

MIDDLING ENGLISH

I would like to make four points. Four short points about Middling English. The point about the midden. The point about the middling. The point about the middle. The point about the meddle. The midden, the middling, the middle, the meddle.

And a series of intersecting lines or tissues of lines. There are lines that draw from one node to another, one bell to the next, towards the architectonic structure, spatial resonant membranes of interconnections and tendencies. There are the obvious ones, the official line, the family line. The power lines, wired and electrical, electromagnetic landscapes, fibrous and spun. There are lines of travel, trade routes, blood routes. Intense seasonal species' traffic, migratory paths. Fields of uproots, departure knots, severance of the connects. Umbilical cords, lianas, plant ropes, hanging moss, epiphytes, headphones. Plumblines, sonars. Infralines of inseams, subvocalizations. The fine lines that crisscross between belonging, adhering, disappearing. Dissenting lines or lines of flight that sustain or dissolve under lines of fire, buzz lines, rumors. Songlines, memory structures, great pick-up lines. Outlines like edges, silhouettes, phasms,

ghostings, x-rays. They set the wider configurations, the threadings that fall in under a future perfect of English as language practice, what I call Middling English.

the midden

Let's imagine the midden of language. Robert Smithson brought a strong interest in geology to his views of language. Gordon Matta-Clark cut transversally through the structures of a condemned Paris apartment building. Let us cut a cross-section into building-stacks of language. What gets revealed is history and ground. Or rather, ground history, compost, history as compost. Temporariness and excavation. Volatility, weathering and renewal.

Principally, one discovers surprising varieties of soil, ancient yet compilable language bones, pressed word-fossils, collapsed layers, mineral soil, friable clays, dried pigments, decomposed fabric stretches, discontinuous tracings, and much unrecoverable matter. The top layers reveal a far larger extent of familiar elements, traceable glossary, well-defined graphemes, syllabic conduits, what looks like mud-encased capitalizations, gold-dust, systems of numerical sticks, animal feathers, and various types of tools. These trace up letter elements historically, and through the altogether confusing and inventive arche-logics of etymology. Language is its own midden ground.

Letters, sounds, words are discarded from a language during accidental breaks. Or dispensed with, like outmoded cooking utensils.

Or pulled out, like teeth. Entire jawlines of these. Like the widely documented Runic and Old English voiceless fricative / þ / thorn which after 1000 successful years as its own separate glyph disappears in the 14th century due in part to the absence of a corresponding letter-block in the new inscriptive techne of printing. More pronounced of course had been the drastic and planned simplification of syntax, and the removal of declension from English grammar. Nominative values hence less codified, relations between elements less certain, less explicitly coded. End letters and cases now thrown into the linguistic midden. Hierarchies to be confirmed and implemented differently, in more contextually regulated ways. Relations and irregularities tied to habitual assumptions and case work.

Writing records these fundamental ruptures, discontinuities, far more than it delivers stability. The blanketing of continuity appears as so many variations on silence and dominant rule. To locate characters with accent marks, non-English characters and additional symbols in our computer fonts today, still largely ruled by an Anglo-American control over digital linguistics, we have to go to the secondary block 128-255 of the relatively recent Unicode consortium, the first block being the basic ASCII.

The oral historian Alessandro Portelli, whose many interviews during the radicalized decades of Italy in the 1960-70s have made him a valuable thinker of the under-the-radar vitality of oral history for contemporary neo-liberalist culture, argues that fieldwork has to change the fieldworker, that it has to put them on the line, or there can be no useful knowledge acquired from the situation. This

intimate challenge of the role of interviews in social science ensures a practice of local history that is firmly rooted in a wish to validate the impulses of the present, and transform the planned, recorded encounter into an uncertain transaction. For instance, about a song his research team has exhumed, he says: “The emphasis [from other critics] was on the fact that we were discovering these very ancient songs... It bothered me because what I had insisted on was not just that ‘Donna Lombarda’ originated perhaps in the eight century, but that it was being sung in the twentieth.” It strikes me that this oral historian’s prime interest in the singing of the song rather than in the exhumation of its ancientness is not that far removed from the way contemporary writers might relate to the explicit use of historic language detail: as a rich field of lived and deductive approximations, some based on ground research, some on the mysterious pleasure grain of the vocalizing, materializing text. A way of surfing the uneven, unruly canopy of present conditions without assimilating them to a dive in the past.

This work is not for the fake chime of heritage culture. Rather it exists for a proactive and politically “non-absorptive” purpose. The emphasis on liminal cultural excavation and grassroots activity addresses questions of language depth, of time retrieval through cultural proximity and singularized involvement. It does not for instance propose a buried and intrinsic connection between song and singer. This is certainly an interesting way of thinking, for the writer willing to break into the history of her language/s without becoming its prisoner. “We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of

sediments” writes the Martiniquais writer and polemicist Edouard Glissant, who continues: “Sediment begins first with the country in which your drama takes shape.” If this drama is also about the hold of identitarian politics and nationalism, he primarily seeks to go beyond this and imagines a translocal emphasis, what he famously calls relational poetics, based on a mixture of lived and acquired historical particularity and on an understanding of the confusing richness of history within language itself. One that looks for ways to integrate culturally, linguistically the voiding horror of the Middle Passage on Caribbean self-perception, by writing through and beyond the unspeakable:

The landscape of your world is the world’s landscape. But its frontier is open.

The midden is method, and style. Intercepted notions of the past. The tracing up of re-emergents.

the middling

What is the middling of English? A middling is a smoothing over, a tense flattening, an artificial erosion, a surface stiffening. It is a blanket and a spread, a spread of green. Golf turfs are a good example of spatial middling. Heather Akroyd and Dan Harvey are two artists who only ever work with grass, turf, industrial nature, “living mini-lawn” as they call it, that “keeps its green color even under stress”, and grows unimpeded into larger and larger structures. It happens whenever the mind of a language reorganizes blindspots

into potholes, and diffuses or homogenizes political reality into sand-dunes, driving ranges, fairways and hazards. Lisa Roberston's *The Weather*: "Half and then half, delectable and idle, with gleams of fine greenery in the intervals. To the middle of instability, no absolutism. To the end of surfaces, our mistake." Planned, inward-looking fertility, power: a fertilisation of the same. Explicitly having to unforeign one's name, to mask a regional or rural dialect. Passing to pass. Making language take a long soak in its own muddy bathtub. Virginia Woolf's unforgettable description of England at the beginning of the 19th century in *Orlando*. Middling in her book becomes a social and political region where dampness rules, values and feelings shrink, bodies are cold, sexes intensely separate and divided, their interactions minutely coded, language excessive and swollen by the damp's inescapable and pernicious influence. "Thus the British Empire came into existence."

Our weather today of course is thoroughly industrialized, globalization and environmental disasters are the measures of its seasonal currents, enforced migratory displacement mark the guarded bounds of turfed geographies. Political powers not so much flattened as flatlined. For the Jamaican poet Kamau Brathwaite, tidal poetics are the measure of a writing necessarily temporary, since compiling archives becomes physically impossible in the mudfloods, his own failing computer an analogical process of the devastation reaped by the hurricane season. The memory promise of writing here nullified, Brathwaite re-imagines the work of writing in a more performative and locative manner, through the "blinding" ideographic lay-out of his Sycorax environment. He wants readers to read more sensorially,

recover another kind of memory structure. In actual fact, for a while, publishing these sycoraxed texts turns out to be surprisingly difficult as it stretches the complacent (not the technical) standards of much commercial or academic publishing.

A standard inevitably holds on to values that must stiffen articulacy and the rules of literacy in the name of a specific socio-political machine, and its historical legacy. This is reflected not only in impositions of pronunciation standards, and line formations, but also at macro level, in letters and their histories of use. In English, the letter H is the most durably complex that functions nearly like a shibboleth in the way it reflects class, literacy, political regionalism. The Irish playwright and socialist G. B. Shaw, who incidentally fought for and invested much effort and money in the creation of a new phonemic alphabet that would assist literacy enhancement for the many, saw in the always much frowned-on dropping of the H a mark of an irremediable social stratification and snobbism. There are those who take the opportunity of the visual glyph to remember the symbolic force of the trace itself. H becomes a fruitful bridge, a bilingual possibility and material connector at the start of Hélène Cixous's *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, written in English. It is for bp Nichol the absolute passage between I and Self in his *22 letter alphabet*, "Aitch is I's magic ... one rotates into the other, palindromic." Regarding I, the French writer Monique Wittig found it necessary to split it right across the middle, "j/e". The reader would find themselves walking the shifter's plank of French pronominal use towards a queering of the entire language in her *Lesbian Body*. Let us play the I, le jeu du je, as a spatial break and passage from unspoken to speaking.

Some speech regulators and linguists contend today that British English is at threat of dissipation through its widespread top layer as a business-led lingua franca. This is an ironic development. Bolstering a standardized island language as prime export has long been part of a continued expansionist safeguard. The British Council's mission has, since its founding in 1934, always explicitly emphasized the international spread and training of the English language and culture. A controversial artist like Derek Jarman admitted that without its support his work might initially not have circulated as far afield as it did. On the dark side, its current *pep* project, Peace-keeping English Project, is meant to improve exchanges in English among international military and police personnel posted in areas of conflict. "English is the language of interoperability" announces its website, "for multinational forces to communicate effectively with each other."

The point is less whether it is a world language than the kind of world it perpetuates. The point is less whether it is a vehicular language than the kind of vehicle it charters.

Middling then an amnesic soak in landscaped language machine. Turfing the ground and the bounds of an exclusive and representative political language for as long as it will last. Maintaining that the French are not Francophones for instance. Or that the English are not Anglophones. The middling is protective levelling. Like making second-language learning optional in British schools or officially discouraging bilingualism in the home on the grounds that it affects integration to British society. One's integration or one's

contribution? It is obstacle to influence, and rejects confluence. Like still finding gender, or race, as one's main outlook. A wipe out.

"Clearance of one organization to its opposite
is known as no man's
land..."

(Andrea Brady, *Wildfire*)

As the narrator Riddley Walker in the violent postapocalyptic novel of the same name has it: "What ben makes tracks for what wil be. Words in the air pirnt foot steps on the groun for us to put our feet in to."

The middling is a long embedded soak. Obstacle to flux and larger access. Language policies. Occupation, not occupancy.

the middle

At the end of the 14th century, the spelling and fixing of Middle English was very much up for grabs. Chaucer's decision to write in a spoken Southern English idiom helped to confirm the richness and versatility of a linguistic region that was starting to strongly de-frenchify its cultural language, de-latinize its vocabulary's antecedents, and revalue its Anglo-Saxon glossary, while Scandinavian roots were still especially clear and exposed in the syntax and glossary of the North. He made his choices from within the language's active maelstrom of influences and confluences. Everything about Middle English was a mashup on the rise.

The dispersed, intensely regional transformations of English active in the Middle English of Chaucer's days are again to be found in the inventive and adaptive, dispersed, diversely anglo-mixed, anglo-phonetic, anglo-foamic languages practiced around the world today, as they follow or emerge from the grooves of military, commercial, cultural transport and trafficking. This transport flows across both diachronic and synchronic routes, sheds as much as it drags historical account along with itself. The wide reach and deep infiltration of Latin had eventually given way to the emergence of distinct latinate languages. English will eventually break and evolve into separate languages. The geopolitical and complex trans-English realities of many post-colonial nations are already exerting lasting pressure. Languages travel as seeded forms of themselves.

Spelling is ideal as a visual marker of such slow changes. It can shift a letter or word from being a semiotic sign to a semiological icon. It can confront the transformed territorialities of English itself. Radical forms of English spelling have dynamized, signed and performed the activist messages of many spoken/written acted up identitarian and revolutionary arts. Explicitly and efficiently spelling can act as a shorthand for cultural outmodedness and revolutionary revival. The K in Amerika continues to hit a raw institutionalized nerve. It is as iconic a sign as the red, green and black British flag created by artist Chris Ofili in response to Paul Gilroy's "There's no black in the Union Jack." Incidentally, its increased usage in preference to the /c/, also recalls the letter /k/'s preponderance in the Old English of pre-Norman times.

Today, a language's physical manifestation often extends towards electricity and surges. Mediated states, telematic socialization. Spelling daily actively tampered with and coded by shorthand wireless, enhanced by bicultural usage, consumer speed, and digitized mixed writing systems. A text takes on forms that extend language into electronics, data systems, aural proximities, means of generation and dissemination that affect the material and temporal traffic of a nodal series of "pages". The reader's body and skills have been diversifying accordingly: thumbs grow more flexible, ears are longer and prosthetic, eyes readily need the stimulus of a moveable text to read.

Writing of course precedes print culture and will continue after it. Being in formation, new media and communication technologies can help to identify the complex hold-ups to the renewal of the role of writing in culture. For instance, they signal that the forms of exchange and learning most widely sought today place transformative and connective value on locationality, transport and audio-visuality. So what will a contemporary writing environment require and for what purpose? And what is its role? How does it record and store itself? What are its essential elements and tools? How does it perform and how does it read? What does reading mean? How will memory function, what will transcription entail?

Increasingly, writing draws from literary as much as cross-media activities. It is signed through by literal as well as lettered bodies. Poetic art becomes an occupancy of language made manifest through various platforms, a range of instrumental tools and skills

and relativized forms of inscription. From audio performance to complex events, it functions in a logic of relays and of distributive networks, incidentally already inherent in the permutational logic of the alphabetic and indexical systems. This is allowing a reinvestment of literary productions away from often stultifying distribution markets towards dynamic networks, systems of exchange and more open archival structures. If this seems on a par with the displacement of literature as a dominant artform, and publishing's hold on that, the diversification of writing culture goes also way beyond strategic survival or a timely fascination with media flexibility.

Indeed, beyond literary culture, all these questions and issues affect the cultural syntax itself. They are a reminder of the needs awaiting future literacy issues, both linguistic literacy (what we now call communication, multimodal training as well as speech production) and, not one without the other, cultural literacy.

The middle is slang. Processing of new literacy tools. Networks and distributive modes of knowledge. Writing in culture.

the meddle

Spoken, transmitted, inscribed languages are at the root of the imagination of writing. They highlight the social machines that underpin the work: the voices, the languages, the pleasures, the complex nexus of cultural and literary motivations with their access markers, their specific narratives, existential tropes, their polemical procedures and formal devices. It is the writer's role to test out, provoke

the naturalized edges and bounds of language use and rules. She mines language for what is always moving, always escaping. To travel at the heels of writing activates reclaiming zones, fictitious collective memory.

So much holds our bodies, our lives, to separate identitarian account. How does one shift the representational stick-up from the face of the speaker?

I repeat what many have said, that poetic or art language must not implicitly be held to account of identities and national language, the seductions of literary history, or the frequently fetishistic methodologies of art movements, but rather seek, far and close, the indicators and practices of language in flux, of thought in making: pleased language, pressured language, language in heated use, harangued language, forms of language revolutionized by action, polemical language structures that propose an intense deliberate reappraisal of the given world and its given forms.

More often than not, we each use a voice that speaks for us before we get to speak. Quite apart from the ideological implications and beyond palliative arts methodologies, this is why so many of us spend so much of our lives and imagination working at the undoing of a voice or identity we do not wish to be tagged as and questioning the methods of environments we might not wish to represent. It is through this confusing, seemingly self-defeating process of dissociation, of "disloyalty", that other forms of allegiances are made manifest and other conductor channels can be generated.

To meddle with English is to be in the flux that abounds, the large surf of one's clouded contemporaneity. It is a process of social and mental excavation explored to a point of extremity. One that reaches for the irritated, excitable uncertainties of our embodied spoken lives by working with, taking apart, seeing through the imposed complicities of linguistic networks and cultural scaffolds. One which is not only prompted to recognizes what it wishes to fight against: what sedates, what isolates, what immobilizes, what deadens, what perpetuates. But works at it tactically, opportunistically, utilising at will and with relish the many methods, tools, abilities and experiential attitudes it needs. Making a workshop of the surrounding world. Oiling creativity and artistry with critical spirit, since there can be no revolt nor renewal without creative impulse, without anarchic pleasure, without a leap in the dark.

It means implicating one's own life through the gestures and events of one's work. Taking the risk of spitting it out, and of being spat out. There is only so much one should want to do to pass, to be passable, to appear to belong to today.

Anonymity – &onymity – of the writer whose masks have fallen deeply into the pits and currents of language. Rebirth of the songer. Intense magnetism of lines that go through the body like radial songs.

My personal sense of linguistic belonging was not created by showing for the best English I can speak or write, but the most flexible one. To make and irritate English at its epiderm, and at my own.

Something crosses over comes. The borders are as long as the journey, etched in. Words disappear from all sides of the borders. A sudden surge of sweat on crossing the border. National, regional, urban borders, unknown streets, spaces, places, bodies, names, faces. Crossing into something, or someone. The borderline eats up the overspill, makes a long line of corpses. Dialogue is conflict, said the German playwright Heiner Müller. The apprenticeship of dialogue as encounter is necessarily a meddling of boundary, a heightening of points of internalized resistance or ideological differences. One's comprehension meddled with. Then, let us imagine it as contact, a point of uncovering. Rather than retaliation, a point of sharpened attention. Transitive directionality, transitive awareness.

The meddle is collective awareness. Denaturalization of one's personal and cultural premise. Getting lost. Physical and mental effort. New apprenticeship and transformed commitment.