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Anne Winters

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In the United States there is a rather curious folk-saying which has always intrigued me: Don't think of a white horse. To read or hear it is to experience the polarity and perversity of human thought. And perhaps the instruction *to think of something* affects the mind in somewhat the same manner. Certainly the first sight of the word *errance* (with which I was perfectly unfamiliar) affected me oddly. Perhaps I regarded with a certain hesitancy a word so thoroughly enclosed in its quotation-marks and breathing an odor of the library. But in the course of our colloquium of Monday, several ideas were expressed concerning the relation of *l'errance* to national life and to the lives of individual writers, which moved me personally very much. What I would like to do today is to respond to these remarks and to explain how the idea of *errance* both attracts and disturbs me in my life first as an American, then more particularly as a woman, and finally as a writer.

It was Miodrag Pavlovic, I think, who brought up on Monday the extraordinary amount of geographical *errance*, « *déplacement intérieur*, » among the people of the United States. This frequently discussed aspect of our national life is most often associated with such aspects of our national sociological patterns as degree of interaction among social classes, upward and financial mobility, etc. Mr. Pavlovic,

however, associated this geographic errance rather with a perpetual national restlessness, and viewed it as possibly being a continuation of the original waves of migration to the New World. I would like to point out, however, in conjunction with our frontiersman's tendency to « move on » geographically, that Americans have always exhibited a parallel psychic striving: an individual desire to attain, in one's own life, to a personal version of the *Paradis Terrestre*. Americans hold strongly to the possibility of absolute personal happiness, though often at the cost of considerable psychic strain. It is not for nothing that America's Constitution actually proposes « pursuit » as a national privilege, thus almost making l'errance part of the country's heritage. The founding fathers thought best to guarantee to the unquiet peoples of America not repose, but the eternal and often evanescent search for a personal idea: "the pursuit of happiness."

From migrations and international wandering, however, our conversations of Monday later passed to internal and individual errance. M. Claude Vigée, speaking of the quest for personal integrity, used the metaphor of two embattled cooks, the biological or corporeal self and the intellectual self, who join in a struggle for predominance and eventually for personal unity. As we discussed the relation of this to writers, I began to be aware how much more difficult this struggle is for woman writers, for whom a purely biological vocation is so highly approved in our society. A woman who desires an intellectual career must, in fact, swim against strong currents. In the decades since World War Two, the educational levels reached by women has been declining steadily, as has the number of women entering professional fields. The median wage in the U.S. for white women, moreover, continues lower than that of black and minority men. In short, the external encouragement for staying in the Home is great, but the woman who begins a writing career may find herself contending with equally powerful internal checks. She has been raised to regard herself as largely an object in the eyes of others — almost, sometimes, an art object. Now she herself must become the creator rather than the artifact,

the subject and not the object. Her eyes, mascara'd or not, are primarily not to be looked *at*, but *through* and even *with*. As an instance of the difficulties she will encounter, consider one of the most enriching forms of l'errance for a writer: the midnight stroll through his own city. He can wander in self-forgetfulness a while, absorbing the neon colors of his city, the fabric of its nightlife, its unique atmosphere — *he* may, but *she* may not. For her, the capacity for attention and creative self-loss will always be hedged by the constraints attendant on her life as object.

It is when the woman writer decides to undertake a family as well as a career, however, that the roar of the battling cooks may become truly uproarious. If she is imaginative as well as ambitious, she may exhaust herself in the effort to become a superwoman — perfect in the roles of poet, cook, mother, wife, etc. One often has glimpses, in the work of such American female poets as Caroline Kizer, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, of the extreme tension and even bitterness that can result when a young writer asks this much of herself. In the later poems of Sylvia Plath, for example, the perfection which she attempted to embody in her life as wife and mother is seen as mechanical, even aggressive: "I learn, good circus / Dog that I am, how / To move, serve, steer food . . . My master's fetcher." Moreover, as the image of the "well-rounded" woman grows more tyrannous, the difficulty in reconciling the opposed aspects of the personality becomes greater. The woman may feel she has lost part of herself, or even come to dread her own creative energy, as well as the Home which is its enemy. To quote, again, from Sylvia Plath:

I have a self to recover, a queen . . .
Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her —
The mausoleum, the wax house.

In the last moments of our Monday colloquium, M. Abraham Yehoshua brought up the final question I would like to discuss here — the relation of conscious will and resolution to l'errance. He declared that for him the writer, especially at the point of launching a work, has a fixed itinerary: "L'écrivain sait très bien ce qu'il fait." This may well be true of the inception of a work, but I would doubt its total validity in what concerns the immediate *act* of writing — the choosing of the sentences, words and images of the work of art. I feel sure that there are crucial moments of choice when the writer must abandon the map, the fixed itinerary, even the wheel itself, and trust himself to the winds.

Think of the specific situation. The writer is seated at his desk, face to face with that whitest of whales, a sheet of blank paper. I think that it is Valéry who said of this moment: "I seek a word, says the poet, which should be: feminine, of two syllables, containing p or f, ending in a mute, and synonym of breaking, separation; and not learned or uncommon. Six conditions at least." It is possible, as we know, that this word exists only in the writer's mind — one thinks of the schoolboy in Barrie who failed the exam by trying for hours to think of a word halfway between *mickle* and *muckle*. But it is possible, too, that it exists — more than likely, indeed, that there are several words swimming just outside the periphery of consciousness which might be suitable. But in the necessary navigation through these possibilities, resolution and the conscious will are of about as much use as they are when we are trying to fall asleep — and it is clear why this is so.

In all important writing, particularly poetry, the important words and images have a tendency to have multiple resonances. It often happens, moreover, that the effect of a good line depends not only on the presence of a certain word, but on the absence of another, or of several others. Finally it may also happen that the key word in the line contains itself not only multiple resonances and meanings, but meanings that seem to contradict each other. We know that this is true of a small body of significant words in all languages.

These polarities of opposite meanings themselves eventually spring, as we know from Jung, from the unconscious, which tolerates the proximity (though in an indistinct or formless state) of ideas or images which in consciousness would be unreconcilable, even intolerable. But at the moment, or perhaps one should say at the mental level, at which unconscious ideas begin to rise towards the surface of consciousness and therefore to take on more definite forms, there is the possibility of great mental tension and of censorship of some part of the thought. Yet it is just here, between the idea or image in its formless state, on the one hand, and the idea made precise in words on the other, that the creative writer does his work. It is an imaginative Sea of Storms, where one must be strong to bring the catch in.

But it is here, it seems to me, that the writer must be strong, not by remembering his itinerary and seizing the word that fits, not by exercising energetic will, but by relaxing and yielding himself to the strange unfoldings which are taking place in his mind. To alter the metaphor, he must « *errer* » by resting still, but with his sails spread wide for the winds that come from those powerful but perplexing quarters of the mind. For a resolute will will find the denotation, but only the floating, waiting reverie, that charterless mental errance, will find the word or image that has all the scintillation of its opposites and incongruities, and yet all the hidden coherence, too, of his own deepest thought.

I would like to close this brief discussion of the importance of l'errance to writing, by quoting a few stanzas of a poem by Wordsworth, the relevance of which, I hope, will be clear. It was written in 1798. A friend, it seems, reproached the poet for wasting his time in silent reverie on an old grey stone. Wordsworth, however, responded that he felt sure there are powers which impress the mind, yet which need not be sought, but rather awaited; and that immobility thus might be the only way to be moved and carried by powers that are greater than ourselves.

"Why, William, on that old grey stone
Thus for the length of half a day
Why, William, sit you thus alone
And dream your time away?"

... "I deem that there are powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

Think you, mid all this mighty sum
Of things forever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must be forever seeking?

Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone
And dream my time away."

ANN WINTERS