

should. In a review of a book called *The Progress of the Intellect*, George Eliot criticizes the author (Robert William Mackay) for writing pages that “read like extracts from his common-place book, which must be, as Southey said of his own, an urn under the arm of a river-god, rather than like a digested result of study, intended to inform the general reader.” Don’t feel you must recirculate everything that you have found (so I tell myself); a recopied passage will earn its keep even if you never quote it anywhere.

There is good to be gained in signing someone else’s mind-signature, in scribbling in tongues: the retracing of a series of long-lost authorial motions with your own present pen, if you do it in the proper spirit, out of a desire to stay delight’s presence rather than out of autodidactic obligation, or even if you begin reluctantly, dutifully, troubled by feelings of self-pelf in the face of so many pressing university-press editions, can calm and steady your state, not to mention improve it, for while the transcribing may appear to be a form of close and exclusive concentration, it has an equally important element of peaceable meditative mindlessness as well, like playing with a paper clip. Reading is fast, but handwriting is slow—it retards thought’s due process, it consumes irreplaceable scupperfuls of time, it pushes every competing utterance away—and that is its great virtue, in fact, over mere underlining, and even over an efficient laptop retyping of the passage: for in those secret interclausal tracts of cleared thought-space, in those extended dreaming blanks of fair-copying between the instant it took the eye to comprehend a writer’s phrase and the seeming eternity it then takes the hedgehog hand to negotiate that phrase again in legible, physical loops on the notebook page (especially on the verso side of the page, when the spiral binding interferes annoyingly with the muscle of the little finger), during which all of your purplest hopes are compelled to idle, and you must pay attention to some common rhetorical turn that you had never until then deigned to think about, at the same time your constrained prose-aptitude is stimulated to higher rates of metabolism by what Johnson called “the contagion of diligence” and through its temporary forced conformity with another person’s exhaust-system of expression—in this state of rubber-burning, clutch-smoking subservience, new quiet racemes will emerge from among the paving stones and foam greenly up in places they would never otherwise have prospered.

Just don’t do it too much—and always use quotation marks.

[Scene]

## OPEN FACE

“*The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life*,” a one-act play by Don DeLillo. The play, which was written for the American Repertory Theatre, appeared in the Winter 2000 issue of *Zoetrope: All-Story*. DeLillo’s twelfth novel, *The Body Artist*, will be published next month.

A MAN and a WOMAN in a room.

WOMAN: I was thinking how strange it is.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: That people are able to live together.

Days and nights and years. Five years go by.

How do they do it? Ten, eleven, twelve years. Two people making one life. Sharing ten thousand meals. Talking to each other face to face, open face, like hot sandwiches. All the words that fill the house. What do people say over a lifetime? Trapped in each other’s syntax. The same voice. The droning tonal repetition. I’ll tell you something.

MAN: You’ll tell me something.

WOMAN: There’s a mystery here. The people behind the walls of the brown house next door. What do they say and how do they survive it? All that idle dialogue. The nasality. The banality. I was thinking how strange it is. How do they do it, night after night, all those nights, those words, those few who do it and survive?

MAN: They make love. They make salads.

WOMAN: But sooner or later they have to speak. This is what shatters the world. I mean isn’t it gradually shattering to sit and listen to the same person all the time, without reason or rhyme. Words that trail away. The pauses. The clauses. How many thousands of times can you look at the same drained face and watch the mouth begin to open? Everything’s been fine up to now. It is when they open their mouths. It is when they speak.

[Pause.]

MAN: I’m still not over this cold of mine.

WOMAN: Take those things you take.

MAN: The tablets.

WOMAN: The caplets.

[Pause.]

MAN: Long day.

WOMAN: Long day.

MAN: A good night’s sleep.

WOMAN: Long slow day.

[Lights slowly down.]

CURTAIN