

The Wet and the Dry

(THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE BOOK)

GREY TO GREEN

Sit on the floor in sunlight and read through eight small notebooks going back to 1998 looking for a phrase about Goethe: *The stars above, the plants below*. The thought is connected to Goethe's mother and what she taught him about the natural world; more generally it is about how people lived in constant relation to nature.

I never found the reference; it was something I stumbled across on the Internet, but it led me to *The Flight to Italy*, Goethe's diary (also recommended by Kafka, in *his* diary), in which G. abruptly takes leave of a turgid existence in Weimar and travels incognito to Italy for the first time in his life. He is thirty-seven years old and the trip is a revelation and a creative renewal of mammoth proportions. He draws plants, collects rock samples, and begins to dress like the locals so as to pass and better be able to observe their customs. G. reports on the weather patterns: sublime clouds and sunsets, he develops a theory of precipitation involving the curious concept of 'elasticity.' He looks at architecture and writes of his worshipful love of Palladio; he has a

deep appreciation for Italian painting but rails against the squandering of genius and talent on the "senseless ... stupid subjects" of Christianity.

Because the diary is written quickly, informally, it feels uncannily contemporary. It is hard to believe this is a voice from the late 18th century. In addition to studying everything, G. takes a hard look at himself, and toward the end of the book there is a striking revelation: he confesses his "sickness and ... foolishness," his secret shame that he had never made the trip to Italy before to see first hand its art and architecture, the objects of his lifelong fascination. Two days away from Rome he no longer takes off his clothes to sleep in order to hasten his arrival, and on October 26th, 1786 he writes "...next Sunday [I]'ll be sleeping in Rome after thirty years of wishing and hoping."

The effusive diary abruptly goes silent: "I can say nothing now except I am here ... Only now do I begin to live..." To his Weimar friends he writes: "I'm here and at peace with myself and, it seems, at peace with the whole of my life;" and to his lover, Charlotte von Stein: "I could spend years here without saying much."

Moyra Davey

The Flight to Italy is filled with references to plants and crops; G. even has a theory of a *primal plant form*. But the only star he mentions is the sun.

THE REAL

Now it is a conflict between the idea of writing from the unknown, versus working from notes and journals. Elsewhere, I have compared these different modes of writing to two genres in photography: the *vérité* approach of the street, seizing life and movement with little chance of reprise, and in contrast to this the controlled practice of the studio where the artist is less exposed, the environment more forgiving, time more malleable. And perhaps another iteration of this distinction between risk and control was intimated in something I heard a critic, quoting Godard, say on the radio when I lived in Paris in 2008: “Filmmakers who make installations instead of films are afraid of the real.”

In his seven-hour documentary *Phantom India*, Louis Malle travels all over the sub-continent filming, and later, in voice-over, he analyses and reflects on the intrusion and indiscretion of the camera. Malle will never get over this feeling of impropriety, but he will keep on shooting, hour after hour,

pushing up against the act of documentary in an attempt to understand something about India and something about himself. Much of *Phantom India* is straight-up documentary, but there are moments of intense self-scrutiny and questioning. For instance, when Malle describes his inability to be “present,” to experience the “real” of what is taking place before the camera.

He lives in his head, sometimes thinking of the past, but mostly caught up in a work whose meaning will only be locked in at a future moment. To every new situation his first instinct is to invoke memory and analysis: a scene on a beach at daybreak reminds him of one twenty years earlier when he was making his first film. “A tamer of time, a slave of time” is how Malle understands his predicament. At a certain point he and his crew will stop filming. Only then will they begin to experience the present tense, the slowness of time, and what Malle calls “the real.”

THE WET

Another problem for me now is the welling up of the Wet, the insistent preoccupation with narrating certain aspects of the discredited past, things I may never be ready to tell. Previously I have incited myself to write by

beginning with the most pressing thing, but the problem now is that I can't face writing about the Wet. I think about giving it a masquerade, or perhaps the Wet will duly give way to something else.

This document parallels another one written from notes collected in diaries. That one is accompanied by the uneasy feeling of cannibalizing myself. *This* document, though not a book, is trying to begin according to a principle described by Marguerite Duras: "To be without a subject for a book, without any idea of a book, is to find yourself in front of a book. An immense void. An eventual book. In front of writing, live and naked, something terrible to surmount." I wanted to try, almost as an experiment, to write both ways, one alongside the other in tandem, but already I've begun to fold in notes from that other document...

Was Duras opening her veins? Yes and no. She was also opening the bottle. But she would go at it—writing & drinking—for days and nights. She had stamina, as Sontag would say. And she was not afraid of the Wet.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder:
"The more honestly you put yourself into the story, the more that story will concern others as well."

MARY

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in 1759, ten years after Goethe and two hundred years before my sister Claire, was Wet and Dry. She was a brilliant star in her firmament, a passionate, early advocate of women's, children's, human rights, and an enlightened defender of truth and justice: a radical. She went to Paris to witness the revolution, and lived to tell of the bloody terror of 1793. A woman with enormous intellectual capabilities and savoir-faire, she supported herself and her largely helpless six siblings by writing.

But she also suffered from depression, and broken-hearted over the rejection by her lover, Gilbert Imlay, drank laudanum. In an attempt to revive her he offered a mission of travel to Scandinavia to investigate one of his murky business affairs. Mary accepted because she needed the money and hoped that this continued involvement with Imlay might ensure a positive romantic outcome.

In 1795 she set out on a dangerous ocean voyage with her two-year-old daughter, Fanny, and a French maid. Like Goethe on his travels to Italy, Wollstonecraft wrote letters to Imlay chronicling her observations and emotional responses to the landscape and peoples of Sweden, Norway,

and Denmark. Her heartbreak is softly intimated in the letters, but mostly she reflects and reports with a journalist's eye on the native customs: a feather bed so soft and deep it is like "sinking into the grave"; children swaddled in heavy, insalubrious layers of flannel; airless homes heated with stoves instead of fires—and here, like Goethe, Mary invokes the odd concept of 'elasticity' to talk about the air. Viewing the mummified remains of some nobles, she responds with characteristic indignation: "When I was shewn these human petrefactions, I shrunk back with disgust and horror. 'Ashes to ashes!' thought I—'Dust to dust!'"

After her return home to England Wollstonecraft composed the letters into an extremely well received book titled *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. It was published in 1796, two hundred years before the birth of my son Barney.

ALISON

Soon after I arrived in Paris, shaky with jetlag and insomnia, I asked Alison, my oldest friend, if she'd help me brainstorm some ideas. Bless her, she is always willing and she is a font of ideas and strategies. I was struggling and fearful, convinced I'd do nothing of value

in this city: I took a pill and drank a glass of wine on a cold terrace on the rue de Rivoli, and told her this: "I came to Paris in 1976 just out of high school. I was lonely, depressed, bored, illiterate. I was thin, I was fat, with no control over any it. I was a Francophile with a deep longing to be part of the culture, but I was clueless, infused with teenage ideas about 'the romantic.' A French friend told me emphatically: 'The Romantic is the 19th century. End of story.' I met two Quebecois artists in the Cité des Arts studios. They were friendly but aloof. Thirty years later I am back in Paris with a husband, a son, a life. I have one of those studios. I am thin. I have money. I have MS." Alison's eyes light up: "*That* is the perfect story." But I have no idea how to write a story. About telling certain episodes of your past, Norman Mailer said: "you must be ready." I may never be ready. Some excised paragraphs, the original motivation for this project, now reside in a separate document labeled *Pathography*.

Why does everyone want to tell their story? Why do all of my students talk about 'representing memory'? Why is Amy, in grad school, suddenly confronted with her working class roots, destabilized, obsessed with her childhood? Why is Jane tormented by the past and asking Mom to talk to

her shrink? Why did I spend so much time in Paris, agoraphobic, brooding, tunneling into realms of childhood where I found pockets of it illuminated with a sudden, violent flash?

Isak Dinesen: “The reward of storytelling is to be able to let go ... All sorrows can be born if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.”

Sit on the bed in cold winter light, radiator hissing, my old habit. Later sunlight will come streaming in. I will capture this blinding flood of light, overexpose for a black dog and blow out everything else. And think this: Paris of the mind is preferable to the real thing.

SIBLINGS

At the end of *The Flight to Italy* there are short bios of all the principals in Goethe’s life. His mother, Catharina Elisabeth von Goethe is described as a very supportive woman, and there is a citation from Freud about G. having been his mother’s favorite, and how children singled out in this way retain a lifelong confidence and glow. This led me to Freud’s brief essay “A Childhood Recollection,” an analysis of an early memory G. recounts in his autobiography, of throwing dishes out the window when he was a small child. The episode remained mysterious to

Freud, until, as is typical of his method, he began to hear similar stories from his patients and started to piece together a theory, namely that the throwing of objects out the window is typically linked to a child’s fury and jealousy in response to the arrival of a new baby. I strongly suspect I reacted as, or even more, violently to the births of my five younger siblings. A therapist explained this to me once, and said I should practice self-forgiveness; but it took Freud’s words to cement the notion that my behavior was not a murderous aberration of childhood. A description of one of these cruel episodes of ‘acting-out’ has been excised and relegated to the *Pathography*.

Michael Haneke:

“Artists don’t need shrinks because they can work it out in their work.”

But can we do without Freud?

SHARON & GLORIA

I fell asleep in the afternoon and dreamed I was commiserating with Sharon Hayes about how a work, once finished, is “like a tombstone.” Gloria Naylor said this about her book *The Women of Brewster Place*: “...I had gotten a bound copy of the book which I really call a tombstone because that’s what it represents, at least for my part of the experience.”

The thing is only alive (and by extension, *I* am only alive) while it is in process; and I've never quite figured out how to keep it ignited, moving. Some stubborn gene always threatens to flood the engine just at the crucial moment of shifting gears.

MARY & MARY

Like Goethe's *Flight*, Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, a narrative moderated by a journey, has a special, self-generating momentum: a trip, with its displacements in time and space can be the perfect way to frame a story. Combine this with an epistolary address and it would appear to be the most easeful of forms. *Letters* was the only happy outcome of the Scandinavian trip. Five months after her first suicide attempt, on confirmation that Imlay had a lover, Mary jumped from a bridge in rain-soaked clothing to hasten her descent. She was saved by a boatman and briefly consoled by Imlay who shortly thereafter disappeared for good from the lives of Mary and Fanny. But MW was lucky to find a friend in the person of William Godwin, a sage man who, according to MW biographer Lyndall Gordon, counseled: "A disappointed woman should try to construct happiness 'out of a set of materials within her reach.'"

A year later, in 1797, in love with Godwin, married and pregnant, Mary read Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* aloud with William. The following night, she went into labor and gave birth to a child who would grow up to be Mary Shelley. But the delivery was botched, the placenta did not descend, and a doctor's unwashed hands reached into the womb to tear it out. Sepsis set in, the mother's milk became infected, and puppies were used to draw off lactation. Two hundred years later, in 1997, less than six months after giving birth, I flew across North America with an electric pump to suction the milk from my breasts. But I missed my connection and arrived at my destination twelve hours later with grotesquely engorged breasts. I took a photo in the hotel room, and some years later published it in *LTTR*, a minutely-circulating, queer-feminist journal. Now that photo is all over the Internet, completely out of my control.

Part of the tragic irony of MW's death in childbirth was her own enlightened advocacy of simple hygiene and non-intervention in the care of infants and mothers; suspicious of doctors she was a believer in wholesomeness and common sense in an age of superstition and quackery.

THE SUN

Plants, flowers, crops and nature figure abundantly in the *Letters* and in *The Flight*, less so the stars, though both Wollstonecraft and Goethe—Northerners from cold, rainy climates—en-
these repeatedly in their correspondences about the presence of sunshine. Goethe marvels to his friends about its perpetual abundance in Italy (“these skies, where all day long you don’t have to give a thought to your body”), and for Wollstonecraft in Scandinavia, its effects are central to her evocation of the sublime, which she experiences in her travels along the rocky coast and mountainous landscapes of Sweden and Norway.

The warm reach of the sun was also surely a factor in granting each of them a measure of peace: for Goethe, when he arrives in Rome and no longer feels the need to double his life in writing (“...I am here ... Only now do I begin to live...”), and for Wollstonecraft, during countless moments when nature impresses itself upon her as the salve and renewal of an exhausted, disillusioned spirit. Waking on a ship one morning she greets daybreak with these words: “I opened my bosom to the embraces of nature; and my soul rose to its author...” Two decades later her

daughter Mary Shelley would write from the banks of Lake Geneva: “When the sun bursts forth it is with a splendour and heat unknown in England.”

In 2004 in Needville, Texas an asteroid is named for Mary Wollstonecraft (Minor Planet Center Designation 90481 Wollstonecraft).

LES GODDESSES

Aaron Burr, visiting England from America in 1816, bestowed this epithet on Mary Wollstonecraft’s daughters, Fanny and Mary, and their step-sister Clara Mary Jane Clairmont, known then as Jane and later as Claire. Mary, aged seventeen, and Percy Bysshe Shelley had eloped to France with Jane in tow; Fanny, with disastrous results, was not invited to join them. Byron soon formed part of the ménage, and together they lived an idyll of poetry, song, travel and love, surviving on whatever money they could squeeze from the Shelley inheritance. On foot, atop a donkey and by boat they journeyed through parts of France, Switzerland and Germany, keeping a collective diary subsequently published under the title *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*. Nearly two hundred years later I procured a facsimile edition of this book printed in New Delhi,

no doubt downloaded from Google Books: the insides are a distant cousin of the original typeset, but the cover is a bright red design adorned with Islamic patterning. It is an utterly charming object, as is the prose it contains.

Eventually the Shelleys settled in Italy where they wrote, read the classics, Rousseau, and Goethe; Jane in particular studied music and languages. About Rome Mary proclaimed: "... it has such an effect on me that my past life before I saw it appears a blank & now I begin to live..." They existed like this for eight years, short of money, outcasts living in defiance of the rigid matrimonial conventions of the early 19th century. The ménage was not without its tensions and jealousies: Mary, pregnant and ill for much of the time, quickly began to find Jane (now Claire), an irritant. But Claire was vivacious and talented, and though she could sometimes be dispatched, she would remain a resolute fixture of the Shelley circle. Mary began to use a little sun symbol in her diary to indicate Claire's presence on any given day: ☀

JANE

Mary Wollstonecraft's parents, Edward and Elisabeth were married in 1756;

their union produced seven children. Two hundred years later, my parents, James and Patricia, met in England and married in 1956. They also had seven children, six girls and one boy, beginning with Jane Elisabeth in 1957.

Prompted by a stay in rehab, my sister decided to write a memoir of her childhood and addiction. In an email she told me: "I am in the process of teasing out an ending but I'm now edging up to a very respectable 60,000 words, plenty to qualify for a book. Now, of course that the deed is nearing completion and *I have set down once and for all a true record of what has happened* (sorta, kinda), I am feeling somewhat uncertain."

MW wrote of "the healing balm of sympathy [as the] medicine of life," a concept Jane, an uncommonly sensitive and empathic person, always, since childhood, and now an amateur homeopath, would undoubtedly agree with. Jane reminds me of MW in some ways. She is a strong and caring woman, a nurturing mother of three daughters who also kept her distance from doctors and their drugs; but she is emotionally fragile in the way MW was at times, prone to depression and occasional rash behavior.

FANNY

Fanny, to whom Shelley had first shown affection, was excluded from the ‘summer of love.’ She had inherited her mother’s melancholic streak, and though she tried to combat the depressive feelings, she was dogged by what she called: “Spleen. Indolence. Torpor. Ill-humour.” Fannykin—of whom Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in the Scandinavian *Letters* when her child was a babe: “I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or her principles to her heart”—succumbed to exactly that predicament of the 19th century woman without means. Fearful of becoming a burden, Fanny drank laudanum as her mother had done, but unlike Mary she was successful in killing herself.

Young Mary’s bliss with Shelley was short-lived as death began to intrude with frightening regularity. Of her four pregnancies, only one child, Percy Florence survived. Claire’s daughter by Byron, Allegra, was callously separated from her by the father, and died at age four, alone in an Italian convent. Just prior, Claire had written heart-breakingly in her journal, that recovering Allegra would be like “com[ing] back to the warm ease of life after the coldness and stiffness of the grave.” Shelley’s first wife Harriet,

in an advanced state of pregnancy, drowned herself, and eight years into his relationship with Mary, Shelley himself drowned in a boating accident on the Gulf of Spezia, near Pisa, with their close friend Edward Williams. Byron died fighting the war of independence in Greece two years later.

JAMES & PATRICIA

In 1975 my father James, aged forty-five, fell from the roof of our house one Saturday morning in August and never regained consciousness. I had just turned seventeen, the same age as Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin when she eloped to France with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Jane Clairmont. My mother, Patricia, retreated to the top of our big box of a house and all hell broke loose below. The Davey girls were not writing poetry, studying Greek and Latin, or procreating; we were listening to David Bowie, Roxy Music, and the Clash and ingesting too many drugs. Asked by a journalist friend about our active sex lives at the time, my mother responded ruefully: “I’d mind less if I thought they enjoyed it more.” It was a different time and different kind of rebellion, nonetheless many thought of us as a female force—goddesses, no; but ‘Amazonian,’ yes—to be reckoned with. And that is what

I tried to show in a series of portraits I took in Ottawa and Montreal beginning around 1980. “Les jeunes filles en fleur” was another expression used by the same journalist friend to describe some of us, but that came later, after we’d settled down a bit.

CLAIRE & KATE

Claire Davey, small and taut, and the only one among us who did not regularly swell and shrink, never succumbed to intoxicants or liquor. And she never threw herself at men, as did some of her sisters, as did Claire Clairmont with Byron. Temperate, she traveled, she studied; now she teaches philosophy and yoga to high school students in Toronto. Kate, born a year and a half later in 1961, two hundred years after Mary’s brother Henry Wollstonecraft, was the fearless party-girl, drinking and inhaling pills until she passed out. Kate never ‘recovered’ into anything resembling normalcy. Multiple stays in rehab would eventually lead to a lifetime of AA, NA, OA. Intelligent, sensitive, she opted out. She read every novel on my mother’s bookshelves and filled the house with rescued animals. Some of the original five cats and four dogs have passed on but the smells linger to remind us of nineteen-year-old, blind, incontinent

Candy and gentle, gormless, club-footed Duke, found on a reservation.

CLAIRE

Of the Shelley entourage, only Mary, her son Percy, and Claire Clairmont lived to maturity. At the dissolution of their circle, Claire joined her brother in Vienna and began to work as a teacher, but she was hounded out of this employment by the lingering scandal of her youth and forced to migrate as far as Moscow where she became a governess. Her journal, a penetrating literary document, was published a century later; an old woman, she eventually settled in Florence with her niece Paola and became the model for Henry James’s story *The Aspern Papers*.

MARY & PERCY

Widowed, Mary Shelley was at the mercy of her tyrannical and conservative father-in-law, a man who had never accepted his son’s poetic gift, nor his marriage to Mary. Forbidden by the patriarch from publishing Shelley’s poetry or even writing about him, lest it shame the family, Mary was forced into a conventional lifestyle for the sake of her son and his inheritance, small sums of which were parsed out to them while Shelley senior lived on and on, defying all expectations of his demise.

According to Muriel Spark, Percy Florence inherited none of his parents' literary or artistic talent and refused to visit art museums with his mother when they traveled in Europe. A disappointment to Mary, she later grew to appreciate what Spark termed his "phlegmatic qualities." Percy was "to remain loyally and negatively by [Mary's] side to sustain her old age." He married Jane Gordon, a sympathetic woman who became Mary's friend and caretaker during her final illness at age fifty-two. Percy and Jane did not have children.

BARNEY

Aged thirteen, does not like art museums either—he says they instantly make him feel sleepy. He told me: "An ideal way to spend the day would be to drive to an airport and watch the planes take off and land."

TAUTOLOGY

I learned the meaning of this from Baudelaire via Barthes: "I take H (hashish) in order to be free. But in order to take H I must already be free." And from Alejandra Pizarnik: "To not eat I must be happy. And I cannot be happy if I am fat." This comes close to summing up my adolescence.

HOMEOPATHY

In November 2010 I traveled to Montreal to visit Dr. Saine, a famous homeopath recommended by my sister Jane, a man who, like his father before him, had treated thousands of people with MS. I sat with him in his Dickensian study, surrounded by stacks of paper and books, some framing white busts, no doubt Dr. Saine's predecessors, the discoverers of this strange and mystical science. He interviewed me for three and a half hours about symptoms, cravings, fears and dreams. He felt my frozen feet and lit a fire, burning a cube of oak cut from his desk. "How do you feel when you see a poor person? On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you fear poverty? Cancer? Death? How do you feel when you are with your son and your husband enters the room?" And on and on. "Is there anything you haven't told me about yourself?" I told as much as I could, including some of the bad and shameful memories from the *Pathography* (because you have to), but the long interview was tiring and my fragmented story came out rather flat and monotone. He received it all without judgment, indeed with a high degree of curiosity, almost excitement.

His examination proceeded like an ophthalmologist's testing

of my eyes, back and forth with the lenses, or in this case, a multitude of queries, a circularity of repetitious questions backing and tracking over the same terrain, designed to eliminate chance and the subjective as much as possible in order to narrow the diagnosis to one remedy. But in my case he couldn't. He said it was unusual, but he was torn between two antidotes: perhaps my parental influences were too strong, too dominant, neither one giving way. I left with two tiny glass vials, coincidentally each substance related to photography: Sepia, which is the dye used to tone photographic prints, and Lycopodium, a component of the phosphorous powder used to set off the old flash bulbs.

STARS ABOVE

In the car at night, dry eyes, I take off my glasses: taillights and streetlights become giant red, yellow, green bursts of color. A tiny fireworks display. Letting go of focus to partake of this magic.

BEING

"To do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations," wrote Walter Benjamin. Yet that abandonment is precisely what would begin to take place in

my photographs over the next ten years, beginning in 1984, until my subjects constituted little more than the dust on my bookshelves or the view under the bed. The burden of "image-theft," as Louis Malle put it, had something to do with my retreat, but also a gradual seeping in of a kind of biographical reticence, perhaps connected to my present reservations around telling my story (*Pathography*).

I too ingested excessive substances in decades two and three, and one result is that I can barely keep track of the analogies I've posited, from Duras' "immense void" and the unscripted nature of *vérité*; between rehearsed writing (from journals) and photographic mise-en-scene. And what is meant by "the real" in the pronouncements of Godard ("Filmmakers who make installations instead of films are afraid of the real") and Louis Malle? For Godard the real is about confrontation and risk in time-based media, the old-fashioned way, no props allowed. Malle uses the term to describe a state of 'being' to which he accedes when he finally stops filming in India; it is about experiencing a kind of existential peace, a freedom from the need to be making something. But he can only enjoy the feeling because he has worked very hard for it.

THE GREEN & THE WET

Four years ago I wrote: “In the hospital, on steroids I have the feeling for perhaps the first time in my life that I can simply ‘be.’ I no longer have to push myself to do anything, to prove anything. I can just sit on the bed and be.”

One of the things I was doing on the bed, was watching Fassbinder’s *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* on my laptop. In the film there is a long sequence set to Roxy Music’s “Song for Europe,” a track I listened to obsessively afterward because it reminded me of that state of ‘being’.

For Virginia Woolf ‘being’ was writing and ‘non being’ was everything else. Though she did say that sometimes the two could be the same. Gregg Bordowitz, in his book *Imagevirus*, describes William Burroughs staring at his shoe for eight hours, high on junk, and it reminded me of the first time I took acid, of sitting in a shallow lake for hours watching the water slip through my fingers, and thinking it will never be any better than this. Over the years I’ve brushed up against that sensation, usually in green places where water infuses the air: in a marshy field in England crisscrossed by canals; on the tiny, narrow peninsula of pine-choked soil that is Provincetown, in Fall or Winter. Something about

the ‘elasticity’ of the air allows me to enter an unusual state of weightlessness, an intense and rare feeling of wellbeing.

Displacement in space and the attendant fatigue of travel must be contributing factors, not unrelated to Stendhal syndrome, which had its origins in Florence in 1817. Stendhal noted this phenomenon in Italy just one year before Claire Clairmont and the Shelley party found themselves climbing the ruins of the Coliseum on their nightly walks through Rome. Goethe, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the Shelleys were all weary travelers—MW had recently given birth, and Mary, her daughter, was more or less pregnant for five years. They both had very young children in tow, they were exhausted. In early 1997, sleep-deprived, my body a post-partum wound, I walked through the snow-covered woods of Provincetown with infant Barney strapped to my chest. I needed to move at all costs, I craved something mind-altering.

SEPIA DAYS

Mary Shelley died in 1851 and Claire Clairmont in 1879, but no photographs of them seem to exist, at least on the web; there is a photographic oval of Percy Florence Shelley as an older man: he looks a bit like Freud.

In his essay "A Little History of Photography" Walter Benjamin cites Goethe, apropos of August Sander: "There is a delicate empiricism which so intimately involves itself with the object that it becomes true theory." Mary Wollstonecraft and Goethe were just pre-photography, Goethe by only seven years. Their travel writings have the vividness and spontaneity of snapshots, and Goethe's phrases and sketches in particular feel uncannily contemporary. It is not a stretch to imagine that Goethe with his scientific mind, might have anticipated the nascent technology: it was 'in the air' after all, long before 1839.

The close observation that Goethe championed and was his means to knowledge, to "true theory," was precisely the promise held out for photography for many, many decades, perhaps a hundred and thirty years if we count up through the late 1970s. And that is when I started taking pictures, at the very moment when the truth claims of the photograph were being dismantled by theory. That moment of the "Discourse of Others" has passed or shifted, but it marked me, changed for good the way I work.

When I wrote about 'being' four years ago, it was under the tapering but potent effect of steroids. Now

I take drugs that make me sleep. But this morning I woke early with precisely the idea of writing these lines and taking a picture of the rising sun reflected off the giant apartment building in the distance.

Up at 7 for the first time in? Photograph gleaming building, my old habit from when I'd wake with the sun.

Moyra Davey (1958, Toronto) is an artist, a photographer and a writer, one of the founding members of the collectively-run gallery Orchard (2005-2008). She notably published *The Problem of Reading* (Documents Books, 2003), and was the editor of *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* (Seven Stories Press, 2001). More recently, she dealt with Walter Benjamin's correspondence and the presence of sculpted books in Parisian cemeteries in her 2009 video *My Necropolis*, and used the form of the 'air letter' to circulate her photographs.

This 16-page, saddle-stitched signature is the **second** installment of *The Social Life of the Book*—a **quarterly**, subscription-based series of original texts by writers, artists, publishers, designers, booksellers, etc.—reflecting on reading, designing, publishing, and distributing books, today.

Next installment:
Order and Disorder, Peio Aguirre

This series is edited by castillo/corrales and published through its imprint Paraguay Press. Piecemeal publishing structure & design by Will Holder.

Print: École des Beaux-arts de Bordeaux

Print-run (this signature): 1000

For monthly *postal* subscriptions:
www.paraguaypress.com

The series will be hand-bound biannually, into a 192-page volume, whose edition is determined by demand. This currently stands at 15. More information and orders: www.paraguaypress.com.

The Social Life of the Book is a project realized as a collaboration between castillo/corrales, the School of Fine Arts of Bordeaux (F), De Vleeshal, Middelburg (NL), and Centro Cultural Montehermoso Kulturunea, Vitoria-Gasteiz (SP).



Vleeshal



Ayuntamiento
de Vitoria-Gasteiz
Vitoria-Gasteiz
Udala

09.2011