Writing as Painting: Creative Scholarly Writing From Hélène Cixous' Post-structuralism and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Body Phenomenology

Virpi Yliraudanjoki

Researcher and Writing Coach, Helsinki, Finland

This paper deals with scholarly writing and a testing and experimental review of its related conventions. The author applies to her review of the subject a theoretical stimulus that returns to the starting point of Hélène Cixous' (2008) post-structuralism and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology of the body. The author becomes open to meditation on the topic as a bodily soothsayer redeeming permission for creative scholarly writing using the intuitively associative method and style of writing which she has developed. The author suggests that a theoretical starting point located in post-structuralism and the phenomenology of the body offers the possibility to equate creative scholarly writing with painting. The aim of this paper is to start from post-structuralism and the phenomenology of the body and to conceive a new method of understanding and adapting creative scholarly writing, while the author allows herself to perceive and write in her intuitively associative style.

Keywords: creative scholarly writing, intuitive, associative, painting, Hélène Cixous, Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

This paper deals with scholarly writing and an experimental review of its related conventions. The author of this paper is interested in piecing together a form of scholarly writing that utilizes creativity, and in the possibilities of its application. The author discusses the topic from the perspective of bodily soothsaying, as a permission to write which also provides opportunities for freedom in the method and style of scholarly writing.

The author pays attention in her review especially to ideas presented by the French literature and language researcher Hélène Cixous (2008) and the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012), which the author applies when she considers the condition of knowing and scholarly writing. The author's assessment, theoretically localized in post-structuralism and the phenomenology of the body, provides permission to write, to paint, which enfolds the ideas of these theorists in a way that broadens scholarly writing and primes creativity. Writing opens up as based on a reading of the text of the bodily soothsayer, as an intuitively associative style of writing, through which the text is produced.

The author describes her pursuit as writing Towards¹. To the bodily soothsayer, the intuitively associative style of writing involves hearing and recording the intuitive associations evoked by a reading of the text. By intuition the author refers to the seemingly random or even mysterious intuition of the bodily soothsayer (Hakala, 2002, p. 13) in relation to the context under consideration. Association means building different, sometimes almost absurd seeming associations between contexts (p. 163). This paper opens the style and text of intuitively associative writing, which unfolds as the bodily soothsayer feels free to perceive and to write of her perception.

The Interdisciplinary Home of the Nonconforming Scholarly Writer

The preface to a work that appeared about ten years ago (Latvala, Peltonen, & Saresma, 2004a, p. 13), states that the conventions of research writing are changing as well as methods of research. Change in research writing refers to the gradual erosion of conventions rather than a real revolution. The change is characterized as a transition from impersonal, superficial reporting towards more personal—even more artistic ways to write. Changes in research methods and research writing have meant “a proliferation of styles, but by no means the stepping aside or disappearance of old conventions” (Latvala et al., 2004a, p. 13). In particular, those researchers and scholarly writers whose interests are located in more cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary research trends, have found a home in the proliferation of research methods and research writing styles. Those with the desire and courage to experiment with new, more personal styles of research and writing have settled with anticipation into the interdisciplinary home of scholarly writing. The author’s outline of an intuitively associative writing style has also found its place in the interdisciplinary home of scholarly writing.

It should be noted that the interdisciplinary writing style—as a personal and creative approach to scholarly writing—can also be positioned as an “enticing gig” in relation to “serious scholarly writing” (Latvala et al., 2004b, pp. 17-22). On the other hand, drawing a sharp dividing line between scholarly writing and literature for example can also seem quite unconvincing. In the world of science, the activities of such “dissident researchers” and “dissident authors” can be characterized as attempts to test the conventions of research work and related research writing. It has meant for example the unlocking of an ethically sustainable research process—by-paths and all. The unlocking of the research process, has, in turn, led researchers to consider, besides the localization and production of information, the researcher, the bodily soothsayer, who knows and writes “with his own voice” (Eskola, 2008).

For the (inter)disciplinary author, reading creates the basis that makes writing possible (Cixous, 2008a, p. 68). In the development of the intuitively associative writing style, reading involves the echoing revitalization of the read text in your own body and writing, and a striving for authentic feeling and belonging in the writing that you offer to your readers. In this paper, the author outlines her promise to produce scholarly writing by offering to her physically present bodily soothsayer the brush with which, intuitively associating, the author may render visible

¹ The author has also described writing Towards in her earlier texts. In her article *Vaikea rakkaus kirjoittaa* (*Difficult love writes*) (Yliraudanjoki, 2009, pp. 216-224), the author describes writing Towards from the standpoint of post-structuralism and the phenomenology of the body, providing an initial outline, without specific detail, of the writing method applied in the present article. In her dissertation: “What Nongraded Upper Secondary School? Feminist School Ethnography in Nongraded Upper Secondary School” (Yliraudanjoki, 2010, p. 146), the author unlocks writing Towards while applying an ethnographic methodology. In writing Towards she wishes to emphasize, rather than cognitive unshakeability—truth perceived as objective—the understanding of knowledge as always connected to power, as relative and therefore striving towards truthfulness. This also means that the researcher has the opportunity to enrol in the text, with good reason, “in his own voice” (Eskola, 2008).

the fragile and powerful lines based upon her reading of the text. At the same time, primed by Cixous' (2008b) ideas, the author considers writing as the pursuit of a radiant secret. How does one surrender oneself to be carried away by the radiant, but always unknown secret? What might writing mean, when it is defined as an attempt to pursue that secret that radiates its own ink?

In the following, the author begins to unlock the (her) permission for the bodily soothsayer to write, which means using the intuitively associative style (method) of writing from a reading of the text—writing Towards truthfulness. Art inhabits that truthfulness, towards which one is permitted to paint by writing. The author's analysis proceeds from the bodily condition of knowing and from knowledge towards writing, painting words. At the end of the author's paper, she frees the ink of the bodily soothsayer and the meanings of the radiant secret: What do they mean and promise to the intuitively associative writer?

Bodily Soothsaying

For a long time, I hid my corporality, which could not find its ink or the path of its soothsayer. I knew my strengths, but I also felt the weakness of the other's account. I left the present condition of knowing to await the future. I would yet find the brush, with which I would make the fragile and powerful lines visible. I would become visible in the compulsion that lived in me and drove ahead of all else, even when invisible. I would still work at my world painting, I would get my delicate and fragile manifesto ready for viewing by masters (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 419-420). I would strive drowsily towards the unconscious, and the hateful too, and I would wake up to life as a new teacher. The ink of my body—ears, skin, eyes (Cixous, 2008a, p. 68).

I would generate the painter's innocent knowledge, breathing in its fragile and powerful lines, in spite of doubts—undeniably, with braided eye and hand. I am discovering my real, living body, which simply radiates cognitive innocence. The viability of my body is the "self", the inwardness that every breath verifies. I feel the knowledge that burns my insides, which once perceived sparks in a sensing state of knowing. The perceived incandescence bursts into a fire that burns my body in its echo. I look and burn in the searing knowledge of world embracing truthfulness (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 419-427).

Finally I begin to understand the secrets that live in the skin and the flesh of the original language. All languages are translations, and writing itself is translation. I translate what I feel towards the language, which I will subvert in my translation. The encounter of language and emotions releases my own language, which I will translate as I write. I realize more and more how writing and painting are metaphorically similar to each other. I too will take a brush in my hand, with which I will make visible the fragile and powerful lines. I find ink and translate my language, of which the drawn meanings are infinite (Cixous, 2008b, pp. 145-146).

I find that I have fallen into an endless dance of meaning and I do not want to find my way out. I begin to devour myself from inwardness, which calls me to explore. I learn to listen to the live body, which echoes the truthfulness of its knowledge. My gaze wanders in images, in which I live. I look at pictures like me, from the endless meanings of which I will build my future homes. I understand my living body, which echoes in the truthfulness of its knowledge a fanciful weave of reality. I paint, and the visible world signs itself into my words. The world of the painter is a visible world—perfect also when partial. I will let my eyes watch and wander. My mind starts to write of a similar, almost insane world, the echo of which my body repeats. I open my ears, I feel the visible cipher on my skin and I take the brush in my hand (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 424-429).

Knowledge

My ear is reminded of trust in the knowing that lives in my body. I surrender, because the ear has the ability to find what is essential amid all the noise. My skin feels the lived, the present and the future. It tells the story in the lap of my subconscious, as long as I have the patience to listen (Cixous, 2008a, p. 68). The certainty of my internal gaze arises in the eye, which sees visions and future paintings. My third eye has grown the ability of my fleshly eyes to see, but I know that the practice must continue. I should look continually, because the painter learns to see, seeing, only by looking. My eye sees the world. It sees what is missing from the world, which would make it a painting. My eye can also see what is missing from the painting that would let it be itself. The colour palette tells the colour that the painting awaits, which I am to make visible. The secret of visibility still populates my unborn painting (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 426-428).

I am going to paint with my body's ink the intoxication of my freedom, the madness of which compels within your eyes. I draw into visibility the partial and complete world of the painter. The fragile and powerful strokes of my brush create what you too can own from a distance. I paint because I have seen. The world has carved a cipher of the visible into me (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 428-429). My wonderful painting is as endless as a book or a poem. The endlessness of painting or writing touches me and I want to join the merciful race towards the secret. You assure me that I want to reach that secret, because I do not know what it is. However, I feel the radiant secret that appeals to me in an inexplicable and powerful way. I want to reach the radiant secret, which is always fleeing. I remember that writing is done in pursuit of a secret. Writing, like painting, is the pursuit of a secret (Cixous, 2008b, p. 146).

There is rarely a clear moment where my flaw finds meaningfulness and begins to carry me. Now it opens up, old and fresh. All is clear—I am trying to catch a freely fluttering hem. I know what scholarly writing means, although my choking words remain. My throat constricts when I look at the painting on the wall. Every delicate brush stroke in the painting dazzles my unseeing eyes. I try to remember the words of my blind friend, when he tells me that he does not know what marsh tea looks like. How to sing of marsh tea and marshes, which live in the dark. He teaches me to take the brush in my hand, with which I will draw the fragile and powerful lines. These are the wise words of my blind friend:

Dip your brush in the ink of your bold body—start to translate your language. Open your ears, let the skin tell the story and the inner eye see the certain images and future paintings. Keep practicing. Let your voice be heard and soon you will know that the knowledge that lives in the dark is beautiful and ugly. You were born to be a painter.

Seize the Brush—Write

Now I trust the strokes that well up from my body and on which my knowledge is constantly drawn. How fitting it is that scholarly thinking returns to its predecessor. That “there is” something—in our lives, for our bodies. For the body, perhaps already for mine, that is quietly involved in everything. I set out to paint the marsh tea, although I knew no more about my colours. My body was present when I looked without eyes. My body was quietly involved in every brush stroke, in the translation of my language. My brushstrokes tell of the right to look and paint without judgement. I learned that my blind birth as a painter made me slimy, slipping from the worthless dictates of knowledge and action (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 418-419).

I learned to see with my friend as a guide. The person with unseeing eyes, encouraged me to take the brush in

my hand and make the fragile and powerful lines visible. My language began to be translated with the ink of my bold body. I opened myself to future paintings. In the darkness, I found the living knowledge, which is beautiful and ugly. Every brushstroke of the painting that I wrote would remain to echo its emerging meanings. Towards, truthfulness (Yliraudanjoki, 2009, p 217), in which the lines remaining between the translated languages would write themselves as new paintings. The paintings would produce fresh lines indefinitely. The lines would radiate the secret (Cixous, 2008b, p. 146) that the never-ending quest continually steals away. I am as unending as the text I have painted, the living meanings of which echo within me.

I own my flaw and I begin to know between my lines. I find the ignorant tears of the masters, with which my colours mix. I dip my brush and sink into the emerging differences that remain to touch me. I remain to appear in features, in which the fragile and powerful lines live as endless paintings. I dare to dive and I get under the surface. Music weaves its meanings into me, in which I begin to thrive (Cixous, 2008b, p. 147). I find the rhythm of my body's birth and dive over and over again. I dare, and my visions become breath-taking. My lines are drawn on life and death, the beginning and the end, on which, painting, I write. My painting, found in the darkness, radiates the beautiful and the ugly. I read my painting over and over and I begin to translate again. The beautiful and the ugly, in which you too can dive.

Your Ink

Diving taught me about life and living without guilt. Slowly I learned to hear, and I found my resurgent self. I painted my beautiful and ugly strokes, knowing better than the masters. I found my life force, and I opened the road of my words. I heard whispering in my ear, how I should only venture—with my ink. I should dive into the ink of the subconscious, in which new teachers feel entirely at home. My new teacher told me that I was ready to start because I knew. I was born in the cradle of my questions, in which I would translate the infinite answers. I would write with my ink, of which the style is the endlessness of meanings. My knowledge is generated in my subconscious, which tirelessly offers me its wonderful gifts (Cixous, 2008a, pp. 64-71).

My new teacher tells me about dreams, in which the perfect cipher of my skin is written. My eye looks at the painter's almost crazy but perfect world, the playful echo of which repeats effortlessly in my body. Mutually incompatibles are drawn into the game, where the painter's gaze lives in secret and complete intersections. I dive into the shadows, reflections and colours, where I learn to distinguish the things that fall on me. I become more sensitive to my body's fevers and unvoiced tunes, which the ghosts by my side have upheld. I ask and I am answered, since all-knowing vision arises in me (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 428-431).

In the ink of my body lies everything I need to produce my paintings. My lines have turned to the rhythm of my breath. I begin to recognize those passing by my side, and I find from my hiding place a painting made long ago. It is painted with ink that makes my red blood turn. I breathe white ink, but again and again I draw the fragile and powerful lines to make them visible. The story does not end, because the painting restarts with every brush stroke, in which I happen. I am on a journey, the breath of which turns the fevered and unvoiced tunes to new births. The endless births end with new beginnings—with anxiety and uncertainty, in the continuity of which I begin to swing. "Will you come back already?" my swing asks. "Does your birth begin to happen over and over again?" it continues. I smile and take up the brush through which my errors continue to revolve (Cixous, 2008a, pp. 75-76).

Radiant Secret

My new teacher writes her subconscious with ugly and beautiful ink that wraps uncontrolled around every word. The obnoxious ink grows into the ears, skin, and eyes even of the masters (Cixous, 2008a, p. 68). The ink of my body turns into my pictures and my words (p. 76). My knowledge is hidden in the depths of ink. Writing from the depths means freedom and the imprisonment of freedom—painting the image while capturing and creating meanings. Writing takes place toward the elusive, radiant secret (Cixous, 2008b, pp. 145-147), in which the interpreted meanings remain to continually rotate. I write that which touches me. I paint my pictures and for a moment I am on the verge of my radiant secret.

I take the brush in my hand and I begin to translate the painter's enchantment in which I live. I ignorantly present all the necessary questions to the seeing that arises in me. What in me thinks and sees? I paint the expressions, gestures, and contours that the painter's enchantment donates. I notice how seeing creates me over and over again (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 431-432) in the middle of my endless journey. I write and paint toward the radiant secret, which is ever escaping. Writing and painting take place in pursuit of the fleeing secret, where meanings continue to revolve (Cixous, 2008b, p. 146). Writing, as painting, is the quest for my secret.

The Endless Painting—Conclusions

I will continue the echoing revitalization of the read text in my body and in writing. I take up the brush again and again, which I dip in the ink of my body. Intuitively and associatively, I draw my fragile and powerful lines. My bodily soothsaying allows me to perceive the secrets that remain anonymous. I have redeemed my permission to write, to paint, while the masters know better. I write towards the truthfulness, to which art carries me. I remain to paint the words that my bodily soothsayer carries in her enduring ink.

I write and paint while allowing myself to know. I dive into the ugly and the beautiful, the slime in which I am born. I write with the ink of my bold body remaining to thirst for a different kind of criticism that would find its place in the interdisciplinary home of scholarly writing. My interdisciplinary home of scholarly writing lies on the border of feeling and intellect, art and life (Behar, 1996, pp. 174-175), where another kind of criticism can allow itself calmly to know and to write of its knowing. My intuitively associative writing style expects ugly and beautiful meanings, where you too can bravely dive. You will notice how your radiant secret will open old and fresh—as something that you always knew.

References

- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Cixous, H. (2008a). My text is written in white and black, in "milk and night": Interview with Christiane Makward (B. Cameron & A. Liddle, Trans.). In S. Sellers (Ed.), *White ink: Interviews on sex, text and politics* (pp. 58-78). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cixous, H. (2008b). You race towards that secret, which escapes: Interview with Martin McQuillan. In S. Sellers (Ed.), *White ink: Interviews on sex, text and politics* (pp. 145-147). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eskola, A. (2008). The researcher's voice—Or your own voice? (Tutkijan ääni—Vai oma ääni?). In K. Lempiäinen, O. Löytty, & M. Kinnunen (Eds.), *The researcher's book (Tutkijan kirja)* (pp. 211-218). Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Hakala, J. T. (2002). *The creative process in science (Luova prosessi tieteesä)*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Latvala, J., Peltonen, E., & Saresma, T. (2004a). Foreword (Esipuhe). In J. Latvala, E. Peltonen, & T. Saresma (Eds.), *The researcher as narrator: Feelings, research process and writing (Tutkija kertojana. Tunteet, tutkimusprosessi ja kirjoittaminen)* (pp. 13-16). Nykykulttuurin Tutkimuskeskuksen Julkaisuja, 79.

- Latvala, J., Peltonen, E., & Saresma, T. (2004b). Researchers tell, conventions fracture? (Tutkijat kertovat, konventiot murtuvat?). In J. Latvala, E. Peltonen, & T. Saresma (Eds.), *The researcher as narrator: Feelings, research process and writing* (Tutkija kertojana. Tunteet, tutkimusprosessi ja kirjoittaminen) (pp. 17-55). Nykykulttuurin Tutkimuskeskuksen Julkaisuja, 79.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). The eye and the spirit (Silmä ja henki). In M. Luoto & T. Roinila (Eds. & Trans.), *Philosophical writings* (*Filosofisia kirjoituksia*) (pp. 415-477). Helsinki: Nemo.
- Yliraudanjoki, V. (2009). Difficult love writes (Vaikea rakkaus kirjoittaa). In S. I. Sotasaari (Ed.), *Think—if you dare: Festschrift on the 60th birthday of philosopher Toivo Salonen* (Ajattele—jos uskallat: *Filosofi Toivo Salosen 60-vuotisjuhlakirja*) (pp. 216-224). Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press.
- Yliraudanjoki, V. (2010). *What nongraded upper secondary school? Feminist school ethnography in nongraded upper secondary school* (Mikä luokaton lukio? *Feministinen kouluetnografia luokattomuuden järjestyksissä*). Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press.