

see to see—

Making Nothing Happen

David Marriott

The poet W.H. Auden once famously wrote: “poetry makes nothing happen: it survives in the valley of its making” (“In Memory of W.B. Yeats”). Anyone seeking to persuade or dissuade someone of the value of poetry could refer to such a line. Often, though, the accent too readily falls on the making happen as if the meaning of the nothing was already understood, as if everyone already knew what it would mean for poetry to survive insofar as it gives form to this nothing, this nothing which is nothing but itself, and can only happen so long as it occurs as such. However, what if this nothing is not plainly and distinctly understood, and this is precisely the reason we read poetry? To see in its experience the happenstance of a nothing grasped not as plenitude but as the emptying out of all content—I mean how could one know this nothing and *still speak to it* without introducing a parenthetical claim thereby?

I should add, though, that this line does not seem to require assent, and seems almost piously ironic in the way that it proffers a thought that refuses conviction while still trying to teach and illumine the limits of conviction. In this sense it reminds me all too well of much recent literary theoretical reasoning. But I would like to insist—despite or because of my naivety—that we read this nothing not as a symbol or path but as what follows from a making that one neither knows nor knows anything by, indeed as something almost inhuman. If poetry presents to us what it feels like to be nothing, to be less than the least, it is because it provides no definition of what this nothing is: neither sacral nor impious, neither political nor humanist, this would be a nothing that must, by definition, lie beyond the institutional forms of knowing and belief that have become enshrined as a literary culture of reading. Is this precisely why poetry is an event rather than a doctrine?

Let me offer an example. Among the many questions facing contemporary

poetic scholarship is the fact that too many leading critics act as if black poetry does not exist, as if it were nothing. I've even seen arguments to the effect that these critics know (the delusion of a conviction unredeemed by irony) what poetry is and much of black poetry is not 'it.' The racial piety of this criticism confirms the exclusionary history it narrates. It provides no definition of its value but nevertheless claims that it is concerned *with nothing but* the making of poems. It follows from this that these critics claim to know when poetry happens and that they possess true knowledge of what its making is. But what if the line above, as we have articulated it, were to refuse all such opinions, or any distinct (universalist pretense) white doctrine—would not the whole idea of poems, and the whole idea of reading poetry, not be changed?

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"Don't resist so hard you will only make it hurt more"

Anahita Jamali Rad

Donato Mancini's newest release, *Same Diff*, is a compilation of language: of arguments, phrases, translations, "and stuff like that." In this work, he illuminates the ways in which society structures language and simultaneously how the particular structures of language in turn frame the ways in which we interact with one another.

Same Diff opens with a list of

translations of the word "welcome." Growing up in the multicultural heyday of the 90s, my friends and I would often scan similar lists of supposed acceptance found in airports, government institutions, schools, malls, and whatnot, in order to see if "our" languages were included. Because if lists like this are a representation of who is accepted into a particular society, they are also a representation of who is excluded. In Mancini's version, welcomes appear only from languages that represent populations currently at war or under siege, with special attention to North American indigenous languages, sandwiched between the colonial-imperialist languages, English and Latin. In this instance, the list is not framed as a supposed liberal inclusivity; rather, the inclusivity of the list is foregrounded by real systemic violences experienced by the speakers of the languages.

In "Self-Sufficient," Mancini takes seemingly banal phrases from colloquial English, the configurations of which represent a particular logic that makes possible the violences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. If you've ever had the pleasure of watching mainstream news or reading the comments section of any online article, you are well acquainted with the format of these arguments. The phrases in the poem are familiar, whether or not you've actually heard or read these specific ones. This is intentional: "I am friends with an X person, therefore I can say whatever I want about X people."

The poem accumulates, making

the unrelenting circular logic within the statements it holds inescapable. When Mancini performs this poem, there is often a flurry of laughter in certain moments. The line, “How about a *heterosexual* pride day?” is a particular crowd pleaser. Surrounded by the familiar rhetoric of the right, this line might seem absurd and ridiculous to a liberal audience, as if the poem has gone “too far.” However, the audience’s laughter could stem more from the uncanniness of Mancini’s performance and his proximity to these ideologies by means of his subject position. As the performer of these phrases, Mancini, a heterosexual cis white man, could easily be the bearer of such ideologies. This laughter is perhaps rooted in uncertainty: just because Mancini the person understands the violence behind the logic of these arguments, does that mean that he cannot also be susceptible to their pull?

“It’s a slippery slope.”

Same Diff’s most compelling moments present various instances in which the frameworks within and around language relate to and/or represent violence in various ways. It directs the reader: these are the few words that represent this other (systemic) thing. *Same Diff* offers no light at the end of the tunnel, no solutions to the clarity it brings to everyday language. What it does do, however, is suggest that there is no “benign” language, and more troublingly, that language implicates us all.

UNBEARABLE! SHIT, IT’S UNBEARABLE!: Danielle LaFrance Reviewing Oana Avasilichioaei Translating Bertrand Laverdure Writing Marie Madeline Reading *Readopolis*

Danielle: What writes a book? I am a reviewer, reviewing *Readopolis*.

Marie Madeline: To review a book you must obtain a copy of the book. I am a reader, reading *Readopolis*. Catriona Strang drops off *Readopolis* at my site of work along with a book summary. I don’t read it. And I can barely look at author Bertrand Laverdure’s author photo. I read fast, too fast. I ask for an extension so I can read less urgently.

Danielle: We are now in the text we review. How pathetic. Other’s torments are part of the protagonist Ghislain’s labour as reviewer.

Marie Madeline: When I write “I am good,” I mean “I am alive.” I will decide that later.

Danielle: This text is restless and it reminds us of this relentlessly. “Books are archives of our restlessness” (15) declares Ghislain both to me the reviewer and to me the reader. And to you who may decide to read this text one day.

Marie Madeline: I consider Oana Avasilichioaei as translator and myself

as reader, instantly aligning myself with Ghislain, this contemptible yet unbiased man. At first I am absolutely taken by this voice, this text. Then I am absolutely dismissive as he dismisses one of his two lovers, Maldonne, casually saying, “I don’t remember feeling anything other than an unbearable desire to perform. We dramatized everything. Her passion continued to grow, was even roused by my hesitation, my doubts, while I gradually lost all my resources, all my motivation” (26). I hate Ghislain.

Danielle: Ghislain is not a suicidal protagonist, he’s not in crisis, he circumlocutes boredom. In her diary, Anaïs Nin writes how particular books grab us, fill us, and remind us that “[we] are not living, that [we] are hibernating.” She continues, “The symptoms of hibernating are easily detectable: first, restlessness. The second symptom (when hibernating becomes dangerous and might degenerate into death): absence of pleasure.”

Marie Madeline: Everyday is living death. I’m in Vancouver in 2017 formulating empty words. The midway point of any text makes or breaks me. Always breaks as though in mourning. But with this text I am tired of the book’s deflection into a book within a book, all instigated by a switch in font on page 82. I both admire and hold contempt for this type of writing.

Was that contempt there before or was it because I read the word “contempt” so many times?

Danielle: I can’t find the quote, but I know it exists somewhere: Avasillichioaei, alongside Erín Moure, says that a translation is “a new original.” Which essentially means accounting for the translator not as a side-line dramaturge, but a primary actor. Maybe Marie Madeline could not bring herself to gaze at Laverdure’s author photo because she only wanted to see Avasillichioaei. Death of the author. Drain the swamp. “Kill the book” (78).

Marie Madeline: Lastly, I want to say that my irritation with all the shifts is not to disparage the poststructural motif, but more to do with a kind of monogamous relationship to texts. In “On Writing a Dissertation,” part of the European Graduate School’s Lecture Series, Avital Ronel compassionately, yet ruthlessly, states how writing is a relationship. “Be monogamous for about two years,” she says. “If you start flirting with every skirt text that comes down the pipe, without have a monomaniacal relation to the thing called the thesis, it’s just going to escape you.” At the same time, I believe Ghislain is correct as well when he says how “we live with texts inside us,” multiple, delirious texts. Reviewers and writers and poets fecund with texts. ▲