

On ecstatic writing: an unfolding definition in 7 citational steps

1. The origin: earlier selves

Complimenting and complicating the experimental and exophonic branches of the project, I want to offer the possibility for an ecstatic modality of writing. The way we arrive at this ecstasy is, as I will hopefully be able to demonstrate in a minute, a logical unfolding of different texts, which, despite bearing no relation to each other, we lined up together like some sort of theoretical cadavre exquis to build up to this term.

Before I get to that, I want to point out that preceding the work in this project, I had written a paper with Kris Pint, with whom I collaborate often, setting the basis for this unfolding, and culminating in the expression “ecstatic citations”, rather than “ecstatic writing”. If you are curious, this paper was published by Text Journal in their special issue on the creative-critical in 2024, and is called “Unhinged, an alliance: Creativecritical writing and ecstatic citations”.

Today, though, I will try and drag you along to this idea of citational writing which is, still, very closely related to that first line of work, and therefore, very much based on citational devices.

2. The performative: Pollock

As far as I am concerned, all roads lead to Della Pollock’s 1998 article on performative writing, and this is no different. Pollock established citationality as

one of the characteristics of this practice. In invoking the citational, Pollock is interested in a kind of writing that “Quotes a world that is already performative – that is composed in and as repetition and reiteration”.

This is then where all ecstatic business begins: with a writing that is material and deeply entangled with an existing world. And as such, dedicates some of its own space to said world.

This citationality then, not only repeats and reiterates, as Pollock says, but also surrenders. There is still an element of again-ness, that re-prefix, but it’s here covered by the aboveness of sur-. To surrender, to give again as well as over, inviting not only plurality but an Other.

3. The ecstatic > Teresa

It is this willingness to connect with something greater than oneself that makes the writing ecstatic. Ecstasy is most often discussed in terms of mystical excess. Saint Teresa of Ávila is possibly the poster child for this affect. She described her first ecstasy as follows: “While I was reciting a hymn, there came to me a rapture so sudden that nearly took me out of myself: something I could not doubt, for it was so clear.”

Notice that text is already present the first time Teresa enters ecstasy. It is through recitation that she reaches this point of departure. As if in incorporating the hymn into her body and mind, some of it was displaced. If this sounds awkward, uncomfortable, or even gruesome, it was. She wrote: “These raptures seem like the

very threshold of death, but the suffering they cause brings such joy with it that I do not know of anything comparable.”

The body of the writer / reader is displaced outside oneself in quoting existing words / worlds. Which means, the words are also travelling, moving, escaping themselves.

4. The reciprocal > Carson

The potential reciprocity between body of text and the body of the writer / reader seems implausible, but let's look at the affect even earlier, all the way to Ancient Greece, via the unmatched observations of the one and only Anne Carson. Carson, reading Sappho, makes of ecstasy a “condition”, that is, according to etymology, “a particular mode of being”, which is, in turn, and back to Carson, “typical of mad persons, geniuses and lovers”. Teresa was probably all three.

What is interesting here, is that, according to Carson, “Ecstasy changes Sappho and changes her poem.” There is this mirroring movement again. Carson continues, discussing Sappho but alluding to that which Teresa has already told us “[Sappho] herself, she says, is almost dead. Her poem appears to break down and stop. But then arguably, both of them start up again.” There it is again reiteration, surrender, and reciprocity. And performativity, too, the poet and the poem offering not just body-like movement, but the meta-awareness of it generated in the materiality of the exchange.

5. The loved: Cavarero

So, we have texts that surrender their own bodies to make space for the greater world, mystics who infuse their bodies with holy texts to the point they no longer fit in there themselves, and Greek poets being affected by this displacement, making it into a condition, a whole different mode of being, both for her and her texts. We have not forgotten, reading Teresa, reading Anne, that some of this business is what love performs in us.

Adriana Cavarero, in *Inclinations: A critique of rectitude*, insists that “To fall in love” is “to be moved outside of the self, to give in to the attraction coming from another person and to slide down a slope that pulls irresistibly [...] a big mess for everyone.” This upsettiness, this mess, death-like but also not in contradiction with pleasure, is what allows for the changes that bounce between poet and poem, changing both. The loving displacement of the self in favour of a bodily other, be it human or textual, is, according to Cavarero a “kind of trouble” that “bends and dispossesses the I”, “causing it to get carried away” - ecstasy.

When we cite the world and invite it into our writing, surrendering, giving our own space up in favour of something messier, we, too, perform something akin to love, bending, turning and returning, and, all carried away, like Sappho, stopping and starting, negotiating with each other a reason to be.

6. The unhinged: McKittrick

And in this cadavre exquis, not quite dead but in the throws of the borrowed saintly agonies, reciprocating affect, if you will, there is a build up, something like love.

The piece of resistance in this sequence I am proposing is another absolute favourite, Katherine McKittrick's 2021 "Footnotes (books and papers scattered about the floor), a chapter of *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Quick thanks here to Helena Hunter for the recommendation, a million years ago. In this glorious text, McKittrick proposes a way of citing that is not so much to do with the demonstration of authority and readerly prowess, but as a way of inclining, like Cavarero, to the other. I will read a whole chunk because the whole thing is delicious:

“What of the practice of referencing, sourcing, and crediting is always bursting with intellectual life and takes us outside ourselves? What if we read outside ourselves not for ourselves but to actively unknow ourselves, to unhinge, and thus come to know each other, intellectually, inside and outside the academy, as collaborators of collective and generous and capacious stories? Unknowing ourselves. [...] The unhinging, unknowing ourselves, opens up learning processes that are uninterested in a self that is economized by citations. And still, displacing the self, unknowing who we are, is awful [...]. Perhaps the function of communication, referencing, citation, is not to master knowing and centralise our knowingness, but to share how we know, and share how we came to know imperfect

and sometimes unintelligible but always hopeful and practical ways to live this world as black. [...] Citing is not easy. Referencing is hard.”

McKittrick’s unhinging takes the inclination and removes the frame, completely opens up to unknowing the self in the process of knowing the other. “A practice”, that, again, “[...] that takes us outside ourselves”.

This is where it comes full circle. This is the climax. This is where the argument lifts off and abandons its own body to become something else: this is when ecstatic citations, or ecstatic writing fuses into meaning in the greater elsewhere.

7. The defined: ecstatic writing

We call ecstatic writing, writing that is performative, that is, that exists for the sake of its own materiality as well as meaning; and willingly and possibly even painfully, surrenders its own space to the Other. In standing outside itself, the body of text mimics the body of the reader/writer, creating an affective connection between the two, and creating opportunity for discourse formation that is based on decentered awe and unknowability, rather than on reassured stability. Here, we come to understand writing that stands outside oneself as a creative literary device that uses citation to iterate its own existence and create a loving, mad, genius condition, performing itself again, changing something about the bodies of the text, of the writer/reader, and of the world in the process.