

Reflective Commentary

When writing my creative piece, *The March*, I decided to base the narrative on a short story by Alain Robbe-Grillet called *The Beach*. This short story is one of the few short stories written by Grillet. Indeed, the Frenchman was more renowned for his filmmaking, more specifically, his “cine-novels”; films famous for their enigmatic narrative structure and ambiguity as to the exact temporal and spatial relationship of the events. Indeed, the “oneiric” style is a distinctive form of Grillet’s writing. When reading *The Beach*, one gets the feeling that they are watching a film – the cinematic quality of his writing persists throughout the entire narrative; and in itself makes this short story a fascinating read.

As the oneiric, or dream-like style dictates, there are no exact temporal and spatial relationships between the events in the short story. The characters in the short story are nameless. By that same token, the venue and time are not clearly specified. It is this feature that gives this short story a “timeless” feel – and one stylistic feature of Grillet’s that I attempted to emulate in my creative response. It cannot be denied that the Frenchman’s deliberate ambiguity in temporal and spatial relationship makes creating a narrative imitating style and tone easier because there are no preconceptions that the reader can make regarding a specific name. My adaptation features three ants in an anonymous field at an unspecified time. In my opinion, when reading my creative piece, one is provided with a lot of visual information but more intimate details, such as names and location, are withheld.

One of the intriguing features of Grillet’s narrative is its cyclical nature. Each paragraph is divided into specific sections which are repeated and expanded upon later on in the story. Indeed, the lack of specificity in time supports the idea that the narrative can, and does, exist in a continuum. In that same vein, the structure of each paragraph seems to begin with a specific focal point, a dot, and then expand outwards into a view of the wider world. I have included this feature in my creative response by starting each paragraph focussing on the ants, and then broadening the perspective until, at the end of the paragraph, the focus is on the ants in the vast field, a “sea of green”, marching away from a ravaged forest.

My reading of Grillet’s narrative is one pertaining to searching and seeking. In my opinion, this reading is supported by the inclusion of birds that continually fly away from the children. The children, who seem rather detached and machine-like, chase after the birds, because it is an object that they are drawn towards. With all the symbolism and analogy stripped away, my creative response primarily deals with soldiers seeking normality in their lives again after returning from a war. Shell-shocked by their experiences, they try to search for balance, which is elusive and just out of reach, in their lives

In writing *The March*, I decided make the ants analogous with the military. Similar to soldiers, the ants are precise, disciplined and execute their actions with a mechanical and calculated exactness. Like the children in *The Beach*, the soldiers also have a clinical disconnection with their surroundings. As a consequence of the discipline instilled through military training, soldiers learn to ignore distractions and carry on with their task.

In my short story, the forest is symbolic of places where war has occurred. Ravaged by “cold bodies of steel”, the ants are walking away from the forest. This is symbolic of soldiers returning home. I adapted the birds in *The Beach* to a kernel in my creative response. The ants are drawn towards the kernel due to their desire to obtain the desirable object. However, the kernel is always just out of reach, and so the ants continue to chase after it. In *The March*, the kernel embodies the “old” life that the soldiers led prior to the service. Now exiting the war, the shell-shocked soldiers seek the balance and normality of their old lives, but the terrors of their experiences makes it difficult to pin down what they are seeking.

In my reading of Grillet’s story, the bell is a timely reminder to the children about mortality; this meaning has been retained in my response, and appears as thunder, the “roar from the heavens”. After serving in a war, many soldiers are reminded of the importance of mortality and how easily lives can be taken away. The reminder of mortality is both pertinent and meaningful to those who have fought in wars. The lessons war teach people, especially soldiers, justifies, in my opinion, the use of the thunder as a reminder in my creative response.

Many soldiers suffer after returning from conflict. Although they have been trained to be disciplined, detached and focussed, the horrors of war leave a lasting impact. Many who return home find it difficult to resume the lives they once lead, and unlike other ordinary experiences, the memory of war is difficult to erase.

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The March



“The longest journey through life, is down the path that leads us Home.”

Author Unknown

THREE ANTS are marching along a field away from the edge of a forest. They pace in single file, with only a dot’s distance between them, searching for food. The three ants are roughly the same size, minute, and the same rectangular shape. The one in the middle, though, is slightly larger than the other two.

Apart from the three ants, the space around them is empty. It is a grassy field, a vast sea of green, with neither weeds nor flowers, sitting outside an ominous-looking forest, ravaged by the touch of cold bodies of steel.

It is a chilly day. The sun, a divine eye, is playing a celestial game of hide-and-seek. The clouds, grey and heavy, are low in the sky, threatening those below with watery bullets. There is no wind. Nothing disturbs the green field, which sits on the edge of the forest, as it travels up a gentle incline and into the horizon.

At regular intervals, dew, always the same, drops from the heights. The sprinkling drops seem to glide down from the trees; burst open, produce a slight depression in the ground, and continue to ooze out from the radius to further quench the surrounding dirt. It is only very occasionally that a larger drop falls and for a moment moistens a few extra inches.

And everything becomes still again; the field, luscious and green, is being fed and nourished by the metronomic dropping of dew as, side by side, the three ants march on.

They are chocolate brown in colour, slightly darker than the dirt they march on. Their antennae are fully stretched out, alert, analysing their surroundings as they search diligently for food that is located nearby. They are walking, one

behind another, with only a speck separating one pair of antennae from the rear of the next ant, in a straight line, in perfect synchronicity. Conscientiously they carry out their task, unbothered by the sun, and its absence as it hides behind clouds which loom, almost menacingly, over the field, deprived of the rays' illuminating and warm glow.

In front of them is grass, an eternal sea of green, smooth strands that sprout up from the moist soil, like silky hair on the head of a toddler. The ants move forward in a straight line, at an even speed, without making the slightest little detour, calm, quite focussed on the job on hand. Behind them the dirt, quenched and pliable, but not muddy due to oversaturation, is marked by a line of tracks left by their feet, a series of even, equally spaced prints, shallow, but well-trodden by the three ants.

The ants travel straight ahead. They do not veer off course, untempted to alter their path away from the forest, which has been violated by soulless construction of metals, as they climb the gentle incline towards the horizon. With unwavering discipline and focus they journey onwards, sights set solely on their target. They do not even pause to acknowledge the dew drops, the little spheres of moisture tumbling off the edges of leaves, falling with rhythmic regularity. They continue on their way with rapid, even steps.

The depth of these prints is constant; a third of an inch, or even less. They are not deformed, either by carelessness or irregularity; they are precise, almost calculated. They look as if they have been mechanically punched out, executed meticulously, almost with sense of a military accuracy. There is a metronomic precision to their steps. The prints seem to possess an accuracy that seems calculated, pre-meditated. The fall and rise of eighteen feet, seeming to mark time.

In front of them, towards the edge of the horizon, is a large kernel, about ten feet away. Staying stationary, the ants are fast approaching the object that they desire, an desperately needed addition to the colony's food mound. And while the dew drops continually obliterate the faint imprint once created by the rolling of the kernel along the ground, the ants' ingrained trails clearly remain imprinted in the moist soil, the line of prints continuing to lengthen, perfectly straight.

As their feet march away, the ants get closer to the kernel. Not only are they covering the ground rapidly, but the distance separating the ants from their target is diminishing rapidly, and soon the distance covered is greater than the distance left to travel. The kernel is in reach. They are soon a few steps left between them...

But when the ants finally seem to reach the kernel, a small gust of wind blows through the field. The grass bows down in the wind and the kernel rolls

away. The gust, almost as suddenly as it began, dies down immediately. The grass return to their upright positions and the kernel settles down, still in the same direction, further up the field, about ten feet away.

The ants do not seem to tire; instead, they seem to march on with a boundless energy, a mechanical stride. Taking no notice of the trail they have moulded into the ground, they continue to march, one behind another, towards their target, unperturbed.

In front of them the silky, green grass stretches towards the horizon, limitless. In the background, slightly to the left, stands, almost vertically, a large grey rock, almost a shade of pewter. Behind the rock lays the forest, now only an arrangement of shadows, stripped bare and robbed of its beauty. The vertical of trees, once beautiful like a treasured crystal, is now only flecks of light and dark; man's caress shattered the gem into a million tiny pieces. The ruin, scattered asunder, no longer is a breathtaking treasure.

The sun is still hiding. Swallowed up by the clouds, the air turns colder and the light fades. A rumble, almost belch-like in nature, comes from the clouds, breaking the silence in the calm air. Like a cry from the forest itself, anguished, the roar from the heavens echo ominously.

The sound soon dissipates, and it becomes calm again. The three ants, no longer hearing anything, are still walking in the same regular rhythm, all in a straight line. Another gust of wind. The grass bows down again, rather submissively, to the wind and the kernel rolls away. When the gust disappears, the grass return to the same upright positions they were in previously and the kernel is further up the field, still in the same direction, about ten feet away.

The sound has not made the ants modify their pace, neither hastening or slowing; and the same trail, behind them, continues to appear, as they go along, focussed intently on their goal. Unruffled by the noise, the call before a winter storm, the ants march on, mechanically, metronomic, leaving their unified prints in the dirt.

The dew drops continue to fall, rhythmically, wiping out the tracks of the rolling kernel. The ants' trail, on the other hand, remains imprinted, they continue leaving their mark, deep enough to not be washed away, unable to be obliterated.

In the distance the clouds thunder again, filling the air with its cacophony. The skies darken and hang low, hostile in its invasion, snarling and threatening, warning those below of the imminent rainstorm. A gust of wind blows. Immediately the grass sinks into the familiar subservient position and

the kernel rolls away, stopping approximately ten feet away. But the ants march on, up the hill and towards the horizon.