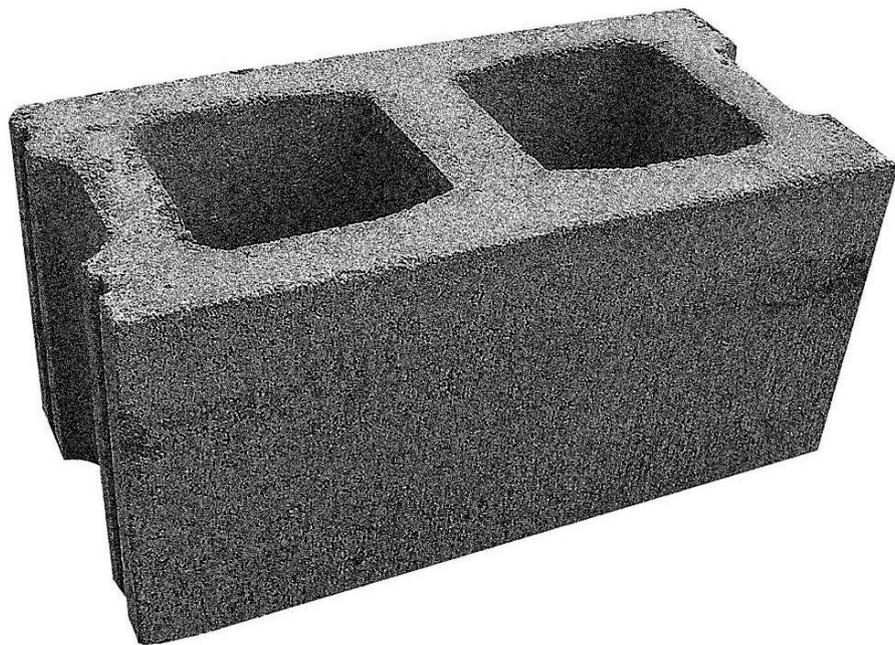


# ***THE BLOCK***

*Samuel Brzeski*



*The day  
offers so much, holds  
so little or is it  
simply you who  
asking too much take  
too little? It is  
merely morning  
so always marvelously  
gratuitous and undemanding,  
freighted with messages  
and meaning.*

James Schuyler

Rebecca Perry tells me *I like it when I am writing a poem and I know that I am feeling something*. This leads me to write more in order to feel more. As if the poetic processing of thought can lead to a validity or an explanation of some exceedingly subjectively experienced emotion. An emotion that, when communicated poetically, and with the possibility of being shared by potential readers, can be more fully explored.

But is it the act of writing itself—pen to paper, fingers to keyboard—that is the progenitor of a more feeling self? Or is it in the sharing of such experiences that allows for those feelings? Certainly, for me, within the act of writing, it is in the hastily scrawled handwritten notes and in the barrages of stream-of-consciousness journaling that the rawness of emotion is most acutely experienced. This experience is then distilled onto the screen into a more shareable and less cringe-inducing form, as raw notes are processed through my keyboard into a configuration more fit for wider consumption. We could call this a 'distillation of emotion' — a laboratory in which items and thoughts are categorised into the real feelings worth sharing and those that are only fit for the bin. Perhaps it is in the spending of time processing these written emotional communications that the 'more feeling' enters in. Through duration and by proximity, the feelings can be comprehensively understood.

Nevertheless, on many nights I still sit staring at the small rectangular shape of the wooden desk in front of me, wondering why I cannot write. If I cannot write, and writing is feeling, then in these moments am I less openly able to feel? Certainly when suffering from particularly pronounced episodes of the tediously titled condition of writer's block (referred to henceforth as *the block*), I can feel, in a way, quite disconnected with myself.

I compare this feeling with a feeling that I experienced for much of my youth and young adulthood. That feeling would arise in conditions of emotional intensity in the form of an incredibly heavy and suffocating wall. The foundations of the wall of this block would lead me to feel somehow willingly/unwillingly separated, in a purgatorial state of dissociation, emotionally

unavailable both to others and to myself. As if I lay on one side of the wall, crushed under a pile of rocks, and my faculties of communication lay on the other. This condition of willing/unwilling feeling/unfeeling is one in which I learnt to deploy, just as many young men learn to deploy, in instances where I really should have been connecting with some degree of honesty to myself and those around me. As if the avoidance of confrontation with one's own emotional state would lead to something quite desirable in the projection of an idea of masculine isolationism — a sort of locking myself in my own cell. The slow violence of this unsustainable situation would then arouse a feeling of unpleasant and inescapable paralysis.

This prison of intense feeling/unfeeling is something that I mostly managed to wiggle my way out of over the course of my subsequent emotional maturity (with occasional revisitations), but the resonance of that particular set of feelings returns when I am faced with the prospect of *the block*. The all-too-familiar sense of a paralysis induces waves of unpleasant *déjà vu*: the discomfort of a dissociation with the essence of the feeling self. Writing is perhaps only able to be accessed when the channels of communication with the self are opened, and feeling is allowed to propagate, to germinate.

There are instances when I would prefer a wilful application of *the block*, such as those moments in which my anxiety becomes quite unmanageable and begins to significantly impact upon my relationship with my feeling self. If I could incite *the block* to move away from obstructing my creative faculties and instead shift it along to cover or to resist my debilitating mental deficiencies, then my everyday experience of reality could be a lot more favourable. I would also be able write more, and therefore able to feel more (I guess here I mean the type of feeling in the positively holistic and comprehensively experienced sense outlined above—the feeling that is the rush of an emotion fully comprehended, rather than the feeling of an anxiety that is completely untamed). However, *the block* wants what it wants, and that is the holding hostage of my ability to move thought into semiotic action, or even to initiate a productive process of thought in the first place.

As a writer I have developed some strategies to deal with *the block* if and when it comes. Working with constellations of existing references and found texts from a variety of sources in the way that I sometimes do, means that the road to *the block* can sometimes be diverted. Not deactivated, as *the block* still exists there in its most unique and infuriating form, but witnessed from afar—the copyist safe in the comfort of his use of the words of others. I can compose entire textual compositions in this conceptualised combinatory manner, or weave these fragments in and out of texts written by my own hand in the style of 'the reference'. Some would describe this process in terms of thieving and poaching, questioning its originality and relevance. I would then like to question, within the age of The Digital, what an actually relevant originality might consist of, and talk instead of appropriation, the voice of the multitude and rhizomatic relation. But *the block* remains avoided for now, and that is all that really matters.

The use of, or copying out of, texts written by others is a form of close reading, of re-reading. Acts of close reading can be evoked to find roads out of *the block*. By witnessing the fact that another has overcome *the block*, and by evaluating the way in which they have done so by taking a slow journey across the landscape of the text, *the block* of the reader's own can also reach cessation.

Walter Benjamin evoked the metaphor of text-as-landscape by comparing two different acts of reading as two different journeys over a road. He places the reader in the position of an airplane passenger flying over the road, seeing the terrain of the text in its entirety. The copyist traverses the road on foot, learning the true power of the text. The copyist sees the distances, the structures, the clearings, the prospects. Benjamin says that *Only the copied text commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that*

*are opened by the text, the road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of day-dreaming, whereas the copier submits to its command.* In Benjamin's mind, the full concentration of the copyist is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the text and of the self, whereas the mere reader is subject to the whim of his own distractions.

Thus, acts of re-reading invariably lead to a closer understanding of the text at hand, or perhaps even a different reading entirely, as Barthes reminds us that *from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages*. However, this re-reading is not always experienced in the most positive way. Recently, I came across a copy of John Banville's novel *The Sea* in a bookshop in Bergen. I held a memory of the experience of reading that book quite close, recalling the rhythmic and meditative reflections that the book instilled in me as a man in my early twenties. Desiring to recreate that atmosphere in a year that was, to all extents, running away from me, I immediately purchased the book and took it home to read. My disappointment in the rereading of the book was palpable. What I had remembered as a poetic musing on the experience of romantic memory now read as a flat and one-sided account of weepy rejection from an authorial voice with reasonably significant misogynistic tendencies. No thanks. This raises some significant questions concerning those books that I do hold close to my heart and the condition of self distraction that I may have been in when first reading them. I wonder which of them should be reread and perhaps, indeed, blocked.

Franz Kafka said that *A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us*. He told me how I should only read the kinds of books that wound and stab me, that wake me up like a blow to the head. This explosive condition seems far too violent to me. I also want my books to sooth and bathe me, to put me at rest in a state of universal empathy. Books can also be a fire to melt the frozen sea inside of us, to allow that frozen sea to flow towards the melting seas of others. I also want the type of books that can just float and sail past me, that do not need a consistent vigilance, that pass the time, that pass me by. Full attention cannot always be activated. It is simply unsustainable for every book that is read to shatter the earth (or ice) below my feet — I would never know where to stand. If every book that I read was as explosive as Kafka required, then I would live in a constant state of exhaustion, permanently in awe of the linguistic complexity and existential revelation that each new reading would abound. This would, I am quite certain, lead to an exacerbated condition of *the block*, one brought about by the feeling of being continually overwhelmed, leaving me quite unable to reach the required condition of mediated distance and inner peace required for the act of writing.

Much rather, I seek a form of reading and writing that sit hand in hand. As the old idiom goes 'each writer is only the sum of the books they have read'. The acts are unable to be seen in isolation, continually informing one another. Daniela Cascella agrees with me in this, as she elaborates, *I cannot read and not write. I cannot write and not read. The two are conjoined and necessary to each other. Next to each book, a notebook. On the pages of each book, adhesive paper marks, lines, arrows, asterisks. On the screen, an open document to transfer, transcribe and remark more words*. These open pages, these lines, these asterisks, notebooks and markers are important tools that can be used in order to overcome *the block* before it even starts. If one is in a constant state of writing, in the ontological sense, then *the block* can never get you.

There is, however, one positive experience of *the block* — a sort of a 'silver lining' moment. That is, the release felt after the passing of *the block*. Most of the time, this feeling of release is not experienced immediately, because the sufferer from *the block* is too busy worrying about whether they can write or not write to realise that they have actually, once again, started writing. The knowledge of the release comes retroactively, when the text is near completion, or when a

significant milestone has been reached, and there is the realisation of 'oh yes, so I can do it, yes I do remember that I am a writer and I can, in fact, write, and have, in fact, been writing'. And so the tyranny of *the block* is quashed once again.

In a wider sense, the release of blocks, the cessation of limbo, the relief from purgatory, are also celebratory processes that can only be fully realised after the events themselves are resigned to the past. These retroactively identified instances of abeyance can come in many forms of differing scales. My favourites are the ones which almost pass me by. Such as the swapping of stories of friends' suicides whilst on a walk with a new found friend, in a way that allows the weight of their passing to feel slightly lighter. Or in the successful correction of a repetitive negative dynamic with a romantic partner. Or in the completion of a full half hour of meditation, without using a mobile phone application to assist. Or with the realisation that actually no, I do not have to respond to that particularly unpleasant email.

The identification of blocks, of *the block*, is sometimes enough to allow for its passing. Other times not, and a more nuanced approach is required, in the form of a period of self examination or, conversely, prolonged distraction. The only thing that can be said for sure is that unidentified blocks will never pass, and they are the ones we should be most careful of.

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Written in response to the exhibition *False Spring* by Thora Dolven Balke. The exhibition combined a six channel audio piece utilising the female voice with sculpturally installed photographs. The work documented a quotidian passage of time, repeating dates and weather patterns to the backdrop of an atmospheric soundscape. The exhibition took place at Lydgalleriet, Bergen, between 29 August and 27 September 2020.

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Samuel Brzeski is the Lydgalleriet Writer in Residence 2020-21.