

Shifting thoughts on stringy forms

A story:

The vocal cords are folds of skin – not strands like guitar strings, as their name might suggest.

FM Alexander had gotten himself into a bind. His vocal cords were a jumbled heap of macaroni. He couldn't utter a word. He was so tense from the shoulders up, his vocal box so compressed by the tightly knitted muscles of his neck, that his chosen profession – acting – was impracticable. Recoiling from the prospect of a life of frustration, pain and disappointment, he approached the problem in a way that fundamentally differed from any his dramatic training might have suggested. He adopted the scientific method: hypothesising, experimenting, analysing and eventually concluding that his behaviour was the cause of his own misfortune and that the only remedy to his handicap was for him to do nothing – to leave his cords alone. But how to “do nothing”? Surely the doing itself was a “something” that precluded a “nothing”?

“Explorers are always lost”, she said. And, by way of introduction: “I think it's when you're lost that you're the most present.”¹

FM learned (though it took him some years) that the ball atop his neck – the grey matter it contained – was the answer to both his doing and his undoing. The solution lay in deculturing himself; letting go of what his friend and disciple² called the “greedy *end-gaining*”, which hooks us into doing, being and moving in the wound-up way we all do.

Prioritising outcome over process had led FM to rearrange his own forms in a disabling way. He isn't alone in this; the tendency to rush to the finishing line is everywhere and glory is spent before effort is paid. The habit is as common and self-defeating as our attempts to control time itself. It produces weird and wonderful shapes: shoulders end up where only ears should go, hips pitch and tilt, destabilising an even keel. Spines curl left and right, sculpting our bodies into more intriguing, more original, more painful shapes. Habit's sharp little fingers are always at the ready, waiting to claw the soft loops of our lives, our threading veins and soft nervous tangles – to grip them into tighter shapes or draw them out in unpredictable directions.

¹ Tania Kovats talking about her work, and her residency at the University of Cambridge's astronomy department, 25th October 2013.

² Aldous Huxley

The hooks of habit that gripped FM's throat bunched his vocal cords into a tightly packed ball of mute matter for years. Finally, after the doing of much nothing and allowing his material components: muscles, tendons, veins and skin to return to an unaffected state, the hooks of habit let his neck be free, and the balled up skein of vocal tissue came undone with a silent sigh.

A script for our shifting bodies:

*We sometimes call this procedure 'Monkey', as the shape of your body resembles that of a monkey, but internally, there is dynamic muscular activity. 'Monkey' can be done in a variety of ways and we are choosing a basic version for our work today. You will end up with your upper body inclined forwards from your hips, your head leading the movement and your legs flexed at all three sets of joints. To maintain yourself in this inclined position, encourage your back to balance you out by lengthening. It is lengthening that will support you and stop you falling further forward. This encourages your back and indeed all your muscles to tone sufficiently. Let's begin.*³

An observation:

Alice Albert was on the Overground train from Stratford, eavesdropping on a conversation between two girls with short springy afros, talking about the ins and outs of hair sculpture and how to dominate individual strands of hair. "I told her, once you start transitioning, it's tough for a while but then you would never choose to go back. I mean: why would you go there and use all those disgusting chemicals!? Plus it's so *expensive*." Alice turned to her academic conditioning for her first response, musing that the politics of afro-hair treatments were alive and well. But then what? What about the processes at the origin of this discussion; the sculptural, physical and chemical work involved in burning a kink, a curl, a frizz into a sleek line (a straight thread instead of a twisted dread or other form)? What about the hair as a shape, or, personified, as an injured being: its reluctance heard and then tamed? A moving image of toxins being brushed in so that on the other side of the discomfort, Cheshire Cat combs of ivory, wood and plastic can smile their way through silky new hair. Combing rigid teeth through straitened locks sculpted by desire, culture and hard work.

Ellen Mara De Wachter, July 2014

³ Carolyn Nicholls, *Body, Breath & Being* (Audio CD), D&B Publishing (2008)