



EXPERIMENTS IN WRITING

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

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You can't write down what can't be written. Grief, happiness, epiphany, love. It can feel impossible to write the world. This is because language only points at what is real. Language is like the telescope we use to see the stars, but not the stars themselves. Language is like the microscope we use to see the organism, but not what's on the slide.

Normal is hard to write. If in your immediate culture, nakedness is normal, but in your general culture, it's not, how do you write about the intersection of those cultures? Explaining your personal catalog of experiences to establish your norm is exhausting and impossible; there's too much data and you have forgotten almost all of it. There could be a tension between your normal and the culture's normal. Is that the most normal thing for you? What can you even call normal?

Simultaneity is hard to write. Simultaneity can feel ambiguous, but also fated—like the future and the past interact somehow to lend purposefulness to a present choice. If you explain the facts first and then the fatedness, it's like your mind concluded an intuition from the facts, when the actual experience felt like facts, feelings, and premonitions that happened all at the same time. Different languages have different systems for this, but in English, writing reconstructs time so that one thing happens before another. You can write about a melodic strain and shuffled stairsteps that obscured the voices of your neighbor and the landlord. You can write that, also at that moment, you realized that you had to leave immediately and without a goodbye. But how can one write to depict the simultaneity without imposing an unwanted logical structure?

Complexity is hard to write. You can write about a social movement that took place over several countries, multiple regimes, and many theological strains. You can follow all of the dialogues, organizing them according to similarities and dissimilarities. Each participant in the social movement has a context to bring to the story, and there are so many ways to sort the story out into simpler stories. But how do you preserve the nuance of the diversity of inputs?

You can write that it was a complex love affair, that you loved her for complex reasons, but when you try to find the words around it, you only say that you know you loved her and it might be that she loved you. Maybe you want nothing more than to be able to put this experience into words. Maybe that's why you doubt it's love.

How do you write about things that have little to do with language?

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Or, what one cannot speak about, one must silence.¹

Are all knowable truths, because they are knowable, those that can be abstracted? And do we allow that there are knowable truths that have no counterpart in words?

Are there some forms of abstraction that are better suited than others to complement the complexities of our lived experiences? And what is the value of the pursuit of the world as discoverable through the arts? Is art meant to pursue truth, or are truths made through art?

Machines assemble raw components, they transform media, they disassemble groupings. Machines can make complex things simpler, and make tasks requiring great strength less exhausting. Machines gain our respect the more parsimonious they are in design, the more they reform chaos into the elegance of structure and logic. Language formalizes ideas and edits experiences into shareable data. In other words, language is a machine to code the unseen as seen. When language moves us into revelation, it points us towards things we knew previously only by our own baffling knowing, things we know even though they resist explanation.

It’s impossible to share worlds, but we try to do so by expressing our ideas through whatever medium will bear them. The language that we use to point to life is an effort to have a conversation. Through writing, we are trying to show each other some part of our thought processes and our subjective ideas, some evidence of the work we’ve done and the selves we are. We want to know who knows what and how they know it. We’re curious and we’re hungry for understanding that will help us survive. We want to know that we’re not alone.

Original experiences, original thoughts themselves, are dead and gone before they hit the page or leave your lips. Writing just notches the groove into a record, one that plays on into new moments; it filters in through the noise of the present and becomes the tune you might remember the moment by. Words allow you to spend more time with an experience to dissect and understand the thing that died. Writing is part of a grieving process, this way. The living parts of you can’t be written, but they reach out towards where your language is. That language points to life, and what’s beyond your knowing, in order to stay alive. So writing is also part of a birthing process, this way.

¹ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Ludwig Wittgenstein,” online edition, last modified March 3, 2014.