

## WHERE AM 'I'

## DEAR ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL ...

I am writing this in response to a question my friend and colleague, Antony Volaris (1), posed to me in an email several days ago. It simply said, with nothing in the subject line, no greeting or sign-off, all in the lower case: where am i?

I sat at my computer for a long time and stared at this question thrust up from nowhere, beckoning to me, requesting something from me and thought it prudent, for the purposes of this essay, to alter the question somewhat. A simple matter of punctuation on my behalf allowed me this: WHERE AM 'I.' A question with, perhaps, a little more interest to us, despite it suffering grammatically. Firstly, however, I think it would be a disservice to Volaris to not address his circumstances.



Fig. 1 - The Subject, age 3

When he was a young boy, Volaris was taken on a sixty-five foot, single hulled yacht by his father and his friend, a Scottish expatriate, who was the boat's owner and captain. They were to sail from Corner Inlet around Wilson's Promontory (2) to Refuge Cove, a camping site otherwise only accessible by foot. Clearly, these were facts related to him later in life, the details filled in by family members and those who were there, Volaris being no more than three years old at the time. Episodic memory of a few key moments are his and (he maintains), his alone. He is sent down into the cabin for a nap, which he does not take because he is too excited—He is called up, much to his relief, and his father shows him dolphins, playing in the yacht's wake and up near the bow—His father vomiting from sea sickness—Catching a salmon—Anchoring the yacht and taking the dinghy to the shore—Making a sandcastle that is quickly swallowed up by the tide—Eating the salmon he caught—Waking to the sound of swell and a bright light in his eyes from the skylight. The only photo that exists of this trip is one of Volaris sitting alone on the deck of the boat (see Fig. 1) and, he claims his father remembers only some of what he himself remembers. Volaris points this out to undermine the arguments that his imagination fabricated these memories from what he was told by those who were older or that he extrapolated these fragments from photographs (3).

This tale, as I have related it, is crucial in that it is the only piece of autobiography that Volaris still retains. Many years after this trip he suffered a traumatic brain injury where he lost all memory of his life before the accident and has great difficulty in forming new memories. His autobiography is lost to him, although the memory in his body remains for he can still play guitar, ride a bike, drive a car, etc, and did not need to re-learn these. The events of his life that formed the person that he is/was are lost, everything has been ripped away from him except for this one trip as a very young boy, fragmentary as it is. Since his accident, Volaris, previously an avid writer of fiction, has obsessively written on this one cache of memory, again and again, inscribing it tirelessly onto the page, fashioning these fleeting moments into words and sentences. He is performing these few precious memories, employing the tools that he once used to beautiful effect in making fictions.

In autobiography, the subject is most commonly the author and the object is that which the author asserts influence over. In the case of Volaris, the subject becomes problematic in that his self has been destroyed, the only remnant is that of a young child on a boat trip, all subsequent self abolished, existing only in its refraction from those who have/had known him before his injury. The projection of self is, too, a performance. Our interrelations being performative, being that of censure and selective exposure. Hence, who else could Volaris be (being stripped of himself) then be he who interrogates, as demonstrated in my peculiar email, 'where am i?', the man having no self to perform. He demands to be inverted to the object. The subject of which he can be sure is that that is refracted back to him/non-him. He buries himself in the work of the only subject of which he is certain: this child staring at him from his past (4).

Baudrillard argues that the object has always been an inert space, a world that we assume control over 'on the grounds that we produced it,' (5) yet when we inscribe the object we merely inscribe the sign that appends it, forcing the erasure of the thing itself, allowing only its symbol to remain. Writing is the realm of sign and of metaphor, it cannot arrest the thing itself for language slips away from us, the signed and signifier exist as two oceans pressed against one another, their tidal patterns not quite synced. The subject tries to transmute this power to function, to give us anchor, to orientate ourselves amongst these signs. Volaris only has access to the object signs with a ghostly subject hinted at, lightly etched in the object. Instead of employing the subject to be expressed through the function of the object he looks to the object to perhaps find something of the subject within it. The object is released and the enforced duality inverted, broken.

For now, let us play, enjoy for ourselves a little bit of irreverence, and take Volaris' story further to how his email came to exist, how I found myself looking at this strange thing with bleary eyes on a Sunday morning, wondering what to do about this interrogation from a friend lost in space.

1. My name, as well as that of the author's, have been changed in order to protect our identities and those of our families.  
2. A national park in Victoria on the southern-most tip of mainland Australia. A popular tourist destination where my father was a ranger for Parks Victoria. We were to stay the night in the staff lodging at

Refuge. Note: The yacht was powered mainly by sail and was only fifty-five foot.

3. I have done some reading about these processes. This article was of great interest to me: Raj, V & Bell, M, 2011. Cognitive processes supporting episodic memory formation in childhood: The role of source

These are the facts as far as I can ascertain them:

*Volaris finds himself on the streets of Coburg, either going to or from someplace, when accosted by a much older man. The man, with a deep Scottish accent, introduces himself as an old friend and Volaris' memory spins back to the yacht, to the building of sand castles soon to be washed away by the approaching sea. The man proposes that they drink together at the Post Office Hotel (6) nearby and they drink Guinness (7) together for many hours. When the night is done, the Scotsman, obeying the directive supplied on a laminated card in Volaris' wallet, pours the well-liquored man into a taxi and gives the driver the appropriate address.*

The next part of the story is, of course, pure speculation. How am I to know what Volaris himself cannot be sure of and, with no witnesses to verify or dispel my truth, I will present the events as follows:

*The driver pulls up on his street and Volaris pays him the requisite amount and gets out and stumbles from the taxi. The taxi pulls away to pursue another fare and Volaris reflexively goes to his back pocket for his wallet to remind himself of where he lives. His fingers feel no familiar lump and, indeed, his pocket is empty. In his inebriated state he left his wallet in the back seat of the cab right after paying; the drunk man being so occupied with maintaining the coherence of his own person that these externalities often slip the mind. He is, in a moment, in a stab of fear and then deflating of the heart, a man without anchor in an ocean of unfamiliarity. He knows one of these houses must be his but he can't be sure which one and at this late hour he doesn't find the idea of trying his key in every lock an appealing one. He walks up and down the street, up and down, up and down, hoping a familiarity will twinge in him, hint at him towards a solution but there is nothing, nothing in the unlit porches and overgrown lawns that allows him any knowledge of that which he could call home. Defeated, he exits the street and finds himself back on the main road, the shops and cafes mostly shut, a few bars still open. He finds himself looking into a white bright shop-front, sterile and fluorescent. It is a 24 hour store and internet cafe, and Volaris knows vaguely in the mists of his mind that the internet is a portal, a simulacrum of real life in a screen, and feels that this will bring him some insight into his situation, a road map to the real. He pays the man at the counter and logs on and finds the word Google staring back at him and in that little box below he types, 'where am i.' The internet offers him no answers. He searches through his pockets, putting everything on his person onto the table in front of him and finds another laminated card with my name, my phone number and my email address. He looks to his phone and finds its battery dead. He types into the internet the word 'email' and signs himself up for a Gmail account, annoyed to have to use Volaris911 because a.volaris, antonyvolaris and volaris are already taken. He puts in my email address, types, 'where am i,' and clicks send. He sits back and sighs: his work complete.*

The difficulty here, in everything I have written so far, is how the language trembles with uncertainty. Derrida makes a distinction between proof (information, archive, etc.) and testimony, the former being that which the latter is not, proof being open and general; testimony being irreplaceable, instantaneous (momentary), direct and individual. The witness 'appeals to the faith of the other' (Blanchot/Derrida) because proof is not testimony, testimony is that of the individual and cannot be replicated, replaced, deferred or shared. Autobiography shares much with testimony, they both have inscribed in them the same social body of expectation and in both of them the witness/author 'does not tell a story, he offers himself.' (Blanchot/Derrida) In both testimony and autobiography the witness/author is wholly irreplaceable as their experience is wholly unique. This definition of testimony/autobiography, as separate from proof, forces it to share more with fiction, stating 'there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction.' (Blanchot/Derrida) Here, then, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is haunted by the ghost of one embedded in the other. The connection between the two forms is that, according to Derrida, they both remain undecidable, and, furthermore, they cannot remain stationary in their undecidability. They each demand to be removed from this undecidability but are simultaneously trapped there, creating a 'double impossibility.' (Blanchot/Derrida))

Every day I attempt to interrogate myself: what did I do yesterday? The day before? The week before? How did I feel? What were my intentions? My motivations? Some of these can be informed by calendars, photographs, notes scribbled in the margins of pages, by friends or acquaintances or professionals with whom I have appointments. These things are biography in that they are verifiable or can be dispelled with or without evidence; these are things that others could write about me if they so choose. They may get it right or wrong but this binary does indeed exist. Wherein lies my testimony, then? The problematic of the subject and the implication of fiction in testimony leads us towards the possibility that truth in this sense is continually deferred in regard to autobiography. It is perpetually under revision and never settles on the truth. Truth is multiplicitous and varied, finding itself inscribed liminal spaces. Perhaps it is appropriate to release the object from the tyranny of the subject for language is a plaything that plays with us as much as we it....

As for Volaris, I found him sitting in a cafe, dishevelled and haggard, having run up quite a tab with the establishment upon reassurance that he had a reliable creditor. I looked to him and he looked back, no recognition in his eye and I paid his bill for him. He stood up as I turned to him and he opened his arms, his eyes expectant.

*memory, binding, and executive functioning. Developmental Review, 30, 384-402.*

*4. As I read this line, note that I have read it and pen my thoughts on the ideas being presented, I notice another note I made earlier in my diary. It directs me to the work of Cortazar, specifically Hopscotch. The note suggests that I try a re-fashioning of my story utilising structural elements present in this novel. It refers to it as being reminiscent of Choose Your Own Adventure books, which it insists is exactly how it sounds.*

*5. Although I disagree with this in principal, I will, however, concede that in the sense that the author is defining autobiography he is, I suppose,*

*correct in questioning the continuity of my narrativised self. However, the implication of non-personhood shows, I think a clear lack of understanding of the subject.*

*6. The very establishment I find myself in as I read this!*

*7. I can't stand the taste of Guinness so I doubt this is correct.*

*Baudrillard, J 1991. Seduction (Culture Texts). English Edition. Palgrave Macmillan.*

*Blanchot, M & Derrida J, 2000. The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony (Meridian, Stanford, California) (English and French Edition). 1st Edition. Stanford University Press.*