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Next

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‘The situation is hopeless. We must take the next step.’

Pablo Casals¹

Some time in his mid-nineties, after a brush with death, my father told my sister why he wanted to keep living: ‘I want to see what happens next.’ This undimmed enthusiasm for life hinted at an intertwining of the life force, curiosity, the narrative drive and, in my historian father’s case, the historical imagination.

Trained in literary studies, I had been attuned to the ontological dimensions of fictional narratives more than historical ones. The capacity of fiction to provide a model, map, analogy or metaphor for our own existential dramas is a well-established theme in literary studies, especially in psychoanalytical and reader-response criticism and its queer, feminist and otherwise critical variants.² Embedded in narrative structures are assumptions about agency, sexuality and desire. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it, ‘Subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative.’³

As temporal mediums, narratives must wrangle time. For distinguished journalist Bob Baker: “Narrative” means any technique that produces the visceral desire in a reader to want to know what happened next.⁴

In fiction, ‘next’ must eventually cease, and endings carry great affective and metaphysical weight. They are the structural lynchpins that make shape from flow, succouring ‘the pattern-seeking tendencies of the human mind’⁵ by allowing us to grasp a stream of experience as a meaningful whole. So they are the least life-like, the most artificial and arbitrary part of a narrative. As Henry James noted, real life doesn’t stop, but narratives must:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.⁶

How will today's stories end? Placards at schoolchildren's climate strikes speak of fearful, stalled or unimaginable futures: 'I want to have grandchildren,' says one. Young Australians are far more worried than elderly ones.⁷ For the young, privilege—having choices—comes with a strange and awful new burden, as a generation of young women face 'an impossible question in an impossible time': whether to have children in the face of this great unknown.⁸ But some remain bewildered. One angry radio talk show caller saw this as 'just another example of women taking things too far these days.'

Persistence is an attitude as well as a fact. It often means being a nuisance. But how to speak of persistence when 'next' is so fraught and the ending unknown?

Many spiritual traditions teach that immersion in the present is a pathway to peace. Suspend 'next' and focus on now. Westerners commonly think of Buddhist *kōans*—enigmas like the sound of one hand clapping—as a non-narrative modality. Though this is an oversimplification,⁹ it is true that for Westerners, immersion in the present involves resisting dominant cultural tendencies toward future-directedness, action and solutions-based thinking. I find it conceptually and politically easier to let go of the fantasy of control than of the desire for solutions.¹⁰

I suspect that the new arts of living require us to develop new articulations between the personal and the political. Sometimes we may have to pull up the drawbridge between them in order to create moments of stillness. This may seem at odds with the tactics and answers traditional to leftist politics—finding solace and power in the collective. But persistence demands that the collective wellsprings of hope and determination be renewed.

A powerful metaphor for this came in a Facebook post widely but incorrectly attributed to Michael Moore.¹¹ It describes what musicians do when the music requires them to hold a note longer than is possible: they take a 'mindfully stagger[ed]' breath and allow others to carry the music forward. Then they rejoin while others breathe: 'Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song.'

As a choral singer, this metaphor speaks to me in bodily terms, connecting me back to moments of collective exhilaration in which myriad lines form a shapely whole. Others will find their joyful immersion elsewhere—on the dance floor, in the ocean, in a stand-up audience, at a protest rally.

This year, the cultural studies classroom has granted me experiences of both respite and hope. Teaching a first-year class for the first time in a while, alongside a class of deeply engaged Honours students, I found myself thinking that these young students were a different species. This was not a fearful thought, but an exhilarating one. More than ever before, this year I have felt the honour and privilege of teaching students who are precisely the kind of people cultural studies always hoped it could help produce. These representatives of the next generation already know many of our core principles not as insights or learnings but as an immersive medium in which they have been formed. My role was simply to seed a few new ideas, to help them meet each other, and to encourage them, even while they were encouraging me.

These experiences have given me comfort when the narrative form that seems most apt for our times is an apocalyptic one. We are at that point in the film where it all seems impossible, and we run around in panic. We need a *deus ex machina*. But in the absence of a plausible superhero, and not wanting to project that fantasy onto someone who doesn't deserve its

burden—a 16-year-old Swedish girl, for example—I will have to put my faith in an abstract principle: the persistence of next.

Endnotes

1. As recounted by broadcaster Philip Adams. Phillip Adams, 'Why We Need a Revolution Now', Address to the Communities in Control conference, 7 June 2004. <<https://www.ourcommunity.com.au/files/Adams.pdf>>
2. For a summary of some of the veins of psychoanalytical literary criticism that have been influential in cultural studies, especially feminist and queer cultural studies, see Patrick Fuery, *Theories of Desire*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1995. For an argument that we respond to literary texts in ways that mirror our fantasies and thus 're-create' our identity through a text, see Norman N. Holland, 'Unity Identity Text Self', *PMLA* vol. 90, no. 5, 1976, pp. 813-22.
3. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Desire in Narrative', in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Macmillan, London, 1984, p. 106.
4. Qtd. in Chip Scanlan, 'What is Narrative, Anyway?' *Poynter*, 29 September 2003. <<https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2003/what-is-narrative-anyway/>>
5. Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1981, p. 7.
6. Henry James, qtd. in Torgovnick, p. 5.
7. As reflected in a 2019 survey of over 50 000 people conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. This survey found that 64 per cent of people over 75 are optimistic about Australia's future, as compared to 40 per cent of young people. See Annabel Crabb, 'Australia Talks National Survey reveals what Australians are most worried about', ABC News, 8 October 2019 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-08/annabel-crabb-australia-talks-what-australians-worry-about/11579644>>
8. This quotation comes from the founders of a support network for women called 'Conceivable Future.' In Laura Paddison, 'The Devastating Reason some Women are Deciding not to have Children', *Huffington Post*, 1 July 2019. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/children-climate-change-reproduction-conceivable-future-birthstrike_n_5d134d63e4b0aa375f564d27?ri18n=true>
9. This understanding ignores their role as elements of practice. Barry Stephenson notes that Western scholars of kōans typically fall into two camps: those who see treat them as a 'psychological device' aimed at provoking particular types of experiences and those who treat them as literary-historical texts ripe for hermeneutics. He notes the importance of also understanding them as ritual performances that occur in a 'liturgical context'. Barry Stephenson, 'The Kōan as Ritual Performance', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2005, pp. 475-6.
10. Cf. Novelist Nitya Prakash's line: 'Freedom came when I let go of the constant need to know what happens next.' <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5095115.Nitya_Prakash>
11. It was in fact written by Aimee Van Ausdall. See 'It Wasn't Michael Moore! We Interviewed the Author of the "Remember Music and Take a Breath" Viral Post', *Declaro*, 27 October 2018. <<https://declaro.com/content/e1rM8Boa>>