LIFEWORK

ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IMPULSE IN CONTEMPORARY ART, WRITING, AND THEORY

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2

Inarticulations

Susan Morris

The title of this chapter, 'Inarticulations' (a word not in any dictionary), is a play on the title of John Berger's last book *Confabulations*, which explores how language, like the body, houses the inarticulate alongside the articulate. Both writing and drawing, Berger argues, involve a search for the 'quivering almost wordless "thing"' waiting to be represented.[1]

I am a visual artist who has always worked with writing. By that I mean that I have written things, such as articles or essays, but also that my work engages with the formal attributes of writing. I am interested in making images that *look* like writing, and in a compositional logic that takes as its model things laid out on a page: the book, the letter, the diagram, and the musical score, for instance – all of which can be thought of as surfaces organised by design criteria privileging readability: flatness, the margin, and the grid. I also have an attraction to . . . *papery-ness*.

Figure 2.1 shows a very papery thing, made up of receipts tracking every transaction I made over the course of a year. Its title is *Expenditure*, which means both what I spend but also (crucially) *waste*. The accumulated receipts were not scanned – I felt this would have made them too pictorial – but transcribed, a gigantean task for which I used a professional typing service. The data was then organised chronologically. I used the same font throughout and a single colour: the violet of the dye used in carbonless copy paper, once widely used for invoices and receipts but now almost obsolete. The information was printed at a scale of roughly 1:1 to that of the original receipts (which, in reality, varied in font size), resulting in a work that covered a large wall in its entirety, like wallpaper.[2]

2.1 Susan Morris, *Expenditure*, 2016, inkjet on paper, 400 × 637 cm

The columns of figures go down in vertical streams. But something else is going on, operating horizontally, that cuts across this downward movement and interferes with it, like an undertow:

You were served today by Paul. How did we do? Like us on Facebook! Check out our back-to-school offers, all through September. Valentine's Day for two, only £14.99. From the Co-Op – Now!

This horizontal activity, a machinic 'chatter' that registers seasonal changes, the coming and going of shop and café workers with names that appear and disappear, and so on, points to another of my interests, writing that exhibits the properties of the mark – in particular, the indexical mark. Something registers in these extra pieces of *peripheral* information that is both part of the flow of money and outside it too.

Another papery thing I have made takes the form of a diary. This, like many of my more conventional artworks, is the result of a long-term recording project. It consists of a series of day-to-day (often hour-by-hour) notations recorded over the course of an entire year (2011), interwoven with material sampled from the real (or exterior) world, such as photographs, drawings, and diagrams, but also uncited quotations, snatches of overheard conversation, dialogue drifting in from the radio and scanned newspapers, 'found' writing and images that are embedded in the text like a bus ticket in a cubist collage. The receipts are in there too.

The diary project was made in relation both to ideas around automaticity in art, as exemplified by the writing or drawing

2.2 Susan Morris, detail from *de Umbris Idæarum [on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts]*, 2021, 12 × softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 23.5 × 37.2 × 13.5 cm

initiated by the Surrealists in the 1920s, and to the *encounter* – the 'sudden violent shock' that, for Virginia Woolf, signalled 'some real thing behind appearances'.[3] James Joyce thought this phenomenon through in relation to the epiphany – the sudden manifestation of the 'whatness' of an object or a gesture. For Proust, it took the form of an involuntary remembrance closer to forgetting; to a kind of ecstatic oblivion, when self-realisation coincides with self-obliteration, an encounter with something *outside* of self; outside of language's shared communicatory system.[4]

It is significant that these writers were all working in the wake of photography, the invention of which, as the linguist Ann Banfield has argued, produced a new kind of sentence structure – one that leaves the 'I' of the first person *out*. Woolf, for example, often appears to be recording the external world from the viewpoint first revealed to us by the photograph – i.e., of no one at all. The instruments of 'modern science', Banfield writes, allowed 'the viewing subject to see, to witness, places where he is not, indeed, where no subject is present . . . He therefore directly observes . . . the appearance of things in his absence' and, by inference, his *own* absence, as revealed by these recording devices.[5] Banfield draws our attention to the question repeated throughout Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931): *how to describe a world without a self?* Each time this question is asked it is followed by the statement 'There are no words.' Or – as one of the novel's characters, Bernard, falteringly realises – there are only the little, broken, breathless words that 'lovers use'.[6]

Triggered by the encounter with the photograph, this kind of writing, in which words fail, may take the form of a *lover's discourse*, which – as Roland Barthes suggests – reduces us to subjects capable of little more than 'outbursts of language'.[7] In his later works, beginning with *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, through to his final work on photography, Barthes developed a writing style that became ever more fragmentary and notational: broken words, broken sentences, or sentences that break off. Texts split into paragraphs that retain the character of the fragment, written in little bursts, like snapshots. In a posthumously published lecture, Barthes describes the process of his note-taking in similar terms to those one might use for taking a photograph. His aim is to get his own 'personal and internal scoops' – 'to "swipe" directly from life' – and he often uses the same words to describe the immediacy or 'suddenness' essential to both notetaking and photography: the moment is one of '*satori*'; of '*kairos*'.[8] As Barthes suggests, writing itself 'is precisely *there where*

you are not' – language, like the photograph, excludes a vital part of the subject (the part that is *not* subject).[9] So in order to come close to what is located, literally, in a no man's land, you need 'a howl or cry', an 'utterance' – something that is neither fully inside nor fully outside meaning, or that is on the edge of meaning: *littoral*.[10]

Much of my recent visual practice has drawn upon the theme of selfhood's intermittent or flickering character. Using medico-scientific devices I have made works, such as screen prints, large ink-jet prints, and Jacquard tapestries, out of data recorded directly from the body. These trace a vaporous bodily unconscious that exists, like a cast shadow, alongside my everyday 'self'. What is important for me here is that the traces produced by these digital recording devices might also be classified as indexical marks, or signs.

An indexical sign is classified as such because it has a direct, physical link to the thing that caused it. 'Shadows', as Rosalind Krauss reminds us, are 'the indexical sign of the objects' that cast them.[11] Likewise, every photograph records the physical imprint of its object. Digital technology is often blamed for breaking this direct link between an object and its analogue. But digital technology is interesting to me precisely because it allows me to make recordings of things that *do not* have a specific location: *orphan* shadows, thrown by an invisible object, rather like the 'smoke without fire' that Walter Benjamin recognises in a photograph, when 'a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious'.[12]

In other words, digital technology makes it possible to record something that is connected to a cause, but in a much more remote, complex, and mysterious way. For instance, if my heart is beating excessively fast at a certain moment and is recorded as doing so in the data converted into one of my tapestries, there is often no way of knowing exactly *why* it is behaving like that. It is a sign with a referent that remains enigmatic, elusive. But we encounter these sorts of signs every day, as the character Marcel in Proust's *la Recherche* knew only too well. Something announces itself, 'like the rush of blood to the face of a person who is unsettled, or like a sudden silence' – the evidence of something impossible to decipher.[13] 'Strong emotion must leave its trace', as Woolf writes in *Moments of Being*. Her idea is that one day 'some device will be invented by which we can tap' or record them.[14]

Digital technology allows me to produce images (such as my tapestries) that trace something enigmatic but related to the body; a

body in the grip of a rhythm dictated by its own, unruly desire. But my thought is that the things that fall into the image – automatically, involuntarily – might also fall across a sentence, might also *mark* a sentence, like a shadow. Denis Hollier has described the early, autobiographical writings of the Surrealists as attempts to find, in literary space, 'the equivalent of what a shadow is in pictorial space'.[15] In their attempts to embed the index into their writing, these writers wanted to ensure, as Hollier argues, that the resulting text contained an element of 'incommunicability': a *break* in communication.[16]

This idea – that writing could also index (point to) something *outside* language – interests me. The problem was: how could 'I' write it? How could the use of the first person generate what Hollier describes as an 'autobiographical *precipitate* of the index'?[17] This question resolved itself once I started working in the diaristic mode, where entries written one day and forgotten the next bring about a paradoxical conjunction between the 'I' of the first person and the *absence* of self implied by automaticity. So it was that on 1 January 2011, and for the rest of that year, I submitted myself to what Michael Levenson has described as the 'tyranny' of the diary form, entrusting myself – as Barthes said of his own diary keeping – to *the banality that is in me*.[18]

The most intense moments I have experienced have often been when I am writing, when I find myself 'hardly aware of [anything], but the sensation . . . the feeling of ecstasy . . . of rapture' that overtakes me, forcing me to stop, in the street, on the train, and scribble frantically in my notebook.[19] For this reason, when I decided to keep a diary, I thought that the resulting text would be full of compelling insights and poetic observations. Not so. Indeed, while some of the motivation for this project came out of an interest in Virginia Woolf's delight in 'rubbish reading', I admit some perplexity at the realisation that I have met this with my own *rubbish writing*.[20]

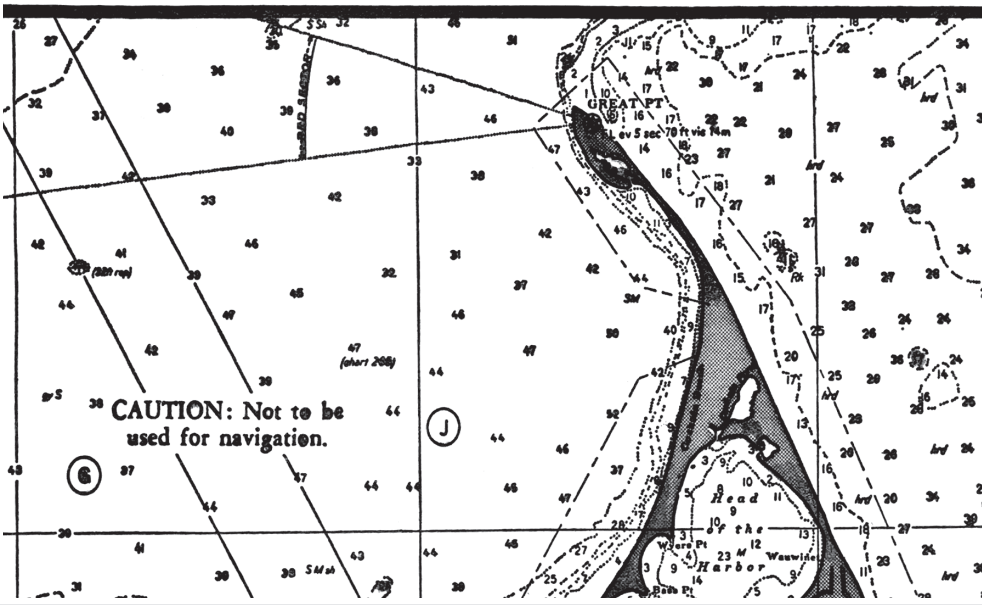
Yet perhaps there is value in all this detritus? Freud suggested that the best place to look for the truth of the subject was by sifting through the rubbish of their discourse. He found this in his patient's dreams – noting too that these dreams could never be fully reassembled; that they always had the fragmentary, 'nonsensical' characteristic of a rebus. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which also juxtaposes unrelated (textual) fragments in a process 'intimately related to that of montage',[21] has been

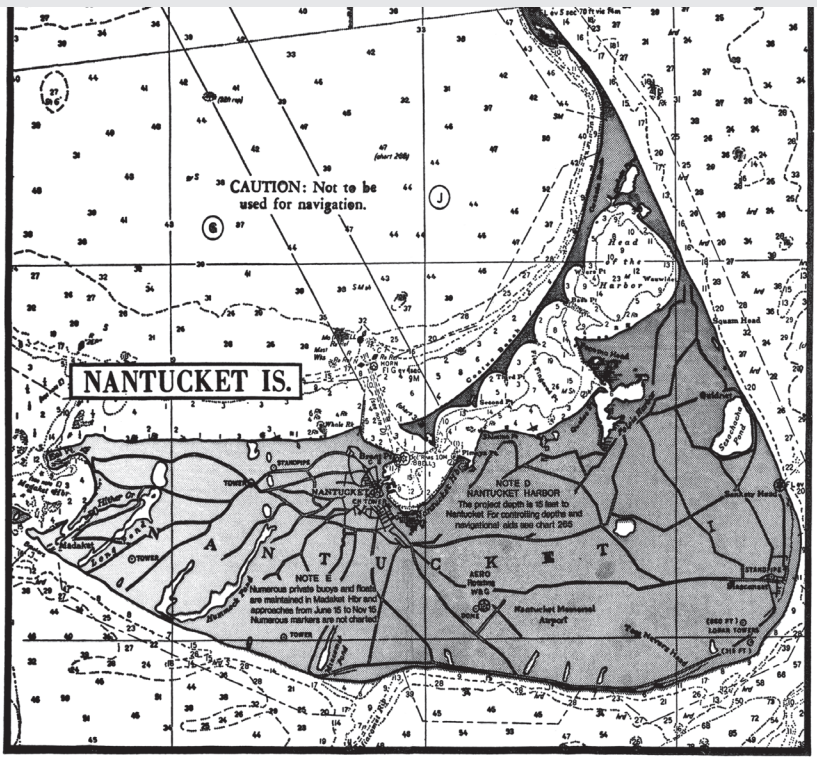
described as a way of writing about an entire civilisation 'using its rubbish as materials'.[22]

The value of rubbish writing has also been discussed at length in Lacan's commentary on James Joyce, whose books, Lacan suggests, are a form of *lituraterre* – a neologism that (in French) brings mud, dirt, and the earth into literature.[23] It is also based on a play on the words 'letter' and 'litter'. A letter is usually intended for a reader. Litter, on the other hand, is more likely to end up on a rubbish heap. *Litura* in Latin means 'erasure' or 'blotch'. A manuscript is *liturarius* when full of such things. My diary, which I kept doggedly for the year, aspired to this state, gathering everything into it. Like the magnetised toy canine that the artist Francis Alÿs dragged through the streets of Mexico City in his 1991 performance piece, *The Collector*, things stuck to me. But more than that too: stuff from the 'world' actually *interfered* with 'me'. In fact, as Hollier has pointed out, autobiography tends to suffer interference from the immediate. 'What is a private diary', he asks, when technologies of media and communication have insinuated their way 'into the innermost recesses of privacy?' The truth is that the writing of the private diary (the journal) is often *prompted* by the reading of what we could call the public diary (the [in French] *journal*).[24]

The title for my 'diary project' – which for years (channelling Joyce) I also referred to as 'Work in Progress' – is *de Umbris Idæarum [on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts]*.[25] The piece consists of twelve books, housed in a purpose-built shelf, one for each month of the recorded year. Clearly, there is a lot of material from the real world, stamped, as it inevitably is, with real time and dates. The *journal* is in the journal, alongside cinema tickets, letters, and 'litter' (such as flyers), and so on, not to mention thousands of itemised receipts, emails, and text messages, all interspersed with the 'text' – the writing itself – which, rather than reflecting the interiority of a constructed self, also appears to be sampled from the world 'outside'. This is because the words I use often seem to echo the machinic clatter of the world I am inhabiting, as if the things I 'say' are simply gleaned or plucked from my immediate environment. Unconsciously or not, I mimic what I read, the conversations I share, what I hear.

The 'I' of the diarist is migratory, fluid, unfixed. As opposed to the memoir, which is typically written from a fixed standpoint, the diary continually changes its perspective and thereby undoes the





11:00

I am awake.

I am thinking. Last night. Was I drunken and foolish? I am thirsty. I am hot. A feeling of despair! I remember surfacing, briefly, in the night.
But can I be bothered to get water?

11:45

I get up. I am feeling relieved. I have finished the work that took up so much of my time last year - all year, in fact. I can't imagine doing it again and hope that my new project is more playful, less duty bound. Above all - it should be FACTUAL.

My intention? To keep a journal.

I am thinking about Roland Barthes, who loved to read biographies for their accounts of mundane things, such as the fluctuations of weather and other "petty details of daily life: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing." Factual details, unlike someone's "insipid moral musing" retain their immediacy and relevance to our lives. Or so Moyra Davey says, in her book *The Problem of Reading*.

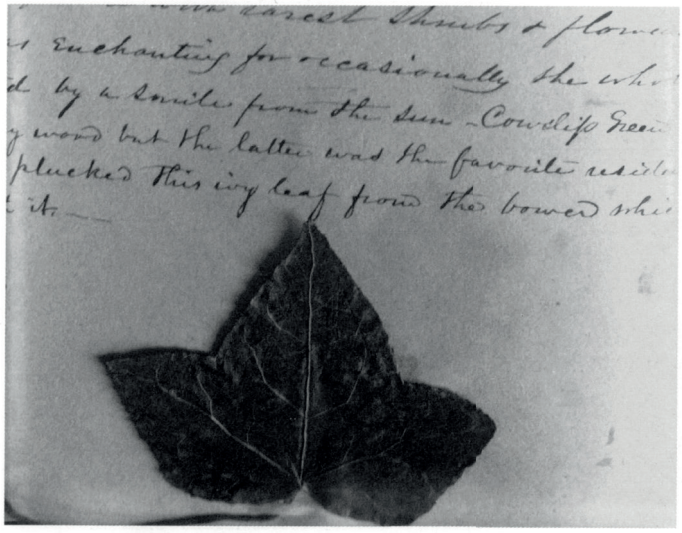
On the kitchen table, the napkin from last night's supper.

NOT TO BE USED FOR NAVIGATION

Put the biography down, she recommends, and look out the window. Try your hand at recording the scene, "stimulating… in its unselfconsciousness, its irrelevance, its perpetual movement."

Woolf had a passion for the letters, diaries, and travel journals of ordinary men and women of bygone days. In "Street Haunting," her 1930 *flaneuse*'s account of a twilight walk through the streets of London for the purpose of buying a pencil, she recounts stepping into a secondhand bookshop, the home of all the "wild" and undomesticated books, and pulling off of an upper shelf a faded little volume, a wool-merchant's chronicle of a business trip through Wales, written and self-published a hundred years prior. In an almost Proustian evocation of the serendipitous, sensory retrieval of memory—the idea that something buried and forgotten may be summoned to life once again through chance encounter—she describes how the chronicler "let flow… [into his account] the very scent of hollyhocks and the hay together with such a portrait of himself as gives him forever a seat in the warm corner of the mind's inglenook." These "relics of human life" constitute the "rubbish reading" to which Woolf is so devoted: "it may be one letter—but what a vision it gives! It may be a few sentences—but what vistas they suggest!" It is the "matter-of-factness," the unpremeditated quality of these writings that is key to Wolf's delectation of them. Like the Surrealists who seized on the evocative, hallucinatory power of the found-object, Woolf prized her chance literary finds and wrote of the paroxysms of pleasure they elicited with an intensity and craving of a gourmet.

(Roland Barthes, in his book *The Pleasure of the Text*, expresses



14:05

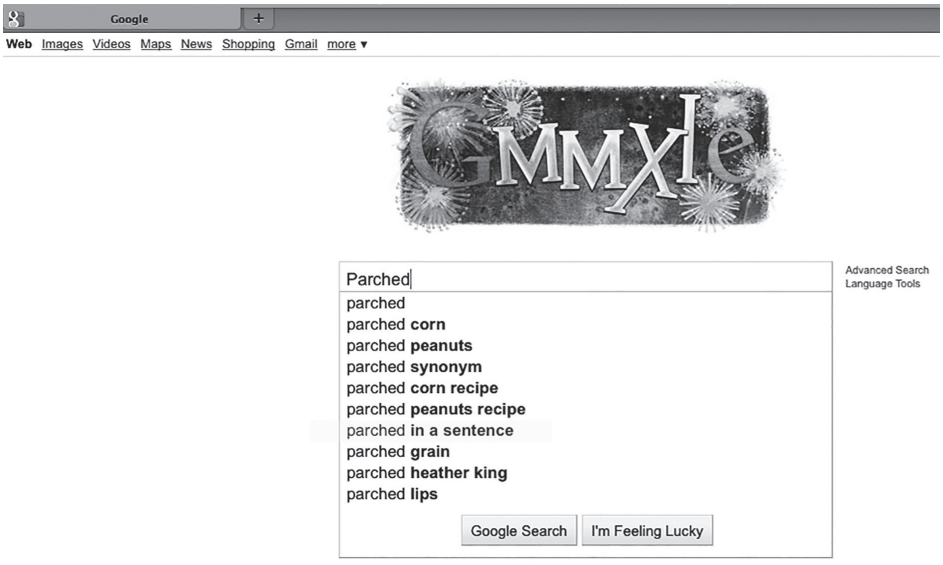
I am eating lentils that sink in my belly like a stone.

15:35

Parched. I am staring at a blank page. Nothing to say!

Parchment.

I type 'parched' into Google. A set of options fall down the screen.



16:17

An email. From Sissu. It is a page from John Cage's *Mushroom Book*. A recipe and a song.

Sissu writes nothing in the email but the subject heading says

for susan
for a sound year ahead

MUSHROOM BOOK

I

Bake *Polyporus frondosus* (buttered,
seasoned, covered)
until tender. Chop.
Steep wild rice 5 x 20'
in boiling water (last water salted).
Combine.

Voices singing Joyce's Ten Thunderclaps
transformed
electronically to fill actual
thunder envelopes; strings playing star
maps transformed likewise to fill
actual raindrop envelopes (rain
falling on materials representing history of
technology).
(McLuhan.) Last rain not falling
(wind instruments), i.e. present moment.
Music becomes nature (Johns).

Man/Earth: a problem to be
solved.

highway system (Ivan Illich): a false utility.

no water unless necessary.

Hunting for *hygrophoroides*, found
abortivus instead.
Returning to get more *abortivus*, found
ostreatus in fair condition. South to
see the birds, spotted *mellea*.
Hunting is starting from
zero, not looking for.

19:30

We are going to the movies. Catfish.

2.3 Susan Morris, *de Umbris Idæarum [on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts]*, 2021, 12 × softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 23.5 × 37.2 × 13.5 cm

work of each preceding entry. There is always a slight sense of unease when you read what you wrote 'last night'. As Stephen Dedalus observes, in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 'I was someone else then.'[26] So the diary's retrospective view is daily rendered obsolete as life outstrips it; each entry brings a new retrospect, inviting a restless process of self-correction, self-revision, and, arguably, a kind of self-erasure.[27] A text accumulates, littered with blotches, blanks, and erasures, or, as Lacan put it, with *failure, impediment, split* – the ways in which unconscious activity makes its presence felt. In the gaps, lapses, and silences across the page there is *being* which is *not* the 'I', or is an 'I' that has something about it that is both unspeakable – 'meaninglessness surrounds it' – and unlocatable.[28] Indeed, as the year of my diary-keeping progressed, a question about the *tense* of the text emerged – perhaps as a by-product of the repeated attempt to

record 'presence'. No sooner is each entry written than it is in the past. The reader therefore encounters the diary in a kind of future anterior, the tense that Barthes claims is the property of the photograph: both 'this *will* be' and 'this *has* been'. 'In front of the photograph of my mother as a child,' Barthes writes, 'I shudder like Winnicott's psychotic patient *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*.' If 'every photo is this catastrophe', are there also instances of written sentences that operate in a similar way?[29]

Nothing catastrophic happened to me personally in the year I kept the diary. However, there were many, *many*, actual catastrophes, such as the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan and the right-wing terrorist attacks in Norway, and many fictional disasters, particularly in films released that year. These seemed to mirror each other in a rather unsettling way, with parallel themes running through both.[30] The diary recorded this peculiar coincidence of real and fictional disasters – floods, earthquakes, random shootings, the deaths of our heroes, and the betrayal of the people by our leaders – all of which culminated in a feeling of dread: an *anticipation* of catastrophe. A kind of post-apocalyptic atmosphere permeates the text; not so much melancholia as fear – a *shuddering*.

On top of this, as the diary went on, I started to feel more and more detached, like a non-human recording machine. Gradually I found that I was adopting quite a psychotic relation to the world, by which I mean one that does not understand language as a series of substitutable signifiers but instead takes every word at face value – so that the graffiti on the walls, the patterns of birds in flight, the shape of the clouds, and even the whispering of the trees, for example, were all encountered as messages addressed *to me alone*. This approach was not without the occasional, unexpectedly humorous effect – during the month of September, for example, almost every time I left my analyst's house, an apple fell on my head. Given, however, that the majority of all the narratives that surround us are received through the same apparatus (phone/computer screen), the difference between fiction or fantasy and (so-called) reality can get confused. Very early on in the diary – at 12.15 on 27 January, to be precise – I write that when you record it 'just as it happens, as it unfolds, life starts to seem little more than a massive hallucination'.

'The recent past always presents itself as though annihilated by catastrophes', writes Benjamin, quoting Adorno, in *The Arcades Project* which, because of its fragmentary form, was one of the many

2.4 Susan Morris, detail from *de Umbris Idæarum [on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts]*, 2021, 12 × softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with bespoke shelf. Printed paper and wood, 23.5 × 37.2 × 13.5 cm

models for the diary.[31] Another was the combination of image and text in Albrecht Dürer's *Dream Vision* (1525), a watercolour painting accompanied by writing that recounts a nightmare, a deluge that 'drowns the whole land'. This image ended up in the diary, of course, but media reports of real events, such as the floods in Australia and Thailand, echoed this image, as if it were some sort of *template of dread*.

Page after page records imagery that describes the world as if after an apocalypse, although this was not planned nor anticipated. I deliberately made sure that no people appeared in any of my photographs (which I also tried to take as if by a disembodied recording device, like a drone.) The only images of people are from printed sources such as newspapers, so a feeling of emptiness permeates the book. I was particularly attracted to sites of dereliction, where

old notices and spray-painted texts appear like coded messages on walls and pavements. I am there, in the diary, but maybe I am not – maybe it is just a machine talking to itself, its messages circulating by themselves, like a malfunctioning Amazon 'Alexa', or a radio stuck between channels.

There is also a sense throughout the text of things being in limbo. Stuff happens but nothing is resolved – there is no ending; certainly no denouement. There is the unresolved nature of my relationship with my partner, but also of my work. My studio practice seems to be in some sort of hiatus. Although, in my memory, I seemed to have always been in the studio – and certainly work gets made and is being exhibited (I talk about the various stresses of that) – still it appears as if I was not there. Those parts of my life went unrecorded. Instead, I seem always to be in the street, in the in-between spaces, on my way somewhere or on my way back. Yet this may just be the nature of the diary's 'ongoingness', with the attempt to capture everything leaving, paradoxically perhaps, vast chunks of unrecorded time.

I referred above to the fact that everything, all information, comes to us through the same devices. That is basically how I made the piece. I gathered the material by using the Evernote app, usually through my phone, but as all my devices were synced together I just added stuff using whatever was immediately to hand (iPad, laptop, or phone) typing in, or more often dictating (while on the move), the diary entries, as well as scanning material, taking photographs, or recording audio material from the radio or television. When it came to laying it out, the only rule I had was that the *time* of each diary entry would run like a column down the centre of each page. Everything else had to fall into place around that. So, all the material, no matter how diverse, is organised chronologically and it is all held or contained in the same digital storage system.

There is no reference in his book on photography, *Camera Lucida*, to the source of the idea that Barthes evokes when discussing tense. In his *Mourning Diary*, however, where he refers to it in three separate entries, the editor directs the reader to psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's paper 'Fear of Breakdown' (1963). Fear of breakdown, fear that 'the unit self' will collapse, fall to pieces, is, Winnicott suggests, fairly universal – it is on his list of 'primitive agonies'. But the main idea in Winnicott's paper is the suggestion that fear of a breakdown is always the fear of something that has *already been*

experienced.[32] The subject scans the future for an experience that is in the past.

'Falling to pieces, falling for ever', shudders the writer Maggie Nelson, who has also been reading Winnicott, and whose 'Fear of Breakdown' she quotes throughout her 2015 book *The Argonauts*. In the book, Nelson is searching for a holding environment – which could simply be the right word (name) or phrase – that allows a fluid, transitory identity to thrive. But she is aware at every turn (falling in love, becoming a mother, finding a mother) how fragile, and how vulnerable to collapse, identity always is.

Nelson's work repeatedly conjures up Barthes's injunction to give voice to this thing that 'is "unreal" i.e. intractable': a stubborn, perverse, ungovernable thing that we must, so to speak, tune into.[33] Her writing, she states, comes out of a need 'to pay homage to the transitive, the flight'.[34] Nelson seems to concur too with Barthes's idea that a discourse might be considered purely as *structure*, as holding place for the 'multiple traces' of the 'I' to be staged. Here the 'utterance' might be considered as something nebulous, drifting . . .

'A frequent image', writes Barthes in his autobiographical book *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 'is that of the ship *Argo*, each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended up with an entirely new ship, without having to alter its name or its form.'[35] Hence, for Barthes, the *Argo* stands for a structural identity that allows the material that constitutes it to be continually replaced. It can do this, he suggests, by a process of two 'modest actions': substitution and nomination. So, is the *Argo* itself 'an object with no other cause [i.e., referent] than its name'?[36] Nelson picks up on this when she suggests the *self* as Argo. And she names this self 'snowball' – destined to melt, to crumble, or disappear.

Nelson assembles her text (her 'self') by gathering together many different voices so that both text and self stay open, constantly *becoming*. She takes this technique from Barthes, confessing in an interview that she 'totally stole' his mode of marginal attributions, in order to build something out of fragments, a collage that has inscribed within it a becoming in which one never becomes, whose rule is a 'certain turning' – like a clock, perhaps.[37] This is a ventriloquising reminiscent of the great works of mourning assembled by W. G. Sebald. Writing from a place of exile, Sebald also allowed his work to be permeated by multiple voices – to create a mobile, mutable 'I' alongside images of things collapsing. 'Like ashes the low cliffs crumble,' he writes, reciting A. C. Swinburne's poem *By*

the North Sea (1880), 'and the banks drop down into dust.'[38] Here Sebald embeds Swinburne's text into his own, so that one line is 'spoken' by two voices.

Ventriloquism produces a disembodied voice, then, or one that comes from the wrong part of the body or from someone else's body, which is put to subversive use, like an undercurrent that moves against the tide. A writer who is ventriloquising channels or picks up, as if her body were a radio receiver, the voices of the dead and buried, as well as those of the restless undead.

Fear of death is one of a number of applications Winnicott makes for his theory, alongside fear of emptiness, the feeling of non-existence.[39] Fear of dying, or of being already dead, may actually be a pretty widespread cultural anxiety, related to language's peculiar operation – we are both inside and outside it. In her posthumously published 'Sketch of the Past', Virginia Woolf writes movingly of how at some moments and without reason something happens and the shield that protects us suddenly cracks, at which point 'in floods reality'.[40] 'Again I had that hopeless sadness,' she writes, 'that collapse I have described before; as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off.'[41]

For Winnicott, it is this feeling of falling, 'falling for ever' – as the repetition of an event in the past – that is dreaded yet obsessively sought.[42] This situation is not confined to the analyst's couch. An obsessive search in the future to understand something that has happened in the past could easily describe the structure of many science-fiction films; one might think of the *Terminator* series, but also of Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée*: 'the story of a man, marked by an image from his childhood'. Sent back into the past by time-travelling scientists, he comes to realise that what he has witnessed as a child was his own death as an adult.

La Jetée is a disjointed, fragmentary collage-film consisting almost entirely of stills so that, even as it moves forward in linear time, it is cut through with stroboscopic flashes of blindness, where the darkness is aligned with intuition or knowledge. The poet Claudia Rankine, in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), uses a similarly disjointed form, with fragmentary notations that explore themes of toxic poisoning, sleeplessness, medicated depression, and fear of death, cut through with blank pages – *white* spaces this time.

Throughout Rankine's poem, again and again, the question is asked and rearticulated: when does death – when *did* death – actually occur? Are we now in fact always already dead? When did the event – the toxins, the poison, the cancer, the terrorists – enter our body and end our lives, send us over to the disunited realm of the dead, the breathless? For instance, 'say the eyes are resting when the phone rings and what this friend wants to tell you is that in five years she will be dead . . . The lump was misdiagnosed a year earlier. Can we say that she might have lived had her doctor not screwed up? If yes – when does her death actually occur?'[43]

What underpins Rankine's questions about death, as well as her desire to locate the precise moment that the death occurred, revolves around the question of race, the exclusion of a whole people from the 'we' that speaks in America. This exclusion has unsettling repercussions. 'In college,' she writes, 'when I studied Hegel, I was struck by his explanation of the use of death by the state. Hegel argued that death is used as a threat to keep citizens in line. The minute you stop fearing death you are no longer controlled by governments and councils . . . The relationships embedded between the "I" and the "we" unhinge and lose all sense of responsibility. That "you", functioning as Other, now exists beyond our notions of civil and social space.'[44]

Later (in a passage about the first person that really resonated for me), Rankine describes a conversation she has had with her editor that goes badly:

> I understand that what she wants is an explanation of the mysterious connections that exist between an author and her text. If I am present in a subject position what responsibility do I have to the content, to the truth value, of the words themselves? Is 'I' even me or am 'I' a gearshift to get from one sentence to the next? Should I say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? What does my subject mean to me?[45]

Rankine's video series *Situations*, which she makes with her partner the artist John Lucas, presents another example of the ventriloquising I discussed earlier. These voices from or *of* the dead – projected through Rankine's body from beloved poets who 'whisper in her ear', or from external sources such as the television – echo throughout her poems. *I thought I was dead. You thought you were dead? / Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they're dead.* The presence of these restless spirits is hinted at throughout the printed pages of the book

by photographs of a television set. A few have messages on them. 'YOUR LIFE IS WAITING', the manufacturers of antidepressants tell us, commanding us to *stop being dead* – but most are of televisions stuck between channels, screens filled with white noise or 'snow'. Yet out of these fragments, the collected quotations, newspaper reportage, and flashes of imagery from the media, out of this *gleaning*, Rankine builds a voice that 'quivers', in the terms defined by Berger for poetry or drawing – as expression of a kind of *dis*integration; a not belonging.

There is also a death – a fading away or collapsing; a *being corpse* – that occurs in Joyce, or at least to the character Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Faced with a situation that causes him extreme anxiety, Stephen slips or fades away, like a shadow. He casts off his body (his body as self) as easily, he says, 'as a fruit is divested of its soft ripe peel'.[46] He feels himself falling and lets himself go. *Portrait* is an expression of extreme anxiety in language, which resolves itself (at least for the writer, Joyce) by moving from 'straight' writing to something very different indeed. As Lacan argued, Joyce saves himself from the psychosis that threatens to engulf the character in his book by his own writing – through which he (literally) makes a name for himself – for *his* 'self' (Argo). Joyce's particular, structural mode of writing holds him together, stops him falling to pieces. And around the 'voice', heard particularly in *Finnegans Wake*, an identity crystallises – as precipitate; as snowball.[47]

Interestingly, *Portrait* ends with fragments of a diary. It is worth noting too that Joyce, whose writing Lacan uses as an example of the *lituraterre* mentioned above, was the ultimate ventriloquist, with *Portrait* containing approximately ten quotations in every dozen pages. Later this ventriloquism interrupts, disrupts, the words themselves, to create neologisms that, when read aloud, allow Irish to be spoken through English. 'How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on [the Englishman's] lips and on mine!', Joyce's character Stephen protests. '*My soul frets in the shadow of his language.*'[48]

Lacan's concept of *lituraterre* suggests litter, letters, and their erasure (a pun that is more obvious in French, since one can always hear *rature* – erasure or crossing out – in the very signifier). It hints, too, at the limit or border of a territory, be it the sea, a hole, or language, literature, itself. Here rubbish writing takes on a new validity and function – rubbish escapes from or falls out of the neat chain of symbolic signifiers that produce meaning. A *lituraterre* – the literature of the littoral – as a discourse made up of rubbish which erases

itself as it is being written may be what we need as subjects, both to hold ourselves together and to allow us to fall apart, to fall to pieces or stay fluid, to flow, but also to speak outside the master discourse in order to disrupt it.

The separation of our shit from other areas of our living space is, apparently, what makes humans different from animals. Both Lacan and Nelson mention this. For Nelson, it makes her 'feel at home in her species'. There is 'no civilisation without the sewer', asserts Lacan.[49] But what happens if a whole people are identified as the shit from which we want to separate? And what if you are part of that group that has been designated as trash?

Rankine and Nelson speak from that position, as does Joyce. For Lacan, it is the *only* place from which to speak; the only place to move from totality to fragments; to make holes in writing, and thereby create self-identifications that resist simple categories of either/or. Nelson draws on Barthes's idea of the Neutral for this, 'being that which, in the face of dogmatism, the menacing pressure to take sides, offers novel responses: to flee, to escape, to demur, to shift or refuse terms, disengage, to turn away'.[50]

True discourse is discursive. It runs; like mercury, it spills. This liquid metal as a metaphor for discourse is attractive, but Mercury the deity is very appropriate too, as he is the god of poetry, of discourse and exchange, but also of travellers (Mercury is the guide of souls to the underworld), of boundaries (i.e., the littoral), of luck, and of thieves.

Joyce was a thief. Lacan shows how – by using wordplay, condensation, neologism, displacement, pun, riddle, allusion, ideogram, misspelling, combination of incongruous words and phrases, words from different languages, absence of punctuation, stress on the sounds of words, the fading self – Joyce created hallucinatory and chaotic texts, situated on the edge of meaning.[51] Throughout his course on the novel, Barthes repeatedly returns to the suggestion that 'moments of Truth' should be scattered randomly throughout a text. In this way any narrative would be interrupted with 'the sudden *bursting forth* of the uninterpretable, '"scattered" within its fabric'; something, or *nothing* – rubbish perhaps – that 'possesses an evidential force'; a wordless, nameless 'presence'.[52]

In my own work, I have been trying to think about a particular kind of mark-making, one that could be classified as indexical, and looking at ways in which this mark can be embedded or manifested in writing; to put pressure on language, expose its limit or edge. This means that

there are things in some of the material that I collected that I could not really see. For example, looking back through the pages now, I am amazed to discover two newspaper articles that warn in great detail of the threat of a global pandemic. I had included them because I liked the diagrams that accompanied the articles. I did not for one moment think that there would actually *be* a pandemic, the impact of which is still unknown because similarly impossible to see. However, I think it is safe to say that a catastrophe *has* occurred, although perhaps not *the* catastrophe, which might be related to the increasingly evident effects of climate change or to something else altogether, something that's already here but to which we are also completely blind.

This year I started another diary. Ten years separate the first from the current recording project, which has the working title of *s/Wake*, intended to evoke both a wake – Finnegan's? – but also, the *aftermath*. The long gap in time between one work and the other, in what may become a series, reflects an already established methodology in my practice. For instance, I have two other bodies of work made out of text either 'found' or generated in accordance with a set of rules, a process I repeat every five years.[53]

This diary, the 2021 diary, records a very real event after it has happened – or it is being made in the aftermath of that event (although of course every recording is of the aftermath of something). It takes the same basic form as the 2011 diary, with all material organised around a central 'spine' of time entries. I have made the decision not to include photographs or images of any kind this year, but the basic rules still apply: as much as is consciously possible, I exclude my own, subjective, point of view. I continue to incorporate 'any old rubbish' as it comes my way, which is added to the ever-expanding text without judgement. This means the same operation of blindness and erasure is at play as before, so that new entries often cancel out previous ones. I cannot actually remember what went into the diary yesterday, last week, and certainly not a few weeks ago, and that is how I want it to be. There will be no revision of the completed text. This is so I do not miss the things I cannot currently see.

Tomorrow will be the last day of May 2021, so I am already five months into this project. This morning, 30 May, I had my second vaccination. My hopes are high, despite reports in the news that indicate potential problems with virus variants. But for the first three months of this year, in England, we were in severe lockdown. I have

almost forgotten what it was that we were not allowed to do, but I know we were not allowed to do much, and anyway the cinemas, galleries, cafés, restaurants, and all 'non-essential' shops were closed and the weather was awful.

Those winter months were grim and dark; repetitive, without texture. The writing – what I recorded from the media, from the books I was reading, from the copious amounts of television I was watching, and of the conversations between friends and family (which, if in real life, had to be conducted outside, on the empty streets or on our daily walks, but which most often took place by text, WhatsApp, or over Zoom) – reflects both the tedium but also our efforts to entertain ourselves. Always present in the background is an undercurrent of fear, like white noise. Almost everything we do, and everything we say – in the media or in our conversations – occurs in the shadow of the Coronavirus.

I sometimes think that this activity is closer to a kind of 'death-work'. I am always recording and writing, I have no time to live! But what interests me, and keeps me at it, is the knowledge that I do not know what I am actually writing as I am writing it. Life – that 'real

2.5 The National Covid Memorial Wall, 2021

thing behind appearances' – keeps breaking in. In addition, the fragmentary form of the text and the ever-accumulating amount of unrecorded time *between* each diary entry draw the reader's attention to another kind of white noise, or undercurrent, within the text. Something is being written in the gaps and silences, the interruptions, fractures, and splits, which shows that 'evidence' may not be what or where we think it is. In this way, the material I leave out of the diary – unconsciously or not – creates a space in language for things that cannot be put into words.[54]

Susan Morris,
London, May 2021

Notes

1 John Berger, *Confabulations* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 4.
2 Of course, the scale at which this piece is reproduced in this book renders this information invisible. However, there is another horizontal/vertical movement operating here on the page, between the reproduced image and the words used to describe it. For installation shots of the work, plus details, see: http://susanmorris.com/self-moderation-installation-shots (accessed 2 November 2022).
3 Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 84–85.
4 Here something – 'a disturbance (to civilisation)' – erupts, which Roland Barthes, following Proust, knew well. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 12.
5 Ann Banfield, 'Describing the Unobserved: Events Grouped Around an Empty Centre', in Colin McCabe, Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, and Alan Durant (eds), *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 265.
6 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 221–227. See also: 'I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, *inarticulate* words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement.' *The Waves*, p. 183, emphasis added.
7 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 3.
8 Roland Barthes, 'Daily Practice of Notation', in *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 90.
9 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 100, emphasis added.
10 In his later work, Barthes repeatedly returns to the idea of the photographic 'Encounter' – met with a cry at 'the end of all language', 'a *satori* in which words fail'. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 109. For 'a howl,

a cry', see also Bernard in *The Waves*, p. 227. For 'an utterance', see Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 3.

11 Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 198. In this essay Krauss also explores the 'collapsed shifter' – "I"'.

12 Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 243.

13 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 5: The Prisoner*, trans. Carol Clark (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 77. Proust also expresses a desire to record these 'precious compounds' and does so in terms that evoke early photographic methodology – for example, when he wishes to 'process' them by 'electrolysis'.

14 Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 81.

15 Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates' ('Précipités surréalistes'), *October*, 69 (Summer 1994), 124.

16 Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates', 113.

17 Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates', 130, emphasis added.

18 Michael Levenson, 'Stephen's Diary', in Mark A. Wollaeger (ed.), *James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 186; Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010), p. 17, emphasis added.

19 Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 81.

20 The second spread from the opening pages of *de Umbris Idæarum* consists of a photograph from Moyra Davey's book *The Problem of Reading*, embellished with my post-it notes. This is one of many found texts and images in the diary that, assembled in the order that I encountered them, set off various associative chains. In this case, I was attracted to Davey's description of Woolf's 'rubbish reading'; her 'passion for the letters, diaries, and travel journals of ordinary men and women of bygone days', with these considered as 'relics of human life'. Moyra Davey, *The Problem of Reading* (Los Angeles, CA: Documents Books, 2003), pp. 22–23. See also Virginia Woolf, 'How Should One Read a Book?', in *Virginia Woolf: Essays on the Self* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2014), p. 71.

21 J. M. Coetzee, 'The Man Who Went Shopping for Truth', *Guardian*, 20 January 2001: www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jan/20/history.society (accessed 2 November 2022).

22 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), [N1,10], p. 458.

23 Jacques Lacan, *Lituraterre:* seminar of 12 May 1971. First published in the review *Litterature (Larousse)*, 3 (1971), republished in *Ornicar*, 41 (April–June 1987), 5–13.

24 Denis Hollier, 'Timeliness and Timelessness', in *Yale French Studies*, 93 (1998), The Place of Maurice Blanchot, 106. See also 'Contingent

Selves: Simone de Beauvoir's Use of the "Journal Intime"', in Rachel Langford and Russell West (eds), *Marginal Voices, Marginal Forms: Diaries in European Literature and History* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi, 1999), pp. 136–146.

25 This title originates from a passage in *The Rings of Saturn* by W. G. Sebald, a key text for me, influencing both my writing but also the making of my tapestries. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London, Harvill Press, 1998), p. 272. See also Margaret Iversen, 'The Diaristic Mode in Contemporary Art after Barthes', *Art History*, 77:4 (September 2021), 798–822.

26 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916] (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 261. See also p. 274 for the character Stephen Dedalus's encounter with what he had written 'the night before'.

27 Michael Levensen, 'Stephen's Diary', in Mark A. Wollaeger (ed.), *James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 190.

28 Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index', p. 77. For indexicality and 'meaninglessness' see also Susan Morris, 'On the Blank: Photography, Writing, Drawing' (PhD dissertation, University of the Arts London, 2006), https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/2309/ (accessed 2 November 2022).

29 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96, emphasis added.

30 Examples of the films I am talking about include Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter*, and *Another Earth*, directed by Mike Cahill.

31 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [K4,3], p. 397. For more on the Dürer work, see: https://theparisreview.tumblr.com/post/58075304454/albrecht-durer-dream-vision-1525-a (accessed 2 November 2022). Note that Benjamin also states that 'the art of citing without quotation marks' is essential to this work. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 458.

32 D. W. Winnicott, 'Fear of Breakdown', in Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (eds), *Psychoanalytic Explorations* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), p. 87, emphasis added.

33 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 3.

34 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House, 2016), p. 66. This book is also, obviously, a lover's discourse.

35 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 46.

36 Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 46.

37 Maggie Nelson, *Argonauts*, p. 66.

38 W. G. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn*, p. 160.

39 Winnicott, 'Fear of Breakdown', p. 92, 95.

40 Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', p. 145.

41 Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', p. 90.

42 Winnicott, 'Fear of Breakdown', p. 89.
43 Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 8.
44 Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, p. 84.
45 Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, p. 54.
46 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* p. 87, 161, emphasis added.
47 Stephen's repeated psychic collapses are discussed in detail in 'A Young Man Without an Ego' by Geneviève Morel, in Parveen Adams (ed.), *Art: Sublimation or Symptom* (London: Karnac Books, 2003), p. 138.
48 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 205.
49 See Santanu Biswas, 'A Literary Introduction to "Lituraterre"', in Biswas (ed.), *The Literary Lacan* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012), p. 178.
50 Nelson, *Argonauts*, p. 139.
51 See Biswas, 'A Literary Introduction to "Lituraterre"', p. 185.
52 Adam Thirlwell, 'My Novel, My Novel', *New Republic*, 8 December 2010, https://newrepublic.com/article/79745/novel-roland-barthes-realism (accessed 2 November 2022), emphasis added.
53 These have been written about by Sadie Plant; see 'Compelled to Count', in Susan Morris et al., *Susan Morris, Self Moderation* (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2016), http://susanmorris.com/self-moderation-catalogue-essays/#essay2 (accessed 2 November 2022).
54 The National Covid Memorial Wall is a public mural painted by volunteers to commemorate victims of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Organised by the campaign group Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, it has no legal status.