

Working with Kalypso: seven notes on concealment

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Genet, J (1986). Prisoner of Love,
New York: The New York Review of Books. p. 5

Sally O'Reilly on Anne Hardy. Exhibition Talk,
The Common Guild, Glasgow. 13 August 2015

Dujovne Ortiz, A. Buenos Aires.
In: Mariani, P ed. 1991, Critical Fictions: The Politics of
Imaginative Writing. Seattle: Bay Press. p. 116

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1 “Should I tell you about it? [intake of breath, pause] Oh God, I’m not sure I can [said on a long exhale...] I’m not sure I want to.”

2 There was a goddess living on the small rocky Ogygia when Odysseus landed there on his way home. This goddess had the name Kalypso, the meaning of which comes from καλύπτω (kalyptō), meaning “to cover”, “to conceal”, “to hide”, or “to deceive”, clues useful to many amateur scholars. Kalypso so wanted Odysseus as her immortal husband that she kept him prisoner on the island for seven years, until, with the intervention of another goddess, she let him sail away without a fight. Once his raft had disappeared into the horizon she retreated to the privacy of her cave and, guarded by owls and ravens, nursed her wounds.

3 I had come off the street and into a cave-like junk shop, to escape the heat more than anything, and was rummaging through a precarious stack of tatty magazines and prints, when a turquoise corner of paper winked at me from near the top of the pile. I hadn’t been looking for it but as I pulled it from its hiding place there it was - the smallest island on the map just under a centimetre across painted in green and yellow and its familiar name in black script suddenly in my hands and my heart thumping. When I took it to the white-haired shopkeeper she didn’t seem to want to part with it as she asked for far too much money for an old map held together by yellowing tape. But after some hand gesturing of numbers we settled on a price, and I took it home.

4 The first page of Jean Genet’s ‘Prisoner of Love’ – which describes the author’s experience of living amongst the Palestinians in the 1970s and 1980s – is a disclaimer of the ability of words to do any such thing. He says ‘The page that was blank to begin with is now crossed from top to bottom with tiny black characters – letters, words, commas, exclamation marks – and it’s because of them the page is said to be legible. But a kind of uneasiness, a feeling close to nausea, an irresolution stays my hand – these make me wonder: do these black marks add up to reality? The white of the paper is an artifice that’s replaced the translucency of

parchment and the ochre surface of clay tablets; but the ochre and the translucency and the whiteness may all possess more reality than the signs that mar them.’ Maybe he’s right. But I’m reading the book anyway, paying close attention to the spaces between each word.

5 There is a photograph of a table covered in white paper. On the table is a collection of artefacts retrieved from the sea, frozen between the curiosity of the diver and the classification of the archaeologist. In Athens some years later there is another table. Covered in artefacts. ‘Curious artefacts’ the curator asked for, and my offering to this table is a large rectangle of blue with an uneven yellow line around it, printed onto stiff paper and folded-up: map-like in form but not function. The blue is a very particular blue made from blue and yellow and white ink and printed imperfectly so that each colour can be visible in places. The blue folded in on itself is all I could bring myself to put on the table, at once too much and too little.

6 The writer Sally O’Reilly is speaking about a cyan blue carpet found in the artist Anne Hardy’s installation ‘Twin Fields’. She speaks of this blue carpet as a holding space, a space of potential like that of a computer screen. It offers the audience permission to project onto it. In fact, it actively asks us to do so.

7 I want to hide but I need to be seen. To be seen is to exist. I am frozen in the act of undressing. ‘A woman passes. A man, leaning against a wall, watches her approach. They both know they have seen each other. They both prepare to replay a scene they have always known, the age-old ritual of virility to which they both must submit blindly. Sensing that she is being watched, Woman fixes her eyes on that invisible line, the horizon. But it is the shock of being seen that makes her exist. When she passes in front of him, Man moves away from the wall, chooses the best angle, and drops a word or two into her ear. [...] He has declared she is Woman. Hallelujah!’ Alicia Dujovne Ortiz fails to mention if the man’s breath was sweet or sour, hot or cool, and whether the woman remembers his words.