

# Prologue

This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be—a case of bald social climbing—but at the time I genuinely thought *this* was the voice of lettered people, and that if I didn't have the voice of lettered people I would never truly be lettered.

Zadie Smith in *Speaking in Tongues*

...Continue, without losing consciousness... Superstitiously...  
Out of the corner of your hand... With a healthy superiority...  
Like a nightingale with a toothache... Attaching too much  
importance... Full of subtlety, if you believe me... Almost  
invisible...

Performance indications scattered throughout piano scores written by Erik Satie (selected from a list in *A Mammal's Notebook*, edited by Ornella Volta, 2017).

As an artist writing a PhD dissertation, I am given pause before setting down the first word. I don't yet quite know in what guise to clamber into this newly explored world of academic writing. Knowing myself to be something of a newcomer (or intruder, depending on your thoughts about practice-based PhD's), I find myself momentarily lacking a research character with which to enter the space of writing the dissertation.

In the supermarket of potential research characters I could adopt in order to write my dissertation, there are some which quickly come

forth and beckon me as the kinds of voices that will surely enhance my sense of belonging within this particular literary environment, and furnish me with the confidence required to set down the first word. These research characters present themselves to me readily enough, and so, in a hurry to get along and make the points I've come here to make, I could, if I wished, select one of these characters in a flash, almost without thought, as if my selection were merely the natural consequence of the genre and its conventions. But for some reason I find myself loitering at the task, wandering non-committally past these characters, continuing to browse.

In the gap between not having and having the research character I am looking for, it appears to me to be something like a ticket without which I may not enter the discourse in the first place. After all, just as newcomers to a country must learn the local language and customs in order to participate in social life there, newcomers to a literary genre must acquaint themselves with the characters and voices that have hitherto populated it, in order to become legible to the readership and constructive to the discourse. The character of the writing, the character of the researcher, acts as a kind of license. Without this license, I can't set down the first word. Perhaps I can't even think it.

In the first quoted passage above, Zadie Smith writes about a similar kind of situation: the process of becoming lettered, by way of first adopting the voice of someone lettered. Citing George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which the Cockney flower woman Eliza Doolittle becomes transformed by elocution lessons into a veritable lady, Smith traces in her essay the transformation of her own voice upon leaving her working class London neighbourhood to study at Cambridge. In this vibrant tale of the journey of the voice, Smith reflects somewhat wistfully on the voice of her youth which, unintentionally and incrementally over time, was lost to the newly acquired 'posher' voice. She wishes she could have retained both, rather than fully adopted either. Her essay ends with a provocation on the virtues of 'speaking

in tongues', and of cultivating the use of multiple voices at one's disposal.

The trouble with understanding the process Smith is describing is that it tends to happen so imperceptibly, so innocently, that it will have very often have caused much change before one has noticed it, let alone had a chance to study its movements and workings. Perhaps I too could, with the right education, acquire the voice, the demeanour, the character, required of me to step into the discourse that follows, and, if I am careful, perhaps I could find a way to spare myself the loss that Smith incurred, through a study of the process of character acquisition itself. Is it possible, by some special technique or sideways glance, to observe the self oscillate in and out of character?

My first challenge here then, before even setting down the first word, is to discipline myself, and protract the time within which the research character is developing, so that this movement from one character to another may have some chance of opening itself up to observation. I must resist the temptation to start writing as if there were only ever one voice or one way to tell the story of the research, avoiding any casual presumptions about who is telling it. And so, because what I want to write about is character, and the kinds of possibilities presented by the skill of speaking in tongues, I feel obliged to document for my reader the period in which I am searching – in writing – for my research character.

Happily, there is already a literary convention in place to assist the writer in saying things that can only be said before setting down the first word: the prologue. The prologue establishes the primordial atmosphere of a fledgling intent, and that is precisely what we hope to capture here: the very faintest desire to become otherwise, pictured in its early, nebulous form. Like both Zadie Smith and Eliza Doolittle, I am about to undergo a character transformation by way of the careful retraining of my (writerly) voice. Yet I – like they – cannot

only be said to be subjugated by the forces of socialisation, for I have come here in search of my own transformation. I am calling for my own undoing.

Smith's becoming lettered must have first originated in a desire to become something she was as yet not, a determination to become otherwise. Similarly, I think of the moments preceding my arrival to the university, the tireless efforts I employed in writing my proposals and attending interviews before finally entering the academy to pursue my artistic research. These investments are themselves testament to the desire to become a different sort of artist to the one I was previously.

Like Lady Macbeth in one of her famous soliloquies, where she calls on evil spirits to stifle her 'womanly' instincts before embarking on her murderous plan,<sup>[1]</sup> I too am inviting a change to my very 'nature', my habitual way of operating, in the service of an aim, (though hopefully a more defensible one). But now that I have finally arrived, now that I am comfortably installed within the library or the seminar room or the postgraduate study room, I find myself in search of a model for how to behave and speak and write.

In truth, I find I am not always sovereign over my influences; that the very smell of the library and its busy silence, its hard chairs and tired photocopiers, speak to me in an instructive language. The way in which the university library speaks to me is nuanced and sometimes absurd, like the instructions Erik Satie left for future performers of his compositions: *out of the corner of your hand*, he directed his pianist, *almost invisibly*, and, if you can muster it, *like a nightingale with a toothache*.

Satie's performance indications are normally appreciated as welcome witticisms in the often sombre cultural environment of musical composition at the time. But in addition to the comedy of their over-specification and the often impossible demands made on the performer, the performance indications are striking for their poetic

specificity. For I am sure that there is in fact *some way* to play the piece 'almost invisibly', and that the indications will have indeed succeeded in directing the manner in which each new recital of the pieces was played, however subtly, or however obligingly the performer received his written directions. They are too indicative not to have insinuated themselves by subtle suggestion into the pianist's very fingertips.

So it is that the very architecture of this institution of learning carves my spine with its firm seating, and even directs how I hold my pen. Yes, I think, sitting up straight, I too want to be a 'man of letters' seated staunchly at his mahogany desk, a 'natural philosopher' of the 17th century surrounded by his alchemical books. I too want to wander the halls of the university like a monk devoted to a path of learning, or like a player of Herman Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*.

At the same time, when a pianist today studies and plays the music of Erik Satie, we call that act, that skill, *interpretation*. In the world of classical interpretation, technical accuracy is valued highly, but interpretation – the manner in which the pianist reinvents and redeploys the score to the point that it becomes her own voice – is perhaps even more prized. With virtuosic playing, the score becomes less a text and more a language – a set of conventions and constraints within which the pianist can find her own brand of eloquence. I like to think then, that if the library writes me, if it corrects me with its careful insinuations, that I in turn interpret its command, accommodate myself within its language, and make its structure the very conditions of my own agency.

So is it that, even as the library air (or aura) infiltrates me and alters me from within, I make my way willingly further into its caverns, curious about the new powers it has to bestow upon me and what I might be able to do with them.

Tomb-like, the university library buries its occupants in a labyrinth of ageing books, in spite of the growing availability of digitised titles. But

these tall shelves are more than mere repositories, just as the walls of a labyrinth are more than mere hedges. They serve to immerse us in a learned tradition by eclipsing the world beyond; they are transportive, if not in space, then in the realm of ideas. Within the shelves I search, browse, rummage, parse, scan, delve, ponder, weigh, deliberate, crouch, decipher, dismiss, recognise, register, translate, judge, presume, qualify, enumerate, indulge, discriminate. *Do it ponderously, say the shelves, with the parsing finger of a clairvoyant... surreptitiously.*

No doubt the auspicious scent of printed matter and machine static causes me to unfurl in the studious room, into something else. And there, near the window overlooking New Cross, I relinquish myself as a man of letters and adopt instead the wry, simmering determination of one who, on the contrary, has *not* been accommodated quite so comfortably within the university library.

Absent-mindedly opening a volume lying unwanted on a study desk, I notice that my thoughts are being accompanied by a familiar voice: tuning into it, I realise it is that of the narrator in *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf. After being denied entry into a university library on account of being a woman, the narrator describes how she has set off instead to the British Museum library in search of answers to the question of the effect of sex on literature.

Alarmed at the copious volumes she finds there about women (all written exclusively by men), and untrained in any scholarly method by which to cope with this mountain of work, she proceeds furtively, wastefully, through the information, her mind wandering wildly from this statement to that on the nature of women, unable to find any consensus on the matter amongst all these learned men. And as the day wanes and her study session draws to a close with next to nothing gleaned, she begins frustratedly sketching out a face in her notebook: it is an imagined portrait of 'Professor X', one of the book's authors.

She has drawn him ugly, red-faced and angry. But why should he be angry, and why should all these men, writing these apparently natural facts about women, write so passionately in a studious domain whose genre precisely promotes *dispassion*? Here the narrator has, in all her scholarly incompetence and clumsy research, manages to glean from her work a most important clue, a clue which lay not in *what* these men wrote about women, but *how*. The fervour of the writing so often drew attention away from the argument and to the author himself, whose disposition our narrator considers further, realising that such anger, such passion, denoted the author's motivation to protect his superiority and thus an underlying recognition that it could, in fact, be lost.

With the voice of *A Room of One's Own's* narrator in mind, the act of learning becomes something else. It no longer implies the disciplined comforts of entitled tenure, but the unsolicited and almost vengeful determination of one who has never belonged in a university. Still holding the book in my hands, I wonder suddenly if I have something to prove, or to fight for, with my learning.

Spotting some of the rustling roadside trees below on the street outside, I picture then an early scene in *A Room of One's Own*, in which the narrator, walking across the quadrangle of a reputable university, lost in the pursuit of a nascent thought, is approached by a flustered, waving scholar, who reminds her that women are not allowed to walk unaccompanied on the grass and ushers her promptly off. Thus he disperses her nascent thought like a flock of furtive fish, never to be found again. How ironic it was then, when, waiting at the bus stop on Camberwell Green on the way to the library today, listening to *A Room of One's Own* on audiobook in my earpods and emotionally absorbed in the argument about Shakespeare's sister, a man interrupted my thoughts too; first waiting patiently for me to remove my earpods and pause my audiobook, to then ask me a series of questions. I still don't know why he interrupted me, to ask my name, to ask where I'm going; these are ostensibly innocent

questions, and yet I felt tense and worried all the same: at the thought of the unknown motivation behind them, at his unperturbed access to my mental privacy, at his persistence when I was asked to remove my earpods a second time. And even after my bus had arrived and I had promptly hopped into it, gratefully escaping my congenial persecution, I found that even in the safety of my seat I kept replaying the last thirty seconds of the audiobook over and over. Frustrated with myself, I realised that I was repeatedly losing my thoughts as they wandered obsessively back to the encounter with the man. Concentrate! I reprimanded myself, but to no avail. At the very least, Woolf had by this point furnished me with the tools to see myself as only one distracted woman among a long line of perennially distracted and interrupted women, their thoughts made to disperse and flee like furtive fish, never to be found again.

But look at what she has made me do. Mind wander. And Woolf was a master of mind wandering if anyone was; yet her drifting prose, taking on the movement of a window shopper, peering first in here, then there, had not the misty quality of a meandering dream, but instead a startling analytical precision, whereby each object under her observation presented itself in utmost lucidity, as a solid object turned over in her hand. Perhaps it is that very quality which made her a woman capable of writing fiction in her time – that 'sudden splitting off of consciousness' which enabled her to exert a certain level of mastery over her inevitable distraction. And it is this very ability to address, as opposed to overcome, the things that stand in the way of progress, as well as the ability to put the very fact of distraction, difficulty and obstacle into the work itself, which makes her scholarship in *A Room of One's Own*, so miraculously straightforward given the complexity of the subject, as if she had taken a shortcut through the woods, where everyone else followed the winding path around. It was her novelist's skill in noticing character, in relentlessly paying attention to the voice of the text, which enabled her to read the unwritten in men's writings about women.

Wandering into the Law section to scan the titles vertically without pulling one out, I think of my cousin, newly enrolled on a course in law last semester after becoming enamoured with the female protagonist in a series of books, and then I think also of my aunt, who, now a judge, similarly pursued the path of justice following her admiration of the women in the 1980s law drama *LA Law*. It was the way these characters dressed, and spoke, and held themselves, which seemed to carry something of significance for my relatives, and perhaps these visible qualities served as proxies for something else, something more greatly cherished. These were, after all, competent, resourceful, self-possessed women, and this is how they looked and dressed.

The urbane eloquence of a well-spoken artist like Susan Hiller or Adrian Piper may have similarly served as a model for me, with their worldly North American accents, lazily erudite and cool. These are the scholarly artists, and this is how they look and sound. And how helpful these proxies can be on a practical level, too. Sometimes, when I find myself vainly trying to read an inscrutable text, I'll start reading it aloud in a voice attempting an approximation to Hiller's. And then like magic I'll find I suddenly begin to decipher the text, that it willingly discloses itself to me as a lock come undone to the right key.

And so on and on do these various characters populate my mind and insinuate themselves into the twitching fibres of my body. That is how the library opportunistically shapes my person with impressions in this hour of ambivalence, furnishing my hands, my lips, my faculties, with strange new behaviours, and with them, new powers. Maybe this is precisely what it means to 'become institutionalised', although the term is often employed in a derogative sense. Might it not provide the very conditions for certain actions, like a tradition, or a game might?

I was now going to say that I feel a little bit like my 'fictional characters', the characters of my performances or novels, who must tentatively feel their way into being, who must emerge from a nondescript soup of non-specificity and assume a definite mould

before they can become actors. But perhaps it is more than a resemblance. Perhaps it is precisely what happens to anyone who must find their place in a new world. 'Character' is, after all, closely related to 'role'; in dramaturgy the two are synonymous. Character and role are form and function, and, as in most cases involving form and function, the two are often difficult to prise apart and apprehend separately. I have one job to do – complete the PhD – but to be functional, to be fit for purpose, I am now called by the occasion to assume a certain form.

And what about you? We mustn't forget you in all this. As a factor outside the scope of the research, perhaps it is something you could ask yourself. Are you too in search of a reader character; a manner from which to assume the role of recipient? What attitudinal disposition ought you settle into in order to receive in the way you wish to receive? Were you already altered – did you already assume a slightly different charge – when you picked up this thesis, as I did when I picked up my laptop to write it?

Those initial, preparatory moments are in fact critical, as when in the beginning of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, the author troubles himself to enquire as to the reader's comfort before starting the story. Should you sit, leaning on the arm of a sofa? Should you lean casually on the side of a desk? What elapses in the decisions about where and how to read entails a readiness to become otherwise, and the book entwines author and reader in a mutual promise of alteration.

But let us resist a little longer, the temptation to settle, and develop a certain infidelity to our choice of research character and reader character respectively. Let us make the exercise of writing an account of this research, as well as the exercise of reading it, an experiment in sustaining above all a curiosity in the movement of our character, and who we are to become on the other side of writing and reading the research.

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1. 'Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here/  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty...'  
Lady Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 5 in Macbeth by William  
Shakespeare. ↩