

AN INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY IRISH WATT

Jessica Wilson

Jessica Wilson: To start off, could you talk a bit about how “Borne Along” fits into the rest of your work — both in relation to the larger manuscript of which it’s a part, and to your other writing?

Timothy Irish Watt: “Borne Along” is excerpted from the eleventh chapter — “Borne Along” — of my autobiographical narrative, *Admittance*, a work I began in September, 2001 and finished this past fall, “finished” being understood provisionally. *Admittance* is to me fundamentally a love story, of the troubled and hurting sort, confused as much as clear, driven from vulnerability to event. The love in question is the love I have for my father, who more or less disappeared when I was four years old, the love I have for literature, which I think now is and has always been my way of dealing with this first, and it should be noted standard-issue distress, and the love I have for my wife. A trip I took to the Orkney Islands the summer after I graduated from college is the structural and thematic backbone of the book; from it all other concerns develop — I see it as the fire from which sparks are thrown and become fires of their own. There are three “Orcadia” chapters in the book — two, eight, and nine — and they are a long bit of bewilderment and also need. There are two other narrative strands to the book, my childhood, and my life as an adult. Those sections dedicated to my childhood are meditations on the fact of my father’s leaving, remembrances of family failure, attempts to admit him, in both senses of the word, from my perspective as a grown man. The final section of the book, “Telling,” is a recollection of the new life I was granted as a stepson, the youngest child, of a new family, and of the curious unreality of that situation, and also of its obvious reality — it was my circumstance. The sections that deal with my life as an adult, concern my saving relationship and marriage with Amity (my wife), and my failures, as I understood them. A large part of these failures had to do with writing, but then, from another angle, that’s convenient. Taken together, the failures constitute an unforeseen collapse in the decade of my twenties, ornamented by your standard-issue drinking, and the thing that needs another name beyond the reach of the DSM, or totally before it, and the for me very difficult problem of

figuring out how to continue in life, as an adult, given who I took myself to be, figurine and rage, inept at protecting myself, bloody-knuckled from hitting walls, and massively ego'd; but funny also and I do believe, designed for care.

"Borne Along" is the second of what can reasonably be called the road chapters of the book; the first, "The Air King" describes a miserable failure of a road trip I took through the south with a friend of mine. It ended disastrously, for me. Many, many pages, and many experiences later, and fashioned by a selfless self, "Borne Along" is the vibrant life-full second attempt. After living in New York for two years, Amity and I moved to Mexico for the summer. When we returned, she went off to graduate school. I moved in with my sister in North Salem, Westchester County and prepared to go back to work in New York (I'd worked on as a systems tester and technical writer at Morgan Stanley and JP Morgan before), a future I did not want, but could not figure out how to avoid. It was while living with my sister that a different option presented itself, to house-sit in Colorado for the fall. When the opportunity presented itself I was probably a day away from beginning as a tech writer at NYNEX in White Plains. Anyway, it was avoided. I headed west the next day, as free as I have ever felt, for feeling I'd escaped. And the west was beautiful, and I knew it when I was in it. And I know it still.

JW: There's such joy in your account of crossing the Mississippi and continuing west. How do you think of landscape and place as functioning in your work?

TIW: In *Admittance*, landscape is kin, stranger, vibrant, living, and sometimes overwhelming in its influence, an immense and holy indifference. It speaks; and what it says is usually more accurate and certainly more instructive than what I am saying to myself. In the case of "Borne Along," the landscape is the necessary vision of enormous, wordless beauty that lifted me out of the ruins of self-absorption. In the nick of time maybe. There is another part of me that listens to what I've just said and finds it all an unattractive stretch of sham sentimentality. But ultimately, the sound of the wind in the trees wins out.

JW: Your academic focus is on Shakespearean and Renaissance lit-

erature. How, if at all, would you say your scholarly interests have informed your own creative work? Likewise, you've got an MFA in fiction; how would you say your fiction has informed your essays?

TIW: I've never quite known if I am a reader first, or a writer first. I began reading very early. I have what are for me luminous (and sentimental of course) memories of being in my childhood room, on the floor, reading. So my need, whatever it was in total, dictated my writerly ambition. This ambition drove me into what used to be called the Canon. I had no interest when I began, and I still don't, in writing something that is not at least a genuine attempt to make a work worthy of a place on the shelf, the sacred shelf. I know it is deeply out-of-fashion, if not generally considered buffoonish and weird, to think this way, but I do. Given the absurdity of the activity, I don't know why else to do it but to try to write if only one, true, nearly-eternal (for outlasting your life at least) radiant sentence made of nothing but bone-music and the blood of light. What Emerson said about Montaigne's sentences — something to the effect of cut them open, and they would bleed — I would want said of my own.

JW: Is genre irrelevant, then, to that desire?

TIW: Questions of genre are certainly not irrelevant to the reader, and decidedly not irrelevant to the marketplace, and I don't think they're necessarily irrelevant to the writerly ambition I mentioned, but for me, the questions are secondary at best, because I'm not sure I understand the distinctions implied by genre. I understand sound, story, and that felt truth that I think comes in the most beautiful writing. I write in terms of a density of sound, in the words, in their connections, in their sentences, and in the overall structure of any given piece. I have to hear this sound to go on with a piece, to be persuaded of its potential worth. Otherwise, I throw it out. If it doesn't need to be written (by me), I don't want to write it.

JW: So when you sit down as a fiction writer, are you bringing yourself to the work in the same way as you do when you write nonfiction? Or is there a distinction?

TIW: In terms of *Admittance*, it is without question an autobiograph-

ical narrative, and its primary engagement is with memory. So part of this distinction between fiction and nonfiction may have something to do with one's opinion of memory. I think memory is true to an individual's experience, and is also unreliable as historical record. In my case, memory is what drives me; it's the incontrovertible engine to my writing. If I am writing about someone I know, I want it to be understood that I am writing my version of him, which is, if I do it right, the truth of my experience of this person, but is not this person. In *Admittance* I've written about living people, friends, family members. I tried to do it with love, and with my reasons for doing so known to me. But it is no fair to them, no matter what. I'm a writer. It is what I do. Someone I'm writing about, who is not a writer, cannot forge an equivalent response. In terms of when I sit down to write fiction...at least these days, when I sit down to write "fiction," consciously, it doesn't do what I want it to do. I also know that to this point, I'm not a fiction writer because I live with a novelist. She is very much a novelist. She thinks and practices and writes like a novelist. I see it, and it is not the way I work. I am okay with *Admittance* being called nonfiction because it is autobiographical, concerned with a history as I know it, and does not utilize novelistic invention. But then, I also recognize that some of those writers who have exerted a heavy influence on me wrote what were considered fiction, but which might, today, be considered non-fiction. Finally, the living writer who I am most influenced by, and stand most in admiration of — Tim Ramick — writes in a manner that fully eludes both classifications, *and* his writing is utterly, frighteningly singular. This singularity is maybe his radical autobiography, but it tells no anecdotes.

JW: Do you see yourself as writing in a particular tradition, or as influenced by any particular writers (besides Tim Ramick)? When I read your essay I thought of Kerouac and the road novel, and I also saw something Whitmanian — lush, panegyric — in your language. Is that fair, or am I misreading?

TIW: I do see myself writing in a tradition, and definitely influenced by particular writers. The writers you mention, Kerouac and Whitman, are certainly influences. Reading Kerouac for the first time is like having your suspicions that the world is indeed beautiful, confirmed. Reading Whitman for the first time is like having your sus-

pictions that your soul is electric and ever-inflationary, confirmed. Reading them both for the second time confirms your suspicion of the deep, abiding lonesomeness, which is also a part of it, and of the risk inherent in devoted receptiveness. In terms of what writers and/or texts have influenced me most, there are many, but James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is at or near the top — to me it is the most singular work of prose in the English language (with a nod of respectful disagreement to C.S. Lewis' similar feeling for Browne's *Urne-Buriall*), also many of the modernist prose writers — Beckett, Faulkner, Hemingway, Joyce, Kafka, Musil, Woolf. There are many other works of prose. There are also poets who've exerted a tremendous influence, namely Dante, Keats, Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, Kenneth Patchen; and philosophers. The overriding influences on the whole thing are for me, the Bible, Shakespeare, Plato.

One of the ways in which *Admittance* is about my love for literature is that most of the chapters are homages to a work of literature; this happened in that odd liminal space between consciousness and dream when I was doing it, and became clearer in the doing of it. Thus, "Figurine" has as its precursor, Dante's *Inferno*. The precursor to chapter 2 is Harry Crew's *Childhood: The Biography of a Place*; chapter 3, Alistair MacLeod's story "The Boat"; chapter 4, William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*; chapter 5, Evelyn Waugh, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, Chapter 6, Carver's story, "Nobody Said Anything"; Chapter 8, *To the Lighthouse*; Chapter 9, Exley, *A Fan's Notes*; chapter 10, Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*; chapter 11, *On the Road*; chapter 12, Malick's films; and the epilogue, Harold Brodkey's "Verona: A Young Woman Speaks." I could, as you can probably guess, go on and on with this. I have loved and love still, been moved by, grateful for, broken and built, by so many; to mention one, is to not mention more than one. If I bring up Joyce, how can I not bring up Hemingway, Tolstoy, Beckett, Synge, Dickens, Hardy, etc... Ach. If I bring up Hemingway, how can I not bring up his great precursor, Conrad. And if I bring up Conrad how can I not talk about Denis Johnson... There is in all of this also the little boy who collected, organized into a hierarchy and memorized baseball cards, and copied pages out of the dictionary. There is in all of this also, the former jock, inclined to superlative performances, whether Earl Campbell's 1978 season, John Irving's *Garp*, Squam Lake, or Coltrane's *Love Supreme*. In the presence of greatness is a felt thing, and is finally resistant I think

to linguistic formulation. One — myself for example — begins to sound like a manic anecdotalist.

JW: Could you talk a bit more about the process by which those homages developed? I'm curious as to when you first realized the book was headed in that direction, and to what degree you consciously shaped the rest of the book after that idea. Also, is it your intention that these homages be transparent to the reader, or are they backbones there for the looking but otherwise unannounced?

TIW: "Figurine," which functions as the prologue to *Admittance*, has as its opening lines, the opening lines of Pinsky's translation of the *Inferno*. It was a semi-conscious theft, and it carried me into the rest of the piece, which then in some ways became my response to some of Kiki Smith's figures. "Telling," the epilogue, I knew immediately was an homage to Brodkey's story, which I think is a miracle, and captures something that resonated completely with a part of my childhood. I began the first "Orcadia" chapter soon after reading "The Boat." I was reading *To the Lighthouse* while I was writing the second "Orcadia" chapter. After this, I understood that these homages were in some ways the underground river of the book. The rest of the chapters were written within earshot, as it were, of the texts I mentioned. I intend the homages to be transparent to those readers who have attentively read the texts being honored, but this transparency is not necessary. If you took this idea of the homages out of the book, the book would not unravel, but its thread-count would diminish.

JW: You've worked as part of a research group analyzing Renaissance-era texts for Shakespearean authorship. On the level of craft & style (rather than on the level of aesthetics and ethos, which you've already addressed), have you got any 'signature moves' that might be considered hallmarks of Tim Watt-authorship?

TIW: I hope I don't have anything that would be called a signature move, like Tom Cruise's smile, but I am compelled by repetition — words, rhythms, images. I think it is how I make sense of things. I circle back to them over and over. The word-use often becomes polysemic, and the repetitions become a self-organizing pattern. My sister, Laura Watt, is a painter, and she paints big abstracts,

dauntingly patterned, and utterly driven by this kind of iteration. I've stood in her studio in Philadelphia, and we've talked about this thing for repetition we share in our work. It's in the genes maybe.

JW: Earlier, you said that you write 'in terms of a density of sound.' It seems in this essay that your language also often specifically describes auditory experience and relies on auditory metaphor: *sleeping is a sound*, you write, and *The Great Plains speak singingly to the Rockies*, and *the river rushed and I heard it, and hearing it heard, heavens-long, the arterial magnificence of a heart, in all its planetary booming*. Elsewhere you've written (of Jerome Hershey's paintings), *Sometimes I forget the fact that I was made to see. Sometimes, I get in the way of myself and I forget to see... I appreciate the alternative to words, which sometimes become a blight of names overtaking all the matter they were meant merely to indicate. I appreciate that such an alternative might rehabilitate both the word and the seeing...* Do you sense a tension, in a literary context, between operation on auditory terms and operation on visual ones? How to prevent words 'becoming a blight of names'?

TIW: I think there can be tension between writing as (of) hearing and writing as (of) seeing, but I think it is a productive one, if both senses are operating fully. I would add that to the "make-them-see" dictum, a writer wants to "make-them-hear", both the language itself, and what the language is describing. In terms of the latter part of the question, I'm not sure how we prevent the "blight of words" other than in what I think amounts to our chosen ethical relationship to language. For me, this means approaching language the way Buddhism and the tradition of negative theology, and its greatest mystics — Pseudo-Dionysius, the writer of *Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart — approach it, as a tool of potentially rigorous approximation, only. What is said is not what is, but is an activity, a spiritual exercise maybe, a process in the direction of intimacy, performed in unknowing. Thus, I am always trying to remember the limited-ness of language, and this remembrance can serve as a vigil for all that one has and will write about: before any writing, silence; after writing, silence. This is not how it always goes for me but it is my intention.

JW: Do you think "Borne Along" operates differently as a stand-alone essay than it does as part of a longer work? Did anything sur-

prise you in the writing of the essay?

TIW: "Borne Along" most definitely functions differently as a stand-alone essay. It was John D'Agata's really expert editorial and writerly eye, which identified "Borne Along" as a stand-alone excerpt. I agreed with him immediately, and was moved by how much innocence the essay communicates when standing alone. In *Admittance* it comes after all kinds of shenanigans, and works both as counterpoint and as restitution, and is part of a larger chapter, in which the narrator (me) recovers happiness.

JW: The essay turns at the end, with the death of the deer, which is figured as 'going home.' 'Home' as a discrete entity, as a concept, is strikingly absent from (or else wholly implicit in) the rest of the piece-- there is house-sitting for Casey and there is Amity's apartment on East Burlington, but neither of these places is home, although Amity herself might be. The narrator is so present in his immediate moment that 'home' seems either omnipresent or irrelevant. How do you see the idea of 'home,' and its appearance at the end, as functioning in the essay?

TIW: Well, that just hits it, dead-on and radiantly. Thank you, most especially for: "The narrator is so present in his immediate moment that 'home' seems either omnipresent or irrelevant." As I mentioned in a previous question, this essay, "Borne Along," is drawn from the chapter "Borne Along" in *Admittance*. That chapter occurs primarily on the road, which becomes — which is and is not — home. The pivotal moment of the chapter, which comes near the end of it, is my arrival in Santa Fe, where I spend the week with my friends, in their two-room apartment. They are a husband and wife, and a son, and two cats, and at the time that is being written about, their son, Reeve, was about ten years old, and he offered me his bedroom to sleep in, with all of its boyhood charms and dreams, and I slept in his bed and felt at home-in-the-world, perhaps as I had not before, or had not for many years.

This search for the believable feeling of "home-ness" is in many ways at the core of the book. The book begins with the childhood loss of this home-feeling, and with the disorientation and vulnerability that succeeds such a loss. And much of the rest of the book, particularly the later chapters, is concerned with finding — and

knowing — that feeling again, if only in prolonged moments of shared presence — with landscape, with animals, with friends. I think the way the book was written, and where it was written, exerted a tremendous influence in this regard. I began the book in first-floor apartment in Providence, wrote a good bit of it in a motel room in Tucumcari, New Mexico. What I wrote in Tucumcari I then revised in our house near the Port of Providence, in a rather depressed and loud neighborhood. I continued the writing in Latvia, where Amity and I lived for five months, for her Fulbright. And I finished the first draft at a friend's vacation house in northern Pennsylvania. I then revised the whole thing in Amherst, where I live now. What I'm trying to say is that I think that the writing of the book itself was engaged in this search for the feeling of home... What I've come to realize is that in large measure home is one's loves. In my case, my marriage to Amity, and our son, and by extension, the bonds we share with our friend and kin. When this bond is matched by a bond with the environment — neighborhood, sea, desert, city — than maybe an "ecology" of home forms, and one is at home in the land, and in one's heart, and is home for others in return.

