

On what writing is and what it does to us



Author and philosopher Senthuran Varatharajah discusses why understanding his impulse to write would make him quit writing.

March 3, 2021 -

As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 2413 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Philosophy](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

How did you know that you wanted to write?

I never wanted to become a novelist. I studied philosophy and theology, with the vague yet determined interest of becoming a pastor, or a professor for the history of philosophy. For a long time, Plato, Hegel, and Freud were like fathers to me, a holy trinity, a father with three heads, each head looking into a different direction, each one speaking to me in a different language, in a different voice, at the very same time. A father who did not recognize me as his son—just like any other father would. I have studied their tongues closely; I know the size of their mouths, the sharpness of their teeth, the keys in which they sang. For a long time, I only read philosophical or theological books.

It is a common story: most writers say, they always wanted to become writers, from the very beginning, from an early age on. We have heard these stories before, this one story, this story of a single, straight line. This story is not mine. To me, literature is not about stories. I don't know any stories. I can't tell you a coherent, compelling story. I don't know why I became a novelist. I can't tell you why there is language coming out of my hands when my hands are empty. I don't know where those sentences are coming from. And yet, they come. And I am just watching. I am just a bystander. A spectator. Another witness.

What is your relationship to reading as a writer?

I've always been an anxious reader, slow and hesitant, with trembling eyes, with careful fingers and sweaty palms. I grew up in a religious family, a family of refugees that survived the genocide and war in Sri Lanka, a family, in which both systems of symbols, the Hinduism of my mother as well as my father's Christianity, were present, shaping what I would now believe became the width, depth, and height of my own wilderness, my own cave, the order of my imagination. The first book I read was the bible. As a child, I did not know that the bible was a translation. I believed the German language was the language of Abraham, of Christ, the language of God. And I needed to understand every single word, each angle, every possible layer of meaning, so God's word could become flesh, and my flesh would become words; his words only. The holiness of scripture, the humility I experience facing a text, this fear has never left me.

We read before we write. And that is how one writes. I still read like the child I was, the child I still am: I know how sentences can cross my body, how a word can cross out everything I am. I know that words can erase me by addressing, by simply referring to me. I am afraid of books, and yet, my apartment is flooded with them. I am scared of reading, and yet, I read, with fear and trembling, even after having lost my faith. I don't know why I became a novelist.

How did your first book come to be?

When I was working on my Ph.D., I began writing; 20 pages during the night, in July 2013; 20 pages that eventually became my first novel, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, that was published three years later, here in Germany, opening with a quote from the gospel of John: "Where are you from? But Jesus did not answer." Writing was an accident. An unexpected event. A collision. I don't know why I am writing, and I will never know why I have written in the first and last place. It remains a secret to me. If I were ever to understand why I began to write, why I'm still writing, I would quit writing instantly.

Do you think that not knowing something is essential for the writing process?

I don't know what is essential for the writing process. All I can say is, that I was never really interested in knowing why I write. That—of course—does not mean that I am not questioning my work, my writing. I question it every day. I question my hands, every hour. But they won't respond. They don't answer. They won't reply. My hands won't forgive what I have done, what I have written. I can see potential reasons, possible connections, nevertheless; I can connect a few dispersed dots.

My mother is a poet. When I was a child, I saw her coming back from work, cleaning other people's houses, coming back from double shifts, with her hands swollen from detergent. When I was a child, I saw my mother coming back from work, cooking dinner, feeding us with her sacred hands full of bruises, helping my siblings and me with our homework, in a language, she barely speaks, to this day. When I was a child, I saw my mother writing poems, after she put us to bed, during the night, with those very hands that have seen too much, falling asleep on the couch, exhausted from another day. I remember the shape of her body when I woke up in the middle of the night to drink water from the kitchen sink, a tired shadow in the dark. The night is the time for writing. Writing belongs to the night.

I always find that for me writing has a sculptural quality—you start with a mass and then you reduce and this taking away then forms something...

That is a rather prominent and quite familiar way to describe the writing process. I think it's both, wrong and misleading. Writing is not related to visual arts. The substance of literature is different, it is built differently. Writing is, I believe, metaphysical. Sculpturing is physical. Sculpturing, for instance, depends on an object, a physical entity, material that is measurable, that has size and weight; material that remains material. Sculptors are using their hands, their hands, and tools on alabaster. To stay in that image: When we write, language becomes our hand, language becomes our tool, our alabaster, our stone. The material of literature is dark matter. Imagination, and imagination only. If writing is related to any different form of art, on an intimate, not on a pragmatic level, it might only be music. Writing is composition: you have to find the right key, intonation, modulation, rhythm, metric, cadence—you name it.

Most prose writers conventionally refer to language as an instrument—not in a musical sense, but as a tool. As a tool for stories to be told. But in poetry, language itself is the agent of speaking, the medium of knowledge, one could say. In poetry, language speaks, language only. Writers should refrain from instrumentalizing, exploiting language for their own purposes, for their stories. Writing is not only a composition but also a gesture of compassion.

You went on a very long book tour with your first novel. What was it like to read the novel out loud, to share it with an audience?

During each reading, I was trying to find explanations for what I had done. During each event I was trying to understand, to reconstruct this accident. But theories and explanations always arrive too late; after the damage is done. When I read from my first novel, I wanted to cross out every single word. And indeed: I am crossing out every word, with my eyes, with my voice.

I detached myself from my first novel the very moment I held the published book in my hands, two weeks before its

publication. I was raised in a conservative Asian family. I never learned to be proud of myself. I learned from an early age on: no matter what you achieve, it will never be enough. I am too old and too tired to get my upbringing out of my system, to unlearn those patterns. I am my parent's son. I learned their prosaic pragmatism from the very beginning, under my childhood circumstances. So there was this book. The other day, I stumbled across my tour dates from November and December 2018: in just two months, I read and spoke in Singapore, in Hong Kong, Berlin, Salamanca, Berlin, Munich, Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Heidelberg, Bielefeld, Bonn, Bamberg and Galle, Sri Lanka. I am not sure how I survived this, physically, mentally—all this traveling, all the reading, all this speaking. The body of someone who writes consists of language, of language only. This is how I feel. This—this—is what I am. And with each reading, you're giving away sentences, you're losing words: your body of language. Your language as your body.

Now you're writing your second book. Is your approach different? Has there been a loss of this innocence after the accident of the first one?

I started writing my first novel when I was 29. I was not a child anymore. But yet, looking back, it felt like I was a child. Like in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 13,11: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I gave up my childish ways." I don't believe there is innocence, there's never been such a thing. I will always reflect on every second that I spend writing, just like the philosopher I am, on every syllable, every colon, on every space. I believe that invocation is quite similar to a state of possession; when I am composing, however, it is me who decides, who makes conscious and deliberate decisions. I am trying to be aware of everything, of every word, of each angle, of every possible layer of meaning.

Now, looking back, seven years later, I think, when I wrote my first novel, I had to prove something, just like a child: to myself, to my parents, to my extended family, to the Tamil people, who have died instead of us, to all the Tamil people who have died fighting for us, to the Tamil community here in Germany, to white people, to the Germans, to God, to—I don't know. I think I had to prove that I can play four pianos with two hands; when I was a child—because I was a child. But now I know: just like Kali, the Hindu goddess of death, destruction, and creation, I can play one piano with four hands. Now I know: I gave up my childish ways. I know what my hands are capable of. Now my hands have mastered me. And that is why they're empty.

What has the process of writing been like for your second novel?

It feels like I am both, at the very same time: the one writing and the one being written. The subject and object of writing. The subject and object of loss. I refer to my first book as a *novel* due to a lack of words, and out of laziness. My first book is not a novel. My first book doesn't use the techniques of a novel, it doesn't trust its form. To me, this book is a long poem, something like a prayer. When I refer to it as a *novel*, I am merely addressing its space and length, I am referring to the area that became text, and to the text that is precisely this area.

The same goes for my second book. It is not a novel either. The text is slowly becoming a space, a dense volume of words. Writing a text like this, is, as previously indicated, substantially different from writing a poem, an essay, or any other shorter piece of literature. There won't be an outside of this text anymore. This text will dominate everything you are. This text will occupy your mind completely. It will find the most distant corner, the last angle of your body, and it will cover, fill it with its own syntax. Whatever you perceive, it is not you who perceives; it is the text. You will speak from its position, in its language. Your body will move to its rhythm and according to its mood. A text like this will replace you. You're not yourself anymore, and that's precisely who you are.

I can't describe it in any other way. Yes. A text like this will possess you. That, too, is its will. The text will arrive at its time and in its own terms and conditions. It took me three years, from the moment I decided to write this book, from the moment this book chose me, to write the first word. I waited three years for the first words to come. I know how to wait. I learned to be patient. When I was a child, we were always waiting: for deportation, for the suspension of deportation, for letters from war-torn Sri Lanka, for a phone call from the city, I was born in, for a family that had to flee the country, for citizenship, for the end of the war, for the

Messiah to arrive. I'm good at waiting, but three years are three years. I have waited for a long time to write this book. And it feels like the last 36 years happened so that I can write this one book.

Do you think that there's also a process of interrogating yourself to get the content out, or to interrogate yourself why it is that you're writing what you are?

If it haunts me late at night, it might be worth writing.

The word possession, being possessed, popped up a few times in my mind while you were speaking.

To be perfectly honest with you, this is madness. I really don't know why I am doing this. All of this. This will be the last novel I am writing, for a very long time. I can't live like this. I can't go on like this. But once I have survived this novel, I know: I have survived this novel.

Senthuran Varatharajah Recommends:

Claudia Rankine - *Don't let me be lonely*

Marguerite Duras - *Hiroshima mon amour*

Camille Paglia - *Sexual Personae: Art & Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*

Sappho - *Poems and Fragments*

Remi Weekes - *His House*

Name

Senthuran Varatharajah

Vocation

Writer and philosopher

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Holm-Uwe Burgemann