

Performative Writings and Contemplative Exercises

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ABSTRACT

I present a proposal for theoretical/practical investigations which articulate the processes involved in the creation of texts with contemplative exercises. With the term “performative writing” I refer to work with words which involves strategies and devices capable of transforming habits related to perception, based on everyday activities and exercises. The goal of this research is to link artistic work with the cultivation of cognitive and emotional qualities which are worked on in the Buddhist references, based on the understanding that such traditions make fundamental contributions towards rethinking the possibilities of performative arts today.

Keywords: performative writing, Buddhist cultivation, contemplation, spiritual exercises, *haikais*

I – Introduction

In this article, I present a proposal for a theoretical and practical investigation of what I am terming “performative writing”, and its articulation with practices of perception and attention. This concept as I understand it refers to writing as a practice integrated into creative processes and is not necessarily aimed at producing a text as an end product. Writing is understood as an exercise which, in principle, has an effect on the subject, both in terms of their self-perception and in the way they perceive and relate to the world. In addition, the act of sharing these texts can also form part of this process and take many different forms: reading, performances, letters, diaries and lectures, among others. Within the context of theatre specifically, “performative writing” need not be a practice solely relevant to playwrights and can also be beneficial to actors, directors and anyone that is part of the creative team, as a tool for investigating creative processes.

The notion of “performative” here refers to a form of understanding writing as an act, an embodied practice that engages the totality of the subject. It is important to stress the relationships between writing and other dimensions of human experiences such as feelings, sensations, perceptions, moods, states of mind, dreams and so on. These investigations return to the pre-verbal. Performative writing explores the border between linguistic and non-linguistic experiences, silence and words, body and mind. This experience takes place in an in-between zone in which vague experiences, feelings, perceptions and thoughts arise, and we look for ways in which to express them.

In my conceptualisation of this idea the work of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector has been an important reference. The process of writing of her final novel, *The Hour of the Star* (2011), arose from this type of perception in which she saw the lost expression on the face of a young North-eastern migrant woman who had just arrived at a bus station in Rio. The writer was moved by the vulnerability of a human being in an indifferent social environment. The general tendency would be to turn away. Contact with suffering commonly provokes aversion. But here the writer faces this reality and this experience resonates with her own vulnerability. This becomes a feeling of urgency to tell this story in order to work on this powerful experience. The book tells the story of a practically invisible character in the big city which becomes a meditation on insensitivity, the absence of compassion, social injustice and ignorance in relation to the human condition.

The relevance of this to our discussion is that this writing is born from a subtle experience of perception: a glance at something that would normally go unnoticed, because it is systematically avoided. Before the words an atmosphere is captured that speaks of manifold forms of the experience of suffering. Writing is inseparable from the awakening of a sense of urgency. Working with language and playing with words is related to a process of existential transformation in which is implied a reorientation in the world. Writing becomes a form of sharpening consciousness, helping to create a path in which the subject as a whole is engaged.

What I refer to as “performative writing” consists precisely in a type of work that involves the transformation of perceptive habits based on actions and daily exercises. Writing is therefore concomitant with creative processes. In a broader sense, the motivation behind this research is to weave artistic work into the cultivation

of cognitive and emotional qualities worked on in contemplative traditions, particularly Buddhism, as meaningful contributions to performing arts today.

Taking the decision to integrate writing into what we call “contemplative exercises” here, means looking for practices which open up space to experiences that cannot be completely translated by discursive and conceptual thought. In ancient Western traditions, the terms *contemplatio* (Latin) and *theoria* (Greek) refer to a silent perception, less symbolically mediated associated with what would be a direct vision of reality¹. Much of modern thought has put the possibility of this happening in check, affirming the necessarily partial character of perceptions which always operate according to specific perspectives. Recent interest in the West in contemplative Buddhist traditions comes, in part, from perspectives presenting detailed practices of refining attention, concentration and perception, making it possible to penetrate the more subtle nature of phenomena. Buddhism also makes use of the distinction between skilful and unskilful mental states, in relation to the suffering they may cause.

This issue has become particularly relevant today when we think of the predominant socio-cultural environment, characterised by the intensity and velocity of the circulation of images and information, and the profound impact this has on our modes of perception. Our habits in terms of perception are not only the result of pre-existing biological structures, we have also been moulded by the historical conditions in which we live. Studies of changes in perception due to transformations in technology and urban life have continued to be developed since the pioneering work of Simmel and Benjamin². More recently, Cray (2001; 2014) has shown how the problem of attention has become relevant in the development of contemporary capitalism, in which the tension between dispersive and fragmentary environments is present, through the quantity of sensorial stimuli, and the need to attain new forms of physical and mental discipline, with a view to arriving at both the psychical balance of the individual and their integration within the dynamics of global capitalism. In this new context, contemplative practices may be transformed into mere techniques for guiding attention, and employed for a range of purposes, even those which are morally reprehensible.

On my understanding it is possible for us to develop another type of dialogue with contemplative traditions in the field of performative arts. This would amount to exploring the critical potential of a type of contact which challenges us to rethink and reinvent our understanding of art and our ways of life. What drives this investigation is a feeling of urgency related to the threat of losing fundamental emotional and cognitive capacities in the realisation of our humanity within a newly configured global culture. These processes not only signify the existential impoverishment of individual life, they also represent a grave threat which has arisen in the multiple facets of a crisis of planetary proportions which we shall not explore here.

In bringing together this proposal, however, I will be exploring two types of references, within which the performative quality of writing can be integrated into contemplative exercises in distinctly different ways. The first, philosophical in nature, comes from the “spiritual exercises” and “techniques of self” developed in the schools of Greco-Roman antiquity studied by Hadot (2002) and Foucault (2001). The other is a clear example of writing as a path (*dô*) in Zen Buddhism: the poetry of Matsuo Bashô.

II - Philosophical performative writing

So-called “contemplative exercises” belong as much to Western as they do to Eastern traditions. Hadot (2002) has shown how they did not refer exclusively to religious context. Much of the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition in antiquity (Pythagorean, Socratic, Skeptic, Cynic, Stoic, Epicurean and Neoplatonic traditions) prescribed different practices for the members of their schools. Engaging in philosophy was not only a rational act, but an embodied action, a way of living intended to transform the practitioner ontologically, helping them develop profound human qualities. There was an understanding that, in the absence of daily practice, human beings would become trapped in a restless state, victims of anxieties and passions and enveloped by a life that was inauthentic. Philosophy presented itself as a therapy of the soul in which wisdom should be incorporated by engaging in certain exercises.

In this sense, the philosophical works of these authors were not exclusively aimed at building systems for interpreting the world. These texts were also viewed as educational resources for providing support to the process of a person’s personal transformation, encompassing all aspects of life. Discourses tended to deal with particular circumstances and specific problems and were directed at determined audiences. The annotations of practitioners were intended as instructions (*paraskeu *) which could be referred to when reflecting on concrete situations, applying principles worked on in the school to personal experience. To facilitate this process some scholars made use of notebooks known as *hypomnematas* in which fragments of thoughts that were considered useful were written down for later study and meditation. Relying on these notes required bringing the lessons of tradition into the present moment, making them active aspects of the situations being lived through.

Hadot lists a series of “spiritual exercises”³ pertaining to different philosophical schools in this period. Among them, the cultivation of attention (*prosoch *) stands out as a central practice which should be incorporated into all moments in life in a way which is similar to the practice of mindfulness in Buddhism. In Stoicism, for instance, concentration on the present moment enables us to recognise which aspects of events are depend on us and which aren’t. In pursuing this, one works on that which can be transformed within oneself in such a way that the individual becomes less dependent on the circumstances and less concerned about the passions to which such situations give rise to.

In order for this to be effective, attention should be directed towards the external and internal aspects of the experience. The study of the chaotic flux of thoughts and representations and their connections with the passions is an aspect which is extremely important to consider. As such, the written word is capable of playing a significant therapeutic role. In the case of the Stoics specifically, writing is understood as an exercise that opposes ‘folly’. In other words, the dispersed state of a mind focused on trivialities, on the volubility of desires, and the allure of the new, impedes the subject from being firmly engaged in the present and expanding their wisdom and understanding of the circumstances in which they find themselves and of the fragility of their own existence.

The Christian tradition reinvents many of these exercises, providing them with new direction. In commenting on a text by Foucault entitled “Self Writing”, Hadot mentions the resource employed by the monk Antonio, which involved describing in his notebooks the movements of his soul, as if seen through the eyes of another. The

intention here is precisely that of gaining distance from intense states and observing them from another perspective. Here, writing supplies an impersonal dimension to an experience with which we would otherwise tend to identify with. At the same time, the invention of the gaze of the other to whom one bares one's soul, also appears to attest to the importance that Christianity places on the act of confession. The transformations that occur in these exercises express the new feeling that each epoch and historical circumstance ascribe to them.

As a historian, Hadot takes great pains to acknowledge the wealth and complexity of the philosophical and spiritual traditions of Western antiquity. The deeper issue for him however is of thinking about the importance and the possibility of reinventing "spiritual exercises" for our times. His study seeks to inspire another type of philosophical practice - one interested in the transformation of individuals and their social impact. And here his concerns seems to converge, in a certain way, with contemporary artistic projects aimed at broadening the field of engagement in the arts, rescuing the power to reinvent ways of living.

Performative activities are often based on changes to everyday habits, with a view to creating events that shift modes of perception and generate other possibilities for developing relationships. Contemporary artists often reject metaphysical connotations and the imitation of models in their activities, accentuating instead the ludic, political, and experimental character of their practices. However, it is possible to be inspired by the ethical and aesthetic quality of traditional examples, in which thought was never disassociated from a way of being - an incorporated practice.

III - Poetic performative writing

In contrast with the philosophical traditions of Western antiquity, the East has preserved the process of the direct transmission of contemplative practices within the context of diverse lineages. In the case of Buddhism, its principal schools (*Theravada*, *Mahayana*, *Vajrayana*) not only continue as active living traditions but have also witnessed a great expansion in the West since the end of the 19th century, influencing a considerable number of artists and thinkers. Some schools within these great lineages have made more forceful criticisms of the limitations of conceptual language in transmitting and expressing the path to the awakening of consciousness. As a pedagogical resource they prefer the use of similes, metaphor, indirect allusions, humour, poetry, and paradox in an attempt to deconstruct mental habits that impede a more direct perception of reality.

For the purposes of this article I will limit myself to highlighting an example of writing practice rooted in the Zen Buddhist tradition directly linked to artistic expression. I refer to the travel diaries and *haikais* of Japanese poet, Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694). Bashô breathed life back into a form of writing and poetry that had become little more than a frivolous pastime in Japanese society.

There is a degree of speculation surrounding the precise origins of *haikai*, however, one likely precursor is an ancient lyrical genre known as *waka*, poems that consist of 31 syllables. Yuasa (1987) acknowledges this form of poetry as a *dô* - a path on the way to realising the awakening of the mind. In referring to ancient texts that discuss this art, it is noted that the first step in the composition of a *waka* is having an

extremely clear mind. One must know how to deal with a turbulent and unfocused and mind and bring quiescent calmness. Without this discipline it will not be possible to express the profound mystery that lies beyond words, the quality of *yugem*, also sought after in Noh theatre. The practice of writing poetry is inseparable from body-mind training, which seeks to attain a high level of concentration, allowing for the accurate contemplation of phenomena. Words are the echoes or the unfolding of this experience, and also serve as reminders and an invitation to enlightenment.

The *tankas* and *rengas* are forms that are derived from the *wakas*, and they transformed the writing of poetry into an activity engaged in by the medieval Japanese aristocracy and which established itself as favourite pastime of the court. Over time, the number of stanzas became unrestricted, and writing them collectively became a staple form of entertainment. The rules became increasingly complex, with preference for puns and canny images. Artists predating Bashô such as Aritaka Morakami (1473-1549) and Yamasaki Sokan (1465-1553) adopted a simplification of these forms and assimilated more colloquial language connected to city life and the period of social transformation that Japan was going through at the time. This new genre would come to be known as *renga haikai*.

Bashô inherited a poetic tradition that had lost something of its spiritual meaning and had incorporated new aspects of Japanese social life. In his own words, he would not imitate what the ancients had done, but would also seek what they had sought. He began by studying Chinese and Japanese classics and calligraphy. This connection with the past would prove deeply important in his work. His first works follow the ingenious ludic style predominant at the time, but at a certain point, this atmosphere no longer satisfied him. When he moves to a small remote house by a river in Fukagawa, the direction his work has been taking begins to change. The tranquil landscape of his new home contrasts with the sombre tone which starts to appear in his new poems:

A black crow
Has settled himself
On a leafless tree
Fall of an autumn day
(Bashô, 1966, p.26)

He began signing his work as Bashô, meaning 'banana tree', a tree he had a special appreciation for. During the same period, he met Zen monk Bucchô and commences practice at Chokeiji temple in Edo. Meditation and the Zen path allow him to bring a certain quality of perception into his daily life, which becomes the basis for his new work in poetry and his efforts to develop spiritually and artistically. In the poet's own words:

What is important is to keep the mind high in the world of true understanding, and returning to the world of our daily experience to seek therein the truth of beauty. No matter what we may be doing at a given moment, we must not

forget that it has a bearing upon our everlasting self, which is poetry. (Bashô, 1966, p. 28)

In 1683, one year after his mother's death, he sets off on a series of long journeys on foot in Japan, practicing a genre of writing which attained great importance in Japan: *haibun*. This genre consists of a combination of travel diaries interspersed with *haikais*. This type of composition juxtaposes more descriptive and prosaic writing - describing landscapes, meetings with people, temples, living beings, and small events that take place throughout the journey - with small capsules of poetry written in highly-concentrated language. As true insights, these *haikais* shift perception onto miniscule details and, at the same time, the rhythm of the seasons and the breath of nature. We leave behind linear temporality and chronology to contemplate the unforeseen instant of an unfamiliar beauty. At the same time, many poems express a mild air of melancholy, expressing the sense of the impermanence of all phenomena.

The passing spring

Birds mourn,

Fishes weep

With tearful eyes

(Bashô, 1966, p.98)

The cultivation of such subtle and delicate writing is, at the same time, connected to extremely demanding existential practices. Bashô adopts an incredibly simple way of life and his pilgrimages throughout Japan are truly ascetic exercises, as suggested by the title of his first travel diary: "The records of a weather-exposed skeleton". His journeys become increasingly long and more difficult. The first takes nine months, the last, two and a half years. Prior to the journey that produced his most important work, "The Narrow Road to the Deep North", Bashô sold the house where he had been living, as if wishing never to return. Poetry was for him inseparable from a progressive path of relinquishing earthly goods and the cultivation of simplicity. Writing had become the footprint of a vital experience.

The performative character evident in his writing appears in a text entitled "Rules for pilgrimages" in which, among others, we encounter the following recommendations:

1 - Don't sleep twice in the same place (...) 2 - Clothes and utensils should be in line with what we need. Not too much not too little. 3 - Do not show your verses if not requested. When requested, never refuse. 4 - The path of the *haikai* begins in concentration and the absence of distraction. Look deep inside yourself (...) 5 - To speak the flavour of the heart is to agonise for day and days. (Leminski, 2013, p.124)

In Brazil today, the artist Eleonora Fabião (2008) proposes the concept of "performative programs", carefully calculated and conceptually developed, generally requiring great effort and discipline for their realization. These programs seek to precipitate experiences that break away from habits of body-mind, allowing for other

forms of connection with the world. As a micro-political practice the programs redesign the relationships between the individual body, the social body and the world-body. Meanwhile, when we consider Bashō's "rules of pilgrimage" we understand that these exercises had been refined within the context of an ancient tradition. They carry in them a long lineage of accumulated experience and therefore have the potential to bring new perspectives to contemporary proposals. As such I emphasize the importance of a dialogue with contemplative traditions and their contributions to our knowledge of human consciousness, much of which has either been forgotten or atrophied by contemporary living conditions and lifestyles.

IV - Propositions

Based on these preliminary studies and my own practice within the traditions of Theravada Buddhism, I present some suggestions for exercises that seek to build bridges between intellectual and artistic work and work on the self. This research is still at an early stage of development and is being tested in my own work and in my research group at the university. As this research develops further, these exercises will be proposed in different contexts, reevaluated and improved.

The essence of this work would involve maintaining a personal diary in which a range of writing styles and personal records are kept based on the exercises proposed. The texts may come directly from the exercises in the form of observations and comments, or be developed in parallel, taking practices presented here as a background for cultivating a state of attention. The forms of writing are themselves varied: descriptions, comments, reflections, images, notes on dreams, poems, fiction, and so on. The actual time of writing is chosen by the practitioner and this may occur immediately after an exercise, or not.

The material generated can also be shared in a group and further developed into other projects at determined points throughout the process according to the inclination of the participants. In adopting the example of the *hypomnemata* and the travel diaries of Bashō these notebooks connect the artist-researcher with the constant effort involved in working on the self as an axis of an artistic and intellectual process. The following is a summarised description of some proposals.

A - Interruptions

The purpose of this practice is to create "holes" or empty spaces that alter the automatic rhythm of daily life. During these interruptions the participant stops doing something and in that stillness and silence, brings their attention to the body, to breathing, to the sensations, to the space they are in and sounds from the surroundings. The physical and mental state of that moment is received, its quality discerned, and a calmer state of body and mind is sought in which we become perceptive in relation to the present moment.

It is important that the first "interruption" takes place at the beginning of the day, prior to any activity, shortly after awakening. At this point, seated meditation is recommended in line with traditional orientation (mindfulness, *Zazen*, *Samatha*) for a minimum of 30 minutes. This initial shock is designed to create a certain disposition which is propagated throughout the day, reminding oneself of the importance of each

living moment and the tendency of the body-mind to be caught up in tensions and coarse states.

These daytime interruptions may last for only a few minutes, in a standing posture. The transitions between one activity and another (leaving home, going into a meeting, the moments after saying goodbye to someone) are of particular interest, as are situations in which we note great tension in the body-mind, or we are “carried away” by a feeling. The interruption is a means of opening up space, of breathing in the situation and becoming conscious of the moment. The development of this exercise signifies creating a greater ability to make cuts in precise moments, creating a new rhythm that breaks up automatic routine. The objective is that a state of attention and discernment is established as a fundamental disposition, an incorporated attitude.

Writing may arise from this as the development of a perception, an understanding, or even the documentation of insight. It may also involve exploring the difficulties faced during the exercise and an investigation of perceived obstacles. Even when it does not make explicit reference to the practice, writing may benefit these modes of perception and the intensification of the type of attention one seeks to promote.

B - Walks and displacements

There are countless forms of understanding and practicing walking as an artistic, intellectual and/or spiritual exercise. From the journeys of Bashô to the *flaneurism* of Baudelaire, from the movements of the Situationists, to those of land artists, there are many possible approaches and with varying intentions.

Here I propose beginning by observing and recognising the trajectories we are accustomed to following, the spaces we frequent, the circuits that constitute our familiar territory. In so doing, we may deduce the presence of borders, taboos, and invisible barriers that relate to our own habits and the way in which we are inscribed in the world in terms of class, gender, race, age, political preference, aesthetics and other social markers that constitute us. It is important to investigate how we create identities and personalities based on the scenarios we engage in.

The walks proposed here are designed to move us away from these references creating a sense of strangeness that heightens our attention and challenges our identifications. For this to be possible it is important that, in the beginning, these walks have no utilitarian routine finality. I am not walking in order to get somewhere because I have some sort of commitment. Nor am I engaging in “tourism”, or “taking care of my health” or pursuing other codified objectives. As with walking meditation, throughout the walk the focus of our attention is our body-mind and the environment we walk in. This is not merely a physical displacement but an exercise in which the rigid distinction between the “individual” and the “world” is attenuated, opening up space for perceiving the interdependence of body-environment and the absence of fixed “I”.

Proximity to unfamiliar situations and people may be aided by a friendly feeling based on a sensitivity in relation to fragility and the potentialities of life and of encounters. This type of empathy is not related to our personal preferences and can be developed through the study of some forms of Buddhist meditation⁴. In the diaries of Bashô one encounters synthetic and vivid descriptions of people he meets along his way. His sensitivity in relation to human dramas and natural environments is extremely acute.

These walks can take place in urban and rural environments or in the transitions between them. It is important that there should be a certain amount of time in immersion so that another state can establish itself, as would be the case in walking meditation. A subsequent stage in this exercise might be that of bringing this same state of strangeness and attentiveness into movements that are habitual and familiar. I refer to this practice as “travelling in everyday life”. We are heightening our sense of understanding that we are passing through existence and that the perceived importance of attachment and adhesion to certain circumstances is only relative.

C - Sleep, dreams, night

Just as we work on the “entrance to the day” slowing down our engagement in daily activities and concerns, here the proposal is a preparation for sleep and for dreaming, ritualising the end of a daily cycle. Variations in this procedure are found both in philosophical exercises of Western antiquity and in Buddhist practices, such as the yoga of sleep and dreaming in Tibetan Buddhism which requires initiation by and the guidance of a qualified master.

Our intentions here are far more modest. The exercise here is simply to live this moment more consciously, like the actor who is attentive when a scene ends and they leave the stage. Ending well is part of an action. Knowing how to close a cycle means remembering, learning from experience, and preparing oneself so that the new cycle is not simply a repetition of the same. As such, one is developing a path. The rest involves the decision to end activities and reduce sensorial stimuli so that we enter into the night and into sleep. We are aware that contact with darkness has been damaged by the hyperactivity of contemporary culture, the ideal of which seems to imply functioning 24 hours a day⁵. It is essential to create conditions for experiencing the shutting down of the day, detachment from occupation and switching off from sensorial stimulation.

One such theatrical exercise is the relaxation of the body followed by remembering the facts of the day. In general we remember with greatest clarity the moments in which we were attentive. The Stoics added an element of the imagination to this exercise. It consisted of considering the day as if it were a life: the morning - infancy, the afternoon - maturity, the night - old age. According to this formulation, sleeping is seen as analogous to the process of dying. Buddhism encourages us to examine the mental and bodily state we are in prior to sleeping; the types of thoughts, concerns and sensations we have. To meditate, we relax the body, focus on the rhythm of our breathing or even evoke thoughts of serenity, for the self and for others. On awakening the next day, we should attempt to perceive the quality of sleep and remember and take note of dreams.

Recording dreams sometimes demands the invention of other forms of writing capable of expressing or building on what is often an incredibly subtle experience over which we have no control. Our relationship with dreams does not have to be taken up with the desire for interpretation. It is simply a question of maintaining proximity with this subterranean life which supplies us with feelings of mystery. It may even directly inspire creation, as was the case for Franz Kafka and the Surrealists. But the simple cultivation of a harmony with this nocturnal world enriches our experience and points to the existence of a multitude of states of consciousness with distinct emotional and cognitive qualities.

D - Sharing

A group for sharing these experiences serves as stimulus for encouraging each member to maintain these exercises with certain frequency so that it is possible to evaluate production. In this sense, a period of practice as experience should be established. The participants can work with the three exercises proposed or create a personal composition according to their interests and availability. It is important, however, to comprehend that the “interruptions, walks, night” triad has a rationale inspired by the four postures in the practice of *sati* (mindfulness) - seated, standing, walking, lying - present Buddha’s famous discourse, *Satipathanna Sutta*⁶. We believe this is a form of expanding the cultivation of attention to a wide range of activities.

The texts shared by participants in the group may have other knock-on effects which lead to this experience being extended to a larger audience. Individual or group projects in different formats (recitals, intimate gatherings, performative activities, theatrical projects and conferences), are possible transformations of exercises which are, in principal, individual and which are aimed at developing the work of the artist on the self. The group is also a forum for the evaluation and the reinvention of procedures that may come to evolve into more complex experiences.

Notes

1. In this respect, see the chapter “Principles of Contemplative Science” in Wallace (2007).
2. In this respect, see the chapter “ The Notion of Shock in Early Twenty Century Europe”, in Brill (2010).
3. The term “spiritual exercise” was chosen by Hadot to designate these practices. For the reasons behind this choice see “Exercices Spirituels” in Hadot (2002).
4. The Theravada tradition proposes *Metta* meditation, or universal friendship. It is based on the perception that all beings are subject to suffering and in some way seek happiness. Based on this we direct our thoughts and intentions in such a way that all may find peace, discernment and freedom. This is true both for people who are not close to us as well as those we do not know, our enemies and non-human and invisible beings. For a detailed description of this form of meditation see: “Wishing the best for yourself and others” in Gunaratana (2009).
5. See Crary (2014).
6. For a detailed description of the contemplation of the body and the four postures of the *Satipattāna Sutta* see Analayo (2003).

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