

## The World of Words: 'Ghost Writing' with Lance Olsen



### **NIETZSCHE'S KISSES**

LANCE OLSEN  
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AN INTERVIEW WITH LANCE  
OLSEN  
BY RAINER J. HANSHE

Lance Olsen is author of six novels, four critical studies, four short-story collections, a poetry chapbook, and *Rebel Yell: A Guide to Fiction Writing*, as well as editor of two collections of essays about literary innovation. His novel *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award. His

short stories, essays, poems, and reviews have appeared in a wide variety of journals and anthologies, including Fiction International, Iowa Review, Village Voice, Time Out, BOMB, Gulf Coast, Electronic Book Review, and Best American Non-Required Reading. A Pushcart Prize recipient and former Idaho Writer-in-Residence, Olsen serves as Chair of the Board of Directors at FC2. He lives corporeally with his wife, assemblage-artist Andi Olsen, in the mountains of central Idaho, and digitally at [lanceolsen.com](http://lanceolsen.com). His most recent novel is *Nietzsche's Kisses*. [Shoemaker & Hoard](#) is publishing his next. To read Hanshe's review of Olsen's novel, please visit our [Reviews](#) section of the site.

On October 13, 2006, Olsen read an excerpt from *Nietzsche's Kisses* at the Nietzsche Circle *a la Greco* symposium in New York City, **NIETZSCHE NOW**, held in honor of Nietzsche's birthday. It was a celebration at which both Apollo and Dionysus were present. . . Lamenting the obscurity into which exemplary novels are cast, Edward Dahlberg noted that hardly "a book of human worth, be it heaven's own secret, is

honestly placed before the reader; it is either shunned, given a Periclean funeral oration in a hundred and fifty words, or interred in the potter's field of the newspapers back pages.” Olsen's novel is a book of deep human worth. It deserves wide readership. May it not suffer as have our other masterpieces. . . This interview was conducted over the summer via e-mail between Turkey and Idaho. Now, may it reach other hemispheres.

**NC:** In part three of *Nietzsche's Kisses*, you describe in graphic detail and with startling vividness Nietzsche giving birth after excising his heart from out his rib cage. Pregnancy is a motif which Nietzsche employs in numerous aphorisms as well as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to express the act of creation. In *The Gay Science*, he declared that philosophers must give birth to their thoughts out of their “pain and, like mothers endow them with all [they] have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate, and catastrophe.” Was the process of writing or giving birth to *Nietzsche's Kisses* analogous to the experience the character Nietzsche has when giving birth?

**LO:** *Nietzsche's Kisses* endured an extraordinarily long gestation period—in a sense, nearly thirty years. There are many Nietzsches, of course, and the one I fell in love with first was the existentialist in a philosophy course on the subject I took as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin in 1976 or 1977. I adored his fierce, aphoristic intelligence, his ability to termite through assumptions, his refusal to see the world simply. Not long after that, I began writing fiction seriously, and, although I thought I had put the philosopher behind me, he turned up in my third published story, a surreal piece called “Friedrich Nietzsche's Birthday Party” (1980), images and even lines from which buoy to the surface of the hallucinatory sequence toward the end of *Nietzsche's Kisses*.

When I met him again, it was in graduate school during the early eighties while working on my Ph.D. at the University of Virginia. This incarnation, introduced to me by Walter Sokel, took the form of the poststructuralist, the one who in complex and diverse ways ghosted the writings of such thinkers as Derrida and Foucault. While it would be facile to name a single thing Nietzsche stands for in my mind, at least one of them is that

intellectual possibility space where everything can and should be thought, tried, unwritten, tilted, troubled. For me, his is a philosophy of indeterminacy and destabilization that ultimately represents a philosophy of liberation.

From that meeting on, I somehow could never quite shake him. He stayed with me in one form or another through the decades, as he tends to do with some people, although at the time I had no idea I would ever attempt a novel about him. I taught him through the nineties, especially *Twilight of the Idols*, an amazing text that concentrates his later thought into a laser beam fewer than one hundred pages long, and, as a result, began reading the biographies and his electric letters in addition to the major and minor works.

But it was the gap in the internal record of his life that occurred after January 3, 1889, that caught my imagination and started the slow burn that would become *Nietzsche's Kisses*. By late 2001 or early 2002 I knew I wanted to engage with him in an extended way in my fiction, but was daunted by the prospect of trying to inhabit something analogous to the rhythms of his thought and prose from the inside out. I suppose that's where the real birthing commenced. It turned out to be the most exhilarating and difficult and satisfying project I've undertaken.

**NC:** To speak of Nietzsche as something you encountered is striking—it wasn't merely an encounter with a text, but something else altogether, something far more palpable, something perhaps uncanny. David Krell referred to Nietzsche as infectious and Geoff Waite as a kind of infection, yet he seems more like a rich and positive vector which has the potential to disrupt, transform, and, as you stated, *to liberate*. However, what else is 'Nietzsche'? The liminal space between Nietzsche's collapse and his death eleven years later is relatively obscure and few have written of it. Your portrait of Nietzsche is neither wholly mythic nor idealized, but a fuller, more complete expression, a portrait which seems revelatory, an opening up of a new way of encountering and seeing Nietzsche. A vision which does not occlude anything, but which comprises everything, yet never closes off or defines Nietzsche with absoluteness. When you began writing, were you intent on shattering the prototypical image of Nietzsche?

**LO:** What puts a hole in my heart is the distance between that multifarious consciousness we think of when we say the word “Nietzsche,” the one that embodies everything from virus to vector, and the one shredding on that bed in that little room on the upper floor of that house on the hill in Weimar, now the pawn of his sister, his unraveling body, the disease eating away at his brain. It’s in that sad, disjunctive zone where the novel commenced finding its pulse and shape. From the start I wanted to try to understand Nietzsche—my Nietzsche, or Nietzsches—as much as one can do such a thing, from the inside out, trace the way his rhizomatic mind moved, and so I wanted to compose a narrative in which, in a sense, almost nothing happens externally. The real-time plot, after all, is no more than this: Nietzsche lies in bed during his last few hours on the planet, drifting among half-thoughts, half-memories, and visions. Yet what fascinated me were precisely the worlds going on in his skull. That’s where he lives. That’s where he dies.

It has always seemed extraordinary to me how many of him there were, both on the page and off, and so, yes, I wanted to resist any sort of prototypical sense of him, if in fact there still is a prototypical sense of him, and instead conceive of Nietzsche, and hence the scenes in the book, as prismatic in nature. That is, I hoped each scene would unfold a slightly different version of him, separate the white light that’s come to us down through the years into something that at least gestures toward a full spectrum, from the human, all-too-human, to the effulgent psyche that I imagine stunned most of us reading this the first time we encountered it.

**NC:** One of the perils of composing a narrative in which practically nothing external occurs is that it could be completely inert, yet *Nietzsche’s Kisses* could not be more mercurial. While the events of the novel occur during the final hours of Nietzsche’s life, they are not limited to those brief instances; instead, the book nimbly leaps through time and the reader is witness to Nietzsche’s entire life, though full, as you said, of “half-thoughts, half-memories, and hallucinations.” When setting to create this work, were there specific events you felt compelled to depict, events which were perhaps emblematic of Nietzsche’s life and philosophy and which you could not refuse depicting? In creating this fictive but at times true account of Nietzsche’s existence, how did you choose

between what you would and wouldn't include and at what moments were you propelled to be purely inventive?

**LO:** For the last fifty years or so, The Novel's demise has been broadcast on an almost weekly basis. Yet it strikes me that whatever happens, however else the geography of the imagination might modify in the future in, say, the digital ether, The Novel will continue to survive for some long time to come because it is able to investigate and cherish two things that film, music, painting, dance, architecture, drama, podcasts, cellphone exchanges, and even poetry can't in a lush, protracted mode. The first is the intricacy and beauty of language—especially the polyphonic qualities of it to which Bakhtin first drew our attention. And the second is human consciousness. What other art form allows one to feel we are entering and inhabiting another mind for hundreds of pages and several weeks on end?

As far as where my own attention settled when writing, what surprised me and fired my fancy most were, as I say, less specific events (although, of course, there were those) than the lacks in the historical record begging to be filled. We've all heard about the whipped horse, for example, but no one knows precisely what went on at that instant, especially from Nietzsche's point of view. We all know about Nietzsche's torqued relationship with his sister, Lisbeth, but no one knows precisely the whys and wherefores of it. Historians and biographers can tell you, if they are lucky, what transpired on a particular day, and perhaps something about the larger forces that impinged on the instant. Only novelists can offer thought experiments about the why of the happening, what it might have felt like, smelled like, tasted like, in a manner that feels three-dimensional to the reader.

By doing so, of course, she or he reminds us of the fictional underpinnings of all pasts. Part of what I wanted to explore was how postmodern historical fiction announces pastness as a narrative continually being rewritten, rethought, re-presented. One can only compose a past that wasn't the past, much the same way one can only write presents that are constantly about their absences. If the genre of science fiction teaches us, not what the future will be like, but how the future will remain permanently unknowable, then

historical fiction such as *Nietzsche's Kisses* executes a similar function with respect to history and memory.

**NC:** The idea of the fictive underpinnings of all pasts and of re-thinking, re-visioning, and re-writing pastness also accords well with Nietzsche's notion of redemption in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "To redeem that which has passed away and to recreate all "It was" into a "Thus I willed it!" – that alone should I call redemption! Will – that is the liberator and joy-bringer." Yet, the will is also a prisoner which is powerless with respect to what has been done; it cannot break time and will backwards as Zarathustra informs his disciples. The eternal return of the same is the terrifying challenge which denies our ability to rewrite the past and few are able to live up to Zarathustra-Nietzsche's exacting demand. Do you think our memory of the past, or events which, for certain, we know have occurred, can impede the rewriting of history? Do you believe the narrative of the past can actually be rewritten? Will not that new history be only a thought experiment and never a 'truth'?

**LO:** Perhaps it's best to say I'm double-minded with regard to the idea of history. On the one hand, surely events which we know have occurred must impede the rewriting of it. On the other, as soon as we begin to recount those events we begin to edit. We choose to emphasize this over that. We leave the other thing out altogether. We tell the historical narrative from a certain point of view. We misremember. We forget. We consciously or unconsciously fudge the facts. We can't agree with others about what, precisely, happened, or when, or what it must have felt like.

For the first several years of my life, I grew up with my sister in a jungle compound in Venezuela. My father was helping set up an oil refinery there. Recently my sister and I tried to share memories of events that we "knew" had occurred. But just the opposite unfolded. I ended up recalling events which I am sure happened to me that she is just as sure happened to her. I couldn't recollect some events she said I partook in. She couldn't recollect others I swear she had partaken in. Who's to say? In our case, there is no absolute perspective from which we can gain the "truth." We aren't left with events. We

are left with memories. My sister and I agree that they are deeply flawed, but we don't know how.

Those are the moments that intrigue me—the ones, as it were, that occur off the record. Or those that occur on the record, but variously, depending on who you are and where you stand with respect to the subject at hand. The effect is Einsteinian, or perhaps Escherian. So, for me, yes, history impedes our rewriting of history at the same time the narrative of the past is always being rewritten—by individuals, by the state, by advertisers, by victors, by victims, by historians. In that sense, every history is a new history, and every new history an exercise in problematizing what Barthes called the “given” or “what goes without saying” in our culture. History has at certain times appeared as “natural” or unproblematically common-sensical. It's that notion I found myself exploring.

**NC:** While in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche playfully recreated his own past, he always, however much he questioned it, remained concerned with truth (or truths) and clearly distinguished between what was pure fable and what more than likely true. In a letter to Peter Gast, Nietzsche tellingly referred to *Ecce Homo* as “an incredible piece of literature”, implying, rather clearly, that while a narrativization of his past, he did not mistake it for a true representation of his “history”. How might memory and our reliance upon it distort our ability to have some sense of truths, of what probably occurred, for memory is clearly full of vagaries and untrustworthy? At what point does recreating a narrative of history or one's own past become an act of delusion or an escape from what may be a tragic reality someone is unable to live with, which Nietzsche would find symptomatic of weakness or decadence? When does the postmodern revision or rethinking of history become dangerous, a way of erasing history in order to deny or to support whatever one wishes to establish as true or as a truth?

**LO:** It's remarkable, isn't it, how memory has a mind of its own. If we grant that, I suppose it's not too great a leap to propose, as everyone from the poststructuralists to authors as various as Philip K. Dick and Beckett have done, that narrativizing one's self

and therefore one's history is always-already some sort of "delusion"—a profoundly necessary one, I'm sure most of us would agree, if we are to remain what we think of as sane and whole, yet a "delusion" nonetheless. At this point the Nietzsche who finds such a gesture a sign of weakness or decadence and I may have to part company. In the scenes in *Nietzsche's Kisses* where Nietzsche struggles to remember if he is remembering, or simply imagining he is remembering, I want to suggest such lapses are less failures than revelations about what it means to be a human being. We are the animals that by nature misapprehend and forget.

While it's clear that situation can and has become dangerous in a negative, non-Nietzschean sense, as you say, if we raise this forgetfulness and misapprehension to a cultural project, it is also clear this is precisely what our governments, entertainment industry, and academic institutions have tended to do. That is, ideological state apparatuses repeat re-edited narratives to us so many times that many of us begin to believe those narratives represent "truths" about the world, our motivations, our fears, and so on. We don't need to go much farther than, say, George Bush's continued recasting of the story about why the U.S. invaded Iraq, or the structure of most sit-coms that tell us life-problems can find simple solutions within twenty-two minutes plus commercials, to see the mechanism at work in its most insidious form.

The question is this: How, in our pluriverse of simulation and spectacle, can we resist such an impulse, or, more unnerving still: is such an impulse simply hard-wired into that forgetful animal, interpellated into the subject, in a way that can't be thought beyond?

**NC:** In *Nietzsche's Kisses*, did you intend to include the other aspect of Nietzsche's history that may have been left out altogether, to tell his narrative from instead of a single point of view, multiple points of view, to reveal what he misremembered or what he forgot, or what biographers have chosen not to write of and not to present an absolute perspective, but a shifting, protean perspective which would remain an experiment, therefore open? Did you think that shifting the narrative perspective throughout from



first, to second, to third person in *Nietzsche's Kisses* was the most apposite formalistic device for interrogating the "given"?

**LO:** I like your adjectival allusion to Proteus and thereby the acts of shape-shifting and wrestling associated with him. That's precisely the sort of experience I wanted to create in the reader through the use of the three points of view in each chapter: the first-person, representing real-time (his last night on earth); the second-, representing dream-time (a series of hallucinations, each tied in some way to an organ of the body); and the third-, representing a failed attempt on Nietzsche's part to pin down memory and therefore history. The consequence, I hope, is for the reader to feel increasingly unmoored in time and space, in fact and fiction, in "selfhood" and "personality."

I wanted to add to that impression by employing three very different sorts of language as well. The first-person sections are marked by what I think of as lyrical metalogic discourse; the second-person ones by backbroke sentences that approximate stream-of-consciousness, or, better, a language of madness that isn't quite mad; and the third-person ones by more conventional sentences that approximate mimetic discourse and its assumptions while, in a sense, also refusing it—that is, those sentences usually work according to conventional fiction's syntax, but the scenes built from them work against logic, absolute perspective, the "given" in multiple ways (they are, for instance, achronological; each often bears a metaphoric rather than metonymic relationship to those around it; they are shot through with misrememberings, confabulations, speculations; etc.).

Reading, then, becomes a hovering that might be in some way correspond to my early reading experiences of Nietzsche's texts: that impression I had—that, I want to say, many of us have when first reading him—that everything I once took for granted about language and the world had been bracketed.

**NC:** If narrativization of the self and one's history is necessary to remain sane and whole, isn't it also, though perhaps only when at an extreme, what might propel one beyond the limit of sanity? Once Nietzsche actually believed he was "all of the names in history" he

was lost to himself and the world, and there are countless other 'madmen' who suffer similar delusions. Is the revelation of being human, all-too-human not then that the very thing which is necessary to retain our sanity and wholeness (if one can even think of sanity and wholeness) might also be the same thing which may separate us from Being? And, perhaps you break here with Nietzsche too, but isn't the human the animal which must be overcome, the bridge or rope towards the Overhuman? The Nietzsche who distorts his history without knowing it seems to be the Nietzsche who has lost his *Wissenschaft*, the Nietzsche who is no longer concerned with overcoming humanity, but who gives in. Isn't "resisting the impulse" part of striving towards overcoming what is human, all-too-human in us and struggling to become greater, to live up to the demand of the eternal return so that we don't have to misremember?

**LO:** This is perhaps a good time to offer an italicized caveat: that these sentences are being spoken by a fiction writer, not a trained philosopher—although the canyon between the two professions, as Nietzsche's critifictional imagination continuously proved with force, isn't, clearly, as grand as it may at first appear. In any case: narrativization is a synonym for being human. This animal just can't stop telling contradicting stories about itself, its beliefs, its desires, its fears, its thoughts, its fairytales. The act itself strikes me as a neutral yet indispensable one. It can and has taken our species everywhere, from what we might think of as sane and whole to what we might think of as mad and multiple. I can't imagine humans who don't instinctively make their lives, their days, their hours, their minutes into fictions that generate a sense of continuity, pastness, future, the impression of stable selfhood.

But, as you imply, it's another matter altogether to speak of the relationship of those fictions to Being. I'm not quite sure how we could even go about talking about what you or I or a bus driver in Bonn believes to be Being without using narrative, yet as soon as we engage in such a project we separate ourselves from—or at least severely perplex our relationship to—the very thing we think we're talking about. While I don't want to say it is impossible to narrativize Being in a way that captures some of its drift and sway, I also don't want to say any of us would necessarily be able to agree about any especially

important fact concerning it. Most of us seem to be able to agree only about the true and trivial—this is red, for instance, and that is a rug, as the logical positivists would point out—but never about what constitutes such troubling concepts as goodness or god or intellectual growth. And yet we can't stop ourselves from the telling. What an astonishing situation.

The notion of the *Übermensch* for me is a strong metaphor of overcoming that we must reinvent every moment we're alive only to fail at forever. It represents potential, an almost-something, that acts, in our most self-examined instants, as a reminder, a deferred desire. So it makes perfect sense to me that Nietzsche himself could only attain occasional glimpses of that beautiful unicorn in his life—as opposed to his Zarathustraean writings.

My own experience suggests we're bound to give in, that in the end breathing doesn't work.

**NC:** While Nietzsche is the primary character of your novel, its main theme seems to be consciousness itself: how it functions, how it is affected by the body, how the body or self is affected by it in varying states of sanity, health, etc., and what kind of language each of these states produces. The importance of the relationship between the body and thought (or language) is something Nietzsche emphasized again and again; it is only when language arises out of the body that it seems authentic and Zarathustra states that it is only writing done with blood that he esteems. How significant is the relationship between the body and language to you, and were there specific hallucinations you found more akin to the different organs you chose to employ as chapter headings in *Nietzsche's Kisses*?

**LO:** I'm not sure it would be particularly interesting to lay out the connections I intuited between certain organs and certain hallucinations in my novel, but, yes, they're there and conscious choices. I do want to emphasize, though, that I can't conceive how language could exist without body—to think it, to speak it, to read it, to bring another's into oneself. I suppose there are those Cartesians among us who imagine language as product

of mind, and therefore separate—or at least at a great remove—from body, but mind, of course, is a product of body (one can't have the former without the latter), and language therefore an expression that finds its source, ultimately, as Nietzsche says, in our very fluids.

Lately I've been reading William Gass's *A Temple of Texts*, a collection of lovely essays about some of his favorite pieces of fiction and philosophy. Every gesture of criticism, of theory, is an act of spiritual autobiography, and Gass's reveals less about those works he discusses than about his glorious obsession with perfect prose. He spends a paragraph, by way of illustration, delighting in an author's use of the letter "i" in a sentence. *That's* the sort of world of words that defines the novel in particular and fiction in general for me. I'm not interested in those iterations that want to be screenplays when they grow up. I'm interested in those that want to do the thing that only they can do. That's why no director will ever be able to make a fully satisfying rendition of a novel like *Lolita*, I suspect. Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne seem to believe the heart of that book has something to do with a naughty narrative about pedophilia, but nothing could be farther from the case. The heart of the book has to do with how a brilliant, funny, amoral, and excruciatingly besieged consciousness subtly crumples, and it has to do with a love affair, as Nabokov reminds us in his afterword, not with "topical trash" and "the copulation of clichés," but with the "English language" and "aesthetic bliss."

*Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins*—what astonishes about those nine words, makes them immovable in my memory, is how they announce, not only a murderous narrative about hobbled love, an acidic satire about the bubblegum-chewing brashness named America, but also the event of language. Closer to the phrasings of resonant lyric than the vapid transparencies of fictions that think they're films, this luminous opening houses Nabokov's novel in miniature: a misshapen consciousness in motion, yes, but, equally, if not more so, the drama of alliteration, assonance, rhythm, self-reflexive verbal surprise, the pleasure of lovingly sculpted prose, the delight in density and detail, each phrase of it written on the back of an index card until it was right beyond belief by that distinguished, trilingual, virtually apolitical Anglophile, so that the reader can hear in this initial linguistic fervor, if he or she listens attentively, the foreshadowing of Humbert Humbert's

burning dyspepsia during the famous seduction scene at the Enchanted Hunters half a book later; in the clash between the spiritual housed within the first bright metaphor and within the fiery sinfulness of the second the ghost of St. Augustine's brutally conflicted *Confessions*; in the "lee" comprising the second syllable of the nymphet's pseudonym (Humbert has stolen poor Dolores Haze's name from her just as he will come to steal everything else) Poe's poem "Annabel Lee," and hence the Annabel Leigh who unreliable Humbert blames (by way of that Viennese quack, Freud) for his, Humbert's, fixation.

**NC:** In the chapter "bowels" it occurs to Nietzsche that "for some people consciousness is a dangerous tenement whose rooms they should never enter alone" (109); thought such as Nietzsche's is dangerous in the most admirable sense, while it also terrifies and invokes fear. For your Nietzsche, after he encounters Schopenhauer, "sentence" is a word which is suddenly insufficient for expressing his thought; he refers to Schopenhauer's thoughts rather as words "written with gunpowder instead of ink" and that "they aren't at all *sentences*" but "they are *teeth*" (44). In one of the most notable and harrowing scenes in the novel, Wagner, who through mis-memory becomes Nietzsche's father too, is a kind of Sadean dentist who performs a horrific operation on Nietzsche; this single scene expresses not only Nietzsche's complex relationship with Wagner, but, in myriad ways, the relationship of Nietzsche to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which at once fears and is in awe of Nietzsche's 'teeth', often the scapegoat for everything from eugenics to fascism, as well as an intertext in or influence upon many of the most significant works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Did anything specific provoke the creation of this scene, and were there explicit things which you sought to express with it?

**LO:** I usually think about my fiction a good deal before executing it, but in the case of what I think of as the Organ Scenes, a very strange thing occurred, something that had never occurred to me in quite the same way before: almost every one of them arrived first as a dream. I imagine this had to do in good part with the fact that, by a certain point in the process of composition, I was living and breathing Nietzsche—rereading his work,

steeping myself in biographies and critical studies, examining photos of Nietzsche and those who played important roles in his life, reviewing notes I made and video I shot of the sites associated with him that I visited in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Consequently, my unconscious probably started conspiring behind my back. Naturally, I crafted and recrafted what it gave me, but, when I look back over them, the Organ Scenes don't quite feel like I was the one who created them.

The scene you mention in particular is for me all about power relations, how the father figure and the son are always locked in a kind of death struggle that, from a certain vantage point, the son will always lose. It's perhaps illuminating to remember that, had Nietzsche's father lived, he would have been the same age as Wagner.

**NC:** In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, realism was primarily abandoned in favor of narratives which brought into play not only stream-of-consciousness but employed fragmentation, discontinuity, and refused to offer closure; in a sense, such narrative forms could, if one metamorphosizes the word, be considered realist, that is, not 'realist' in its known sense, but realist in a new sense, for they more truly reflect human consciousness, a 'real' which includes the fantastic, the irrational, and the absurd. From Joyce to Musil to Goytisolo, many novelists, and you obviously have similar concerns, through reacting against verisimilitude are in search of something further communicative of consciousness, of a form which expresses more truthfully reality as we know it. Would you consider *Nietzsche's Kisses* realist in this sense?

**LO:** Absolutely. If one can locate an analogue to the nineteenth-century novel by, say, Dickens or Flaubert in a photograph, then one can locate an analogue to the modern novel by, say, Faulkner or Woolf in an x-ray, and to the postmodern novel by, say, Kathy Acker or, more recently, Mark Danielewski in the fast, multidimensional, hypertextual, infinite space of deferral called the World Wide Web. Each mode seeks to capture a kind of "reality," the way the universe comes to us at a particular time and place. The crucial question for novelists composing here and now, when the outrageousness of "fact" seems to have swamped "fiction's" ability to compete, and the novel itself has attained a

secondary status in our culture of spectacular entertainment with respect to film, the internet, and so forth, is this: How do we capture what it feels like to exist, to experience experience in a way that at least *seems* to matter?

**NC:** While influence is often unconscious, aside from the works you noted as “essential to [the] novel’s composition” in the acknowledgements, were there other non-Nietzschean works you read during the creation of the novel which you think may have affected it and which it would be different without? And did you read the other fictionalizations of Nietzsche’s life before writing your own?

**LO:** It was a deliberate early decision on my part not to read any other fictionalizations of Nietzsche’s life. I wanted to make sure that no other fictive versions of the philosopher contaminated the creation of my own. Having said that, it soon became clear to me that, in a sense, all the non-fictive portraits of Nietzsche were, for all the reasons we’ve already discussed, also narrativizations, and, hence, categories of fiction, too—including, of course, the ones the flesh-and-blood Zarathustra gave us.

It is difficult to remember most of what I read while working on *Nietzsche’s Kisses*, but I recall vividly that, while tracking Nietzsche’s traces through Europe, my wife and I read the wonderful Hans Walter Gabler edition of Joyce’s *Ulysses* to each other in the evenings. It had been a good ten years since I last re-read it, and the realization struck me again with great power that it, along with the likes of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and, most recently, Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, really is one of the great innovative encyclopedic novels. What I love is how Joyce adopts a wholly new style and form for each of the book’s eighteen chapters, so the reader continuously has to regain his or her narratological footing as he or she proceeds. *Ulysses* represents text as challenge, as Nietzsche wanted our lives to be. And some of those chapters—Hades, for instance, where Bloom attends Dignam’s funeral; Nausicaa, where lame Gerty MacDowell sits and thinks on Sandymount Strand while Bloom masturbates; Circe, where German expressionist drama collides with French surrealism in the brothel of the mind; and, of course, Penelope, where Molly’s stream-of-consciousness language is all liquid and light and eight sentences over forty pages—are simply,

movingly, technically splendid. I suspect they all made it into *Nietzsche's Kisses* in various elliptical ways, and I hope immersing myself in Joyce's language kept my own more muscular. One's writing is only as good as the best books one has read over the last six months or so, and I wanted to surround myself with some of the most flawless and stimulating I could find.

A list of other novels I imagine infiltrated the composition of my own would probably have to include Carlos Fuentes's *Death of Artemeo Cruz*, the narrative of a man on his death bed who looks back over his life, although I haven't read it since first encountering it in graduate school nearly twenty-five years ago; Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, whose beautiful prose and brilliant engagement with a historical figure (in Cunningham's case, Virginia Woolf) was very much fresh in my mind and inspirational when I was writing about Nietzsche; and, perhaps oddly, both for their diverse linguistic sparkle and ruthless exploration of consciousness, Beckett's *How It Is* and William Gass's *The Tunnel*.

**NC:** In a recent interview you noted that many modern novels "act as rough drafts for movies," while in another you stated that novels "can mine psychology in ways that films can't" for they "are all about depth and taking one's time." Yet, a director like Bergman is concerned primarily with human psychology and experiencing his films is like scuba diving into the human soul, while Tarkovski (and contemporary directors like Bela Tarr and Kiarostami) elongates and expands time as perhaps very few modern novelists are courageous enough to do. In what way do you believe cinema, which is perhaps able to express in a more mercurial way multiple dimensions of consciousness at once, has positively affected or influenced the novel as well as your own writing, for there is something cinematic about *Nietzsche's Kisses*? Also, who for you are the innovative novelists of our era, novelists who stand in opposition to such trends (as you justifiably criticize) and are writing *a rebours*?

**LO:** Because of film's inherent relative briefness, even in its most lingering form via a Warhol or Matthew Barney, and its relentless emphasis on the visual, on surface glisten,



it simply can't engage with consciousness to the extent and with the complexity the novel can, and certainly not, as it were, from the inside out. This is most likely no more than to say that each genre can do certain things other genres can't, and can't do certain things other genres can. I adore film as a medium, and, as Donald Barthelme pointed out many years ago, the contemporary novel tends to be more scene-driven, more dedicated to what I think of as the Screenplay Effect, because of its deep awareness of movies, both in terms of its aesthetics and economics. But just as one variety of painting became more abstract, impressionistic, expressionistic and, one could argue, freed up in response to the development of photography, one variety of the novel (I'm thinking here of such writers as Thomas Bernhard, Ben Marcus, Lyn Hejinian, and Diane Williams) has become more abstract and impressionistic and expressionistic and freed up in response to the development of film.

*Nietzsche's Kisses* is both one of those sorts of novels and not one of those sorts of novels. In its language and obsessive concentration on consciousness, it strikes me as an anti-filmic text. But the third-person sections are heavily scene-based, dialogue-driven, and, to that extent, it is a filmic text. It is, I like to believe, also a visual, even painterly, text (my wife is an artist and art historian whose eyes I have come to borrow). Too, there is something in its deep structure that relies heavily on what I think of as the novelistic equivalent of the jump cut and montage. And, at least from my perspective, it is a novel that could not have existed without the presence of certain films and filmmakers in the world. I would be surprised if the spirits of both Herzog's *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and *Land of Silence and Darkness* weren't drifting among its pages, and, in various perhaps odd ways, Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, Lynch's *Lost Highway*, Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*—all on my short list of favorite flicks.

As far as current innovative writers working against or outside the mainstream—ah, there are so many wonderful ones of whom most readers, because of the increasingly gloomy economies of publishing and reviewing, might not have heard. In addition to the ones I've already mentioned in passing, I might mention, by way of the first half dozen that come to mind, Laird Hunt (*The Impossibly*), Steve Tomasula (*Book of Portraiture*), Shelley Jackson (*The Melancholy of Anatomy*), Patrik Ourednick (*Europeana*), Brian

Evenson (*Wavering Knife*), and David Markson (*Wittgenstein's Mistress* and *Vanishing Point*). These are the sorts of books that make me want to go out and write, that keep me going, that refuse to sit still stylistically, structurally, theoretically, that force me to stay awake.

**NC:** To conclude, the event of writing for you seems to include both conscious and unconscious processes; thus, is conscious or unconscious, less thought out writing stronger for you, and can you tell the difference in other writers? From Paul Bowles to James Purdy, many writers claim to be able to and find unconscious writing more significant or moving than what may be considered purely intellectual writing—perhaps one is primarily either a Cartesian or a Nietzschean writer, or perhaps such writers want to play at being inspired by 'the muses' through criticizing purely conscious writing. And in lieu of our discussion of language and the body, when you feel that your writing is not done by you, is it Being, or 'world as text' which is *writing you*, or *to you*, or is it simply the unconscious, which seems to no longer be the self, but something else altogether, the self disintegrated or sacrificed to the night?

**LO:** I think I'm fairly able to distinguish between what you call conscious and unconscious writing when coming across it, if we think of passages from, say, William Burroughs as emblematic of the former, and passages in John Barth as emblematic of the latter. But I find setting forth a binary distinction between the two modes makes each seem much more discrete than in practice it turns out to be. My experience as a writer and reader suggests such a distinction only holds at a distance. Close up to the prose, I sense something much nearer to an intricate double-minded dance between intellect and its opposite, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Every paragraph, certainly, perhaps even every sentence, seems to me some complex interlacing of the two impulses. If, however, we could grant that some writers tend toward the one, while others toward the other, then I would have to say I delight in them both. I can't imagine choosing one over the other. How much more dreary the world of words would be without either!

With respect to your second question, I envision textuality along the lines Roland Barthes does in "The Death of an Author." There he talks about a text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." That is, when composing in The Zone, where everything is right and time goes away and it no longer quite feels like I'm the one doing the work, I imagine myself as a sort of nexus in which a number of tellings (dreams, other writer's rhythms, bits of language I picked up in the street two weeks ago, a detail from a photograph I saw when I was seven, and so forth) speak through me. I renounce any New Age goofiness one might hear in the interstices of such sentences, and of course I don't for a second mean to suggest that the Apollonian mustn't dominate during revision. Rather, for me, every bit of writing I do at the end of the day feels like ... like what? Like ghost writing.

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