

Perhaps a text about evaporation shouldn't even be written in the first place. For the fact of writing such a text is not without its fair share of potential irony. I say *potential* because it could happen that this text departs from the mind just as quickly as it entered it, disbanding like so much porous linguistic matter into the ether of memory. And in doing so, faithfully reflect its subject matter. Yet the risk of irony is not necessarily a given, because in order for something to actually evaporate, it must pass from one state to another. It must exist in a palpable form in the first place. The way language could be said to exist, on the page. And just because it does, because it has been 'set in stone' doesn't mean that a stone can't turn to dust, even in an instant.

Ideally then, this text would evaporate. Would self erase. Dissolve before the mind's sweetest, unremembering eye (but then again, some might argue, myself among them, that the ideal of every text is to self-erase, if only formally).

[Prospero: *Our revels now are ended. These our actors,*]

One imagines a text that begins from the assertion of an apparently incontrovertible truth, which is then gradually and methodically disproved. Or a text like an epiphany. A blast of clarity that illuminates the mind. Then floods away into obscurity. Or a fiction that ultimately annuls itself (e.g. Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Borgesian end of which coincides with the revelation of the foretold destruction of Macondo, where the book takes place, or Borges' *The Theme of the Traitor and The Hero*, a story whose Poe-style revelation is immediately sublimated back into the fraudulent texture of history, or even better, his little known *Book of Sand*, which concerns a book in which no single page may ever be found twice). Or maybe a film. For example *The Usual Suspects* ('The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.') - a masterpiece of self-erasure, which undoes itself with stunning immediacy.

## NOTES ON A TEXT ABOUT EVAPORATION

Perhaps a text about evaporation shouldn't even be written in the first place. For the fact of writing such a text is not without its fair share of potential irony. I say *potential* because it could happen that this text departs from the mind just as quickly as it entered it, disbanding like so much porous linguistic matter into the ether of memory. And in doing so, faithfully reflect its subject matter. Yet the risk of irony is not necessarily a given, because in order for something to actually evaporate, it must pass from one state to another. It must exist in a palpable form in the first place. The way language could be said to exist, on the page. And just because it does, because it has been 'set in stone' doesn't mean that a stone can't turn to dust, even in an instant.

Ideally then, this text would evaporate. Would self erase. Dissolve before the mind's sweetest, unremembering eye (but then again, some might argue, myself among them, that the ideal of every text is to self-erase, if only formally).

[Prospero: *Our revels now are ended. These our actors,*]

One imagines a text that begins from the assertion of an apparently incontrovertible truth, which is then gradually and methodically disproved. Or a text like an epiphany. A blast of clarity that illuminates the mind. Then floods away into obscurity. Or a fiction that ultimately annuls itself (e.g. Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Borgesian end of which coincides with the revelation of the foretold destruction of Macondo, where the book takes place, or Borges' *The Theme of the Traitor and The Hero*, a story whose Poe-style revelation is immediately sublimated back into the fraudulent texture of history, or even better, his little known *Book of Sand*, which concerns a book in which no single page may ever be found twice). Or maybe a film. For example *The Usual Suspects* ('The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.') - a masterpiece of self-erasure, which undoes itself with stunning immediacy.

That scene at the very end where the bullying detective glances around him and realizes that everything he has just heard was masterfully conjured up from visual aides found in his office, and the movie we have just seen ribbons out backwards, from end to beginning, and retroactively evanesces.

[*As I foretold you, were all spirits and Are melted into air, into thin air:*]

W.G. Sebald on Robert Walser: “Things are always quickly dissolving and being replaced by the next in Walser. His scenes only last for the blink of an eyelid, and even the human figures in his work enjoy only the briefest of lives. Hundreds of them inhabit the *Bleistiftgebiet* alone – dancers and singers, tragedians and comedians, barmaids and private tutors, principals and procurers, Nubians and Muscovites, hired hands and millionaires, Aunt Roka and Moka and a whole host of other walk-on parts. As they make their entrance they have a marvelous presence, but as soon as one tries to look at them more closely they have already vanished. It always seems to me as if, like actors in the earliest films, they are surrounded by a trembling, shimmering aura which makes their contours unrecognizable. They flit through Walser’s fragmentary stories and embryonic novels as people in dreams flit through our heads at night, never stopping to register, departing the moment they have arrived, never to be seen again.”<sup>1</sup>

[*And, like the baseless fabric of this vision, The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,*]

Or what about Keats’, whose name was incidentally ‘writ in water’ Negative Capability? The notorious passage in question: ‘Several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when man

is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’<sup>2</sup> Juxtapose this with Douglas Huebler’s oft quoted, ‘The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add anymore.’

Object as certainty. Thrown up into the air like a ball. That never comes back down.

[*The solemn temples, the great globe itself,*]

Somewhere there is a Zen Koan that perfectly, if obliquely encapsulates all of this, rendering it more tenuous than it already is. But maybe the koan about evaporation is too shrewd to exist, too shrewd to be formalized into a koan. Or maybe it evaporated before it could be set to paper. So the koan about evaporation never becomes a koan.

[*Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve*]

The fugitive accrual of time and motion into a specious photographic instant (of evaporation). Carleton Watkins’ photographs of waterfalls toward the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Or Muybridge doing the same, as described by Hollis Frampton: ‘...long exposures of which produce images of a strange, ghostly substance that is in fact the tesseract of water: what is to be seen is not water itself, but the virtual volume it occupies during the whole time-interval of the exposure.’<sup>3</sup>

But the works are many. Worth dwelling upon, or at least, *around* would be Gabriel Orozco’s *Breath on Piano* (1993). Everything the work excludes from itself: the person leaning forward and the lung full of breath invisibly issuing forth from the mouth and clouding the surface of the piano just before the picture is taken. The word ‘afflatus’ comes to

mind, 'miraculous communication of supernatural knowledge,' 1660s, from Latin *afflatus* 'a breath upon, blast,' from the present participle stem of *afflare*, 'to blow upon', from *ad-* 'to' + *flare* 'to blow.' The click of the camera shutter. And the thin, opaque trace of humanity on the black, shiny surface seeming to withdraw into itself, like a tiny, fleeting geography, and evaporating.

[*And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, Leave not a rack behind.*] <sup>4</sup>

- 
- 1 W.G. Sebald, *Le Promeneur Solitaire*, trans. Jo Catling. Published as preface to Robert Walser, *The Tanners*, New Directions, New York, 2009, p. 15-16.
  - 2 John Keats, *Selected Letters*, Letter to George and Tom Keats, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 41-42.
  - 3 Hollis Frampton, *Eadweard Muybridge: Fragments of a Tesseract*, p. 76. [hollisframpton.org.uk/links.htm](http://hollisframpton.org.uk/links.htm)
  - 4 All of the text in brackets taken from *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare. Act IV, Scene I.