

Writing And Living As Torture And Hope



7. Franz Kafka, *Drawing From: Scott Spector's Prague Territories* (2000)

In Scott Spector's (b. 1959) book *Prague Territories* we can find a picture, drawn by Kafka, of a man apparently despairing at a desk or table. Spector links the image to an extract from one of Kafka's letters in which the desk is described as a kind of torture device. Spector goes on to compare the drawing with Kafka's short story *In The Penal Colony*.

(Spector, S. 2000)

This story describes an outsider's visit to a colonial island community where a peculiar, sadistic and anachronistic form of punishment is carried out. It involves an elaborate machine that gradually inscribes a man's alleged crime into the flesh of his back using tiny needles while he is strapped to a kind of table. This goes on until a point comes when the punished man begins to decipher and

understand what is being written, and shortly after this moment (of supposedly sublime revelation) comes death.

Kafka deals with the law and punishment elsewhere in his work (e.g. in *Before The Law* and *The Trial*), but here - Spector implies - it is the writer's hardware, of desk and pen, which have inspired Kafka, and which are personified in the agency of a torturous justice.

But Kafka's tale might further imply that, whatever we write, we are always truly writing ourselves, writing ourselves to death, writing our lives away, and always from the perspective of a guilt, perpetually writing in search of some elusive and original sin, and yet also in search of the recollection of some lost, original grace –a kind of first love.

(Kafka, F. 1971)

Kafka's image invokes images of Stephen King's (b.1947) *Misery* in which the longed-for fantasy of the successful writer's life gives way to the real difficulties of being confined and dictated-to by desks, pens, computers and deadlines, as well as being trapped by genres, characters, publishers, and an audience that hungrily demands more product of similar quality.

(King, S. 2001)

Furthermore, the infinite possibilities of writing - that most plastic of arts - can all too easily lead us into a *mirage* or dead-end where we produce only uninspired language - 'words without wings'. The pen falls, we lean back and look up, but nothing comes down to rescue us. The paper waits for our inventions to fill it, but in vain, as we begin to feel a compulsion to bathe, to walk, to shop, to eat, to sleep, or to reminisce, to do anything *but* write. And if our guilt and responsibility conspire at this moment to hold us to our word and our task, the desk - rather than being a craft capable of transporting us on extraordinary journeys - now transforms itself into a sacrificial altar, a site of painful, impossible duties. We are free to write anything, and yet, our body is bound to this all-too-worldly place where there is nothing to write, nothing to be written and nothing worth the trouble of writing. Why are we being punished, and by whom?



8. Wong Kar Wai, *2046*, 2004

In film director Wong Kar Wai's (b. 1958) *2046*, the post-modern, self-reflexive and autobiographical figure of the emerging writer, hesitates over his attempt to begin writing, and not just for a seconds or minutes but for several hours, *days* in fact, before the flow of inspiration can begin.

(Kar Wai, W. 2004)

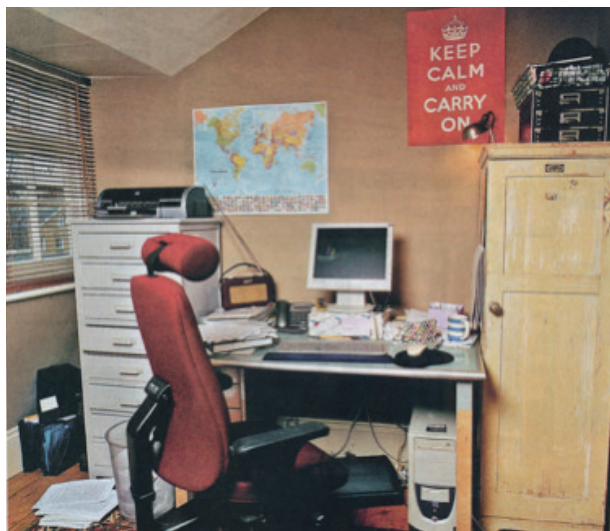
Wong Kar Wai seems here to insist that writing shares with cinema a reliance on a certain flow or momentum which is at least as important as any particular content or idea. Writing's linear and liquid means lend themselves to such thoughts of passage as the writer's role is represented as that of not *interrupting* time with any intrusive obstacle or contemplative proposition (as might be the case with sculpture, painting or photography) but rather to 'shadow' or parallel time itself, finding a means of matching pace with time, of pulling time into our own qualitative experience precisely *by* writing, writing along smoothly with time while nevertheless unveiling, as we travel, an image of experience never previously revealed.

When we fail to write, or hesitate to write, when writing tortures us miserably, it is with regard to our *inability* to enter and swim along with time accompanied by thought and led by our pen. If we are successful (on our own terms and not those of Stephen King's miserably exploited antihero) our desk transforms from an instrument of torture back into a vehicle of hope.



9. Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla, *Under Discussion*, 2005

In recent years the UK Guardian newspaper's weekend Review section - which, for writers, would-be writers, and writers-on-writers, is a weekly haven from the swarm of otherwise crass media- has featured professional writers' desks and workspaces in the form of a photograph accompanied by a short explanatory text by the writer concerned.



10. Guardian Newspaper Saturday Review, *Writer's Rooms: Sarah Waters*,

27th January 2008

Here, the Guardian's large, non-professional and aspiring readership may drool over the tantalising, probably unrealisable goal of the writerly life. But the image and the accompanying explanation often play-down (in typically professional, pragmatic tones) any sense of complacency or liberating success and emphasise instead a tough materiality and matter-of-factness of writing's routine.

Yet this still seems to understate what anyone who has so-far failed to write professionally might imagine to be the often grueling difficulties involved in writing full-length works as a full-time occupation capable of sustaining one's self in a costly and competitive world.



11. Guardian Newspaper Saturday Review, *Writer's Rooms: Will Self*,
7th April 2007

The pleasure taken in the images by the reader is nevertheless voyeuristic and superficial, and the images keep alive taunting hopes of attaining the fantasy of liberty and autonomy associated with the writer's profession. The reader is pulled between reality and fantasy, writing and living, torture and hope.

The pages of the Review are also peppered with advice from well-known authors to aspiring writers, however, Kafka's expressive drawing (above), like his peculiarly masterful clumsiness with words, surely provides a more appropriate warning and guide for the aspiring writer. In Kafka's drawing, writer and desk, desk and chair are all made of the very same ink as writing itself, as if to illustrate that writing's materials must absorb us wholly into the event of writing, for better or for worse. And such comprehensive absorption is inferred by Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author* where one inspired phrase still resonates down the years since it was first encountered: the author 'slips away' in the event of writing

(Barthes, R. 1977)



12. Roland Barthes working at desk.

This phrase conjures in the imagination, not only the sense Barthes seemed to intend i.e. that at the moment of any proud, authoritative inscription we paradoxically ‘slip way’ in the sense of *relinquishing* identity to the art and act of writing, to culture, to History, semiotics, to the reader, the other etc. Barthes’ words also invoke the very action of the pen itself ‘slipping away’, in the sense in which a carpenter or stonemason might ‘chip-away’ at a block, or a humble bee might ‘buzz away’ a summer afternoon.

That is to say that the writer and the pen do indeed ‘slip away’, producing the text by laying down a trail and a trace which is also the very lubricant which enables the journey and which allows a graceful form to appear. The ink provides a wet,

black road for a hazardous progression while the product is simultaneously - as if inadvertently - left behind, if only because the event of writing itself cannot be represented. Writing is a line emerging within a blind spot.

The event of writing takes place in a sparking interface between dry paper and shining steel nib, between typewriter keys thumping against incarcerated paper, between keyboard and a remote aqueous screen where memory bytes and pixels trace formations of matter as memory and meaning.¹

Writing takes place in an immeasurable event between the future into which it blindly leads and the past it leaves as an unreliable trace. Writing is memory writing *to* memory *in* memory. Despite our efforts to plan, hope and justify our present by our trajectory, we too proceed blindly, like writing, as much a *grammatology* as a psychology or ontology. To carry this comparison further, we can see that if we 'slip away' also in the act of, at the task of being, we also fail to 'be', we slip away from being itself and rather, are left yearning to be.

What we call 'plans' or 'the future', are always imaginary (something that rich insurance companies happily exploit). Significant and unexpected events - a road accident, an illness, sudden bereavement, 9/11, have the ability to remind

¹ Note that technology has also advanced in such a way as to make writing increasingly mediated and almost vicarious. If the computer is overloaded there can even be a temporal hesitation between the act of typing and the appearance of words on the screen.

us of the extent to which we live at a blind interface with the world, oblivious to what is about to happen next. Experience is laid like a trail, in such an inadvertent way that only art is capable of giving this trail of experience a shape that looks remotely like an intention. We could even go further, and claim that art itself *is* the sign of intention attempting to overcome resignation to the chaos of a life lived blindly.

Michel Foucault, who, like Barthes, also wrote of the demise of the author, used the image of a 'table' in his Borges-inspired preface to *The Order of Things* (a title which can also be translated as *Words and Things*). Here, Foucault suggested that, as well as Marxist-ly re-arranging a world given as a set of hierarchised objects and categories, we also need to consider the 'table' on which we imagine these orders and things to be arranged, the given context or 'ground' against which we are able to imagine or perceive them.

(Foucault, M. 1989)

The profound implication here is evocative of Nietzsche's use of the term *Law Tables* in *Zarathustra* (itself evocative of Moses' tablets). For the Nietzschean Foucault, amid the heady, salad days of Post Structuralism, it seemed momentarily possible to question away something as fundamental as foundation itself, and to suggest that, among deconstructions of a Male, Western, European, white, heterosexual and Modern culture, we should not forget to attend to that

specific and perhaps deluded notion, that 'things' not only have 'orders' produced by a certain perspective, but that both orders and things rely upon some imaginary foundation or 'table' on which realities -whether personal or cultural - are organised as a kind of power or defense.

(Nietzsche, F.W. 1969)

It is risky to trouble this 'table' but once it has been acknowledged there may come a time when that is necessary. Foucault at least wanted us to keep this 'table' in question, to consider the possibility of changing it, or of making it disappear. Other questions and changes may be important but might be mere tinkering in comparison with this potential paradigm shift.²



13. Pre-G4 Power Book

² This unnerving thought, which remains vital and current, also briefly illuminates the image of 'thought' and 'writing' as entities having power over their own productions, or the presumed ability of written thought to tempt us beyond our established reality and comfort.

To turn Foucault's image back towards our more immediate concerns, the arbitrariness and unreliability of the supposedly *fixed* table on which we base our power or defense, and against which we compose our hierarchy of values, invokes the computer's aqueous, virtual, floating 'desktop', or, even more so, the nomadic image of the laptop or 'powerbook', a hyper-commodity writing machine which is *already* a book, a book we don't have to write but merely be seen with in order to obtain some of the power or kudos we might seek by writing a book. The unattainable fantasies of the Guardian Review's 'writer's rooms' photographs, and all the tortuous machinery of Kafka's drawing seem momentarily dispelled once we award ourselves the angelic company of a stylish 'laptop' whose very wings promise to elevate both our language and our status, offering freedom from the gravity, pain and torture of serious writing. But in reality, the laptop is more often seen on a desk than on a lap. This may be because even the largest and steadiest and most reliable lap cannot accommodate the accumulated everyday array of bric-a-brac, talismans and coffee cups, which enhance the sense of territory and privacy necessary to serious and prolonged writing.



14. Kip Carroll, *Freud's Desk* (Photograph), 2006

A glimpse of the Freud museum in London's Hampstead reveals just how much apparently superfluous paraphernalia is required to enable the realisation of world-shaking thoughts. It is noticeable that readers of the Guardian Review 'writers rooms' series enjoy hearing almost every writer whose workspace is represented, describing in detail the little images, charms and fetishised mementoes which accompany them on their daily journeys into writing.



15. Max Pollak, *Freud's Desk* (Etching), 1914

If we now reconsider Kafka's drawing we could imagine that the spindly figure there is in fact *clinging* to the object which tortures him, because the desk itself can also be fetishised, along with a particular pen, a time of day, a brand of note book, type of tea etc. as part of the ritual that tempts the mystic art of writing to work.



16. Charles Ray, *How A table Works*, 1986

The awkward physicality that enables the desk's all-important supportive surface is brought under the scrutiny of the sculptor's eye in the work of artist Charles Ray who has made several pieces on this theme. *How A Table Works* (1986) takes great pains to show us little more than its title suggests as things that we know all too well. And yet, the result of the artist's peculiar ambition here seems to bring into question (as Kafka himself often does) something disturbing regarding basic facts of our lives which the artist or thinker cannot allow to go unquestioned.



17. Charles Ray, *Tabletop*, 1989

To use another example, Ray's *Tabletop* (1989), presents us with nothing more than banal objects on an unremarkable table, until we notice that the objects - most of which are entirely symmetrical - are each spinning, at different speeds, on tiny, hidden turntables built into the otherwise reliably fixed table-top.³

This piece might illustrate those diverse, subjective and qualitative 'times' that we experience while - more or less - writing, sometimes feeling trapped and trudging, sometimes skimming along effortlessly with flowing (good) time, sometimes diverted into other times entirely by daydreams. *This* is the table that Freud needed, and that every writer really needs, to keep all the necessary fetishes, mental wheels, plates, and cogs, myths and metaphors, spinning happily

³ Of all the apparently randomly convened objects it is the relatively chaotic, asymmetrical houseplant that gives the game away as its relation to its background is different to that of the symmetrical pots, bowls and beakers whose movement is almost invisible without close inspection because their symmetry means that their profile doesn't disturb their relation to their background when they move.

together in synchronic harmony while giving ourselves over fully to the event of writing.



18. Erich Lessing, *Machiavelli's Room*

The final desk image here is one that has haunted me (if I may be excused the liberty of slipping momentarily into a personal and anecdotal mode) for some time in a personal and uncanny way, which I am still writing, thinking and waiting to fully understand. The image appears in an *Illustrated History of Philosophy* and has many qualities of a 17th century Dutch realist interior painting, but closer inspection reveals it to be a relatively recent 'Magnum' photograph. Here, the inherent tracery of photography seems to prove itself capable of transmitting haunting qualities that might adhere to places, as there seems to be more than

just a desk, chair, window, candles and other paraphernalia in this room, there is also some kind of 'spirit' transporting itself down the ages. This is Machiavelli's writing desk, in the house to which he was exiled and from where he wrote his infamous works.

(Kenny, A. [b. 1931] 1994)

Daylight falls gently in to Machiavelli's room, through a window that perhaps offers a view of the city from which he is exiled. It makes sense to us that he would dream from a window that frames his longing and his regret, his pride and his shame, motivating him to become again in some way all that he has lost. A brace of candlesticks awaits the night, while a quill, a receptacle for ink, a goblet, and an open writing book await the long-departed presence of their master. Upon one page a little bell appears to now act as a paperweight, though it perhaps once called for assistance. This is all we see on the plain, dark table accompanied by a robust and modestly decorated seat.

For Machiavelli, the image of distant Florence was perhaps the prompt he needed to maintain his momentum, aim and purpose. The desk in Freud's London study is very different, surrounded and littered with cultural paraphernalia from unseen and unknown places as if to guard him in his explorations against that overarching modern conceit; the known itself. Guarding against the dehydration of fluid speculation, the little audience of assembled figurines are

crowded here as if to invoke every kind of pre-modern spirit and invited to whisper to Freud alone the secret of what 'modern' really means. Many of Freud's key emblems can be seen in this room, in totems, images of Gradiva, Oedipus etc. operating, presumably as fetishes, prompts and illustrations for his theories or - from a modern perspective - only as metaphors and myths, yet equally possibly - from an anti, ante, or post modern perspective – simply as retaining and maintaining their original powers.

Both Freud and Machiavelli are exiles, and yet, for the writer, who in beginning seeks nothing so much as a way to an end, exile is part of the 'furniture' of writing, one of its familiar and necessary requirements. To begin to write is first to throw oneself in and therefore throw oneself away, albeit with the aim of rescuing, at some unknown point in the future, both the work and the self, rescuing all that is at stake, exiling oneself in order to negotiate one's own return.⁴ The writer's desk, however bulky, no matter how fetishised, must therefore at some point become a vehicle, a carriage for a Mercurial messenger.

Writing never masters our enquiry nor answers our question, but at best illuminates and communicates via its own means and its own limits 'via', the passage that life is (*sic*). Writing attempts as its highest aim to keep pace with

⁴ It is of course possible that, in attempting to rescue ourselves with garlands of words we will become fatally entangled, and, like Ophelia, die an ignominious death whose precise cause and moment remains uncertain.

that momentum rather than claim false perspectives (sedentary points-of-view), but in doing so it necessarily enters into a fold of self reflexivity from within which it then struggles to reveal anything more than itself to itself.

In the midst of this turbulent adventure, the tools and materials of writing - our form, method, desk, chair, pages, ink, pen or keyboard - offer the illusion of a means of belonging, but no matter what schema we rehearse and however we make it manifest, our writing's value is guaranteed only as an untimely and audacious gamble pitched in the direction of posterity and passing almost certainly unnoted by the unspeakable force which relentlessly urges all along, making space, all-too-soon, for other events.

The writer's product waxes and wanes within its lines and pages, coagulating into fragments of conviction then growing only half-convincing. Or, here and there, convincing so confidently as to become thoroughly *unconvincing*. Only according to that unforgiving description by Maurice Denis (1870 - 1943) of modern painting as: '[...]essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order' could writing's unnerving fluidity harden and homogenise into cohesive thinghood via endless rituals of completion that only consolidate with the effect of passed time.

(Denis, M. in Harrison, C. and Wood, P. 1998, 863)

Writing is a manufactured truth, a story told by winners, and the writer is only one of the many forces acting to determine its success or failure. Only as a result of popularity can writing regain its original mobility, only through being translated, read, copied, distributed, interpreted, can it evaporate and effervesce again, as diverse and numerous readers are invited to rain fresh meaning on to its long-dried pages, reawakening the diverse and numerous possibilities that were present at its moment of origin.

If a writing's conviction is strong (and the honest writer will be the first to admit that its source lies in an untimely hunch) it is - unlike almost any other medium-likely to offend some one or some thing, some where at some time, and this is the source of its strangely attractive responsibility. More than any other artist the writer knows and questions responsibility, not least in the propensity to harm and to self-harm. To *pronounce* is the writer's *raison d'être*, and yet, in publishing anything of value to a world thirsty for new images of itself, we are likely - at some time and place - to be denounced. We do battle with writing, attempting to disarm it, to overcome it, if only that it won't overcome *us*. We tussle, seeking to save ourselves from the injury that our own writing might do to us, we wrestle, craft, attempting to turn its edge away from self-harm and towards some other object, some objective and objectivity, only to find that writing can never be simply 'for' or 'against' but is always more mercurial than any Mercury we hope to become by delivering a singular truth to the world.

In Machiavelli's letters, sent from his exile in Saint Andrea, Percussina, outside Florence, after 1512, he describes in detail the rural lifestyle to which he had been reduced by his fall-from-grace as a result of changing powers within the city. And having described, with a sophisticated eye, such relatively crude pastimes as snaring birds and gambling with local tradesmen, he takes pleasure in also revealing that, when evening comes he leaves his rough country clothes at the door of his room and dresses again in his urban finery so as to be appropriately attired when studying the great writers and thinkers that he will here read and respond-to in his own writing, at his reassuringly substantial desk.

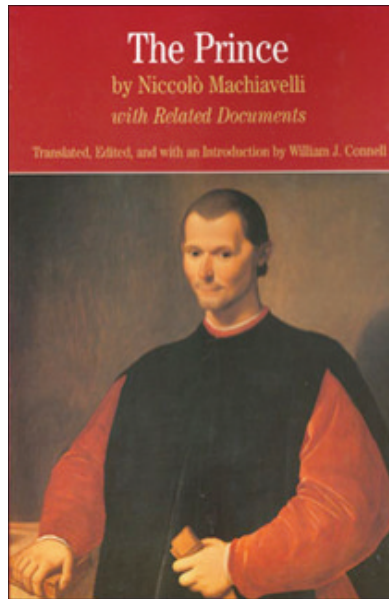
(Machiavelli, N. 1979, 66-71)

It is significant for us that Machiavelli dressed especially for the event of writing, fetishising the clothes which made the identity of the thinker and writer possible, he 'made a date' with writing and his circumstances forced him to theatricalise and make apparent the specialness of the event as he slipped into more comfortable and prestigious clothes in order to 'slip away' into the role of author, a role which, for him, had become increasingly unreal and vicarious as he attempted to whisper cold, conspiratorial pragmatism into the ear of a future power from an unlikely distance.

If we have seen Wong Kar Wai sufficiently influenced by the thought of Barthes and Foucault as to hesitate in a post-modern limbo, struggling to pursue the ironised author function long after its rumoured death, we can also see him eventually breaking through this block and writing-on, even if it means doing-so in simulation, without truth or sincerity, jettisoning the Romantic see-saw of (real) torture and (false) hope and embracing (as does Barthes) the escape-route of performativity in a way comparable with that described by Machiavelli as the key to ending the writer's exile from the territories of authorship.

But as to why this image of Machiavelli's room is so uncannily important to *me*, we have to switch again into an un-academic, anecdotal and autobiographical mode, justified as necessary to explain what might be the prime motive of this thesis, yet one which we have thus-far hesitated to confess.

The image of Machiavelli's desk and room may have some relevance to my own battles with fortune and the city, having once or twice lost my own financial and social grip and been exiled to the more miserable suburbs, from where, only written correspondence was capable of starting the process of restoring me to hard-won metropolitan respectability.



19. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Paperback)

What is more likely however, is that this image is linked to my very own 'author' in the shape of my late father, and his very real, unexpected death. My father was a frustrated would-be writer whose responsibilities to his family took his dreams beyond his reach. My mother often described the scene in which 'dad' is sitting at a desk or dining table, as a young, newly married man, having hurried home exhausted from work to try and fulfill his daily commitment to write so-many thousand words, but finding this target increasingly elusive with, first one, then two inquisitive children perched simultaneously on his lap, before finally giving up writing altogether when numbers three, four, then five arrived.

Here I can again invoke Kafka's story *In The Penal Colony* and, in this tale of my father, begin to discern my own 'crime' as that of an intrusive child disallowing my

father access to his literary dream. If so, then my own writing, even here and now, repeatedly inscribes, as if into my own life and flesh, a fair and accurate diagram of my culpability, perhaps in the hope that it will be satisfactorily deciphered before my own death (whose timeliness or untimeliness, I have learned, it is impossible to anticipate).

We can also equate Kafka's imagery here with Freud's project and procedures involving, not only Oedipal relationships but the uncovering and assimilating of a primary autobiographical event capable of initiating a lifelong problem -which can be diverted and sublimated as art. However, what links the Magnum photo of Machiavelli's desk to the tale of my father's frustrations is not only that my father was a civil servant -and therefore like Machiavelli in being an advisor to more truly empowered men- but that when my father died, (quite suddenly, at an early age, having apparently exhausted himself in performing the roles of dedicated 'servant', dutiful father, and enslaved commuter) the office desk at which he had worked for many years was cleared and its contents returned to his family. The only book that occupied the draw of his desk was a cheap paperback edition of 'The Prince' by Machiavelli, and, when this was handed by my widowed mother directly to me (among five siblings) it may have made some indelible impression in my moment of disorienting, teenage grief. The book, and the image of Machiavelli -as well as that of desks- could then be interpreted as a significant, personal object, symbolic of my father's self-image and of my own relationship to

him, symbolic of some outstanding debt or duty (a kind of gauntlet), symbolic of guilt at his premature and dissatisfied death, and at my own intrusive birth and persistence in his absence.⁵

(Machiavelli, N. 1981)

Despite this writing, and previous attempts to investigate the possible scene of this possible crime, I can say no more about these connections, but hopefully the reader can glimpse the layered echoes, germane to this dissertation's form and content, e.g. in the figure of the vicarious, secretive, shameful and exiled writer, the servant, the exile,⁶ the traveler between city and suburb, as well as the would-be writer's relation to the would-be powerful. We can also compare these two performers, who change clothes and identities at the end of drudgery days, connecting them to our emphasis here on the elusive dream of writing compared with the necessary materiality, stamina, time, and tools that it truly demands.

There is both a hope and a torture of writing, a fantasy and a reality, neither of which can be allowed to dominate the other for long without losing sight of writing altogether. The writer and writing can never travel far from some foundational support on which we must rely in order to produce any writing capable of supporting that writerly life. Nevertheless, *any* such fundamental reality, security,

⁵ I have also speculated, in more Kafkaesque moods, on whether *every* civil servant's desk might come replete with a copy of this iconic book tucked in its drawer, in the way that bedside tables in hotels were once equipped with Gideon bibles.

⁶ My father was a Catholic emigrant to a country dominated by Protestantism, and consequently doubly-marginalised, as well as being far off-course in pursuing his dreams.

or territory *can* suddenly shift, revealing itself and everything that depends upon it to be a fantasy after-all and thus necessitating recognition of the fact that, however secular we feel ourselves to be, we nevertheless live and write, in and with, faith.