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She and I

Claire-Louise Bennett

I want the forest before the book, the abundance of leaves before the pages, I love the creation as much as the created, no, more. Hélène Cixous.

Over the course of a few months I had the privilege of spending some time with the dancer Mary Nunan, with the purpose of writing reflectively about her work and practice. For a while at the beginning it seemed that, in addition, I might collaborate with her on a piece she was working on called 'The Movement', and come up with a text that would be incorporated in the performance. Several mornings throughout February I travelled down to a hall in Limerick, took off my shoes and socks not long after arriving there, and explored, with Mary's guidance, some of the principles she was currently working with. These principles did not comprise a methodology as such, they were more like coordinates that Mary developed in order to facilitate an alertness of those currents which typically necessitate and guide movement – specifically will and intention, control and surrender. Moving in the same space as Mary according to this somewhat abstract brief felt surprisingly natural very quickly and occasionally produced an energy, or accord, that briefly attained a resonant pitch. However, despite these encouraging signs, nothing concrete came to fruition and the idea of a collaboration was shelved. Partly because, while standing barefoot in that somewhat chilly hall in Limerick, I routinely derived a mild yet undiminishing pleasure from the absence of words. I was delighted to find myself away from my desk and standing upright, with hands loose, the fingers not bent into claws by the merciless letters of a keypad. Enjoyed, even more, dragging myself across the floor, then up again by some strange procedure, pacing to and fro, turning, hunching, reaching, twisting, back to stillness; letting it all register, each movement an attempt perhaps to inhabit and turn over a preverbal space. Thought can and does occur, I believe, outside of language. And the purview of thought that movement of this nature elicits is akin perhaps to those 'psychical entities' that Albert Einstein refers to when describing how ideas took shape in his mind. These 'elements of thought', he goes on to explain, 'are, in my case, of

visual and some muscular type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously only in a second stage...'. God knows, but I find the second stage daunting (and I'm hardly in the business of constructing outcomes that are on a par with the theory of relativity), and so I resisted looking for words, continued instead to blunder around in the visual and muscular realm, out of my depth – in a new uncharted depth – and I've no regrets about that. Affirming my putative skills as a writer in order to secure a plum role in the finished work was of no real importance to me; it didn't matter whether or not I was 'in it'. (What, in any case, does it mean, to be 'in something'? The two occasions I've watched Mary perform 'The Movement' I have felt oddly integral; very much in there, somewhere.) As Mary pointed out in a later discussion, making and performance are different things. Instead of getting caught up in producing something of passable interest myself, it seemed more worthwhile, more insightful, to align myself as closely as possible to the how of what Mary was doing, to go further into that shifting stirring wordlessness and attend to her approach.

So far, I have, I think, managed to avoid using the word 'process'. I'm not terribly keen on it, which is a nuisance because it infiltrates pretty much any discussion pertaining to artistic creation. Recently I attended a public interview of a world-famous photographer who had just arrived in Dublin from America. After the scheduled conversation, questions were taken from the audience and the customary inquiry into process arose, to which the photographer replied that she didn't have a process – she took photographs of whatever she wanted, whenever she felt like it. She wasn't being offhand; her answer came across as sincere and well-intended, and it was certainly refreshing to hear. However, the photographer's simple rejoinder downplays the likelihood that having such discerning impulses requires deep sustained work. Theatre practitioner, Peter Brook, echoing Einstein's conception of a generative preverbal state, observed that 'a word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behaviour which dictates the need for expression.' These stages of inception are not, it turns out, confined to language – one day Mary said to me; 'the interesting thing has happened before the movement.' Which rather surprised me. Thus, in the time since, I have been wondering about the nature of this 'interesting thing', this 'visual and muscular' element, this 'impulse', which precedes and vouchsafes expression. Where are on earth do such things originate from, and what

kind of training or method, or, indeed, *modus vivendi*, enables a photographer, an actor, a dancer, a writer, to discover and cultivate what Brook identified as, ‘the source of energy...from which true impulses arise.’?

The inexplicability and capriciousness of the imagination’s vim and yen has been and will continue to be a cause of considerable anguish to anyone working artistically, be they composers or carpenters, and many poets have expressed acutely – and somewhat paradoxically – the deadly torment of gazing ‘with how blank an eye’. This is from Coleridge’s aptly named lament ‘Dejection: An Ode’. The Romantic imagination was of course demonstrably enlivened by the beauty and terror of the natural world, but, as Coleridge grudgingly deduces, ‘I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.’ The idea that one’s inner life is a hub of creative potential is so familiar to us as to be proverbial, however the practice of drawing upon subjective experience for inspiration was just gaining ground when Coleridge wrote the poem in 1802 – and it was radically reshaping the role and merit of poets. Typically, bards of the 1700s were admired for their mastery of classical forms – the great satirist Alexander Pope, for example, is renowned for his skilful handling of the heroic couplet. The eminent poet and critic, Al Alvarez, describes the advent of Romanticism as ‘a sudden, violent explosion of emotion, enthusiasm, and introspection’ which obliterated the authority of Augustan mores, overturned literary standards, and signalled a new sense of freedom; ‘the freedom to feel, react, and create in a personal and unpredictable way’. Indeed, the Romantics rejected classical techniques of poetic composition and instead tapped into the intimate vitalities of their personal lives, producing fulminant compositions characterised by a rhapsodic conflation of ardent soul-searching, vivid sensation, and spontaneous revelation. Self-generated currents of heightened and unfettered experience, fountains from within, were what got the poet going – and while that would seem to indicate a great deal of creative freedom, it also means that the emancipated poet, who no longer is in the service of and guided by pre-existing forms and courtly themes, has only one resource; herself. What pressure! – it is hardly surprising that the Romantics soon began to seek out the terrible and the fantastic; the routine behaviours and attitudes of conventional daily life could hardly be relied upon to work them up into a terrific creative frenzy. Dreams and nightmares provided access to a bizarre alternative realm, replete

with outlandish figures and uncommon scenarios – some went to extreme lengths to stir up the most terrible phantoms. The painter Henry Fuseli, for instance, gorged on a frightful smorgasbord of raw meat and gone-off food in order to induce horrible night visions – it is alleged that a print of his painting, *The Nightmare*, a truly heinous scene, hung in Freud’s office in Vienna.

It was around this time that the notion of artistic genius became practically synonymic with the ability to perceive and relate to reality in wholly unprecedented and boundless ways – to the point where madness itself was well-nigh a prerequisite for producing an authentic work of real visionary significance. To some extent artists are still thought of as highly-strung creatures whose permeability beckons the unknown, chaos, the void, the abyss, and so on to seep into them – stain their hands – so that more boundaried souls may wonder at the dappled imprint. The wonderfully perspicacious writer, historian, and activist, Rebecca Solnit, says that, ‘It is the job of artists to open the door and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar.’ While observing Mary work, and listening to her speak about its trajectory, it soon became clear that a quality, or an attitude, that is central to her practice is indeed receptivity. However, neither woman recommends that the artist be subsumed or taken over by whatever comes up or seeps in. ‘Its arrival’, Solnit adds, ‘signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own.’ Mary spoke about the ‘power of the intimate’, referencing Julia Kristeva who suggests that in the contemporary age, collective upheaval and mass rebellion are no longer feasible outcomes; ‘we may have reached a point of no return’, says the theorist and novelist, ‘from which we will have to re-turn to the little things, tiny revolts, in order to preserve the life of the mind and of the species’. Seen in this light it is clear that Mary’s notion of receptivity has within it a micro-political dimension, accordingly, when she says ‘I think the power lies in maintaining a sense of the intimate’, she is perhaps proposing that creation is an inherent form of activism – as long as one stays focused. ‘Merging with emotion is blurring territory,’ she warns, ‘better to stay present with what you are doing – follow the task at hand.’ Even during the Romantic period there were tempered voices among the tumult. The German Romantic poet and philosopher, Novalis, said, ‘Chaos, in a work of art, should shimmer through the veil of order’. Equilibrium in the face of so many opposing forces seems

to be paramount, but how is balance of this kind achieved and preserved? After all, as Alvarez points out, ‘to lose one’s poise is an occupational hazard for an original artist exploring the unknown.’

On the morning of Easter Sunday, Mary sent me an email that described her journey as a dancer. It began, as most passions do, when she was very young – however, since there was no place in Ireland to study dance, the path ahead of her wasn’t so clearly marked out. ‘Most contemporary dancers, these days’, she writes ‘have a very eclectic approach to dance technique’, and she describes an encounter in the mid-1970s with an American woman, got up in an electric blue unitard and leg warmers, who taught evening classes in Graham technique – ‘She smoked very stylishly with a cigarette holder. I felt crap in her class and had decided that I should just give it up.’ Fortunately, not long after this dispiriting episode, Mary was to have a more encouraging experience at a workshop with contemporary dance pioneer, Joan Davis, ‘which kind of blew my mind and made me decide to go to New York to study dance.’ The next forty years ‘involved a lot of explorations into a lot of techniques.’ The range of techniques Mary studied is impressive, though each one, she points out, ‘has ideological underpinnings and aesthetic values embedded in them – and it can take a while to figure that out – and to locate oneself within all of that – to select what’s relevant.’ There were the ‘traditional’ contemporary dance techniques of, mainly, Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham and José Limón. Then, in the 1980s, came postmodern release-based approaches, whose methods were directed towards ‘stripping the layer of style away...and emotion too, to an extent, and focused on movement (as the message)’. This was followed in the 1990s by the Somatic practices of Body-Mind Centering and Authentic Movement, as well as yoga and meditation, subtle practices that were oriented towards ‘looking at sensation and the body-mind feedback loop.’ What is clear from the myriad sources that Mary has drawn upon is that her professional development has been steered by a more profound incitement than the honing of physical and aesthetic skills. ‘It’s not about being beautiful, it’s about being relevant’, she told me. Indeed, from time to time Mary expressed frustration that dance is read primarily in terms of the body, she feels such an interpretation overlooks a contingent element of corporeal experience; ‘space is a partner’ she says, and as such her interest is pitched upon ‘bringing attention to space’. Placing emphasis on spatial relations

suggests that the receptivity which is essential to Mary's practice is of a kind that transcends the personal. Going beyond the scope of emotional or intuitive sense, it is a particular register of awareness that could be described as existential in its reach and vibrancy – her research and the practice it informs is, as she puts it, 'All in an attempt to figure out, through the process of doing and undoing, what feels most alive and fresh at any moment', and it would seem that it is the augmentation and refinement of that capacity which has really shaped the course of her path as a dancer.

In replying to Mary's email I reflected on the prefixes that attempt to designate the kind of work we both make; 'contemporary' dance and 'experimental' literature. Both of those terms are suggestive of something new-fangled and untethered, as such they are regrettable misnomers since they belie the antecedent influences which permeate the ideas and questions that keep us both going. In more recent years, for example, Mary's curiosity about mind and consciousness, and whether it is possible to 'square emptiness and action in the context of performance and teaching', has been significantly impelled by her studies of the ancient traditions of the Zen and Dzogchen schools of Buddhism. In one of the last conversations I had with her she emphasised again how important it is not to force things, 'it's not about muscularity,' she said 'there's another energy – and of course I'm physicalising it – a more powerful energy, a fundamental vibrancy that comes through us all.' When I asked her some awfully bungled question about her sense of her body when she danced and what it was she was aiming for, she replied, 'how to be as simple as possible in terms of the impulse.'

Energy. Impulse. Those magical words again.

Watching Mary work, and talking with her about her practice, shed new light upon those elusive terms. They appear less shrouded in mystery, and certainly less mythologised. Part of this dispelling is due to how she unlinks these operations from the self – they do not denote or correspond to an emotional state – it's not about working oneself up – if anything, it's the opposite – it's about getting the self out of the way in order to attain a level of openness that connects with a fundamental universal energy. 'Emptiness' said the 14th century Tibetan master, Je Tsongkhapa 'is the track on which the centred person moves'. This dispersed conceptualising of inspiration has many exciting and radical implications – not least, it calls into question what might be meant by the well-worn phrase, 'self-expression'. It also

has an impact on what performance is and what sort of engagement it asks of those watching. Mary acknowledges that there is a discrepancy between what she is working on and how people read dance generally. When she performs 'The Movement' Mary uses no other resource apart from her sensing body – there are no music or lights, no costume, and no props; 'it's about, we're here in the room' she said, 'it's not meant to bring us somewhere else.'

The woman walks into the room. There are many people in the room by now, sitting in chairs unstacked and arranged into tight rows. There is no available seat for the second woman, she came down the stairs too late, for reasons she cannot distinguish she was feeling apprehensive, as if exposed, already in there somewhere. It doesn't matter. She doesn't want to sit down, she doesn't want a chair, she wants to crouch on the end at the front, somewhere between the woman and the audience. Isn't that where she is? She crouches down and sees again what she has never seen. Wordless questions arise in different parts of her crouching body. The left side, around the shoulder and left breast, feels thick, juicy, livid; ready to pounce. Behind her right knee meanwhile feels brittle, defeated, ghostly. She straightens her right leg out in front of her, quick as a flash, then tucks it away again. She looks at the people watching. To begin with they seem puzzled; there is no music after all. Are these actions, are these gestures: is this a dance? But they recognise something; the air, the atmosphere, the condition, is familiar, is something they have lived through many times themselves. This is an appeal perhaps that has been uprooted and briefly made foreign. So raw and contained. The second woman is quite lopsided. Pushed and pulled. Parts of her go nearer, parts of her are prone, parts of her attenuate. The woman she has frequently met is there and not there and the there is this room and not this room – it is simply 'there'. The woman is remote and she is vivid. She is she and she is not she. Each move asserts the situation while erasing the protagonist. It's extraordinary. The second woman feels a trembling up and down the outer edges of her fingers.

'Never to be oneself, yet always – that is the problem' said Virginia Woolf, and to see Mary perform is to see that challenge embodied. Woolf made this compendious remark in relation to the difficult undertaking of writing essays. In the case of composing this particular essay, mindful of Mary's adage to stay focused on the task, I endeavoured to keep myself out of it as much as possible, without

becoming conspicuous by my absence. A previous draft had much more emphasis on the subjective ‘I’, albeit in a completely bogus way since I referred to myself as the ‘second woman’, and Mary as ‘the woman’ – which in the paragraph above is a more or less effective strategy, but not at length. Mostly this angle brought about quite a lot of slightly entertaining, but really very irrelevant, observations. For instance, a whole paragraph was about how I often thought that Mary, especially whenever she was walking briskly in a diagonal line, looked a lot like French actor Isabelle Huppert, and how difficult I found it not to blurt that out at inopportune moments. I also thought it fit to catalogue, in this rambling often inane previous draft, some provisions Mary brought in one day and arranged on the table in the room we were working in; *crackers, houmous, apples, two bags of crisps. Out of a small rucksack she takes a kettle, two cups and a box of green tea. The second woman is curious about the crisps because the packets they’re in are perfectly square. They look so classy, it’s strange. Also on the table is a roll of toilet paper. A smallish knife has been inserted between its tightly wound white sheets. It looks Aesculapian and violent both and impresses the second woman, she tries to recall another occasion when she’s seen a knife sheathed in such an alarming and practical way and she cannot. She looks at the woman, who is eating a bare cracker, and thinks ‘you know what’s what.’* Those, I assure you, are the highlights. The ‘I’, even when it is rolled into a ‘she’, will only get you so far, all on its own.

When I was younger and life was much more dramatic and unpredictable, my inner life had a turbulent searing intensity. The constant flux of ecstasy and anguish, revelation and confusion, immersion and alienation filled many many notebooks over many many years (I was very young for a very long time it seems). Then at some point, hard to say exactly when, when it all felt a little less messy and inexorable perhaps, my relationship to writing began to change and I didn’t want it to be all about dashing my heart out against the white page, and I didn’t want the ‘I’ to just stand for me anymore. I expect, in order to begin, I will always draw upon my own life, why wouldn’t I – living is something I do and think about every day after all, but an equally nourishing source for my blood and intellect and imagination is books, and the more I read, the more there is for me to write. The writers I gravitate towards are those who in their own inimitable and incredibly courageous way manage to let go and stay in control at the same time. Who succeed in ‘never being themselves, yet always’, whose work is both forest and book. Writers

such as Jean Rhys, Marguerite Duras, Anais Nin, Clarice Lispector, Marlen Haushofer, Muriel Spark, Leonora Carrington, Renata Adler, Fleur Jaeggy, Natalia Ginzburg, Shirley Jackson, Elizabeth Hardwick, Doris Lessing, Tove Jansson, Dorothy Baker, Anna Kavan, Isabelle Eberhardt, Maeve Brennan, and Virginia Woolf. When I write, especially when I write fiction, I do not feel that the ‘I’ I write represents me alone, of course not –that would be impossible –it is a conglomeration of all these women. Sensing in them some shared quality and flaw, writing often feels like walking into a pool of black water flecked with electric tints. A place without bottom that we all bathe in – sometimes naked, sometimes touched with leopard print or something rucked and emerald – or lie down beside, now and then, in the unfathomable shadows of smooth white rocks, silent, appraising, and milky, with stained feral eyes dark as moths, tapered fingertips tipping back and forth without a single care in the soporific nocturnal air. Wounded and luxuriant, burdened and remote, edgeless and intact. Those who fall apart of course know a great deal about the art of precision and poise. For an instant out of time I saw something of that paradox embodied. Ever since then a dancer comes to stand, now and then, at a distant edge of the brimming scintillant black pool. Standing there, in what she once described to me as, ‘the scorching orange of stillness’.