

Through the Looking Glass
On Doubt, Perception, and Art which Breathes
Dashiel Carrera



I. Introduction

I am most moved by that which is expressed obliquely—by the mumblings, the mutterings, the ineffable impulses. I am most moved by art which appears like a semi-lucid dream in the flash of conscious as we wake and disappears just as the sunlight comes through the shades. I am most moved by art which lays plain the mutability and inscrutability of our world, which enables us to, as Rilke once wrote, “love the questions themselves.”

To read is to synthesize experience, to cast a tainted mirror on our memories and reform them into some new image. As writers, then, we are not creators of standalone works so much as we are providers of tools—kaleidoscopes and telescopes and looking glasses—which enable our readers to re-see the world by allowing them to re-see themselves.



A sculpture displaying Ana morphosis.

I want an act of artistic expression so intense that it eclipses any awareness of the self or audience, for the artist to be so consumed and lost within what they are creating that the distinction between them and their work dissolves. I want art to appear before me as suddenly as a deer before me in my yard, to stare deep into my eyes and disappear in the dark — because life is this dangerous, this ephemeral.

I want the canvas of every story, every play and every painting, to be the artist's mind. I want reading to feel as if the writer has sent me their newborn child in the mail. I want art that is so alive that I can hold it to my chest and feel its beating heart tremor against my own.

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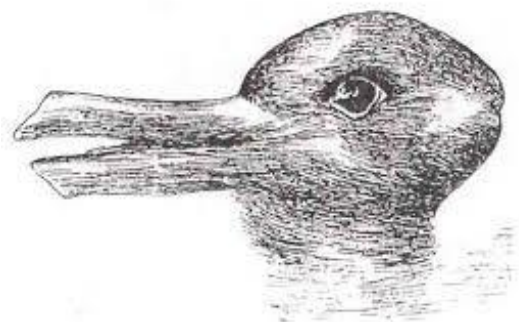
"What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail to nothing."

-Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

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I want art that is of such startling and terrifying intimacy that the very modes of coherence that allow us to conceptualize, market, and discuss, are torn away. I want only the dream. I want art which like an optical illusion we look at again and again and with each passing day appears differently to us. I want work which is *alive*, which like us is constantly changing and full of doubt, which we may look *through* and in doing so, better comprehend.

So much of this world is devoted to granting us new knowledge; only art allows us to take what is already there in front of us and achieve a deeper understanding.



Duck or bunny?

It is this art that is most dangerous — not writing which is declarative of its subversion or which stakes its claims of formal innovation from the get-go, but that which flows and tremors from the writer's pen with such fervor and immediacy that it escapes description altogether — art for which the very ideas of “literature,” “the novel,” “form,” and “content,” all fall away, and we are left only with that which is most human: a perpetual longing.

II. The Nature of Doubt

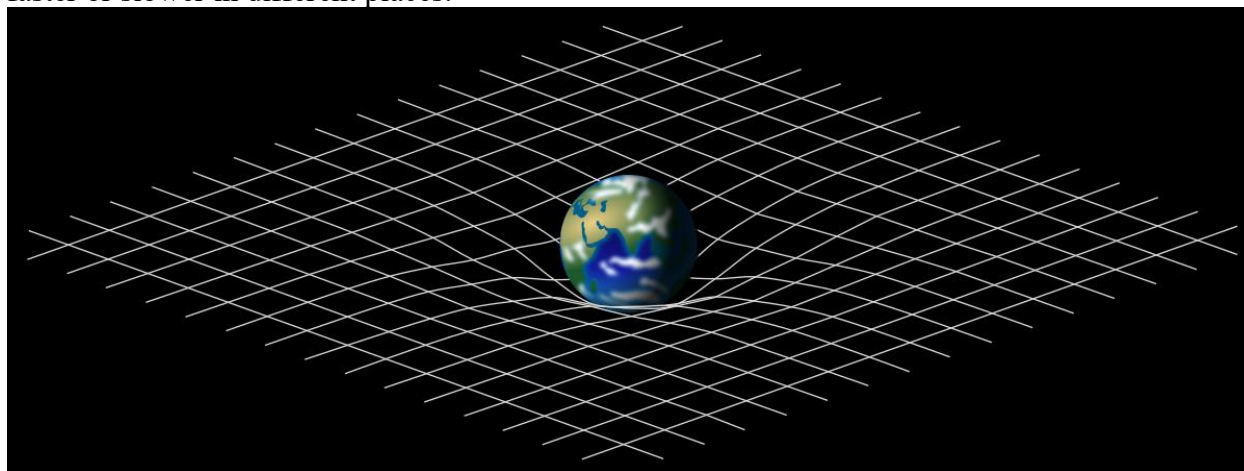
Logic and the sciences have been in a state of epistemological crisis since the early 20th century, largely due to the publication of three works: 1) Kurt Gödel's *On Formally Undecidable Propositions in Principia Mathematica and Related Systems* (1931) 2) Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) and 3) Albert Einstein's *On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies* (1905).

All three of these papers debunked wildly held beliefs about the nature of logic, reasoning, and language that were so fundamental that even though they have been debunked they remain ingrained in the public conscious.

Gödel's *On Formally Undecidable* lay out his famous Incompleteness Theorems, which showed that no mathematical system could be both logically consistent and complete. This means that all functioning and rational systems of logic must be predicated on axioms, statements which are accepted without logical explanation. This means that no mathematical system can be entirely composed of logically proven statements. That we must always start from a place of belief, and build from there.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* argues similarly that philosophical argumentation is entirely a product of the ambiguity of language and that seemingly profound philosophical arguments often boil down to petty disagreements about poorly defined terms like "God" and "existence." As long as philosophy is trapped in the amber of language, he argued, logical argumentation is doomed to fail.

Einstein's *On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies* introduces his famous theory of relativity, the first in a long and ongoing series of theories which refuted the Newtonian model of time. In the traditional Newtonian model, time and space were viewed as independent variables that do not correlate or react to one another's changes. Einstein demonstrated that this was not the case — that in fact the gravitational pull of objects distorts time. In other words, time passes faster or slower in different places.



Earth distorting the fabric of space-time.

These theories are important because they cast doubt on our picture of reality and our sense of self as perfectly logical beings. Time and language operate on a series of approximations, guesstimations, and compromises. Our world is, at its most fundamental level, unknowable, and the more we learn about it the more we enrich our understanding of how unknowable it really is.

Because of this, I want art that emphasizes what we don't know, rather than what we do know. These findings reveal that it is the unknown that is the more fundamental part of human experience — that this Earth as we know it is, at its most granular level, shaking and ambiguous. That it is only by stacking these unknowns together that we come to believe that we have anything that resembles a knowable universe.

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Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* serves as a perfect example of a novel willing to engage with the doubt which plagues our world. *The Waves* refutes a Newtonian model of time in favor of the modern one, in which no external world is said to exist; in which nothing "is" but things "happen." The voices which speak in the novel are as brief as vapor — as soon as they pass away from us the memory of them quickly fades and only the impression remains, and this impression, this metaphoric thread which carries us through to the next speaker, in the next instance so quickly disappears. This is completely reflective of the doubt induced by the above theories, which came out around the same time as *The Waves* (1931). Our intervention as observers so distorts our measurements of the world that the notion of a universal, objective reality becomes an absurdity. We can only speak of these brief moments to which we lay witness.

And so if we're doomed to try and create a narrative out of a world which exists only as patchwork and disconnected logic, we are left trying to describe what this underlying momentum that carries us all is. And in the case of *The Waves*, one can't help but see them this the waves themselves. The waves refract and reverberate through these characters to form the strange undulating emotion that Woolf may better understand as narrative — not the causal sequence of events that for some strange reason has become the language we use to describe our lives, but these forces which disperse us, collect us, and send us again crashing into the rock. In *The Waves* Woolf draws our attention to the rising of the sun, the twittering of the birds, the drawing in and out of the water in great layers over each other because these things form the metaphoric cascades of trauma and emotion that crash through life. This is all that can be known.

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"The moment was all; the moment was enough."

— Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

III. In Favor of Poetic Logic

“In my view poetic reasoning is closer to the laws by which thought develops, and thus to life itself, than is the logic of traditional drama.”

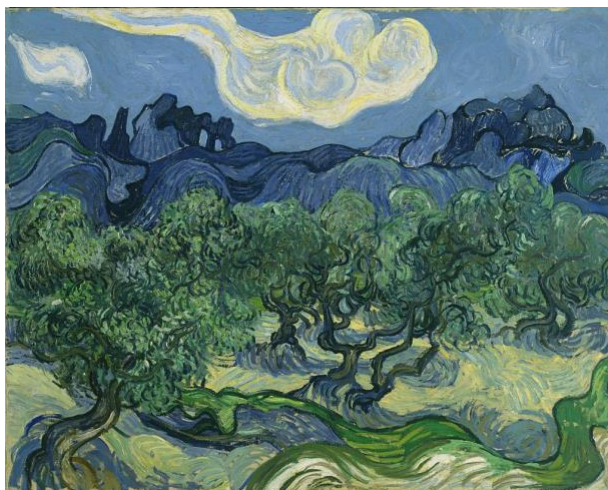
– Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*

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Sometimes I awake in my room with the strangest dream. It is as if I have lived an entire life already—that I have raised children on some foreign land, have opened a business by the sea only to watch it fail, have owned a dog and painted a home and lost friends and gained friends and saved a beached whale and watched a marriage unravel as quickly as the frayed edges of a spool of thread—a dream so long and deep and intense that when finally I awake I have no idea where or who I am, and must look over each of the objects in my room to try and reassemble myself until finally, the trickle of my conscious begins to flow.

I am struck, always, by how beautiful this moment is. In this brief amnesia I am born again without any artifacts of a previous life, with no preconceptions and presumptions and prejudices. I am only what I am, and enter into the realm of the waking much the way a child does — with no understanding, but tremendous curiosity and love. I am haunted, always, that it is only in these brief moments that I really seem to know anything completely, that I feel a love for the world around me and the objects within it with such totality that it eclipses my own heart, and lets me finally fall away.

This, I think, is the impossible thing which art is capable of, that thing which I see in the rolling hills of Van Gogh’s early works, in his bleeding blends of blue — a vision for the world of such intensity that it becomes a shaking motion, a world which only he can see.



Van Gogh’s Olive Trees.

Because our subjective impression of the world is shaking, is ambiguous, is full of the unknown. And nothing seems more strange, more alien and obtuse than the construction of some linear logic which forces us to think of writing as a series of causally linked dramatic events. The

implication of such works that use this form is that the properties of our world are known, that we understand the construction of art, the world, and ourselves.

But as Tarkovsky notes, this is not how thought develops, and therefore not how *we* develop. Our lens of understanding the world is only the product of our memories, experiences, and perhaps the art which we have previously consumed. If we allow ourselves to believe that causal logic is the true form of conscious, then we run the risk of dismissing anything in life which does not fit into this form, and those moments which are often most beautiful—which move us but defy explanation—fall to ashes.

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“We’ve come to the end of the day: let us say that in the course of that day something important has happened, something significant, the sort of thing that could be the inspiration for a film, that has the makings of a conflict of ideas that could become a picture. But how did this day imprint itself on our memory? As something amorphous, vague, with no skeleton or schema. Like a cloud. And only the central event of that day has become concentrated, like a detailed report, lucid in meaning and clearly defined.”

—Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*

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Our memories rely on association and momentum. They are kinetic and energetic, but much like subatomic particles, have little content themselves. We act as if our understanding of the past is fixed, but if it is stored only in memory, then it will always be shifting and changing as the lens through which we interpret the world changes from day to day. Our impression of the present may have more weight on our self-understanding than the actual moments of the past. Something as simple as a fleeting emotion can alter the course of our memories and assemble them into some new shape. In a fit of melancholy, what was once a memory of great joy can suddenly become a failing. It is in this way that memories are like optical illusions—our perception of them changes as we change.

A poetic logic is one which recognizes the amorphous nature of memory and leverages this to create evocative art. By reflecting memory, we in turn reflect the subjective nature of experience—that shaking vaporous world of doubt post-Einstein, Gödel, and Wittgenstein.



Levitation Scene from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror*

One example of poetic logic appears in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. The image of a woman levitating over a bed is juxtaposed against dialog between a man and a woman. The relation between the voices and the image is left ambiguous. The scene continues until tension in the dialog reaches an absolute peak. Then a dove flies by the woman, and the scene abruptly ends.

While this scene does not provide us with a clear understanding of the interior world of the piece, its use of poetic logic allows us to see the world in a new way by displaying Tarkovsky's impression of a memory. While we do not have direct access to the memory, we do have direct access to his vision of it, which in turn provides us with the tools to re-see the world ourselves.

This is not to suggest that artistic work should resist "sense" or the "tyranny of logic" or anything like that. The goal of poetic reasoning is not to invoke a particular mode of sense making, but rather to provoke the various modes which sense can take—to create a mirror in which the reader can come to see themselves and reformulate the world in some new image. To serve not only as vapor, but as a looking glass that with a slight tilt will burst and burst with the various forms truth can take.

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"The alternative is for the audience to be presented with a final deduction, for no effort on their part, and that is not what they need. What can it mean to them when they have not shared with the author the misery and joy of bringing an image into being?"

– Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*

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I want art which is constantly moving and growing. I want art which provides us with a new understanding of the world each time we see it. I want art which, as David Shields says in *Reality Hunger*, provides me with tools, enables me to view the world under some new light. I

want art that encourages the viewer or reader to misinterpret it, because it attempts to invoke as many interpretations as possible, serves only to stimulate and stimulate and stimulate again the many ways in which our world can be understood. I want art which is so intimate, so subjective, that it provides me with the unfiltered experience of being human, confusion and all. I want poeticity, poetics of narrative and image and sound because I want works which require me, as a viewer, to let go—to have a willingness to allow some aspect of life which isn't normally rendered on the page to appear. I want work which mirrors the moment right before conscious has draped itself over the known structures of causal narrative and grammar. Not works which are incoherent, but rather works which capture the moment right before a more distilled, known understanding of coherence takes shape.

IV. Readerly Experience

"A work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world."

-Susan Sontag, On Style

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When you consider literary work not as a material object but as an interpretative movement in the reader's conscious, the idea of a "linear narrative" begins to break down.

It is very rare for a novel to be read in one sitting and assembled in the reader's mind the way in which it appears on the page. The reader does not move through the text in a strictly linear fashion, starting at word 1 and continuing on to word 80,256. Instead, their experience is fragmented, nonlinear— even with the most traditional of texts.

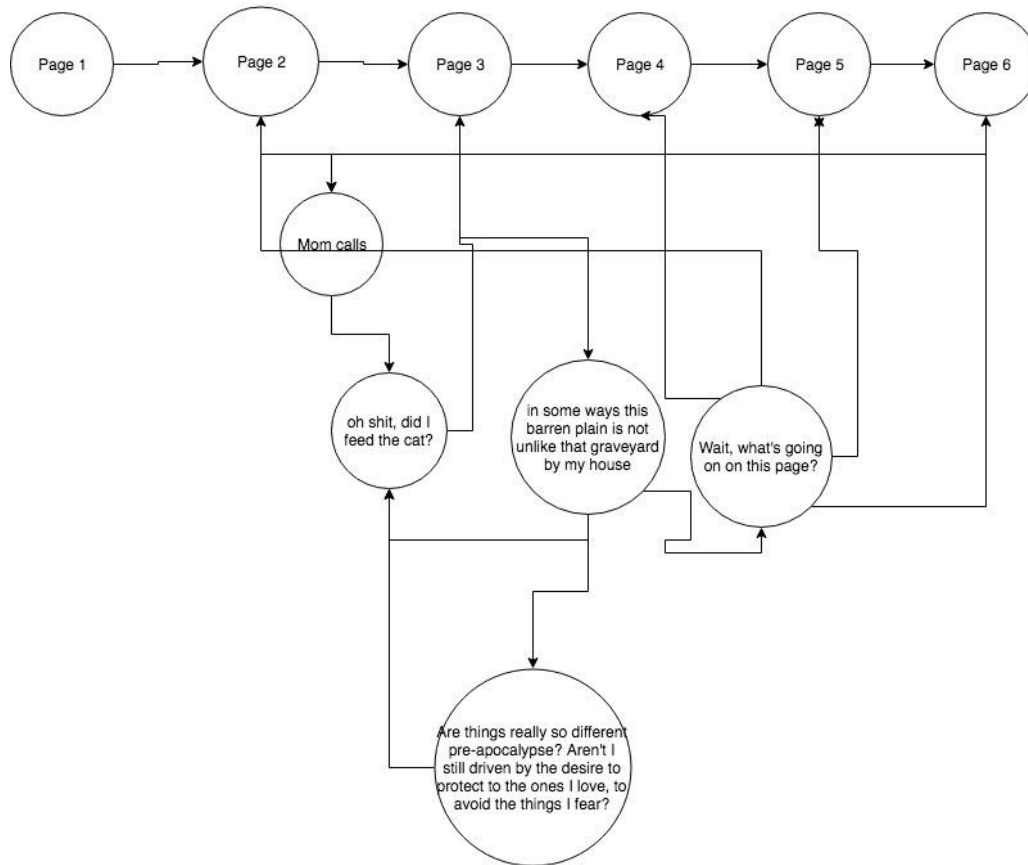
This is because people take breaks as they read — they stop on page 3, feed the cat, go for a walk, bounce a tennis ball off the wall, think about calling their mother, don't call their mother, check Facebook, feed the cat again, watch a bit of television, mow the lawn, clean the gutters, and then, *maybe*, hours later, flip the book open again.

Too often, I think, is this intermittent time taken for granted. It makes sense we don't discuss it: how can writers be expected to address the experience of *not* reading? Yet these intervening moments might be where literary arts shines brightest. Because what other art form, besides the literary, requires the reader to formulate a world within their own mind rather than experiencing the work sensorially? The mind-enveloping nature of reading is capable of illuminating everyday life with the lingering conscious of the readerly experience — often so much so that the time between reading sessions seems just as much a part of reading as actually looking at the text.

For instance, if you are intimately engaging with that barren landscape that sets the scene of McCarthy's *The Road* every day for half an hour, you may find that that walk home in the dark from your evening GTAship suddenly feels barren as well, and that cat you sit down on the pavement and pet under the streetlight feels a bit like that child in the book, and you wonder whether it, too, has lost someone — all of which could be dismissed as tangent, but which, perhaps most importantly, changes you and your understanding of the book, so that when you return to page 66 the next morning, though the text itself remains a linear sequence of letters and numbers and whitespace, your understanding of it has changed.

Consider the following diagram:

Possible readerly experience of McCarthy's
The Road



While there is an obvious linear path available — that from page 1, through to page 6 — the tangents and detours seem to be far more reminiscent of the typical readerly experience. Of course we could dismiss these tangents as “outside” the work, but I think to do so does not fully capture what it means to experience a text.

V. Interpretation and Resistance of Existing Forms

“To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to setup a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ It is to turn the world into this world.”

-Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

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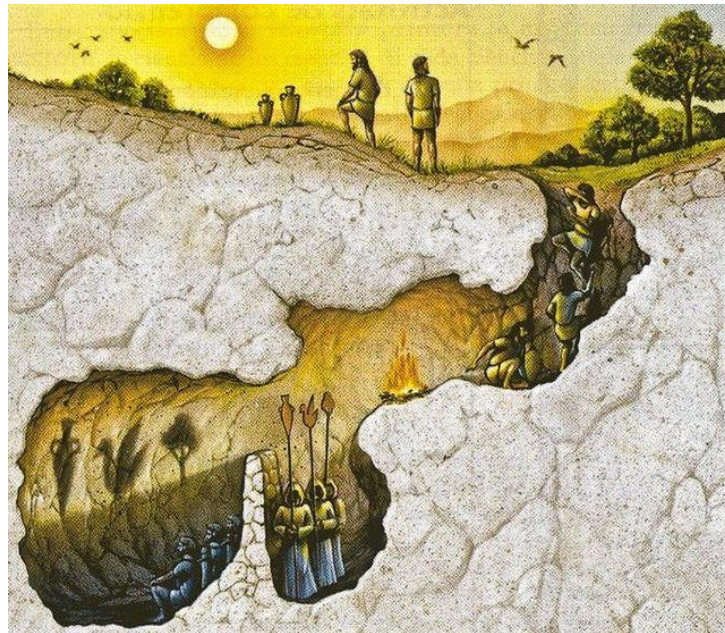


Illustration of Plato's Cave

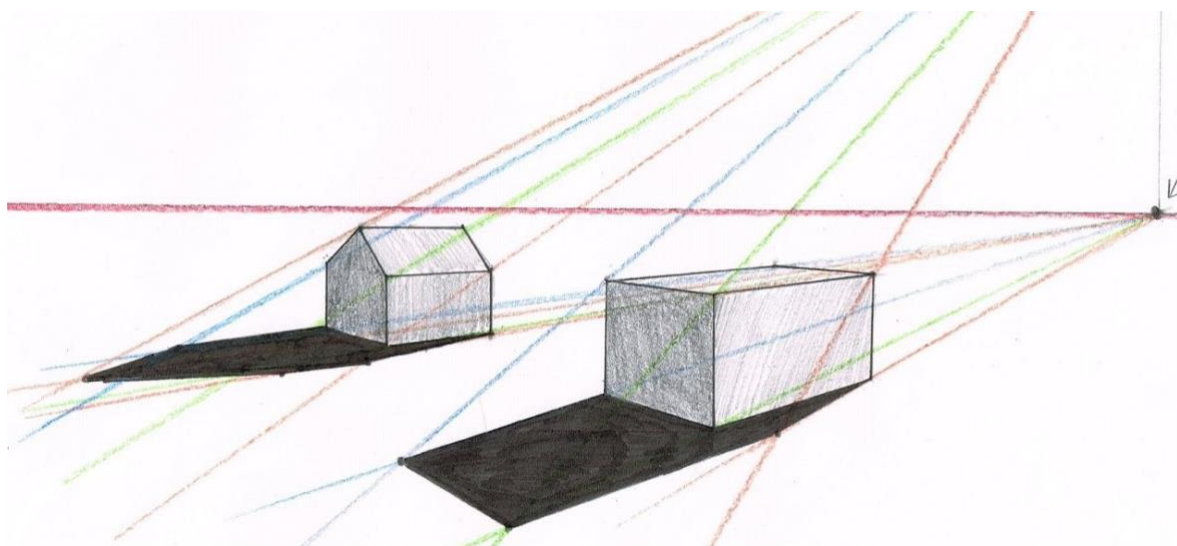
Plato's Allegory of the Cave posits the following:

Suppose three men spend their entire lives chained to the wall of some cave. They are never allowed outside, never allowed to see sunlight, and must remain with their eyes fixed to a cave wall. On the wall their captors play shadow puppet theater. They show birds and trees and vases and rivers—all the delights of the world above. The men spend 20 years of their lives watching these representations play out before them on the cave wall, until one day, their captors set them free. The men slowly climb their way out to the outside world, and look upon real birds, real trees, real vases and rivers. The questions Plato posits is: what would these men make of the outside world? Would they think that it was real? Would they understand, as we do, that the shadows were representations of life above?

At the heart of Plato's Allegory of the Cave is the concept of *mimesis*. What does it mean, Plato often wondered, for one thing to “represent” another thing? And — as he wondered about art — was art a means of “representing” the natural world?

There is no greater error, I think, than to believe this: that our goal as writers is to represent the outside world as photorealistically as possible for our readers.

What value could this possibly have? Readers are already perfectly capable of experiencing the world around them. They don't need to be provided with a copy of what they already know. Not to mention that attempting to be as detailed and realistic as possible ultimately makes writing inferior to film, which is so much more capable of capturing a "real" moment objectively and representing it again to the reader.



Drawing of shadow projections.

I am tired of art which attempts to do this. I do not want the shadow of the thing, but the thing itself. I want art which resists the desire to reduce, not art devoted to providing us with a 2D projection of that which is 3D. I want to see art which is living, breathing and complex; I want art which defies our capacity to make simple projections, to conceptualize and categorize. I want art for which the shadow is constantly shifting, for which the impression of the art is as amorphous and vaporous as memory. I want art which forces us to question, which refuses to be held captive to simple interpretations.

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"Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable."

– Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

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We enjoy reducing art, art which reduces itself, and art which reduces our world, because it makes understanding easy. For those of us who live in fear and insecurity that our systems of belief may be invalid, this kind of art feels essential, because it helps quell the doubt in our hearts. But art which is meant to confirm is also art which lies. It reinforces the idea that our world is simple, and allows us to believe that the world itself is composed of simple abstractions we constructed to make understanding more manageable. That indeed, the shadows playing on the wall of Plato's Cave are all there really is. There is no world above beyond our conception.

For some of us, to accept anything else is simply too scary. It's a return to when we were children and hearing a noise wrap against our window were terrified some monster was trying to get in. These artworks of poetic logic take all the progress we thought we made in life, all the security we thought we'd built up, and throw it away.

But it is precisely this lack of security, this childlike wonder and naivety and confusion that I think can make art so profound. If we are willing to occupy the headspace of a child and approach the world with the same degree of wonder and boundless love, then we will move through it with great awe, even when it seems inscrutable.

We live in a world in which doubt is cast around every corner, and as a result the pressure on artists to explain themselves and their practice only mounts. But I think the cost of compromising to this pressure is too high. An artist has a responsibility to stick to their own vision, their own logic for associating image, sound, and language, even if it is not readily understood.

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"... because dear God, what would happen if you actually spoke in your own voice, and sounded like no one else. Looked like no one else, could not be categorized, could not be sold."

—Carole Maso, Interview with Dalkey

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I'm most moved by formal experimentation when it seems the story could not possibly have been told in any other way. Too often, I think, we have a tendency to separate form from content — to assert that the novel in its "true" ideal form is some abstract notion of story that only by happenstance has been executed in text. The best fiction, I think — experimental or otherwise — is that which seems like it could not possibly have been expressed in any other way. Works for which the mode of expression is so married to the story itself that each sentence has a sudden and immediate feeling of perfection, and the reader feels not like they are reading a book, but as if they are watching a life unfold in front of them.

The occasions when formal experimentation seem most powerful, then, are those in which the reader doesn't consciously think about the nature of formal experimentation, but that the novel has unfolded in its truest form in a way which happens to deviate from literary norms, just as life does. So much of life cannot be captured in the tight, perfectly linear form of the traditional three-act narrative arc.

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"The true artistic image is always based on the organic unity of idea and form. Indeed, any imbalance between form and concept will preclude the creation of an artistic image, for the work will remain outside the realm of art."

—Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*

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What we need is art which is incapable of being reduced. Artists who don't fear being misunderstood, and unmarketable. Who try actively to make art which represents their living vision, something which we, as readers or viewers, can hold up to the light and watch the beautiful refractions of. What we need are artists who will stand up for *visions* over *beliefs*, who will render art precisely as they see fit without feeling the need to mount some defense for their craft.

As Sontag notes in *Against Interpretation*, the language of fiction writing engages almost exclusively with the content of a work. Constructs like character, plot, and setting — deal almost exclusively with the events which “happen” on the page and the interior world of the story.

This seems an absurdity to me because fiction is, by definition, made up. The “rules” of a work of fiction are entirely up to the reader and to the writer. The presence of these constructs in the so called “craft” language of fiction writing implies that the goal of fiction is to represent some world and people and places which do not exist. Yet this fails to acknowledge that fiction is above all a reading *experience* — that at the end of the day it is in only this experience and the vague imprint in memory that we can grant to the reader. All the novel's constructs can be omitted and destroyed. What we can hope to give the reader is just an *effect*, some impression they can mull.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that by resisting interpretation I mean rejecting emotive art. Abstract expression of any form is not necessarily about being intellectually evocative over emotionally evocative. In the beginning of *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky discusses receiving letter after letter from fans who saw his most inscrutable film, *Mirror*, saying: “how did you know my childhood so completely?”

Rothko wrote of how fans of his work used to break down crying in front of his paintings.



COMPOSITION, 1959 By Mark Rothko

Using a more abstract or dreamlike palette for artistic creation does not have to come at the price of being emotionally moving. It's about creating a landscape via which the reader can imprint and interpret an understanding of their *own* life, rather than looking at the shallow representation of somebody else's. It's about allowing the reader to look into a work and let its logic guide them to some new perception of the world.

The movements of narrative need not be draped like a canopy over the scaffolding of causality, but can instead be contracted and expanded at will until they form a kind of poetics. This has its own sense, casts and effect that life itself casts on us, even though it is not the form in which narrative is generally delivered. The extent to which these narratives are immersive or moving depends on the reader's willingness to accept this sequence of sensations that the non-linear work delivers and meditate on them without immediately mapping them to some predetermined shape.

VI. Ambiguity of Language

“Ambiguity has always inhabited musical art, indeed all the arts, because it is one of art's most potent functions. The more ambiguous, the more expressive — up to a certain point.”

-Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question*

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One reasonable definition of writing may be the supplying of information. Writing – or at least prose—by nature comes as a series of assertions. It is the product of these assertions which compose the world of the piece.

But if we are to accept this interpretation of literary art, we must also accept that literary art is inherently minimalist. Writing provides us with very little information about the interior world it describes in comparison to, say, film.

As a result, writing is largely a negative space art form. It's an art form where the most important decisions are not so much what is written but what is omitted. It's the omission of these key statements that generates the most interest.

As such, writing remains the most mysterious and ambiguous art form we have, one which calls attention to the massive gaps in our own knowledge, making us aware of the void of not knowing, from which all art is birthed—that brief blank page before the story begins. Then, by shifting our attention within this void of unknowing, writing can show us that a story exists already for the taking.

The literary arts are in a unique position to enhance the mysteries of life, because language, by its very nature, requires inference on the part of the reader. The reader must make up for themselves whatever details the author has omitted, must decide if the jacket described is green or black or burgundy and if the panels of the protagonist's house are made of wood or stone. The reader fills in these blanks themselves, and in doing so enriches the story with the touch of their own stories and own experiences. This yields the looking glass effect described in an earlier section of this manifesto — what is written on the page guides the reader to a particular way of viewing the world, but it is the reader themselves that must create the world inside their heads. The experience of a text is left almost entirely up to the reader, who must willingly let the author guide them to some new way of synthesizing their memories in order to construct the world of the story.

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“Man is a symbol-making and using animal. Language itself is a symbolic form of communication.”

-Ralph Ellison, *The Symbolism Survey*, *Paris Review*

RALPH ELLISON

730 Riverside Drive
New York 31, N.Y.
April 26, 1964

Mr. Bruce McAllister
577 Rosecrans Street
San Diego, California 92106

Dear Mr. McAllister:

Please find below answers to the questions listed on your questionnaire concerning Symbolism:

1. Symbolism arises out of action and functions best in fiction when it does so. Once a writer is conscious of the implicit symbolism which arise in the course of a narrative, he may take advantage of them and manipulate them consciously as a further resource of his art. Symbols which are imposed upon fiction from the outside tend to leave the reader dissatisfied by making him aware that something extraneous has been added.
2. Yes, I think symbolism arises initially out of the sub-conscious. ~~and the function of the symbol is to~~
~~express the unconscious~~
3. Yes, readers often infer that there is symbolism in my work, which I do not intend. My reaction is sometimes annoyance. It is sometimes humorous. It is sometimes even pleasant, indicating that the reader's mind has collaborated in a creative way with what I have written.
4. Man is a symbol-making and -using animal. Language itself is a symbolic form of communication. The great writers all used symbols as a means of controlling the form of their fiction. Some placed it there sub-consciously, discovered it and then developed it. Others started out consciously aware and in some instances shaped the fiction to the symbols.

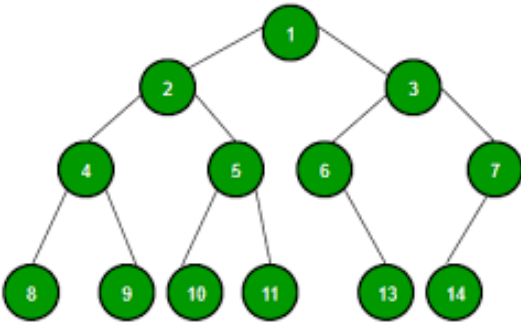
I hope this is of some assistance to your work.

Sincerely yours,



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Language is symbolic. Words are stand-ins. To use a word as simple as "tree" can invoke for one person something radically different than it does for another.



Binary tree and real tree.

Words take on experiential, emotive meaning not by virtue of their dictionary definitions (which is just a reference to yet more ambiguous symbol) but rather by the memories and patterns of associations which the reader has with that word. The reader “makes sense” of the word “tree,” by thinking of the words that surround the word “tree” and thinking of other situations they have seen before in which this same pattern of associated words have appeared. If the surrounding words are “discrete,” “depth first search,” and “alpha-beta pruning,” the reader may have some memory of these words being associated with computer science, and realize that the tree is a binary tree. If the surrounding words are “fauna,” “sunset,” and “mountain,” the reader may have some fond memory of these words being used during a picnic when they were a child that helps them understand that a natural tree is being discussed.

Is there any medium that plays so elusively with memory as language? To see a word you’ve long forgotten brought before you again and remember an entire sensation, an entire mode of the world. Language, with its ambiguous mappings, is able to look deep within us and uncover things we’d long forgotten.

This is what allows literary arts to transcend the page and intimate something larger, rather than serving as a blueprint for some realist object that will never be constructed. The literary arts are at their best not when they are simply “compiled” into some conceptual understanding, but rather when they form something beautiful onto themselves, like the elusive, shifting forms of life.

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“... I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words... What the words stood for, symbolized, or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the sound of them...”

– Dylan Thomas, Poetic Manifesto

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Does a writer really love language? Or are they its greatest abuser, willing to contort it to their will, to bend the very convention and structure which separates random sequences of words and characters from ordered meaning? The Oxford English Dictionary defines language as “the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of words in a structured and conventional way.” Perhaps the only real lovers of language are legislators, who try and eradicate even the slightest hint of ambiguity, leaving only the raw communicative act which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, makes language.

Or is it this distortion which is the entire point? Is the beauty of language not that it is capable of communicating abstract ideas, but that it is an enigma, an unbreakable code like life itself?

By distorting language we expose the fluidity of thought and the numerous ways in which language can connect different thoughts together. This is a necessity for the reader, because in literary arts they have no external sensory experience to hold on to. A literary work, in contrast, need not have any form at all. Characters can be shifted to any typeface or font size and a piece will still be considered the same. A piece can have no physical presence at all and only exist as an audio book, and it will still be considered the same. Even if a piece is translated into another language, each word switched out for completely different one — this piece will still be considered the same.

So my question is: what is the piece?

Words are by nature living, breathing objects, because they are constantly changing depending on who reads them. As time goes on and our culture shifts, words take on completely different meanings than they did in the years prior, and as a result, a literary work can become something new. This is paramount, because it means that the literary arts, when done correctly, is constantly vibrating, thriving, and being updated. It means that we can revisit a good work of literary art and because our associations with the words will have shifted, find some new meaning within it.

In other words—the literary arts are very much alive.

VII. Liveness

“A work of fiction should be a genuine experience, I think, and not (as it most often is) a record of an experience. I feel sorry, actually, for the other kind of writer. There’s something dead in them, something (as Virginia Woolf said of Sackville West’s work) that fails to vibrate.”

– Carole Maso, Interview with Dalkey

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All writing is a performative act. There is a precise moment at which pen is set to paper, or finger is set to keyboard. The moment at which we choose particular words and commas and periods as we are writing has never come before and will never come again. If some other moment were to take its place, a different character or word may have been set on the page.

Too often, writers trick themselves into thinking they can escape the grips of time. We can always revise, we say. We’ll go back and fix it later.

But the moment in conscious during which we write will never return again, and whatever moved us to begin writing will not be there in the same way when we come back. It is in this way that writing is a performative act—like any two performances are the same, no two writing sessions are the same.

Often, the precarious nature of the draft is met with fear. The craft of revision invites us to privilege hindsight over the mindset of the writer in the thick of it because the latter is considered too dangerous, too wild, lacking any “objective” understanding of what they are doing. While it may be the case that hindsight makes a more effective editor, without the initial burst of hope and joy which conceived the piece, does it make for better writing?

Great writing recognizes that each moment we are writing may never pass again. It is as strange and ephemeral as life itself, realizes that it cannot and will not be interpreted in precisely the way it desires. It does not attempt to create an impenetrable, robust artifact of the performative act of writing that will withstand the weight of obtuse interpretation because it has the courage to dismiss interpretation all together. Great writing does not give the rendered, but the process of rendering.

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“AVA is a work in progress and will always be a work in progress. It is a book in a perpetual state of becoming. It cannot be stabilized or fixed. It can never be finished. It’s a book that could be written forever, added to or subtracted from[...].”

– Carole Maso, Break Every Rule

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The writing that excites me the most is writing which feels ephemeral and dangerous, that feels alive, in which we can sense the precarious ground on which the writer is standing, in which we can feel the very moment in which the writing is being conceived play out before us on the page, in which the reader experiences a total collapse between the moment of conception of the writing and the writing itself—like the writer is speaking directly into the reader’s inner ear.

I want writing which is raggedy and full of mistakes. I want writing that is circuitous and wandering and bold. I want writing which brings me as close as possible to that incredibly precise moment in which the writing was initially conceived. Because it is this writing which invite me into the world of the author and make me feel the suddenness and immediacy of the literary experience. It is this writing which will enable me to understand the process of writing itself, which is to say the process of coming to understand something.

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“Many creators choose to reveal the process of creation to users so that users can understand how an artifact is made and appreciate the effort that goes into creating an artifact. In general, people put more value on an artifact that is created live. [For instance, people are willing to pay more for live music performances, even though listeners are less and less willing to pay for recorded music]. In the case of cooking, in some restaurants, chefs cook in front of their customers in real time. This is true of teppan-yaki restaurants (sometimes referred to as “Japanese steakhouses” in the US), which serve a style of Japanese cuisine cooked on an iron hot plate called a teppan. The visible process of creation adds value to the artifact because users can understand how the artifact is created.”

– Sang Won Lee, Liveness in Interactive Systems

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As performers, musicians have the intuition that the fundamental grain with which they are working is ephemeral. Notes do not last forever. As soon as your finger is lifted from the key, the note leaves the air. Words, we delude ourselves into thinking, do last forever. But ultimately even they unravel — they change in meaning, as the perception of readers shifts.

All art is ephemeral, but only some art makes its declaration of ephemerality clear. It is this art which I think is most important. Street art, for instance, has no pretense of enduring power. Its created and displayed with the full awareness that it will be destroyed, likely within the span of a few weeks, when some building owner decides to paint over it.



A Banksy in England.

I want an art which embraces the ephemerality of all things and makes it its centerpiece. I don't think any work of art will every feel truly alive unless it recognizes the inevitability of its own death, is aware that it is going to be appropriated and distorted and interpreted and ignored.

I want tape hiss, shuffling steps, the little laugh Bob Dylan makes in the recording of Ballad of a Thin Man that now, is just as much a part of the song as the melody.

The last producer to work with Elliot Smith said: Elliot taught me that the best recording wasn't one free of mistakes, but one which was irreplicable.

I want art that is so relentlessly and passionately absorbed in the moment of its own creation that it assumes no future will follow. I want art which is irreplicable, which embraces the moment of its own creation, which is relentless, immediate, dangerous, and unhinged.

VIII. The Artistic Process

“An essential portion of an artist’s labor is not creation so much as invocation. Part of the work cannot be made, it must be received; and we cannot have this gift, except, perhaps, by supplication, by courting, by creating within ourselves that ‘begging bowl’ to which the gift is drawn.”

– Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*

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I think of writing like this: I am on one of my late night walks, and passing by a field, hear a faint, muffled voice. I follow the voice until I come upon a divot sized hole in the grass. I kneel and press my ear to the hole. It’s pretty hard to tell what it’s saying but after a bit of time I realize that it’s a short story, and that if I’d like, it’s mine. So then I am reaching for a pen or a pencil or something but I also can’t move my ear from the ground or I’ll miss what’s being said so I have to tangle myself in the right position until I can finally write some of it down but by this time I begin to wonder if there really is any voice at all, if instead this might be some trembling residual of the universe, some whoosh of the wind or licking of atoms which I am merely perceiving as a voice—and then I wonder if it would really matter if this were the case, if I would owe just as much a debt to my perception of a voice in the void as I would to a real one.

I believe that it is the artist’s responsibility to receive their gift or talent, and to render it in their art. I think a true artist is someone for whom the abundance of ideas, images, sounds — whatever they may be — must be set down, because to do anything less proves painful. I believe artists have a kind of contract with their talent, where so long as they continue to do the best job they can with the ideas their talent gifts, their talent will continue to gift ideas.

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“Suddenly, in the early evening, the poem “The Dance” started, and finished itself in a very short time—say thirty minutes, maybe in the greater part of an hour, it was all done. I felt, I knew, I had hit it. I walked around, and I wept; and I knelt down—I always do after I’ve written what I know is a good piece. But at the same time I had, as God is my witness, the actual sense of a Presence—as if Yeats himself were in that room. The experience was in a way terrifying, ”

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Gift*

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How does an artist receive gifts from their well of talent? By staying open to the moment. Because if there’s one thing talent is, it’s fickle. By staying attuned to the world around us, by always listening for something new, we create the demand for talent — even if it may secretly just be us reading into the wind.

In order to listen, we must stop willing our writing in some particular way, but rather treat it as we would a child or some other living thing, providing guidance and support as needed. Otherwise, how can we expect our art to take on a life of its own, if we don't treat it as a life in the first place?

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“[Creating] means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless—abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world.”

– Allen Ginsberg, The Gift

IX. Finale

Someday I'll live a life by the sea. I'll peek out into the fading starlight and see my reflection across the landscape. I'll chase it out to the beach where the moss sinks in little suds beneath my feet and the rocks come up to my ankles, dip my feet into the shallow water and breathe in. And then I will whisper something to myself quietly, think only of the way my body breaks in the water and how this breakage reflects the breakage of the landscape I try so vainly to form on the precipice of my mind each morning, that like the meniscus of blue disinfectant in the jar under my bed I hold to eye level in hopes of finding some known shape; and when I have given up, place so carefully next to me, so heartbreakingly careful, as I realize I cannot hold the world in this way, that the world can only hold me—the rip of red sun which gleams across my body in the morning light and illuminates this jagged coastline, this love for all things which compels me to lift each mussel and mollusk from the tide pools and admire their shapes, will leave me just as soon—because I cannot carry them, cannot possess them—they can only glimmer in my mind as briefly as the specks which drift across my eyes in the instance before sleep, and disappear.

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I would have the artist obliterate themselves.

I would have the artist live in the void.

I would have the artist speak to me only obliquely, as if they were calling from the other end of a very long tunnel.

I would have the artist beat on my door and drag me out of bed. I would have the artist take me to a party lit entirely with candles and introduce me to no one. I would have the artist part the crowd of the party with a wave of their hand and draw me down the middle, deeper and deeper, until we are surrounded by shadows.

I would have the artist leave behind a trail of breadcrumbs, a glowing constellation on the ground, which I can only follow and follow and follow onto some new plane, some new world which I have always known because it whispers to me before I go to sleep, when the purple streaks on the bottom of my eyes come into being, when the variegated darkness sweeps over me and I am lost, finally lost—

I would have the artist speak with great poise as they burn a barn down with a Molotov Cocktail.

I would have the artist be unreasonable, brash, elusive, sensitive, loving, cold, afraid, angry, distraught, fraught, enraptured, resistant, insistent — as if sleep has been refused, as if your mind has strung you up and pulled back your eyelids and screamed, *here, now, you wanted breath—*

I would have the artist hide behind a tree and quiver.

I would have the artist dig a 100 mile wide hole, dive deep within it, and never return.

I would have the artist lurch from the driver's seat, spiral through the windshield, rip the seatbelt off with their teeth —

I would have the artist speak to me only in riddles, to forget the answer to the question they were asking, to forget the question itself, to forget forgetting until the forgetfulness embodies their being more than thought itself, until they are lost in forgetting more than they are lost in memory, until the thought of memory becomes the shadow of memory and the artist —

I would have the artist walk as though they are on coals, as if a great calm has calm over them, as if they can only feel the wind around them and not the air in front of them, as if they cannot feel the heart beating in their chest, but they can hear it, as if some distant sound, as if some echo which they try to move closer and closer to but can't quite grasp, even more elusive than —

I would have the artist stand up on the stage, protrude their tongue from their mouth and circle the air round and round in a loop-do-loop, as if encircling some taste that has now left them, which they are still trying to identify but the attempt to identify becomes —

I would have the artist slip in and out of dream.

I would have the artist wander, wander, wander.

I would have the artist never return home.