

INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

Eileen Myles's Homage to a Dearly Departed Dog

Afterglow is written in part from the perspective of the poet's pit bull, Rosie.

Felix Bernstein February 24, 2018



Eileen Myles and Rosie (photo courtesy of Eileen Myles)

Gertrude Stein famously wrote, “I am I because my little dog knows me.”

The poet Eileen Myles has reshaped knowing into collaborative becoming in *Afterglow*, written in part from the perspective of Myles's Pit Bull, Rosie. Together they recount their relationship through to Rosie's death, while speculating on how memory is

recollected and how it vanishes in reflection. In *Afterglow*, contemplation extends past generic human boundaries. Myles's assertive poetic voice is transfigured into Joycean landscapes that are seen through the eyes of Rosie and eventually synchronize with Myles.

The visions that ensue seem to embody German Expressionist artist Franz Marc's dictum that rather than paint animals in landscapes, we should paint landscapes seen through the eyes of animals. While Rosie's breed was Pit Bull, the book's genre is a unique hybrid of its own. The

metamorphic, metempsychotic nature of the book evades genus but might be something like what Derrida called “zoo-autobiography,” which would not be a question of “giving speech back’ to animals but perhaps of acceding to thinking ... the absence of the name and of the word ... as something other than privation.” Rosie is never presented as a voiceless creature, a transitional object endowed with language by the author. Rather, Myles and Rosie are shown to constitute each other through a myriad of mirroring games.

Building from the theory of the ancient Greek philosopher Thales that we are all water, *Afterglow* shows that, more than just primordial ooze or bodily fluid, water can be toxic poison (alcohol) or a healing pool of light and lightness. “Light meets everything and it’s where the color goes. It’s what’s left when it’s gone,” Myles writes. Indeed, light seems to intensify when the soul recedes from the material body, serving as a halo and spot of time in the poetic memory.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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Felix Bernstein: *You’re known for writing in a distinctly personal voice. How is it different to have a book out written from this trans-subjective perspective?*

Eileen Myles: I get to take space and I think it’s good for me as a writer, and it’s sort of funny, I’m getting serious reviews in a way I’ve never gotten before, I think since the main character isn’t Myles.

FB: *So the dog’s POV is taken seriously, the way that the perspective of Alice B. Toklas was taken seriously.*

EM: Exactly! Like it wasn’t Gertrude Stein *writing*, it was about Gertrude Stein, and so I’m like a sidekick to this dog in this book. And my subject matter lasts so people can talk about it like a real book, as opposed to debating whether or not it is a memoir.

FB: *Right, or debating the kind of genre or gender. Dogs also suffer from being hybrid in that way. It's not clear if they're wild or domestic, deviant or generic. Stein's dog functions as a lover sometimes, and sometimes Alice functions as a dog.*

EM: You get to be mute in your love of a dog in a way that's so interesting — like you're talking to creation or you're talking to some art audience about the dog. You're talking to everybody but the dog, in a way, so the dog maintains its incredible integrity despite your proclamations. There's something really beautiful about that. Like you become silent, too, in the exchange.

FB: *You become silent as the dog speaks?*

EM: Well yeah! All my “blah blah” supports the dog's integrity. You're dying for her to speak, you're willing it in a way after my diverse approaches. The dog simply speaking has volume and I fade.

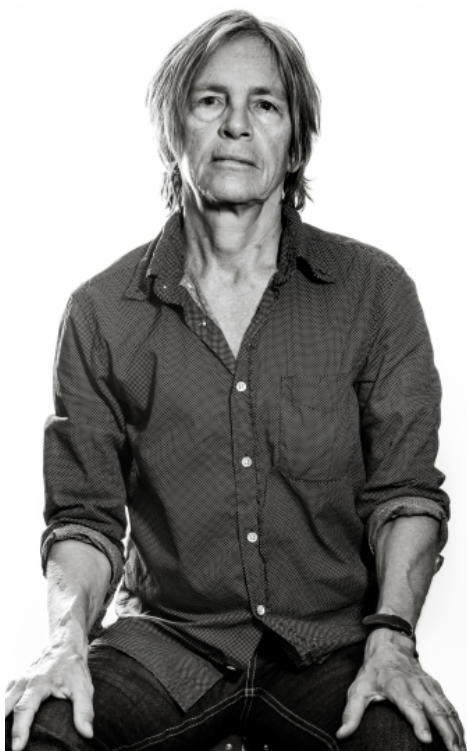
FB: *Was your reflection of the dog always present to you as a textuality or photographic memory? Or was that more of a process of losing and regaining a connection to the dog? Or is this really a direct transcription of what was always there?*

EM: It was kind of an inventory of the body. And I felt like I'm going to do that, just write a really punk-ass, down-and-dirty dog book. Devoted to her decay ...

FB: *Reminds me of Don Bachardy's time-lapse paintings of the final days of his partner, Christopher Isherwood.*

EM: Those are amazing paintings. I wanted to do that kind of witnessing. So that was like one surge, and then it became more philosophical. And then, when she was dying, I started to recognize this was a kind of worship or a kind of devotion. You know when you're close to someone who's dying there's just this sense of awe in the room, just feeling the passing of a life — and then she was gone. And then it was *stuff*, like I literally had her crap in a box, her bowl, you know. And I bring those things to Los Angeles. And then in Los Angeles I stuffed

them in the closet. And when I'm leaving Los Angeles, coming back here, I pull it out and that's when I inventory them. It's similar to [being] in a workshop, when you get prompts. And so you're always throwing something out and you go fetch it. And so the process, the performance of the writing, is fulfilling the obligation of finding it where you tossed it. And so it just became a series of prompts, which always engaged the dog in some way. Ultimately, it was improvisation — "what else can I do?"



Eileen Myles (photo by Shae Detar)

FB: *The book mixes what seems to be unfolding transcriptions in real-time with philosophic speculations that always come back to Rosie. Your writing from Chelsea Girls (1994) to the new work reminds me of how Nan Goldin started taking photos after the death of her sister. So all her photos have this belated “afterward-ness,” even though they’re often capturing queer exuberance. I’m wondering if, with Rosie, there was an afterglow only after her death or was this something gradually presenting itself in the dog?*

EM: I think both. As soon as I got to San Diego in 2002 there was an anticipation of her death. You could see it in her body that she was failing. And because I had a little bit of money I bought a video camera and I started shooting our walks, you know, I just transcribed those, literally, and popped them in. So it was all in anticipation of her gone-ness. And, I'll say for me, I think the way I'm wired, honestly I feel like I live my whole life in an afterglow, you know, because I'm a little obsessed on my dad, who I lost when I was 11. And I happened to be there when he died. And I saw it and I think I never knew how to deal with that. I've written about it so many times and it's a story that I'll just keep retelling because it's trauma. Trauma means dreams, means

repetition. You just keep repeating. You're always already living it. There's a past-ness to it. So I think there was a way in which Rosie was — there was a relationship I had with something living, [which] meant that I began to live in an afterglow. Like I knew "I'm going to lose her. It's going to end." And unlike feeling that way about girlfriends and it *does* end, it ended in an authentic way, which was that she simply died. You know, dogs are four-legged. They're closer to the ground and their life-spans are one fifth of ours. And so we think of them as not tragic lives, as small lives.

FB: *Miniaturization is a really important effect of the book, which shrinks all of these philosophical dualisms down. In a way, the dog's smallness also has a mystical largeness in it. It's like what romanticists call the feminine sublime: the large in the small — how Dorothy Wordsworth, instead of subsuming everything into eternal macro-concepts, finds the vast in tiny flowers.*

EM: Yeah! Nonetheless you experience the fullness of that life in play and become a sort of cyborgian with it. But the fact that you can see it means the dog is like a small epic. And it's kind of a manageable experience of "born-die," you know. So there was a way I was able to witness the full process of it. And there was a first-ness to that.

FB: *This book is your most mythopoeic, but in very spontaneous, un-traditional ways. Was there an impetus to deform the religious and create all these different orders of things in order to make these new orders of things?*

EM: As one who feels deformed by religion, absolutely. I was brought up in a very religious background. And in a way my whole writing career is that sort of deformation. But I felt those things coming back in this book, wanting to be named and present, and I genuinely felt the need for spirituality, religion, God. Yet, still I could only bring it in as a sort of mockery, as a deformed version of it. So I could have it with me, you know? This joke, this mockery, seemed the only way I could create a new deformation of it and it could live and exist at the very least in this book.

FB: *Including your father in that sense?*

EM: Yeah! Because he lived there, I guess. Rosie's dying led there and that led to him, in a way. Her existence led to him. Always. And perhaps it was his intimacy or a gaze, a beloved gaze, that weirdly — or not weirdly — led to the spiritual.

[...]

FB: *I was thinking, there is this difference between the satiated and the craving, which you touch on about originally wanting a dog. Did you really want the dog? Or did you want to be seen wanting the dog? And that's really the fascinating issue of the movie star, which you get at, and being photographed — how that ambivalence, similar to naming or being named, resolved around the issue of being claimed and photographed and seen as a desiring being while still being ambivalent about that. But you also show how the child and the dog's moment of intermingled cravings for recognition are not merely a transitory phase but very close to raw desire itself, as opposed to the vaster world of symbolic relations where desire is fixed and named very clearly.*

EM: I think a book is desire. You know, it's like what keeps you writing a book — something must keep going forward. And I think, say, to be very young and want something as simple as a dog, and to not get it means you either confront death in that moment or you try and contrive some way to be ... actors. I think of actors as those people. I mean, I guess it's connected here. And I think a poet is that person, who wants to be seen desiring! I mean, so much of what a poem is, I think, is [a] devotional request for attention or to feel one's self arching in ecstasy and about to crash. When, as a child, if you ask for a dog, you're just full of desire. You know what you want. You've seen that picture! You've seen dogs. You've seen kids have dogs, normal kids, kids with happy lives. And so you want a dog. And your parent, or practical being, says "no" because what they see is that they will be walking the dog. They will be picking up the dog shit. But it's sort of like the child is completely ... I mean the child should be given what they want because they are in a desiring state and they should be shown the desiring state can receive an object. And fail, but kind of become. Because otherwise it's almost like throwing yourself

back on your narcissism eternally, then only wanting to be seen as desiring. And only getting that. It's like an endless narcissistic performance.

FB: *There's a lot of re-photography of life and memory in the book. You call dogs the "original picture-takers." Is the poet also a picture-taker?*

EM: I think part of the picture-taker thing is with our language. I also think of childhood as the place of trauma, as the place of picture-taking. Because you don't know how to articulate what you're witnessing. You're just simply witnessing it. It's almost like you're making this recording all the time except there's no voice track ... And then you start to attach the voice track to the visuals.

FB: *So it's kind of a process of adding layers of sensory reflection to experience, which seems to be the methodology, if there is one, behind this book.*

EM: Yes. Each layer surprisingly ran deeper than I knew. I tried to keep up with the surprise. I kind of feel like this is my most experimental book. And I almost didn't know it because I was so desperately making, you know? It just felt like it was an homage and I felt I would just keep throwing everything I've got at it. And that just became an occupation in its own self. And so I didn't actually notice. And I kept upping the ante. I was like "Can it hold the lecture I wrote on 'Foam' [for an academic conference]?" And I contrived to make it be as much of home as I could and starting to inject "Foam" or realizing there were "Foam" opportunities throughout the book. You know, in order to make it seem in order. But I think all orders are faux, indeed, but we have this need.

FB: *There's definitely an uncanniness to the book's genre, since it seems on the surface that it will be your least experimental book, but in many ways it felt to me, too, like your most experimental book. The "Foam" essay is actually a good taste test on that,*



Albrecht Dürer, "Melencolia I" (1514), etching
(photo via [Wikipedia](#))

because suddenly there's an essay-lecture-performance in the middle of an already unconventional memoir that has a Pongean explication on foaminess, and also a feminist reading of the Aphrodite myth. Your voice there comes in very clearly, making polemical judgments about art and theory and history. But the whole does still coalesce because the dog is sculpturally miming this coalescence for you: as a being that contains multitudes of genres. And the fact that the book contains multitudes of genres makes it extremely experimental, but, because of the dog-as-

representation, it's extremely readable. So it's very uncanny in that way.

EM: I think I really upped the bait-and-switch because if you thought you were reading a dog book, you'd be like, "Where am I going?"

[...]

FB: *But there's also something sadder in the book — there's a revelation that the interiority we prioritize as writers is empty — "The inside is empty, waiting to touch everything, then sink." And this "waiting, touch everything" relates to what you describe as your experiences as writer, being of desiring and of wanting to touch and name. But what about the fact that it's empty inside and that you sink?*

EM: If it's empty then it can contain light or dark, depending on what's available. I don't think there's a negative to being empty. I think maybe it's joyous. We could be filled with whatever.

FB: *It's a capacity to be filled.*

EM: Yeah! And to be emptied again.

FB: *And that's sort of where your phenomenology of light begins: with this*

emptiness leading to a capacity to see light everywhere?

EM: I mean it's sort of like when you write a book — you don't know where you're going and you start with something empty ... but each page is anticipated before you write. There's all this knowledge, all these pictures. It seems like you have nothing at the beginning but your mind, and then it's framing and chopping and removing. And then, when you're done, you're empty again. It just goes out into the world and it's gone — and you're gone in some way. The person that made that is gone.

FB: *It's like the dark room in photography, too. Your methodology brings writing so close to photography. [...] That's what I took afterglow to mean: the halo or residue on the eye of a prior image, but also the glow from many images being shown together fast in an impressionistic blur. It's not clear if it is empty or full of data. The way Gerhard Richter said, "I blur to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant." With Rosie, it seems important that she had ideas, and you were not just photographing her to remember her body, but also her ideas. So your transcriptions of videos of her become metaphysical.*

EM: When I transcribed the videos of Rosie walking I was in Istanbul and it was so perfect, because I was staying in this hotel and I would get up every morning and just write about Rosie. You know, it was a 90-minute tape and it took a while to transcribe it. And after the day's transcribing I would walk out the door into Istanbul and it was just like it totally made the practice vanish. And you were in this complete other visual field.

FB: *When confronted with the loss that animates writing, sometimes one wishes to sink down to the lost object. And in the book's dream-play first you lose words then you lose image, then you lose sound, then you lose everything. What is left seems to be letters. Are they holding onto a sensory trace of the lost?*

EM: Yeah! I think so. Letters are a trace of the lost. And if the trace didn't exist, you would have to create it. That's fiction, which this is not. I don't know, it's weird; I felt I was involved with the magic of writing.

That it can do all these kinds of things, put all these things together and even create a myth that you need. It's umbrellic. Is that a word? Like an umbrella. I want to say it's fragrant.

Afterglow (2017) by Eileen Myles is published by published by Grove Press and available from Amazon and other online retailers.

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