

Roy holds a branch, picking at some of the leaves. The TV is on, but he is impervious to the sounds of the news report explaining how recent mysterious events have been due to some kind of freak electrical storm.

He turns around and walks toward the massive mountain of earth, plants, bricks, garden furniture, chicken wire and papier-mâché. The object takes up the entire living room, leaving less than half a foot between the ceiling and its summit. It looks like a huge version of the clay lump from a model train set, but more detailed with steep walls of mud sculpted to have a rock-like texture with a flat top.

He scrambles between the wall and the side of the mountain, finding the perfect spot to plant a tiny tree.

As Roy reaches down to push the trunk through the muddy surface of the lump it becomes difficult for him to discern his body from the texture of his creation. His face, hair, and bathrobe are caked in a mixture of all the materials composing the mound; black creosote handprints cover his thighs and his bare feet are encrusted with dried bits of concrete, plaster and dirt.

He shuffles over to the window to wipe his hands on the drapes. It's a typical balmy Indiana August afternoon. Kids play Frisbee, a man in Bermuda shorts and Ray Bans washes his Buick. Roy chatters to himself, "How can you continue to, to, wash your fucking car?! Walk your dog in the face of this, this.... this!?!..."

It slowly dawns on him that he might be alone in his obsession, that maybe he is losing his mind.

Close Encounters

Rebecca La Marre

It is often said that the object of criticism is one best approached with caution, walking around, circumambulating rather than approaching directly. The risk with direct approach is that the closer a text comes in proximity, the further the object recedes; a disappearance just as one is about to grasp the desired prize.

Criticism can be likened to embarking on a voyage into the unknown in search of what lies behind a rumour, a conspiracy, a tall tale, a lie. In the process one discovers that if *Mount Analogue* even exists, if it turns out to be possible to find using rational calculations aided by a rigorous method, it would probably be impossible to report. One may leave clues, sticks in the grass to indicate which path was taken, but those who follow the trail are best advised to disregard the clues as the realization will quickly follow that they have been led into error.

According to the author of the novel René Daumal, the best mountain guide will stop an expedition and say:

"I can go no further. From here on in, you are on your own."

The work to be done is the climbing itself, a confrontation, an encounter with materials. It is far too early to even begin imagining the summit.

Just as an artist will emerge from their studio boasting ink stained fingers, plaster caked trousers, or what has come to be known as 'lap-top face' (a term that needs no description), after hours of work the writer becomes muddied and muddled with the materials with which they engage. Or perhaps it is better for the task at hand to say, the materials that engage a writer.

In this light writing becomes a strategy for the movement from self to other, a way to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. St. Augustine famously said in his *Confessions* "I have become a question to myself." The adventurous protagonist of the novel *Mount Analogue* abandons his narrative on a comma in what is staged as a mysterious disappearance. In his pursuit of the summit his narrative-producing self, his ability to report "I" is dissolved.

Some translations of Augustine use 'problem' rather than 'question', and as we might expect from him, Augustine is suggesting that his lust and life of pursuing the desires of the flesh is an 'infirmity', something that requires healing and the eradication of his personal will so he can be filled with God's will instead. The top of the mountain is considered to have the clearest air, the pure, cold, ice of Nietzsche's ultimate philosophy, the clouds where Moses was given the Ten Commandments.

This would imply that writing is traditionally conceived as a report from the summit, rather than the long, hard climb with only a tenuous promise of arrival. In the common imagination a writer is not covered in dirt, caked

That would explain why Ronnie was crying.

He draws the curtain slowly, slumps against the wall and begins to weep.

The telephone rings. It's his sister in law. Roy asks to speak to Ronnie. "Don't hang up... I'll see that guy tomorrow... right now if you want.. yes, yes, I'll talk to him - don't you think it's worth it?"

Please, Ronnie, don't hang up... Ronnie!"... CLICK!

Enraged and exhausted he hurls the receiver and phone through the TV screen, replacing the images of the Voyager 1 launch with smashed glass and sparks.

He swings around to the mountain and screams, "WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?! WHAT, WHY HAVE YOU... WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME?!" He lunges at it, tearing out lumps of dirt, beating his fists against the broken lawn furniture that makes up its base.

He falls to his knees in defeat and convulses in sobs.

He looks at the peak through his bleary eyes and the tip of the mountain begins to draw him in again. The TV hisses and sparks, the dial tone of the phone inside emulates the sound of a flat line from a heart monitor. Every limb seems to hang inertly from his fixed and immovable stare. He drools a little, closes his mouth, sputters half a chuckle.

The corners which discern his body from his environment become hazy as what seems like a halo of empathy emanates from the mound and drapes itself over him. It slowly, somehow, seems to cradle and sooth his lingering worries about his sanity, about Ronnie and the kids, about the amount of time it will take to clean up the mess.

As he stares at its muddy surface the sensation of its presence begins to morph. It feels like a confrontation.

It seems to pulse, alive, but inorganic. The sound is too regular and sharp to be organic. Then again, it's not quite a sound. A sound dampened by a smell perhaps, or made more acute by its taste. Maybe it's closer to a texture he thinks, or a temperature. He can't quite grasp it. The sensation keeps approaching his sensual faculties but recedes just as quickly. It crosses the wires of his senses before slipping under them, tentacle like, expanding throughout his body.

with mud, becoming entangled in the brush, one creature among many engulfed by the giant mass.

Perhaps this conception is undesirable; if the writer were to lose their privileged position of rigorous mountaineer, Socrates' basket would have to be lowered and his philosophy produced on the ground.

This would be undesirable as it would remove the line dividing Man from God and Beast. Rather than a Man with ideas and ideals, not even an animal, a writer would become a thing among things, a thing that encounters other things and is changed by the encounter. A concatenation of text, body, artwork, artist, writer, gallery.

Sublimation of the self is supposed to engender horror, a complicated and simultaneous fear of and desire for union with the Other. This is only possible from the position of Man, who fears his implication in a union with Beast or God, ignoring that this Other is always already present in himself.

Should this division be rendered useless, horror, sublime dissociation, trance states and mysticism would lose their potency, and when inspected closely, rather than finding the obscurity and darkness of poetic materials (the tradition of lyric poetry descending directly from prophetic writings in the Bible), we would find instead a constellation of institutional forces and limits operating, acting upon material production.

Writing would then become a tool to investigate the size of the room, the shape of the walls, the economies through which the objects in question move. What does putting a thing in a room produce? What happens when the people looking at a thing in a room become things as well? What sort of evaluation becomes possible? What expectations does an institution demand the object to fulfill?

Its breath is articulated as a whisper, it moves through his muscles, telling Roy's arms and legs that they aren't any different from the mud. His mind is filled with the sensation that he is made from the same elements as the mountain; he is dirt, garden chairs, house-hold paint.

Its arms and legs spasm as they struggle to meet its will. Like a newborn foal, it topples over onto itself, gets up shakily, and topples over again. Its eyes open and shut, struggling to understand what it is to see shapes and forms in space. It groans with indiscernible words, sounds, wrestling with the unwieldy combination of tongue in mouth and vocal chords.

It doesn't like these new sensations; they are confusing and terribly abrasive. It feels too intense, too active, there is too much motion.

Awkwardly it manages to pick up a shovel. It flops a limb through the handle and plunges the spade clumsily into the softest part of its surface, slowly carving out a hole in its own base. It lets out a low and drawn out howl, the same note as the dial-tone of the phone. It crawls inside the hole in its base, clawing deeper under the dirt and newspaper and paint cans, yanking at its wooden skeleton, the chicken-wire. It is deep in its own belly. It collapses, curling into foetal communion with its inner being. It is hard, it is inert. At last, each component is at rest, in proximity but without movement, no voice stronger than any other, only the fuzz of the TV and the dial-tone of the dangling phone.

To imagine criticism as an encounter between things highlights the importance of focusing on a relation between types of matter, the movement between things and how they are situated.

Circumambulation then becomes a useful strategy for understanding this relation, a practice of learning and knowing that does not descend from the summit of a mountain like an avalanche of boulders. Writing becomes a process of discovery, leaving traces and clues that enable a reader to forge ahead on their own path.

Criticism can be considered a form of close looking. A writer-thing wanders in circles until an assimilation with the work, a concatenation is achieved; the writing becomes indistinguishable from the artwork itself, absorbed.