Summoning Ghosts and Releasing Angels

Challenging the Tyranny of the Blank Page

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors challenge the notion of "the blank page" and, with reference to visual phenomena such as Charles Bonnet Syndrome and pareidolia, suggest ways in which the page can be reconceptualised as a space in which the text already exists, along with ways in which they may be accessed by the writer.

Introduction

"How," asks Julia Bell at the beginning of her and Paul Magrs' excellent *Creative Writing Coursebook*, "do you pass through that first, often terrifying, encounter with the blank page?" (2001: 3). It's a question that lies at the root of a whole industry of Creative Writing guides, of classes and courses, of more or less formal groups and networks, and of fidgety self-doubt as we attempt to stare down notebooks or laptops. Writing, it seems, is an activity which a great many wish to undertake, but which many find "terrifying" – a description that will only appear hyperbolic to those who have never bared themselves to the self-revealing page. Every "how to" book on the subject will offer prompts and exercises to overcome the challenge of the blank page and, indeed, there are whole books which are focused entirely upon strategies for breaking through the psychological barriers we may meet in this complexly adversarial encounter.

As Jack Heffron's reassuringly-titled – and refreshingly upbeat – *The Writer's Idea Book* notes, though, the difficulty isn't generally the oft-perceived problem of not having ideas. "Most writers," says Heffron, "have more ideas than they can explore in a lifetime" (2000: 2), yet still the would-be writer may so often find the looming spectre of the blank page overwhelmingly daunting. While the books already mentioned, along with countless others in the field (see, for example, Doubtfire, 2003: 5; Luckhurst and Singleton, 2000: 10; Mills, 2006: 35-6) aim to jolt their readers into overcoming this obstacle, we both – as writers, teachers and workshop leaders – seek instead to encourage the writers we work with to reconceptualise the idea of the blank page itself. In doing this, we approach the act of writing within a framework that is informed by visual phenomena: namely Charles Bonnet Syndrome and pareidolia. While the introduction of such weighty terms into the Creative Writing classroom may simply scare the faint-hearted even more than an empty page, and send them scuttling straight into writing, we employ the theory with a decidedly soft touch. In what follows, we shall describe our approaches, offering illustrative examples of the results from our own work, and suggest how they may be used in the Creative Writing classroom.

Summoning Ghosts – Amina Alyal

The blank page is itself the site of expectation and interpretation, always already haunted by the "Thought-Fox" (Hughes, 1957: 15) of both writer and reader. Even a printed page, made up as it is of words and blank spaces around them, is populated by spectres which find their genesis in the acts of reading and of interpretation, in other texts, in generic expectation, and even, ultimately, in the reader's memories and associations. In considering the complex ways in which this process operates, a number of theories are apposite, most prominently perhaps reader-response theory, in the inception of which Wolfgang Iser declared that, "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence …" (1972: 279). He discusses the tension between explicit and implicit content of the text in the process of reading (ibid: 282), and how "the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations," as is demonstrated by how "a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first" (ibid: 285). In all this, we need to

> bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself.
>
> These gaps have a different effect on the process of anticipation and restrospection, and thus on the "gestalt" of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. In this very act the dynamics of reading are revealed. (Iser, 1972: 285)

The "virtual dimension of the text," as Iser suggests (ibid: 283), may be different for different readers. The phenomenological theories of Descartes and Husserl cast further light on the process, in terms of the ways in which sense perceptions are processed by a subjective cognitive activity: whilst these theories originate in sense perceptions of the empirical world generally, we can apply the concept to how words and spaces, perceived on the page, take on subjective formulations within the observing mind. Indeed, even emphatically neurological conditions such as Charles Bonnet Syndrome can shed light on this experience. Some texts more than others focus on the process of the mind making sense of what it

sees, what Barthes called "scriptible" or "writerly" texts: "the goal of literary work (of literature at work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes, 1975: 4). These texts can be examined (and written) in the course of a productive exploration of hermeneutics.

Taking such hermeneutics as a starting point stimulates writing. I am working on a collection of poems with the broad theme of *ghosts*. In doing so, I am partly exploring the ways in which we read and the effects of form on the reading experience. Thus, as well as reading widely on ghosts and their histories, I am exploring the ways in which missing or fragmented texts generate meaning, this meaning being drawn partly from nuance and partly from generic expectation. The ghost, that persistent phenomenon, has been framed in ways that enlighten my writing process, including as metaphors, memories, recorded apparitions, sense impressions, states of mind, theories and concepts. Particularly fruitful, in this connection, is Iser's assertion that

> with a literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination. (Iser 1972: 288)

"Gaps" are an integral part of Charles Bonnet Syndrome, one of the explanations of ghostly sightings and a condition in which failing eyesight causes the visual cortex to make up the shortfall by providing mental images that are understood in the same way as retinal images received from outside: research suggests "this phenomenon is akin to phantom limb syndrome" (Nair, Shah and Anilkumar 2015: 206), so that "spontaneous neuronal discharge result[s] in visual hallucinations" (Stojanov, 2016: 883). This idea of how the mind can coherently "fill in the gaps" leads in turn to related philosophical considerations. Descartes's ruminations on perception seem relevant: for him, consciousness constructs external reality (he too cites phantom limb syndrome), and he distrusts even the senses in conveying to us an objective external world, alluding to how changing perspective adjusts our ideas of what we are seeing: "Towers that had seemed round from afar occasionally appeared square at

close quarters. Very large statues mounted on their pedestals did not seem large to someone looking at them from ground level" (Descartes 1998: 95). Husserl goes even further: "We must bear in mind that *what things are* … are as things of experience. Experience alone prescribes their meaning" (Husserl 2012: 91).

So, if we apply this principle to reading, we may surmise that if a piece of writing leaves gaps to be filled in by the mind of the reader, the reader will project their own ghosts out into the fragments put in front of them, because that is what a reader does with any text, however open or closed it may appear to be, with Sherlockian intensity: "Holmes has a spooky ability to look at a certain outcome – a corpse, a smattering of clues – and see the whole rich story that led up to it. … We each have a little Sherlock Holmes in our brain" (Gottschall 2013: 99-100, 102). Reader-response is perhaps most obviously a factor when considering modernist and post-modern poetry, as indeed Iser himself recognises (Iser 1972: 285), for example the syntactically coherent, semantically impenetrable Gertrude Stein – "The change in that is that red weakens an hour" (Stein 2006: 1) – the cut-up maestro Tom Phillips –

> unpack
> 　　delight
>
>
> 　savour
> 　　the old
> adventure. 　　　　　　　　　　(Phillips)

– or J. H. Prynne. Prynne superimposes multiple snippets drawn from a variety of sources, including "shamanism; Chinese; metallurgy; medieval and Tudor music; botany; and geology" resulting in a "mesh of indirectness" that both invites and defies comprehension (Noel-Tod 2016). Richard Kerridge comments on the "dialectical exchange" between "fragments," in which "the poetic effect consists of the interaction of contrasting and opposing elements that continue to challenge and transform each other" (Prynne 2018: 10-11), allowing for a seemingly endless dynamism of shifting coherence, in which the juxtaposition of unrelated fragments creates semantic gaps that require the reader to, in Husserl's words, "supply their meaning." Consider the effects of a poem like this, for example:

Just a treat sod Heine you notice
the base going down, try to whistle
with a tooth broken. Safe in our hands
won't cut up rough, at all, pent up
and boil over. Fly, my brother, he watches
a point of entry, only seeming to
have a heart for it. Thermal patchwork
will tell, sisal entreaty creams out. (Prynne 2018 38)

We learn from annotations that "safe in our hands" is from *The Times* in 1983, quoting Margaret Thatcher on the NHS, and "Fly, my brother" recalls *King Lear* and a tale of murderous betrayal of trust (Prynne 2018: 92-93). Does this information help us to make sense of the poem? And how are the semantic gaps between the fragments thus thrust together filled in by the reader? The information adds something certainly about seemingly protective figures threatening our health and lives. But what or who is Heine? And what does "sisal entreaty creams out" mean? Google reveals that "sisal" is a Mexican plant, used for rope-making, and nowadays generally for cats' baskets and scratching posts. But was it once used for hanging, I wonder? Would it change the poem to see a condemned man lurking in its shadows, or a pampered cat? Must I choose between them? The poem encourages continual detecting effort, but without a final "whodunnit" conclusion; all its associations and connections and the exercise of reading it become entirely a (rigorous) exercise of my own imagination. "[A]uthors," says Jonathan Gottschall, "trick the readers into doing most of the imaginative work" (2013: 4).

These notions of seemingly outer worlds being constructed in the imagination, are suggestive, especially if such constructions are not necessarily shared (Husserl talks about multiple such worlds: 2012: 86). Particularly in light of Gottschall's assertion above, we may think of these readings as analogous to the Rorschach effect of juxtaposed fragments which construct unique and unplanned meanings for each viewer. This disruption of objective reality brings me round again to the theme of ghosts: "are they real?" becomes an irrelevant question. And finally, if a piece of writing had actual gaps within it, as in Charles Bonnet Syndrome, would that not be in itself a fitting form for the subject-matter, so that the poem would only be half-apprehended, translucent, like a ghost?

This last thought gave me my starting point. The method it suggested to me is to provide suggestive skeletal arrangements, leaving much to the reader's imagination, a Barthesian *scriptible* text. This can be done by fragmenting and dislocating selected material in various ways. As a typical example, here is one poem:

Account
   woke   bending   .
I could not   grey   *succulent*
           pattering
   fell , down
 end of the   stood for
   , swaying from   sickly   within
a cowl   low
something   a dream   *drip kiss*
  of course white notes   *; accounts*
    Did   Did   *a red voice* sent
lemon-sharp   a spike of light
   half-drawn   *iced silence*
           had   all the country

To produce such a poem, a starting point would be to write a generic, indeed somewhat clichéd, story, so that even fragments of it might trigger a familiar scenario. Here is mine:

I woke suddenly, and saw a figure bending over the foot of my bed. I could not see the face. A long grey robe fell from its shoulders, down below the end of the blankets. It stood for a while, swaying from side to side with a sickly motion, and from within the cowl over its head a low voice said, like something half-heard in a dream, Did you forget, Did you forget … The moon sent a vivid beam in between the half-drawn curtains, and outside the wind had dropped and all the country slept.

The next stage is to add more layers. The walls between dream and reality become porous in my story, as between living and dead, substantial and insubstantial. This chimed in well with my interest in dissolving the borders between reader and writer, and I also thought further about borders between the senses; so I applied synaesthesia, and asked myself about the taste of grey, what the voice looks like, what silence feels like on the skin, what the moon smells of. I chose to add sound as a further layer (Google gave me "drip" and "kiss" from a website listing cartoon film sounds effects), and a couple of ambiguous rogue words floated in ("notes" and

"accounts"). Finally, I took a scalpel to my story, removing most of it. I left gaps where text had been cut out, arranged the words in new lines, and layered in the synaesthetic comments, and the sounds.

This was how I raised a ghost where previously I had only a space. The poem now suggests various things to me that were not there when I started. It suggests an intimate, painful apprehension, even embracing, of mortality ("I could not   grey … sickly … swaying" but also "succulent" and "kiss"); "succulent" also makes me think of "succubus"; I sense guilt in "accounts," which might be a weighing up of what is owing (metaphorically), but on the other hand it might simply be the recording of ghostly sightings, or perhaps it is both. I sense regret at something irrevocably *done* ("Did … did" – perhaps the "red voice" is holding me to account); the "spike of light" just popped in at the editing stage, and has a surgical, uncomfortable feel to me, a probing that maybe I don't want, and it does more than the "vivid beam" I first wrote. But another reader, or I on another day, might make up different meanings. The gaps and juxtapositions allow for ambiguous, shifting coherence, dependent on a "smattering of clues." Others may find different materials and starting points for their own poems using this process, and it is also possible to play the same game with a found text and random additions of sensory terms.

Releasing Angels – Oz Hardwick

"Most writers," observes Dianne Doubtfire, "feel that it is incredibly difficult to start, even with plenty of time at their disposal" (Doubtfire 2003: 5). For, as well as finding the time to write, we also need to carve out spaces – physical perhaps, psychological most certainly – within busy environments which are rarely ostensibly conducive to writing. With ambient noise and other auditory distractions, it is difficult to focus on "what we want to say," and the looming blank page itself recedes into the surrounding room, children, television, cats, and so on. Indeed, such is the semi-mythical nature of ideal writing conditions that early in his book, Heffron offers a writing prompt that begins: "Fantasy time. Describe your ideal writing space …" (Heffron, 2000: 27). Rather than providing an excuse for not writing, it is my contention that these disruptions should be embraced, as they may themselves provide stimuli, not only for writing, but for writing which one would perhaps not otherwise produce.

To draw an example from the plastic arts, a quite possibly apocryphal story recounts how, when he was asked about sculpture, Michelangelo replied that, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." While the writer's art is often characterised as making words appear on a blank page, it is arguably more practical to let the page shrink into the sensory overload of the moment, and to, in terms of this anecdote, "set the angel free." But where does one begin?

Pareidolia, though an esoteric term, is something with which I am sure all of us will be familiar to some extent. It is that phenomenon by which we interpret vague or random stimuli as a pattern or image of something that is not there. Visually, this may be seeing a slumped figure in a pile of discarded bin bags, or the face of Mother Theresa in a bread roll; less commonly, it may manifest itself as hearing voices in the sound of the wind, or in the rattle of a railway carriage. We are predisposed to conjure forms where they do not exist, and they take the shape of things we already know, but that we may not have been conscious of at that particular moment (Robson 2014). And it is in this predisposition that we may find in the daily – or even momentary – jumble of sights, sounds, smells, and other sensory experiences, the words that are already there, waiting for us to free them.

In order to find the words within, it is first necessary to overcome the barriers we may erect by imposing our personal agendas onto proceedings: as noted above, we all probably have more ideas than we'll ever use, so we just need to trust that we'll discover the shape of one of them. Glyn Maxwell invokes Auden when making the point that it's much more important to love playing with words than having "something to say," observing that through doing so, "by the time [he] had something to say [he] had a pretty good idea how to." (Maxwell 2012: 73-74). I would like to take this further, and suggest that it can be through playing with words – the words that we just happen to have around (and inside) us at any given moment – that we can discover which of our ideas, which of the many things we want to say, is already within them. We each develop our own writing practices: I customarily write for thirty minutes over breakfast, a time which in my household would fulfil very few people's criteria for ideal writing circumstances: I will still be waking

up, perhaps remembering the outline of a dream; checking my diary and emails; thinking about day-to-day domestic tasks; being more or less aware of any broader concerns occupying my thoughts; and taking in snatches of breakfast television, and of local radio intruding from the kitchen. All of this makes for a huge, dense block of metaphorical stone. Where is the angel? To take an example from my own work, I will describe some aspects of a morning late in 2017 which led to a prose poem that appeared in my chapbook *Learning to Have Lost* (Hardwick 2018).

It is around 7.00 am and it's raining hard, though I don't mind as I'll be working from home. My wife and I have just engaged in the weekly duvet-wrangling ritual, and the washing machine's throbbing with bed linen, providing a rhythmic backing for a news item about the fortieth anniversary of Christiaan Barnard's first human heart transplant. I'm old enough to remember this, though I was only 7, and what I was really interested in was space and Rupert Bear. So I Google the Apollo programme, because the dates I remember – particularly Apollo 8, artefacts from which I saw recently in Chicago, and Apollo 11, because *everyone* remembers that – are a bit later: but while I'm looking up space exploration, I'm really thinking about my old Rupert books that were stored in my parents' house in Plymouth, and about finding them after my mother died and I had to sort and sell everything. And for no reason I can explain, I think of being very small and going to Buckland Abbey where Sir Francis Drake had lived, and of how those Rupert books always had an origami page, and of how I've always liked the sound of the word "origami," and of William Reynolds-Stevens' sculpture *A Royal Game* (1906) which shows Elizabeth I and Philip of Spain playing chess with ships. These are just a few of the unchecked thought impressions that accompany the news report, the washing machine, and the beginning of another day. As I habitually do – I am a great proponent of the *habit* of writing in order to apprehend and embrace the chaotic and random as it happens – I begin typing:

> **Origami**
> As you fold the sheets, it reminds me of the Great Origami Craze of '68-'69. Wherever you went, there were people folding squares into something-or-other: frogs that hopped when you tapped them with a pencil, lotuses that opened to reveal Shiva, delicately balanced and

winking. Some days, the air was so thick with planes that you had to fold bell-like umbrellas to keep their sharp noses at bay. On rainy days, gutters would become armadas of frigates and galleons, each bristling with guns that pinged matchsticks off passing traffic. Origami was prime time entertainment, there were special live broadcasts at breakfast time from the world championships in Mexico City, and soaps would end on a seemingly impossible crease, leaving the nation anxiously awaiting the outcome the following evening. A surgeon won the Nobel Prize for the first successful origami heart, and when those gloved astronaut hands planted the first origami stars and stripes on the Moon, the whole world held its breath and watched. You, being those few years younger, don't remember it, but the way you fold the pillow cases, sharp edge to sharp edge, could have stopped paper clocks.

Looking at this now I can see that, apart from those influences mentioned above, the 1968 Mexico Olympics also came in from somewhere – presumably just as part of a train of thought that looped around the late 60s – as did a brass statue of Shiva that my parents bought for my birthday one year. And looking at that last line, there may well have been an echo of Auden in response to the deaths of my parents, but I couldn't be sure.

The important point about the above example, though, is that what this half-hour produced was a surreal – and I think tender – poem about the comfort of small domestic rituals in a crazy world. There was no plan, other than to look in an unprejudiced way at all the words and images outside and inside my head, and cut away the unimportant ones until I was left with the shape in the centre; saying what I wanted to say but didn't know that I wanted to say it, in a way that I would not have done had I begun with a specific idea and aim. It is a process that privileges everything within one's range of perception above the blank page, to such an extent that the very idea of the blank page doesn't even occur.

Conclusion

In describing the processes that we employ in our writing, what I hope we have suggested are strategies which may enable the would-be writer to view the blank page neither as a terrifying adversarial

challenger to be overcome in a life-and-death struggle, nor as an endless, featureless prospect into which one cannot imagine entering without being swallowed by emptiness. Rather, it is a small space within which one may, by cultivating attentiveness to what is already present at its edges (both physical and conceptual), summon one's own ghosts and release a multitude of angels.

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