

I am not reading. I am not writing. This is not normal

Time to finally finish Proust, read poetry, make things, learn a language, focus, concentrate. So many opportunities present themselves. What have I done with this rare chance to be with my thoughts, to start or develop or complete new projects, to learn new things? Most of all, what have I been writing?

In the last weeks I've taken up, and put aside, woodcutting, drawing, German. I've cooked and painted walls and baked. Several weeks in, I caved and made a sourdough starter. (It really does seem miraculous, the raising of bread, though I won't go on about it.) Watched the lilac, then the climbing rose, then the honeysuckle bloom. Planted sweet peas and watched them sprout. I know I am fortunate. Sat in the small, overlooked garden, for which I've never been more grateful, with a book unread in my lap, picking up and putting down my phone, listening to building works and the radios of neighbours, staring into this fragrant, sunny, confined space. I can't settle to anything.

I work at a university and the last months have been the busiest I've known, as we respond and support and adapt and plan. This is not about having an excess of time on my hands to be idled away, and wondering what I might do with it. It's about what I've been doing in the time that I do have, when I'm not doing that job; and whatever that has been, it is not writing. This is all just distraction. From everything. From what's beyond the flat, the garden, and from this sudden circumscription to those bounds. From writing, and the fact that I am not writing. Because I have not done any writing. (Writing this, here, is terrifying.) Why can't I write?

Writing comes *out of* a kind of distraction. I am used to a form of procrastination that is otiose and seemingly directionless: casting about, reading, note-taking, until an agitation sets in and a sense of urgency, from book to notebook to another book and back and there is the sensation of connection, or the possibility of connection, maddening and lively enough for something – an image, a sentence – to emerge while I am not looking. A kind of restless dissatisfaction that is at the same time meaningful, substantial, generative. But this is not that. This is merely unsatisfying. This distraction is dull and leaden and dread-full, endlessly long and yet it eats hours, it eats days, and weeks have passed now in this same space.

Writing comes out of reading; without reading I can do no writing. I have barely read a book. This is not normal. I have read many articles: from the moment of waking and throughout the day, reaching for the phone and

scrolling, reading statistics and think-pieces and analyses for as long as the attention holds. I've read a lot of tweets. But this is not the kind of reading that is going to generate writing.

I have read snatches and fragments of books, those that lend themselves to a haphazard and partial attention. This is not the time, it transpires, to try Proust again. I have found brief solaces in Boccaccio's Decameron: the people of 14th-century Florence, it seems, spent the plague years holed up and drinking, or otherwise abstemiously not drinking, or they lived riotously in the streets, no longer caring. A group – call it a bubble – of noblewomen and men retreat to the hills, to villas decked with broom blossom, and fine wine for breakfast, and brief, funny, tragic, dirty stories. There's an odd kind of aptness to it and I recommend it highly. Reading has always been, should be, both solace and tonic. But if I try to apply myself for any stretch, my eyes and brain disconnect themselves from sense and feeling, so that I become a machine for comprehending and discarding sentences, and I have turned over 10 pages without taking in a thing. Reading can't work without remembering. Remembering can't work without location in time, in space. Everything abandoned unfinished, put aside for the endless capacity of the future.

And what can I possibly offer, in writing, by way of tonic or solace? This isn't about writer's block, because I'm not even trying (unless that's what writer's block is, really – the not trying). The intention to write, the possibility of writing, recedes endlessly into the same incomprehensible future. Writing is speaking across time, across space. And space and time are making little sense to me. How can I calibrate myself to the world without being out in it? What is the future I am speaking to? I am struggling to make connections, to do the work of sentences, to find words. I can't go anywhere, can't get anywhere. I can only languish in the present, because the past is a warren of nostalgia and forgetting and the future is too much to contemplate for long. By "for long", I mean for the space of a minute, or a protracted hour in the early 4am light, or constantly, at all times, on a level that's not quite subliminal.

I have tried diary-keeping. If I were advising my students, I would advocate discipline, routine, setting a task with defined parameters, not worrying about the end result but sustaining a practice. The first weeks pass in a panicky blur. One month in, I begin a new notebook with the resolve of making a daily account, because time is passing so strangely and quickly and unobserved. By day two, I wonder what the point of this is. I record the weather. By the end of the week I am beset by embarrassment; this is self-indulgence, redundant. I record that the lilac has come into flower. I write, "my brain is full of holes that words are falling through". I record a sense of meaninglessness, claustrophobia, uncertainty about the world and what to

put in it. A repetitious cycle of despondency and forced optimism, of insomnia and vivid, immediately forgotten dreams, of waking very early and struggling to wake.



Virginia Woolf wrote, in her superb and not at all self-indulgent writer's diary: "When I wake early I say to myself Fight, fight. If I could catch the feeling, I would; the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world ... Anything is possible." This is one of those fragments that, like a mantra – solace, tonic – I think of often, and especially now. I copy it out and try to mean it. In the absence of my own words I offer this, her quivering brilliance and her valour.

I record sudden lapses in time, and languors. I record the rose, the honeysuckle, seeing Venus in the sky, at its brightest. A week passes without my noticing, and writing the date in the diary I record my surprise that this has happened. Then another week passes, and I do the same. Then another. I give up.

At around 6pm I tend to have a cocktail and I tell myself this, at least, is in some way writerly. I come back to the page, I always do eventually. And today, I've written this.