

## Writing narrative as ethics and philosophy in International Relations: Reflections on a difficulty in writing a research monograph\*

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I.

I am here with you, sitting in the woods during a torrential thunderstorm so heavy that I almost have to gulp to breathe. It is exhilarating. The tension of the electricity that has been building in the sky all morning has finally burst.

I've come to this place to write. Writing, as you likely well know, is a requirement of academic employment in a university. Like any prestigious university in the United Kingdom, mine would like its academic staff to write "research outputs of the highest quality to world leading standards of excellence". Flows, more accurately splutters, of funding depend upon it. This banal information might offer itself to you as the most obvious reason for why I find myself here in this thunderstorm. But, for people who share my temperament, it's scant motivation to write. I find it's more likely to produce the opposite effect.

Lamely following in the footsteps of every published academic in International Relations (IR) and beyond, I yet again find myself asking what writing might *be* in an academic context that insists I must do so. This constant questioning of what I think I'm doing, of why I am doing it and moreover, the gaping mismatch between my answers and what actually happens are an ever-present feature of what passes for my employment record. I know I am not alone.

Before we set off on the wrong foot, I declare that I am not looking for *the* answer to what academic writing in IR might be; whether singular, or correct, or right, or good or, for that matter, what gets academics employed or promoted. If there's one thing I do know, it is that there is not one answer. So why not start here—at the ordinary, everyday, commonplace kind of knowing which reveals an experience of life as not fixed; as not having one answer? For some, this place is the question of philosophy (Cavell 2004: 27). For me, it is the place I love

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the best and from which I have a personal preference to write International Relations. This site of philosophy is not necessarily the most obvious place from which to write IR but, after twenty odd years of stubbornly persisting in doing so, I feel the need to narrate the (infinite?) possibilities that it offers.

I've been reading the work of the ordinary language philosopher, Stanley Cavell—again. In much of his writing he uses the wonderful device of lingering on quotations. At times they are points of departure, sometimes detours, sometimes a way of revealing what profoundly matters in his life and how he lives it. He meanders with thoroughness and takes his time. When I read his writing I think of him as a gastronome, degusting each word and sentence before telling you how the flavours have occasion to remind him of philosophical recipes and moments of human experience he has encountered. As I am struggling to get right to what I want to write about writing, I'm going to use a quotation to linger upon, too. I'll take a quotation from his beloved Emerson and include Cavell's response to it because it is one I share with him.

[Emerson] says there is “no fact, no event, in our private history, which shall not, sooner or later, lose its adhesive, inert form, and astonish us by soaring from our body into the empyrean.”

This sense of being able to speak philosophically and openly about anything and everything that happens to you is an ideal of thinking that first seemed to me possible in contemporary professional philosophy in the work of the later Wittgenstein and in that of J.L. Austin. It is what their redemption of what they call the ordinary from its rejection in much of philosophy has perhaps most importantly meant to me. (2004: 29)

I love it. To talk of the inevitable loss of “adhesive, inert form” of fact and event in personal history is so much more poetic than saying that we know, ordinarily, that life—our life and the ‘stuff’ in it—is not fixed. In other words, that things can and do have more than one interpretation or meaning. Many meanings can exist at the same time, overlapping, sometimes contradicting each other, sometimes complimenting each other, sometimes both. Equally, the meaning of things can change over time. For example, what an event “in our private history” meant at one time—a personal catastrophe—years later is looked back upon as the more positive “making of me”. This kind of knowledge about life is hardly a philosophical secret.<sup>1</sup> It's ordinary and commonplace. Emerson tells us that is an experience of “soaring” that is nothing short of astonishing. Basically, when it comes to possible ways of making sense of our lives and the multiple realities in which we live it, the sky is the limit.

For Cavell, the loss of adhesive, inert form makes it possible to “speak philosophically and openly about anything and everything that happens to you”. It—the question of philosophy—makes, more specifically, autobiographical philosophical narrative possible. It opens up the meanings each one of us assigns to events and facts to philosophical consideration. For ordinary language philosophers, vitally, this kind of consideration doesn't mean a search for abstract, metaphysical justifications and grounds for the correct interpretation; a “winning

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) and works inspired by it, such as Cavell's, are explorations of precisely this feature of life.

argument” so to speak. Rather, it suggests that philosophy may well express how we stand in relation to the world and those others with whom we share it. In that sense, philosophy can be read as profoundly autobiographical expressing to others, publicly using ordinary language, where and how one stands, which of course opens up one’s life and how it is lived to the possibility of confrontation and conversation (Cavell 2004: 24).<sup>2</sup> Indeed Cavell, Emerson, Thoreau, Wittgenstein and other moral perfectionists would say that “making oneself intelligible is...the demand for providing reasons for one’s conduct, for the justifications of one’s life” all, lest one forget, in a context that lacks the possibility of justifications being foundationally grounded and therefore, lack immunity to “soaring” and escaping us (Cavell 2004: 24). Nevertheless, there is the insistence of “the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible” (Cavell, 1990: xxvii). To do so one stands exposed. Vulnerable. One stands in the open with no foundational walls behind which to hide. Out in the open one’s responsibility is to try to communicate albeit sometimes by stammering and tripping over one’s words. At least a stammer is a start (Kumarakulasingam 2011). The conversations and confrontations can begin and therefore, continue. Being in motion, *with others*, has been introduced back into philosophy. “We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!” Wittgenstein says (1958: §107).

This sense of being in a friction-filled world that overflows with reactions to soaring facts and events in personal histories suggests that we do not stand and live in abstract, lifeless, philosophical arguments no matter how beautiful they can be in their purity. This is what ordinary language philosophy partly means by its insistence on a return to the ordinary as the rough and messy ground of everyday human existence. Thus, what is being asked as the question of philosophy is what one has expressed, sought to make intelligible, as “conduct confrontable in moral conversation that affects your sense of your own worth and of those who in various ways identify or associate themselves with you” (Cavell 2004: 12). Another way of putting it is to say that the question of philosophy forces one to examine one’s life and possibly require that it be transformed or re-orientated; “being true to oneself, or as Michel Foucault puts the view, caring for the self” (Cavell 2004: 11).

Philosophical writing then, can be the enactment rather than the avoidance of the knowledge that we are in relation—and exposed—to each other. It can be the acknowledgement of “one’s need of and hence dependency on the other, thus, one’s incompleteness and potential vulnerability” (Sparti 2000: 92). The link with moral perfectionism, for me, is that being in relation to each other unavoidably presents moments of encounter that can, and do, instigate change in how one lives one’s life and what one thinks matters most. These encounters instigate occasion for “care of the self”. And it may be that the people with whom we are in relation may also be in motion, moved to change themselves. These are perfectionist moments where, as Emerson puts it, “the self is always attained, as well as *to be attained*” (Cavell 1990: 12). Small wonder then that sitting down to write can fill some of us with horror. Indeed, *reading* can be just as threatening to the tendentious hold we think we might have on our “self” and life. Why burn books otherwise? But, of course, if a moment can be one of

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche puts it this way, “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown” (1966: §6). I take issue with Nietzsche however. I don’t think that his observations are confined to “great” philosophy. I want to say that writing in ordinary language philosophy counts too, and moreover, ordinary philosophical writing in International Relations.

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potential fear it can, at the same time, also be a perfectionist moment for the “unattained but attainable self” (Cavell 1990: 12). Adhesive, inert forms come unstuck, after all. Personally, I find that sometimes the dissolution of the glue that binds me to “inert forms” is nothing less than a profound psychological and existential relief (Pin-Fat 2016b). Sometimes, the dissolution is *ethico*-political. It can be a mix of both. That mix is, on my understanding, an example of the possibility of writing narrative as ethics and philosophy in IR. Wittgenstein calls it therapy (1958).

## II.

A few weeks before the dawn of the new millennium I made a dying man a promise. That man’s name was Howard Dennis Suttle. He had been, amongst other things, an artist whose chosen form of expression was jewellery design and manufacture. He would talk enthusiastically about the history of goldsmithing and how the techniques we use now have barely changed since the Ancient Egyptians. “You see this?” he once asked, holding a gold bracelet he was finishing with fingers blackened from polishing compound and flecked with the shimmer of gold. “The person who buys this could lose it in a field and centuries later it could be dug up, polished a bit and it would look like it does now. Gold is a noble metal.”

The man was the father of our child, Jacques, and he was my husband. Very close to the end of his life when he was weak but we could still converse, I found myself saying, “After you’ve gone, I can’t paint you a picture but I will write you a book instead.” It took me nearly ten years to do it (Pin-Fat 2010). That is a very long time. Way too long! In making this promise I had produced what, for me, was a near insurmountable difficulty. The book I evoked in that promise was a research monograph. Being no writer of poetry or novels I had no tools to write anything else. How on earth was I to write such a thing and fulfil the promise that I had made to beloved Howard?

Feminists have long written about the place of gender in constituting the multitude of practices that produce and police a distinction between the private and the public, the personal and the political as well as the personal and the professionally publishable (Ackerly et al. 2006; Enloe 1989; Elshtain 1993; Masters 2009; Sylvester 1994; Zalewski 2007). Challenging these distinctions, in part, implies that it is profoundly problematic for anyone to maintain the belief that their own, gendered, life stories do not find their way into their ‘research data’ or, for that matter, their academic writing. Feminist insights into post-positivist debates made clear that methodological decisions of fact, facticity and appropriate methodologies by which to pursue them were, in themselves, far from objective pursuits of truth and value-free reports of reality (Ackerly et. al. 2006). Here, as with the question of philosophy, the theme of each of us being responsible and in need of being held to account for what we are expressing is inescapable. Our writing tells something of what we value in life, of our stance towards it, of what we think we might be up to. And that is open to scrutiny, to disagreement, to conversation, to confrontation and any other manner of engagements many of which, it has to be said, are violent. These are not debates about fact but instead they are political and ethical debates about how to live with others in the world.

In what follows I offer up the story of how I personally found my way through the distinction between the public and the private in the writing of a research monograph which, on the face of it, seemed to have nothing to do with a promise made to a dying man. I don’t think there is anything special about this story. I suspect that my experience of a struggle is commonplace.

At least, that is what seems to show itself in the dedications and acknowledgements of others' books in IR. The difficulties that were surmounted are, alas, merely hinted at but the gratitude for and to those who accompanied each author along the way is laid open for all to see. I am often touched by them. They hint at who and how the author loves.

In this instance, I am not hinting. I am narrating the sub-text I sought to write into the main text of the book I wrote for Howard. It was my way of fulfilling my promise to him in a vehicle that hardly seemed fit or appropriate to carry it. I am not ashamed to admit that it was not easy. "Words are deeds," says Wittgenstein (1980: 46). What kind of a "doing" had the uttering of this promise committed me to?

One way of approaching what my promise to him meant would be to see it as a commitment to successfully "paint a picture" of him. Perhaps, that the book be not so much for him but of him. What might that look like? Perhaps, it would look like an endeavour to capture and represent in words what was most essential (essentially lovable?) about him. How on earth could I decide what those essentials might be, let alone set about describing it in words using a vocabulary of academic IR that was focused on ethics and global politics? For a variety of reasons I found myself stuck and unable to write what had now become "Howard's Book" in conversation with friends and family. One reason was because I was stuck on precisely this question of capture; this question of representation. It should be no surprise then, that the problem of representation is the core theme of the research monograph.

Actually, to be more honest, I had got stuck on two difficulties. One was directed towards the possibility of capturing what it was like when Howard was alive in the world with us. The other was directed towards the possibility of ethics in global politics – the subject of the monograph my employer had long been expecting me to finish. Does such a possibility rest on successfully locating the essential features of global politics and humanity—universals—as so many IR theorists seem to insist, I asked?

It wasn't because I was theoretically inclined to go searching for essential, foundational things that I was stuck. Nor was I stuck because I was designing an attempt to represent reality, what it consists of and our humanity (no less!). My love of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein had seen to that. No, I was stuck for different reasons and somewhere else. I felt that what I wanted to express couldn't be said. It was as if I was stuck at passport control at the border of the limits of language. The passport that I was carrying had no photograph to match the name of the bearer. I was unable to pass. And so, in the wake of losing Howard, another very famous quote from Wittgenstein became my meditation, "Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must remain silent" (1922: 7.0; Pin-Fat 2010: 26-30, 122-129). This silence is known as Wittgenstein's mysticism and it can take a while to work out what to say after such a conclusion.

In my case, it took the best part of a decade until I came across a combination of words that finally moved me to start writing again in earnest; "openness to surprise" (Diamond 1995: 314). Something clicked on reading them. It was the memory of the instance that, ultimately, led me to this struggle with a promise. I had met Howard at Vancouver airport. It was love at first sight. Within seconds we knew that we would marry each other. That was a surprise! We both unfailingly trusted that feeling even though we kept saying it was "completely crazy". But, it's not so unusual, is it? To be surprised by love, that is. I imagine you have your stories,

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too. One of the things that struck me was that, had I been able to list all the (essential?) features of my “ideal” partner, I wouldn’t have come up with Howard. And yet he was ideal as far as I was concerned. I, like countless others before and since, had grasped that to give reasons for why one may love another utterly and spectacularly misses the point. Their being, their subjectivity, exceeds any description or reasons I or anyone else might give. In encountering those words I had found a way to express this hidden jewel, revealed through having personally experienced an openness to surprise. Nussbaum simply calls it “love’s knowledge” (1990).

I think that to be open to others in this way, to act on love’s knowledge means, in effect, that we cannot successfully paint pictures of each other. The passport photograph never really matches the bearer and, in that sense, the person is always missing.<sup>3</sup> Confronting the difficulty of writing with a blank passport wasn’t so unusual, or problematic, after all. Whether we seek to capture a dead husband or each other—each person that makes up “humanity”—it does not seem possible to fully represent a person in language. “Bits” will always escape us, escaping in the silence of each pause for breath as we speak. And so, it seems to me, the fullness of successful capture renders us silent because we *are* silent in those moments. There’s nothing to be said about our pauses for breath. And anyhow, on reflection, I don’t think it should trouble us too much. After all, if we never stopped speaking to pause for breath we’d simply suffocate and die!

And so it was that I came to embrace the realisation that my promise to write a book in place of painting a picture was a doomed enterprise. Ironically, standing at the border of the limits of language, the passport photo now had a face of sorts. It was the face of failure. However, therein lay a happy redemption. In stark contrast to the silence, the ineffability of the mystical, there is an awful lot that can be said about failure; about failed attempts at representation, about closure rather than openness to surprise. I began to write about that. I called the stories I wanted to tell about failure “grammatical readings”. They were stories of the doomed, but illuminating, journeys we can take in search of the satisfaction of desire. They were stories about “caring for the self” and the dangers certain forms of care can bring when one forgets that adhesive, inert forms eventually soar and escape us.

With my vow of silence now broken by Cora Diamond’s words, I felt that I could now set about reconfiguring the task of an IR theorist and write about it. I approached the endeavour of writing the research monograph and doing IR theory as, so to speak, someone who had inherited the curatorship of an art museum.<sup>4</sup> In this case it was the Ethics in IR Art Museum. My academic task now, I figured, was to re-arrange some of IR’s most famous pictures of global ethics that resided there. I expressed what I was doing in “scholarly” fashion by employing Wittgenstein’s description of the task as “assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (1958: §127; Pin-Fat 2010: 31-38). The task was simply to point out what was hidden in full view. My claim was, and remains, that the academic discipline of International Relations is a collection of pictures that can seduce us and that such forms of seduction have ethical and political effects.

And, of course, I myself had struggled trying to fulfil a promise because a picture had

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<sup>3</sup> See Edkins, Jenny. *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Writing and doing IR theory (understood as philosophy and ethics) are the same thing for me. This is what this piece is trying to both illustrate and make intelligible.

seduced and captured me. The idea of representing a person, in language, had captured me because I had fallen silent for nine years unable to write the book. It's a capture of an extreme sort when you become silenced by this picture. It insists that one must say nothing if one cannot say it all. But to see the range of possibilities this way, as literally all or nothing, is a grammatical effect. It is grammatically constituted by a commitment to expression that confines itself to successful representation. It already assumes too much; namely, that representation is the only use of language and that truth is the measure of its success. Having been seduced by this picture, I felt I had a story to tell about the seductive power of pictures. I called that power "metaphysical seduction". It was meant to convey something of the assumptions that might lead us to believe that words are bound to objects such that they can depict reality. I was trying to point to something sticky or "adhesive" as Emerson would put it. Wittgenstein talked about it as a belief in a "hard connection" between the order of possibilities common to both thought and world (Wittgenstein 1958: §97). I simply called it "ontological hardness" in my attempt to play IR's scholarly language game.

Having now begun to develop a vocabulary by which, and behind which, I could express my personal experiences, I assembled nine pictures in different galleries of the Ethics in IR Art Museum. There was a gallery for each of the three theorists I included. In the published monograph they were chapters. I allowed each theorist to display three of their paintings; a picture of the subject, a picture of reason and a picture of *ethico*-political space. That sounds scholarly enough, no? I won't bore you with the story of each picture. There's the research monograph for that. But I wanted to share with you a tale about the art museum that I was told. It concerned the portrait gallery displaying the "pictures of the subject".

The portrait gallery lay at the centre of the museum. The passageways to the other galleries radiated out from it, which meant that if you got lost wandering about you'd usually wind up back there. As someone who infamously has absolutely no sense of direction, I notice that's what happens when you're lost sometimes. You wind up back where you started.

The design and contents of this gallery were a part of the history of the place.<sup>5</sup> Unlike my abandoned portrait of Howard, the three canvases in the room were not blank. A few of the staff of the museum, that others impatiently tried to ignore as "incompetent", took me to one side early on in my curatorship. Right out loud, loud enough for anyone to hear should they be interested, they told of the curse that is rumoured to be attached to the three paintings in the portrait gallery. They said that the canvases are made of a bewitching material that causes the viewer to unwittingly fall in love with themselves when they view the portraits. Some say the canvases are slightly sticky, like honey, if you dare to touch them. More alarmingly, it was said that those who fall under the curse of the portrait gallery lose their ability to recognise the reality of anyone else around them. They walk upon the earth continuously convincing themselves, and anyone else who will listen, that the people around them are zombies with no souls when, in fact, it is they that have been cursed. It is even said that some

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<sup>5</sup> Postcolonial critiques of configurations of subjectivity make explicit what is at stake here. See for example: Loomba, Ania. *Colonial/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, London, 1998; hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. South End Press, 1989; Mohanram, Radhika. *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999; Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1991; Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 1986. 1952; Muppidi, Himadeep. *The Colonial Signs of International Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

of the cursed become murderers not realizing that they have killed anyone who might matter. After all, killing zombies isn't killing people, right? Or so they keep trying to tell us (Pin-Fat 2016a). Personally, I was (and remain) so appalled by the power and danger of this curse—the tempting honey sweetness of seeking to recognise one's own reflection in the face of others—that I posted a warning sign by the doorway: "Beware of Snarks," it said (2010: 122-129).

The dangers and temptations of "the curse" are probably the animating heartbeat of the research monograph and all that I have published before and since. It is a concern with the political and ethical practices of humanity. In the monograph, I tried to show the stickiness of the curse through an examination of the kinds of grammar that produce universalised foundational portraits (pictures of the subject). These grammars, I tried to show, are taken as given. I hoped then, as now, that seeing these pictures as *grammatical* (as opposed to a representation of what is fundamental to the reality of being human) is the moment at which the curse loses its grip on us. As Wittgenstein famously put it, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (1958: §109). The very possibility of a loosening, of "soaring" more poetically, implies the ever-present possibility of challenging ethical and political *practice*. This is why a focus on language games and the rule-following that they produce and engender matters. It is a way of seeking to understand and explore what holds dominant political practices in place and the effects of this for our understandings of humanity and ways of living with each other. An appreciation of the metaphysical seduction of grammars ('stickiness') enables an understanding of what accounts for and produces ontological *hardness* as a hard connection between words and the order of the possibilities of things.<sup>6</sup> The hardness is the effect of the curse. Ontological softness is what you see when it has lifted. Or so I hope.

As I set about describing the other pictures in a scholarly vocabulary appropriate to the language games of IR, a very famous quote from Wittgenstein was animating my endeavours, "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (1958: §115). Wittgenstein's words enabled me to talk about the ways in which pictures in IR hold us captive and limit our ethical imaginary. I was finally free to talk about picturing as *ethico-political*; as the practice of drawing lines between what is politically legitimate and illegitimate, who counts as human and who doesn't, between what matters in global politics and what doesn't, between what we can and can't (violently) do to each other, who we can kill and when. I could talk about how those lines get created and why they appear more solid than they really are. I could talk about the effects of these pictures on the world and their effects on the others with whom we live. I could talk about the failure of these representational enterprises to provide the answer to global ethics. I could talk about the whole sorry collection of landscapes and junk in the basement of the museum as the dangers of universality and I could talk about the curse of the portrait gallery at the same time. And last but not least, I could talk about where an openness to surprise might lead us. I had finally found a way "of being able to speak philosophically and openly about anything and everything". All that from simply returning to the rough

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<sup>6</sup> See Rachel Massey for a feminist focus on stickiness, flows, coagulations and hardness in relation to sexual violence and embodiment in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Massey, Rachel. "'Leaky Bodies': Critical Reflections on Contemporary Framings of Conflict Based Sexual Violence in Congo (DRC)", University of Manchester, 2016.



ground of the ordinary! After my initial misunderstanding of silence, it seems there was quite a bit to say after all.

The deadline for submitting the manuscript of the book was set for my birthday one day in April 2009. Nine years had passed since Howard had died and our son, Jacques, was playing downstairs with a foam tennis ball practicing his football skills. I could feel the floorboards shake as the thumping sound of his step-overs travelled upstairs to where I was working. After some time there was a pause in Jacques' playing. Perhaps, in the football match of his imagination, it was half time and an opportune moment for a glass of milk and some chocolate.

With the pause came a silence; the sort of silence that accompanies each breath between sentences. It seemed that, at long last, I had found a peace of sorts—right there in the spaces between the words I had written as the enactment of my promise to Howard. It was the place where I had begun. And yet, everything looked different now that I was no longer stuck. What I had thought was impossible had happened.

I hit “send” to an email with the completed book manuscript attached.

### III.

The exhilarating thunderstorm has ceased and I am still here with you in the woods. I wrote to you today because the question of philosophy drives me to; astonishing me as you and I soar into the empyrean. Perhaps you can't see yourself soaring here, with me—but Emerson knows that you are.

I came here to narrate a short story about my relationship to IR; how I stand in relation to it, to the world and those with whom I share it. I came here to speak of a time when doing IR theory was a philosophical engagement with global ethics, and, at the same time, a struggle with profound grief. And similarly now, here in the woods with you, I am writing philosophy as the narration of soaring personal histories to try to make them intelligible as politics and ethics. For me, the question of philosophy demands nothing less. But I confess that, for all that, I do get lost here sometimes. Some of the wildest stories come from such journeys, don't you think?

Once, halfway through the journey of our life,  
I found myself inside a shadowy wood,  
Because the proper road had disappeared.

How difficult it is to tell of it—  
That savage wilderness, so harsh and thick.  
Remembering it now renews my fears.

Could death itself be worse than that grim place?  
But if I am to show the good it brought  
Then I must speak of other things I saw. (Dante *Inf.* I.1-9)

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