

6

Write this down: Phenomenology of the page

Monica Carroll

Shark's teeth

Everything contains some
silence. Noise gets
its zest from the
small shark's-tooth-
shaped fragments
of rest angled
in it. An hour
of city holds maybe
a minute of these
remnants of a time
when silence reigned,
compact and dangerous
as a shark. Sometimes
a bit of a tail
or fin can still
be sensed in parks. (Ryan 2005)

What are the circumstances under which writing is said to take place? On a blank canvas? In the darkness of night? The materiality of writing is often only considered in specialised circles or for functional purposes. Completing a form in Black Pen Only. Ensuring margins meet minimum required standards. Or choosing a font with emotional associations suited to the message. There is, however, a deeper significance to the materiality of writing and this is reigned by space. 'When silence reigned', is Kay Ryan's hark to this level of life; while the shape of this space-type will develop as we progress, van Manen captures the difficulty of entering a phenomenological writing process when he says, 'It seems all somewhat absurd until we begin to discuss the silence in the writing' (1984: 37). One

such silence is the experience of space. The centrality of space is evident through a phenomenological approach to writing. In this, space must first come as ‘the page’¹ and then as writing itself.

We know the non-physical. An empty page is the dangerous, elusive state before ‘idea’. Trust is compulsory for we cannot be certain the storm inside will tumble onto the page with the metallic taste of lightning, with the thunderous rattle of our floorboards. How do we know the slaving lust, the kiss engorging the already swollen heart, will carve a space into the primordial page? This is convention—the writer, adorned in accoutrements, tempts moments to ‘create’. This ‘create’ is an act given by, not our pulsing body, but the sightless, intangible ‘mind’; writing is taken as a conceptual act, *logos*. Does this describe the lived writing process? Or are we pacing a known marble prison; an acquainted Cartesian poke with its theory/practice split? Escape is in considering the physical, fleshly lines of writing in practice.

To perceive things for what they are is the Husserlian enterprise. This begins with a ‘setting’. ‘So we experience in this “pure”, or cleansed theoretical setting, not houses, tables, streets, works of art, we experience only material things’² (Husserl 1952: 25). The foundation of Husserl’s approach is experience. Reading this, for you, is lush in experience. Phenomenology offers a methodology that opens our subjective experience to research. What makes writing that which it is? We may discover through I. Not Descartes’ I, devoid of taste and tongue but Husserl’s *Leib* of the animated, sensing I. Husserl describes the phenomenological reduction as ‘effected by me, as the actually philosophizing subject, from the natural standpoint as a basis, and I experience myself here in the first instance as “I” in the ordinary sense of the term, as this human person living among others in the world’ (Husserl 1969: 13).

Phenomenological texts are frequently, as philosophical texts, comparatively poetic. To enter such spaces, we must abandon ourselves (Bachelard 1969: xxiv). We immerse, record, describe, to produce a phenomenological tract. ‘The text must reverberate with our ordinary experience of life as well as with our sense of life’s meaning’ (van Manen 2007: 26). Use of the poetic in this descriptive process moves us from abstract-empty to significance touched. Poetic structures can bring us to a ‘physiognomic apprehension’ such as described by Werner and Kaplan (1963).

A hindrance in phenomenological inquiry, however, is not that we know too little about phenomenon but that we know too much (van Manen 1984: 46). This is emphatically the case for writing. Reflection upon ‘to write’ fills mountains. In this, as a type of process, writing is an action by

which a substance is attached to a surface according to patterns and code; it is tower-building, skyline-marking. To address the writing process phenomenologically, attention must turn from accepted metaphor to practice. The phenomenological reduction makes us sensitive toward grasping other settings, such as idiom (Husserl 1952: 179). A phenomenological description can disclose detail absent in idiom.

Vilém Flusser, for example, through his phenomenological description of writing as a gesture, says writing is not attachment, building; writing is a taking away, a destructuring (Flusser in Roth 2012: 26). Writing is more akin to sculpture than drawing; it consists of constant chopping (Flusser in Roth 2012: 34). Writing is scratching and tearing; a subtractive gesture³. Flusser's historical analysis of writing emerges from evaluation of the 'first' writing down, Mesopotamian clay tablet carving. The soft clay tablet was pressed with tools thus forming pictograms for crops and economic transactions. The clay tablet has become paper and screen, the pictogram tools are pencils or pressed keys on a board.

To write, then, poses the requirement of several material preconditions. In the deceleration of thought and patient observation of things themselves, Flusser suggests:

First, we need a blank surface, for instance a blank sheet of paper. Second, we need an instrument that contains matter that contrasts with the whiteness of the paper and which can put that matter on the paper surface, for instance a typewriter supplied with a ribbon. Third, we need the letters of the alphabet (Flusser in Roth 2012: 26).

In this, Flusser correctly distinguishes between reduction and interpretation. To describe the gesture of writing as the writer periodically reading an invisible text and then inscribing it on to a surface, is not a description but an interpretation (Flusser in Roth 2012: 30). There is a divide here between what may be phenomenological and what is not. In a Husserlian tradition we may highlight common metaphors, assumptions, held around the phenomenon, each defining what is not. 'I never think of walking backward,' says Cataldi recalling, phenomenologically, the first-person moments before she is physically assaulted by a stranger stealing her purse, 'The space behind us is a "dark space" it is not space we move around in' (1993: 14). Similarly, the method of defining what *is* by what is *not* seems a gesture of 'dark space', a necessary move of backwardness.

Space in writing is not found in the space of geography. As Certeau exemplifies, 'Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice. For this reason, spatial practices concern everyday tactics, are part of them, from the alphabet of spatial indication ('It's to the right,' 'Take a left') ...'

(1984: 115-6); or, for our exploration, ‘Write this down’. Our body is the measure of the world. We are the ‘null-point’ in Husserlian structures. You are six of my feet tall. I cannot fingertip-to-tip, fathom, the breadth of your love. Certeau’s space is space *before* writing practice. As a pre-writing gesture it comes from ‘up here’ with me and is performed ‘down there’ on page. This, however, is still not writing itself in process.

Let’s double back to Flusser’s initial condition for the writing gesture. ‘First, we need a blank surface’ (Flusser in Roth 2012: 26). The constitutive role of ‘the surface’ in Flusser is exceedingly modest. He remarks, for example, that the ‘sheet of paper becomes a surface on which letters may be put according to various patterns’ (Flusser in Roth 2012: 28). Further, the ‘result’ of writing is ‘surfaces covered by letters’ (Flusser in Roth 2012: 29 and 41). Descriptively, a surface, a blank page, cannot be ‘covered with letters’ for then it becomes incomprehensible, an illegible mess. Such description disregards a critical characteristic of ‘the surface’. For Husserl, ‘a concrete description, for instance, of perceptions or recollections, and so forth, also calls, of necessity, for a description of the object as such, referred to in intentional experiences, as such, we say, indicating thereby that they belong inseparably to the current experience itself as its objectively intended or “objective meaning”’ (Husserl 1969: 25). That is, we describe the object as intended, as is.

A surface for writing is space. Flusser has passed over what Lingis calls the ‘sensual density’ of the world. In this, similar to the actions of light, the sensual fills and thickens all space (Lingis 1996: 26-27). Every object, every place has/is sensual in perception. The white page as surface is, sensually, space. Through our ‘felt body’ (*Leib*) we approach the blank page in affective involvement with our sensitivity to ‘surfaceless spaces’ (see Schmitz et al. 2011).

Flusser’s description emerges from a broader idiom of the page. The blank page is both noose and laurel. Associatively, an unwritten page may come to us as nothing, open, blank, empty, silence, or infinitude. Westphal concludes that white itself is considered a non-colour when associated with processes, that is, white has no active role (1986: 324). Auster’s lost writers are ‘swallowed up by the whiteness’ (1980). Husserl challenges Locke’s equating of mind with ‘white paper’ (1989: 423 and 1969: 24). These metaphors are variations of the page’s space. The page contains no memory. Bachelard notes the same where the poetic image has no memory yet arrives with ‘a past’ (1969). The page’s space holds a potential future, like Husserl’s kinaesthetic consciousness, we simply know this fact to be present. The page’s space is opportunity such as in Barthes’ bliss (1975: 4), where all is possible. It is also a punishing encumbrance much like

Bachelard observing, ‘The cell of the secret is white ... The whiteness of the walls, alone, protects the dreamer’s cell. It is stronger than all geometry’ (1969: 228).

Common to the above interpretations of the writing surface is an assumption of passivity. The page is a passive background. Writing is assumed an active role while the page is mere support. Perhaps this seems obvious. A white sheet of paper is nothing more than a necessity for writing. Yet, I cannot speak into my cupped hands and pass to you the patterned code. I can, however, scratch into a page that will carriage meaning from 3100BCE to you. The page is mule, servant. We do not seek permission from the blank page but we may shoot a prayer to Sappho before pen hits.

‘Now such considerations seem to be extremely banal. Why should one stress such obvious matters? Because, as often happens, the very banality and obviousness of the matter hide its importance’ (Flusser in Roth 2012: 31). Within this setting, we come to realise writing, as a process not product, is burdened with superfluous characteristics. Phenomenologically, through acceptance of the banal, we may come to find the ‘essence’ of writing by bracketing all until we reach *that* phenomena, without which, writing ceases to be writing; we may then incise what *it* is.

Typically, the page is subsumed into the text-making process or writer’s will; for example, McGann argues that ‘a “text” is not a “material thing” but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practised’ (1991: 21). McGann hints at the absent page in his conception of the material (and space) but fails to bring forth a useful reduction. McGann trusts ‘communicative interchanges’ to secure his analysis yet this seems abstracted from the material process he seeks to explain. In contrast, what can we make of Ong’s observation of transcription that ‘two manuscripts of a given work, even if copied from the same dictation, almost never correspond page for page’ (2002: 124)? ‘Page for page’ is not a materially given fact; page is not fungible; it holds an influence beyond being a blank necessity.

Space is necessary for movement. We cannot move where solid materiality dominates. I cannot move my hand through a table. The table (and my material hand) prevent my ‘through’ movement and determine my alternative movement, ‘around’, ‘along’, and so forth. In this, the page, as space, performs a greater phenomenological role than idiomatically granted.

Page is a space, an invitation to space. This view contrasts with typical passive space approaches, such as Certeau, where space is ‘actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it’ (1984: 117). Space possesses intrinsic sway. Space determines the movement of writing, and consequently, on that which is written. There is a material boundary where the page ends and thus so too must writing movements lest they continue into table space or whatever space of the world exists beyond the page. Movement is shunned to the next line. Then the next, then the next.

A unique struggle exists between poetry and the space of the page. Is poetry an act of space, not line? Page’s space forces line? In this scrimmage, much discussion is focused on ‘the line’, that is, the length of the impression of code. ‘The poetic idea which emerges from this operation of line in motion’, says Baudelaire, talking of ships no less, ‘is an hypothesis of an immensely vast, complex, yet perfectly harmonised entity’ (2006: 51). For example, ‘the verse always has a movement,’ says Bachelard, ‘the image flows into the line of the verse’ (1969: xxiv). Yet, how are we to account for that which falls after the line? Mallarme sought space to express that which could not be expressed in words. Space is more than an absence of black marks. It is a mark of its own, namely, the mark of space. Even texts dedicated to poetic forms such as concrete poetry and typographical art, such as Apollinaire’s calligrams, do not theorise space as an active characteristic (See Bohn 1993).

What does page space arouse, phenomenologically, in the writer? Movement. Writing is movement. This observation is under-theorised but present in other fragments of life. Think of Orwell, experiencing movement in the space of a coal mine. In this, movement feels motionless. The vast is sensed as usual.

You get into the cage, which is a steel box about as wide as a telephone box and two or three times as long. It holds ten men, but they pack it like pilchards in a tin, and a tall man cannot stand upright in it. The steel door shuts upon you, and somebody working the winding gear above drops you into the void. You have the usual momentary qualm in your belly and a bursting sensation in the ears, but not much sensation of movement till you get near the bottom, when the cage slows down so abruptly that you could swear it is going upwards again... When you crawl out at the bottom you are perhaps four hundred yards underground. That is to say you have a tolerable-sized mountain on top of you... But because of the speed at which the cage has brought you down, and the complete blackness through which you have travelled, you hardly feel yourself deeper down than you would at the bottom of the Piccadilly tube (Orwell 1957: 53-54).

Orwell has moved into a subtractive space, a coal mine, yet his experience speaks of non-movement until he comes to a halt even though he is moving. In this we capture something of writing as movement and page's space.

The experience of writing is an experience of movement from the opportunity of space. A body, yours or mine, scratches patterns into a page. This is not executed in the space of static thought but in a material living. Blanchot says, 'one writes only if one reaches that instant which nevertheless one can only approach in the space opened by the movement of writing. To write one has to write *already*' (1982: 176) (emphasis added). Similarly, from Goldberg, 'only writing does writing' (1986: 12). Auster too, talks of this, sparsely; writing as moving when presenting oneself to the white spaces.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) expressed the same of phenomenology where one grasps it, philosophically, only through doing. Our concern is not the interpretative consequence of 'to write' but a sense of the writing gesture as kinesis. To sit, one sits and the sitting is done. To write one must keep moving. It is a movement that must be done again and again. Where the movement ceases, so to does the writing. The writer is secondary to the moving process; they are the 'joker in the pack, the dummy in the bridge game', says Barthes (1975: 35).

Something happens. Or else, something does not happen.
A body moves. Or else, it does not move. And if it moves,
something begins to happen. And even if it does not move,
something begins to happen (Auster 1980).

Auster's *White Spaces* is a description of no writing, no generative movement. Where we have no space, we cannot move. Where we cannot move we are 'blocked' from writing. We are swallowed up by the whiteness. We cannot 'Write this down'. Writer's block? Writer's bliss? The space of an empty page is both light and darkness. Langveld says, 'space, emptiness, and also darkness reside in the same realm where the soul dwells' (1983: 16). The dark white page is indeterminate and speaks to us of its alterability.

Writing can only occur in space but the act itself creates space. Page's space suggests sculpting; a piece of paper, a leaf, the sky, all perform as page for each are space that can withstand subtraction. The gesture of writing is a subtractive movement; a taking away. It is an amputation of materiality. Thus further movement becomes possible. Bachelard says that 'space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It

has been lived in' (1969: xxxii). The page's space is unstable and altered by writing movements.

We must move toward, without haste; observe the space behind; frequent what is through severing what is not. In this we may come upon the heart of our observation by discarding, bracketing. To write, as gesture not artefact, there must be space, for writing is sensually, bodily, a movement. This space is, initially, in the form we know of as 'the page'. Here the page is threshold for through writing another space is pre-reflectively co-present.

We can find a parallel in the 'being here' spatial experience of aged women living alone at home with dementia. De Witt, Ploeg and Black refer to these women as living on the *threshold* of 'being here', independently living at home. Past the threshold is 'being there' in an assisted-living dwelling (not home). In the threshold experience of solitude, spatial characteristic emerged from a series of participant interviews; 'being here' feels like being both 'closed in' and 'opened up' (De Witt, Ploeg and Black 2009: 277). The threshold of the page, a space that defines and constricts also 'open ups' through the writing movements that sculpt space.

What is the phenomenological experience of 'being here', written by page's space? We grasp that movement is prevented by an absence of space. Movement can be blocked. The writing gesture is an 'already' act; to occur it must be occurring. Thus, there must be in the 'already', the presence of space. Yet deeper still within this gesture, we have a sense of the movement itself creating space, leading, of course, to more movement. The page space is threshold to further space. Writing makes space for more writing. For if it did not, how is it we continue?

In writing, sculpting, space generates the sensation of space. The kiss is not a sensory impression upon lip-skin. The scratched line is not symbols impressed upon a page. 'Sensing is a behaviour, a movement, a prehension, a handling' (Lingis 1996: 54). Writing is, crucially, a material movement. Movement, says Sheets-Johnstone in her Husserlian philosophy of dance, is a structure inherent in the sense-making processes (1999: 209). We do not, however, need to grasp for epistemology; this process is enough in itself; it is a sensual, *Leib*, process.

Our sentient writing bodies and willing blank pages are not only vectors of force but substances; and transubstantiations are possible⁴. One thing can become another. Kafka, in letters and journals, expressed his desire for transubstantiation of his body into language through the channel of writing (Jany 2011: 402). *Being* subtractive *becomes* space. Against impulse, the sculpting of page space is not a 'filling up' of page but a

‘making more of’. To place a wardrobe in an empty room does not remove space but defines, shapes and perhaps creates a land of endless winter.

Lingis’ claim for ‘second space’ draws us closer to understanding the spread of space created by writing movements. Second space is between but not liminal. Second space, in the writing process, comes from the materiality of writing ‘already’; to be done it must be done. In speaking of a Greek temple, Heidegger says, ‘Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock’s clumsy yet spontaneous support ... The temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air’ (2001: 41). We understand the temple of writing draws up out of the page’s mystery. We do not understand the mystery. It is invisible. It is not the temple that lets us see but the ‘firm towering’—the ‘draw up out of’ movement, the ‘write this down’ motion. One thing becomes another. Page space becomes subtractive writing movement becomes second space becomes—.

There are many second spaces in conscious experience such as there are many rhythms of internal time. Novelist Murakami runs long distances for, and in debt to, space; ‘I just run. I run in a void. Or maybe I should put it the other way: I run in order to acquire a void ... the kinds of thoughts and ideas that invade my emotions as I run remain subordinate to that void. Lacking content, they are just random thoughts that gather around that central void’ (Murakami 2008: 17). Langveld’s phenomenology of the secret, quiet spaces of children created within a regular household are, I think, a second space. These are ‘play’ spaces behind a full, heavy curtain or in a deep cupboard, where mystery is possible in chosen solitude. Lingis approaches the simultaneously invisible and material gesture more directly when he says:

What of the disengagement from things, and from the levels and planes which engender things, toward those refuges from the space of the world where the phantom doubles of monocular vision, perceptual illusions, mere appearances refract off the surfaces of things? What of the dream-scene, the private theaters of delirious apparitions, that realm of death in which the melancholic takes up his abode? What of the possibility of releasing one’s hold on the levels, drifting into a sensible apeiron without levels, into the nocturnal, oneiric, mythogenic second space that shows through the interstices of the daylight world of praktognostic competence (1996: 49) ?

The seductive movement of writing in space slices through materiality into a second space for further writing movements. This is sensory both as a material phenomenon and sensory as a thing felt. ‘The writer never knows whether the work is done,’ says Blanchot, because, the work is ‘infinite’ (1982: 21). To sculpt with white page is not the shaping of a

medium but the unearthing of shape within that medium. This is an act of our body, an act harnessing the ‘competence of the body’; in this we are cast fully into the world (Lingis 1996: 50). This echoes Husserl’s exposition of the doubleness in perceptive sensation. Touching one hand to another we are both subject and object to ourselves. We can feel the touch and the touching. We are in the space entirely *there* and *here*. Husserl’s observation speaks to what we physically know and reflects what van Manen calls the inexhaustible deposit of primordialities that constitute our experiential existence (2007: 16). To bare the primordialities, phenomenologically, is to accept white page as sovereign where it is all we can do to move towards.

Notes

1. In discussing *the* page, we must pause to consider *a* page. This is not a naive argument for nominalism but a request to consider that which is before us. We can put our hand to a sheet of paper. There is, then, a phenomenal experience to be considered beyond the usual process of writing as creative, mental, expressive
2. The full sentence from Husserl read: *Wir erfahren also in dieser ‘reinen’, oder gereinigten theoretischen Einstellung nicht mehr Häuser, Tische, Straßen, Kunstwerke, wir erfahren bloß materielle Dinge und von solchen wertbehafteten Dingen eben nur ihre Schicht der räumlich-zeit-lichen Materialität und ebenso für Menschen und menschliche Gesellschaften nur die Schicht der an räumlich-zeitliche ‘Leiber’ gebundenen seelischen ‘Natur’* (Husserl 1952: 25)
3. Etymologically, *scribere* (Latin) means the intended ‘to write’, while *writan* (Old English and Old Saxon) comprises the active ‘tear’ and ‘scratch’
4. Extending Lingis’ sensory work to reflect writing reflects the extensions Lingis made to Levinas’ (2006) *Otherwise than being* arguments of the alterity of people’s faces. This sentence follows Lingis’ construction (1996: 59)

Works cited

- Auster, P 1980 *White spaces*, New York: Station Hill
- Bachelard, G 1969 *The poetics of space*, Boston: Beacon Press
- Barthes, R 1975 *The pleasure of the text*, Reissue edition New York: Hill and Wang
- Baudelaire, C 2006 *Intimate journals*, New York: Dover
- Blanchot, M 1982 *The space of literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press
- Bohn, W 1993 *Apollinaire, visual poetry, and art criticism*, London: Associated University Press
- Cataldi, SL 1993 *Emotion, depth, and flesh: A study of sensitive space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodiment*, New York: State University of New York Press

- Certeau, M d 1984 *The practice of everyday life*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- De Witt, L, J Ploeg and M Black 2009 'Living on the threshold; the spatial experience of living alone with dementia' *Dementia*, 8(2), 263-291
- Flusser, V 1991 'Gestures' in *A note on 'The Gesture of Writing' by Vilém Flusser and the gesture of writing*, 25-41
- Goldberg, N 1986 *Writing down the bones*, Boston: Shambhala Publications
- Heidegger, M 2001 *Poetry, language, thought*, New York: Perennial Classics
- Husserl, E 1952 *Ideen zu einer reinen phänomenologie und phänomenologischen philosophie II* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff
- . 1969 *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology. First Book*, London: George Allen and Unwin
- . 1989 *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Second Book*, Dordrecht: Kluwer
- Jany, C 2011 *Schriftkerben // Kerfs of writing a phenomenology of Kafka's Stylus. Monatshefte*, 103(3), 396-415
- Langveld, MJ 1983 'The stillness of the secret place', *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 1(1), 11-17
- Levinas, E 2006 *Otherwise than being: Or beyond essence*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press
- Lingis, A 1996 *Sensation intelligibility in sensibility*, New Jersey: Humanity Books
- McGann, JJ 1991 *The textual condition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Merleau-Ponty, M 1962 *Phenomenology of perception*, New York: Humanities Press
- Murakami, H 2008 *What I talk about when I talk about running*, London: Harvill Secker
- Ong, WJ 2002 *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*, 2nd edn New York: Routledge
- Orwell, G 1957 'Down the Mine' in *Inside the whale and other essays*. London: Penguin, 51-62
- Roth, NA 2012 A note on 'The gesture of writing' by Vilém Flusser and The Gesture of Writing, *New Writing: The international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing*, 9(1), 24-41
- Ryan, K 2005 *The Niagara River*, New York: Grove Press
- Sheets-Johnstone, M 1999 *The primacy of movement* Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing
- Schmitz, H, J Slaby & RO Müllan 2011 'Emotions outside the box: The new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality', *Phenomenological Cognitive Science*, 10, 241-259
- Überwants, G 1952 *Gedanken über die Natur von Raum: Unterstruktur und Demokratie* Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag
- van Manen, M 1984 'Phenomenology of writing', *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 2(1), 36-69

- . 2007 'Phenomenology of Practice', *Phenomenology & Practice*, 1, 11-30
- Werner, H & B Kaplan 1963 *Symbol formation: An organismic developmental approach to language and the expression of thought*, New York: John Wiley
- Westphal, J 1986 'White', *Mind*, 95(379), 311-328