anonymous. On the contrary, I am generally very talkative and have a boisterous laughter. But the fact that I have to write all my thoughts on a screen forces me to a special kind of thoughtfulness. Written words are separated from my body in a way that makes them unfamiliar to me and when time passes they seem to get more and more unfamiliar. I sometimes feel like a voyeur even to my own writings.

Once published, a text seems to have a life of its own; it is other; it is not dependent on its author or its reader, or even on some external reference to which the text points. This condition is known as the autonomy of the text and an entire hermeneutic of reading and critical semiotics has been built on the notion of textual autonomy and authority.

And yet, from an originating point of view, the spoken word is

irrevocable in a manner that is rarely true of the written word. In a normal conversation or discussion, what has been said and heard cannot be taken back. Of course, we can apologize for some things that may have slipped our tongue. We may try to deny that we said what has been heard. We may correct ourselves, and say what it is that we "really meant to say." We may add meaning through a certain tone of voice or physiognomic expression. We may repeat or paraphrase our earlier points when we feel that we are being misunderstood or when we feel that our words do not seem to have their intended or hoped-for effect. And yet, what has been heard has been heard; and, therefore, what we say can never be completely revoked. Indeed, our spoken words some day may be brought back to us, to remind us of things we may wish forgotten. Of course, all of this is even truer when our words have been electronically recorded.

Cyberspace

When we talk of cyberspace, digital landscapes, or the electronic frontier, what place or places are we referring to? When we connect to the Internet, are we in some space, cyberspace? Online, do we become inhabitants of a different world? Do we become digital immigrants or perhaps returned natives of the electronic frontier? In a similar sense, Sherry Turkle (1995) asks: "Are we living life on the screen or life in the screen?" Mike, a college student she interviewed, spent thousands of hours in a Multi-User-Domain (MUD). There he created "an apartment with rooms, furniture, books, desk, and even a small computer. Its interior is exquisitely detailed, even though it exists only in textual description. A hearth, an easy chair, and a mahogany desk warm his cyberspace. "It's where I live," Mike says. "More than I do in my dingy dorm room. There's no place like home." (p. 21)

Today, Mike might spend his time on or in "Second Life", a graphically enriched rather than text-based "online digital world." There he would be joining hundreds of thousands of other human "residents" or Second Lifers. In Second Life, one may rent a high-end flat while actually living in a drab apartment, be a writer with the Second Life Herald, or even belong to the Mafia. Such virtual environments are suggestive of the cyberspace—"a consensual hallucination"—novelist William Gibson originally envisioned.

Consider how Bruce Sterling, a cyberpunk writer and theoretician, describes cyberspace as "the place between", a vibrant, but insubstantial world sprung out of the thin, dark conversational space of the telephone:

Cyberspace is the "place" where a telephone conversation appears to occur. Not inside your actual phone, the plastic device on your desk. Not inside the other person's phone, in some other city. The place between the phones....[I]n the past twenty years, this electrical "space," which was once thin and dark and one-dimensional -- little more than a narrow speaking-tube, stretching from phone to

phone -- has flung itself open like a gigantic jack-in-the-box. Light has flooded upon it, the eerie light of the glowing computer screen. This dark electric netherworld has become a vast flowering electronic landscape. (1992, 2, 4)

This "dark electric netherworld" of which Sterling writes is strongly reminiscent of the dark Orphean underworld that Blanchot evokes in his portrayals of the space of literature in which the writer dwells. Blanchot, who has reflected perhaps more patiently and more deeply than any other philosopher on the nature and experience of writing, insistently returns to the theme of coming to the realization of the illusionary nature of the real. Blanchot uses the allegory of Orpheus to allude to what happens in the act of writing (1982, pp. 171-176). The story of Orpheus, son of Apollo and the muse Calliope, is well-known. It happened that shortly after their marriage Orpheus' wife Eurydice dies from the poison of a snake bite. The grieving Orpheus descends into the dark caverns of the underworld to implore the gods with his songs to reunite him with Euridyce and allow him to take her back to the daylight world of the living. This is a classic story about the power of the artist. Orpheus enchants the ferryman Charon, the hellish three-headed dog Cerberes, and the monstrous Erinyen. His songs are so moving and so stirring of the soul that finally, Hades and Persephone grant his wish to take Euridyce with him from the realm of the dead, but on one condition: that he will not turn around to look at her till they should have reached the upper air of daylight (Holme, 1979).

They proceed in total silence, he leading and she following, through passages dark and steep, till they nearly reach the cheerful and bright upper world. Just then, it is said, in a moment of forgetfulness, as if to assure himself that she was still following him, Orpheus casts a glance behind. At that very instant she is borne away. Eurydice is snatched from him so fast that their stretched-out hands for a last embrace, fail to reach each other. Orpheus grasps only the air, and her last words of farewell recede with such speed that they barely reach his ears. He has lost her for a second time and now this loss is forever. All that Orpheus is left with is the image of that fleeting gaze that he saw of Eurydice. This is the way the story is usually told: "when in fear he might again lose her, and anxious for another look at her, he turned his eyes so he could gaze upon her" (Ovid 95-98). But the philosopher Maurice Blanchot (1982) suggests a different interpretation: Orpheus was not forgetful at all. He was motivated by a different gaze, the gaze of desire.

According to Blanchot the ambiguous gaze of Orpheus was no accident. He does not subscribe to the romantic view according to which Orpheus tragically forgot the promise he made in a moment of anxious unguardedness. The gaze was motivated by desire, says Blanchot. But it was not the simple desire for the person, Eurydice, in her visible flesh and blood appearance. No, says Blanchot, Orpheus "does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but [he] wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance,

with her closed body and sealed face--[he] wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy… (1982, p. 172).

I felt surrounded by the phenomenon but at the same time I could look at it as if I were a little bit distant. I was naked, somehow stripped of the usual conceptions and definitions of the everyday world….I was not trying to define anything. I was not trying to conceptualize anything. I was just looking at something, as I have never seen it before. (Julie)

What Orpheus came to seek in the darkness of the Underworld was not a lost love, but the hidden meaning of love itself. "That alone is what Orpheus came to seek in the Underworld," says Blanchot. He came "to look in the night at what night hides" (1982, p. 172). It is about a mortal gaining a vision of what is essentially invisible, the perfection of Eurydice--before she resumed her mortal state as they approached the light of day.

Love had driven Orpheus into the dark. His consuming desire was to "see" and to "feel its form." But such glance is not permitted to mortals. What lies on the other side belongs to the great silence, to a "night" that is not human. So the gaze of Orpheus expresses a desire that can never be completely fulfilled: to see the true being of something. And yet it is this veil of the dark that every writer tries to penetrate. This is the very nature of writing, Blanchot explains, "Writing begins with Orpheus's gaze" (1982, p.176).

My desire to write, did not naturally lead to free flowing, pithy sentences. The blank screen was daunting. The words did not come quickly and the sentences sounded flat. It wasn't until I turned my thoughts away from the text itself and onto the experience I was reliving, did the sentences begin to crawl across the page and give form to my thoughts. (Anne)

And one writes only, if one has entered that space under the influence of the gaze. Or perhaps it is the gaze that opens the space of writing. As Blanchot says so eloquently, "When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens" (1982, p. 171).

The writer uses words to uncover a truth that seems almost within reach. And indeed, at first it seems that Orpheus's words (his poetic songs) bring his love into presence. His words and songs have made her visible, so to speak. He dimly discerns the image of his love in the dark of the Underworld. But this is not enough. He desires to see more clearly. He must bring her back from the dark of night to the light of day. Orpheus is not satisfied with the image evoked by his words. He wants the immediacy of a presence--a presence that is not mediated by words or other means. This is a presence that is not some-thing or some-one evoked, but an evocation nevertheless. Orpheus turns around and gazes at Eurydice. He wants to see the

invisible in the visible. And for that reason he must turn around twice -- paradoxically he must turn away from her to see her: away from Eurydice (into the dark of the Underworld through which he must find his way) and towards Eurydice (to see her in her immortality). In his desire, Orpheus turns away from his love to see Love. He must turn his gaze toward the image in the space of the text that he tries to grasp in his writing, and he glances towards Eurydice who he desires to see in her perfection of Love itself.

So what does Orpheus see? Love in its primal appearance? A mere image? In this writerly wondering gaze one may hope to see existence in its nude appearance, peer past the veneer of human constructs. How is this possible? Does such realm exist? The writer can find the answer to this question in the experience of writing itself, in the virtuality of the text where one may run up against the human wall of language or where one may be permitted a momentary gaze through its crevices. It is striking how Blanchot's likening of the Orphean underworld with the space of the text is evocative also of the contemporary images of cyberspace.

But what does it mean to speak of cyberspace in terms of the mythical language of the netherworld? Sterling suggests that cyberspace is this multi-modal technetronic place where computers connect in digital space or the place where telephone conversations take place. Cyberspace seems to elicit images of empty space, other realities, dark regions beyond our sensory reach.

I enter a webboard conference. I expect to meet some people here. No one is here, yet.
I start "talking." No one responds. Where do my words go? I feel alone.
No one is here, ever. (Sarah)

But, the nature of the conversational space of face-to-face relations is ultimately as elusive as the conversational space of the telephone. How do people experience the space of a conversational relation? Face to face or on the telephone? The conversational space is neither in the telephone set nor on the tongue or in the mouth, neither in the electric line nor in the audible waves of the air separating people involved in a conversation. If the connections between telephones occur in cyberspace then how should we understand the space that connects and distances people in ordinary face-to-face relations? But even more interesting perhaps is the question: what is that space that we enter when we read or write? Whereas, Sterling uses the metaphor of a dark netherworld to arrive at a conceptualization of cyberspace, Blanchot involves us in more serious philosophical reflection of the nature of this dark underworld of the space of the text where writing occurs.

Online Text as Relation

In online text spaces—webboard, email—we come to know the

other through writing alone. Relation is not perturbed or infected by visuality or orality, physical presence or vocal discourse. We do not meet the other's eyes; rather, we read and are read by the other's text. We move and are moved by word alone. Online, we have no access or visceral response to the pre-reflective, tacit understandings of another's bodily presence, voice and gesture. We come to know the other through a single modality: text. Here, textuality is the sole interstitial site of meaning, presence, contact, and touch.

One participant suggests that even when online seminars are combined with face-to-face seminars then text and face may be difficult to reconcile:

One of my classes had a face-to-face as well as an online component. But it was virtually impossible to match the online pseudonyms with the real names in class. I did not know the individuals at all behind the posted words, except the belief that each pseudonym belonged to one of an amorphous sea of some 30 faces in my class. I felt like I was filling in caricatures all the time: it was like living in a complicated novel of two-dimensional characters where I couldn't keep most people straight. As it happened, a few people engaged me, or rather my postings, online rather quickly, each making rather confrontational responses. Over time, I came to know them through our online debates. And over time, during class discussions, I also began to identify those people in particular. In fact, part of my class time was taken up with detective work, trying to match people to their pseudonym. I would listen especially to each person's "voice", their manner of speaking and word choice, and the particular opinions they held. Occasionally, I was lucky and a reference was made to their pseudonym, or a personal clue that was revealed on the webboard was repeated in class. I remember about a month in to class trying unsuccessfully to identify a particularly cantankerous web board character who had appeared suddenly and was making morally abhorrent but rationally defensible comments. I began to suspect our teacher might be behind this pseudonym to help stir up debate. This turned out to be not true. (Ann)

Otherness is felt in the particular choice of words, in the style and tone of writerly presence, in the manner participants respond (or not) to others online. All else is left to the imagination. In this way, writing online forces us into a mode of pure relation. We sense the other through their text. We are touched by and desire to touch the other through the text we write.

Interestingly though, when I did connect the actual persons with their pseudonym, they never really matched my manufactured image based on their pseudonym and text. And stranger still, I could never quite let go of that pseudo-image. Thus, there was "azazel", this very feisty but aggravating character who took issue immediately—albeit intelligently and surgically—with almost everything I said in the online environment. And yet his "real-life" self, Corey, turned out to be a bright young man who was prepared to stand up for what he believed

in, but was not confrontational at all, just persistent and interested in expressing his own well-considered views. Indeed, in our in-class discussions, we both came to have a certain respect for one another that slowly began to seep into our online debates, as well as in our comments on each others papers. I doubt that I would have "warmed" to azazel's views without the experience of "Corey" the person. But of course, that is conjecture. Nonetheless, when I think of "azazel" and I think of "Corey" they are still two somewhat different persons. (Ann)

Once you have met a person face-to-face and you know their gestures, you will read their text differently. The text will now be read against the carnal qualities that make up this person. The body is written back onto the text as it were, and the text rewrites the face-to-face relation. And yet author and embodied person may remain strangely incommensurable.

The Space of Speaking and the Space of Writing

How is responding online (writing on a seminar webboard) different from responding orally (speaking up) in a seminar class? We obviously tend to experience the space of speaking differently than the space of writing. In face-to-face situations speaking and hearing are more likely conversationally and relationally intertwined. The speaker speaks in a listening way and the listener listens in a speaking manner. Even monologues (lectures, speeches, addresses) tend to have this conversational spatial quality in the sense that speakers may tend to focus on particular individuals in the audience with whom they feel conversationally connected. People who have a talk together tend to be more intimately tied into the relational space than people who are listening to a lecture. Conversations involve the interchange of personal interiors, says Walter Ong (1986, p. 167). That is why it makes such important difference whether a lecture is delivered ad lib (retaining a conversational relational quality) or whether it is largely read from prepared script.

Conversational relational space has a certain quality of immediacy. In normal discussions we are physically immediately present to the other person's speaking. The telephone, too, retains a sense of this immediacy. This temporal-spatial immediacy also means that the speaker cannot erase what has been said. One cannot restart a conversation in the way that one can restart a written text. One cannot edit out a phrase and replace it with a more appropriate one. One cannot step back reflectively from one's spoken word to monitor and adjust the effects that selected words and phrases seem to exercise on other words we utter. In contrast, the space of writing has a different temporal-spatial quality.

Sometimes I write immediately on the webboard and sometimes, (especially when I anticipate that I will be writing a longer text) I write first in a word document and paste the text into the webboard space once I am ready to post it. But in either case, what seems to happen

is this: I start to write with a sense that I am addressing my seminar colleagues, but then, as I get more involved in my topic, I may forget the others and now I am just thinking, just writing by myself. (Maurice)

One may begin to write with someone in mind for whom one writes. But when one starts to write for insight then others disappear.

Right now I am writing to you and I have the feeling of trying to reach you, making a real contact with you. Except that ... as I continue writing I may get caught up in the words and then I get absorbed in the mood space of writing and gradually it seems that I am addressing no-one (not one) … I am really writing… (Maurice)

The writer inhabits a textual space of one. "I do not think that I have written for anyone at all," says Cixous. "This does not mean that I scorn the reader, quite the contrary, … But I do not know who it is. I only know there is one. (But who?) Before I write" (1997, p. 100).

In writing a poem—for example, a love poem—writing seems to somehow destroy and recreate the other person at the same time. In contrast, when I am having a real eye-to-eye conversation with someone then I do not seem to lose myself in the space of text in that same way. The other person looks at me (touches me with his or her eyes) and so I experience a certain togetherness that I may not experience when writing.

So, when I stop now and reflect on this moment that passed just now, as I was writing the last few lines, I had momentarily forgotten that I was writing to you because the experience of writing itself began to absorb me. (Maurice)

Some authors have commented on the intensely solitary dimension of writing. In the moment of writing I am here by myself at this writing desk and in this writing space. But I am also with myself, the first reader is the self: the first other is oneself. As one writes it may happen that the space opened by the text becomes charged with a signification that is, in effect, more real than real. As readers, many of us know this phenomenon. Many readers have at one time or another been profoundly moved in the realization of being touched by a human insight. And this insight might not have affected us this deeply if we had undergone the experience in the sober light of day, rather than in the realm of the novel, story, or poem. "Reading a text oralizes it," says Ong (1982, p. 175). This accounts for the strange sensation of immediacy of presence that a vocative text can induce (see Steiner 1989).

There is something paradoxical about the un-reality of a powerful text: it can be experienced by the writer or reader as real, as unreally real, as nearer than the nearness that things may have in ordinary reality. This super reality turns the insights we gain in the space of the text essentially virtual, unencumbered by the presence of

all the other memories, impressions, and factualities that permeate the affairs of our everyday life. The phenomenologist as writer is an author who starts from the midst of life, and yet is transported to that space where, as Robert Frost once said: writing is "like falling forward into the dark." Here meanings resonate and reverberate with reflective being.

A Space Outside-of-time Opens

The moment we at last begin to write, we surrender to the silent space of the text, and allow ourselves to be embraced by time's absence. But before this timeless, intimate expanse opens, we must in some sense be summoned.

I remember one night, half asleep and half awake in bed, thoughts were flying from everywhere. As I tried to make sense of them, I was strengthening them and could not take it anymore: I had to write them. It was my little Jerry Maguire moment! I woke up, got the computer on, and started to write. Some pages later, satisfied with the thoughts now written, and exhausted because of the hour, I got back to bed… only to get up again to complete another part. (Peter)

Such tyrannical prehension (Blanchot, 1982, p. 25), the insistent demand to write right now, is perhaps more rarely than regularly experienced by writers. Yet, can we not see in this wakeful moment the desirous force that opens every piece of writing? To write, to put hands to keyboard and make perceptible the inchoate speech pressing, is the yield to this demand.

Sometimes the space of writing seems to open with the simple gesture of putting fingers to keyboard and beginning to type. But is it really so easy to begin?

When I write, it is like this. I sit before the keyboard and just wait for something to happen, just wait for the light. But nothing comes. I have to start writing in order for the words to begin to flow. I know this but it doesn't help. I think about the ideas and experiences I want to include, and sometimes make little notes to myself. (Tim)

For Blanchot (1982), "one writes only if one reaches the instant which nevertheless one can only approach in the space opened by the movement of writing. To write, one must write already." (p. 176). This impossible contradiction haunts the start of many writing projects, often only overcome by a deadline.

What helps is the deadline, either a self-imposed one or a deadline assigned by a professor or publisher. When I know that I have to start writing immediately in order to reach the deadline, the words suddenly flow. My fingers fly on the keyboard. I am lost in my writing. Then, suddenly, I find myself done. My body feels cold from the hours of sitting, moving nothing but my fingers. And I think, "That was easy. Why didn't I start sooner?" But it was not easy. (Tim)

At other times, we may find we are already ready to begin. Here the impatience of desiring to write happily gives way to a mood of insouciance. It is a gift.

I am here in my room, ready to write about [my topic]. I look around the room. The light is good, outside it is snowing and the music on the radio is very relaxing. The atmosphere is perfect to help me with my inspiration and certainly I feel in the mood to write. I turn on my computer. I just want to write. I do not want to think much about it. A lot of ideas flow from my mind, and my hands quickly translate those ideas into words. It is like I want to let myself be lead by my hands. I sometimes write absurd things. But certainly others are very good. I am really inspired today. Music, light and room are left behind. Now I am not aware of them. It is just me and my writing. (Anita)

And once the writing begins, the words draw us in. We are drawn to write them further, to dwell in their timeless space until, at last, we are released from their claim. But still, Margaret Atwood (1998) warns the would-be writer not to approach "the page that waits" too lightly:

If you decide to enter the page, take a knife and some matches, and something that will roar. Take something you can hold onto, and a prism to split the light and a talisman that works, which should be hung on a chain around your neck: that's for getting back. It doesn't matter what kind of shoes, but your hands should be bare. You should never go into the page with gloves on. Such decisions, needless to say, should not be made lightly.

There are those, of course, who enter the page without deciding, without meaning to. Some of these have charmed lives and no difficulty, but most never make it out at all. For them the page appears as a well, a lovely pool in which they catch sight of a face, their own but better. These unfortunates do not jump: rather they fall, and the page closes over their heads without a sound, without a seam, and is immediately as whole and empty, as glassy, as enticing as before.

Darkness

The main project of phenomenological inquiry—the reflection—seeks to "re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii), with human experience as it is lived. This project is intimately involved in bringing to language the pre-verbal and the pre-reflective, i.e., that which cannot be rendered in words. It requires entering and traversing the space of the text. Blanchot speaks of the darkness of the space of text since the writer (and the reader) has to leave the ordinary everyday world of daylight and sight to enter it. And phenomenologically the writer faces darkness also in trying to see what cannot really be seen.

In response to the prompt sheet many seminar participants found resonation in this image of "writing in the dark" (see also van

Manen 2002). For Kenji, the space of phenomenological writing involves trusting the sensitive touch of his fingertips, his writing hands, to sense their way in the dark.

Writing for me is like being blindfolded and having to rely on your other senses: for me, my hands. My hands are like a blunted version of a heat-seeking missile. They sense heat, roundness, texture; they feel laughter (joy), rigor, tension, release, pace, and I imagine countless other qualities that I don't yet register in my awareness.

I don't have a view of the entire terrain, but what I get is a 'sense' of where I can safely go, where there are openings and what is closed off for now, what is a strain, what is a flat-out lie (probably the hardest thing for me to sense sometimes)…

Part of the methodology that I've developed—for better or for worse—is to run with my eyes closed. That is, I speed off as fast as I can just to spin out a draft, because once something is there, then, it is like having a map of sorts. It may be a pretty sorry map (which oftentimes it is), but it's still something that I can see in front of me. So then, I use my 'sensors' to feel out what parts of this map require greater detail, are completely useless and ridiculous, and so on. I think that I have stumbled upon this way of writing mostly out of practicality.

Tim describes his writing as "walking in the dark." He says, "It rather like falling forward voluntarily. It is going without seeing, (which is like traveling without a map)." He draws analogy to a time he found himself navigating home in the utter darkness of an African forest at night. In the dark, the familiar daytime world can become suddenly strange, disorienting and filled with imagined fears. Writing demands a certain kind of courage: the fortitude to step into, and continue to move forward in a place where one cannot see.

I have a growing sense of unease that the particular tack I have been writing along is mistaken. My understandings, insights, seem suddenly to be lacking the depth I was striving for. I hadn't thought this before about my paper. In fact, I had been thinking things were coming along just fine. Something in me has recognized a shallowness in my writing in light of the others' progress, but really, I don't know what it is. I am in darkness. (Jane)

Writing in the dark, we are in an state of unknowing, of agony. What is familiar has become strange. Yet, in the dark, blindly feeling our way, we may suddenly happen upon something familiar. That something is recognized because it has in fact been seen, perhaps without any significance, many times before in the daylight. But in the dark, it attains new significance for it is now grasped in a very different light. Jane writes:

Waking in the night, I feel suddenly closer to the essence of my phenomenon. My certainty of being "closer" to it, to my question, is

the recognition of something I know to be simply and plainly true. I had paid no mind to it in my waking hours perhaps because it was so plain, so obvious. I know my insight is correct because it is plain to see. That is all. I have seen something very simple that has been there all along—right under my nose—but I could not fathom it until this very moment. At this revelation, my question appears at once bigger, much larger and more meaning-full than I could have imagined, for it is revealing to me much more than I could have anticipated beforehand. Indeed, I feel it is revealing (unveiling a little more) to me my real question, what is truly engaging me here, that which is drawing me to itself. But in that same moment the question itself appears even more elusive: this unveiling reveals even more veils. And yet I stand closer, I stand in wonder.

Like Orpheus traversing the dark underworld in search for his beloved Eurydice, our nocturnal wanderings may reveal insight that daylight is unwilling or unable to yield to us.

Proximity of the wor(l)d: "Contact at a distance" (Blanchot)

Phenomenological writing aims to engage the reader in the phenomenon itself; to render living experience immediately sensible, near and recognizable. Here the writer is charged with using words to draw the reader (and indeed the writer him- or herself) closer and "into" the experience itself. Anne struggles to bring an experience to words, until finally, the experience seems to infect her, and then her writing.

The house is still and I am at my computer getting set to write. The white glow of the blank screen is numbing. I look out the window at the moon and let my mind return to the experience about which I have chosen to write. I want to bring the experience of running in the coulee back to the surface. As the images return, I write about the path winding through the coulee and the crispness of the morning air. It was such a perfect morning. I re-read the sentences and am not impressed. The sentences aren't reflecting the essence of the experience. The words are describing it, but not in a way that makes it palpable. I delete them and start over. I focus again on the memory of that morning. What made it the moment that it was? How do I capture the distinctive smell of the sage along the path? How do I paint with these words the fog patches hanging in the valley? I begin to type short, quick sentences. I keep writing. My mind's eye turns inward and takes me along the path again. My fingers tap out short sentences quickly. In these moments, the spelling mistakes lose their significance as I focus on the experience of running on the path that morning. The words tumble on top of one another. The room slips away as I listen to the tapping and relive the joy of that morning.

Reflecting on this experience, Anne writes of her desire to write. Desire, she reminds, literally means "to reach for the stars" or "to await what the stars will bring." In desiring, we both stretch towards what cannot ultimately be touched, and too, in this hopeless gesture,

we await being touched by what is beyond our grasp. As Anne reaches again towards the originary moment, towards the experience still experiencing, the "desire still desiring" (Rene Char in Blanchot, p. 187), the experience itself seems to find voice through Anne's fingers.

It wasn't until I turned my thoughts away from the text itself and onto the experience I was reliving, did the sentences begin to crawl across the page and give form to my thoughts. I had to let the experience speak through my fingers.

The person who learns to "really" write, gains the experience of being in touch with something. One writes to make contact, to achieve phenomenological intimacy with an object of interest. But the moment when the writer senses that contact (close in-touchness) has been achieved something strange may happen: it appears that this contact came from the outside. Rather than touching something with words, the writer feels being touched, an invitation as it were. The touch says: "Come!"

For Jane, this moment of in-touchness is experienced as insight, a revelation in the dark. She is awakened by her phenomenon, which suddenly seems to be "revealing—unveiling a little more" of her real question, that which is "truly engaging me here, that which is drawing me to itself." We might say Jane has heard the language of her phenomenon, for it has spoken to her, it has shown something of itself to her. This moment of contact also precipitates a new understanding of her writing.

The next morning I get up early and write. I struggle. My insights from the wee hours seem to have lost some of their shine. I feel like I am writing in thick mud, trying unsuccessfully to rework these new semi-lustrous ideas into a paper which itself seems now impenetrable and dull. I abandon trying to write anymore today. We attend a Baroque concert in the afternoon. I drift through it feeling an unexpected excitement about where I'm going with my writing. There is a lovely guitar solo. It is delicate and understated and strangely moving. At intermission I tell my husband: I know what's wrong with my writing: I need to have a lighter touch with it. Yes, much lighter. That's how I've been missing the obvious: I have been too heavy-handed, striving too hard and killing it. I feel certain this is right.

The next day I begin writing again. It feels near impossible, but I think I see something off in the distance. I keep writing towards it.

Julie too experiences this deep writerly contact—gazing at something naked of human constructs—as a kind of elation, only to be sobered by the paradoxical understanding that one can only hope to "almost touch" the desired something.

As each sentence appeared on the screen I thought, "I have never written this way before. I have never tried to look at that this way". I felt surrounded by the phenomenon but at the same time I

could look at it as if I were a little bit distant. I was naked, somehow stripped of the usual conceptions and definitions of the everyday world. Wonder was guiding me. I felt like a kind of detective or investigator whose words and thoughts were the main tools of investigation. I was not trying to define anything. I was not trying to conceptualize anything. I was just looking at something, as I have never seen it before. I did not want to know "about" the phenomenon. I wanted to know what it was like. But as I continued on in my writing I felt I couldn't know the phenomenon entirely. It became an infinite universe of secrets and possibilities. Each line, each question and wonder made me see it a little bit more, I could almost touch it. But it escaped showing me how much I haven't found out yet.

Even as our text seems to draw us nearer to the contact we desire, it inevitably retains its elusive, veiled distance. The text that fascinates touches "in immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws [us] close, even though it leaves [us] absolutely at a distance" (Blanchot, 1982, p. 32). Writing is not the practice of some clever technique; neither is writing restricted to the moment where one sets pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard. Writing has already begun, so to speak, when one has managed to enter the space of the text, the textorium.

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