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A Leaf from the Sibyl's Book

Abstract:

The Sibyl of Cumae is a powerful force in my writing practice. She exists as the object of this writer's fascination and research, as the subject of a work of fiction, and as a mentor for my writing method. In this paper I investigate some of the possibilities of the Sibyl for my writing in particular, as expressed in my PhD project, and for other contemporary writers. I argue that while this mythical figure is rooted in a previous millennium, her influence stretches forward to the present, provoking discussions of authorship and offering a great deal to writers at the birth of a new millennium.

This writer's journey began with some dead leaves. French dead leaves, in fact. Or autumn leaves, if you prefer the gentler translation. They were **les feuilles mortes**, from Yves Montand's version of the song of the same name (Kosma & Prévert, n.d.). I was at school, in Year 10 French class, and my conversation teacher brought in a tape of French songs to help our learning. At the time I didn't like it, but later, when I found the song in an opportunity shop, I was compelled to buy it. I played the record over and over, unable to explain how it mesmerised me or how I could manage only short, shallow breaths while Yves sang. Yves' leaves caught me and made me follow.

Ten years after I first heard the song, the leaves led me to the Sibyl of Cumae. She was the legendary prophetess of classical antiquity who gave advice to heroes and rulers and who, as portrayed in *The Aeneid*, wrote her prophecies on leaves (Virgil, trans. 1990: books 3 and 6). At that point I began a PhD in professional writing at Deakin University.

Since then, I have often stood at the entrance to the Sibyl's cave, a trapezoidal tunnel hewn into volcanic tufa and striped with bands of dark and light. I don't stand there physically, because as yet I haven't made it to Italy. But I look into the cave from my computer screen, via Leo C. Curran's on-line photograph, staring at the same view that captivated so many before me (Curran 1966/1997). Recently, watching Andy and Larry Wachowski's film *The Matrix* (1999), I gasped as Morpheus led Neo down a long corridor to visit the oracle. The corridor was a standard one in a block of flats, familiar to us all, but the bands of light from the neon strips, and the receding perspective lines, transformed it for me into the corridor that leads to the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl.

The image of the Sibyl's corridor connects *The Matrix* to *The Aeneid*, creating an enduring series of narrative arcs in which the Sibyl plays a significant role. This series includes other narrative manifestations, of which the following are a small selection. In *The Aeneid* the Sibyl takes Aeneas down to the underworld so he can speak to his father's spirit (Virgil, trans. 1990: book 6). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she tells Aeneas how Apollo had loved her and once granted her wish for as many years as grains in a heap of dust. She forgets to ask for eternal youth, which Apollo will grant - if she sleeps with him. She refuses and continues to age (Ovid, trans. 1986: book 14). The Sibyl in Petronius' *Satyricon* is so shrivelled with age that she hangs in a jar and wants to die (Petronius, trans. 1959: book 48). Marina Warner (1995) describes appearances of the same Sibyl in medieval times. The Sibyl features in Andrea da Barberino's ***Guerino il Meschino*** [Guerino the Wretched], a chivalric romance written in 1391 (Warner 1995: 3-5), and in Antoine de La Sale's '***Le Paradis de la Reine Sibille***' ['The paradise of the Queen Sibyl'], produced between 1437 and 1442 (Warner 5-8; see also Kristeva 1970/1986). The 'Author's Introduction' to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826/1965) describes a visit to the Sibyl's cave and the discovery of leaves inscribed with text (Shelley 1826/1965: 1-4).

The many narratives of the Cumaean Sibyl are fragmentary and often contradictory. There are different accounts of where she came from, when she came, how long she lived for, her different names, what she did, how she prophesied, where she went after Cumae, how she died, etc. (see Parke, 1988: chap 4). There is not space here to

investigate all of these. Instead, I will concentrate on the very detail that brought me to the Sibyl in the first place, her leaves, because they unfurl into a discussion of writing practices.

In *The Aeneid*, the prophet Helenus describes the Sibyl's frustrating oracular technique:

> When you have landed and come to the city of Cumae and the sacred lakes of Avernus among their sounding forests, there deep in a cave in the rock you will see a virgin priestess foretelling the future in prophetic frenzy by writing signs and names on leaves. After she has written her prophecies on these leaves she seals them all up in her cave where they stay in their appointed order. But the leaves are so light that when the door turns in its sockets the slightest breath of wind dislodges them. The draught from the door throws them into confusion and the priestess never makes it her concern to catch them as they flutter round her rocky cave and put them back in order or join up the prophecies. So men depart without receiving advice and are disappointed in the house of the Sibyl. (Virgil, trans. 1990: book 3)

The prospect of the scattered leaves so daunts Aeneas that he begs the Sibyl to prophesy in her own voice: 'do not consign your prophecies to leaves to be confused and mocked by every wind that blows. Sing them in your own voice, I beg of you' (Virgil: book 6).

It is difficult to find an original source for the tale of the leaves. Other classical works featuring this Sibyl, like the *Metamorphoses* and the *Satyricon*, do not use the leaf motif. Herbert Parke (1988) does an excellent job of tracing the classical sources. He asserts that the tradition of the leaves came to Virgil via Varro (Parke 1988: 82-83, 97). Supporting this assertion is a seventeenth-century manuscript of the *Oracula Sibyllina*, which paraphrases Servius and states: '**In folÿs autem palmarum Sibyllam scribere folere, Varro testatur**' ['Varro bears witness, however, that the Sibyl writes on palm leaves' - translation by Jenny Lee] (Brettano 1607: 139). Varro's source, however, is unidentified. Parke speculates that the tradition of the leaves might refer to the Italian custom of cleromancy - prophecies drawn by lots (Parke 1988: 92-3). Or perhaps writing prophecies on leaves might follow the magical tradition of inscribing leaves with spells (literally spelling on the leaves) (Parke 82-3). From the evidence extant today, Parke concludes that the tradition's 'ultimate origin is uncertain' (83).

Uncertainty also surrounds the legend of the Sibyl's books. One of the Sibyls is said to have sold her books of prophetic writing to a Tarquin, one of the last Etruscan kings (Dionysius, trans. 1758: vol. 2, book 4). While some accounts state that this was the Cumaean Sibyl, others disagree (see Parke 1988: 2-3, 19, 31-34, 49). What is not in dispute is the cultural and political value of the Sibylline Books. They were closely guarded by the Romans and consulted in times of war or disaster (Bates 1918: 11-12; Keller 1970/1975: 193-4; Lactantius, trans. 1950: chap. 5; Parke,1988: 33-4).

The uncertainty surrounding the Sibyl's leaves and her books echoes the points of conflict in her stories mentioned earlier. It also reflects the uncertainties discovered when multiple accounts of any myth or legend (ancient or modern) are compared. The Sibyl of Cumae is a hybrid of myth and history - a mystery. Tantalising fragments drift down to us from the ancient sources, as frail and chaotic as the leaves themselves. But that is all they are, fragments.

My writing research has led me to gather and bind these Sibylline fragments. In doing so I find not one clearly-defined figure, but a collection of stories - ambiguous, fertile, conflicting, contradictory stories - a folio of stories, if you will, that is not neatly sewn together, but creates the composite figure of a very interesting woman. The folio creating 'the Sibyl of Cumae' as I experience her, investigates issues of love, faith, power, exile, politics, propaganda, prophecy, magic, revenge, creativity, sorrow, ageing, and death - intriguing subjects for writers and readers alike. In subject matter alone, the Sibyl has given me much to consider for my PhD project. But her influence does not stop there.

In French, the word for leaf is **feuille**. It is a feminine noun. Sheets of paper (bound in a notebook or separate) are also known as **les feuilles** - **les feuilles d'un cahier** [the pages of an exercise book] or **une feuille de papier** [a piece of paper] (Carney 1993: 375). In Italian, the word for leaf is **foglia** (Tosi 1989: 460, 1898). This, too, is a feminine noun. A sheet of paper is known as a **foglio** (masculine this time) (Tosi: 460, 2048). In English the word **folio** refers to a leaf of paper or parchment, as well as to a book made from such sheets (Pearsall 1999: 712-3). The Latin stem for these words is **folium**, a neuter noun meaning **leaf** (Morwood 1913/1995: 57). While the English word **leaf** comes from a different stem - apparently from the Germanic **laub** or the Dutch **loof** - we use the linked meanings when we **leaf** through a book (Pearsall: 1047). The connection occurs again in the word **leaflet** - which means both a young leaf and a small sheet of paper for distribution (Pearsall: 1047).

Thus, at an etymological level, leaves and paper, and leaves and books are deeply connected. These small details - at the level of the word - link the Sibyl's leaves with writers' pages, paralleling our methods of production and our final products with those of the mystery Sibyl woman.

Mary Shelley uses the motif of the Sibyl's leaves to provide a context for her apocalyptic novel, *The Last Man*. In the (fictional, I presume) 'Author's Introduction,' Shelley's 'Author' collects the scattered leaves inscribed with text that she and her companion find in the Sibyl's cave (Shelley 1826/1965: 1-4). With the help of her companion, then later

alone, the 'Author' describes the process of translating and ordering the leaves to make 'a consistent form' (Shelley 3-4). Shelley's 'Author' translates the leaves in two senses of the word: from one language to another, and also in space, rearranging the leaves until the pattern (of the resulting novel) becomes apparent.

The narrator of Shelley's 'Author's Introduction' takes the role of one who consults the oracle to find the wind has already scattered the leaves. Unlike Virgil's 'men [who] depart without receiving advice and are disappointed in the house of the Sibyl' (Virgil: book 3), Shelley's 'Author' attempts to retrieve the lost meaning of the leaves. She is re-membering the dismembered corpus of the Sibyl's work, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Gilbert & Gubar 1979: 97). The prophecy's meaning must be reconstructed through painstaking 'toil' - a process that 'cheered long hours of solitude' for the 'Author' and transported her to a world 'glowing with imagination and power' (Shelley 3-4). She experiences great satisfaction in the process of interpreting the oracle, in the 'labours' of synthesising these '[s]cattered and unconnected' fragments of 'divine intuition' (Shelley 3-4).

Shelley's introduction emphasises the 'Author's' role in the construction of the text - she is actively engaged in creating structure and form in the interpretation of the fragments. While the 'Author' acknowledges that the starting point and material belong to the Sibyl, she admits that the final product stems from her activity. She says 'they owe their present form to me, their decipherer' (Shelley 4). Without the 'Author's' intervention the leaves would be 'unintelligible in their pristine condition' (Shelley 4).

The image of the author shuffling scattered leaves inscribed with text has great resonance for me. My first extended piece of creative writing (in fact, the seed of the novel I am now working on) came together in such a way - literally, not metaphorically. This writing began in my gut. Sometimes, while reading a book or newspaper, listening to conversations on the street, or watching films or television, my belly would quiver. My body knew the importance of these details before my conscious mind. It said 'take notice.' I recorded the incidents - an image, a snatch of dialogue - typed them up, and waited. I cut them out and shuffled them on my floor. More fragments appeared, piece by piece and apparently unrelated. I rearranged them like a puzzle. I paused, brooding about them, went away and then returned. These were writer's clues; they had meanings I did not understand at that moment. I shuffled the cut-out papers until something happened. Suddenly there was part of a plot, a face(t) of a character, a theme. I came to know the meanings of the clues as I wrote and was surprised to discover I had the first draft of my first novel.

I continue to work this way, although now I have a word-processor and the cut-and-paste function is my special friend. But while much of the work is done on screen, I still have to print the pages out and shuffle them around, shuffle **les feuilles**, the leaves of paper, as the French call them.

Some writers work in a linear fashion, their stories unfolding step by step, chapter by chapter. They know where they're going before they begin the journey. I admire (perhaps envy is the right word) that method and often crave crisp, linear unfolding, instead of my vague wanderings. At first, I felt anxious, unsure of the haphazard way my own writing develops. I asked myself, am I using this method because I'm new at this and haven't discovered a better one, or because it is the right way for me to work? I still don't know. But when **les feuilles mortes** led me to the Sibyl, the image of the leaves immediately gelled. The leaves lead me to a revelation, and they were the revelation itself.

The discovery of the Sibyl and her leaves proved more useful than simply providing subject matter for my fiction. It also offered a 'hands-on' model on which to base my writing method and, importantly, it gave me the authority to write that way. The textual fragments did not have to be symbols of chaos and confusion; they could signify the gradual emergence of an idea. The Sibyl's leaves gave me permission to follow the quiver in my gut and see what happens. When I kneel on the floor and shuffle, I am in the company of those confused seekers who have come before, who have knelt in the Sibyl's cave and tried to reconstruct the scattered leaves. With the Sibyl's permission, I have learnt to accept the uncertainty, the mystery, of the process. I have learnt to wait and see.

The interesting thing about the seeker/Sibyl dyad when applied to the creative process is that the creative writer plays both roles. Like the Sibyl, I provide Shelley's fragments of 'divine intuition' (Shelley 1826/1965: 4), the writer's clues and the scribbled fragments that accompany them. Simultaneously, I am also the seeker, frustrated and tantalised by the leaves' secrets.

This dyad illustrates the relationship between unconscious and conscious aspects of creation. The Sibyl in her cave represents the source of our ideas. She generates them and offers tiny, yet numinous clues to point the way - the cryptic paragraphs, sentences, or phrases we scribble in our journals or on our computers. The conscious aspect of the process is the writer-at-work, on her knees with the fragments before her, scrabbling to find the pattern or construct ways the leaves might fit together.

Yet even as I work consciously to bring the fragments together, I keep one eye open for the next clue, the next falling leaf. The conscious work proceeds by trusting the clues from the unconscious. These aspects are not separate; they are necessarily connected. The stories of the Sibyl's leaves combine both aspects of creative practice and provide a powerful model for writers learning to trust the unknown.

When I first read the passage from *The Aeneid* describing how the Sibyl prophesies, I assumed that the disturbance of the leaves was random - that if you were lucky you got to the leaves in time. Reading the passage again, I realised the

disturbance was deliberate. The Sibyl closes the door and seals the leaves in the cave. If the seeker wants to read the prophecy she must open the door and, in doing so, allows the breeze to disturb the leaves. Paradoxically, the perfect and original form of the prophecy exists only when it has not been viewed by the seeker.

The seeker is faced with two choices. She could choose not to enter the cave, thus preserving the integrity of the prophecy, but then she must leave without access to the oracle. In the second scenario the seeker opens the door and disturbs the leaves. The confused leaves offer two more choices. Daunted by the confusion, the seeker could turn away and, like Virgil's disappointed men, 'depart without receiving advice' (Virgil, trans. 1990: book 3). Alternatively, like Shelley's fictional 'Author,' the seeker could work to rearrange the cryptic writing and hopefully recover the prophecy in some shape or form. The original prophecy may never be re-constructed, but through her work the seeker/author (hopefully) creates something of merit.

Writers face the same choices when translating the glimmer of a writer's clue into a full-bodied piece of writing. Many great books exist as ideas, perfect as the unseen prophecy. Do we leave them there, perfect but never read? Or do we risk the confusion of the leaves, the anxiety of the creative process, and bring them out from underground? The answer is obvious. By closing the door on the arrangement of her leaves, the Sibyl emphasises for me the importance of the hands-on work, the craft involved in creating a piece of writing. She makes me work to discover, to uncover and recover the meanings in the fragments scattered before me.

It may seem strange that a mystery figure from the ancient world can offer fertile subject matter and advice about creative practice to contemporary writers on the cusp of a new millennium. But, as expressed earlier, the repeated appearance of the Sibyl in the two millennia separating *The Aeneid* from *The Matrix* demonstrates her continued relevance.

Discussing the figure of the Sibyl in medieval art, Julia Kristeva describes the wealth of possibility that the Sibyl offers:

> Belonging to this and not the other world, the Sibyl speaks all languages, possesses the future, reunites improbable elements both in and through the word. The unlimited possibilities of discourse, which the sign (novel) will try to represent, are symbolised in this transitory figure produced by the art of the late Middle Ages. (Kristeva 1970/1986: 68)

A sense of Kristeva's 'unlimited possibilities of discourse' is a vital component in a writer's toolkit. The Sibyl inspires that sense in me - in both subject matter and methodology she is infused with possibility - and an aural pun gives her presence away. She exists within every pos*sibyl*ity, reminding me to trust uncertainty and unknowing - to trust the ephemera of a writer's craft.

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Notes and Debates

Jeri Kroll *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer*

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