

Like many bookish children who grew up in the 1970s I read Roald Dahl's short stories far too early. The polymorphous perversity and adult viciousness of *Kiss Kiss* and *Switch Bitch* were an education and a bracing corrective to *The Secret Seven*. Alongside the leprous sex, talking brain and general deceit the tale that stayed with me was *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*. Or part of it.

The story begins with idle playboy and gambler Henry Sugar discovering a hand-written report of how a Hindu mystic learnt to see without using his eyes – to see through physical objects to whatever is beyond them. The essence of the technique was to develop an inner sense of sight, brought about through concentrating on the flame of a candle. The dissolute Sugar immediately obtains a candle and sets about practicing, with the aim of being able to see through playing cards.

Being a Roald Dahl story we assume that something will go terribly wrong for Sugar. That he will learn to see through objects only to spend the rest of his life unable to see what is in front of him, or that he will come to see people as merely bones and gristle. The twist in the tale is that he succeeds, and that the daily discipline of candle meditation has changed him.

The original Hindu mystic (and Henry Sugar) were both practicing *trataka*, a yogic method of meditation that involves staring at a single point such as a black dot or

the centre of a candle flame. *Trataka* is said to still the mind, stimulate the pineal gland, open the third eye, and promote psychic abilities.

Outside of the possibility of occult powers, one of the things that initially fascinated me about the story was the length of time it took to master the technique. The mystic took 15 years, and Sugar himself three years and three months. What if at the end of that time one failed?

As an artist I've spent what is rapidly becoming a lifetime pursuing a self-generated series of tasks, the success of which is ambiguous at best. It has become a life filled with the potential for total failure. A realisation that what one does has no effect or is just wrong. Stupid. Misguided. That time, perhaps a lifetime, has been wasted. That, rather than achieving anything concrete, all the looking and thinking and making has been in vain. That one has been simply staring at a flame as the candle below it burns away. And yet there is always the chance of success...

I was reminded of the story of Henry Sugar and *trataka* while working on a previous book called *The Egyptian Postures*. It was concerned with esoteric practices and their relationships to colour theory and eugenics. While trying to grasp the interwoven histories of the Bauhaus, Mazdaznan, Theosophy, W.B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley I came across the obituary of a woman who had damaged her eyesight through practicing candle

meditation. I made a mental note to return to it and moved on to more pressing matters.

Who that woman was, and how her story relates to Yeats or Crowley, I cannot say because I've been unable to find the obituary or any reference to it since. I've scoured the internet to no avail, visited occult bookshops and interrogated witches, pagans, Buddhists and historians, but no one can suggest who the woman might have been. All I am left with are my memories of a half-read article. Was she a poet, a critic, a novelist? Someone who did something that is considered obituary-worthy at least. Perhaps somebody reading this will know?

All of which is a suggestion as to why this book exists. What it does is another matter. *Trataka* consists simply of two hundred photographs of a candle as it burns in daylight. Although it resembles a series of stills from a film each photograph was taken individually, necessitating six hours of concentration and attention to ensure the exposure was adjusted and the shutter depressed every two minutes.

The photographs record the subtly changing light of a passing November day, as well as the gradual disappearance of the candle's physical form. Wax is consumed by flame and a solid object converted to light and heat. The final photograph shows the moment the flame goes out. A trace of white smoke rises from the extinguished candle wick.

Of course, candles have been used in art, religious spaces and rituals for thousands of years, the naked flame coming to symbolise many things – the light of transcendence, the illumination of the faithful, the transubstantiation of matter into spirit and simultaneously to act as a *memento mori*, a reminder that everything has its time, that the flame will inevitably go out.

In this relationship to death my documentation of a candle's passing resembles another meditation practice: Buddhist *maranasati*, the visualisation of one's own death and decomposition. Traditionally this begins with summoning the image of one's own corpse, followed by seeing the skin turn blue and fester while the flesh rots and is eaten by worms to reveal the skeleton beneath. Finally, one's bones become dust that is scattered by the wind until no trace of the body remains.

The white cloud of bone dust mingling with the atmosphere returns us to the white smoke of the candle's last moment. Yet the intention of *maranasati* is not simply to anticipate extinction or to allow us to look upon death with equanimity. It also serves to remind us that through *trataka* each moment of entropy, or artistic failure, on the way to that end can be stilled, studied and revered.

Notes on Trataka



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