Writing in Practice

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Writing in Practice Volume 10

We are pleased to share that from this issue of *Writing in Practice* all of our articles will be DOI referenced and catalogued. We would like to thank the NAWE Management committee for supporting us with this vital development which will make our articles easier to share, locate and reference. We are also gradually working through our previous issues and articles to retrospectively give them DOI references also. This involves quite a lot of painstaking, detailed work that our Publications Manager William Gallagher, is generously taking on. We are very grateful for his work on this also.

In this issue we have been interested to receive a range of articles that engage with the use of creative writing for mental health and wellbeing purposes.

Kate North

Hywel Dix's *Telling (My) Stories* illustrates the importance of giving people the space and time to tell and pen their own life stories. Dix's research makes a significant contribution to the growing body of work which shows how helpful writing autofiction – fiction which has an autobiographical element – can be for diverse people, who are not necessarily professional writers. His research is notable in pointing out how if set up purposefully and ethically, supporting people to write autofiction can improve their wellbeing in modest ways. This finding is endorsed by decades of research which shows expressive writing of this type can help wellbeing (Pennebaker 2018). Possibly more originally, Dix also shows that the institutional setting of the university for such writing workshops for "ordinary" people – i.e. not current students/academics – can provide a safe and inspiring space.

Nathan Filer expands even more significantly upon the links between writing and mental illness. Drawing upon his own experience as a mental health nurse and his reading of such books like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*, he explores the creative decisions that writers make when creating fictions which investigate mental

health. His bestselling novel, *The Shock of the Fall*, is discussed in depth, with Filer offering insights into his own creative process which many writers will find invaluable. Above all, Filer offers no easy answers; writing about mental ill health is incredibly complex, but he shows that fiction can provide a way of both representing and illustrating that complexity in a way that many other forms of representation just cannot.

Amie Corry takes this exploration of representation a step further in her exploration of dis/embodiment in Ta-Nahisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. It is fascinating to perceive how Corry effectively avoids the discourse of mental health, but threaded through her analysis of Coates's groundbreaking book about his brutalising youth in Baltimore, USA, his friend's murder at the hands of the police, and Coates's subsequent sojourn in Paris, is the sense that black people like Coates are necessarily alienated by a racist system. As Corrie eloquently expresses it Coates's work 'powerfully expresses a complex facet of racialised alienation – a desire to separate from, or transcend, one's body, while recognising that awareness of it is what guarantees survival'.

Like Nathan Filer, Gavin James Bower explores the nitty gritty of the medical and health professions and his grief after the death of his father. Having a background working in TV, he wrote a script about an NHS forensic psychiatrist working at a high security hospital. After writing this, he then wrote a memoir about his father's death and his becoming a father for the first time. As he says himself: "I struggled spectacularly to cope with my new responsibilities. This resulted in my arrest for drink-driving at the end of 2015 and then led, beyond all that, to the writing of *Your Father's Secrets*… If the script was about making sense of my grief through fiction then the 'memoir' was designed to make sense of the making sense." Bower, like many of the authors in Issue 10 of *Writing in Practice*, puts it both simply and eloquently when he says his memoir was "designed to make sense of the making sense".

This form of reflection -- metacognitive questing if you like – is very much in evidence in Rupert Loydell's interview with H.L. Hix. Together these two poets make sense of their making sense. As Hix says, 'There is already plenty of information out there, and plenty of words. Nobody needs another poem to add to that abundance; but we can use another poem to select from and re-order it.' This, then, seems to be the project for many of the writer-researchers in this volume: to use writing as a form of "selection" and "reordering" of experience, particularly challenging experiences.

Moving from selecting and ordering, Patrick Wright questions how poets look within the context of ekphrasis. He considers new ways of viewing that do not give primacy to the work of art as a narrative or imagistic whole. He invites us to consider sections, peripheries and small details to elicit responses.

Sophie Georghiou suggests how a change in perspective can be a political act using the poetry of Chelsea Minnis and Sarah Peters to demonstrate how representations of pleasure can be wrought under the female gaze – as opposed to the traditional male gaze. She suggests that the work of Minnis and Peters offer the reader representations of pleasure that exists across dichotomies such as pleasure and pain or giving and receiving. This is explored with reflections on her own work.

Another article rooted in the contemplation of female lived experience is Mel Parks's *Creative Pause*. Reflecting on a project that explored menopausal wellbeing, a woefully under researched area. As with other articles in this issue, Parks finds that writing workshops, and broader arts practice, can be used to increase understanding,

in this case of the menopause, while also improving wellbeing. It's focus on autoethnography as a method is particularly interesting and I found the suggestion that conversations and dialogues be treated as valuable methods of research refreshing and honest.

Zosia Crosse's article on the value of writing as a method of processing trauma is powerful. Crosse offers a queer feminist take on understanding what trauma is. She explores how graphic fiction writer Alison Bechdel and comedian Hannah Gatsby have used the retelling of their own traumas as the basis for their creative work. She also reflects on her experience of working in the women's sector and the trauma that comes with doing so. Both the trauma of the women seeking help and support along with the personal experience of trauma working in that arena. She articulates how writing and reading feminist fiction helped her process, understand and interrogate her trauma, eventually leading her to write a novel, *We are Volcanoes*.

Finally, we very much hope that you enjoy our guest article for Issue 10. Professor Scott Thurston of Salford University is kind enough to give us the transcript from his inaugural professorial lecture. The lecture was a structured, improvised physical and poetic performance in which he danced, reflected on his journey as a poet over the course of his life and shared how dance and therapy were brought into his practice. It looks a little different on the page to our usual format because of this. We have tried to capture the spirit of the performance and you will be able to judge whether we have managed this. The link to the recording of the performance is given in the introduction.

Francis Gilbert

References

Pennebaker, J.W. (2018) 'Expressive Writing in Psychological Science', Perspectives on psychological science, 13(2), pp. 226–229. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617707315.

Scott Thurston

Kinepoetics: An Embodied Journey Through Poetry, Dance And Therapy

Scott Thurston

What follows is a transcript of a kinepoetic lecture – an improvised, structured talk-dance/movement-lecture – delivered by the author on the 19 March 2024 as his inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Salford. The performance was introduced by Professor Robert Sheppard and followed by a series of questions and answers (not included in this transcript). You can see the [full version of the event on YouTube](#).

Keywords: poetry, kinepoetics, dance, movement, therapy

Welcome to this kinepoetic lecture!
Kinepoetics is a compound from the Greek words
kinein meaning movement,
poetics to do with making,
so, we're about movement making,
but I'm about much more than that as well:
seeing movement in other forms
whether that be poetry or therapy.
So, I'm going to begin at the beginning
– Robert's stolen some of my thunder with this –
I began writing poetry when I was 14,

I was very lucky to meet three amazing teachers

in very quick succession and they all sent me on a

terrific path of discovery. The first was Sue Appleby,

my English teacher at school,

who knew I was writing before I'd even told anybody

– even myself –

I was writing poetry

and she sent me on a creative writing workshop

at my local Tech College, which meant I got to get days out of school,

and I met Jan Dean, a poet and now painter,

who was very helpful, supportive and signposted me to

Robert when I was deciding where I was going to study

my 'A' levels at college. And Robert introduced me in turn

to the whole vibrant experimental poetry scene in London

– this is the late eighties and early nineties –

and there I began to encounter really remarkable poets,

many of whom I still follow, some of whom I've been lifelong friends with,

many of whom I've written about and interviewed

– Ulli Freer, Adrian Clarke, the late, great Bob Cobbing

and his wife Jennifer Pike Cobbing, Geraldine Monk, Maggie O'Sullivan, Allen Fisher –

you may be familiar with some of the things I've said about these writers.

So, poetry was the bedrock,

it's what's gotten me into this whole journey

to start off with.

I should have said earlier,

this lecture's brought to you today by the number five:

there's going to be five parts

and this first part I'm calling **activation**,

but what's happening also, as you'll notice,

is that I'm dancing.

I'm dancing the Five Rhythms

and that's also providing a structure.

And Five Rhythms is a movement meditation practice

I first encountered about twenty years ago,

just when I was beginning to work here at the University

and it was invented in the 1960s by a dancer called Gabrielle Roth.

She was brought up on the East Coast

she was, I guess, intending to become a professional dancer,

although she was very interested in theatre as well,

and had considerable spiritual gifts that she was exploring,

but she had two severe knee injuries which meant

that she had to find a different direction.

So, she went west and she found herself,

I think sometime around 1965-1967,

at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur in California,

and there she met a great deal of really influential

people in the Human Potential movement and began

putting her movement, her dance movement, to different ends.

She actually started working with people

with severe depressive symptoms and inviting them to

put their bodies into motion and noticing how this

seemed somehow healing and relieving of those symptoms

of being stuck and in low energetic places.

And she developed a whole cosmology –

a life cycle of birth to death –

a vision of how energy moved in five different patterns. [1]

So, at the moment, I'm dancing the rhythm of **flowing**

which, as you can see, does what it says on the tin:

long continuous flowing movement,

it has a physical focus in the feet.

There's also an emotional map of the rhythms so

flowing is actually connected to fear,

but it's not really about necessarily feeling fear

or expressing fear, but being

in the energy of fear,

which has both light and dark aspects to it.

So, my encounter with Five Rhythms is…

I'm calling it activation.

I've devised my own map in a way,

my own answer to the Five Rhythms,

in this talk, and activation for me

– and you'll see later it's also a principle

in therapeutic practice of different kinds –

is the way in which I connected with my body

when I fell into the dance.

And I think it was a really important antidote

to all of the heavy intellectual work of

the daily life of the University,

which Robert's alluded to in terms of the invisible labour

that many of us academics do.

So, this kind of experience

woke me up in a really profound way,

and I began to explore how

this could be a companion to the work I was doing at the University and that began a journey

of twenty years of discovery or so

alongside many other activities,

digging deep into the

dance and seeing what it could offer.

So that brings me

to part two, which I'm calling **translation**.

So, I'm moving now into the rhythm of *staccato*, which is a rhythm of starts and

stops and lines, energetic,

directional. The focus is actually in the hips

and the emotional tone is anger;

again, not necessarily expressing anger,

although that can be part of it, but feeling

the energetic shape of anger.

So, I'm thinking about this section of translation,

about moving from one form to another.

When I first started dancing Five Rhythms,

and this is about paying this conscious attention…

I'm not sure I've introduced you to all of the Five Rhythms yet…

we're in staccato, the third one is *chaos*…

I'll introduce you to them more fully in time,

the fourth is *lyrical*,

the fifth is *stillness*.

You go on a journey with the rhythms in a class

usually held by somebody who's playing recorded music

and you're with a group,

you might be moving in and out of the different dynamics

of pairwork,

of working with small groups,

working with the whole group,

and the attention that I found this could help give to my

movement…

I felt, this is like reading and writing poetry.

That was the first insight and one

that I spent the next ten years thinking about

and I did get an answer eventually

and I'll tell you about that in a moment,

but one of the other things that was happening was

beginning to find ways to turn

this into a research project at the University.

Robert was really helpful because he put me on to an amazing poet

called Jackson Mac Low, an American poet based in New York,

active right the way through the fifties and sixties and beyond.

He wrote a book of poems for dancers in the mid-sixties [2]

when he was associated with a really vibrant context called the

Judson Dance Theater

where you had poets, painters, dancers, theatre makers, you name it,

all coming together and making new forms of multimedia art.

So, this was a really good place to look

for examples of poetry and dance working together.

And I discovered Mac Low had also written a series of cards

for the dancer Simone Forti to use in improvisation.

I met a fantastic dancer and writer called Kenneth King

who actually danced in the first production of *The Pronouns* in 1967

when he was just a teenager,

we've corresponded now for many years,

and I met the younger generation of writers

and poets to be influenced by the Judson Dance explosion:

Sally Silvers a dancer and Bruce Andrews a poet

were both artists I got to interview and learn about their

processes through.[3]

So I went to New York, I got to see *The Pronouns* being

performed, put together by Clarinda Mac Low, Mac Low's daughter,

I got to take a workshop with Simone Forti, in her seventies,

she does an amazing practice called *Logomotion*

where she improvises speech and movement at the same time,

kind of like what I'm doing now,

and started to learn a lot more about

this rich history of practice.

And at the same time I was also getting into

and expanding my own physical repertoire

studying movements like Contact Improvisation,

Feldenkreis, Alexander Technique

– I almost want to get into these a little bit more [through movement] –

Iyengar yoga, some outgrowth practices of the Five Rhythms:

Movement Medicine and also Open Floor,

and I have a lot of teachers to thank along the way

from my introduction to those practices

who I'll mention later. [4]

So, it was a practical,

but also an intellectual and academic inquiry

trying to find out what's possible here in this translation,

why am I so fascinated by this relationship between

maybe doing something like this [makes a gesture] –

why does this feel like poetry somehow?

Why does this energetic movement have a

quality that I recognise, but in another form?

And I was really lucky, once again,

to be advised by a fellow Five Rhythms dancer

called Celia Simpson

to look at the work of Daniel Stern

who wrote a remarkable book in the early 2000s

called *Forms of Vitality*. [5]

Stern was an American psychologist

who made his name through doing psychoanalytic work,

studying the communication between children

and their caregivers and how

that was feeding into the development of personality:

fascinating work, really detailed and complex.

Towards the end of his life he started to think

in a very big and ambitious way about how we

experience life itself:

what are the building blocks of

how we inhabit the world,

how we feel ourselves to be alive and present within it?

And this is another number five,

he came up with five elements,

you can't really separate them out,

they're all mixed up together,

but he named *movement* really as the preeminent one,

then you have *time* and you have *space*

and you have *direction* and *intentionality*

and you have *force*.

So, if I'm thinking about just

isolating a movement in the moment,

just really bringing it down to something

very simple

[extends left arm out at shoulder height, parallel to the floor]

it's unfolding in time –

takes maybe one two seconds to get where it's going

it's unfolding in space –

so, it's a certain height above the floor, a certain

distance from the wall, a certain distance

from the back of the room and so on, we can pinpoint it in space –

it's also unfolding with a certain amount of force

so, I can do it in quite a relaxed way,

but I could change the level of force

I could make it much more 'tension' and 'explosion' –

and these are the kinds of words

that Stern was interested in

because they conveyed something of the

vitality dynamics

that he was interested in –

and, in terms of intentionality or direction,

it looks as if this movement could possibly be about

to do something, so I might be going to

grab something over here,

or switch off a light,

or say hi to somebody,

there could be meaning behind this movement.

So, this was the Eureka moment for me,

I thought, finally, after ten years of wondering

about what's this connection between dance and poetry,

I had a language for understanding it.

It was something about what was going on

on a lower level, if you like,

a more profound level,

that somehow,

poetry or music or dance

is always drawing on

those vital experiences:

of time, of space, of force, of direction

and they show up

in those art forms

in different ways.

Because I was bringing poetry and dance

so closely together in conversation I could almost see

the same underlying meanings

going out into these different art forms

and then communicating.

And Stern's work became very interesting

to certain kinds of artists,

he worked with the theatre director Robert Wilson,

who's actually bringing a play to Manchester next week coincidentally,

he worked with the dancers Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer:

and they were absolutely fascinated by how

he was making films

and slowing them down to 1/24th of a second

so that he could really observe the tiny granular detail

of these interactions that he was interested in

between children and their caregivers,

so, this got very interesting for dancers,

they'd never seen movement like that before

and they were drawn to it and

Stern collaborated with Wilson

on a piece called *Bob's Breakfast*.

They did what's called a microanalytic interview,

so, two minutes of Wilson trying to remember

everything that was in his head

as he was having breakfast

– sounds like an extraordinary thing to attempt –

But very, very detailed, really trying to

get down

to that moment to moment movement of thought

and Wilson said at that particular time

he had the impression that his thoughts

were just going around in circles

but not really getting anywhere

– and I think we've all had days like that –

and what he did, however, was make it

into a theatre piece, or even a choreographic piece,

called *Bob's Breakfast*,

where he put an actor on the stage,

running around in huge circles

and doing exactly that,

finding a sense of that circularity

but it doesn't get resolved,

it doesn't become a whole circle,

so, that's that idea of translation, the movement:

there were the vitality dynamics

of those mental motions in the head

now becoming projected onto the stage

into physical movement.

And that was a really important starting point for me.

I've probably completely lost staccato now,

but I'll just finish with that.

So, part three is

meaning.

So, I'm trying to dance

this in the rhythm of chaos

which is going to be quite difficult!

Chaos is about letting go,

a sort of release,

the physical focus is in the head,

the emotional tone is sadness

because of that sense of letting go of things

that have maybe been encountered in the other two rhythms. But I'm interested in meaning because at this point I think I began to get, you know, I couldn't give up this inquiry, – it was getting deeper and deeper – so, I started seeking out professional dancers to work with because I realized if I didn't do that I was only going to get half of the story. And I was very lucky to be able to meet a dancer working in my own department, or my School, at the University – Sarie Mairs Slee – we began a wonderful collaboration for five years together, having conversations, writing articles, working in the studio, and we eventually made a collaborative duet together and hosted a festival of like-minded folk who were experimenting with bringing language and movement together. [6] And so alongside that, I found myself studying with Billie Hanne, a remarkable Belgian poet and dancer who combines these practices in an improvised way with a beauty and grace that I've seldom seen. And I got the opportunity to train with her in London and in Berlin and also online during the pandemic, and Billie really taught me to try and think of poetry and movement as not separate at all, but if you really get to the right place there's no real distinction. And I think I learned in her workshops in London, in particular, that I

was beginning to develop my own movement vocabulary, that actually I now knew how to say things in movement, that were new, as if I was now becoming a dancer and beginning to articulate to get that little bit of extra skill: I was beginning to feel like I could say something with my body as a dancer. So, what does that look like in practice? Well, I realized one of the problems of dancing as a poet is that you have to memorize the poetry because you can't really, you know, read stuff that well when you're in motion, and I started with one short poem – it was the only poem I could remember of mine at the time – and it's actually the first poem in my selected poems, it has a special place and it's called *sleight of foot*. I wrote it when I lived in Poland in the mid-nineties and it just seemed to ready to go into movement because I already had it embodied, it meant I could begin moving with it, begin experimenting with it. I'm going to share it with you in a moment, but one of the things I discovered that really excited me was that, when I moved with a poem I could find new meanings in it. It started to become a way of expanding the poem, discovering different things, and you might think, well, if you don't know what meaning is already in your poems, then what are you doing?!

But actually, that's not quite the way I write, I write in quite a… if you know my work… quite an impressionistic, abstract way sometimes because I'm curious about how suggestive language can be – even to myself – as I'm writing. I'm interested in its potential for movement, for change, for discovery and there's a very unassuming phrase in in this poem, it's simply the words 'quarry-canteen' conjoined together. I seem to remember when I was writing the poem I was reading a Jack Kerouac novel and he'd been walking in the mountains and he descended into a quarry to fill his water canteen, so that was the image somehow, it got into the poem because I was just drawing on different images that were suggestive to me. When I performed it, and this was when I had a lovely time working at the Liverpool Improvisation Collective, where I studied Contact Improvisation with Mary Prestidge, and Mary Pearson

and Jo Blowers and worked with the vocalist Steve Boyland – and he helped me a great deal to put together a little programme of works in progress. So, I performed *sleight of foot* and right in the middle of it I got to that phrase and I suddenly realized it means something else, another association came into being. I was then thinking about a canteen of the cafeteria kind that I visited in South Wales at a mine, rather than a quarry, when I was in search of my ancestral roots in that part of the world. I remember I went into this canteen and they had a photograph on the wall of the same building forty, fifty years ago and I realized it hadn't changed a bit and I was thinking, oh so my great uncle would have known this canteen, more or less, how it looks today. And I somehow happened upon that meaning in the

moment and what surprised
me even more was that everybody
in the audience could see it too.
So, I thought there's something about this,
another layer of meaning…
what this practice can potentially bring to me.
So, I'll just render
that poem for you now:

sleight of foot
        where you hung
up traces
      coax her to rest
solid glimpses
        cultivate labour to wait
as a pearl grows
        what rocks your skin
enlarged again
       gleaming over soil spits
quarry-canteen
       hooking over to this
venture
     one sided figures gleam

Part four. Part four is called…
I can't remember what it's called!
It's brought to you by the rhythm of lyrical…
part four is about **structure**.
So, I was building up a level
of experience and practice and
performing with dancers,
thinking about how to make meaning
now in poetry and dance together.
And when you get all that material together,
you want to put it together in a way
that you can present it,
so Sarie and I made our performance
it was called *Wrestling Truth*,
it did involve actual live wrestling and it
was a great pleasure to work with Sarie

on that,
we brought together all of the ideas
that we'd accumulated,
all of the meanings
and put it together into something
that made sense,
a container that held all of those meanings.
And around that time, I was also
beginning to develop a new area of collaboration.
Joanna and I had thought for many years
that we wanted to work together
– Joanna's my wife, if you've not met her before –
and we were working across poetry and therapy,
broadly,
and dance was always our
common language.
We began dancing, well, actually, Joanna started
dancing *Five Rhythms* six months
before I plucked up the courage…
it was actually the introduction of our dear friend Josie [Padfield]
who first let us know about the Five Rhythms,
so thank you to her,
things would have turned out
very differently otherwise!
And so, we started exploring how movement
embodied, or could contain, like a *lingua franca* – a go-between language –
[this relationship]
between poetry and therapy
and at that time we decided,
well, we really need to get someone
in who's a movement specialist,
and the Five Rhythms obliged in an extraordinary way.
We met Vicky Karkou, who's become a
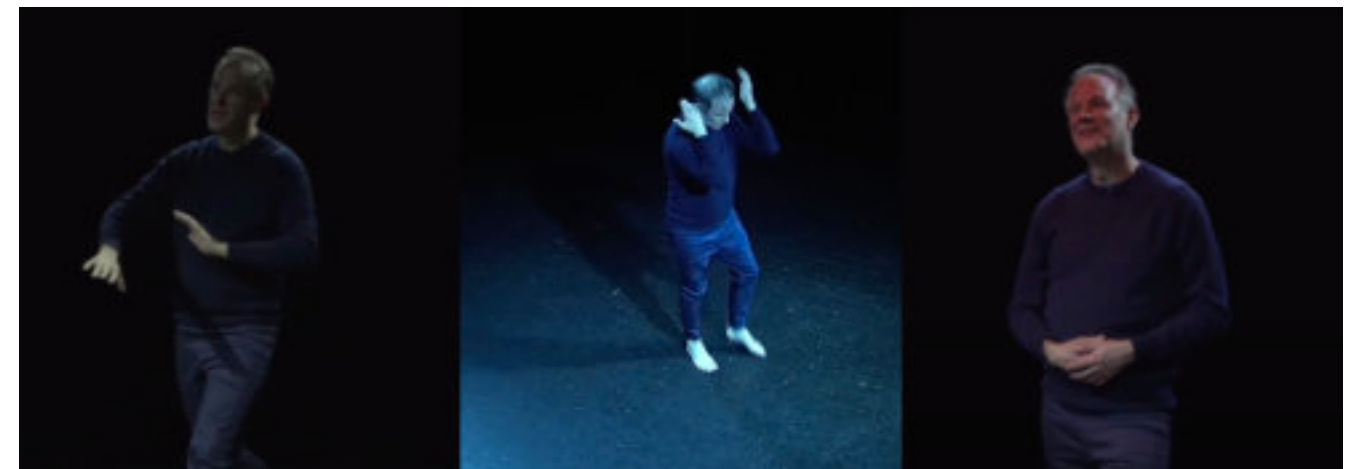
long-term great friend and collaborator,
in a Five Rhythms class in Liverpool.
We danced together for a good few months
without ever knowing anything about each other
or what they did,
but we had wonderful
conversations and encounters on the dance floor
– whole conversations in movement –
and I think that was a very good basis for a project
which has now gone on for over ten years.
But when Vicky and I started working together
it was about exploring this connection between
movement and language but from her point
of view as a Dance Movement Psychotherapist,
so, she had a very particular clinical interest in how to
bring language into relationship with movement
in that particular area and she saw an opportunity.
And Vicky had written an extraordinary article –
co-written a very high-level review of all of the literature
about the use of Dance Movement

Psychotherapy
for treating depression – and there were
four really big ideas in this
and she felt they needed to be shared more widely. [7]
It was a fairly specialized academic
language but she felt
let's try and use a performance,
use an artistic way to communicate
these research findings to a wider audience.
So, she recruited me and
the dancer and choreographer Julia Griffin
to create a piece using these
ideas and the four ideas…
and in a way this connects right back to Roth
effectively pioneering a form of
Dance Movement Psychotherapy in the late sixties,
at a time when other clinicians and dancers
were beginning to explore that use of
movement, we started to unfold them.
The first is – and I've borrowed some
of these ideas for the structure of my own talk
– the first is about
increasing *vitality*, so recognizing
that importance that Gabrielle Roth noticed
with someone who's depressed,

if you can get them moving
it's a very powerful way of
changing their physiology
and can have a big impact
on those depressive symptoms.
The second part is to do with the *relationship*
and so, in therapeutic terms,
many different forms of therapy
rely or benefit on the quality of the relationship
between the therapist and the client
and, in terms of the third phase,
it was about this building of *meanings*,
how in movement therapy we discover
metaphors, images, symbols in
movement so,
we might be making movements
that have particular
metaphorical understandings,
we can interpret them and use them to build up
a picture of somebody's sense of themselves in the world.
The fourth phase is *narrative* – what
I'm calling structure in my talk –
bringing all of those meanings and ideas together
so that they make sense,
they become a story,
perhaps a new and more empowering story
for the person who's receiving the therapy.
So, Julia and I worked with that and we
recognised, of course, that those
principles were absolutely intertwined
with what we would encounter in artistic practice:
you go into the studio and you need to activate
yourself, you need to raise your energy
levels in order to be able to work.
We'd never met before, we had six

weeks to make our first show,
so, we needed to make our relationship work
and we did brilliantly, and
we've worked together since as well,
so, the relationship was key to
that artistic work happening.
The moment we were in the studio,
we were making stuff,
we were improvising,
we were coming up with images,
symbols, ideas,
just playing about
and then we were choosing
the ones that were most suggestive to us,
that really spoke to us,
and then gradually we
accumulated all of those materials
until we had a structure,
we had a duet
 – a twenty-minute duet –
which we called *Getting Out of Your Own Way*. [8]
So, I'm not sure we really ever
communicated those research findings
in a very obvious way to audience
but what we did do was discover
how close that particular kind of therapeutic practice
was to artistic practice,
and that realization really helped to inform the
next project which grew out of that.
The work we did with Julia was called
Dancing the Blues and then it morphed
into *Arts for the Blues*
as Joanna got involved and worked together
with Vicky to create a new clinical model for
creative group psychotherapy
which we've been working with ever since, and I'll

say a little bit more about it in the next and final section.
I haven't really told you about lyrical
but I think these lights say it all really,
it's a movement associated with joy,
physically located in the hands
and a rhythm which is often, I guess,
the harvest for me, the celebration of all of the work
that's been done navigating through
the fear, anger and sadness of the first three rhythms.
So, to close this section,
what structure has meant for me is that
I've started to make my own

performances.
I was forced in the pandemic…
I couldn't get out to the studio
to collaborate with other people
so, I started making my own
scores if you like or simple structures
for performance, and the score that I use
most commonly now is a three-part score:
it begins with improvised movement which
is what you've been seeing, it moves into then
improvised movement with a memorised poem,
so, like *sleight of foot*,
and then the third phase is to both
improvise the movement and improvise the poem,

which is the hardest bit,
and I'm still learning how to do that,
but I'll give you a little sample just of that last part, before we
move into
the final section:

has it

made sense so far?
what have I forgotten?

I'm sure I'm sure I'm sure
I've forgotten something

there's nothing inside this circle
or there's everything inside this circle

I'm so grateful you're here

I want to think about what's
outside the room

I don't want to think about what's
outside the room

I'm here
you're here

perhaps that's
enough

part five:
integration.
Brought to you by the rhythm of
stillness
which is not an absence of movement
– the physical cue is the breath,
the emotional note is compassion;
about how breath is connecting us out to
the world
and back in.
And integration is a really important
principle in lots of therapeutic work,
as I've learned,
so, I built it into my own creative
structure for the process and
the story that I've been through,
which is still unfolding.
And by integration I think
I want to talk about a number of different

things
in which our body of work with Arts for
the Blues
is really coming to fruition.
We've received several important grants
over the last few years which have
meant
that we're now starting to train people
in the NHS to deliver Arts for the Blues
and Joanna is indeed offering it to her
patients
in the NHS as we speak.
We've come full circle
in a way from our earliest explorations
to something which is now
going out into the world in a different
way
and making a real difference,
and we have many, many other projects
to explore there as well,
including working with children and
young people,
as well as training practitioners.
So, this feels like a level of integration
I'd never really imagined
from my beginnings and my training in
poetry,
my experiences of working with
Robert both at 'A' Level and at PhD:
I was set up and trained in a very
particular way and that's changed
obviously beyond recognition
but there are connections back.
Mum used to tell me how apparently
when I was young,
I would carry a book
around in a pillowcase
wherever I went.
I don't remember exactly when that was,
but I think of that as an image
for my relationship to poetry,
that need to have meaning close by
so, I would have it whenever I needed it

and I think my learning of…
memorizing poetry and
embodying it,
has extended that,
so that I really integrate the poems that I
create and I feel closer to them in that
way,
that feels really important.
My work's also moved out into other
areas,
a wonderful collaboration
with the dancer Gemma Collard-Stokes
who, when we met,
had been interested in
bringing writing into her movement
practice for as long as I'd been interested
in doing the opposite,
and we've enjoyed a terrific
collaboration,
we've made performances,
we're developing now a new piece of
work
with the artist Sabine Kussmaul
and we meet on a damaged, post-
industrial
landscape in the Peak District
and we make dances in mineshafts,
effectively,
and we write together and we draw
together
and we're thinking about how we can
develop
a practice that's also about healing our
relationship to
the landscape, from an ecological
perspective.
So, layers of integration,
layers of progression,
a sense of a new cycle
beginning.
And this is also into my journey as a
therapist,
I've just recently qualified as a person-
centred
counsellor and those ideas have a deep

root
into Arts for the Blues:
Natalie Rogers,
who was the daughter of Carl Rogers,
who created person-centred therapy, but
was also the daughter of Helen Elliott,
a very talented and accomplished painter,
Rogers – Natalie Rogers –
took those two profound influences
and began to pioneer creative arts therapy
in the US,
and what I discovered was that she
had her own name for this kind of
movement
between different art forms
that I'd been exploring through Daniel
Stern's work,
she called it the *creative connection*, [9]
and she understood that we could begin
a process in a piece of writing or a
drawing
or a piece of movement and
we could follow it into
another, another art form,
and that would deepen the process
and enrich it,
so, it's something else
I've been coming back to.
And in many ways,
I think integration is a kind of
coming home,
and I've been very lucky
to enjoy amazing experiences
with art and therapy throughout my life.
When I first met and heard Maggie
O'Sullivan
read poetry when I was sixteen,
I completely didn't understand it
but I felt it was the most interesting thing
I'd ever encountered and I felt
that way seeing her, as recently
as a year ago, reading in Manchester:
that this is work that has inspired me for

my whole life.
Poetry's given me everything,

in many ways,

it's given me those lifelong friendships,

it's given me a sense of community…

I can see in the audience James [Davies] and Tom [Jenks]

who I ran The Other Room with,

a poetry reading series in Manchester,

for ten years. [10]

It's given me a career,

it has given me a livelihood.

Dance has also given me many,

many different things. It's been about,

I think, crucially, becoming more flexible,

and I don't just mean flexible

physically, but flexible mentally and emotionally.

Five Rhythms, I think, is very

much a practice about learning

how to do change,

and this is something which I

needed to work on quite a lot.

I think it's still a work in progress,

but it's also given amazing friendships,

amazing sense of community and better

health in all sorts of ways.

Therapy is another layer into that,

the process of my own therapy

has led me to be able to integrate

and accept parts of myself

which are now enabling me to offer

therapy to others, and it feels like that

journey is really noticing that,

even though I've had all of these

different artistic ambitions and interests

my whole life that…

what do I want to say here?

It's quite a big thing

I want to conjure out of the

movement.

Yeah, it's that poetry has been

a well-being practice for me as well,

it's not just been about the creative endeavour

for the sake of it,

it has actually been the thing that's kept me,

kept me going, as has dance.

So finally, a little image of

connection between self and world,

that's something else that I think

is in common between these different areas:

something about the relationship

between reader and writer,

and client and therapist,

and body and mind,

and self and world –

that's what it feels like is active

now that I'm able to bring all of these things

together into relationship.

And so, as I bring this to a close,

I really hope that you find something

that you can integrate

and take with you today,

and if you do,

let me know.

Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BIOGRAPHY

Scott Thurston first began writing on the London experimental poetry scene in the late 1980s. Following a degree in Literature, he taught English in Poland, before undertaking a PhD in Poetics.

He joined the University of Salford in 2004, setting up a degree in English and Creative Writing, followed by the Masters in Creative Writing: Innovation and Experiment and a PhD pathway in Creative Writing.

Scott co-organised The Other Room – an experimental poetry reading series in Manchester – for ten years and is founding editor-in-chief of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. Since 2004, he has been developing a creative practice integrating dance and poetry which he calls *kinepoetics*.

Following this interest into a collaboration with Dance Movement Psychotherapist Vicky Karkou and Counselling Psychologist (and partner of twenty-six plus years) Joanna Omylinska-Thurston, led to the founding of Arts for the Blues, a new creative group psychotherapy model. Scott's selected poems, *Turning*, was published by Shearsman in 2023.

Scott has recently qualified as a person-centred counsellor at the University of Salford.

FOOTNOTES

[1] See Gabrielle Roth's *Maps to Ecstasy* (1989).

[2] See Jackson Mac Low, *The Pronouns: A Collection of 40 Dances for the Dancers* (1979).

[3] See https://movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/sally-silvers-and-bruce-andrews-an-interview-by-scott-thurston/

[4] I wish to thank Kate Engineer, Alex MacKay, Clare Backwell, Andrew Holmes, Ya'Acov Darling Khan, Susannah Darling Khan, Chris Boylan, Nick Walsh, Liz Collier and Kate Paul.

[5] See Daniel Stern, *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development* (2010).

[6] See our Figshare portfolio: https://salford.figshare.com/collections/Vital_Signs_Poetry_Movement_and_the_Writing_Body/4530458/2

[7] See Bonnie Meekums, Vicky Karkou and E. Andrea Nelson, Dance movement therapy for depression, *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* (2015).

[8] See Scott Thurston, Julia Griffin et al, Dancing the Blues: An interdisciplinary collaboration between artists and therapists, *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* (2023).

[9] Natalie Rogers, *The Creative Connection* (1993).

[10] See https://otherroom.org/

Writing Feminist Fiction as a Means of Transforming Trauma

Zosia Crosse

Abstract

Many forms of creative writing explore the idea that a writer's experience of trauma can be transformed, or to some extent moved forward, by the process of "artworking" (Pollock 2013: 6); the act of *poiesis*, or making something new. In this article I address several examples of this, from stand-up comedy to graphic novel to surrealist fiction, considering concepts of aesthetic transformation and aesthetic distance, looking at what each example can illuminate in terms of the nature of this process. What follows is a reflection on my own affective experience of trauma, both personally and as a result of a decade of working within the women's sector, and how this intersects with the necessary politics of feminism. I then conduct an analysis of how I sought to transform both my own experience of trauma and that of a fictional character, Connie, in an extract from my novel *We Are Volcanoes*. Lastly, I share the ways in which this research experience has affected me, both in terms of my wellbeing and in the development of my creative practice, and I argue that research such as this can contribute to a more trauma-informed creative writing classroom.

Keywords: trauma, fiction, feminism, process, transformation, political, witnessing, testimony, dissociation, survivor

Art, in its varying forms, has long been a site where real life traumatic experience can be configured and reconfigured by the artist-survivor[1]. Seventeenth century Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi famously created many subversive works portraying women inflicting violence upon men. As a survivor of rape who was then tortured during her rapist's trial in order to "prove" she was telling the truth, Gentileschi later depicted herself in her masterpiece, *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (1615-17). In the painting, her tenacious gaze is fixed upon the viewer, and she holds fragments of the instruments of her torture as if to show it is those that are broken – not her (Williams 2018).

In *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma*, Reina Van der Wiel discusses modernist literature's approach to trauma, particularly that of Virginia Woolf in the early twentieth century. Distinct in its tendency towards writing that "instigates, facilitates or represents the transformational process of symbolization, thinking and working through" (2014: 18), Van der Wiel suggests that as well as an abstractive process, to write in a way that "attempts to work through trauma" can constitute a therapeutic process (6). Woolf speaks to this herself in her autobiographical essay, 'A Sketch of the Past', in which she writes candidly about her childhood trauma in relation to her mother's death and the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her step-brother. Of the transformational process of writing a novel she says, "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest." (Woolf 2002: 119).

This transformational process of "working through" trauma can also be explicitly depicted *within* the writing, in a form of meta-text or meta-narrative. In comedian Hannah Gadsby's groundbreaking show *Nanette* (2017), they describe the methods they use when writing for comedy performance; setting up tension and then relieving it. Later Gadsby confronts the fact that they have regularly used this formula to create jokes out of their experiences of trauma, explaining how they had "fused" their stand-up telling of events with what "actually

happened", and in so doing, "froze[n] an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point" (2017), repeating it, making it routine. As a way of breaking from this formula, and in a sort of live unfreezing of their trauma, they then tell the real ending to a story from earlier in the show – one in which they reveal they were brutally attacked – offering no consoling punchline. "This tension is yours," they say, "I'm not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like" (2017).

In Michaela Coel's semi-autobiographical BBC drama series *I May Destroy You* (2020), the protagonist, Arabella (played by Coel herself), is a writer struggling to meet a deadline with her publisher due to the trauma of being drugged and raped while on a night out. In the final episode, as the drama plays out a series of possible made-up endings to her story – in one version she is enacting revenge upon her rapist, in another befriending him in an act of compassion, now and then breaking with the action to scribble on and rearrange post-it notes on her bedroom wall – we see Arabella fully regaining her sense of agency in the process of reconfiguring her traumatic experience through writing.

Aesthetic Transformation and Aesthetic Distance

In *After Affects/After Images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, Griselda Pollock distinguishes between the material process of writing something down and "artworking", a process which generates "aesthetic transformation" (2013: 6). Aesthetic transformation is the process of arriving, belatedly and therefore differently, at a knowledge that is "affective rather than cognitive", and thus more conducive to eliciting a "shared encounter" (7), or to being *witnessed*.

In her bestselling graphic novel *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel dissects her fraught relationship with her father, who died by apparent suicide after his affairs with his male students were almost exposed. In Chapter 2, "A Happy Death", Bechdel works through what she knows about her father's relationship with death and suicide, the literature he read, and his work as a

mortician in the family funeral home, as though collating evidence in order to enable her understanding of what happened. No one witnessed his death, either literally or emotionally, in that there was "no proof, actually" (2006: 27) that he had killed himself. Bechdel was away at college when she found out, and in her illustration of this day she is pictured telling a fellow student, "I have to go home. My father got hit by a truck." (46). Though, above an illustration of Bechdel looking almost bored, sitting at a café table opposite her date, is the caption, "For years after my father's death, when the subject of parents came up in conversation I would relate the information in a flat, matter-of-fact tone…", and then in a speech bubble, "My dad's dead. He jumped in front of a truck" (46). The shift here is clear, from the passive voice, positioning her father as "getting hit", to the active voice, positioning him as having jumped.

Underneath, another caption reads, "…eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me" (45). She compares her need to access the emotion of the trauma vicariously, with that of her father purposely calling her into the room at the back of the funeral home when she was just a child, while he worked on a cadaver at the prep table, "bearded and fleshy…his chest split open…a dark red cave" (44), observing that he might have been eager to witness in her some of the horror he was unable to invoke in himself. This intergenerational connection when it comes to dealing with traumatic experience – Bechdel's and her father's similar numbness and dissociation, the desire to elicit in another what they cannot feel themselves – is discovered through the creation of the meta-text that is the book. It is in her writing and drawing about her and her father's difficulty processing or witnessing these emotions that she is able to move them forward.

In Chapter 3, 'That Old Catastrophe', Bechdel works through the trauma of learning about her father's secret life. After a series of illustrations in which he appears to be seducing a student in the library of the family home, coupled with captions where she tells us of his love for F. Scott Fitzgerald and likens her father to Gatsby, Bechdel reaches the understanding that, "My parents are most real to me in fictional

terms", calling this perception "aesthetic distance" (67).

There is a fascinating dissonance here, both in terms of the images being incongruent with their captions, and in the notion that something can be made *more real* by fictionalising it. Perhaps it is precisely because of and within this gap – the gap between Bechdel's knowledge and experience and the new form it has taken on the page – that a new perspective or affective experience is created.

Shoshana Felman calls this process "re-externalizing the event", a "therapeutic process" in which one can "*transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back in again" (emphasis in original, 1992: 69). Perhaps it is this "re-externalizing", that which makes the trauma "other", and therefore its state of alterity, that can facilitate a transformation in how the trauma survivor experiences it.

Defining Trauma

Given that I am in the business of storytelling, and that storytelling is cultural work, for the purpose of my research it has been important to define trauma culturally rather than clinically.

Distinguishing between trauma as an isolated event and trauma as structural and ongoing is integral to a cultural understanding of it. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich uses "trauma" to name "experiences of socially situated political violence" that expose "connections between politics and emotion" (2003: 3), establishing a distinction between traumatic experience as a result of an accident, and that perpetrated by individuals which also implicates a system.

The latter kind of trauma is the focus of this work; it is part of something structural and ongoing, and often feels as perpetual as culture itself. I say this because those who experience socially situated political violence cannot live outside of the structures that enable or inflict it against them, and as feminist psychologist Laura S. Brown stresses, despite The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and*

Statistical Manual (*DSM*) defining trauma as "outside the range of usual human experience", this kind of trauma could be considered "common" for those not in "the dominant class" (in Caruth 1995: 101).

Trauma itself is very often not experienced as a single isolated event (Pollock 2013: 2). Atrocities such as rape, assault, and other forms of sexual and domestic violence tend to overwhelm the sympathetic nervous system, fracturing or suspending our sense of control, connection and meaning, causing a "collapse of understanding" (Herman, 2015: 33). Common responses such as dissociation mean that the event itself is often not remembered, at least in part, rendering it "not locatable" (Atkinson 2017: 85), a "subjective non-experience" (Pollock 2013: 2). Afterwards, though the event itself is largely directly inaccessible, the trauma can exist as a perpetual but evaded presence, it is "unfinished business" (Viksnins 2022), often amorphous and ghostly, experienced as what Atkinson terms "a haunting" (2017: 86); it can re-visit upon us in the form of intrusive and disjointed thoughts and images.

Moreover, often involved in these types of trauma is a degree of unwitnessing (Felman 1992: 211), both during and after the violence, with phenomena such as survivor dissociation, bystanders turning a blind eye, gaslighting, the survivor not being believed, denial, repression, lack of punishment or acknowledgement for the perpetrator, lack of reporting, and condoning of the violence.

This can culminate in a profound disconnection from what happened, from oneself, and from others. In a sense, trauma can therefore preclude the possibility of community. It is often, therefore, in the naming of the trauma and the telling of a trauma story that we can begin to properly witness what has happened for the first time.

Why Feminism and Trauma?

It is a feminist approach to trauma that has enabled the distinction between "trauma as everyday and ongoing and trauma as a discrete event", something Cvetkovich calls its "most profound consequence" (2003: 33). Secondly, it is a feminist perspective, or more precisely a *queer* feminist perspective,

that has recognised the importance of "safe spaces" and their relevance to trauma and art: "the power of the notion of safe space resides in its double status as the name for both a space free of conflict *and* a space in which conflict and anger can emerge as a necessary component of psychic resolution" (emphasis in original, 87). This understanding has greatly influenced my perception and intention when it comes to writing feminist fiction that deals with the topic of trauma. I want my writing experience – both my own personal experience of the process of writing, and my readers' experience of reading my work – to be a place that is safe *from* what has caused trauma, and also a place where it is safe *to* express responses to that trauma.

If a space does not prove "safe" – in that a survivor does not feel believed or acknowledged, or that their experiences and the nature of their trauma are not understood or held – it is possible that the survivor may be re-traumatized. In her ground-breaking text *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, feminist psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman states, "To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and witness in a common alliance… [and] therefore depends on the support of a political movement… [and] becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women" (2015: 9). From this I glean further confirmation that there is a necessary connection between trauma and feminism; if the infliction of certain types of trauma is inextricable from its political context, then so is any journey of healing and recovery from that trauma.

My ten years of experience working in the women's sector has enormously influenced how and why I write [2]. During my time working at a national helpline, I listened to thousands of women's disembodied voices, each with her own articulation of what was happening to her, each at her own point on the support-seeking timeline. This timeline covered anything from the first instinctive hunch that something wasn't right, to having twenty minutes in which to escape. Any time I answered a call I might have been the first person to tell the caller that what she was experiencing did sound like

abuse, or I might have been the person who has twenty minutes to help facilitate that escape. Or anything and everything in between or beyond. Sometimes a woman would call several years after her abusive husband had died, to talk about it for the very first time.

I kept journals throughout this period with the intention of recording my observations and keeping track of how the work was affecting me. I was continually struck by the multitudinous nature of the problem. While the women I listened to were different from one another, often vastly in terms of age, class, culture and race, the abuse, hurdles and oppression they faced were markedly similar. This kind of observation, of similar experiences lived by very different individuals, led to deeper insight into the profoundly structural nature of violence against women and girls. When it comes to understanding the scale and breadth of an injustice, there is nothing like hearing thousands of different voices saying ultimately the same thing.

This also helped me make personal connections. Immersed in the echoes of common experience, it was while working on the helpline I realised that I had been in abusive relationships, and I was able for the first time as an adult to address the abuse I witnessed in my parents' marriage when I was a child. At first these memories and realisations came in the form of flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and night terrors, related to my personal experiences but spliced with experiences disclosed to me over the phone.

It got to the stage where I could not enjoy time off. If I was not answering calls at the helpline, I felt guilty. My vicarious trauma cup was full and my burnt-out brain interpreted this feeling as a need to do more, to find more time to help, more ways to serve. The problem felt too big.

Reading feminist fiction enabled some of the processing and understanding of these elements of my trauma. At the time I was reading *The Wanderground* by Sally Miller Gearhart, a work of science fiction about a utopian future where the Earth has rebelled against the domination of men and confined them to the cities, allowing the women to escape and live in communities together in

nature. The women have the power of telepathy and there is great emphasis on remembering and re-witnessing the violence inflicted on them in the past, so that they can better protect themselves and each other.

In my journal from this time, I wrote three direct quotations from the book, one in the centre of each page. The underlining is my own and the first reads as follows:

> For the second time in a day
> Alaka realised that she had
> failed to shade herself. In grand
> old-fashioned female style she
> had tried to protect Seja, but
> she'd left her own lower
> channels open. As Seja re-knew
> Margaret's horror, Alaka, too,
> was <u>absorbing the full force</u> of
> the woman's experience. She
> was aware that she was going
> to be deeply and violently ill
> (1985: 22).

The second reads only, "In her function as a remember-guide Alaka had re-channelled <u>thousands of rapes</u>" (24). And the third:

> The trick, she knew, was to offer
> the attention only when it came
> from her own fullness, never
> from duty or obligation. "If I do
> not give from my overflow,
> then what I give is poison," she
> reminded herself (129).

These entries demonstrate that I was able to interpret clues as to what was happening to me in the feminist fiction I was reading, along with suggestions of what I might need to do to help myself.

Gradually, the longer I worked on the helpline, I developed a sense that I was a living repository for these stories. Many of them contained joy or triumph, humour and empowerment, but not always. Most of them had no end, no resolution, because the women were still living inside them. This emulated the very nature of living with trauma itself, as according to Dori Laub, "trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and

therefore…continues into the present and is current in every respect" (in Felman 1992: 69).

What I kept coming back to after I left the helpline was the question of what I could *do* with these stories, and underlying that was the sense that I needed to do *something* to change their role in my life and their effect on me. I needed to somehow resolve or conclude them for myself.

In Dorothy Allison's semi-autobiographical *Bastard Out of Carolina* - perhaps the novel that has influenced me most in my writing *We Are Volcanoes* – Allison's first-person narrative in the voice of Bone, a child growing up in South Carolina in the 1950s, has all the impetus for a hopeful, triumphant ending for the character. The novel is full of Bone's anger and acts of resistance and rebellion in response to the horrific abuse she endures from her stepfather, along with acts of self-care and self-preservation, building a sense that despite everything, the character is strengthening, and that Allison is paving the way for her to triumph over her abuser in a final climactic resolution. But in the most devastating ending, we witness Bone being beaten and brutally raped in a detailed seven-page ordeal, only for her to afterwards see her mother cradle the crying perpetrator, despite walking in on him raping her child. The perpetrator's hateful dialogue is scripted, and every movement and action of his choreographed, as well as every injury inflicted on Bone detailed. In the very last pages of the narrative, Bone's mother abandons her completely, leaving her "empty", "understanding nothing" (1992: 308).

The first time I read the book, I experienced several different trauma responses; flashback, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, dissociation, stomach ache, headache; quite common responses for somebody who is "triggered" or re-traumatized. But, gripped by the voice and story, I decided to – or needed to, considering what I had invested – read to the end. I felt certain that Bone would prevail, that Allison would offer some form of payoff for having put Bone, and me the reader, through all of this. So why didn't she? Is it because for many survivors, perhaps including Allison, this is

predominantly true of their experience, that there was no triumph or payoff after their suffering, no resolution or feeling of justice? If so, is this reason enough to depict it time and time again in fiction? Isn't fiction an ideal site for re-envisioning, reconceptualising, a place for "alternate ways of imagining… a better world" (Piercy in Lauret 1994: 43)?

Emma Glass's protagonist, Peach, in her surrealist novel of the same name, is given a not dissimilar fate to Bone. After Peach kills her rapist, Lincoln – a man who is portrayed as a sausage, whose greasy residue has remained on Peach's body since the attack – she puts the meat of him in "stacks of sacks" (2018: 83). Her mother then unknowingly uses this to make sausages, cooked on the barbecue the following day, ingested and enjoyed by family and friends, including Peach: "I watched them all devour my demon and I joined in" (92).

However absurdist and gruesome this may be, in the context of the novel it is Peach triumphing over her abuser, and for the first time she feels "contented", "the trauma and tension fall away like an old dry scab" (93).

But in the final chapter, entitled 'Final Pieces, Final Peace', Peach purposely "unfurls" herself, unravelling her own flesh until she is "nothing but solid stone" reduced only to the pit of a peach (97). In one review of Glass' novel, Sarah Ditum states, in an almost pleading final comment, "there must be other kinds of story to tell about being female than ones that end in nothing" (2018).

In her memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Dorothy Allison says, "the story becomes the thing needed" (1996: 3). Perhaps then, for her, in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone's abject suffering needed to be presented and witnessed fully, along with the conditions under which it took place at this intersection of class and gender.

Perhaps Allison needed us to experience it and be affected by it with no reprieve or relief. Or perhaps this was meant to be read not only by survivors, but by those who are in denial or ignorance that these horrific acts of male violence so commonly take place, as an act of forced witnessing.

I do believe there is a place for this type of unapologetic reconstruction of violence and trauma that resists resolution. I have witnessed, countless times, the use of it as a processing tool for survivors. However, these days the type of feminist fiction I want to read and certainly to write has some elements of hope and affirmation, at least in the form of agency and autonomy in female characters, where we see them on more than one occasion take action which produces their desired effect. I feel empowered when I read and write about empowerment.

Writing in itself can become an act of empowerment.

In writing a work of fiction, I get to decide, I get to play, to test out what takes place and what the consequences are; I have control. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, in writing a novel I "acquire the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of [my] own image" (in Champagne 1996: 4). The narrative "I" becomes a "constructed being" (Lindner 2004: 13), no longer constrained by factual veracity.

Writing trauma stories into a work of fiction – specifically those involving male violence, given that this kind of trauma is largely defined by the way in which control and autonomy are taken away from the survivor – is nothing short of a powerful act of subversion.

Creating Connie

My novel, *We Are Volcanoes*, takes the form of a conversation between four generations of women in the same family, and explores themes of intergenerational trauma, violence against women, and the importance of listening to women when they speak about their experiences. Connie Bell is one of those women; she is elderly and suffers from dementia, which triggers her into a traumatic reliving of when she was raped at sixteen years old by two American GIs who were lodging with her family in Surrey during the Second World War.

There are many ways that the effects of such trauma can manifest in daily life for survivors. One example of these adverse

experiences is flashback, a type of traumatic memory distinct in its 'predominance of imagery and bodily sensation' as well as an absence of verbal or linear narrative (Herman 2015: 38). My experience of flashback is precisely that, a flash or slice of intrusive memory, often without context, that cuts through what is actually going on in front me, and is just as vivid or *real*.

Another common experience is dissociation. Both a trauma response and a survival mechanism, to dissociate is to disconnect in some way from events that have taken place. This perceptual shift can result in "feelings of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity" (Herman 2015: 43). For me, in relation to my own experiences of trauma, dissociation feels like a mechanical fragmentation, a splitting up of the parts that make me an entire being. I use the word "mechanical" because of the distinct sensation of the separateness of these parts, a deconstruction – limbs, fingers, organs laid out like car parts on a mechanic's cloth – how this becomes the main or only sensation, and also to convey the involuntary, automatic nature of the experience.

With Connie's character I wanted to address experiences of both flashback and dissociation, to portray trauma as a "perpetual present", and to try to give form to that which has no form – the lived affective experience of traumatic memory (Pollock 2013: 2).

These intentions together formed the basis of a broader intention, which was to transform the trauma; I wanted to see whether I could move Connie forward in the processing and healing of her trauma through its telling, and subsequently explore whether this changed my own affective experience of trauma.
In the following two excerpts, in the fictive present Connie is in her mid-eighties and has recently been experiencing flashbacks associated with when she was raped at sixteen years old. Here she attempts to retrace and reorganise the traumatic memory. The first piece takes her further into the event than her conscious memory has allowed before, and then, having done that, the second piece – which takes place later in the novel – enables a moving away

from the traumatic encounter and towards a memory of safety and care.

Connie (1)

Too quiet in here, in this house. Where are the noises? Where's Alan with his trains? Moll with her dishes and her banging about?
It's so quiet I can hear the clock.
But the soldiers are here, are they? Now I hear their voices. Low. And I smell their tobacco.
They've not said a word since I saw.
That you, Connie? the shorter one calls. Then something else I don't hear.
I go to see.
In the room I know I've not been alone with them yet.
Shorter one is talking. Talking, talking as he closes the door. Taller one not looking at me.
Is it about them leaving soon? Them sad and scared to go?
There's no air in here.
Can I go now? I wonder.
Then short one is closer. Too close.
Where's Alan? I hear my voice say.
No one's in.
I smell the brown of his breath. The sour.
I know you saw, he says. Smiling then. A smile like there's a trick. Like there's a joke but I missed it.
Then they move around me, almost dance around me, awkward.
Until shorter one moves, quick. And I'm flat. He's flattened me. And my voice gone, out of me. Only my legs kicking, until they're gone too. Then I'm nothing.
There's jolt. There's spit. But it's not me that's feeling it.
Head lolls like they've wrung my neck.
And just there, outside on the wall. It's a butterfly. She flames but she is still. Blue eyes on her wings. I see her and she sees.
The curtains slice. And then it's all swirling black.
What's next?
Wake up.
Sitting up and knickers back on. Legs back on. Then out of the front door, that's right. Running. All the way to the trees to hide. The hard ground jolting up through me. Then the soil, the leaves, the twigs. On my hands and knees. Burning but cold. The wet of it. The grit.
I dig. Dig and dig. Hard soil and stones stabbing under my nails. Then tear the knickers back off me, scrunch them into a ball and stuff them down, make the ground swallow them.
I lie down then. Curl myself around myself.

Hold the hurt. Cup it in my hand. And try to think of water. Of river. And wait for something, something certain.
I wait for it to be dark.

Connie (2)

It's dark.
The dark's always darker in the woods.
What wakes me up is rain, not the feel but the sound of it. The trees protect me now, but soon it'll come through.
I sit up.
My toes are curling, gripping in the soil.
Did I run here with no shoes on? Must have. I look around. Don't see any shoes. Just trees and dark, and a pitter patter.
I'm up before I know I'm up, and dizzy, head swirling round. I hear a tawny owl and that sets me straight. She tells me to walk. So I'm walking the way home. But not going home.
My mouth tastes like I've been sucking a spoon, all tinny like blood and dirt. There's pain rolling round my belly. My hands are tingly. It's my legs I can't feel, but they're still carrying me. Over stones like marbles, though we're not falling down. We're on our way.
But where?
Got to think of something.
Out of the trees and back on the road. The night is grey and I smell the rain on the concrete. A few kids are out, a couple of them stare. My hands tug down my dress. My legs walk me quicker.
Then there's this light, all pink and warm in the window of twenty-one. Where Janet lives. She lives alone.
I knock on the door three times, hope she's heard me.
When she opens it her face drops and I know I must look a state.
I look down at my dirty bare feet and so does she.
Sorry, I say.
Come in, you poor lamb, she says. What on earth's happened?
She leads me through to the pink lit room and sees me properly.
Sweetheart, she says. And asks me again.
I open my mouth. My tongue's too big and swollen to talk. I can feel my eyes bulging, like they're trying to say it. But nothing comes. Janet makes sweet milky tea and says she'll help me get all cleaned up. I try to slurp while the pans boil. She tuts to look at me, scrunches her brow and looks sad. Her hair's in rollers.
Sorry, I say.
You're not to say sorry, she says. Poor thing.

I nearly say it again.
Then, water's ready.
She chatters away like a nursery rhyme.
There we are. There we are.
Arms in the air, up we go. And my dress is off.
I'll get you a nice clean one, she says.
When she comes back she stops and looks. I still can't speak any words but she reads the words on my body.
There we are. There we are.
It's the warm of the water and the softness of her touch that make me cry. Not anything before.
There we are. There we are.
When I'm dry and dressed and wrapped in blankets she tells me I should get some sleep. She tells me in the morning we'll have a proper breakfast and a good chat.
What do you say to that, Connie love?
I nod, eyes wide, wondering how they'll ever close.
Then by the door she turns and says, shall I stay with you, love?
I nod again and try to smile.
Be back in a minute, she says, and climbs the stairs.
And I'm alone. Alone but with myself.

Occupying the Present

Imagining oneself in a real-life traumatic event and potentially reconjuring some of the sensations of one's own experience is an intimidating task. It can feel exposing, as if the risk of feeling re-victimised or weakened is too high, particularly by survivors who have responded to trauma with the coping mechanism of hyper-resilience. In effect it makes the trauma survivor vulnerable again, giving new meaning to the phrase "opening up old wounds". But it could be that it is precisely in this revisiting, this opening up, that we truly have the ability to make the wound *old*, because in so doing, we are committing it to the past.

Shoshana Felman explains:

> To *seek* reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it – to turn back on, and to try to penetrate the state of being s*tricken*, *wounded* by reality – and to attempt, at the same time, to re-emerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality as an advent, a

movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of *moving on*. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible (emphasis in original, 1992: 28).

So how could I write "beyond the shock of being stricken", yet also "from within the woundedness"? My thoughts were that I needed to write belatedly, after the event, but in the present tense.

Writing Connie's voice in the present tense was a way of giving equal weight to recent or current events and those that took place decades ago, so that she appears to inhabit this continuously unfolding here and now. I felt that writing in this way was both *representative* of traumatic memory – specifically flashback – and *subversive*, in that, commonly, during episodes of flashback, the specific areas of the brain involved with words and language are not immediately accessible (Rauch 1996: 383). With the scene in which Connie remembers when she was raped, I wanted to create something as close to an experience of flashback as I could, rather than a detailed, literal blow-by-blow account of the violence, as Allison did. I wanted to write a scene that was relatable but not re-traumatizing.

Transformation

In order for writing to reflect the experience of traumatic memory, it needs to include, "vivid sensations and images", striking in their lucidity, yet disjointed, with "intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context" (Herman 2015: 38). Connie remembers the quiet, so quiet she can "hear the clock". Then the clear image of one of her rapists as he, "talking, talking… closes the door", though not what he says. The rapists "move around" her, "until shorter one moves, quick. And I'm flat. He's flattened me. And my voice gone, out of me. Only my legs kicking, until they're gone too". Here the short, juddery sentences and clauses reflect the fragmentary structure of the memory, and make visceral the sense of an unfolding

powerlessness, with each clause acting as confirmation of the one before.

My next sentence, "Then I'm nothing.", is the epicentre of Connie's traumatic memory, in that it is the place she must get to, one of complete annihilation, in order to then rebuild and reassemble. It is not an endpoint, as it is for Emma Glass' Peach.

I have had sexual assault disclosed to me most likely thousands of times. If I were to find any common threads in all of these experiences, including my own experience of sexual assault, one of them would be this feeling of being reduced to nothing, whether in relation to objectification – "I am nothing" equating to "I am nothing but an object" – or nothing in terms of meaning or worth – "I am not a person".

In their essay 'Floccnaucinihilipilification', a word defined as "the action or habit of estimating something as worthless" (in Gay 2019: 137), So Mayer explains that this is the entire purpose of rape:

> Rape was and is a cultural and political act: it attempts to remove a person with agency, autonomy, and belonging from their community, to secrete them and separate them, to depoliticize their body by rendering it detachable, violable, nothing. (140)

Facilitating a survivor in their reaching this point, this acknowledgement that they felt reduced to nothing also facilitates the next realisation, one that I have attempted to elicit alongside every relevant disclosure: even to recognise the feeling that you are nothing means you must be something, or, as Mayer so powerfully puts it, when applied to the event of the rape itself, "I was alive enough to be annihilated." (141).

It is when Connie is "nothing" that she sees, through the window on an outside wall, the butterfly, perhaps the ultimate symbol of transformation. Not only is the butterfly an example of vivid, intense focus, the pattern on its wings resembles a pair of eyes, giving Connie a witness: "I see her and she sees.", a confirmation, however detached and brief, that she is in fact something.

From this point in the act of remembering, even amidst the horror of it, Connie can put herself back together, "knickers back on. Legs back on". She is commentating as a form of self-support, and continues to use this commentary as an aid to her sequencing what follows, "What's next?", "Then out of the front door. That's right.". Once in the woods, Connie has the compulsion to ground herself, to "dig and dig", and in an act directly subverting Allison's narrative – in which we are given this image of Bone's rapist: "he ripped my panties off me like they were paper" – it is Connie who "tear[s] the knickers back off" *herself,* in order to "scrunch them into a ball and stuff them down", making "the ground swallow them", granting *her* the use of violent verbs and the power to symbolically erase (Allison 1992: 284).

She then remembers her attempts to self-soothe, "curl myself around myself. Hold the hurt. Cup it in my hand", here embodied in the repetition and the alliteration of the breathy "h", so that I, and subsequently the reader, might feel held also, imagining Connie re-enacting this foetal position, enclosed, thus bringing the memory to a close.

As well as prioritising the telling of the traumatic memory as true to affective experience, throughout its composition I have tried to be intentionally mindful of my wellbeing, as well as that of my reader. The process of writing the scene and in fact, the process of writing about the process of writing the scene have been incredibly powerful for me, significantly reducing the frequency and severity of intrusive thoughts and night terrors.

Griselda Pollock states that, "artworking about trauma risks… being traumatic; but it can also stage at one and the same time, both a passage to the [traumatic] encounter… and a passage away from it" (2013: 8). After completing the second draft of the novel, I realised that I had left Connie in the woods, waiting "for it to be dark". This is not where I ultimately leave her – after this, we hear the triumph of her teaching herself to swim. Then at the very end of the novel, Connie confirms her niece's hopeful imagining that she got to experience the joy and pleasure of romantic

love and consensual sex. Nevertheless, the woods was where I had left her in terms of traumatic memory. To address this, I wrote her path away from the encounter, "out of the trees and back on the road", and into the "pink and warm" light of a neighbour's home, where she is taken care of and comforted. And although at first she cannot speak, we know from elsewhere in the narrative, and from this very testimony, that she will eventually regain that power and reclaim what happened.

Renowned psychologist Alice Miller writes about the reconstruction of traumatic memories and feelings "not experienced consciously" (2008: 70) as essential to healing. In *The Drama of Being a Child* she explains: "we can repair ourselves by choosing to look more closely at the knowledge that is stored inside our bodies and bringing this knowledge closer to our awareness" (2), something Shoshana Felman calls "witnessing [one]self for the first time" (1995: 258).

Psychologist Emily Soroko found that this is especially effective when reconstructing the experience in a "narrative manner" (in Kubacka-Jasiecka 2012: 218), because of the specific way our brains structure and organise information when forming narrative. She explains that this process creates opportunities for the integration and assimilation of experience and feeling which has not been possible before. In this sense, I have used Connie as a conduit, transmitting unassimilated experience through her so that I might then be able to re-integrate it fully for myself, once again "re-externalizing the event", so that I can "take it back again, inside" (Felman 1992: 69), transformed.

Conclusion

By creating fictional characters and utilising those characters to explore different areas of traumatic experience that might benefit from a new perspective – the occurrence of adverse experiences such as flashback and dissociation, and the concepts of trauma resolution and integration, for example – a writer may have a starting point to work from with traumatic material. This framework entails a method in which the essence of what needs "working through" is

taken from real-life experiences and feelings and is altered, as though refracted through the process, and put somewhere else outside of the writer in an alternative fictional space, where that new perspective can be achieved. Putting my characters' dissociative experiences into words has enacted a process of *re*construction, of reconnecting what has been severed, of meaning-making; a writerly process that has helped to integrate repressed parts of my experience into conscious understanding. Writing about dissociation has felt, at times, to be its very antithesis, bringing awareness, connection and language into a space the brain purpose-builds for the opposite.

Creating a work of feminist fiction, and, importantly, writing about the process of creating it, has transformed the way my trauma *feels* and the way I feel *about* my trauma. In creating the characters and plot I have been able to take some of my experiences and put them into another form, one that is malleable and workable, and can progress and resolve in the way I decide. I have been able to *enact* what has otherwise felt impossible to express. I have developed understanding and compassion for my characters, their decisions and behaviours, and have translated this into deeper compassion and understanding for myself. My characters have said things I needed to hear.

It has amounted to something that exceeds what is commonly called "therapeutic" for me. It has shifted the landscape of my affective experience of trauma entirely, so that rather than feeling I am "on the ground" so to speak, at the mercy of the weather of my trauma, a more appropriate metaphor would be that my experiences have become instruments in an orchestra, and I am the conductor. Judith Lewis Herman best describes this feeling when she writes that a "significant sharing of the trauma story…serves a purpose beyond simple ventilation or catharsis; it is a means toward active mastery" (2015: 222-3).

Implications for Teaching and Learning Environments

Awareness of the prevalence of trauma and of its impact is greater than it has ever been

before, as is evidence that suggests that writing about our traumatic experiences can "open up transformative opportunities" (Spear 2014: 54). With this comes a heightened understanding of creative writing as a pedagogical discipline that would benefit enormously from a trauma-informed approach, both in the planning and delivery of content and in the response and practice of educators. Therapist and writer Foluke Taylor states that wherever 'creative writing is praxis (action and reflection) [Friere, 1972] and offers space for the development of critical consciousness, it has liberatory – and therefore therapeutic – potential' (2022: 122).

Many traumatised people are drawn to creative writing courses, wanting to write about their experiences as a "sense-making, witnessing and testimonial project" (Atkinson 2023: 340), and even for those who might not *begin* with this motivation there is a great chance that they will encounter writing material and exercises that invite them to draw from personal experience and emotional or sensory memory. It even appears that the relationship between fiction and trauma is in some way reciprocal, as Goldsmith and Satterlee explain, "fictional representations facilitate cultural understanding of trauma and can offer additional pathways to recovery" (2008: 35).

In addition, we are most likely to *write* well when we *are* well (Lindner 2004: 8). A deeper understanding of the poietic process detailed in this work, using creative writing to work with traumatic experience and reflecting upon that, has the potential to enable new feelings of self-governance, forging a set of writing tools that can be used to clear and cut back overgrown bracken, to create new pathways in thought and behaviour.

Practice-led research such as this, including detailed accounts of the self-reflexive processes it involves, has an important part to play in developing trauma-responsive learning environments, not with the intention of creating a therapeutic process for students, but rather as a way of increasing awareness and therefore the capacity to acknowledge, hold and accommodate that process, should it occur.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Zosia Crosse has been an educator for 16 years and in 2023 was awarded a PhD in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University for her novel and contextualizing thesis, Writing Feminist Fiction as a Means of Processing Trauma. Her current research explores the use of biomythography as a writing method for marginalized people. She recently guest lectured at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Cardiff Metropolitan University, on the use of creative writing as a tool for decolonizing academia, digital writing and writing for performance. She lives in Bristol and is currently writing her third novel.

[1] The use of the word "survivor" as opposed to "victim" is largely to signify the political meaning made of the traumatic experience: "survivors reject the demand to stay politely silent. They remember, speak up and take every opportunity to 'make politic' their experiences of abuse" (Champagne 1996: 2).

[2] The women's sector broadly refers to a network of organisations borne out of second-wave feminism, specifically radical feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s, and the development of the "feminist public sphere" (Hogeland 1998: 1), in which writers such as Andrea Dworkin drew attention to the male violence that women and girls experience at an endemic level. Activists addressed the desperate need for support services by establishing the UK's first Rape Crisis Centre in 1973 as well as domestic violence refuges. They also campaigned for increased awareness and further protection for women in the law. The first Women's Aid federation was instrumental in lobbying for the 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, and for having women and children at risk of domestic violence to count as homeless under The Housing Act 1977. For more information see: www. womensaid.org.uk

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The Structure of Writing Through: Handling Grief as a Creative Methodology

Gavin James Bower

Abstract My PhD thesis, *Writing Through* (2022), was envisaged as a critical and creative inquiry into the process of writing through grief. My intention was to write through rather than simply about the loss of my father in 2015 and to then explore the structure of this writing, yielding insights for other practitioners. The four-year process of research resulted in the production of a creative component over three parts – an original television screenplay, a work of nonfiction and a bridging piece of prose in various ways drawing on a personal experience of grief – alongside a contextual component: 'The Structure of Writing Through.' This component is abridged and its opening part, on 'Handling Grief as a Creative Methodology', introduced and established here.

Keywords: *autobiography, autoethnography, autofiction, counselling, creative, critical, death, fiction, grief, loss, memoir, nonfiction, practice, process, prose, script, structure, television, therapy, writing*

Objective

I wanted to see if I could write through grief (rather than about or even around it) to produce something – a script or a piece of prose – to take out into the world as a practitioner. This was about creatively handling loss through practice rather than therapy.

The point was not to cure myself but *to produce a creative outcome*. Many of the insights arose from this process of creative inquiry, rather than through a theoretical review of literature. I nevertheless recognised during the process a structure, which I could see in my own work as well as the work of others.

My overarching objective was therefore to investigate this proposed *structure of writing through grief* via reflection on my own practice as a writer – i.e., by examining the *formation of writing through grief* as a process and exploring *the resulting form of this writing* as a body of text on the page.

The discovery was made possible because of the journey, as it were, a process of writing through fiction and nonfiction and the joining of dots – in other words, the integration of creative elements and analysis of what was there on the page. I mean *on the page* literally, of course, the structure of writing through manifesting in sentences and paragraphs and pages and pages and pages.

This is recognisable in the text but does not call for a one-size-fits-all approach to writing through. It is not a checklist of things to find and tick off. It is not rigid. It is a very delicate pattern to do with writing as a structured and lived process and indeed writing as a way of experiencing *life through writing*. In a word, writing through is a process of integration and it has a structure.

Handling Grief as a Creative Methodology

Writing Through used a practical research methodology and was grounded in my work as a practitioner.

My research process started with a script. DESCENT (formerly OUR FATHER) was envisaged as a television drama about family and forgiveness. The story, set in the north-west of England, would ultimately follow Edward, an NHS forensic psychiatrist at a high-security hospital, and Adam, his patient – with the drama centring on Edward, his responsibilities both as an NHS doctor and a man finally stepping out of his father's shadow.

I began working on the script a few months after my father died in May 2015. I wanted to see if I could write *through* rather than around or even about my grief. I also wanted to continue a conversation cut short – a conversation that I could, somewhat obviously, never have again. I found myself writing about a relationship between two men as well as the relationship between these men and their fathers – the doctor-patient dynamic both a fictional meeting of minds and a once (or perhaps twice) removed searching for answers to seemingly unsolvable real-life questions in dramatic form. The result, effectively, was me talking to myself about my dad, missing my dad and grieving for the loss of my dad.

The two main characters, Edward and Adam, would nevertheless come to mirror my own descent. I had become a new father not long after losing my own and, in a case of life mirroring art, I struggled spectacularly to cope with my new responsibilities. This resulted in my arrest for drink-driving at the end of 2015 and then led, beyond all that, to the writing of *Your Father's Secrets* – a parallel work of nonfiction *memoirising* this period in my life.

If the script was about making sense of my grief through fiction then the 'memoir' was designed to make sense of the making sense. The intention was to

experience and understand my life by *writing* – that is, *supra*, writing as a structured and lived process and indeed writing as a way of experiencing *life through writing*. I went from being twice removed through fiction to (perhaps) once removed through nonfiction. I was my own subject. I was interrogating this fact using the tools of my discipline. I was getting closer to my grief and writing through it. The bridging piece at the very top of my thesis, while completed last of all, joined up the dots. The three pieces were therefore integrated and connected through *practice* – they were also three pieces forming one *creative* whole.

My methodology was grounded in my work as a practitioner. I nevertheless had a duty of self-care to consider when deciding what to share and what to protect. I worked with the Centre for Death & Society in Bath for guidance on counselling and meeting other researchers in my field. I interviewed working forensic professionals for DESCENT, a work of fiction – but for *Your Father's Secrets* I had to be careful to show respect for other people and their part in 'my' story.

This was supported by the creative application of the Dual Process Model (1999) – a model that separates the experience of dealing with grief into the 'loss-orientated' and the 'restoration-orientated' (the former focusing on the loss itself and the latter focusing on the life after loss), with everyday living then involving a degree of 'oscillation' between the two. Loss-orientated activities centre on the avoidance and even denial of change while restoration-orientated activities centre on attending to this change and embracing new things. In my research I went one step further, coalescing these loss-orientated and restoration-orientated activities by merging the writing life with the everyday life – *without oscillation between the two*. I lived my grief and wrote through my grief and there was, in my case, neither oscillation nor separation. I was not using the model as a form of therapy but, rather, as a way of thinking about how I engaged with grief through

my process of writing.

This essentially personal nature of grief directed my wider research, involving a close reading of a range of texts across various genres and platforms as well as existing scholarship on the grieving process. My writing process included the reading itself and keeping a journal with light notes. Much of the latter comprised observations, snippets of dialogue and quotes either heard or remembered. These rough thoughts were expanded on and transferred, in my case, to a laptop screen – but I maintained the diary, writing about my emotions and how these emotions might eventually be represented in another form.

Reading supported my writing. I looked at other examples of writing in this specific area, considering contemporary nonfiction and autobiographical fiction – and this writing helped me to reflect on my own work and how grief rendered itself visceral on the page. I looked at self-help books. I looked at grief memoirs, all of which dealt with first-hand and felt loss. By exploring how this experience impacted on the creative process – in turn reflecting on *my* grief and its influence on *my* writing – I pursued a clear line of investigation into grief as delineated in writing through and recognised how grief could shape creativity in particular ways. It became possible to decipher the poetics of writing through and reveal where grief showed up in the language and mood of a text. In this way, I was able to identify a structure to this writing through.

Writing Through is more than just the title of my thesis – it is the key methodology that I used to research, investigate and create this body of work.

In plain language, I write in order to reflect on writing. Specifically, within my thesis, I use writing to creatively investigate and explore the structure of grief on the page.

Other writers (and scholars) have approached writing (and grief) in a similar way. Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*

(1986), asks writers to focus only on 'the essential, awake speech of their minds'. In the context of grief, Goldberg's words evoke the Freudian concept of working through (with *mourning*, rather than writing, providing necessary separation and release from *melancholia*). The result here, or the answer to Goldberg's question of methodology – writing with no other goal than to discover something about the process of writing itself – leads inevitably to further questions. These questions concern form as well as structure – i.e., what this writing actually looks like. 'We may write three novels before we write a good one,' Goldberg warns. 'So form is important, we should learn form, but we should also remember to fill form with life. This takes practice.'

Goldberg is not an academic but her approach to writing, much like mine, has a lot in common with the scholarly tradition of 'autoethnography' (Matthews, 2019). The use of writing as a methodology is most prominent in this tradition. Practice (or structure) here renders the imperfect (or life) something writers can work with – give form – and leave out there on the page. To give the reader an insight into how I used this thinking and writing as a research methodology, I will discuss and explore the similarities between the scholarly use of autoethnography and more 'authorly' practices of autobiography and autofiction. I will use a combination but prefer *author* over *scholar* to refer to creative thinkers who, although not academics in the traditional sense, have nevertheless produced new knowledge about the processes, experiences and structures of writing on the page. Scholars and authors alike, I propose, can use writing not only to communicate a subject but also to work and write *through* it creatively.

The following methodological exposition entails a review of how autoethnographers, nonfiction writers and literary authors have approached the practice of writing through grief in its initial phases, often with no audience but themselves in mind. I will consider the process or methodology of writing

through and look at what it means to directly confront grief within the felt experience of writing, drawing on and analysing how scholars / authors have talked about the ways in which their grief first appears in the text and citing the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler (2014), alongside writing by (among others) Joan Didion, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Thomas Harding, Richard Beard, Yiyun Li, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Annie Ernaux. I will also compare the process of scholars / authors with my own methodology, using the theory of 'Handling Grief' as a scaffold to explain how the raw and unprocessed appearance of grief first appeared on the page in my own work.

In her profoundly moving paper, 'Writing Through Grief: Using Autoethnography to Help Process Grief After the Death of a Loved One' (2019), Angela Matthews harnesses autoethnography – i.e., an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis *et al.*, 2010) or, as Matthews defines it, ethnography with the self at its centre.

She does this via a 'grief journal' to process the grief she endures over the loss of her son, arguing persuasively that a combination of the so-called 'personal' and the so-called 'academic' can reveal an understanding of 'complex, painful issues' and indeed that such an approach can work as a strategy for others. The paper is itself an outgrowth of Matthews' Dissertation (2017), exploring writing through grief as a doctoral student and offering this as a guide to other doctoral students during the completion of their studies.

This work is very much in step with my inquiry here, although there are three major differences.

The first difference is my avoidance of approaching writing as 'therapy'. This is a personal rather than theoretical rejection, although I explore some of the differences between grief writing as

therapy and writing through grief as a creative process elsewhere in my thesis. The second difference is my absolute and total focus on writing as a practitioner (rather than, say, a student), hence the emphasis on *writing* rather than what follows – my preoccupation, remember, was with the creative handling of a loss and ultimately producing a creative outcome. The third difference is the departure I make by examining the results of this process on the page, offering a structural analysis of my work and the work of others and yielding insights for other scholars / authors.

To understand my methodology in the context of handling grief is to begin to recognise a structure to the process of writing through and even to see the early stages of this structure on the page. I will draw below on different examples of how this might work in practice, both from my own writing and the writing of others.

Matthews herself writes about feeling 'flat and dead' immediately after the death of her son and describes the 'sparseness' of her early journal entries (Matthews, 5). Echoing the work of Goldberg, the act of writing, for Matthews, then gradually becomes about discipline and release. This study of the self follows stages, in Matthews' case the model belonging to Worden (2009). Greenblatt's stages follow denial, depression and acceptance (1978) while the five stages of loss – a model belonging to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) – presents a five-act structure. 'Handling Grief' might represent a parallel stage for creative thinkers, a stage that is at once integral and able to stand apart.

Whatever the model, though, it is tempting to think of this initial phase of writing through grief as *the beginning*. There is still a need here for refinement as well as caution. Kübler-Ross and Kessler warn:

The five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live

with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order (p. 7).

Similarly, during the process of producing my thesis, I found that although there was a structure to writing through grief – a structure with 'stages' – this process was not linear. There is order to the chaos but no order to either writing or grieving. Kessler (2019) himself adds 'meaning', a sixth stage – writing three years after the death of his own son – and it is this yearning that relates directly to writing through. Finding meaning, like writing, requires effort, as Julia Samuel (2017) writes, for 'grief is a process that has to be worked through'.

This process can be a painful one. 'My brother Chuks called to tell me,' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2021) writes, 'and I came undone.' The immediacy of the writing here, coming as it does in the very first entry, offers a way in. Subsequent sections are short – the book, originally an essay in *The New Yorker* (2020), maintains this rhythm throughout – but these opening moments deal with the impact of loss, the loss itself and felt experience of that loss.

The news of Adichie's father's death comes via Zoom, a physical distance joining the ontological. 'I stare and stare at my father,' Adichie writes. 'My breathing is difficult. Is this what shock means, that the air turns to glue?' There is denial to go with the sense of shock. 'He *was* not,' Adichie corrects, denial turning into anger. 'He *is*.' This denial is at times to the point of *unseeing*. 'A refuge, this denial, this refusal to look,' Adichie writes. In the immediacy of a loss there is still a choice to make – to face things or turn away – to *orientate*, one way or another. 'Grief is forcing new skins on me,' Adichie explains, 'scraping scales from my eyes.' There is also a feeling of futility – of hopelessness. 'Only now do I learn,' Adichie continues, 'while feeling for its porous

edges, that there is no way through.' There is a questioning, too. 'How is it that the world keeps going, breathing in and out unchanged,' Adichie writes, 'while in my soul there is a permanent scattering?' The immediacy here is, among so many things, *physical*. 'My four-year-old daughter says I scared her,' Adichie admits – then continues:

She gets down on her knees to demonstrate, her small clenched fist rising and falling, and her mimicry makes me see myself as I was, utterly unravelling, screaming and pounding the floor. The news is like a vicious uprooting. I am yanked away from the world I have known since childhood. And I am resistant (p. 3) …

The loss of a loved one – whether parent or partner – brings with it a physicality evident on the page. 'No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear,' writes C. S. Lewis (1961) after the death of his wife, 'H'. 'At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed.' Again, for Lewis, there is denial. 'I find it hard to take in what anyone says,' Lewis writes. 'Or perhaps, hard to want to take in.' Denial then hardens into something like resolve. 'There are moments,' Lewis continues, switching gears, 'most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so much, not so very much, after all.' A dose of realism swiftly follows. 'Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory,' Lewis adds, 'and all this "common sense" vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.' There is that questioning again, for Lewis, of the spiritual sort. 'Thank God the memory of her is still too strong (will it always be too strong?) to let me get away with it,' he writes – but the immediacy of it all, even for the devout, brings with it recrimination. 'Meanwhile,' he asks, 'where is God?'

A Grief Observed, like Adichie's a relatively short work, forms four separate sections, while Calvin Trillin's *About Alice* (2006), which is about the loss of a spouse and, at its heart, about love, unfolds over eight parts. Trillin tells the story of Alice from the beginning. He dedicates and devotes but

navigates the immediacy of her death through laughter and lightness – a particular condolence letter opening the story.

For Joan Didion (2005), writing after the sudden death of her husband, a longer work comes after a protracted pause, the only words possible, at first, 'Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant.' These come 'a day or two or three after the fact', in January 2004, following Didion's husband's death in late December 2003. There is nothing more for a number of months until it is finally time for Didion to tell the story. 'In outline,' she begins again, not quite able to find the right words. 'This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning,' she writes, yearning for something but finding this elusive. Writing on the page, for Didion – and like grief – 'comes in waves'.

To recognise a structure to the process or methodology of writing through is to see the stages there on the page – but understanding the structure of any story is about listening to what the story is telling the writer it wants to do (Saunders, 2017).

Returning to the stages, in the case of handling grief it is only *the beginning* insofar as it initiates or sets up everything that happens straight after (inclusive of the ultimate inciting incident – i.e., death). This unstructured process of handling grief often happens without a reader in mind and only through the immediacy of the first act. There is nevertheless the process of writing through a gradual build-up to *the next thing*, an impact, or a second act. The writer moves towards a moment when they are writing *for* someone, or for something – i.e., towards a time when their writing might make an impact somewhere else.

In some instances this is impact of a brutal, unthinkable kind. For Thomas Harding, writing in *Kadian Journal* (2014), the only way to tell the story of his son's death is by beginning at the beginning and describing the terrible accident in the present tense – everything

immediate and *happening*. Kadian is riding up front, his father behind. 'He's suddenly way ahead of me,' Harding writes. 'A hundred feet perhaps. He must have gathered speed. And then there's a flash of a white van, moving fast from left to right, at the bottom of the slope. It shouldn't be there. And it hits Kadian. Driving him away from view, away from me.' Harding establishes time and place and builds a dreadful tension, over the space of a few pages, until he sees the worst. 'This is real,' he continues. 'This is happening. I can't believe it.' Harding's sister arrives at the scene. '"He's dead," I say to her. "He's dead."' Harding, on the page, is seemingly back in an endless present and uses the tense to bring the reader with him.

Richard Beard, in *The Day That Went Missing: A Family's Story* (2017), uses this same tense to great effect. 'For nearly 40 years I haven't said his name,' he writes, 'but in writing I immediately slip into the present tense, as if he's here, he's back. Writing can bring him to life.' Beard describes the day and the hour and the moment of loss and tells the story from there. Doubt creeps in. 'The memory is unsatisfactory,' Beard concedes. That self-assurance and initial control over tense soon slips, the writing faltering. 'My younger brother's name is Nicholas Beard,' he writes. 'He was nine years old, and I was with him in the water when he drowned.' Beard manages to steady himself in the *now* rather than the *then*. 'Events that happened before and after are a blank to me.' The story becomes about the telling, moving beyond denial – 'without any fictional evasions' – towards something like honesty. 'Liars prosper, no question about it,' Stephen King (2000) confirms, 'but only in the grand sweep of things, never down in the jungles of actual composition, where you must take your objective one bloody word at a time. If you begin to lie about what you know and feel while you're down there, everything falls down.'

Fiction, too, tackles the impact of an encounter with grief – as well as its immediacy. *Bad News* (1992), the second

of Edward St Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels, delivers on the promise of its title on the opening page. Patrick's father, the reader and Patrick soon learn, is dead. The rest of the story, taking place over the proverbial long weekend, involves the protagonist attempting to outrun his past and painful memories of an abusive parent – neither one of which is *gone*. Life and death coexist in this space. 'For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can,' goes the first line of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* (2009), the first in his autobiographical 'My Struggle' series.

In Carys Bray's novel, *A Song for Issy Bradley* (2014), the eponymous heroine dies and the family, stricken, must learn to deal with what comes after a life (and a loss). 'There is no discernible moment of death; she stops imperceptibly, like the clock in the Parents' Lounge,' Bray writes, evoking *the moment* and pre-empting the next. Meanwhile, in *Where Reasons End* (2019) – 'a novel', according to its title page – Yiyun Li imagines a conversation between a writer and her son, Nikolai, the conversation here taking place in the shadow of Nikolai's suicide. 'One of us made this happen,' Li writes, assuming the narrative 'I'. Nikolai replies, 'I blame you.' Li began writing the book only months after her 16-year-old son's suicide (Sehgal, 2019).

Where Bray's search for honesty adopts a more familiar fictional form and Li's book cleverly subverts convention, Beard's is a journalistic quest for the truth or, again, something like it. All three writers deal with the immediacy of writing on the page, Bray by exploring the moment and its aftermath, Beard by reliving and Li by circling it – in the latter case not evasion but avoidance and, for the author, a necessary and understandable denial.

Inside Story (2020), by the late Martin Amis, also presents on the title page as 'a novel'. 'Fiction,' he writes, 'comes from silent anxiety.' The cover image of the UK edition is a photograph of Amis with his long-time friend, Christopher Hitchens – the conceit of the 'novel' inviting the reader in, like a house guest,

even suggesting something of an *entre-nous* quality to the telling. The result is straight-talking autobiography and structurally 'freewheeling' at the same time (Harvey, 2020).

Amis missing his friend is, however, what he is really writing through. 'Life,' Amis writes, 'is artistically lifeless; and its only unifying theme is death.' Here, writing and grieving, Amis is beginning to find structure to the experiences of loss in a writerly form.

In *If the Spirit Moves You: Life and Love After Death* (2001) Justine Picardie writes parenthetically – the following lines within brackets:

When someone dies in a family, the survivors rearrange themselves in unexpected places; find different ways of talking to each other; negotiate the spiked mantraps of grief. This struggle to make the separate pieces of a broken family fit together again is, possibly, as bewildering as anything one might encounter in a séance room (pp. 102-103).

Picardie also writes in the present tense, like Harding and Beard, turning her attention to conjuring and communing and, like Didion, following a full year in her life after her sister's death – although the beginning of this story begins almost three years later. 'Good Friday in the year 2000,' she writes. 'Jesus is dead and so is my sister, and I'm running on a treadmill at the gym, watching MTV with no sound on.' Picardie nevertheless looks for structure by stages – 'numbness, denial, anger, grief, acceptance' – before that familiar doubt, again, creeps in – 'but it can't only be me who looks for short cuts, and ends up going the long way round?' There is no order – to writing or to grieving.

Cathy Rentzenbrink (2015) writes about the death of her brother, Matty. She begins the story not at the beginning but later, looking back, questioning her prayers immediately following her brother's accident – 'Please don't let my brother die' – and accepting, rather than Matty living for eight years in a coma, 'It

would have been so much better if Matty had died then.' In the next chapter Rentzenbrink relives the day of the accident – again, like Harding – and tells the story from there. This becomes about regret (they work in the same bar – she gets a lift home and her brother stays). 'This is the moment,' she writes. 'If I could go back in time and force him to come with me then everything would be different.' The way in – the immediacy here – is also a question of memory. 'I just wish I could tell her,' she adds, 'the girl with the henna-red hair in charity-shop clothes, to write down everything that happened. *Write it down*, I'd say. *You won't want to – you'll think every detail will be burnt onto your brain forever. You don't know this, but you'll forget*.'

Handling grief, like going through those stages, is not a linear process.

Jean Hannah Edelstein (2018) writes about the death of her father – and inheriting 'the gene that would cause me cancer too' – by dividing the story into three and rearranging the order: 'Between', 'Before' and 'After'. The impact of loss, this time in the past tense, is nevertheless there in the first line. 'I was in Brooklyn looking for love on OKCupid when my father died,' she writes. There is a sense of time to go with place. 'It was a cold February night in 2014,' Edelstein continues. 'It was almost two years after the night in late spring when my parents called me on Skype – I was at home in London, and they were at home in Baltimore – and Dad looked into the camera and said: I have lung cancer.' There is, again, the physicality of things to go with the impact. 'That night in February,' she writes, 'I had a rare feeling of contentment, or something like it.' Then, a few pages later, there is the immediacy of it all. 'His heart. It stopped. The cancer wore it out.'

Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2016), like Edelstein's work, is in three parts: 'A Lick of Night', 'Defence of the Nest' and 'Permission to Leave'. Two young boys and a father are missing a mother, the usual well-meaning visitor taking the form of a

crow, remaining with the grieving family until *the thing* is done. This (re-)structuring is something of a trend. Julian Barnes, too, splits *Levels of Life* (2013) in three – 'The Sin of Height', 'On the Level' and 'The Loss of Depth' – taking in ballooning, photography, love and grief – and dedicates the book to his late wife.

'The facts may be correct so far as they go,' writes Norman Douglas in an open letter to D. H. Lawrence (quoted in Forster, 1927), 'but there are too few of them; what the author says may be true, and yet by no means the truth. That is the novelist's touch. It falsifies life.' Barnes, in *Levels of Life*, certainly employs 'the novelist's touch'. 'You put together two things that have not been put together before,' he writes at the very beginning of part one. 'And the world is changed.' In part two, though, there is a subtle shift. 'You put together two things that have not been put together before; and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.' A few lines later, Barnes refining things further, he writes, 'You put together two people who have not been put together before; and sometimes the world is changed, sometimes not.' The dramatic arc continues to climb until, in part three, Barnes is able to at least write *about* rather than *around*. Only here, though, two thirds of the way into the book, is the author ready to confront the immediacy of his wife's death.

You put together two people who have not been put together before. Sometimes it is like that first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a fire balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash? But sometimes it works, and something new is made, and the world is changed. Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is emotionally possible (p. 67).

Writing through becomes about, among other things, confusion. 'Grief, like death, is banal and unique,' Barnes writes, himself quoting Forster – 'One death may explain itself, but it throws no

light upon another.' Grief, for Barnes, is 'unimaginable: not just its length and depth, but its tone and texture, its deceptions and false dawns, its recidivism. Also, its initial shock' – this in 'the moment', that is, when it comes (just 37 days, he writes, 'from diagnosis to death'). There is denial and anger – anger at the dead and anger at the living, anger at friends – especially for not reacting to the speaking of his wife's name – or for using the euphemistic 'pass' – before Barnes begins to empathise with 'the griefstruck', taking his place among their number.

Writing through does landscape as well as any other writing – that is, emphasising exterior over interior, or setting the scene rather than focusing (only) on emotions.

'It was a Sunday, in the early afternoon,' writes Annie Ernaux in *A Man's Place* (1983), a book about class and about growing up and about leaving home and, in the end, about the death of her father. Within a page or two Ernaux deals with the immediacy of things, describing the day of her father's death and preparation of his body. 'I don't remember the doctor who was called in to sign the death certificate,' she writes – questioning her memory but also confronting the physicality of the situation. 'Within a few hours,' she continues, 'my father's face had changed beyond all recognition.'

Combining autofiction with sociology, Ernaux tells the story of her father's life as well as death and, five years later, performs the same ritual for her late mother. 'My mother died on Monday 7 April in the old people's home attached to the hospital at Pontoise, where I had installed her two years previously,' she writes in *A Woman's Story* (1988). 'The nurse said over the phone: "Your mother passed away this morning, after breakfast." It was around 10 o'clock.' Again Ernaux describes the body, this time following preparation. 'She looked like a small mummy,' she writes. And again Ernaux describes the funeral, before turning to the physical. 'The week following the funeral,' she continues, 'I

would start to cry for no particular reason.' She describes her dreams and, when awake, her forgetfulness. 'Quite often I forgot how to do things in the right order,' she writes. Ernaux confronts the reality of her mother's loss on the page – her mother's suitcase leaving her 'paralysed' in the cellar. 'The worst moments were when I left home and drove into town,' she writes. 'I would be sitting behind the wheel and suddenly it would hit me: "She will never be alive anywhere in the world again."' This 'condition', as she calls it, 'is gradually easing'. Full of doubt, Ernaux analyses her own words. 'I still get that sinking feeling every time I realise "now I don't need to" or "I no longer have to" do this or that for her,' she writes. 'I feel such emptiness at the thought: this is the first spring she will never see. (Now I can feel the power of ordinary sentences, or even clichés.)' The only way forward, Ernaux decides, is to write about her mother. There is nevertheless more doubt. 'Perhaps I should wait until her illness and death have merged into the past, like other events in my life' – like her father's death – 'so that I feel the detachment which makes it easier to analyse one's memories. But right now I am incapable of doing anything else.'

Before detachment, then, there are *emotions*. 'You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends,' Didion writes. There might be another way of seeing, so to speak, or another way of writing. You sit down to *write* and life as you know it ends, immediacy only the first thing before the next thing. This for Didion was a beginning, of course, if only insofar as it was the beginning of her 'year of magical thinking'. She continues:

This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself (p. 7).

I have, above, introduced and explored 'Writing Through' as the principle methodology that I used to investigate and develop my thesis – and I have argued that the brutality of loss represents an inciting incident for the writer. It is not a linear beginning but a way of directly confronting the immediate impact of grief on the page.

Writing through, as it goes – after anger and denial and the questioning of memory (and even words) but before detachment from the moment – indeed before *interrogation* and *integration*, which I explore fully in my thesis – is on the page all about *immediacy*.

Biography

Dr Gavin James Bower FHEA was born and grew up in Lancashire. He graduated with a degree in History from the University of Sheffield, before modelling in Paris and later working as an editor and publisher in London. The author of two novels (*Dazed & Aroused* and *Made in Britain*) and one nonfiction title (*Claude Cahun: The Soldier with No Name*), his journalism has featured in the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire* and BBC Radio 5 Live. He joined EASTENDERS in 2014, writing five episodes. He lives in Somerset and is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University – where he completed his PhD – as well as a Tutor on the Jericho Writers Ultimate Novel Writing Course.

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The Imaginary Patient: Honouring the Complexity of Mental Illness in Fiction

Nathan Filer

Abstract

This essay reflects on my efforts to write fiction honouring the unyielding complexity of mental illness. It draws on my experience working in healthcare, considers seminal works of literature (most notably *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*), and interrogates relevant mental health theory and practice. It pays specific attention to my creative decisions when writing *The Shock of the Fall*. This novel tells the story of a young man dealing with his grief at the death of his brother and his experience of mental healthcare services for schizophrenia.

Keywords: fiction, mental health, narrative, psychiatry, trauma, recovery

Introduction

I was still a newly qualified mental health nurse when I began drafting my first novel, *The Shock of the Fall* (nine years before it reached the shelves). The novel tells the story of a young man experiencing psychotic symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

In writing this work, I hoped to honour the unyielding complexity of serious mental illness. This essay will interrogate some of my main creative choices, but first it is worth briefly unpacking these terms.

At first glance, the meaning of "mental illness" may seem obvious and universally understood. It is not. As I observe in my book of nonfiction, *The Heartland*, "there is no uncontroversial language when talking about mental illness – and that includes the phrase 'mental illness'" (Filer 2019: 5). Much of the current controversy, especially in the US and UK, relates to differing ideas about whether perceived patterns of distressing thoughts, feelings and behaviours should be viewed through a predominantly biomedical or psychosocial lens (McCarthy Jones 2017). For now, however, it's enough to emphasise that when I write about mental illness, I refer to uncertain and contested ideas rather than absolute facts – and that is never more the case than when considering schizophrenia.

It is also worth pausing on the word "honour". I sought to *honour* the complexity of mental illness in my fiction. It's a term that draws from the work of the American physician and literary scholar, Rita Charon. The subtitle of her seminal book on narrative medicine is "Honoring the Stories of Illness" (Charon 2006). She writes that during her medical training, she came to understand that her task was to "absorb [her] patients' multiple, often contradictory, stories of illness" and "listen expertly and attentively to extraordinarily complicated narratives" (p.4). Elsewhere, she has described this as paying "exquisite attention" to these narratives and to "cohere" them (Charon 2011). It is with this interpretation that I use the word "honour". It reflects my efforts to pay exquisite attention to complex, contradictory ideas. Finding

ways to explore such uncertainty is central to my storytelling.

The Imaginary Patient and Diagnosis

"It takes around 30 seconds to diagnose Holden Caulfield," writes the psychologist Lucy Foulkes. "Sixty, maybe, if you look at more than one website.

The unhappy protagonist of The Catcher in the Rye has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), brought on by the death of his 13-year-old brother several years before the novel begins. The diagnosis explains a lot: the distressing thoughts, the trouble sleeping, his habit of drinking to numb the pain. Other critics say he might have depression instead, or an anxiety disorder, or maybe all three. The details don't actually matter. One thing is clear: Caulfield is a teenager in need of a diagnosis (Foulkes 2021: 77).

Foulkes is lamenting a recent social trend. Increasingly, she observes, we seem compelled to reduce difficult and distressing human experiences into medical-sounding labels, including, evidently, the experiences of people who don't even exist and so cannot benefit in any way from the exercise. Foulkes doesn't limit her observation to Holden Caulfield. Dorian Gray, King Lear, and even dear Winnie-the-Pooh have been analysed by readers in the context of the disorder they're presumed to have (body dysmorphia, Bipolar and ADHD, respectively). I pause on *The Catcher in the Rye*, though, because of its influence on my own fiction. In truth, I feel unimaginative when I say that J.D. Salinger's most famous work influenced *The Shock of the Fall*. And yet, I say precisely this whenever I am questioned about their shared themes by A-Level students and teachers from Northern Ireland, where the two books are sometimes taught alongside each other. I'm made nervous by these questions. I've never been a reader who engages with stories through the critical lens of literary theories or comparative studies.

So I answer with something vague: How the legacy of *The Catcher in the Rye* is such that even if I hadn't consciously invited aspects of its "style" into my work, they'd have likely still found their way. My novel's protagonist, Matthew Homes, is part of an established lineage of young, male, disaffected "outsiders" looking over their shoulder to that most conflicted, irascible, funny, and, ultimately, sensitive of forebears, Holden Caulfield.

As I think of Holden now, I wonder why anyone would feel a need to reduce him to a psychiatric label. What could that possibly tell us about him that the 220 pages of unfiltered access to his every vibrating thought, feeling and behaviour hasn't already told us?

As Foulkes (2021) concludes: "Maybe Holden Caulfield does have a mental disorder. He is certainly troubled and needs support. But it takes a whole book – as it should – for us to even begin to understand him." (p.77).

Another way of expressing this is that it takes his *story* to understand him. Holden Caulfield, we are led to believe through one or two of his more oblique references, is narrating from within a psychiatric institution. It would have been around 1950, so it's no surprise that he mentions a "psychoanalyst guy" who keeps asking him questions. Psychiatry at this time – especially in the United States – was still enamoured of psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud. Holden Caulfield would have been asked a great deal about his life story; his parents and "lousy childhood" and "all that David Copperfield kind of crap", as he caustically dismisses it (Salinger 1951).

We might speculate on what a psychoanalyst would have written in Holden Caulfield's notes. It's safe to assume that he wouldn't have ascribed his patient's behaviour to any of the disorders that readers like to diagnose him with today. The reason: they didn't exist yet. The first edition of the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, often abbreviated to DSM and commonly – if increasingly with a tone of sarcasm – referred to as "psychiatry's bible", wasn't published until 1952.

The DSM was an attempt by the *American Psychiatric Association* to create a comprehensive guidebook for mental disorders – to improve the discipline's woeful reputation for diagnostic reliability. Psychiatrists at this time could seldom agree on what was wrong with their patients (Aboraya et al. 2006). It's widely acknowledged that this first attempt failed in its objectives, as did the DSM-II, published in 1968. In both editions, the descriptions of each mental disorder were rather vague and brief, rendering them of little practical value to clinicians. Notwithstanding that, they serve as valuable artefacts, offering a glimpse into prevailing attitudes about mental illness at the time. The disorders, as listed in the first DSM, were considered to be reactions to events occurring in an individual's environment. The same thinking informed DSM-II, where "depressive neuroses", to take a commonly cited example, is described as "an excessive reaction of depression due to an internal conflict or to an identifiable event such as the loss of a love object or cherished possession." (American Psychiatric Association 1968: 40).

Putting aside that this description lacks scientific validity, there is, we might agree, something pleasingly literary about it.

Internal conflicts! The identifiable event! Loss of love objects and cherished possessions! It's a miniature novel in itself!

Four decades later, when Matthew Homes is first detained in a psychiatric ward in *The Shock of the Fall*, the theoretical landscape is utterly transformed. Moreover, the language of psychiatry has been severed from the language of storytelling.

We can pinpoint this change to the publication of the DSM-III in 1980. That

was the moment psychiatry officially reinvented itself as a biomedical discipline.

Gone was "depressive neuroses" with its implied narrative backstory. Instead, "major depression" had a definition that ran to several pages replete with checklists of discrete symptoms, including dysphoric mood, insomnia, loss of appetite, suicidality, etc. (American Psychiatric Association 1980).

Crucially, the emphasis had shifted away from the "identifiable event".

The implication inherent to this new model of psychiatry was that what we call mental illness begins and ends in the brain (Filer 2019). That was especially deemed to be true for the most severe psychotic disorders.

I have written elsewhere about the social and political forces behind these changes – some laudable, others deeply problematic. And I've added my voice to criticisms of the DSM and the increased medicalisation of distress. Detailed checklists may have the *veneer* of science, but to quote the former director of the National Institute for Mental Health, Dr Steven Hyman, the DSM is "an absolute scientific nightmare" (Belluck and Carey 2013). It's beyond the scope of this essay to revisit those arguments. The reason I'm highlighting psychiatry's wholesale shift to the biomedical model is to present a picture of the mental health landscape when *The Shock of the Fall* is set (the novel covers a period from the early 1990s to 2010). And to remind myself of the environment that I was still working in when I began to write it.

In acute psychiatric wards at this time, there was little attention given to the role that social and environmental factors might have in causing or sustaining serious mental illness, a line of inquiry that leading researchers had virtually abandoned through the 1980s and 90s (Murray 2017). That is now gradually being addressed by some NHS services, and in recent years there has been a move towards a more trauma-informed approach, emphasising social factors.

That being said, most people using psychiatric services are still not asked about potentially traumatic events from childhood such as abuse and neglect, and men diagnosed with psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia, are the least likely to be asked (Read et al. 2018). This is all the more problematic given the strong correlation between traumatic early life experiences and serious mental illness: one review by Read et al. (2008) found that between half and three-quarters of psychiatric inpatients had suffered some form of abuse as children.

Other social risk factors, such as people's experiences of poverty, isolation, migration, racism and bullying, were similarly ignored by leading schizophrenia researchers – and, by extension, clinicians – for decades (Murray 2017). And they were virtually never discussed when I first started working in hospitals.

It is also the case that modern psychiatry is considerably more interested in the presence or absence of psychotic symptoms than in their *content*. That is especially true where "delusions" are concerned, often seen as the archetypal characteristic of madness. It's a source of regret for some in the profession. "Delusions, like all thoughts produced by the mind, have meaning," writes Joel Gold, Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry. "Yet psychiatry today is not inclined to this view, has no interest in why different brains choose different delusions, and is simply interested in eradicating the psychotic symptom" (Gold and Gold 2014: 228).

Delusional beliefs, almost by definition, are a story.

They will typically revolve around conspiracies, subterfuge and perilously high stakes.

The first known case study of a delusional patient describes James Tilly Matthews (1770 - 1815), a financially ruined tea merchant who believed himself at the centre of a terrifying conspiracy involving the Prime Minister

of England, the Duke of York, the king of Prussia and a supporting cast of fully-realized imaginary villains with impressively creative names: Bill the King, Sir Archy, the Glove Woman and Jack the Schoolmaster (Haslam 1810).

Reviewing this case, Gottschall (2013) observes that James Tilly Matthews' delusional creations had "all the quirks and tics that turn flat characters round". He goes on: "When Matthews was about thirty years old his brain decided, without his permission, to create an intricate fiction, and Matthews spent the rest of his life living inside." (p.91).

So we might begin to see that madness and stories are inextricably linked. There is usually a story, a comprehensible narrative – with its biological, psychological and social subplots – that can help make sense of why a person becomes mentally unwell. And for people who lose touch with reality and become psychotic, their distress often literally expresses itself *as a story*.

And yet, patient stories (at least, of the more exploratory variety for the most poorly people) were out of fashion and favour by the time Matthew Homes was admitted for his first stretch on a psychiatric ward – which coincided with my time working on one as a nurse.

I suppose, in a sense, that is how we "met".

It was around 2004, the final year of my mental health nursing degree, and I was on clinical placement. The ward was challenging to say the least – lots of extremely unwell people, not nearly enough staff or resources.

As a student, I was technically supernumerary, but it never felt that way, and besides, if I was there, I wanted to be fully involved.

However, there was one nursing intervention that trainees were never allowed to participate in, for which I was grateful. Control and Restraint:

physically holding people down and medicating them against their will. There had been a few instances recently. I'd observed them from the sidelines, feeling weird and conflicted. That must have been on my mind as I walked home from a late shift. Whatever the weather, I always preferred to walk home – a bit of quiet time to process what I'd learned and decompress.

So I'm walking home, knackered. It's dark and cold. I'm leaning into the wind, hands pushed deep into my pockets. When from nowhere, a couple of sentences are circling in my head. Well, no, that's not strictly true. They're not exactly *inside* my head. I'm muttering them out loud beneath my breath.

"I had no intention of putting up a fight, but these guys weren't to know that. And nobody was taking any chances."

That's what I was saying.

Over and over.

"I had no intention of putting up a fight, but these guys weren't to know that. And nobody was taking any chances."

I didn't know that I had started writing my novel yet. But when I got home, I turned on my computer and quickly typed the sentences out. I then wrote, rewrote and tweaked a scene depicting a Control and Restraint incident. I wrote this from the patient's perspective, the person who was being restrained. I have never been restrained and drugged against my will, so I don't know how close I got to capturing that sensation, but clearly, some part of me wanted to explore what it might feel like – to imaginatively *inhabit* the experience.

I drew on my limited experience as a student nurse to get the setting right, the terminology spoken in hushed tones by the nurses, an incongruous calm.

I spent an hour or so writing and carefully editing that scene.

Then I deleted it.

I do a lot of my writing with the delete key. The scene never made it into *The Shock of the Fall*. And yet, by the time I switched off my computer, I could see him. I gave him his name straight away.

Matthew Homes, nineteen years old, a chipped front tooth, a tentative diagnosis of schizophrenia – and a dead brother who refuses to stay dead.

It was a start.

There would be no guessing game required for readers wishing to diagnose my protagonist. It may be symptomatic of the time, or my medical outlook as a trainee nurse, that I had his diagnosis in mind from the very beginning. I knew that I would write a character exhibiting some of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours we frequently call "schizophrenia". And yet, just as Holden Caulfield seems to buck against the idea of a neatly presented "inciting event", I anticipated that Matthew Homes would reject the neatness of his label or any perception that this diagnosis might somehow be enough to contain his experience. In other words: I knew it would take me a whole book to understand him.

The Imaginary Trauma and Recovery

In an interview with me in 2018, the psychologist and author Dr Lucy Johnstone described *The Shock of the Fall* as being not dissimilar to a "formulation" for Matthew Homes. She was referring to a therapeutic intervention frequently employed by clinical psychologists. Written in a joint effort with the patient, a formulation is a carefully structured story. It summarises the patient's difficulties in a way that explains why they might be happening, making sense of them. And it will acknowledge their strengths and resources. Developing this kind of account is helpful for many patients, and some practitioners advocate for it to be used instead of diagnosis.

If we can briefly overlook the fact that novelists are responsible for creating their protagonist's suffering (lousy form

in a psychologist), then Lucy Johnstone's interpretation of my novel as "formulation" offers up a surprisingly robust framework through which to examine fiction. Consider, for instance, this description of formulation from the British Psychological Society (2019):

Working on a formulation is like two people putting together a jigsaw. The pieces of the "jigsaw" are pieces of information such as:

- How you feel at the moment

- What's going on in your life now

- When the difficulties or distress started

- Key experiences and relationships in your life

- What these experiences and relationships mean to you

I would argue that these are precisely the questions that virtually every novelist must ask when developing their characters and plot, and certainly authors of "psychological fiction", with its emphasis on the emotional and mental lives of its characters. That being said, *The Shock of the Fall* can be seen to mirror formulation in a more specific way that is not quite so ubiquitous. Namely, for Matthew Homes, the very process of reflecting on and sharing his story is integral to his recovery.

Novels tell stories of change. Storr (2019) asserts that this change will often involve a protagonist identifying and accepting their flaws. "Changing who we are," he writes, "means breaking down the very structure of our reality before rebuilding it in a new and improved form. This is not easy. It's painful and disturbing. We'll often fight with all we have to resist this kind of profound change. This is why we call those who manage it 'heroes'" (p.63.).

Matthew Homes and a hundred thousand other fictional protagonists represent this kind of hero. But again,

where *The Shock of the Fall* can be seen to mirror formulation more closely is that it isn't only the events detailed *within the story* that culminates in Matthew's profound change. Rather, the therapeutic process of him *telling the story* enables this. Simon McCarthy-Jones, associate professor of Clinical Psychology and Neuropsychology at Trinity College, Dublin, acknowledges this point in an analysis of the novel. "We bury our dead six feet down, but memories inflated with guilt rise irresistibly," he writes. "They bob against the surface of our mind. They will not be pushed down. They must be let go. This is what Matthew Homes [...] is trying to do by telling his story." (McCarthy-Jones 2018: 237). Or, as Matthew articulates it himself: "We place memories on pieces of paper to know they will always exist. But this story has never been a keepsake – it's finding a way to let go." (Filer 2013: 306-307).

Another way of thinking about this is that my protagonist is engaged in a "meaning-making" exercise. Johnstone (2022) observes, "The book is essentially concerned with showing that Matthew's experiences are meaningful in the context of his life – the opposite of the pseudo-medical diagnostic process of attributing them to 'schizophrenia'." So, it will be clear enough to see why *The Shock of the Fall* might be interpreted as a fictional equivalent of a psychological formulation, at least by a psychologist. The construction of stories to make sense of our lives is, according to a key text on formulation, a fundamental characteristic of human nature that's "essential for psychological survival, enabling us to arrive at a coherent sense of identity through providing a vehicle by which we can understand the past, explain the present and prepare for the future" (Corrie and Lane 2010: 106-107). In this respect, Johnstone and Dallos (2014) argue, "it is not surprising if we can find examples of what could loosely be called 'formulations' in all aspects of our daily lives [...] and anywhere that is concerned with exploring what it is to be human such as novels." (p.281).

Whatever way we choose to frame Matthew Homes's "meaning-making" in *The Shock of the Fall*, it is clear from the plot that he's processing "trauma".

I am far from alone in using fiction to consider the aftermath of trauma. Increasingly, we may be hard-pushed to find work that doesn't delve into the traumatic events of a protagonist's past to explain their current traits, behaviours, or beliefs. It's an observation lamented by the literary critic Parul Sehgal: "Dress this story up or down: on the page and on the screen, one plot— the trauma plot—has arrived to rule them all." (Sehgal 2021, para. 4). For Sehgal, trauma has become synonymous with "back-story", which she argues is a recent phenomenon in literature. "Jane Austen's characters are not pierced by sudden memories," Sehgal writes, "they do not work to fill in the gaps of partial, haunting recollections. In contrast, characters are now created in order to be dispatched into the past, to truffle for trauma." (para 13). She concludes, "The trauma plot flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority." (para 26).

All things considered, I don't think Parul Sehgal would like *The Shock of the Fall* very much. It principally concerns itself with the trauma Matthew endures following the childhood death of his brother, Simon Homes, for which he holds himself responsible. This "back-story" is woven through the present-day narrative. And as Matthew grows more disturbed during his adolescence, Simon reappears in various hallucinatory forms. "Grief haunts" and "trauma catches up with you", two notions dismissed as vague homilies by Sehgal (2021), would not be out of place in the novel's blurb. My defence draws upon many of the arguments I have already made in this essay. To wit: not examining back-story or trauma when writing about someone with schizophrenia would be *more* problematic by necessarily reducing their character to diagnosis.

That's not to say my approach hasn't

any potential pitfalls. Seeking to explain all of a character's psychological difficulties as the neatly born outcomes of traumatic experience is a problematic – and, frankly, dangerous – simplification. It was precisely that kind of reasoning, fuelled by misogyny, that led to the now-discredited notion of the "schizophrenogenic mother", a dominant theory from the late 1940s to the 1970s that blamed mothers for causing their children's schizophrenia by either not caring for them enough, or caring too much (McCarthy-Jones 2017). In writing about Matthew's complex and not entirely healthy relationship with his mother, Susan Homes, I felt a responsibility not to propagate such harmful myths while at the same time not shying away from that most vital ingredient of fiction – *conflict!*

The solution: spend time developing Susan's character, revealing her flaws in the context of her vulnerabilities. It may have been tempting to create a villain, but I wanted the friction and collisions within the Homes family to more closely reflect those I witnessed as a nurse. That is to say, the conflict is generated by good people who desperately want what is best for each other but are at a loss as to how to achieve it.

I believe that what we call mental illness often exists as much in the spaces *between* people as it does *within* people.

My defence for writing a "trauma plot" is not to imply that I wasn't guilty of other literary tropes. Matthew's psychotic hallucinations of his brother – a reanimation of the dead – borrows wholesale from the genre of horror, and the classic trope of a protagonist bringing a loved one back to life only to be met with something far darker (McCarthy-Jones 2018).

Portraying Simon Homes as a manifestation of grief/guilt/ schizophrenia proved one of my most demanding technical challenges, requiring a careful balancing of my desire to accurately portray psychotic

hallucinations with a need to drive forward the plot and create pathos. Generally, I felt most comfortable when writing Simon as an amorphous, partially hidden presence:

In my room, at night, if I stayed awake, filling the sink with cold water to splash my face, if the tap choked and spluttered before the water came, he was saying, I'm lonely. When I opened a bottle of Dr Pepper and the caramel bubbles fizzed over the rim, he was asking me to come and play. He could speak through an itch, the certainty of a sneeze, the after-taste of tablets, or the way sugar fell from a spoon.

He was everywhere, and in everything (Filer 2013: 196).

This quality of experience, poised somewhere between a hallucinatory perception and a delusional idea, felt to me a credible representation of psychosis based on my understanding from working in mental healthcare. Where I felt more conflicted, however, was in portraying Simon as a fully formed visual and aural presence, in the way that hallucinations – or ghosts! – are typically presented on screen. I limited this approach to one pivotal scene when Matthew is in hospital. Simon appears in his bedroom, crawling out from beneath the bed, and the two characters engage in an interaction that leads to Matthew absconding with a plan to take his own life (pp. 223 - 229). There was a neatness to this representation of Simon that was useful to me as a storyteller but was arguably less credible as a depiction of psychotic experience.

Here, we stumble upon a possible limitation of fiction. Or, at least, a limitation of my fiction. I have argued in this essay that "story" is integral to the causes and manifestations of psychosis. But that is not to say a typical story of madness will be nearly as neatly cohesive – or, indeed, *sensory* – as is desirable in a novel. My brief portrayal of Simon as a fully-formed auditory and visual hallucination arriving at the

perfect moment to advance my plot was a creative compromise. Or, to use the hackneyed phrase, poetic licence.

I was less prepared to impose neatness and narrative order in my depiction of Matthew's recovery. If, as Sehgal (2021) suggests, the "trauma plot" currently has a vice-like grip on popular literature, the same might equally be said of the "recovery narrative" in mental healthcare.

Mental health recovery narratives are first-person lived experience accounts that typically begin by describing elements of adversity or struggle and conclude with survival and self-defined success. These stories have proliferated in recent years as popular resources used by practitioners and anti-stigma campaigns and are widely accessible online. Recovery narratives are almost certainly inspiring and helpful for many people, but their impact has not been well-researched. Recent studies seeking to address this knowledge gap have uncovered problems of authenticity, where narratives have been excessively edited, as well as evidence that they can contribute to distress and feelings of inadequacy in recipients if they perceive the narrator has made a "better" recovery (Rennick-Egglestone et al. 2019).

As with most terminology in mental health, "recovery" is a contested term, meaning different things to different people (McCabe et al. 2018). For example, a strictly medical definition might focus on remission of "clinical symptoms". But some prefer to conceptualise recovery as a journey involving the attribution of meaning to difficult experiences over time rather than necessarily returning to an earlier mindset. I have heard former mental health patients speak passionately about this – arguing that something as profound as psychosis *should* change people.

The Shock of the Fall is, broadly, a coming-of-age story. As is typical of this genre, it

describes a "growth" or "positive change" character arc (Storr 2019). I knew that Matthew would need to experience some sense of recovery for the novel to feel complete. But I also wanted his recovery to reflect the nuance and complexity of the term as outlined above. For Matthew Homes, a medical recovery (again: remission of clinical symptoms) presents its own conflict:

My medication was changed yet again. More side effects. More sedation. In time, Simon grew more distant. I looked in the rain clouds, fallen leaves, sideways glances. I searched for him in the places I had come to expect him. In running tap water. In spilled salt. I listened in the spaces between words (Filer 2013: 276).

To clinically recover is for Matthew to accept a litany of chemical side effects and the further loss of his brother. As he explains:

This is my care plan: As a small boy I killed my own brother, and now I must kill him again. I'm given medicine to poison him, then questioned to make sure he's dead (Filer 2013: 280).

In no way are the specific details of Matthew Homes' psychotic experience intended to be representative of schizophrenia as a whole. They could not be. There are as many iterations of schizophrenia as people given the diagnosis. But in addressing Matthew's ambivalence about his recovery, I hope that I was able to touch upon a frequently overlooked truth: Too often, mental health professionals incorrectly assume shared priorities with the people they are treating. Recovery, we must remember, is not always without cost. It is also not a fixed state. In the final pages of *The Shock of the Fall*, we understand that Matthew remains on a journey but that his "formulation" – the act of telling his story, piecing together the jigsaw – has offered him hope.

The Imaginary Us and Them

Upon finding me in a pit of writerly despair, the novelist Fay Weldon once offered me these words of advice: "Novels are just essays to which you have attached names and characteristics to warring themes. Nothing special, just more work and a degree of chutzpa." (Weldon 2016).

I like this way of thinking.

So far in this essay, I have endeavoured to articulate some of the "warring themes" that I believe are crucial to consider when writing about mental illness and trauma in fiction.

But I have perhaps neglected a bigger question: *why fiction?*

I worked on a real ward with real people. The "medical memoir" is a wildly popular genre. Why bother with make-believe?

It isn't easy to fully recall this impulse to write fiction so many years later. However, I believe my motivation was at least partly grounded in something I've already briefly touched on. I wanted to imaginatively "inhabit" an experience of psychosis rather than "observe" it from the outside. This exercise was as much to do with trying to expand my own understanding as it was to illuminate the subject for potential readers. When writing an uncommissioned first novel, there is no way of knowing that it will ever be published, so it's a good idea, I think, for the process to be of some value in and of itself.

Novels invite empathy. Lynn Hunt, the Eugen Weber Professor of modern European history at the University of California, has written extensively around this observation and goes so far as to argue that novels played a key role in the emergence of the concept of human rights in the 18th Century. The novel helped to popularise the view that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner psychic processes (Hunt cited in Stanford 2002). Hunt

describes the empathy that can be awoken by reading a novel. However, I would add that this also occurs when writing one – and perhaps with greater intensity when writing in the *first person*. I have commented elsewhere that "the creative act of imagining the life of Mathew Homes felt akin to an extended and deeply meditative exercise in empathy" (Filer 2020: 11). My writing process often felt like a kind of role-play, a sensation doubtless sustained by a central conceit that Matthew is sitting at a computer and physically typing out his story. I watched my fingers moving across my keyboard and saw his fingers, his bitten nails and tobacco-stained knuckles. I got to know my protagonist by spending half of my waking life being him.

I am not alone in using the imaginary first person to wrestle with complex questions about the experience of psychosis and to reflect on aspects of healthcare practice. A recent example is found in *Connections: The New Science of Emotion* by Karl Deisseroth, a professor of Bioengineering and of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences. This book is not a novel. It sits somewhere between a memoir and a collection of narrative essays. Still, it employs fiction, telling stories from the imagined point of view of patients experiencing psychosis. Deisseroth (2021) explains:

Where another person's inner depths – their thoughts or feelings or memories – are depicted in this way the text reflects neither science nor medicine, but only a reaching out of my own imagination, with care and respect and humility, to create a conversation with voices I have never heard, but only sensed in echoes. The challenge of trying to perceive, and experience, unconventional realities from the patient's perspective is the heart of psychiatry, working through the distortions of both observer and observed (p.4).

The first-person narrative of *The Shock of*

the Fall seemed the ideal creative form through which to try to deconstruct this binary notion of "observer" and "observed" – or to use the terms favoured by many mental health campaigners: "us" and "them".

As I reflect on this now, however, it occurs to me that I may have been the primary beneficiary of the process.

As the author, I was able to inhabit my protagonist's experience (to try on the imaginary "I" through an immersive acting exercise), but where does that leave the reader? Consider this paragraph from page 5:

I'll tell you what happened because it will be a good way to introduce my brother. His name's Simon. I think you're going to like him. I really do. But in a couple of pages he'll be dead. And he was never the same after that (Filer 2013).

We clearly see the use of the first person, but I am also employing a second-person address: "I'll tell *you* what happened … I think *you're* going to like him". Does this not implicitly force the reader into the position of "observer" and so sustain the us/them dichotomy?

Well, yes and no.

As Brain (2019) observes: "What is crucial about second person narrative is that it establishes a relationship between the speaking 'I' and the 'you' who is being addressed. At the same time, it cements a bond between these 'I' and 'you' persona and the reader, who is made to occupy both of these positions at once. That is to say, the reader is simultaneously located as the person speaking and the person spoken to." (p.84). Brain makes this observation in the context of the works of Sylvia Plath, which brings us to *The Bell Jar*. If, as I have suggested, Matthew Homes is a literary descendent of Holden Caulfield, then he also shares a lineage with Holden's iconic contemporary, Esther Greenwood. Set in the summer of 1953, Sylvia Plath's roman à clef protagonist is an embodiment of internal conflict and

the novel devotes far more of its narrative to depicting the psychiatric landscape than *The Catcher in the Rye* attempts. Esther describes in detail her time in hospital and the treatments she receives. It is among the first notable works of fiction that deal explicitly with mental illness in the post-DSM era. It also skilfully deploys an "intermittent, flexible second person" to "establish the reader's close relationship with the speaking 'I', and their shared positioning" (Brain 2019: 91.). Esther Greenwood shifts between the first and second person throughout the narrative, challenging the reader to associate themselves directly with some of her most distressing thoughts and preoccupations. For example, in this passage where Esther is wrestling with feelings of suicidality: "The trouble about jumping was that if you didn't pick the right number of storeys, you might still be alive when you hit bottom. I thought seven storeys must be a safe distance." (Plath 2019 edition: 131). Here, Esther co-opts the reader for the moment of impact. There is no escape. We're to countenance with her the agony of hitting the ground alive.

Of course, it can be easy to read more into a sentence than the author intended. As Brain (2019) acknowledges, the second person direct address in *The Bell Jar* may be principally born of the author's desire to give the effect of informal, spoken language. This interpretation may be doubly true of *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which the conversational style even evokes a kind of "turn taking", as though the narrator and reader are sharing the same physical space and time. Consider, for instance, these lines from its opening paragraph as Holden Caulfield describes his parents: "They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're *nice* and all – I'm not saying that – but they're also touchy as hell" (Salinger 1951).

Myers (1982) notes: "The 'I'm not saying that' seems to mean 'I'm not saying what you (the reader) are thinking or saying – that is, that my parents may not be nice.' Thus, the narrator suggests that the

reader is a participant who has taken a kind of half-turn paraphrasing the narrator's comments in some way." (p.20).

It is this intimate, participatory connection with the reader that I wanted to create in *The Shock of the Fall*. My efforts to achieve this can be seen in "Make Yourself at Home" (pages 101 - 177). This chapter, which is the longest in the novel, captures Matthew Homes having a mental breakdown in real-time while he ostensibly recounts a previous mental breakdown. At the start of the chapter, we learn that he has disengaged from mental health services and retreated to his home. "I didn't tell you where I live yet," he begins. "It probably doesn't matter, but I'll tell you now, because then you can have some pictures in your mind as you read.

Reading is a bit like hallucinating.

Hallucinate this:

An ash grey sky over a block of council flats, painted jaundice yellow. I'll buzz you up. It's the sixth floor, No. 607. Come in. The narrow, dim-lit hall is cluttered with pairs of old trainers, empty Coke and Dr Pepper bottles, takeaway menus, and free newspapers.

To your left is the kitchen, sorry about the mess. The kettle's billowing steam onto the peeling lime green wallpaper. There is an ashtray by the window, and if you open those blinds you can spy on half of Bristol.

It can spy on you too (Filer 2013: 101).

In this passage, I'm attempting to locate the "I" and "you" in a shared physical and psychological space, inviting the reader to participate in Matthew's creeping paranoia.

The reader will briefly glimpse something untoward in the corner of the room, which Matthew later refers back to in a more challenging tone:

You saw it in the corner, and stretching across the far wall. Were you too polite to say anything, to ask any questions? The sprawling tubes and dirt-encrusted jars.

Strange, isn't it? (Filer 2013: 149).

Here, the distance between the narrator and the reader is re-established. It's a push-pull dynamic.

Later, the reader may be surprised to discover how elusive Matthew remains. "You don't think I'm really called Matthew Homes, do you? You don't think I'd just give away my whole life to a stranger?" (Filer 2013: 274).

This too echoes *The Catcher in the Rye,* where the reader is initially positioned as "a kind of interrogating enemy who will not prevail against the narrator and is kept at a distance from him." (Brain 2019: 91). That being said, in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar,* the second-person "you" is most often simply a colloquial stand-in for "one", achieving the conversational style that their authors epitomised. From the above extracts of *The Shock of the Fall*, it will be apparent that although I sought to emulate this style, my imaginary "you" is seldom a substitute for "one".

Matthew Homes (or whatever his real name is) isn't talking to an abstract, impersonal pronoun. He's talking to, well… *you!*

And yet, you remain out of reach to him. He can't be sure who you've met, what you know, whether you truly understand him. Charon (2006) has observed how healthcare workers and patients can seem to each other like alien planets, "aware of one another's trajectories only by traces of stray light and strange matter." (p xii). Was I unconsciously recreating this dynamic between my troubled protagonist and his imagined reader?

It's possible. In any case, we have come full circle. Though Matthew differentiates himself and the reader, they can still – as we have considered –

occupy both positions. Charon (2006) cites Georges Poulet's claim that "the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside." (p.108).

In his last direct address, Matthew Homes quietly acknowledges that a shared understanding with the reader has been achieved. "You know what I'm like," he concludes, making a fleeting reference to a vaguely suspicious thought he's just entertained, requiring no further explanation (Filer 2013: 306). Ultimately, Matthew Homes feels *seen* by the reader. He feels understood by his ever-present confidant, with whom he has shared many of his most intimate vulnerabilities. Naturally, I hope readers of the novel – especially those with personal experiences that reflect Matthew's – will share this feeling of being seen and understood.

Where I have achieved this, my creative choices outlined in this essay, including my decision to write a first-person narrator who addresses the reader directly, is likely to have played a part.

As I draw this essay to a close, it feels important to acknowledge that my efforts to imaginatively inhabit the experience of my psychotic protagonist in *The Shock of the Fall* were precisely that: *imaginary*.

I am fortunate that I have not experienced the sustained intensity of distressing thoughts and feelings that might lead to a diagnosis of schizophrenia. At the same time, I believe that the boundaries between what we might call "healthy" and "unhealthy" mindsets are highly porous; there is a psychological fragility to everyone, and many of us will have at least glimpsed the edges of madness at dark moments in our lives, even if we have never received any clinical diagnosis or required specialist care (Filer 2020).

There is an irony to the fact that my writing about mental health has, on occasion, taken its toll on mine. I'll quote Flannery O'Connor: "Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I'm always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system." (O'Connor, 1970).

That being said, I believe the endeavour is wholly worthwhile. In its myriad forms, madness cannot be understood if examined only through a single lens. Research from health and science-based disciplines is essential. So, too, is input from the arts, uniquely placed to explore personal dimensions – and to bring us to a greater emotional understanding. Fiction is an ideal medium to honour the complexity of mental illness by deconstructing arbitrary notions of the "observer" and "observed". It invites the reader to explore the inner psychic processes of another, to exist for a while as more than one person – and to emerge, finally, changed.

Note: this essay is adapted from the author's 2023 PhD exegesis, which can be found in the reference list.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Nathan Filer is an award-winning author of fiction and nonfiction. His works are published in thirty languages. He is a recipient of the Big Anxiety Prize, awarded in association with the University of New South Wales for "a creative thinker advancing the discussion of mental health". He holds an honorary doctorate from Abertay University, conferred in recognition of his role in raising awareness of mental health issues through literature. He is a Reader in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, where he co-directs the Research Centre for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Creativity.

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Creative Pause: A collaborative, autoethnographic research project exploring how storytelling menopause experiences might support wellbeing

Moriarty et al

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Abstract

This article reports on Creative Pause: a pilot research project, funded by Research England that explored creative responses to lived experiences of menopause and measured the effects on wellbeing. Menopause is a major part of the life course, yet its wellbeing implications remain poorly understood and this leads to negative impacts on lives. Despite recent media attention, there is a lack of understanding of lived experience and a lack of visible stories about menopause in literary texts and the arts. With creative workshops in poetry, dance, drawing and other embodied writing techniques, the project identified that workshops can support the wellbeing of people navigating this obscured stage in the life course.

This collaborative, autoethnographic article co-produced by workshop participants (equally valued as researchers) and the research team uses dialogue, creative and reflective writing to explore the lived experience of menopause. It will show how creativity, specifically storytelling through writing, image, speaking and listening, or movement, can help not only navigate this transitional life stage but also raise awareness and consequently understanding. We argue that supporting people to tell and share stories that draw on lived experiences of the menopause can support them to navigate this liminal space.

Keywords: menopause, creative workshops, storytelling, collaborative autoethnography, conversation

Introduction

Menopause currently affects the lives of millions of women globally and will be an issue of increasing concern as the population ages during the next few decades. Menopause is a complex time in a woman's life, leading to both physical and emotional challenges (de Salis et al 2018) yet its wellbeing implications remain poorly understood and this leads to negative impacts on how people experience menopause. There is a limited understanding of lived experience and a lack of visible stories about menopause in literary texts and the arts (Dillaway and Wershler 2021; Manguso 2019; King 2013). Consequently, menopause as a stage in the life course remains obscured

and this can be alienating to those experiencing its various stages. This article reports on a qualitative research project, Creative Pause, that identified how storytelling, specifically collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2013), can create a moment of pause and have beneficial impacts on health and wellbeing. We argue that supporting women to tell and share stories that draw on lived experiences of the menopause can support them to navigate this liminal space and transitional time of uncertainty.

Dillaway (2020: 253), says that while there is "existing clinical and attitudinal research on reproductive aging, we often forget to focus on the phenomenological experience of perimenopause and menopause—that is, *the lived, embodied, day-to-day experience of this reproductive and life course transition*." Menopause is a normal life transition which is associated with symptoms which may vary in severity from minor to more troublesome and be experienced over long or short time periods.

Menopause is defined as not having had a period for at least 12 months and according to NICE medical guidelines, perimenopause can be defined if the patient has any "new onset vasomotor symptoms and any changes in their menstrual cycle" (NICE 2015: 8). Symptoms are many and varied and can include mood changes, memory problems, fatigue, hot flushes, vaginal dryness, weight gain, hair growth, changes in libido, insomnia. Menopause is a milestone which only makes sense in retrospect and as this transition lasts for years and sometimes decades, symptoms change over time and can be filled with uncertainty.

Dillaway (2020: 253) goes on to say that in fact "acknowledging and owning this uncertainty could be a new and different way of approaching and thriving during this reproductive transition."

The language surrounding this time in life also differs in the medical world from the everyday experience, which is often hidden or shrouded in silence.

Workshops such as the ones developed for the Creative Pause pilot project use storytelling in its many forms to give voice, language and embodied understanding to the many different menopausal experiences and so support wellbeing, helping to navigate an uncertain time.

Research Context

The starting point for the Creative Pause Project came from an awareness that cultural constructions of the menopause raise and shape debates about what it means to be embodied, the aging process and how we conceptualise the limits of human subjectivity (Komesaroff et al 1997). It remains important to continue to destabilise the 'deficiency disease' model of the menopause in order to develop inclusive and broader health and social support, for those who require it and to develop empowering, life affirming, materially and context sensitive representations and narratives.

There are tensions however, mainly not to reproduce the polarised discourses / representations that already characterise women's ageing: namely those that reduce women to frail, unproductive, burdensome and readily-invisibilised bodies on one hand—on the other, the "relentless buoyancy" (Segal 2013: 179) of privileged bodies, imagined as freed from the material realities of the ageing body; those whom Stephen Katz (2005: 188) defines as those who grow old without ageing.

This is important for several reasons: The first is that there is already a strong suggestion that current medical models may be preventing women from seeking help or guidance should they require it: the British Menopause Society's Ipsos MORI survey in 2016 found that only half of women experiencing symptoms, or had experienced them, consulted a healthcare professional. This may well suggest that women did not regard that their experiences necessitated help. Indeed, the title of the report's press report 'are women suffering in silence?' foreclosures women's approach to the 'change' as a natural aspect of life: there

are then, different possible readings to the report's claim that 'among those who have not consulted a healthcare professional for their menopause symptoms, more than a third (35%) believe it is something they should have to put up with'. However, the survey indicated 42% of the sample found their experiences 'worse or much worse than expected' with half of women surveyed saying their menopause symptoms have affected their home life, their social life (36%), and work life (36%) (The British Menopause Society 2016). It is important then, not to marginalise women's material realities of the menopause.

It is important too, not to simply 'pitch' the multiple perspectives derived from women's experiences against a medical knowledge that is perceived to be, or represented as, monolithic. Murtagh and Hepworth are amongst those who remind us that medicine is not a "static field in its construction of the menopause" (2005) not least because of a concern to deal with women's critiques and bring women into the decision-making process.

Although the deficiency model is hegemonic without and outside of medicine, there is still considerable uncertainty and hesitation in how healthcare practitioners apply and negotiate 'deficiency' understanding to women, particularly around advice on HRT take up (Niland and Lyons 2003) which is due to be updated in 2024. Nor should we think of menopause multiplicities as mutually exclusive: Ballard et al (2001: 397) research is clear that their participants regarded the menopause as a 'medical event' which they understood as happening within the context of their lives.

Similarly, Lyons and Griffin's (2003) comparison of menopause self-help texts found that 'traditional medical' texts and those that were 'more 'woman-centred', shared areas of similarity in the ways the menopause was represented as subject to women's 'management'. At the heart of this project was (and still is) a desire to respond to the lack of existing stories and narratives about lived experiences

with menopause and for this response to be diverse and inclusive, identifying existing gaps in the literature in terms of stories not yet visible in research on menopausal life and to work to identify ways to ethically and sensitively address those gaps.

Research Methods

Storytelling

Storytelling can help us make sense of the chaotic and confusing and has always been vital to qualitative research (Gilbert 2002). Bringing elements of experience, thought, and feeling together on one page or text, can help researchers identify a central theme or themes (Polkinghorne 1995) that can give clarity to the previously unclear or obscured, and this has obvious benefits for both readers and writers of such texts. Working in this way, storytelling can connect people via shared experiences whilst also maintaining respect and valuing individual stories and experiences that might not have previously been identified in research.

In the Creative Pause project, we offered a range of methods of storytelling (autobiography, poetry, prose, dance), hoping that people would identify a mode of telling their story that felt accessible to them without privileging text which can often alienate participants, especially if they are being asked to write in a language which is not their first. A focus of the project was to include and value a diverse range of styles and stories that would make the workshops accessible and appealing to as many people as possible.

Plummer (1994) argues that people tell stories, which are not only personal, but which also form part of larger cultural, and historical narratives. Narrative puts the personal and the social in the same space; in an overlapping, intricate relationship (Speedy 2007). This is highly relevant here as there are fewer stories about older women (Sharratt 2021) – especially autobiographical accounts but the Creative Pause project aimed to use storytelling to address gaps

in research in relation to experiences with menopause which typically – but by no means only – affects women over 50.

Stories have the ability to provide insights into contextual circumstances most people may not have experienced first-hand (Mattingly and Garro 2001) and research exploring human stories is often considered as the 'flip-side' of established discourses (Bamberg 2004), able to challenge dominant societal narratives and 'carry rhetorical weight' (Mattingly and Garro 2001: 5) making it highly appropriate for feminist qualitative research seeking to challenge patriarchy and raise awareness about women's experiences.

In Laugh of the Medusa, Cixous suggests that: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing...Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement." (Cixous 1976: 875). The writings that were developed in the workshops were to enable the participants to rethink and reimagine their own stories, to help them gain perspective and discover meaning (Kvale 1996). Rather than coding and explaining these stories that are shared, the project seeks instead to bring the conversations to value the stories and mix of writing styles and to acknowledge the individual voices within the research instead of simply trying to code and/or report what happened (Dundar Jnr and Rodriguez 2003).

Tedlock (2000) argues that "women's ethnographic and autobiographical intentions are often powered by the motive to convince readers of the author's self-worth, to clarify and authenticate their self-images" (Tedlock 2000: 468) and identifies this as a feminist issue. The authors suggest that storying oneself can offer the necessary detachment that is needed when seeking a viewpoint from which to examine one's lived experiences (Moriarty 2017). This distance can provide a space for reflection that can trigger meaning-

making and offer powerful insight into one's own identity. This process can offer people a method for authenticating self-image and recovering feelings of self-worth, allowing for a more expansive and liberated self that is able to critique and also resist oppressive cultures that are synonymous with traditional academic work (Moriarty 2019).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that values personal storytelling and autobiographical insights gathered through "research, writing, story…[which] often seeks to value creative and evocative storytelling in academic research including stories about problematic life events and trauma" (Moriarty 2013). As Carolyn Ellis says in her methodological novel, *The Ethnographic I*, autoethnography is "research, writing, story [graphy], and method that connect the autobiographical [auto] and personal to the cultural, social and political [ethno]" (Ellis 2004: xix). The forms used in autoethnography can include emotion, introspection, dialogue, story, scenes and techniques borrowed from literary writing. In this way, autoethnography disrupts traditional academic writing traditions.

In the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013: 32) identify five purposes for autoethnographic work:

1. disrupting norms or research practice and representation

2. working from insider knowledge

3. manoeuvring through pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty

4. breaking silence/(re)claiming voice

5. making work accessible.

The process of telling and sharing stories can be transformational and empowering, allowing for a more

expansive and liberated self (Marr and Moriarty 2021). Autoethnography can and must provide spaces for flourishing rather than trapping people in potentially reductive narratives and embrace the multi-faceted identities we all have rather than repressing people in just one. And once others read these stories, they have time to think, reflect, act. In this way, the "weaving of the visual, poetic, and prose narratives is a creative, intuitive, and imaginative process that evolved through the autoethnographic act….Allowing the body to speak in her own terms and moving beyond the abyss." (Metta 2010: 499)

Collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al 2013: 25) allows for:

1. Collective exploration of researcher subjectivity

2. Power-sharing among research-participants

3. Efficiency and enrichment in the research process

4. Deeper learning about self and other

5. Community building.

And these are the principles that guided the Creative Pause Project, reassuring the research team that collaborative autoethnography was a suitable approach, able to resist critique of autoethnography that it is inward facing and narcisstic (Delamont 2007). Instead, this approach seeks to encourage a diverse range of voices and personal stories and value them as equal to conventional academic research (Moriarty 2019).

About the Creative Pause Project

The Creative Workshops

All workshops were hosted at the Phoenix Art Space in Brighton. The gallery has a history of community engagement and a reputation as a champion of diversity and it was identified as an appropriate venue for

events bringing community partners and researchers together. The combined expertise of the workshop facilitators, who were recruited for their experience of running workshops with vulnerable groups and their own practice exploring menopause, and the experience of the project leader meant that the project built on existing expertise.

This increased the viability of the project and feedback (via feedback forms issued at the end of each of the four workshops) was unanimously positive. The workshop programme consisted of:

1. Book of spells—life writing and spells to reclaim narratives around ageing.

2. Poetry—found poetry using medical menopause texts.

3. Writing as activism and rest.

4. Drawing and movement.

Because of the funding, the workshops were free to all.

Safety in the workshops

At the start of the project, it was agreed that certain ways of working were essential to make the participants and facilitators feel safe in the workshops. These were based on earlier work in the field (Moriarty and Parks, 2022b) and included:

1. No costs attached to any of the workshops, free to join and all materials resourced by the project.

2. No-one obliged to share their stories in the workshops or after for project dissemination, just taking part was absolutely fine.

3. Workshops booked via the project research assistant and consent had to be given before people could join the workshops.

4. Safety brief at the start of every session.

5. The project leader attended every

Participant	Wellbeing score before first workshop	Wellbeing score after last workshop	No. of workshops attended
1	39	47	4
2	37	41	2
3	45	52	4
4	27	28	4
5	40	55	3
6	58	57	3
7	45	48	1

Wellbeing assessment

workshop to check-in with workshop facilitators, discuss any issues, share concerns and offer support.

6. No-one could watch or listen into the workshops unless actively taking part.

Despite the collaborative discussions and clear commitment to ethical practice from all of the writers and artists, the workshops failed to recruit many people and this was a potential barrier that has informed our future thinking and plans.

In a future funding bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, we have decided not to host public workshops but to instead identify an international collective of artists, academics, community partners and activists who will be paid for their time on the project, including devising stories about experiences with menopause that will be used to create a digital archive of critical and creative work about this obscured stage of the life course.

Wellbeing assessment

A total of seven participants attended at least one workshop of the four offered.

They completed the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al 2007) before participating in the first workshop, reflecting on their wellbeing during the preceding two weeks. They then completed the scale again after the last workshop, reflecting on their wellbeing during the preceding two weeks which included the workshops themselves. This allowed for an assessment of the impact of the workshops on their wellbeing (see table above).

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the wellbeing of participants before they participated in the first workshop and following the last workshop. There was a significant difference between wellbeing before the first workshop ($\bar{x}$ = 41.74, SD = 9.45) and wellbeing after the final workshop ($\bar{x}$ =46.86, SD = 9,89), t(6) = -2.632, p < 0.05. Despite the low sample size, these results suggest that participating in the workshops had a beneficial impact on wellbeing as measured by the WEMWBS.

Conversation and Creative Work

The next part of this article presents dialogue about and creative work from the initial project at Phoenix Art Space.

We have not attempted to code or deconstruct what emerged as working in this way, we have been able to include the words and writings of two of the workshop participants. Instead of researching about others in our research, we are researching with them and argue that this offers a way of being more inclusive in academic research.

The Conversation as Collaborative Autoethnography

Following the creative workshops, we invited participants (as co-researchers) to share their creative work and to take part in a recorded reflective conversation about menopause and the Creative Pause project. This, it was explained, would then become part of an article for publication. The workshop participants then became co-researchers and consequently co-authors as they were consulted at every stage in the writing up process. The workshops were free to take part in, and then any further optional research time was paid for. This way of working aligns with the three dimensions that Wenger identifies as being synonymous with a community of practice:

• What it is about—its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members

• How it functions—the relationships of mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity

• What capability it has produced—the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. (Wenger 1998: 2).

We suggest that Creative Pause:

• Is about menopause, a condition that we were all experiencing or had experienced;

• Functions by valuing each of the people taking part as researchers whose stories make a valuable contribution to our understanding of menopause and

identifying stories of lived experience as research;

• Can help us to create resources – this article and a future funding bid – that centres storytelling about lived experience of menopause as intrinsic to research into this complex time.

We devised and shared the questions below before the recorded online conversation, while acknowledging the need for and allowing space for the dialogue to unfold naturally. We also applied to the University of Brighton's ethics committee to ensure that informed consent was gained and that this way of working met the university's criteria for ethical research.

The questions we began with were:

1. Do you think experiences of menopause are currently represented in our culture? If so, how and what do you think about these representations?

2. Which stories are currently missing or underrepresented in research about menopause? Do you feel that your experience is seen/heard?

3. What was your expectation for the workshop? Why did you sign up?

4. What happened in the workshops – what inspired, what was hard? What would you like to have seen/seen more of?

5. What did you produce and how do you feel about it?

6. Would you be happy for your work to be part of our dissemination and if so, how? (we are using collaborative autoethnography and happy to say more!)

7. How might this project be used to raise awareness and understanding about menopause as a stage in the life course that is currently still obscured?

8. What else would you like to add?

The conversation was written up in a

way that makes sense to a reader but also stays close to the live conversation. In this way, our experience of this project has provided us with a living archive (Kitch 2018) that we will now share as a dialogue, situating ourselves and our experiences of the project in order to disseminate our methods.

J: Hi, I'm Jess. This work grew out of conversations and an exchange of stories. As I went into perimenopause, I felt as if there was an absence of stories and experiences. Thank you both for taking part in the pilot project. The contributions were generous, creative, personal and important. Let's introduce ourselves.

M: I'm Mel and I'm a writer, researcher and I facilitate creative writing workshops. I've been working with Jess on storytelling research projects with topics such as motherhood, gender-based violence and now menopause.

F: I was drawn to this project because I am interested in creative expression, rather than the need to talk about menopause. But it's been interesting to notice the topics that have turned up in conversations I've had with friends subsequently.

T: I am a lecturer in midwifery and I selfishly saw it as a time for me to think about some of the things that were going on for me, but that nobody else I know is interested in. It was about carving a bit of time and space in an otherwise overloaded life to think about myself.

J: Let's crack on with the first question: Do you think experiences of menopause are currently represented in our culture? If so, how and what do you think of these representations?

F: The short answer is no. For example, in soap operas everything has been dealt with: incest, dementia, mental health, gender identity, but nobody mentions menopause. Nobody mentions it in the workplace either.

T: There have been more recent mentions, but the discussion is

reductionist and centred around this idea that menopause is bad and that everyone should be on HRT to continue being capitalist good little worker bees. It's not seen as a positive rite of passage, but as a negative biomedical, physical problem that we deal with by taking medication. My experiences have been much more emotional and psychological than physical and I don't think that's explored.

M: I've been finding that there is another narrative in the alternative health world, that menopause is an empowering time but this negates the psychological and societal difficulties that people go through.

T: And it's not really for me to say, being a middle class, white woman, but the language feels as if it has been co-opted by us again. You don't feel as if there are a multiplicity of voices and experiences, whether it's class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or faith.

F: I look at my daughters and notice that their conversations about periods are better than the conversations I had in my generation, so I'm hoping that this will carry forward for them. Culturally, menopause in women has always been something to tease.

M: The next question is: Which stories are currently missing or underrepresented in research about menopause? And do you feel your experience is seen and heard?

T: I am married to a woman and I think this aspect is missing because I often hear about what men should know, but there are other relationships and ways of doing things. I feel as if menopause ends up being a social catchall for an awful lot of things that are happening to women. I'm dealing with becoming a grandparent, elderly parents, bereavement as well as employment issues and health issues that may not be related specifically to menopause. There's an awful lot going on at this time in life that may not be all to do with menopause but it all gets lumped together. You know – *she's menopausal*.

J: I often hear of women, who happen to be going through menopause, being problematised, particularly in the workplace.

T: I like returning to the idea of 'the change' because it's that moment or several years when you take stock. We talked about this in the workshops. It's not just a question of thinking about what we've lost in terms of youth and beauty but in terms of how we can change and grow and maybe what we want our lives to look like for the next 30 or 40 years. So yeah, I completely agree. I had a bit of a breakdown, went off work for six months, reduced my hours and came back with a different role and I still feel really guilty about that because I'm somehow, you know, not pulling my weight. Why can't people accept that I want to do different things with my life?

F: I moved out of my family home at precisely that time in my life and I'm wondering how much of it was empty nest syndrome. I feel a lot calmer now but I also really love living on my own.

I don't regret it but it is fascinating to look at the impact menopause has on relationships.

J: Let's move on to the workshops. What were your expectations for the workshops and why did you sign up?

T: I signed up immediately because menopause has been on my mind. I've been battling with it for several years now. As I mentioned, in the middle of it was a busy time at work. I thought I didn't have time because it would be time out of work. Then I thought, you know what? I'm doing it anyway. That's why I came to all the workshops. I valued the concept of having some time to be with other people and to explore something that was important to me and had an impact on every single moment of my life, but that nobody ever talked about. I love writing but it's usually academic, so I looked forward to being surprised and challenged.

M: What happened in the workshops? What inspired you? What did you find

hard and what would you have liked more of?

F: I loved the poetry. I feel I created a lot which I was pleased with and there was a lot of variety. The last workshop with the dancing and drawing was a very special, energetic room to have been in. There was a moment when this wonderful female energy burst out that we could actually do something and I became teary.

J: So what did you actually produce? Can you describe particular things and how you felt about it?

T: I found the process of re-engagement interesting. To kind of come back to it and think, oh I didn't know I wrote that. I loved the spell. That really, in a way I didn't expect, spoke to me and I hadn't enjoyed poetry before. I loved the art and I've been thinking about where to go with it next. I've decided I'm going to knit a jumper with menopause across the chest to make it completely visible.

F: Around the time of hitting my fifties, I bought a sketchbook and did some sewing. To give myself the time and permission to play was so important when I'd been busy bringing up children.

J: It was permission to be vulnerable as well. I'm used to writing workshops but drawing and dancing was something I'm much less comfortable with. Going forward, we do need to think about how we don't privilege texts and make space for other ways of telling stories.

T: When I was off with anxiety and depression, I taught myself to crochet. I was determined to give myself the time, you know, hour after hour. There is such negativity around what is seen as women's crafts as well but there are people working on it to reclaim it as a radical space.

J: Just wondering, how might this project be used to develop understanding about menopause as a stage in the life course? And how might we meaningfully work with people in the workshop space too?

F: I struggle a bit with this question because I was thinking that the reason we got on so well and were all so relaxed during the last session is because everyone in the room is naturally drawn to creative opportunities.

So I was struggling with – who are you going to pull into this? Who is it going to be useful for? How do you make it accessible to people who don't realise how wonderful it is to have that opportunity? You know, how to get it into GP surgeries where people are experiencing loneliness or who haven't got the self-confidence or finance to seek out a course.

J: One of the big problems we had with workshops was that we didn't get a huge response and I think for a lot of people, it's the idea of luxury time.

There was a stigma associated with the menopause too and how to get round this is something we are problematising in future research. Is there anything else you wanted to raise or mention that you think might help the project going forward?

T: How we manage inclusivity and represent a broad range of voices. And your definition of what creative is and broadening that to a wider variety of creative endeavours.

F: I am wondering about the word 'menopause' as well because it's a continuum, isn't it? It needs destigmatising. I didn't read anything about the menopause because I didn't want to. What drew me in was the chance to be creative.

J: That's why we want to do it because I had no idea. In Kenya, menopause is seen as a positive time in life, when women share their wisdom with younger women and experience rituals.

We are looking to learn from other cultures, communities and individuals about how they navigate menopause to try and create something that might be useful for other people.

Creative responses written during the workshops

Here are extracts of work written during the Creative Pause Project workshops, followed by reflections on the process by each author. We invited all the participants to submit work for publication in this article and these were the pieces two participants chose to submit.

Spell for finding peace, for breath and pause

by Tania Staras

Date: the equinox

Time: the rising of the full moon

Place: outside on a windswept hill, moon rising over the sea, hawthorns bent in the prevailing wind. Something of a blasted heath but not bleak. A sense of ages. The air smells fresh but there is something behind it.

Clothes: a long cloak whipping in the wind. The body enveloped. Nobody would know who it was underneath that fabric. Soft wool. Embracing. Hiding secrets.

Tools & ingredients: a scrap of cloth. Herbs and grasses. A glass of white wine. A cup of darkness, a sliver of sunlight. My own blood, a grey hair and a child's hair. A wooden bowl – the one I keep my working yarn in. No spoon – just fingers and hands. My measurements are in handfuls. Ingredients running though my fingers. Feeling everything.

Phrase: 'Let's get to a straight edge'. Tidying up, being neat. But let's not. Make it curvy, wavy, wiggly.

It tastes sharp and creamy, feels rough to make me alive, soft to comfort me. The colours are a penumbra – orange sky and shadowed earth. What the world looks like when you have to imagine it.

Vegetable

by Tania Staras

I am a potato

Lumpy and shapeless
Tucked away in the dark
Doing my thing
Dug up by other hands
Sliced and diced
Versatile, quotidian, useful
Not admired or put on a pedestal
Taken for granted
I am the everyday
The background to a thousand meals
A million conversations
I support dreams too many to count

Reflection

I enjoyed it. I was exhausted when I got home – new people, new places. Thinking about myself – why is that more tiring than thinking about others? I really appreciated the space and time to be selfish, to turn inward and to be irresponsible. I don't mean irresponsible – I think I mean just not to be the responsible one. The grown-up leading the activities, managing the situation, sorting things out. I don't have enough time in my life to be irresponsible. I'm always the grown-up. My pot-poem spoke to the child and the less responsible – days at the cricket, handstands and sunsets and sports cars, eating rubbish food and reading all day. Maybe I need to find time for that in my life. More time.

And my relationship with my body, with activity and action and contemplation. All jumbled up. I think I am quiet sat in a library but I never am. I buzz about – I sit when everyone else is done. And then I'm done in. But I don't judge my body like I used to. I don't need to be thin or groomed. The cloak of menopause envelops me and I love that.

***

Blood red

by Fiona Stevenson

Blood red, seeing red

Angry, angry, angry

Won't let the music stop.

Glorious roller-coaster

Hormone cocktail high

Keep-up, keep-up.

Energy cauldron

Overflow, unclog, lighten-up

Shed, soar, fly.

Found poem

by Fiona Stevenson

(See image below: text from Menopause: The One-Stop Guide)

Highlighted words: purposeful heart freely searching to make change

Reflection

I enjoyed writing the poem and it was good to get it done as at that time, I'd given myself the challenge of writing a poem a day for a month, so that was it for the day, done instead of leaving it til five to midnight, as is often the case. But I couldn't get to grips with the blackout poem or found poem because I wasn't coming up with what I wanted, but then after the workshop, I repeated the process. And I got it. I was thrilled with the words I found in the text: purposeful heart freely searching to make change. I loved the density and succinctness and the message in the words. It wouldn't have been a technique I would have thought to try without the workshop, so I was delighted to try something new.

Conclusion

Collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al 2013) is a research methodology that seeks to draw people into the research instead of writing about them (Parks and Moriarty 2022). Ellis and Bochner call this approach to research "a

search for a better conversation in the face of all the barriers and boundaries" (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 748). The method of disseminating the Creative Pause project that we have identified here, seeks to value conversation as a method of research, offering insights into expertise and experience without reducing these dialogues as merely data and instead placing an emphasis on the voices in this research and their lived experiences. Wenger (1998) suggests that: "Communities of practice develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important." (Wenger 1998: 2) and we discovered that by sharing stories of our menopause, we were able to value unique and shared experiences that deepened our connection to each other, but also offered more knowledge and understanding of this complex time. It has also allowed us to create new knowledge and resources—including this article and a funding bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council— which Wenger states is a key component of any community of practice (1998).

This project built on established best practice in creative workshops (Parks, Moriarty and Vincent 2022) and identified stories and creative practice as having the potential to raise awareness, develop empathy and inform policies and practices related to menopause. Having used autoethnography as a methodology in the past to bring in and connect colleagues, we thought it would be possible to adapt it to level the playing field in traditional academic research where the academic often researches about the participants in research, rather than valuing them as co-creators. This approach has implications for issues of power and control within the field of co-production (Bell and Pahl: 2018), and instead, this article advocates a way of conducting and disseminating research that we have developed and written together. It is a method of disseminating research that we identify as collaborative, holistic, feminist. Working in this way, we hope that this project and our approach can contribute to meaningful societal change around menopause.

BIOGRAPHIES

Dr Jess Moriarty is a Principal Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Brighton where she leads the Creative Writing MA and is Co-director of the Centre for Arts and Wellbeing. Jess is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has published extensively on autoethnography and creative writing pedagogy.

Mel Parks is a writer and independent researcher as well as an experienced creative writing mentor and workshop facilitator. Her research values creative practice, story and autoethnography and she is currently working on Moonpause: a series of creative essays about midlife and menopause inspired by moon cycles and originally funded by the Arts Council (Developing Your Creative Practice).

Professor Jayne Raisborough's work at Leeds Beckett broadly focuses on two questions: who can we be and how can we live in prevailing socio-economic contexts? These questions are explored across a range of journal articles and her most recent books: Lifestyle Media and the Formation of the Self (2011 Palgrave) and Fat Bodies, Health and the Media (2016 Palgrave). She has explored, published and taught on media/cultural representations of social class, gender, ethical consumption, litter and more recently anti-ageing and women's gun ownership.

Tania Staras is a midwife and historian. She currently works as a lecturer in a university midwifery department. She has published extensively on the history of midwifery and maternity in the twentieth century.Tania writes for work, keeps a diary and is trying to rediscover writing for pleasure. And **Fiona Stevenson** is an independent writer.

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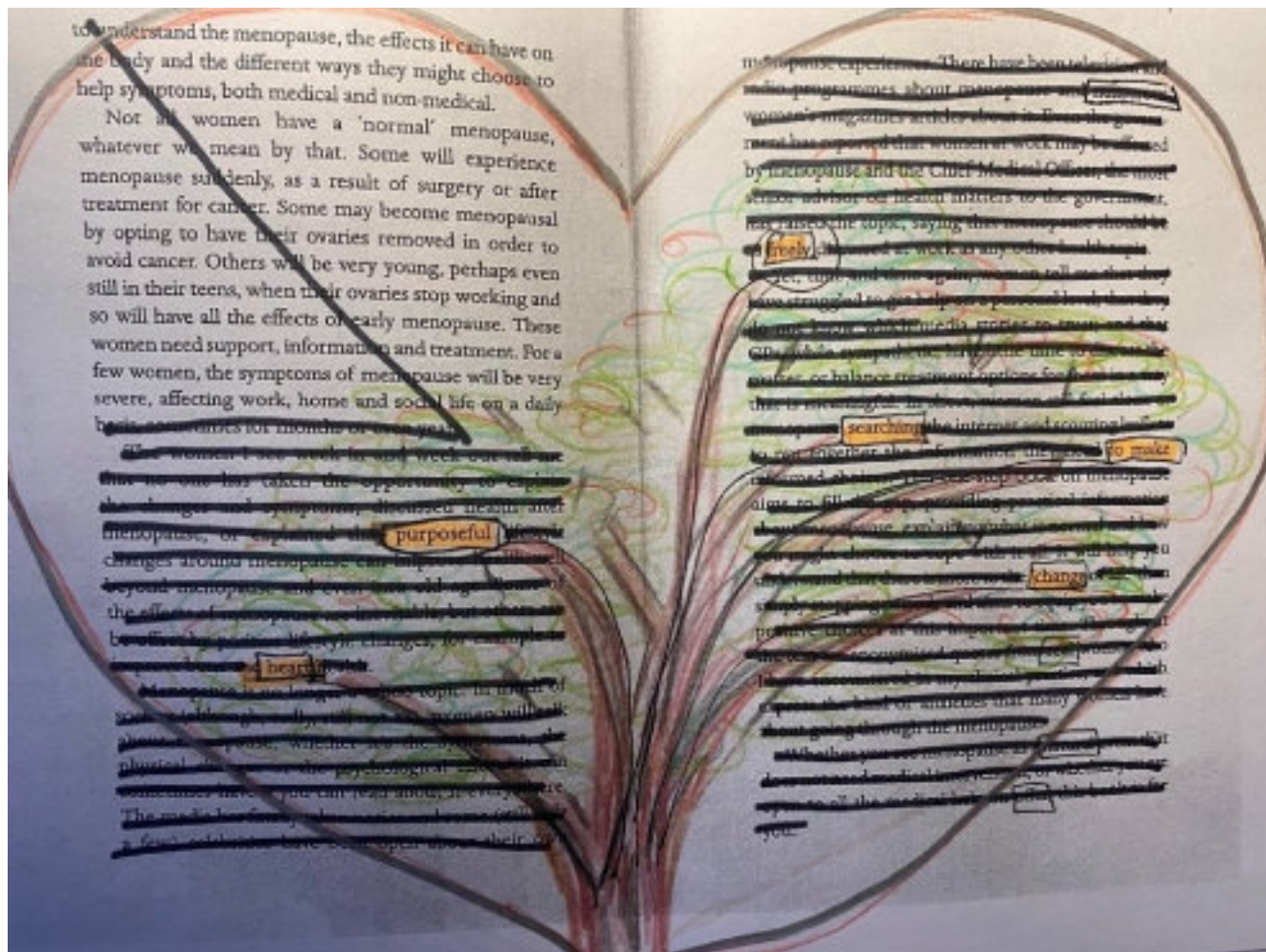
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Telling (My) Stories: Potential Uses of Autofiction to Enhance Wellbeing in a Community Arts Setting

Hywel Dix

Abstract

This paper reports on *Telling (My) Stories*, a two-month community writing project that was held at Bournemouth University in 2023 with the aim of elucidating the life stories of 12 participants to enhance their feeling of wellbeing and their mental health. It evaluates the applicability of autofiction to community arts projects with a focus on writing and wellbeing. In doing so it takes the evolution of autofiction to a new a stage, treating it not merely as a fashionable fictional genre in the literary marketplace, but also as an active tool for potential utility in the kinds of community writing setting where the public gesture of publishing a finished, written work of fiction is not the goal and where achieving some kind of wellbeing benefit through writing is a valid end in its own right. It suggests that it is possible for autofiction to be employed in a community writing project in such a way that enables a modest benefit to their wellbeing to be achieved by the participants. It also makes some observations on the status of the university as an institution perceived by project participants to be both a safe space and a somewhat prestigious venue that they wanted to attend, provided that potential barriers to attending (most notably, social anxiety among those unaccustomed to doing so) can be sensitively overcome.

Keywords: autofiction; life writing; community arts; participatory arts; wellbeing; inclusivity; safe spaces.

Introduction

Over the last two decades a narrative turn has taken place in the social and human sciences, using storytelling in a wide diversity of fields to create new forms of understanding that would not be available using traditional research methods. During the 1990s researchers and practitioners in Therapeutic Writing, Health and Social Care, Education and Vocational Counselling all started to use storytelling as a research tool to supplement existing ways of working (which were mainly quantitative) with methods that were more qualitative. For example, writing therapists often use storytelling as a way of helping their patients to work through troubling experiences (Lengelle, 2021); Healthcare researchers encourage patients to keep diaries of their treatment as means of evaluating the quality of the service they receive (Matthews, 2018); Trainee teachers frequently use journaling as a way of reflecting on their developing education practice in order to improve it (Walker, 2018); Vocational guidance counsellors encourage their advisees to write life stories in the

form of career narratives to help them make difficult vocational decisions in their careers or professional lives (Ortiz-Vilarelle, 2021).

As this narrative turn has become increasingly adopted, a status quo has emerged which privileges autobiographical (i.e. factual) narratives over other forms of writing (Shands et al, 2015). This has the effect that more creative forms of storytelling have not been used to anything like the same extent, and the opportunity for using more creative genres of writing in these fields has been missed. By contrast, the recent emergence of autofiction creates an opportunity to apply alternative, creative forms of writing to research into people's empirical experiences and to extrapolate those experiences to improve our understanding of their lives.

The concept of autofiction has loosely been used to refer to a form of life writing that combines autobiographical and fictional elements. Coinage of the term *autofiction* has variously been attributed to British-American novelist and critic Paul West in 1972 (Bloom, 2019), French novelist Serge Doubrovsky in in 1977 (Grell, 2014), Jerzy Kosinski in America in 1986 (Nicol, 2018) and Edmund White in 1995 (Saunders, 2010), with this variety of derivation hinting at a potential multiplicity of both origin and meaning. In turn, this double-layered multiplicity implies the existence of a potentially wide variety of forms of autofiction and an equally possible broad application of the term. Indeed, this multiplicity might be why autofiction has become a form of creative writing that is very popular in the contemporary literary marketplace (Wasserman, 2022). For the most part, however, the term has been used to carry out acts of generic classification. Much less common has been applying the properties of autofiction in the teaching

of creative writing, in community arts settings or in community projects that contribute to the arts and wellbeing agenda.

This paper reports on one such project, *Telling (My) Stories*, a two-month community writing project that was held at Bournemouth University in February and March 2023 with the explicit aim of elucidating the life stories of 12 group members in order to enhance their feeling of wellbeing and their mental health. It evaluates the applicability of autofiction to community arts projects with a focus on writing and wellbeing.

In doing so it takes the evolution of autofiction to a new a stage, treating it not merely as a fashionable fictional genre in the literary marketplace and the world of published books, but also as an active tool for potential utility in the kinds of community writing setting where the public gesture of publishing a finished, written work of fiction is not the goal and where achieving some kind of wellbeing benefit through writing is a valid end in its own right. In other words, it assesses how far the potential for autofiction to facilitate people in achieving relative therapeutic benefit through writing can be unlocked in such a setting. Its findings are necessarily provisional, given the comparatively small scale of the project.

Nevertheless, it concludes by suggesting that it is possible for autofiction to be employed in a community writing project in such a way that enables a modest benefit to their wellbeing to be achieved by the participants. In passing it also makes some observations on the status of the university as an institution perceived to be both a safe space and a somewhat prestigious venue by group members who had little or no prior experience of taking part in activities on campus, provided that potential barriers

to attending (most notably, social anxiety among those unaccustomed to doing so) can be sensitively overcome.

Theoretical Background

As stated above, one of the branches of the human sciences in which the so-called narrative turn of the 21st century has taken place is career counselling, where career counsellors have used narrative and storytelling to elucidate life stories among the people they counsel in order to help them see themselves in new ways, achieve new forms of self-knowledge and make better vocational decisions as a result.

Although career narratives are not to be conflated with autofiction, there are a number of intersections between them of direct relevance to the aims of this project, i.e. assessing how far autofiction can be used to unlock therapeutic potential, especially in a community arts setting. One of the leading exponents of using narrative methods in career counselling, the South African researcher Kobus Maree, has gone as far as to argue that career narratives can be used to help people overcome the pain of negative experiences, make sense of turbulent periods of rapid change in their lives and achieve a degree of self-healing through the making of new vocational choices following which the pain of a prior experience is converted into a meaningful social contribution so that taking on a new vocational role in one's personal or professional life affords opportunities to help others and in doing so, to heal one's own wounds. According to Maree, the key elements of career narratives are therefore as follows:

firstly, every life story is defined by the pain suffered by its authors. Secondly, for survival, it is essential to turn this pain into a social contribution, a gift to others who have suffered a similar fate. Thirdly, healing

is brought about by narrating or telling the story to empathetic career counsellors as well as other valued audiences in the client's life such as parents, partners and friends. Lastly, repeated reflection under the attentive eyes of skilled career counsellors has the power to heal psychic wounding and scarring (Maree, 3).

This account of how a painful experience can be first conceptualized in narrative and then overcome through the adoption of a new social role which enables the individual to make a wider contribution to the society around them so that helping others becomes cathected as a means to heal oneself is perhaps idealistic and may not be equally operative in every case.

Indeed, Larry Cochran (1997) has developed a more nuanced understanding of how differentials of race, culture, nationality, class and social status all play formative parts in how people experience the world and so construct their life stories.

Nevertheless, Maree's assumption of a foundational experience of pain which is somewhat alleviated through a practice of re-narration points to possible ways in which autofiction might be mobilized to attain therapeutic benefit because many works of autofiction have been written in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, or what Arnaud Genon (2013) calls a "faille fondatrice" (58), or founding faultline that rips a tear in the chronology of the person's life story so that the period before the specific traumatic experience becomes fundamentally severed from the period after it.

In other words, combining the narration of trauma that is a common component of autofiction with the attainment of self-healing that is the goal of Maree's career narratives points to a new way in which

autofiction might be deployed to achieve this effect through writing practices that are not necessarily limited to a person's career or vocational narratives. Mary McMahon and Mark Watson (2011) have drawn attention to the fact that the "literature in career psychology is generally recognized as being more theoretical than practical" (2) and this also has previously been true of autofiction, where most scholarly research has focused on literary stylistics and generic classification in the critical analysis of published works.

But when our conceptualization of autofiction is opened up to include not only published works but also self-narratives written for the more private and provisional goal of therapeutic benefit on the part of the writer this would potentially represent a transition from the theoretical to the practical and the applied.

Structure

In designing the *Telling (My) Stories* project, academic researchers from Bournemouth University worked with two community arts practitioners from a local partner organization. They met several times while the project was at the planning and preparation stage and this was important in enabling academic research about autofiction to be brought into contact with professional community arts practice in the design and implementation of the creative activities. The project was not buying in an off-the-shelf creative writing programme from the practitioners' back catalogue because the activities were newly created and bespoke to the project. However, neither was it a case of researchers communicating solely with other researchers about their academic work because the purpose of the project was to enable applications of that research in a non-academic setting and

in this the collaboration with community partners was essential. In other words, both the work of the researchers and that of the practitioners was transformed by the encounter.

It was clear from the start that collaboration with the partner organization was essential in identifying and recruiting potential participants. As a prominent and active community-based organization with long-standing connections to the community, the partner organization had not only an extensive network and contact list but also the confidence of their service users.

By contrast, universities are not always as thoroughly rooted in the communities of the geographical locations in which they are based and in fact many of the eventual participants had never been to the university campus before. Having an organic connection to the communities was an absolutely crucial element of the project, since recruiting participants required a high level of mutual sensitivity and trust. These would have been lacking were it not for the collaboration with the partner.

The main recruitment tool used was a bright and attractive flyer sent to the partner group's mailing list. This struck an informal and accessible tone, emphasizing that no previous experience was required to take part and that 'Being creative in supported group settings is a great way to grow in confidence, make new friends, and spend time discovering more about your own thoughts and feelings.' More specifically, it identified that the course was suitable for people using mental health services or those who would like to try new ways to support their mental wellbeing. Finally, along with the practical details of where, when and who to contact it promised that 'Alongside developing new creative

skills and learning more about art, we hope you'll be inspired you to develop a short creative piece inspired by your own life.' It proved to be a highly effective recruitment tool and the course was over-subscribed – which might indicate a strong need for arts and wellbeing activities that was not being met by other, more traditional service providers.

Having recruited 12 participants for the project the professional partners remained in regular email contact with them before, during and after each session. At the start of each one they also met all the participants in the relatively neutral and familiar space of the university's central cafeteria area before leading them to the precise venue on campus. This provided a liminal space, and a period of transition between off- and on-campus, which was a consideration that seemed especially important given that the majority of participants had never been onto the university campus before (and many of them were very quick to point this out during the informal conversations that took place at that first meeting point).

Of the 12 participants, six were men and six were women. There was a mixture of ages from mid-thirties to early seventies. Three of the female participants came from other countries (Brazil, Columbia and Poland). The participants had been encouraged from the outset to take seriously their responsibilities to themselves and to other members of the group. These included the idea that where possible they should aim to participate in all sessions, or as many as practically possible. One participant dropped out after the first session, having been referred to the professional partners through a practice of social prescribing and apparently having been under the mistaken impression that the course was taking place at Arts

University Bournemouth, an institution geographically proximate to but separate from Bournemouth University, so that his expectation to take part in activities including wood crafting and other kinds of sculpture were clearly not met. This indicates the importance of clear course description and accurate signposting towards the exact nature of the activities to be covered.

On the other hand, all the other participants attended regularly, with a few individuals missing isolated one-off sessions. This high level of buy-in was anecdotally attributed by the professional partners to the participants' perception of the university as a prestige venue that they do not ordinarily have access to. This attribution was confirmed by post-event participant evaluation (see Figure 1) and interestingly alleviated an initial concern surrounding whether the university might be perceived as an intimidating, daunting or even alien environment for people not accustomed to visiting it.

Do you have any comments about where the course was held?

It was useful to have a venue which offered car parking, a bus hub, a bar, warm, clean and bright rooms to work in. The campus also felt safe which is vital as so many places feel threatening these days.

I had never been on campus before so welcomed the opportunity. Say what you like about the architecture (I liked it), the entire site was highly impressive.

For me it was not so important it was at a university although I think it is brilliant the university is facilitating courses like this. The quality of all the facilities was excellent and although we did not take advantage I am sure any AV / presentation requirements could be easily accommodated. The space and the furniture worked well for the different exercises. I have attended an art course there and the same applied. The environment is very much fit for purpose.

It is not only very close to my house, but also I felt more open minded when the venue has educational angle, is well equipped and safe. I liked the location, it was generally quiet and was also easy to access by public transport. I helped me see that the university offers things for the public as well.

I found the course being at the university was a middle market from Bournemouth and Poole and the buses to wimborne were more frequent, it was great to be a part of the university, but I could also say it may be daunting for people who want a smaller venue with less people

Also with the lecturer […] attending spoke volumes , it was great for him to immerse himself into the course.

It was great to finally be at BU (I don't live far away from it) and have that feeling of being part of a learning environment again

This was naturally important to me (although I am also interested in the idea of university-supported activities off campus).

It was a welcoming space that I personally was familiar with which put me at ease when I was feeling particularly anxious
The venue was secure, modern, brightly lit, accessible, safe.
Figure 1: Feedback on venue

Other responsibilities that were clearly flagged to the participants at the start of the programme and at the start of each individual session were the fact that the programme should be seen as a safe space in which the ideas, opinions, emotions and work of all participants should be fully respected and treated in the highest confidence.

Equally, although the ethos of the professional partner organization is to deliver community arts activities with a focus on wellbeing, the participants also clearly understood that the programme was neither a form of therapy nor a substitute for counselling. As such, they should only bring to the sessions emotions or experiences that they felt

completely comfortable sharing with the whole group. In fact, the group went through the process of forming, norming, and performing remarkably quickly given that only two of its members had ever previously met.

This might be partly attributable to the perception of the university as a prestige venue in which participants wanted to work collegially for the collective good, and partly attributable to the fact that as a community arts group, the professional partners' contact list (from which the participants were recruited) comprises a very specific sample of the public, i.e. people who can be characterized as both interested in the therapeutic potential of arts activities and somewhat empathetic with regard to the well-being needs of others.

Although the location for the project was the university campus, this was not a lecture or seminar series in the conventional sense.

It was clear from the beginning that it was not teaching autofiction to the participants in the way that university tutors would teach (for example) modernism or postmodernism to a class of honours students. An outline understanding of autofiction, its properties and affordances had been embedded in the initial planning discussions between the university researchers and the partner practitioners because clearly, developing a specialist programme on the application of autofiction to enhance wellbeing requires a base level understanding of what autofiction is on the part of the practitioners. On the other hand, since autofiction was being used as a technique by the practitioners, whether or not the participants were familiar with the concept of autofiction was of much less significance and in fact during the five sessions of the programme only

one of them referred to the concept at all.

Figure 2 summarizes the content of all five sessions on the project.

2/2/23 Introduction to art and autobiography
9/2/23 Writing your stories – writing and autobiography
16/2/23 'Self Portrait' – visual art and autobiography
23/2/23 Performing the Self – performance art and autobiography
2/3/23 Sharing week; time to practice your short piece, then share your ideas and get feedback.

Figure 2: Schedule of activities

All of the sessions were two hours long with a break in the middle for refreshments. This break proved very valuable both in enabling the concentration of the participants to be renewed and in allowing for informal socialization and group cohesion.

All sessions were carefully planned and although they each started with a physical warm-up they did not follow a formulaic pattern. However, they were designed in such a way as to create the impression of enabling diverse ideas and forms of creativity gradually to coalesce and come together – giving the impression, that is, of becoming more formally structured over time.

The overall idea was to provide a form of scaffolding, starting with very short written activities and slowly expanding them as the course progressed. A relatively lengthy period was necessary for this to occur because participants had little experience of conceptualizing their lives in narrative and could not be expected to arrive fully adept at doing so from the very beginning.

Through narrating their stories in a variety of different formats participants developed their self-narratives, incorporating their past experiences,

character traits, interests and ambitions, key achievements and positive limitations.

As the narratives became deeper and richer they also became more valuable as sources of potential self-knowledge on the part of the participants, giving them opportunities to see themselves in new ways and hence to author the future chapters of their life stories.

Some of the participants stuck to the strictly factual as if they were writing journals or diaries whereas others became more creative and imaginative in imagining themselves in alternative situations and stories that departed from empirically experienced events.

For the first session participants were asked to bring along something that had personal significance to them such as an item of clothing, a childhood toy, an object from a special time in their life, something they had been given and so on. After initial discussions about how they understood the words "self" and "narrative" the session involved working from these objects as creative starting points in a variety of ways: drawing the object; creating and enacting a series of hand and facial gestures that expressed its significance; and free writing based on the memory of the first time each person encountered their object.

The second session introduced the concept of autobiographical art, looking at pieces of writing by two artists (Sylvia Plath and Bobby Baker) and then discussing responses to them. This was followed by a discussion of the different stages involved in the creative process (including Research, Free Writing/ Play, and Editing), with participants encouraged to identify a particular moment from their lives that they wanted to explore through writing.

This could be interpreted very broadly and might include a particular challenge they have faced, an achievement of which they are proud, a specific relationship with another person, an issue that is currently troubling them or similar. Time was set aside to engage in examples of each stage plus time at the end for sharing of work and peer feedback. The Free Writing through creative play was especially important in allowing participants to get ideas onto the page without fear of getting it wrong. This was complemented by the Edit stage, where participants were encouraged to develop a critical voice to reshape what they had written, and make creative decisions about what they wanted to present.

Sessions Three and Four adopted similar approaches, looking at examples of visual artists whose work draws on their own life stories; and performance artists whose work is not quite theatre, not quite visual art, but somewhere between the two. A discussion of both Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono elicited the observation that some artists use themselves, and their bodies, as part of their work itself. By contrast looking at 'Family Hold Back', a darkly comic performance satirizing the manners and etiquette of an English dinner table by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris prompted the opinion that this was closer to theatre, where artists tell stories and perform more recognizable roles. All of this discussion was underpinned by a consideration of what the participants could see happening in each work, how it made them feel, and what the artists might be trying to communicate to the audience. This in turn could then be applied to the participants' own self representations in the final session, by exploring the opposing poles of autobiographical fact and creative, imaginary alternative selves.

Discussion

For the final session, participants were invited to share some of their work in the form of a 3-minute presentation. The format of this was open-ended and depending on what each person had produced could be a reading, performance, or visual piece. Although it was emphasized that nobody was obliged to share their work if they did not wish to, everybody chose to. Presentations were recorded and made available uniquely to each participant as a permanent take-away from the course and also as a finished artefact of which they could feel proud.

By the final presentation, a number of small but discernible developments had taken place among the participants.

For example, in the discussion of the words "self" and "narrative" in the first session, a male participant in his forties immediately started talking about dementia and the impact this has on our sense of who we are and how we relate to others. This then carried through his work in all five sessions, which he used to explore the challenging experience of living with (and caring for) a relative who was also a dementia patient. Another male participant was a carer for his ageing wife and although his willingness to share aspects of this experience was more muted (possibly indicating that five weeks was insufficient to gain his trust), this facet of his life nevertheless informed his narratives at certain moments.

Figure 3 collates the post-event participant feedback collected about the impact the programme had on their mental health and wellbeing.

In addition, the evaluation asked participants: How far would you agree with the statement, "Taking part in the

course was good for my mental wellbeing?" to which all respondents answered 5 out of 5 on a Likert scale, indicating "Strongly agree."

However, although a useful general indicator of how highly participants valued the course and a potential means of quantifying the benefit to their wellbeing that it brought about, there is a danger that this kind of approach can be superficial and in fact the quantitative data generated by the participants during the evaluation phase was much richer and more meaningful.

Can you tell us more about how you feel the course had an impact on your mental health and/or wellbeing?

For my first 70 years I had been the model citizen. Middle of the road, middle income, middle class. Having suffered from clinical depression a few years ago, I had decided to try to experience anything on offer. This short course was well outside my comfort zone so I joined with not a little trepidation. I needn't have worried. I loved it and hope to be part of the SALT performance [another project run by the same partners] in July. My confidence, self esteem and even ego received a huge boost from this course.
I have very strong perfectionist tendencies which often prevent me engaging in art or finding ways to avoid it. The different course approaches (artistic, literary and performance) to telling my story offered me the opportunity to explore without getting bogged in detail and hence avoiding.
It made me feel accepted, understood and not judged. Felt a sense of belonging.
I think mainly connecting with others and trying something new. Even if the challenge of it was perhaps a little daunting or overwhelming at times. But it was good to have to challenge to help develop myself. Simply being in an event in person was hugely helpful and opened my eyes to how isolated I had become. I think it has also helped with my confidence, being able to do the final story and this will help in terms of other difficulties in my life.
500% these courses help with confidence, self worth, being able to interact and integrate safely, non judgemental, people can be open and honest in a safe space , the course can

challenge your boundaries and comfort zone again in a safe space , the deliverers always say tasks check in etc are all optional , this unpressurized approach makes it more inclusive for all, my mental health improves immensely, and also having something to look forward each week, I cannot stress how this helps with mental health but so many other areas in my life!!!
It provided a safe space to share our stories and creative ways to enable that sharing
I found it interesting to be able to pick out recurring themes or common elements from among the different activities we did each week - especially when the connections between these things was not necessarily obvious to begin with.
I have been struggling for some time with my mental health and isolation has been a big issue so this gave me somewhere to go and be around similar people to myself and explore some of my own personal history in a safe way
The course has had a great impact on my wellbeing. First, I made friends with a group of diverse and interesting people with whom I would have never met her I not joined the course. The course was a safe space where I felt comfortable being open about myself and my feelings. There were tears and laughs from others in the group. I felt we got to know each other quite well in such a short time. Performing my final piece in front of the group was an effective way to help me deal with some of the things that negatively affect my mental health. I'm so grateful that I had this opportunity.
Figure 3: Feedback on mental health and wellbeing

For example one of them, a woman in her late thirties who had previously worked for a bank, said she valued the sessions highly because since becoming a mother over a decade earlier her opportunities to assert her own sense of identity had become limited. Another woman in her early thirties who evinced a degree of shyness and even low self-confidence during the sessions specifically requested that she be the first to present her work in the final session as this would ensure that she had no opportunity to duck out of it.

In her story she adopted the persona of an explorer (named after herself) and

used cut-up maps to demonstrate her journey through the metaphorical adventure of her life in a loose, symbolic and open-ended way. In other words, although she apparently had chosen not to share many specific details of her personal life with the group through story, she nevertheless utilized the process of storytelling to adopt a fictional persona somewhat modelled on herself to construct a high level of articulacy and personal meaning.

This demonstrates the difference between autofiction and autobiography when applied to a practical community arts setting.

By contrast, one of the participants was a retired, professional male somewhat confident in his demeanour (he was former captain of a golf club) who used the final presentation of his story as part of coming out. After the final session he revealed that he had only recently done so to his wife and grown-up children and was still in the process of doing so in his life more generally.

He had not specifically intimated in any of the writing activities or discussion in the prior sessions that this was the end point towards which his self-narrative was tending, but he did reveal in hindsight that he had nevertheless been working towards that point in his mind all along. His decision to do so in the final session thus is further testament not only to the supportive environment of the university but also to the high level of trust he felt had been generated among members of the group.

Notably, this participant was the only member of the group who used the term autofiction to refer to his narrative, and he did so hesitantly and uncertainly, mainly because he had chosen to write in the third person as this provided a higher level of freedom from self-censorship than writing in the first person would have done, whereas during discussions we had mentioned that autofiction is more normally a first-person narrative. On the other hand, it has been established by Martens (2018) among others that it is possible to write autofiction in the third person. More importantly, since the whole project was not a class in the conventional sense, and since it provided opportunities for self-exploration among the participants rather than teaching them as such, it would not have been appropriate to try and correct this perception.

What mattered more was the capacity for personal development (Hunt, 2018) that it facilitated. Having contributed to his process of coming out and recalibrating his sense of self and his relationships around him, this narrative could therefore be seen as an instance of what Edmund White (1995) has termed "gay autofiction."

Prior to the final presentation, most of the writing produced by this participant had been dedicated to his memories of his mother and grandmother. For one of the sessions, members of the group had been given the task of bringing in three objects of particular emotional significance to them because objects elicit memories and memories elicit emotions. Indeed, as Maree has pointed out, when life-narratives are co-constructed jointly between a facilitator and a subject the factual truth of the recollections "will not always be 100% accurate – nor should they be" because factual accuracy is less important than the emotional meaning and value ascribed to it by them (12).

This further illustrates the distinction between autobiography and autofiction in a community arts setting, whereby in order to utilize autobiographical narrative facts have first to be verified as the basis for the narrative whereas autofiction takes emotional experience as its own kind of truth.

Having chosen to bring his mother's golliwog to the group in response to this task, the participant in question somewhat nervously contacted us in advance to discuss the wisdom of doing so. After a brief conversation between the researchers and facilitators it was decided that having invited members of the group to bring in artefacts from their homes, it was not helpful to censor or restrict the range of items they could choose. However, it was also suggested that the group might pause for an open conversation about what a golliwog stood for and how it had been associated with those feelings historically.

To the individual in question, it was simply a child's toy, well over seventy years old and richly laden with personal memories and emotional experience. But he was also reflective enough to realize that it was not simply any children's toy, and that its historical association with imperialism and racism might endow it with very provocative and unsettling feelings for others. Catherine Cusset (2012) has said that a search for truth and a need to be honest with ourselves even if it might be painful or unflattering is a hallmark of autofiction and one that certainly came to the fore in this case.

In the event, no discussion arose of the golliwog within the group during the session based on bringing in objects. However, the golliwog did feature briefly within this person's final presentation (which, as mentioned above, took the form of a coming out narrative). After he had finished reading his story to the group, although the other members asked no searching questions at all about the coming out narrative, one member asked the question: "Did I hear the word golliwog in there? It's a while since I've heard that word." Notably, this question was asked by the only black male participant within the group and he did not say anything any more critical or probing than this, choosing instead to simply leave the question hanging.

This might be because he did not want to challenge the author of the story too overtly in a narrative that was ostensibly about coming out, within the specific context of a group in which the inner dynamics were highly mutually supportive, but did not want the tacit racialized history of the golliwog to be left entirely uninterrogated either. In other words, it was in itself a very sensitive form of challenge, raising the objection in an indirect and allusive rather than confrontational way and through the words "It's been a while" consigning the history of racism to the past so that the individual telling the story did not feel arraigned.

The only subsequent discussion that took place was directed towards the three overseas women in the group who all stated that they had never heard the word before, thus rendering it necessary to explain without necessarily endorsing while also not alienating the original member who had brought the object in.

Of these three women, two chose to use their final presentations to reflect on the experience of migration, doing so through non-verbal performance pieces that were both powerful and emotional (see Figure 4: Participant Feedback on activities). The first, a Brazilian woman in her fifties, staged a performance in which she was getting ready for a night out, perhaps a date with a lover, by putting on clothes and make-up and then systematically working through all the same steps in reverse order as she took the clothes and make-up off, thus

leaving her symbolically (though not literally) bare and hence exposed and vulnerable.

The only constant - an item that she was wearing at the start of the performance and that remained on for the whole time - was a crucifix and this was perceptively identified by members of the group in the discussion that followed as a potential constant in a lifetime of (unvoiced) turbulence and change. In other words, the non-verbal nature of the performance had the effect of elevating the simple act of dressing and then undressing onto a metaphorical level where it could speak to and for all the unspoken experiences - of love? Of loss? Of leaving people behind? Of being left? - that had made up that person's life.

What stood out for you? What did you enjoy? What would you like more of?

The support from the two leaders bred support from the wider group. Everyone was encouraged without application of pressure to participate. They also serve who stand and wait. I enjoyed it all and was distressed that I had to miss the middle session through illness.

Most of it was miles out of my comfort zone so the positive feedback did wonders for my confidence level and will encourage me to tackle other creative tasks.
What was important for me was:

The statement "Remember creativity is about playing, so let it be fun and focus on exploring". That has helped with my perfectionism and also beginning to change my attitude to art.

The different forms of expression I am convinced could help people in all sorts of ways, especially wellbeing. I saw this in action.

I can now see the value of the safe environment (before I thought it was a bit woke) to allow people to explore and articulate what are often difficult thoughts, facts or emotions.

The supportive and caring environment allowed people to challenge themselves to do what they

would otherwise avoid (its all about me!) and benefit and grow from it.

We had all signed up for this but I could really see the value of a course like this in helping people with wellbeing/mental health.

I really like the variation of different activities during each session, as it kept my brain occupied and stimulated. I also really liked the duo of facilitators and their individual styles, which nicely complimented each other and brought something different to the table. The games helped to break the ice and made us feel a part of a community, which them made it easier to share personal stories. There was a lot of positivity and lack of pressure, making the course very relaxing - it also encouraged people to come every week as it was very enjoyable. Hot chocolate was a cherry on a cake 🍵

Even though I missed the writing week, I enjoyed the free writing homework and would love to have explored this further.

My memory can be poor, I liked more so the working in groups also the telling a story by each adding a part

We were VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE from all walks of life, and listening to their stories was as powerful as telling mine

I really liked the final session where everyone shared their work. Some of these were very moving and there was a noticeable change in the levels of confidence and articulacy among many of the participants.

I missed the visual art session as I was unwell in hospital at the time and this was a shame. The course was very quick and I appreciate that it was free and understand the reasons but I would of preferred a longer course to enable more time to each area

The people in the group were supporting and genuine and committed, [the professional facilitators] were amazing, the atmosphere was just right and so contributed to an amazingly successful outcome of 10 fantastic and unique stories that we heard from all the participants.

The recording of our pieces needs better sound and was a rough sketch of something that might go on to be more polished. Perhaps we might

make a professional collection of our stories to go online or be shown publicly. With direction, set, music maybe...
Figure 4: Feedback on activities

This non-verbal performance piece found a surprizing level of congruence in the presentation made by a Columbian woman in her twenties who took an almost identical approach through the silent putting on and taking off of a wedding dress. Here too the performance was emotionally charged and powerful and again the implication seemed to be that wordlessness was a more expressive vehicle for the revelation of a life story in miniature than the use of language.

Although autofiction has primarily been understood as a form of writing, de Bloois (2007) has recently started to explore the possibility for it to exist in other media, especially visual art and there has also been early-stage research into autofiction in performance (e.g. Delhey 2019, Stubenrauch 2019). However, as Patrice Pavis points out, a true autofictional practice of theatrical performance or autoperformance is "rarer" and remains under-conceptualized (2016, 24).

Although it would be tempting to make a theoretical leap from the performances of these two women to a wider theory of autofiction in performance, or indeed of autofiction and the narration of lives lived in migration, it would be difficult to do so without making an absurdly essentializing move.

Indeed, the fact that the third overseas female member of the group (a Polish woman in her forties) did not explore aspects of migrant experience at all in her presentation flags up the importance of not over-generalizing. Her narrative instead was dedicated to caring for a friend diagnosed with - and

subsequently surviving - cancer. The images of fragility, precariousness and immizeration perhaps stereotypically associated with dominant consumer images of migrants' lives were eschewed in favour of a narrative emphasizing both care and hope.

That is not to say, however, that the Polish participant wanted to overlook aspects of migrant experience altogether. During one of the sessions she had told a comical but also cutting story about the unfashionable uniform she was made to wear when she first came to the UK to work in a hotel; and in another she talked about the irony of the fact that she had travelled to the UK by coach so that the first time she ever took a plane it was to leave Britain for a holiday in Barcelona. Each of these anecdotes, though based on aspects of migrant experience such as dress and travel, rapidly superseded them and instead fed into a wider self-narrative of her as a determined, beauty-loving and somewhat rebellious person.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on a dedicated community writing project with the specific aim of evaluating how far the techniques of autofiction can be applied to provide a benefit to the wellbeing of participants. In other words, its aim was to report on the activities of the project in order to identify what insight could be gained from it, rather than to carry out a programme of original field research as such.

This means that a more formal programme of research would be needed among a bigger sample group over a longer period of time in order to enable a series of longitudinal measures of the impact autofiction can have when applied in such a way. Nevertheless, given these limitations, in the light of the

qualitative and quantitative evaluation data generated by participants in *Telling (My) Stories* it is possible to conclude that autofiction can be used by facilitators of community writing projects to enable a modest wellbeing benefit on the part of the project participants. This seems to be owing to the genre instability and open-ended definition of autofiction.

That is, whereas autobiography is perceived by participants to require a strict adherence to known facts at all times and therefore places limitations and constraints on how they see themselves, autofiction can be looser, freer and more speculative and therefore has the capacity to enable individuals to see themselves in a new way and hence gain new forms of self-understanding and self-knowledge.

Moreover, although the techniques and affordances of autofiction are used by practitioners to elicit this understanding from participants it does not matter whether the participants themselves are aware that this is what they are doing or not, or even whether they use the term autofiction at all.

For them, the wellbeing gain is what matters rather than the theoretical name for the writing techniques that enable it. In addition, it appears to be the case that the university, as a prestigious institution, a safe space, and a well-connected venue to which physical access was relatively easy was an appropriate organization to run such a project provided perceptual and emotional barriers to participation could be overcome.

It should be noted, however, that participants also expressed a strong level of interest in taking part in university-led activities off campus. In either case, the important element is the collaboration, putting researchers into contact with practitioners in order to enable new kinds of practice and improve people's lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Hywel Dix is Professor of English at Bournemouth University, UK. He has published extensively on the relationship between literature, culture and political change in contemporary Britain, most notably in Postmodern Fiction and the Break-Up of Britain (2010), After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-Up of Britain (Second Edition, 2013), Multicultural Narratives: Traces and Perspectives, co-edited with Mustafa Kirca (2018) and Compatriots or Competitors? Welsh, Scottish, English and Northern Irish Writing and Brexit in Comparative Contexts. His wider research focuses include modern and contemporary literature, critical cultural theory, authorial careers and autofiction. His monograph about literary careers entitled The Late-Career Novelist was published in 2017 and an edited collection of essays on Autofiction in English was published by Palgrave in 2018. He has recently completed a study entitled Autofiction and Cultural Memory with Routledge. He is very interested in how academic research can be put into partnership with community arts practitioners, especially in creative writing, to enhance personal development in a variety of ways among diverse participants and stakeholders, and has run or contributed to a number of projects to achieve this.

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The Ekphrasis of Abstract Paintings through Oulipo and Other Critical Techniques

Patrick Wright

Abstract:

This article emerges from a larger project: to develop new modes of responding, in ways that might be understood as ekphrastic, to modern and especially abstract works of art. It posits different ways of looking, in contrast with the poet believing that they know where to look and what is to be considered important. I want to emphasise the point that unknowing can be a creative device. Methodologically, I draw on Georges Perec and art historian Giovanni Morelli. What they have in common is a concern for how attention is directed and how to cultivate methods that enable an even or free-floating perception, where all elements of the image are given equal weight. Employing a pedagogic approach (where my poem might focus on trifling or marginal details, or show other ways of looking), and procedural and Oulipo techniques, I demonstrate an innovative mode of ekphrasis.

Keywords: ekphrasis; modern; art; poetry; image; abstraction; subjectivity

Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux observes that "images are more urgent [for poets] in the twentieth century than ever before" owing to what W.J.T. Mitchell called the "pictorial turn", "from a culture of words into a culture of images that began in the late nineteenth century" (Loizeaux 2008: 2-3; Mitchell 1995: 11-34). At the same time, while she identifies an upsurge in poets responding to art in a variety of modes, their prompt is usually one that pre-dates, often by some time, the major formal innovations associated with modern art, such as abstraction (Loizeaux 2008: 2-5). I acknowledge that, among the many and wide-ranging examples of ekphrasis during this period, there is a scepticism towards the artwork and how we should look at it, or, as Loizeaux writes, "a heightened emphasis on the provisional nature of the truth pictures convey […] a wariness, too, of the viewer's ability to see 'right,' and of the illusion-making nature of art that further complicates the difference between 'seem' and 'is'" (Loizeaux 2008: 23). Nevertheless, even though poets have toiled with the uncertainty of modernist images in the twentieth century and up to the present day, I notice that there remains a preference for figurative rather than abstract art.

I am aware that "figurative" and "abstract" are in no way a strict dichotomy and the region in between is highly nuanced (actually, there are many semi-figurative examples); thus, I want to clarify that by "abstract" I have in mind images with no trace of figures or the referential world, that are dominated by colour, brushstrokes, or formlessness. This might apply, then, to Mark Rothko's Seagram murals or Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), but likewise to early precedents, such as J.M.W. Turner's late and often considered "unfinished" seascapes.

Barbara Guest, influenced by the principles of Abstract Expressionism, was able to find related and corresponding possibilities for poetry. A perceived rupture in the

tradition of figuration, evinced in the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline, led her to a poetry that "extended vertically, as well as horizontally", and refused to "remain motionless within a linear structure" (Guest, in Ford and Winkfield 2006: 17). While this suggests direct engagement with an abstract image and re-presenting its formal attributes, poets responding to such artworks often move swiftly away from its surface. Instead, they tend to write about historical context, the biography of the artist, or their own life. Examples of this instinct to move away or outside the frame are: Jorie Graham, associating outwards, from the red of a Rothko's colour field painting to the red of a bird in the speaker's immediate vicinity ("For Mark Rothko" [1979: 85]); Tamar Yoseloff's *The City with Horns* (2011), where the social and cultural milieu around Pollock's abstract canvases is the focus of her poems; Ocean Vuong's "Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952", where, aside from the title, there is little in the poem that refers to Rothko's painting (Vuong 2017: 47); or the poet can sometimes look to the space around the artwork, the gallery, or other images in the exhibition, and incorporate the visitors or staff. One instance of this is Gillian Clarke's "The Rothko Room": "In this, the last room after hours in the gallery, / a mesh diffuses London's light and sound. / The Indian keeper nods to sleep, marooned / in a trapezium of black on red" (Clarke 1997: 106-107). Each time, the abstract image itself seems to be circumvented.

Similarly, I have identified a gap in criticism on the ekphrasis of abstract art. It is likely that James Heffernan has figuration in mind when he puts forward the idea that ekphrasis is "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 2004: 3). This bias is also implicit in the criticism of Mitchell and Murray Krieger (Mitchell 1995; Krieger 1992), while Shahar Bram asserts that ekphrasis is "tied up with the mimetic tradition" (Bram 2006: 372).

There has been a shift in recent decades from understanding ekphrasis as an act

of representation to one of *re-presentation*, or the production of a new work of art, resulting from the dynamic interaction between the poet and the image or artist (Kennedy 2012). However, even if poets are now more likely to think in terms of finding a "response" or "answers" to an image (rather than representation or description), they are still usually reliant on figures or narrative, even if this is partial or discreet (Brandon 2018).

Accordingly, I would like to address the seeming evasion of the abstract image, and how to stay with this image, rather than (as is often the temptation) to move outside or beyond it. It may be the case that context is useful in the process and finds its way in, at some point, but I want to propose techniques to work against skirting the image in a way that is premature, where first we begin by looking with new and critical perspectives. Though such techniques can also be applied to figurative images, they are perhaps more easily utilized with artworks where we are unsure of what we are seeing, that are subject to guesswork and indecision, or lack critical consensus as to their meaning. And, despite our proclivity to find form (as attested by the experience of pareidolia), looking at a monochromatic painting, for example, makes overt the fact that we have no script to follow. The figure/ground distinction is vague or non-existent, and the image becomes a screen on which to project our interpretations.

The new ways of looking I propose have emerged from my reading of existing scholarship. James Heffernan understands ekphrasis as a "paragonal … contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image" (Heffernan 2004: 6). Finding this too restrictive and emblematic of what David Kennedy refers to as the "representational model" of ekphrasis, I am persuaded, like him, to think more in terms of an "encounter" between word and image, opposed to rivalry or competition (Kennedy 2012; Kennedy

and Meek 2019). So too, my idea of an encounter is inspired by Camille Guthrie who cites Barbara Guest's meditation on Juan Gris in "Roses" and Kevin Young's "Cadillac Moon" (Guest 2016 [1973]: 128; Young 2003: 10). For Guthrie the relationship between poet and artist is not adversarial: it is based on "an interaction that doesn't require a winner… It revels in the image, even if the artwork is ironic, a spectacle. It asks, it reveals, it wonders" (Guthrie 2013).

With Guthrie's understanding in mind, I would like to develop ekphrastic modes that begin with a stance of humility and openness, allowing ourselves to be receptive and let the image guide our looking experience. This is because knowledge can be an obstacle in producing new writing: it can direct attention in a way that limits the scope of what can be perceived. As an alternative, I suggest an "unknowing" approach, which means looking at the artwork without imposing preconceived ideas or laying stress on certain signifiers. Similar to how a psychoanalyst can listen to a client's speech with evenly dispersed attention, without assuming the meanings or weight of words and phrases, it is possible to view an image in a way where everything is perceived as having equal value. For Wilfred Bion this meant "the capacity to forget, the ability to eschew desire and understanding" (Bion 1970: 51-52). Though this attitude of mind can be challenging, and the viewer might still be swayed by prior or supplementary knowledge of what should be deemed important, it can yield new insights or perspectives on the image.

Regardless of the approach or the kind of artwork the poet works with, we must deal with what we already know about the image, the artist, and other poems with the same or a similar prompt. This calls to mind Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton's idea of "ekphrastic inheritance": "when a writer composes a new ekphrastic poem while cognisant of previously published ekphrastic poetry on the same artwork. In such cases, the previous poems

become part of the ekphrastic tradition informing the new poem" (Hetherington and Atherton 2023: 16). This "knowing" approach can result in a recurrence of tropes or bringing well-travelled motifs to the fore; and this is the subject of satire in Julia Deakin's "After Rothko". In this poem, clichés are pronounced only to be denied in the style of *via negativa*: "This is not the night sky, teeming with more than we know. / This is not the abyss. Not a black hole. Not unremitting black" (Deakin 2018: 77). Such inheritance can allow us to see art in a way that is reflexive or ironic; not disavowing what we know but writing through it. Yet, the time is ripe for a methodology that may help us to see new and familiar images with fresh eyes.

I have thus furthered ways of working with or subverting what I know of paintings in a way that brings about new insights into the self, ekphrastic modes, and inventiveness in poetry. Indeed, though I agree with John Hollander and George Raitt in casting doubt on whether ekphrasis illuminates the image, and poetry arrives at a supplementary "truth" about artworks (Hollander 1988: 209), I think that poetry can illuminate the experience of seeing, the writing process, and the writer who sees. Raitt makes this distinction, and the important point that the poet responding to visual art can allow meaning to emerge at the limits of signification (Raitt 2006: 14-26). To do so, the poet needs to restrain from believing that they know what they are seeing or where to look. While it is impossible to view the artwork without any knowledge whatsoever, I proceed with the argument that new ways of writing about abstract art can be expanded through alternative ways of looking and critical techniques of engagement.

In what follows, I present strategies for steering my attention away from what I assume to be of vital importance in the image. This also means outlining the ways in which different modes of poetic ekphrasis can lead me away from where my lyric "I" might take me; how by prohibiting some ways of looking, I facilitate others. I draw then on the

Oulipo school and procedural methods (Motte 1986; Conte 1991), while suggesting that a systematic or rule-based approach could be one way of dealing with the ekphrasis of abstract images. I also examine how a more deliberate use of critical writing on images can alter my lyric habits, direct my awareness to seemingly insignificant details, marginalia, or the paratext. This can provide new ideas and language to work with, resulting in a poem that looks different from what I usually write. One example is the effect of collaging texts or quotations together. The idea of a found text (at least as a starting point) is thus discussed, along with the cento form.

My proclivity to take flight from the image can be seen as part of a contemporary interest in moving beyond representation or testing its limits. I have been motivated in this endeavour by my reading of Anne Carson, Emily Berry, and Deryn Rees-Jones — poets who, through their ekphrasis, do not gesture to figures or narrative. Instead, the prompt is used to generate the poem (as formally analogous, as a source of inspiration, as a metaphor for lyric themes, and so on) (Carson 1998, 2006; Berry 2017; Rees-Jones 2012). Simultaneously, I am inspired by poems like Moniza Alvi's "I Would Like to be a Dot in a Painting by Miró": to include the lyric within my experiments with form and to promote ways of seeing which might be considered subjective (Alvi 2008 [1993]: 20). Rather than begin with or studiously incorporate knowledge of the artwork, I associate Alvi's poem with poets in the habit of trying to look naïvely or playfully misperceiving what the artist intended. Another example is Susan Fealy's "Gouache, Sheep Skulls, Fence Bracket". She writes: "Look closer. / The skulls are singing, / More like bird-beaks than sheep" (Fealy 2017).

Like other poets responding to modernist art, such as Tamar Yoseloff in *The City with Horns* and Mary Oliver (see her poem "Franz Marc's Blue Horses"), I often rely on biographical or historical details to compensate for the absence of referents (Yoseloff 2011; Oliver 2014: 43). In "Nocturne", for example, I employ description and have recourse to the imagination and wider milieu. I was inspired by Charles Simic's *Dime-store Alchemy* (2011) and Pascale Petit's *What the Water Gave Me* (2013). In these ekphrastic collections, while there is still occasional reference to a figure or object (in the work of Joseph Cornell and Frida Kahlo, respectively), the art serves as a springboard for the poet to make use of extraneous content, such as biography, history, or literary context In "Nocturne" (based upon Whistler's simplified composition, tonal relationships, and atmospheric effects), I move from reflections prior to research in the first stanza ("Over the Thames are ghost trails of rockets / reflecting like stars on the water's edge") towards a more "knowing" attitude *vis-à-vis* the painting, after having read about it, in the final stanza ("In the courtroom, it was hung upside down"):

Nocturne

After James McNeill Whistler

Over the Thames are smoke trails of rockets
reflecting like stars on the water's edge —
cinders showering down, a Rorschach test.

They say this is a cause to celebrate:
the paint vague, stirring the mind's slideshow —
dabs of green, yellow. They double, cascade,

coalesce into a Manhattan by night.
Or are they strip-lights seen through fabric?
Much begins with deliberate accidents.

Spectators gaze, blinkered by their habits.
Pale to themselves, not quite transparent.
In the courtroom, it was hung upside down.

To counter my instinct to move outside the abstract image and reach for context, I put into action strategies that allow me to stay inside the frame, at least to produce a first draft. With Rothko's murals in mind, it is easy to move away from the canvas and assume there is little to describe or respond to beyond colour. I understand this in contrast with figurative works such as Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560), where my eyes are drawn in towards the ploughman, the sun, the ship, and so forth. This could be due to several factors, such as knowledge of the painting and the "ekphrastic inheritance" of well-known poems that have instilled partial bias. W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (2007: 57) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (2000: 212) are canonical examples, the latter underscoring the key visual features: "Icarus", the "farmer", and the "sea".

To bypass or at least become aware of my visual prejudices I explore free-floating or evenly dispersed attention. This includes an effort to look closely at the image over time, bracketing preconceptions, not knowing where figure and ground are situated, where the focal point is, what is central and peripheral, and so on. I have thus read the Oulipo poets, whom I see as advancing ways of looking that are "flat" or even and open to the possibility that everything in the visual field could be of interest or the locus of meaning. Particularly apt is Georges Perec's proposal in his essay "The Street":

Note down what you can see.
Anything worthy of note going on.
Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you? Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see… You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless (Perec 2008: 46-56).

I have also repurposed the thoughts of nineteenth-century art historian and critic Giovanni Morelli. His attitude to looking involved observing clues in trifling details (an ear or hand for instance) rather than in composition, narrative, and subject matter, which would likely be the foci for students, copyists, or imitators. As Carlo Ginzburg explains, the Morellian method involves working like a "detective", "discovering, from clues unnoticed by others, the author in one case of a crime, in the other of a painting" (Ginzburg 1980: 8). As such, the artist's identity is paradoxically disclosed most reliably in details least attended to. In my writing, I am less concerned about the artist's identity. Instead, the method I describe helps to shift my focus away from what I assume are the significant components of the artwork and towards the parts to which I had not yet attributed meaning.

Other than myself, at least one poet has looked to apply such a strategy to abstract art. Liz Cashdan, observing her tendency to "find representations of objects" in Angela Baum's abstract paintings, regards my approach of "seeing flatly" as innovative and has successfully re-utilized it within her series of poetic responses (Cashdan 2019). Here, like in my poems, elements in the image are itemised in the poem in a way that appears disinterested. I found this deceptively "objective" recording useful in galleries, where my attention span was rather short (if my interest was not piqued). Additionally, even when time and attention were given to the act of seeing, my visual literacy skills were at times impeding. My knowledge of where or how to look, particularly regarding composition, modelling, or the picture plane, resulted in overlooking certain details, such as marginalia or curios. This led me to ponder whether these aspects (those originally missed), rather than figures or narrative, could serve as the wellspring of a poem.

I tried to look at what I assumed were insignificant or trivial marks when viewing first-hand the work of Hughie O'Donoghue and Henry Moore at the Whitworth Art Gallery, but I later rejected these as disinterested exercises. My initial thought was to arrange to view the images privately in the hope that distraction would be kept to a minimum (e.g., background chatter). But I later found inspiration in the unwanted stimuli. The space itself, whether in the research room or in the holdings, offered

additional points of interest, such as a sense of surveillance. The *in-situ* experience was, however, only successful in producing a first draft; and I was naïve in my belief that under such conditions my focus on the artwork would be intensified. I now see this as a conceptual stage through which subtle details emerged, and in later revisions I re-integrated personal themes.

Sina Queyras writes how the ekphrastic poet "doesn't … try to read a painting from the top left corner, describing it square by square the way an artist might have blocked it in", but she then goes on to wonder "what that would be like" (Queyras 2010). I have also been directed by my reading of Cole Swensen, who, as Kenneth Goldsmith notes, has tried to "get beyond the 'emotions recollected in tranquillity' paradigm." She sees this as what "conceptual poetry" in its widest sense looks to accomplish. For Swensen, in fields of visuality, the ways in which we see and "read" have not changed much, based, as they are, on the primary figure/ground distinction. What has changed is the subject matter:

Increasingly, the visual arts and some poetry have worked to distil subject matter so that core structural elements and their dynamics are laid bare or at least made much more apparent. But it seems that the visual arts have been more successful at this than poetry, and in part, it is because, after a very promising start [translating cubism's geometric and perspectival shifts into writing], poetry took a turn which confused distillation with simplification, turning away from that which would expose underlying dynamics apparent through rhythm, echo, and juxtaposition, and towards simpler language, where "simpler" was understood to be both "clearer" and "truer," with the result being poetic language dominated by subject matter (Swensen, in Goldsmith 2008).

I like how Swensen posits that "ekphrasis as a tool can help poetry by historically analysing how the visual arts have achieved this" (Goldsmith 2008). I understand "this" as referring to how modernist art has been successful, through techniques of abstraction, to emphasise and make overt its formal construction. Moreover, with the images I have in mind, "form" can be indistinguishable from "content" (the figure/ground distinction collapsing).

Thus, ekphrasis can be a re-presentation of the formal elements of the image, without looking to reduce the poem to subject matter. Recognizing an affinity with Swensen and linking her evaluation with my own interest in answering to the forms of abstract art, I applied the idea implied by Queyras. I started by placing a grid over a painting by Wassily Kandinsky, then studied each section in turn, cataloguing elements in a systematic manner.

Given the degree of nebulousness, I was led to respond pareidolically to each part, seeing for instance "a ladybird in disguise", "a snail on the pavement", and a "black swan". Initially, I gave six sections of the painting equal treatment and engaged in freewriting activities (provoking the aforementioned images). I discovered that my written observations were incongruous, though were ultimately brought together under a unifying lyric theme (like in my poem "Abstraction", below).

I then played with swapping phrases around, corresponding with the formal arrangement of the image.

I also recalled the Comte de Lautréamont's statement: how such juxtapositions are often as "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" (Ducasse 1953 [1869]: 327). I began by seeing the picture as though anything could be as exciting as anything else. Soon, however, some parts became more alluring, and my openness to finding unintended forms and shapes meant that any narrative I imposed was illogical. My poem only emerged when I began to write in a lyric mode, taking the parts I mis-perceived and weaving a more personal theme around them. What I retain in the final version is a tabulated form, a schema that is suggestive of a canvas with no centre, that has several foci which are also coordinated:

Abstraction

Alongside Alma Thomas

the greatest truths I've found are
that god is a ladybird in disguise
                              Hades will
remain mute to my protests
after the apocalypse I must nail
meaning down through inscape
                              the choice to
go on living arrives
when I feel vertigo over a cliff
                              the sound of
immanence can be heard
as the rain blitzkriegs my glass
                              one meaning
of martyr is to bear witness
when I save a snail on the pavement
I save humanity
                              at least Christ
only had one crucifixion
I need a ghost in the machine

science is just a line of paradigms
I need my black swans and white crows
                              my
words must serve as a requiem
love is beyond Aristotle's categories
                              all these
are variations on a theme

Looking to undo standard dichotomies of figure/ground, centre/margins, and form/content required practice and inspired unorthodox methods. For example, I rotated some artworks sideways or turned them upside down: simple actions in themselves, yet highly effective ways to defamiliarize the artwork and subvert expressive modes. This was easier with abstract or "formless" artworks, such as Turner's final seascapes. With these, I began by shuffling and reshuffling a set of postcard reproductions on the surface of a table: creating new images and simulating a personally curated "exhibition". Deidre Lynch links this method and my poem (below) with the "scenic myriorama: a parlor amusement from the 1820s, which was touted to its purchasers as being the source *in potentia* of a multitude of landscapes" (Lynch 2024: 4-5):

Imaginary Museum

On this Sunday autumnal morning
I arrange a set of postcards on the table's
surface — all Turners from the 1840s
with billowing waves and detonating suns.

          I juxtapose them in ways entirely my
own —
          I rotate them in the style of a gyre:
          the ships and shorelines disappearing
          till all that's left is one big creation
myth —

          like how once everything we
know
          was crammed inside the size of
a dice.
          All this at some remove from
the Clore
          with its taut ropes and
exclusion zones.

          Under my hands I see
the paint sail
          outwards and into the
grain — the edges
          fizzling away and
atmospheres escaping
          into the larger lozenge:
the place of prayer.

I also tried adopting a Martian attitude, which relied on a state of negative capability, making things strange, or "resting in doubts and uncertainties" (Keats 1958 [1817]: 193-194). In doing so, however, I found that I was still applying knowledge to my poems. Indeed, I distinguish my dispersed attention tactics from the Martian poets and how they immediately saw objects as "foreign". In Craig Raine's "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home", books are "Caxtons" and "mechanical birds

with many wings" (Raine 2000 [1979]: 95-96). This poem could be said to belong to a romantic tradition: returning to a child-like perception of the world. Though the Martian poets were projecting personal content ("Caxtons" and "mechanical birds" are not "objective"; they say something about the poet), my initial phase usually involves procedural rules. Rather than have, from the beginning, the imagination in operation, a system helps to avoid making the image a screen for fantasy (at least initially).

I find that employing a system works against my ego-based habits and the aspect of the lyric mode that emphasizes personal themes. Eschewing the romantic myth of "innocent" vision or finding a deeper truth, I embraced the postmodern tenet that I can only represent another mediation of what I see and can never gain access to the image *in itself* (outside of language or cultural frameworks) (Jay 1994: 8). Though I will always see by way of lenses, it has been crucial to draw attention to these while looking at how they might be exchanged for others. But I find it necessary to re-introduce a lyric element in my final poems (if there has been an initial phase of self-effacement). Not only are aspects of my life always present to some extent (whether I like it or not), inserting these into my poem gives it an emotional core.

An example of the approach I outline is "Black Square": a poem based on Kazimir Malevich's painting of the same title (below). I chose this image because it has no clear figures or centre; as such, the principal areas of focus are prohibited, and I am forced to look for details I do not normally seek out. I am faced with an image characterised by flatness, aside from physical properties such as the frame, the brushstrokes, the texture, and so on.

With Perec's method I became aware that, in terms of surface area, white is just as prevalent as black. The title is also misleading: the picture is not black but contains a sprinkling of colours ("Closer … this is only a semblance of black").

Neither is the painting a square: this fact is in plain sight (though we might not notice it at first and may need a critical source to point it out). These initial impressions, after looking "stupidly" as Perec suggests, shaped the form of my eventual poem. It looks like a slightly distorted square with use of lineation and space: the borders of the image determine the line breaks of the poem.

 The white space around the words hints at traces of hues and craquelure; while the space around my poem's edges signifies the white bezel that surrounds the "black" centre. I have considered the size of the margins, and these are just as important as the words and are a vital part of the poem. It is a "hybrid" poem, as Hetherington and Atherton read it, which employs aspects of the prose poem while combining these with the concrete poem's deployment of the right margin (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 161-62). Aside from the formal aspects, much of the poem is concerned with seeing flatly. I noticed my reflection in the glass covering the artwork, which tempted me to write about myself in a way that increased self-awareness. Though I wanted to resist this, and I announce: "I don't want to see myself seeing back, not seeing black" despite my call to "see flatly, the way Freud listened", I reveal my angst in what the blackness evokes ("the starlessness between galaxies") and how "sense deprivation" gives rise to forms in obscurity (e.g., a running "buffalo"). Likewise, I notice my associations outside the canvas (Gallipoli, Suprematism, Russian icons, or references to Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*) (Dostoyevsky 2008 [1869]: 228-229). The formal aspects of the poem contain the imaginative leaps, while my questions express doubts (in contrast to the assumed academic authority of art historians). While my poem is, in part, a reflection on the failure of the disinterested attitude I began with, my questioning seeks to elaborate what I see in terms of unknowing (as defined earlier). The accuracy of my recollections is unimportant, giving a fictive and notional quality to the final poem:

Black Square

After Kazimir Malevich

In this light   the surface is a black mirror
I don't want to see

myself seeing back   not seeing black
Behind cut glass a black

cat in a coal bunker   fur curled in a
corner   Learn to see flat

see flatly   the way Freud listened
Does matt paint glisten

a sea-creature?   or is this Vantablack
sense deprivation

an anechoic chamber?   The only sound is
the nervous system

heart hurtling inside my cranium   Here
I see the starlessness

between galaxies   the black   of
nothing quite happening

of consciousness closing   fastening
Could this be a Madonna

and Child   figures excised   (Suprematist
and still   a mother

and child)?   This black   has a dead
Christ uncanniness

(Holbein's panel for Prince Myshkin)
This is also Gallipoli

field artillery (out into history)   Closer
this is only a semblance

of black   a rainbow   the web of
a shattered phone

A buffalo torso legs   a head hurrying
towards some wilderness

Another method was to make use of free association over successive viewings. This led to a series of poems divided into numbered stanzas. I made use of the temporal device (seeing the image at different times) to work against the idea of a unified, humanist model of the self and what Swensen sees, succeeding Wordsworth, as the "emotions recollected in tranquillity paradigm" (Swensen, in Goldsmith 2008; Wordsworth 1989 [1801]: 73). Pursuing this rule, neglected details are brought to the fore. By unknowing what I am seeing, re-discovering the image with each viewing, I become aware of other particulars.

Although prior knowledge can be an

obstacle in producing new writing, I also see potential in becoming more cognizant of how critical writing can have an auxiliary role in the poetry-making process, as I will now illustrate. The distinctiveness of modern, especially abstract, art lies in how its meaning often depends on critics, theorists, or art historians. The discourse surrounding the image or object not only informs our viewing but also plays an integral role in defining the artwork (Krauss 1986: 162). Thus, my ekphrasis can sometimes be understood as a triangular relationship between image, poem, and criticism — where the last item subverts what I know (or think I know) about the image. The knowledge I imbibe through critical texts can then be employed during a phase of freewriting or assembling a preliminary draft. Examples include how an essay on an artwork might be incorporated into my poem, responding to a quotation, distilling ideas in an exhibition catalogue, or the use of the paratext. If my initial draft has an academic tone, I will subsequently blend this with a personal engagement.

One case here is my poem "Portrait of Katherine Mansfield" (below). Notes were first gleaned through a visual analysis of a portrait by Anne Rice, then through commentaries by art historians and critics. This has been useful as a technique during my first phase of writing. I was inspired by the cento form, since this demonstrated how a poem could be constructed in fragments and cobbled together in a way that produces meaning and elicits new insights. This involved collating and condensing quotations and phrases, rearranging and editing them, which then became a spur for a second phase of writing. My re-ordering is inspired by collage and is a way of linking my poems with the spirit of Modernism. This is evident in my poem on Mansfield:

Portrait of Katherine Mansfield

Alongside Anne Rice

I never dreamt of coughing blood the colour

of this dress.
Nor spending the English winters abroad. I
only dreamt
of ending stories abruptly, using words the
way a cello rises
and falls. As a girl my dreams were an atlas.
To escape windy
Wellington, leave on a liner, find my fictive
home. I wrote
of jazzy palettes, low-neck bohemian garb.
How life could
be all syntax, experiment. From Wilde's
prose and a Maori
breast, I adored the fetish, torn between
gestalt and imago.
My red dress fills most of the canvas. As an
émigré, I'd share
a cigarette, strut in a kimono. At parties, I'd
laud suffragettes
or write vignettes in bold strokes like the
Fauves. Aroused,
I'd return from the colonies, my personas
piling like a house
of cards. I'd be polyamorous, endless rhythm.
I'd embody
the fleeting and contingent. In the end, I'd
ride a falling star.

In this instance the form can be construed as a prose poem that resists narrative. Sentences are provided as statements of equal bearing, resembling the flatness of Rice's canvas.

I began *in medias res*, suggesting no single focus. Parataxis and vivid imagery were employed to parallel the vibrant colours of the Fauvist style. I opted to experiment with dramatic monologue; I speak in the voice of Mansfield and make use of prosopopoeia, as if she were speaking from a moment after her death. I did so to subvert my lyric voice, which, by this point, I felt had become too predictable. I saw the techniques I was developing as a means of writing poems that looked like someone else had written them. This can feel like a creative achievement, and it often comes about as an effect of unknowing the artwork in the way I describe (along with relinquishing elements of my style or identity) and

integrating other sources in the process.

Particularly valuable has been initial research into images, artists, or ways of looking, which then suggested alternative points of view, a precise lexicon, or an unintentional ekphrasis by a critic, which functioned as a starting point for my poems. While, as I have said, my eyes are often directed or certain signifiers are privileged, critical writing has illuminated parts of the image that I had not yet seen or could *not* see. This includes criticism that reads the life of the artist or how they worked. John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" has set up a precedent in this regard, since it provides a meditation on Parmigianino's working methods and Mannerist ways of looking (Ashbery 2007 [1975]: 68-83).

My poem "Lessons on How to View a Mondrian" has similar (though less ambitious) aims. I began with a blog article on Mondrian by James Elkins, which I stripped down to prominent phrases. Next, I focused on the line, paying attention to cadence and rhythm, cutting words, and using synonyms when internal rhyme was possible. I then re-ordered lines, again looking for rhyme, but also to convey skittishness and disjunction. The process of adaptation went on until I had a first draft. Here the poem emerges out of a pre-existing text and the dynamic is triangular rather than dualistic: my poem fuses my own idiosyncratic way of looking at the image with observations imparted by the critic (Elkins 2010). I end with lines that comment on the seemingly more comprehensible activity of a painter in comparison to that of a poet, like Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" (2005 [1957]: 112):

Lessons on How to View a Mondrian

First glance simple, though it's a
masquerade.
Off-white, black stripes, pale lemon. The
canvas
is the whole universe, with nothing beyond
it.
Stop and a world unfurls from a bud:

scarabs,
teeth, X-rays, halos. Luscious surfaces,
rubbed
to a weave. At the borders of stripes, they
aren't
just lines where black meets white or blue or
yellow. At the cordon you'll see how he's
changed

his mind. If you bend down, look up against
the
light, it shows the warp and weft at forty-
five
degrees to stripes. A closer look shows a
stairway
of paint. In some parts, there's been no paper
to
guide him. He's kept his hand from
wavering,
joyed in the tremble and feints. When you
put
up an easel in a museum, everyone talks to
you.
　　If you sit and write a poem, nobody
does.

I have also been led to work this way through my reading of Anne Carson, especially in what is often called "the lyric essay". Her work "The Glass Essay", for instance, can be seen as a poetic form marked by lineation and organised in tercets and quatrains (Carson 1995: 1-38).

This form is open to experimentation and often comprises what Lia Purpura understands as "provisional responses" as opposed to certitude (consistent with the questioning attitude I set out earlier) (Purpura 2007: 97). Polyvocality and code-switching may also feature, and I value how these techniques enable a personal or objective tone, even within the same poem.

I am working, then, within an established postmodern lineage of poets writing critically and self-reflexively about images and/or the act of representation. Again, in this context, I have Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" in mind. While my poems focus on abstract or modernist artworks, I have found Ashbey's poem

useful when writing in a way that is open about my act of looking and the process by which I work. This can often occur on site, while I look at the image and record my techniques of looking in a notebook. This is important as a generative strategy, and when revised into a poem the result can resemble an *ars poetica*, one that reflects on my thoughts and concerns (e.g., "Black Square"). "Ars Ekphrasis" (inspired by a poem of that title by Paul T. Corrigan [2019]) is another example. This has Turner's late seascapes in mind, but it also serves as a condensation of my larger project.

Ars Ekphrasis

Is my subject broad or specific? Does it
include dreams? Does my focus extend to
scenes of sketching by the sea & things in
galleries? Can it evoke prints yet to exist?
Should I say 'abstract', 'liminal', 'non-
figurative', 'colour field'? Are such pictures
even finished? A key question seems to be:
Does spending long on detail suggest
illness? Is it perverse to spend time with
shadows? Should my poems be written
in sittings? Do I forbid words & efface the
trick? Is the world there to interpret? Is the
author dead or merely asleep? Is a poem a
provisional system? Might I write theory
elegantly & done in a few syllables? Should I
care if there never was a Shield of Achilles?
Should I have fun playing with the partial &
indistinct? Do I see cloud patterns or draw
ovals in sand? If I find a border, is this
happenstance?

To conclude, I have presented different ways of looking. These are: looking as free-floating or evenly dispersed attention; observing clues in trifling details (an ear or hand for instance) rather than in composition, narrative, or subject matter; looking in a way that seeks to undo the standard dichotomies of figure/ground, centre/margins, and form/content; seeing the artwork over successive viewings; and regarding the critical discourse surrounding the image as integral to it, and using this material as a way to direct or inform the ways in which I look. I see these as vital for poets to know and practice because they work against preconceptions or prior

knowledge of what is or should be considered significant to the artwork. In other words, they can be useful in unknowing the image: to pave the way for new discoveries or highlight aspects that we might not have seen otherwise. Each tactic either subverts what we think we know or offers new perspectives as a way of inviting new modes of writing. These ways of looking can also overcome the idea that there is little to write about on the abstract image: the poet feeling stuck or limited. In such instances, they can act as a foil against the urge to reach for context or to project aspects of the self onto the artwork.

Even if the latter is seen as desirable, the techniques I describe can warp or alter habitual or unconscious lyric impulses, such as reflexive distancing from the artwork. To stay with the image, at least for a while, allowing what and how we see to shape our poem (suggesting a dialogue *with* the artwork), can also affect the eventual form; and it is important to emphasise that in my poems, form and content are not a simple dichotomy. Formal rules are linked to content to the extent that this apparent dualism breaks down into a "system" or what is often understood as "procedural form" (Conte 1991). I set out initially to write in a way that was disinterested with the assumption that this would help transform my poetic voice. Not only did I find, however, that disinterestedness was difficult to attain, but I also found that it rarely led to a successful poem. What it did result in was a first draft that involved novel insights on abstract art; it was only after I revised this, though, with the lyric in mind (personal thoughts and feelings) that it felt like a meaningful poem. Likewise, as I pursued a system of procedural rules, I would eventually — like a Möbius loop — re-inscribe aspects of my identity in the process of self-effacement. I do think though that it was first necessary to apply the techniques I have presented, and then, only then, to bring in personal themes (in the manner of a dialectic), to construct a different kind of ekphrastic poem.

BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Wright has a poetry collection, *Full Sight of Her* (Eyewear), which was nominated for the John Pollard Prize. He has also been twice shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland, Poetry Wales, The North, Gutter*, and *London Magazine*. He has a second collection, *Exit Strategy*, which is scheduled for publication by Broken Sleep Books in January, 2025.

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"I love this gory business": The Art of Female Hedonism in the Poetry of Chelsey Minnis and Sara Peters

Sophia Georghiou

Abstract

Does the incorporation of sensory details contribute to the hedonistic experience within poetry? This essay discusses the concept of hedonism in poetry, specifically the intimate connection between sensory richness, self-awareness and the poet-reader relationship. The poems analysed are "Sectional" by Chelsey Minnis and "Playing Lesbians" by Sara Peters, specifically focusing on how both poets employ vivid sensory details, figurative language, and tone to create immersive experiences for the reader. Moreover, the essay also reflects on the broader themes of gender, materialism, and societal critique embedded in both poems. Ultimately, this exploration aims to uncover new techniques and perspectives, fostering a sense of liberation for one's own writing practice within the realm of sensory hedonism.

Keywords: female pleasure, embodied language, hedonism, male gaze, female gaze, contemporary poetry, patriarchy, physicality

Not often am I pulled from reality by a poem so vividly that I wish to inhabit its space; a space where language transcends its communicative purpose, becoming a personal sanctuary of pleasure. As a female-identifying artist, I have always been interested in the concept of female pleasure: specifically, how embodied language can serve as an expressor of contemporary hedonism. Derived from the ancient Greek, "psychological or motivational hedonism" is the theory "that only pleasure or pain motivates us" (Moore 2019).

In the following essay, I will argue that pleasure and its embodiment in traditional literature is primarily the conceptual product of the male gaze, and that contemporary female poets like Chelsey Minnis and Sara Peters have been reacting against this tradition, creating a new form of female-focused literary hedonism. For these poets, hedonism isn't a masculine-normative reaction against societal restraints (to the further empowerment of men), but an exploration of unbridled feminine embodiment: a deconstruction of patriarchal value- and power-structures, and a reclamation of *lived* female physicality and pleasure. To that end, the somatic language of this female-driven hedonism is that of the female gaze: one of encompassment rather than dissection; a means to reclaim and reconstruct the physicality of female experience as a whole, normatively dismembered and decontextualized by the male-gaze.

In general terms, whilst the male gaze "dissects" (Mulvey 1975) the female gaze is holistic. In traditional hedonistic contexts, the language of pleasure has been markedly masculine: that of violence, of recipients of pleasure, not givers. Contrary to this trend, female poets like Minnis and Peters have explored a different, markedly female language of pleasure: that of giver and receiver, pleasure and pain, strength

and vulnerability. To that end, I will examine and compare examples of traditional male-focused literary hedonism to illustrate the aforementioned giver-recipient pleasure gap. As a poet, I don't want to focus solely on my own pleasure: I want to encompass "whole" situations, to slide under their skin and inhabit them as they inhabit me. This is a core quality of Peters and Minnis' work. Their poems aren't sweet, palatable or limited to one point-of-view. They say not only: *Here I am!* but also: *Here is what matters! Here is the reality of it, flaws and all!* Re-reading the poems "Playing Lesbians" and "Sectional" for this essay, I realized I had to abandon, unwillingly, the notion of writing *about* them and instead attempt to write *in* to them, to crawl under their skin and inhabit them, creating my own "gory" poems.

Whilst superficially about two people sinking into a couch, Peters' "Playing Lesbians" is actually about power: the speaker being seemingly intent on abandoning her "moral compass" and hedonistically "sinking" into the pleasure of a memory about their childhood babysitter. "Sectional" also explores power-structure related themes, whilst seemingly being about eating a caramel. In terms of my writing practice, I find both poems fascinating with respect to the way they *inhabit* the complex physicality and pleasure of "sinking" feelings. My own writing practice certainly feels like "sinking" into a mode of pleasure. Writing in public feels awkward and uncomfortable. As with sex, I need privacy in order to shed my inhibitions, to feel free from judgement, perceived or real. Secondly, when writing, I need music in order to *feel* and construct the rhythm and form of a poem. It is not unusual that the combination of music and relaxants like alcohol make me break into dance: I need to move my body as I write, to inhabit the literal *body*, the *pleasure* of a poem. Both "Playing Lesbians" and "Sectional" encapsulate this process: that of "sinking" into a realm where pleasure and body (viewed holistically) take centre stage.

A poem of mine titled "Pirouette" explores this notion of "sinking" (again, both literally and emotionally). The poem begins with the speaker and a man on a couch. The man talks of how he has used date-rape drugs on women. The speaker, shocked and afraid, performs oral sex on the man, conceptualizing the act as that of performing a pirouette as a child:

> The way to pirouette is to
> perfect your spotting technique,
> relaxing the neck, focusing the eyes,
> and whipping the head.
> (Georghiou 2021)

The speaker's sinking to her knees is literally one of sinking into memory, embodying the taut physicality of performance as art, of art as performance, the somatic inhabitability of memory as movement, as ungraspable fluidity. Like Peters and Minnis, my writing practice is one of holistically-orientated female hedonism: whilst exploring topics of grief, pain, alienation, and sexuality, my poems are in fact expressions of *pleasure*, of fully inhabiting myself, my life, both physically and emotionally, my experiences as a woman; of embodying the complex, contradictory "whole" and thus allowing the beautiful and the dark, the hopeful and the harrowing, to be, as they are—at times impossibly so—equally true and false. Reader responses to my own writing have highlighted the affecting nature of, and potential to use more, vivid sensory imagery. Recognizing this, I began to reflect on poets I admire (Ariana Reines, Rachel Long, Brenda Shaughnessy and Hala Alyan, to name a few), noticing a common thread: rich descriptions of sensory-focused pleasure. This realization prompted me to explore the place of the "senses" and the "sensual" in my practice, and how these factors can create an immersive experience for the reader. The quotation prefacing the title of this essay is a line in Sara Peters' "Playing Lesbians". The extravagance of the phrase "*I love*" (Peters, 2023: 4) felt apt given the central themes of this essay. I will refer to the above-defined

concept of "female hedonism" throughout this essay to underpin the distinct methods used in both "Playing Lesbians" and "Sectional" and how both poets indulge in a distinctly embodied form of feminine hedonism, shaping new ways in which to engage the "poetic mind" (Makoha 2021).

In contrast to Minnis and Peters, consider Keats: a poet of the Romantic era known for his sensual language and vivid imagery. Whilst indeed rooted in the language of pleasure, on closer inspection, one soon notices a distinct giver/receiver pleasure gap in Keats' work. In the poem "Fancy", Keats uses the feminine third-person pronoun "her" to describe an experience of pleasure. However, in his use of this term, Keats establishes a distance between the speaker and the female-gendered recipient, making it clear that this pleasure is *not* mutual: it belongs to the speaker, not the "her" in question. In fact, in this context, pleasure is mostly readable as a projection of the speaker's desire, not the addressee's. For example, consider the passage: "Then let the winged Fancy wander / Through the thought still spread beyond her" (Keats 1820: 122). In this extract, terms like "winged", "wander" and "spread," whilst suggesting sexual gratification, indicate that this gratification is not mutual; Keats' choice of pronoun ("her," rather than the more personal, emotionally inclusive "you") indicates that this pleasure is in fact *his* pleasure, and is thus exclusive.

Similarly, Anthony Hecht's "The Vow" depicts an experience of pleasure and suffering through a vivid, hedonistic lens. The poem explores a father's grief-laden reaction to the miscarriage of his unborn child, and the guilt of having originally wanted an abortion: "The frail image of God / Lay spilled and formless. Neither girl nor boy, / But yet blood of my blood, nearly my child" (Hecht 1967: 35). The poem appears in his collection *The Hard Hours,* and focuses exclusively on the speaker's pain and pleasure while largely neglecting the experience of his wife, the subject of the event. Instead of trying to describe or

include his wife's (the poem's object-recipient) or even his dead child's experience, Hecht focuses solely on his own gratification. To that end, in giving the miscarried child its voice, he gives it *his* desired voice, creating a self-gratifying echo chamber of its absence: "Do not recall / Pleasure at my conception" (Hecht 1967: 35). In this sense the poem is limited to one point of view, encapsulating the traditional male-focused hedonistic emphasis on personal gratification or self-centredness. This perspective, which highlights the speaker's near-solipsistic focus on their own sensual and emotional fulfilment and the priority of their own cogito, though hedonistic in its ideals, is a far cry from the experientially holistic empathy found in the hedonism of contemporary female poetry, such as that of Minnis and Peters.

In the opening line of "Playing Lesbians", Peters writes "In my dreams I am a moral child" (Peters 2013:4). Interestingly, the poem that follows is a self-aware objection to this statement. Almost practical in their tone, the next two lines "And once I tire of performing / My idiosyncrasies" (Peters 2013:4) preface the rest of the poem: an account of what seems be a clandestine, psychosexual relationship between the speaker and their childhood babysitter. While the poem's opening lines convey a normative self-assuredness, the rest of the poem is littered with decadent, physical language, luring the reader from the overarching theme into the emotionally confused physicality of the speaker's experience. Peters allows the poem to "sink" into the private language of pleasure, a "vocabulary that is only known" (Adcock 2014) to, and thus interpretable by, the characters in the poem. Upon first reading, the poem's motive seemed not to be that of an ethical critique on the relationship between a child and their babysitter, but rather to explore the fractured, highly physical nature of memory. There are references to sensory affliction throughout the poem. For example, consider the following passage, in which an highly *affecting* amalgam of the senses is expressed in just four lines:

As I watched (with one eye that wasn't
Pressed into the couch) the wind shunt one
of her hairs
Over the hardwood floor, and heard
A sudden rain begin, silvery and short
(Peters 2013:4)

The reader is invited to enter this sensory, all-encompassing space through the alluring use of alliteration ("watched", "with", "wasn't", "wind", "wood") and soft sibilances ("pressed", "shunt", "hairs", "sudden", "silvery" and "short"), enhancing the poem's sonic texture and lulling the reader into a linguistic pattern wherein they have no choice but to experience it viscerally and wholly: *seeing* the wind shunt a strand of the babysitter's hair and *hearing* the silvery, short rain.

I read Minnis' "Sectional" a few months after Peters' "Playing Lesbians". Interestingly, "Sectional" felt not so much like an extension of Peters' poem, but rather a valorisation of two specific lines: "my babysitter and I / Are somewhere still sinking // Into a dimpled couch" (Peters 2013:4). Coming to "Sectional" after "Playing Lesbians" meant that I read Minnis' poem in a more *physical* way. Like with Peters' work, I was struck by her use of visceral language. Consider, for example, her description of the act of eating a caramel:

. . . . *launching my*
molars . . . . . . *into the cluster* . . . .
in order to . . . . . *locate* . . . .
. . . .
. . . . *the nucleus* . . . .
. . . .
. . . . *of the caramel in my mouth*
and . . . . *maul the unformed mass* . . .
. . . . *with my tongue*
(Minnis 2019:23).

Here, Minnis' highly complex, somatic portrait of the act of consuming a caramel can't but affect the reader, leaving them clamouring for their own hypothetical caramel. The language is careful and exact: the verb "launching" alludes to a forceful and deliberate act, a literal ascent into pleasure; the long-vowel assonance of the term "molars" evokes a heavy, lugubrious biting or

grinding motion; and the terms "locate" and "nucleus" introduce a near-scientific sense of precision, of embodied self-awareness, to what is in fact a fairly trivial and mundane act. In general, the language seeks to defamiliarise the action, creating an euphoric sense of near-climactic dissociation, thus immersing the reader in the physicality and emotional pleasure of the speaker's experience. Minnis' use of ellipses is highly distinctive. The ellipsis, indicating a cutting off, or elision, has a breathy physicality to it which well suits Minnis' hedonistic style. The speaker is seemingly breathless and confused, their thoughts jumping around, holistically one but individually non sequiturs, occurring at irregular intervals and with varying intensity in a pattern reminiscent of the literal physical effects of pleasure: the increase of pulse rate, breathing, and sensory over cerebral logic which prelude the achievement of orgasm.

This section of Minnis' poem reminded me of another holistic reading experience. In the opening lines of *Lolita*, Nabokov (1955) describes the journey a tongue takes when saying the name "Lolita": "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth" (1). "Sectional" similarly engages the reader's literal *body*, drawing attention to the specific teeth used to process the caramel, the intricate journey to its centre. Like Minnis, Nabokov had the condition synaesthesia (Corballis 2010): a neurological blending of the senses, often correlated with visual processing and an enhanced sensorial memory. In an interview with Amy Key for Poetry London, Minnis speaks about her experience of synaesthesia:

I've been learning about ASMR. One theory is that it's a type of auditory synaesthesia. I do have it and I've been wondering how much of my poetry might have been inspired by trying to create a similar type of experience. When you have it, you do this thing in your head to artificially prolong the feeling of it, and some of my poems feel like they have that same almost masturbatory quality. Like trying to keep bouncing a

balloon in the air so that it doesn't hit the floor. (Minnis 2019).

The belief that writers, particularly female-identifying writers, obtain an amplified sensitivity to the world rings true, whether the individual has synaesthesia or not. Knowing this, I have endeavoured to bring a wholly hedonistic perspective to my own writing. For example, a poem of mine titled "Pater Noster" explores distinct memories of my Italian-Catholic heritage, including prayers which feel as if they are forever "stuck" in my head. The ending of this poem engages in a poetic pseudo-etymological play on the term "amen": "a man / a men / any man / *amen*". The creative deconstruction of this key word is an attempt by the speaker to break with tradition by exposing how gendered language is. Switching to the third person (the poem begins in first), the narrative ending attempts to capture a broadly encompassing perspective (specifically that of women) (McLane 2008) and to address female desire in an inclusive, all-encapsulating manner.

In *Madness, Rack and Honey*, Mary Ruefle (2012) writes that "the mistrust of poetry has a long history, for a variety of reasons, but they all come down to sentiment and invention over fact and truth. Figurative language is suspicious" (42). In Peters' poem "Postfeminism", also in her collection *1996*, she begins with the lines: "From the beginning / you should know I'm embellishing" (Peters 2013:10). These lines cleverly embody the female-hedonistic idea of the 'whole'; Peters reclaims her own "mistrust", her sense that truth and falsity are of equal verity in the domains of memory and feeling, before painting (i.e. re-creating) a picture of a situation in which the true and the false are both expressions of *felt* pleasure. To that end, Peters' use of figurative language in "Playing Lesbians" enhances the poem's exploration of memory and pleasure as something that isn't singular to the speaker, but rather a communal experience. Her use of sensory verbs encourages the reader to experience that memory as a physical experience, a

somatic "flashback" formed of textures, colours, and feelings. For example, the use of sensual verbs in the following extract vividly conjures the underlying eroticism in an apparently platonic moment: "in front of my parents she licked // An eyelash off my cheek: for scrapbooking, for luck. / And we all made sounds that groped towards laughter" (Peters 2013:4). Whilst the verb "licked" does not necessarily convey sexual undertones, it does acknowledge the implied *romantic* tension between the speaker and their babysitter, as well as their sense of danger, acting as they do in the presence of the speaker's parents. Whilst the following line has more vulgar connotations, the idea of "sounds that groped" remains ambiguous. Peters is not spoon-feeding us sensorial details; rather, she is inviting us to form our own conclusion, to *inhabit* the moment for ourselves, and experience its pleasure individually, even differently to her.

In describing the babysitter, Peters delights in the image of her "scalloped shoes, / Each heel so high her steps like **"Playing Lesbians" appears in Sara Peters's "1996"**

needlepoint" (4). This simple yet precise simile vividly informs the reader of the chosen style of the babysitter, the speaker's admiration of her appearance, donning a heel rather than, say, a trainer. The first line of the following couplet, "Bright dust beneath each brow's cathedral arch" (5), presents us with lively personification; the "bright dust" of the babysitter's eyeshadow alludes to how one might see a dust-mote-replete ray of light shine in through a cathedral's stained-glass windows. The following and final lines ("My face swept for a second by one of her thousands // Of polished rococo ringlets, as – for and since it was my birthday – / She fastened gold chains to my ankles and wrists") (5) further enliven the image of the babysitter. Details such as "polished rococo ringlets" and the fastening of "gold chains" to the speaker's "ankles and wrists" evoke a lavish Rococo-maximalist sense of experiential

decadence, illustrating that the speaker almost views the babysitter as royalty.

Minnis' "Sectional" also makes use of rich figurative language. In her *Poetry London* interview, Minnis comments on our culture's obsession with materiality and excess: "I might watch a scene in a movie and not be able to appreciate anything except the feathers on a hat" (Minnis 2019). Both poets ruminate on the idea that smalls details such as the aforementioned feathers are what keeps them coming back to a piece of art. Indeed, this focus on detail is evidenced in Minnis' poem: the "nucleus of the caramel" (23); the "sectional couch with 12 separate sections" (24); "mutable caramels" (24); "modular couch with padded armrests" (25). Minnis adds a fair amount of texture to these images by seemingly fetishising their idiosyncrasies. A leather couch is not simply a leather couch, the same way a caramel is not simply a caramel. They are items to be enjoyed, or rather, *indulged in*. In *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose (2012) states that "details aren't only the building blocks in which a story is put together, they're also clues to something deeper, keys not merely to our subconscious but to our historical moment" (207). This rings true in Minnis' poem: its fragmentary build-up of images is reminiscent of the way in which our minds process the appearance of objects.

Like many other female poets, I felt drawn to Sylvia Plath growing up, feeling that her poetry conveys a similar desire for pleasure. In the poem "Lady Lazarus," the speaker engages in a performance akin to a strip-tease, but instead of presenting the female body as erotic they present it as a "grave cave" – disembodied and dissociated of subjectivity. The speaker wields her body as a memento of her own self-destructive tendencies. By the poem's conclusion, consistent with much of Plath's work, the speaker is compelled to transcend their physical form, asserting, "I will rise with my red hair" (Plath 1965). Unlike Keats and Hecht, Plath addresses desire and the concept of hedonism from both the giver's and the

recipients' point of view. A poem which exemplifies this stance is "Fever 103°" (Plath 1963). In this poem, Plath explores the intensity and complexity of sexual desire and the feverish state it induces, blending both of the poem's individualized perspectives on pleasure and pain. The poem's imagery and language evoke a sense of consuming, *shared* passion, examining the dualities and intersections of erotic experience.

However, similarly to Keats, the female subject ultimately ends "dissolving, old whore petticoats" (Plath, 1963) and thus succumbs to the dissective, disembodying of the male gaze. This sense of "dissolving" could also be seen to conclude Peters' poem "Playing Lesbians". Pulled into the lyrical with "for and since it was my birthday – / She fastened gold chains to my ankles and wrists" (5), the diction used conveys the abstraction of the speaker's memory, being a digression of voice which is thus intrinsically linked to the overall tone of the poem. The pursuit of pleasure, once thought of as "love" by the speaker, has become protean and ungraspable through the use of lyric abstraction. However, the "gold chains" — a hard, concrete image — are something we as readers can visualize and *grip* onto, rooting us in our bodies and thus differentiating Peters' resolution from Plath's "old whore petticoats". Furthermore, Peters' is an instinctual, hedonistic landscape over which she holds tonal control. This variation of voice in "Playing Lesbians" can, at first glance, make the poem uncomfortable to read. The strikingly casual way in which the speaker reflects on their own perceived perversion: "*I love this gory business*" (Peters 2013:4), stands in stark contrast with the poem's progressive lyric escalation. Peters uses narrative time to create an *embodied* space for her descriptive language. Trees serve as an outlet for material gain and loss, much like the "gold chains" that are fastened to her "ankles and wrists": "With August over / And linden trees no longer / Buzzing emporiums" (Peters 2013:4). The exteriority of the trees metaphorizes Peters' interiority: the "no longer / Buzzing emporiums" echoing

the sensory hedonism once felt by the speaker to be out of reach, high above them. By the end of the poem, we are left feeling both secure and unsettled. Eavan Boland's (2011) work on tone and how it "reveals a poet's choices" (137) implies a deliberate strategy on Peters' part. The voice of these couplets is startlingly serious, an epitome of feminine instinct and sexuality: instinct encompassing pleasure and pain, all without judgement.

The poem "Sectional" exhibits slightly different tonal motivations to "Playing Lesbians". In her interview with Minnis, Key reflects on her own connection between writing poetry and shame:

Even as a 40-year-old I'm still embarrassed about masturbation, and that is entirely shame-driven. When writing a poem, I'm often ranging about for 'that feeling' which isn't a masturbatory pleasure but it's a very specific pleasure that no other activities replicate. Sometimes I can get into that zone, others I'm just not feeling it. (Key 2019)

The "zone" Key is referring to bears resemblance to the female-focused sensory hedonism found in both Minnis and Peters' poems. Feelings of decadence, luxury and self-indulgence that are often felt whilst writing are framed in "Sectional" as an exclusive relationship between the speaker of the poem and the poem itself. Unlike the varied tonality achieved by Peters in "Playing Lesbians", the consistency of voice in "Sectional" is what drives the poem. As such, the speaker reaches a more concrete conclusion than that of "Playing Lesbians":

. . . . *and hauling up the . . . . delicate past . . . .*
. . . .
. . . .
. . . .
. . . . *on the casual . . . .*
. . . .
. . . .
. . .
. . . . . *modular couch with padded armrests .*
. . . .

. . . .
. . . .*where I can rest my arms*
. . *as I revisit sorrowful . . and frightening moments . . of happiness that must have occurred*
(Minnis 24-25)

The self-awareness manifest at the end of Minnis' poem serves as an alternative to Peters' tone. The singular voice and lyrical reckoning focus the poem. As Mary Oliver (1994) writes of the lyric poem, "It is not unlike a simple coiled spring, waiting to release its energy in a few clear phrases" (85). The poem gains, rather than cedes, clarity as we reach its end, arguably creating a more hedonistic terrain by virtue of its surety than Peters' poem. The lyric time we are immersed in at the beginning of the poem is eventually 'filled' by the poem's subject matter.

Minnis (2019) defines her writing practice "as a sort of tantrum", a glorious conceit that further relates to the idea of female hedonism. An indulgence in immediate pleasure or avoidance of discomfort, tantrums can be seen as a desire for instant gratification or a release of tension. The alignment of Minnis' writing practice with this hedonistic tendency is reinforced by her word choice in the aforementioned quotation: terms such as "hauling," "sorrowful" and "frightening" create a simple, almost childlike sense of intimacy. Interestingly, for Minnis (2019) the speaker—whilst familiar—is distinct from herself: "I realized I'd mistaken the speaker for the poet". Due to this poetic anonymizing, Minnis creates an intimate space for the reader to inhabit themselves. However, whilst there is a relatability and familiarity to the speaker of "Sectional", upon closer examination I realized, like in Peters' poem, these qualities are a product of the writer's intent. Recognizing this, I have become more instinctively precise when it comes to the applications of voice and diction in my own writing practice. My approach being a combination of a free-writing "tantrum" and editorial clear-headedness.

What initially drew me to Minnis' poetry, particularly her collections *Zirconia* and *Bad Bad,* was her exciting use of form (or lack thereof) in her "free-verse". Not only does Minnis fill the white space around each line or phrase with ellipses, but each poem also inheres a unique concoction of surprising line breaks, enjambment and repetition. In her foreword to *Zirconia*, Ariana Reins (2019) highlights how the poems in the collection are from the turn of the century, representing the end of the "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement and the beginning of something else: something "erotic, feminine, bored-pissed off, chill evil" (i). Reins' reflection suggests that "free-verse" poems are tonally a product of their time. Mary Oliver (1994) reinforces this sentiment:

With such expectations—of intimacy, of 'common' experience—the old metrical line, formal and composed, must be off-putting for a poet. A new tone, reflecting this growing relationship between the writer and reader, was called for. (69)

The "expectations—of intimacy" are fulfilled by "Sectional". Lines, determined by the individual needs of each moment, are full of the iambs and dactyls of natural speech. Rather than adhering to a set metre or rhyming pattern, lines seem to be structured by the memories they relate and a nostalgic sense of self-indulgence, of inhabiting one's own life fully and pleasurably. The speaker is enthralled by each moment, each sensation: "I sink into a reverie in leather […] sectional couches / with caramel in my mouth", and "loosening and loosening / […] into my dreaminess" (Minnis 2019: 23). Each new line builds upon the last, informing us of the twists and turns of the speaker's psyche. While such enjambment can sometimes be jarring to read, here, it feels appropriate and adds to the overall experience of the poem. We appreciate the unfolding of the poem as we see its language *consume* the page. If this poem contained stanzas or a more traditional form, the notion of the somatic "whole" prevalent in female-driven hedonism would perhaps not be so intoxicatingly manifest. Going forward, I am excited to explore more "free-verse" and experiment with design in my own practice.

Peters' poem has made me aware of the audible qualities of my own poems. Embracing the hedonistic nature of writing—for example, by reading my poems aloud—I have become aware of my spoken rhythms, which help to promote a more expressive and emotionally charged form of communication. Peters cleverly emphasises her pleasure through her use of line, breaking on words like "performing," "sinking," "painting," "becoming," and "thinking". The use of "-ing" present participles at each break literally *embodies* (i.e. in the poem's grammar) an aspectual sense of imperfective continuity, creating a dynamic forward momentum. Indeed, this made my reading of the poem a pleasurable experience. As the poem evolves emotionally, so does the reader's sense of its meaning or conclusion. Suffice to say, I *had* to reach the end of it.

Throughout my research, both Minnis and Peters remained shrouded in ***Poemland by Chelsey Minnis***

mystery, with the latter perhaps being the more private of the two. There are only a handful of reviews of her poetry online, few interviews, and only a single article written by her in a 2015 issue of *The Poetry Review*. The article is presented as a *Letter from Canada* (Peters' birthplace) and titled "Be Afraid." It explores that state of perpetual fear which led her to live a sheltered lifestyle. She talks about her fear of writing from a place of privilege, making it a necessity to instigate a level of trust between her and the reader. This article came as a surprise to me. The idea of Peters imagining her reader, rather than writing without any fear or mental obtrusions, only increased my appreciation for her poems. "Be Afraid" comforted me: we all have our fears when it comes to writing.

In a podcast with Emily Berry, Minnis is asked to comment on the "outburst of the speaker" (Berry 2018) and the prevalence of grandiosity in her poems. In her answer, Minnis also admits to thinking about her sense of privilege during her writing process and translating that onto the page: "before we can pretend to separate ourselves from it, first we have to acknowledge it and almost follow in it" (Minnis 2018). As poets, we may question whether a poem solves certain issues, if the reader will be moved by the end, if the poem will reach its desired audience, but thinking about the future is not necessarily important in art or when having a pleasurable experience. Most poets write for pleasure, a self-indulgence if you will. As Minnis (2018) asks on the podcast, "why can't poetry just have a bunch of satin around?" If it feels true to the piece, why can't we indulge in the repetition of an image, or the authentic cadence of our own voice? Both "Playing Lesbians" and "Sectional" have encouraged me to push the limits of my own writing. Whether that be letting the poem flow freely during a first draft and not trying to control where it goes, choosing line lengths that best represent my subject matter during the editing stage, or not getting bogged down by metrical lines. Whilst honing my senses and following them *into* my work is something I continue to grapple with, both these poems have shown me how pleasurable the hedonistic approach makes the writing experience. Both Minnis and Peters have created works which push the boundaries of palatable, functional language, all the while maintaining a wry self-awareness. Instead of fearing the "*gory business*" (Peters 2013:4) of writing, the sensory richness of Peters and Minnis' work has armed me with new techniques, freeing me to indulge in a new female-centred hedonism, to inhabit my own body, my own life, my own words, and to experience a radical, unbridled pleasure in doing so.

BIOGRAPHY

Sophia Georghiou is an Italian-Greek poet. Her poems have featured in Wonder Press, Poets Versus Sexual Harassment: An Anthology x UN Women, the6ress, Spectra Poets and Dream Boy Book Club. She was the winner of James Massiah's Party Poetry Prize in 2020 and was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize in 2021 and in 2022. Sophia is currently undergoing an MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths University of London.

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'The people wore no armour, or none that I recognized': How perspective contributes to the exploration of dis/embodiment in Ta-Nahisi Coates's 'Between the World and Me'

Amie Corry

Abstract

Considering the work of two recent works of life writing, Ta-Nehisi Coates's Between the World and Me (2015) and Amy Key's, Arrangements in Blue: Notes on Love and Making a Life (2023), this text considers the strengths and pitfalls of working from a place of acknowledged subjectivity. Linked to this is recognition of the fact that the writers often employ an embodied perspective, or conversely, a point of view that questions the narrator's connection to their body. In very different ways, this expresses profound feelings of isolation from the world.

Keywords: memoir, life writing, embodment, epistolary, perspective, first person, subjectivity

Ta-Nahisi Coates has made interrogating what it means to 'live free in a black body' the question of his life.[1] In his 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*, the act of asking this question is described as a necessity that has girded the writer 'against the sheer terror of disembodiment' (2015: 12). In this essay, I will consider how Coates's use of perspective, and the careful deployment of writing around embodment or the threat of disembodiment, invokes the imperative nature of his task.

Aided by a strong lyric impulse, *Between the World and Me* explores the experience of moving through the world in the writer's particular body, while presenting the structural and systemic conditions that preface, and often, obstruct, that movement. Rather than simply staking claim to the body as the self, or conversely, mind/body dualism, Coates argues for the necessity of contextualisation in the relationship between the material facts of our being, and ways of knowing. In his writing, we find embodment as personal necessity, and as a radical counter to literary expectation, carefully expressed through the second person.

The first word of *Between the World and Me* is not 'I' but 'Son'. A line break follows the mode of address, the epistolary form encoded in the shape of the text. Coates then launches straight into an anecdote illustrating the casual regularity with which he is forced to face the prospect of disembodiment: 'Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body' (5). But the narrative, summoning a diaristic immediacy with its reference to the preceding weekend, quickly stretches back into ratified history. Abraham Lincoln is quoted and Coates notes that in 1863, America 'had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world' (6). The immediate return to the second person is thus a sharp shock, as Coates warns his son not to take comfort in this fact, for when Lincoln said 'government by the people',

he 'did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me' (6).

The second-person perspective is employed with care throughout the text and Coates is mindful not to let it wear thin. This ensures that each time the word 'Son' and later, his name, 'Samori', appears, the language is injected with both urgency and tenderness – these words are not really meant for you or for me, they are intended as a manual, a poetic manual, but a manual nonetheless, necessary for Samori's survival in a country whose 'entire narrative [...] argues against the truth of who you are' (99). Despite being prompted by a desire to guide fifteen-year-old Samori, the story is Coates's own and, as we shall see, it is also critical for his survival.

While Coates keeps us close, the second person also induces a subtle othering that serves what Vivian Gornick would describe as Coates's 'the story'.[2] McKenzie Wark identified this process in the context of trans life writing, numerous recent examples of which – including Akwaeke Emezi's *Dear Senthuran* (2021), Kay Gabriel's *A Queen in Buck's County* (2022) and Wark's memoir *Love and Money: Sex and Death* (2023) – use the second person because it, 'turns the writerly self away from the self towards the other'. This is helpful for confronting readers 'used to perceiving trans-ness through the cis gaze which categorizes us as objects to be discounted, distrusted, spoken of or for.'[3] To take another example, in Carmen Maria Machado's fragmented memoir, *In the Dream House* (2019), the narrator addresses her younger, abused self in the second person. Claudia Rankine's lyric essay *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), meanwhile, also makes use of the second person, to powerful effect. These writers ask, alongside Coates, what does it *feel* like to live in an othered body.

Key to this essay's thesis is the repost Coates offers to the idea of a 'universal' literary voice. Rankine harnesses the subjectivity of the indefinite article in the subtitle of *Citizen: <u>An</u> American Lyric* (my underline) – to make an express point. Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feeling*s: *An Asian American Reckoning* (2022) does this as well. The indefinite article expresses that, while these writers are considering the conditions of living in a racist society, neither is attempting to speak for a vast, diverse group that has historically been treated monolithically, dehumanised and anonymised.

Coates's title, meanwhile, is taken from a 1935 Richard Wright poem that tells of stumbling upon the human remains of a lynching. The words nod to the space the book occupies, between polemic (*the World*) and lyric (*Me*). Through this between-space we hear the defining facts of Coates's life: his brutal Baltimore youth, his intellectual awakening, his friend Prince Jones's savage murder at the hands of the Maryland police in 2000, and his hopes for Samori's future. The title suggests a conversation but also, a 'breach' (115) between the writer's body – or the perceived 'condition of my body' (6) – and the American 'Dream'. A balance of proximity and distance is an essential tool for Coates.

Some of the critical reception to *Between the World and Me* illustrates the potential difficulties of embodied writing, and more broadly, working from the self. Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Matthew Shenonda opined that the 'epistolary memoir' gave Coates space to engage in 'sentimentality, conjecture, feeling, confusion, and contradiction'. This is, Shenonda concludes, tricky, 'freeing' but also 'messy'. Arguably it is unwise to choose personal narrative over more scholarly forms given Coates's subject matter, and he 'could have done more to help readers – and his son – make sense of' events such as Prince Jones's murder, through deeper, analytical contextualisation of racism in America. Importantly, Shenonda does frame this argument in response to the discourse surrounding the book as much as to the book itself – it becomes a 'public text' because many previously silent on racism chose to engage with it at the time of its publication.[4] But in suggesting Coates could have distanced himself from his material, filled in more gaps, Shenonda's position perhaps speaks to an anxiety over the pigeonholing of work by marginalised writers as intrinsically 'personal'. As academic Lauren Fournier states, 'It has been writers of colour, queer/trans writers, and women writers who have come up against charges of solipsism and narcissism.' These writers, Fournier argues, 'have been historically overdetermined by limiting conceptions of the "personal", as if their work is inherently subjective and embodied.'[5]

At the other end of this spectrum is what Sandeep Parmar describes in the context of lyric poetry as an 'inherent premise of universality', which is unfailingly 'coded by whiteness'.[6] Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda think through the fallacy of universality in terms of opposing positions: transcendence and addressability: while white writers can assume that transcendence 'is a given', for many writers of colour, it is rendered out of reach, because they so often 'begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed'.[7]

If literature's universal position is canonically taken to be white, Coates arguably reclaims the personal, embodied narrative as a perspective with radical potential. Instead of ascribing to a literary convention that has traditionally excluded him, he takes the immediacy of embodied life as his subject. This subject coexists inextricably with the brute fact of systemic racism: 'In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wished to live' (12). The text's disinterest in objectivity, despite its page-by-page cataloguing of indubitable injustices, results in a powerful evocation of a life haunted by violence, attrition and fear, as well as one capable of extreme love and beauty.

A passage in Part II of *Between* illustrates Coates's skilful use of embodiment. Samori is invited to bear witness to Coates's first trip to Paris, a place that was once as foreign as Jupiter (117) to

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him. Checking into his hotel in the 6th arrondissement, the narrator ventures into the streets:

I did not think much about Baldwin or Wright. I had not read Sartre nor Camus, and if I walked past Cafe de Flore or Les Deux Magots I did not, then, take any particular note. None of that mattered. It was Friday, and what mattered were the streets thronged with people in amazing configurations. Teenagers together in cafés. Schoolchildren kicking a soccer ball on the street, backpacks to the side. Older couples in long coats, billowing scarves, and blazers. Twentysomethings leaning out of any number of establishments looking beautiful and cool. It recalled New York, but without the low-grade, ever-present fear. The people wore no armour, or none that I recognized (122-123).

We are presented with a tentative utopia. Coates acknowledges Baldwin and Wright, but does not 'think much' about

them, lightly quashing the inevitability of a comparison predicated on race.[8] Deftly, and without irony, he proceeds to cast aside the city's white (or 'those who believe they are white', 42) literary giants and historic cafés in favour of the immediately experiential: the magic of living, breathing people at ease with themselves. The Parisians appear through a series of tableaux, clear-cut and refined. Even the crowds are rendered painterly in their 'amazing configurations'. All ages are out, exhibiting, to the narrator's practiced eye, an openness that can only result from living without constant fear. An openness that, with their blazers and bar-hopping, smacks not only of foreignness, but of wealth.

Each of Coates's words in this slim volume is weighed and measured. The breathlessness of the language here, the incompleteness of sentences such as 'teenagers together in cafés', implies the speed with which he takes in the scenes. This observational distance contrasts with the embodied 'ever-present fear' of walking the streets of New York. That that fear is felt in the chest, the area of the body most vulnerable to attack, is implied by the reference to 'armour'. (Coates often refers to emotions in sensory terms – 'my eyes were blindfolded by fear', 126). In Paris, the narrator feels less visible, and consequently, he becomes as assured as the children who have left their backpacks unattended to play. His body is free to melt into the city, like the gorgeously idiomatic 'butter in the stew' (123).

The reader breathes a short sigh of relief. Oh, how we want this for our narrator, who, for one of the few times in the book can forget the perpetual danger his life is in. More than that, the fresh context and feeling of safety makes space for a realisation that nudges towards transcendence: 'For the first time I knew not only that I really was alive, that I really was studying and observing, but that I had long been alive' (122). He continues with his evening, eating a 'magnificent' steak and engaging playfully with a waitress who presents

no disdain for his 'catastrophic' French (123).

In his *LARB* essay, Shenonda described Coates's treatment of Paris as 'naïve', and yet, Coates arguably submits to this knowingly. We find him falling in love, experiencing the rose-tinted bliss of liberation from the daily violence of America. Whatever the reader's circumstance, we surely recognise the experience of being far away, somewhere beautiful, and feeling the mind and senses momentarily transcend the worries of life back home. His observations are impressionable and, despite appearances, deeply subjective. To quote Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart: 'Encounters are not events of knowing, units of anything, revelations of realness, or facts'.[9] The city's unqualified conviviality sets the scene for what is to come, which is prefaced by Coates's qualification regarding the lack of visible armour: 'or none that I recognised'; he is on foreign land, and he knows his distance is perhaps too great.

The next day, we follow him to Le Jardin du Luxembourg where his surroundings, after the previous day's revery, prompts an intense, strange loneliness:

Perhaps it was that I had never sat in a public garden before, had not even known it to be something that I'd want to do. [...] But sitting in that garden, for the first time I was an alien, I was a sailor-landless and disconnected. And I was sorry that I had never felt this particular loneliness before [...] Now I felt the deeper weight of my generational chains – my body confined, by history and policy, to certain zones (124).

Sat in this historic garden, Coates's perspective remains embodied, for he does not have the privilege of absconding entirely from his physicality, or the conditions of his birth, the fiction of his race. The sentences build in a ballad-like lament: 'had not even known it to be something that I'd want to do'; 'a sailor-landless'. His loneliness is all the greater for its shock appearance amidst all this pleasure, and for his regret at not

having experienced it before. As with his feelings of wandering through Paris's streets, this 'particular loneliness' momentarily punctures the pressure that has accumulated as Coates describes, with unremitting passion, the terror that grips him at the thought of his child going out in the world: 'Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me' (82). But the relief is temporary, the distance invoked only adds to the weight of Coates's 'generational chains' when they inevitably close in around his body. Those chains represent the violence and othering, arguably what Rankine and Loffreda refer to in literary terms as 'addressability',[10] that he and his son remain subject to, as were his parents and their parents. Our focus remains on Coates, but we recognise that the chains speak to millions of bodies shackled over a 250-year-period, described earlier in the book as 'whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains' (70), as well as the writer's family.

Finally, Coates switches back to the second person to debunk the Parisian dream for Samori, who would shortly visit with his parents. To do this, he refers him back to his body and the bodies of his kin, urging him, through anaphora, to remember:

We will always be black, you and I, even if it means different things in different places. [...] Remember that you and I are [...] the children of trans-Atlantic rape. [...] Remember the Roma you saw begging with their children in the street, and the venom with which they were addressed. Remember the Algerian cab driver, speaking openly of his hatred of Paris...' (127-128).

The core of the story is necessarily and resiliently embodied. The writer is so used to questioning the impact his body has on his safety, and his ability to care for his son, that he constantly battles the 'sheer terror of disembodiment' (12).

Rather than naivety, Coates's experiences in Paris over a period of a few months powerfully expresses a

complex facet of racialised alienation – a desire to separate from, or transcend, one's body, while recognising that awareness of it is what guarantees survival. In a very tangible sense, Coates take subjectivity as his subject and dis/embodiment as his medium.

This is a writer aware of the fact that, any notion of working from a 'universal' position is a fantasy from which writers of colour are excluded. *Between the World and Me* rejects claims to universality contingent on a birds-eye, transcendent view of the world, and assumes instead an embodied position capable of inspiring similarly bodily feelings of guttural rage, tenderness and fortitude. What these moments reveal, as does Coates's journey through Paris, is the ever-shifting relationality of the self. This work is as unfinished and changing as the body.

Note

This article is shorter than might be typical; its length is the result of the application of decolonising principles by the author, which the editors welcomed. The first draft considered Coates's book alongside another text thinking through aspects of dis/embodiment. On reflection, this pairing set up a false equivalence, given that only Coates was working from the position of a racialised other.

BIOGRAPHY

Amie Corry is a writer and editor based in London. She works mainly in visual art, writing criticism for titles such as Art Monthly and the Times Literary Supplement and editing for publishers including Tate, MACK and Phaidon. Amie is Chair of the art and mental health charity Hospital Rooms. In 2013, Amie co-produced a London-wide audit of gender equality in the art sector, and in 2019, she co-founded the books and ideas festival Primadonna alongside sixteen other writers and publishing professionals. The festival aims to redress the make-up of traditional book festivals, giving prominence to women, people of colour, LGBTQI+, working class people and disabled people. She

has an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths, London and is represented by Nicola Chang at David Highams.

Footnotes

1. Coates, T-N. (2015), *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau), 12

2. Gornick, V. (2002) *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 13. Gornick writes: 'The situation is the context or circumstance [...], the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.'

3. Wark, M. (November 2023), 'Critical (Auto) Theory', *e-flux* 140

4. Shenonda, M. (13 September 2015), 'Reading Between the World and Me in Context', *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

5. Berggren, R. (6 August 2021), 'Writing the Self, Communally: An Interview with Lauren Fournier', *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism*

6. Parma, S. (2020), 'Still Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 12 (1)

7. Rankine, C. and Loffreda, B. (9 April 2015), 'On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary', *Lithub*

8. Though James Baldwin's claim that France offered him 'the lucidity of distance' is arguably pertinent.

9. Berlant, L., & Stewart, K. (2019), *The Hundreds* (Durham: Duke University Press), 5

10. Rankine and Loffreda argue that the writer of colour may wish to operate inside, 'literary institutions that expect and even reward certain predictable performances of race. […] But even if it conforms, the performance returns the writer of colour to an addressability that at any moment may become violent' ('On Whiteness…', 2015).

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The Words Already Around Us: A Conversation Between Rupert Loydell and H. L. Hix

Loydell & Hix

Abstract

In this dialogue H. L. Hix and Rupert Loydell discuss the reasons for "impersonal" methodologies in writing, in response to the overcrowded information age we live in and to fragmentation, appropriation and remixology. Philosophy, creativity, politics and the personal inform this debate, with the authors interrogating one another's recent and past books of poetry as a springboard to think about the nature of 21st Century writing and current poetics.

Keywords

poetics, dialogue, creativity, fragmentation, identity, voice, networks, meaning, ekphrasis, (mis)understanding

Rupert Loydell first came across the work of American H.L. Hix when researching and preparing a module about Remixology for validation at the UK university he teaches at. Hix's *God Bless: A Political/Poetic Discourse* (2007) a book length poetic and philosophical dialogue between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden created from transcripts of their speeches, has proved an important example of satire and repurposing already existing language for students to study.

Since then, email contact has resulted in informal and formal discussion, several written and/or visual collaborations and anthology invitations, along with the sharing of new individual work and publications. Both are interested in the conceptual ideas of sampling, collaging and recontextualising and how they can be applied to the arts, especially the written word; also how creative writing might be renewed and refreshed in the 21st Century, specifically when emotional confession and projected avatars and narrators have blurred, and notions of "the personal" and "confessional" seem both impossible and outdated.

Both authors write in series or sequences (Hix almost exclusively so), both are interested in pedagogy, postmodern theology, poetics and creativity, both work at universities. Hix is a professor of philosophy who writes, Loydell a lecturer in creative writing who also paints. With their cultural differences, own tastes, ideas and understanding, and still only having met online via email, this particular exchange was motivated by the near-simultaneous publication of their recent books: Loydell's *The Age of Destruction and Lies* (2023) and Hix's *Say It Into My Mouth* (2023c).

This dialogue explores how two contemporary, well-published writers, negotiate the over-abundance of information around us to try and reach tentative conclusions and ways of thinking about the world and how we can write about it without shutting down the debate, or impeding future possibilities.

H. L. Hix (HLH): I experience *The Age of Destruction and Lies* (Loydell 2023) as high-stakes work, and my urge is to read it as performative. It is as if your book recognizes not only that things are amiss, but also that things are amiss so entirely that all prior strategies of damage control are co-opted, and that absent those strategies I have to do something else. In the age of destruction, poetry can't delight, and in the age of lies it can't teach, so your book isn't describing our circumstances or narrating how we created them or critiquing our having created them. How far off base is such a reading?

Rupert M Loydell (RML): Unlike many of my recent books there is no over-arching concept or framing device, neither is there a "spine" of themed or similarly titled poems throughout the text. This is mostly a gathering-up of individual (I hesitate to say occasional) poems from the last six or more years which I have woven together into sections. The one exception is "Bomb Damage Maps", a sequence of poems previously published as a chapbook (Loydell 2020) which I described as exploring "West London's elevated A40(M) (Westway) through a mixture of future history, psychogeography and elegy". Although this sounds somewhat removed from myself, Westway is actually a raised roadway into central London near where I grew up and my mother still lives, which passes Grenfell Tower, the site of a huge fire which killed many residents on the back of 1. cost-cutting construction and 2. inept instructions from the emergency services. It's also a road that I regularly drove up and down on my motorbike to see friends and get to concerts; one that passes over Portobello Road, which hosts a street market where I used to go on many Saturdays when it was still a kind of post-hippy place for music, bootleg albums and tapes, exotic food, etc.; and was my route to the skateboard park where I used to skate three or four times a week.

I say that not to foreground the sources, but to point out that even when poems are "constructed' ("Bomb Damage Maps"

makes use of documentation about the physical and social communities the new road destroyed, and also invents a post-apocalyptic future) they are still personal.

And *vice-versa*: even when the poems feel like personal gestures or responses (to use your terminology) they include elements of fiction, collaged material, imagination and what I am listening to, hearing and reading at the time.

I was worried that the book would feel miserable or grouchy, so I am pleased that you haven't read it as such. Part of the process of arranging the book was, of course, to leaven the sections with more optimistic poems, perhaps even funny ones, and give myself the benefit of distance from when the poems were written, something which I found quite difficult, especially as I haven't had to undertake this process since *The Return of the Man Who Has Everything* (Loydell 2015). So the first section, which I see as an introduction to the book, and immediately uses the word "power" (Loydell 2023: 11), is leavened by a poem about the historical sun disk, the arrival of spring in a damp and muddy world and a positive spin on the removal or destruction of racist and imperial statues. Even the last poem in that first section alludes to ideas of resurrection or renewal, as "the whole thing comes back to life". (Loydell 2023: 29)

"The Shape of Paradise" is mostly a cluster of poems about faith and doubt, "Material Form" a cluster of ekphrastic and other poems in response to place and art – be that specific images, artists or movements. Again, both include some tongue-in-cheek allusions and ideas, be that a response to Thomas Merton's "The Only Known Photograph of God" (Loydell 2023: 34), a collaged poem from a news item about a "Click to Pray" electronic rosary, or further poems in my "Not Your Friend" series. The final section, after "Bomb Damage Maps", tries to be more upbeat as it considers, memory, time and "The fickleness of language / refusing to mean what I want to say." (Loydell 2023: 102)

To come back to the actual question, I'm not sure the poems do posit any alternative to those established gestures you mention. I confess that my writing processes and techniques are fairly traditional ones, and the fact that I still get published in traditional book form suggests (rightly) that I do not engage with other media forms beyond online publication in magazines and journals. You are right that these poems don't seek to explain or act as damage control. I'm not adverse to responding to other people's notions of faith, belief or action (c.f. "Quiet Prayer" (Loydell 2023: 40-41)), talking to myself ("Note to Self" (Loydell 2023: 89)) or admitting to defeat ("Mending a Broken" (Loydell 2023: 29)).

That last poem is a somewhat smartarse response to a question by the poet Dean Young in one of his poems, but is part of the same set of poems where I declare that "The poems were configured for maximum twitch". (Loydell 2023: 85) This twitch is about being slippery, multi-faceted, tangential and allusive, which seems to be the only possible response to the world around me if I don't want to simply despair or get depressed. A couple of lines from poems that were originally in the book might help... Here's the opening stanza of "Watching a Train Wreck in the Distance":

    smoke and spark *over there*
    impossible to intervene or interfere

and the last two (of five) stanzas of "Shortwave Ruins":

    I come from nowhere and only know
    one language, had problems with
        speech
    from the start. I have learnt to mistrust
    what is said then abandoned around
        me
    and to watch what I say when others
    are about. Voicing oblivion is what
    we must do, I need to tell you about
    all the things I have not heard or seen.

There's a sense of resistance there to me, and not in a nihilist or captain-going-

down-with-his-ship sense. We need to voice the oblivion that may await us, to articulate possibilities that we have not heard or seen, but not in any declamatory or simplistic way: life is more complicated than that.

Two things occur to me about your work in response to that. In the poem "Luminosities" in *Constellation* (Hix 2023b: 3-32) you perhaps come at similar ideas from other directions? You use phrases like

    Addressed to what it cannot address,
    tested against what tests
        but is not tested
            (Hix 2023b: 24)

                    [...] There are
    things I can't tell you
        because others are involved. And
    things I can't tell you, because.
        I contradict my own principle of non-
    contradiction.
            (Hix 2023b: 25)

and further on offer a stanza comprised of a list of "No"s, which may be part of a sense of self-negation which is part of the conclusion to your poem:

    It's now that I am most myself that I
    am not in the least.
            (Hix 2023b: 31)

Your equivalent to my "maximum twitch" might be the "bluster back into brilliance" (Hix 2023b: 32) which comes in the final line of the poem

My other question is more about your assertion in *Say It Into My Mouth* (Hix 2023c) that

    Reality never *did* make sense.
    Introspection always *was* a black hole.
            (Hix 2023c: 66)

although you later counter that with the assertion that

    Art, however, is more than a mere reflection of social reality. It is at the same time,

and even primarily, a revolutionary agent for the transformation of that reality.

(Hix 2023c: 67)

which means that

Writing reality as it is transforms reality into what it is not.

(Hix 2023c: 67)

You seem to share my sense of incomprehension at the world but be far more optimistic about what poetry, indeed art, can do? And like me (and many others) you only (?) find ways to engage with the world through the language and voices of others, collaged in contrast, comment and argument to make a tentative text which tentatively explores (rather than explains) the/our world(s)?

HLH: I take your clause "Voicing oblivion is what / we must do" as a point of sensibility we share. It looks initially like an absurdist shrug, but the clause is more complicated than that, to reflect the fact that, as you note, life is more complicated than that. The force of the "must" in the clause is open. We must voice oblivion because we are ethically obligated to do so? Because it is impossible to do otherwise? Because some ill consequence would attend our failure to do so? As is the "we": you and I must? all humanity collectively must? each human individually must? we poets must?

We're a little more accustomed to something like "voicing my oblivion is what I must do." Each of us is mortal: it's a basic fact (*the* basic fact?) about humans. One might argue that poetry is always voicing *that* oblivion. "That time of year thou may'st in me behold", and so forth. But *our* oblivion, ouch!

The end of present forms of human organization? The end of the human species? The end of life on earth?

Maybe it's the further qualification, "not

in any declamatory or simplistic way", that is the more specific point of consonance. Whatever the reasons for it, public discourse in our time seems increasingly declamatory and simplistic, and I hope in my own voicings to be moving away from rather than toward the declamatory and simplistic.

Which makes your word "tentative" seem to me especially apt. The person whose assertions I want to hear is the person who more often asks questions than makes assertions. The person whose talk I want to hear is the person who does more listening than talking. The person whose word I take with most trust is the person who speaks with the least self-assurance. So I do want my texts, including *Constellation* and *Say It Into My Mouth*, to be tentative, exploratory, provisional.

I'm curious what you make of another point of contact between our works. The last stanza of the title poem of *The Age of Destruction and Lies* reads, "but you don't get to choose who reads you / or who does what with music and words" (Loydell 2023:11). That "you don't get to choose" resonates with the "we don't get to choose" that recurs throughout "Luminosities" in *Constellation*. Coincidence? Trivial? Or opening onto something significant?

RML: I think I am inclined toward that absurdist shrug, yes. I certainly feel obliged to face death – for myself, for my children, and possibly the human race, although there's also a part of me that thinks the world is going to survive just fine without us.

Poems have a life of their own, not in any mystical sense but in the simple fact that language itself is open to every readers' interpretation and understanding, which may change at every (re)reading. That's basic Death of the Author stuff, isn't it. I might add I often feel more like a reader of my work than its author: I like creating work, often out of the bits-and-bobs, the detritus, of my own and others' language, which I often do through shaping, ordering and juxtapositioning.

I'd agree wholeheartedly regarding tentative discourse, and indeed tentative understanding. I am not some covid vaccine denier nor a conspiracy theorist but *everything* changes as time moves on: science, theology, philosophy, media studies, ways of writing, ways of thinking and understanding. I'm not very good at change, indeed am prone to resisting it, but it happens, like it or not.

So yes, tentative, of its time, a product of its context, the result of my current state of mind, reading matter and mood. One of my earlier books was called *A Conference of Voices* (Loydell 2004), an attempt to acknowledge not only my use of collage, but dialogues between myself and source material (or their authors), and myself and readers. Your book title *Say It Into My Mouth* suggests to me an idea of echoing or regurgitating what is said *to* you, with a hint of ventriloquism. I constantly have to remind my students that poems can be as fictional as any other form of writing, that it is primarily about language, which cannot help but mean something, however difficult that something might be. And poetry can be populated by invented characters, be that the narrator or someone within the poem as a third person.

I was discussing the idea of provisional poetry earlier today, online, with one of my tutors from my arts degree. He is someone who revises and revises right up to the last minute of publication, whereas I fidget with and revise my poems for as long as it takes (usually weeks or months) and then it is finished, it goes into the file. I regard them as finished per se, even if they are not good poems and never appear in a magazine or book. But I think you mean provisional in a different way to that?

I see that in "Luminosities", which you highlight, there is a longing "for principle and pattern", and an understanding of "what makes the possible / possible". You suggest that this partly depends on "antecedents" and "precepts", that although you "reason towards wholeness", you have to face up to the facts that "One intimacy compounds another" and "fragments

follow fragmentation, precede integrity". You are very aware of your body within the physical world, of how you are perceived by both others and yourself, but are adamant that "This is not the *story of* my life, but a *figure for* it."

Isn't the "figure for", which you compare to the idea of stars understood through and seen as the shapes of constellations, at least *one* if not *the* story? Certainly the story you want to tell is at the moment. How tentative do you want to get? At what point is the author present in the work, like it or not?

HLH: You've opened a way of talking about how and why that shaping of bits-and-bobs of language matters. My book on the death of the author was ignored, but I stand by its pointing out a very basic error that theorists of the matter continue to make these decades later, with perverse insistence. Scholars keep right on treating "the author" as a natural kind, as if the term functioned in English the way "the moon" functions, to pick out a single pre-existent object in the world. But in fact we use "the author" to refer in various ways to very many quite divergent phenomena.

This has everything to do with "real life" because such denialistic treatment of "the author" is a form of reductiveness that works like other forms of reductiveness on behalf of violence, as Amartya Sen observes with such clarity in his *Identity and Violence*. A person's identity is "inescapably plural" (Sen 2006: xiii), and reducing identity "to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning" (Sen 2006: xii) contributes to violence, as in nationalism, racism, and so on. I take the tentativeness we both solicit in our writing processes as staked in this way to concerns of justice.

But not staked in some straightforward way that lets me count my earnestness for justice. From tentativeness I want aid toward inhabiting complexity and inhibiting the impulse to reductiveness. I take it that this relates somehow to your report that "I often feel more like a reader of my work than its author." So for example in your "Not Here" it is and

is not you, Rupert Loydell, venturing that "god must play by our rules" (Loydell 2023: 36); you do and do not allege that as a fact; the voice of the poem is and is not your voice; and so on. Yes? No?

RML: The author is someone who constructs a text, the narrator is the person who narrates the text (if it is a simplistic text). I have never understood why people confuse the two in poetry or regard poems as autobiography. No-one ever expected Ray Bradbury to have gone to Mars, so why expect me to have experienced what I have written about? My tentativeness simply reflects the way I construct my poems – using text, often collaged, found or cut-up, and the simple fact that readers will interpret my texts differently, both from me and other readers. That seems to me pretty obvious and also what the idea of death of an author was about... And, of course, the way I write my poems is not avant garde or new, it is a product of Modernism which is well over a century old and has other and previous historical precedents. Charles Bernstein is very good when he talks about an author taking responsibility for what they produce, but also the fact that, say, using chance procedures is no better, no more right or wrong, no more natural, than some confessional, "true" poem (Bernstein 1984: 39-45).

I am sceptical of the idea that "my experience" has something to offer others and should be shared by me, that seems egotistical and self-important. That doesn't mean it is easy to tell my students that we probably don't need any more teenage poems of love and lust unless they can do something radically new with the subject. (As an aside, I wouldn't dream of stopping anyone being creative for themselves, but bringing them in to the public domain – even just a seminar or workshop – is something different.) I am also suspicious of poetry that is too didactic and self-limiting. I want to be puzzled, I want poems to be ambiguous, provocative, questioning (indeed self-questioning) and use language in an interesting way. That doesn't mean

using "big" words or difficult concepts, though I am always interested in what happens when the vocabulary and texture of a specialist or technical language is used within or alongside more vernacular text.

Coming back to your direct question, the poem is of course "mine" (whatever that means) because I put the words together in the order they are in, organised the verses, titled it and put my name to it, as an individual poem and on the front cover and copyright page of the book it is now published in. It is also part of a decades-long dialogue (in poems) with the author David Grubb, but also a text about faith and doubt, touching on the humanist theology of people like Don Cupitt who are happy to not believe in God but regard him as a useful social construct, but also the way people make God in the image of themselves, and reduce him/her/them to a list of rules, a vampiric attention-seeking deity who needs to be sung to, an absent gnostic creator, or some sort of mystical friend who can be plea-bargained with.

Re-reading it today (and the poem is several years old) I can see echoes of *The Psalms* in the second verse and many voices and ideas juxtaposed and compressed into the second half of the poem. I have probably thought or considered many of those positions in my time, I was brought up in a church by my parents and am interested in ideas of negative theology, spirituality and mysticism (not to mention the resulting visual art and writings), but many of the ideas or comments in the poem are not compatible with each other, and the poem is not a didactic statement of belief or disbelief. I hope there is a certain wit evidenced in the relentless rush of ideas, and in many ways the narrator's voice here is clearly a composite. But talking about poems in this way always makes it sound so ordered and dry... Time and time again I come back to the fact that I think in this way, a whirl of associations and asides, informed by current and past reading, conversations, radio programmes etc. That may be the biggest difference between us, the fact that you seem

rooted in ways of philosophy, order and logic, and more interested in a focussed exploration of concepts and ideas in your poetry? (You've previously stated that you don't write occasional poems.) That isn't, of course, to suggest that your poems aren't also able to digress, insinuate or wander.

HLH: Definitely I'm rooted in ways of philosophy: my academic degrees are in philosophy, I'm a professor in a university department of philosophy, and so on. That said, in relation to the academic field of philosophy, I am quite marginal. At least over here in the U.S. analytic philosophy is dominant, but analytic philosophy looks to me like a blind alley, and most academic philosophers would pooh-pooh what I write and teach.

I might shift the accent a little in the way you've characterized the difference between us. You seem to give relatively more emphasis to the descriptive (the poem as a record of how I in fact think), and I seem to give relatively more emphasis to the prescriptive (the poem as a pursuit of how I might think better than I mostly do). That's one thing I would say I've taken from philosophy: not a methodology (the stubborn and to my mind stupid will to mathematize language and algorithmize reasoning) but a sense that human thinking – and most importantly to me, *my* thinking – can be improved. My philosophical marginality derives from my being less influenced by the mainline philosophical doctrine that thinking is improved by precisifying one's logic than by the sense (that shows up in such figures as Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil) that thinking is improved by honing one's attention. But I suspect that, framed either way, the way you've just given or the way I've just given, much more of our poetic DNA is shared than differs.

A different way of getting at this question would be to pause over your narrator's observation in "Note to Self" (Loydell 2023: 89) that "There are / still colours in the darkness, / but they take some searching for" (which reminds me of the Scalapino/Wittgenstein pairing on

page 70 of *Say It Into My Mouth*). I take it that you and I share a love of the searching.

RML: Yes, but the idea of us being unable to describe the colour of evenings, on the page you cite, is anathema to me. I believe we create the world through language, that thought involves language. We don't know anything we can't name or make with words, and we tend to not come up with anything particularly new language-wise (and I am not dismissing your or my own poetry here!) which is why I am drawn towards remixology, and the processes of quotation, collage and juxtaposition. Also in misapplying language and theory, perhaps looking through the wrong or an inappropriate theoretical lens to consider something.

Marjorie Perloff, on the back cover of *Say It Into My Mouth* quotes you, starting her blurb with "It *matters* what we quote and how we quote it." I like that phrase, but there's also part of me thinks "No it doesn't", it's just words. I gave up listing source material for my poems a long time ago, it seemed mostly irrelevant. Unless you make something new when you collage then you have failed anyway. I mean if you go "Oh yes, X has combined Pink Floyd lyrics with a Joe Biden Speech and some headlines from the *New York Times*" then you have failed. It's just raw material, and raw material needs forming, shaping and changing.

I'm assuming your *Say It Into My Mouth* is reciprocal, that you are also saying it back? That's how I read it: hints of ventriloquism, quoting, speaking for somebody, or at the very least voicing something they have said. It is the combinations of what is said to and by you that counts, that produces the poetry? I may be going round in circles here, but I've just finished writing a review of Ian Penman's new book *Fassbinder Thousands of Mirrors* (2023). It's a fascinating, assemblage of commentary, biography, autobiography and quotation that produces a digressionary, pointillistic essay that totally exemplifies the Creative Non-

Fiction genre. One of the sections (#274, p. 102) starts with the question and statement

> How do you inscribe a form of self-portrait into your
> work without seeming to do so. The long-time dream of
> a deeply personal text made up of other people's words.

The strange thing is the book is exactly that! It is as much about Penman as Fassbinder, about obsession, thought process, sexuality and film theory as anything else. I often feel I am in my poetry despite myself. Not only because I am the author and have constructed the texts but because even in the way they evidence what I have been reading, thinking about, listening to or experiencing, I am present. No-one needs to seek out or construct "a voice", authorial or otherwise, for themselves, we construct temporary networks or webs of language (and thought) to deal with what concerns us at the present moment. Your *Constellation* book seems to evidence this, using what Robert Morgan calls 'an extraordinary combination of memory and meditation', although over in *Say It Into My Mouth* you question whether "thinking about thinking [is] exploratory or evasive?" (p. 87)

Have you come to any conclusion regarding that? Elsewhere in the same poem you suggest not only that "Philosophy is never an interpretation of experience. It is the act of Truth in regard to truths" and suggest that rather than interpreting the world, as philosophers have ("only") done, "the point is to change it." We're in difficult territory here: Truth and truths, and changing the world, yet neither of us write polemical poetry that calls for revolution or political change, not always anyway.

HLH: To me, this calls back to your previous Shearsman book *The Return of the Man Who Has Everything* (Loydell 2015), especially the poems in its last section, such as "What Are We Doing the Writing For?" Your first-person speaker

there reports, "I feel like the single red line on a sheet of grey, / a car driving the wrong way on the motorway, // am waiting for a tender stranger to stop / and ask if I'm okay." (Loydell 2015: 102)

That feels much closer than revolution or political change to what I understand myself to be doing by writing (or to be doing in the writing). Not Liberty leading the people: more like Antigone sneaking out at night and scattering a little dust on a corpse. Not a declaration of independence but the dissenting opinion in a legal case. Not a fiery orator leading thousands of followers, but what Sara Ahmed calls an "affect alien" (Ahmed 2010: 41-42).

Your poem, I want to say, is a thinking about thinking. The poem also asks a question about the question that stands as the title. The poem recognizes that framing the question that way begs the question, by assuming that there is only instrumental value, not intrinsic value, that one must write as a means toward some other end. Isn't there an important sense in which polemical poetry that calls for political change is reproducing what it purports to resist, by performing the premise that poetry is *for* something, that poetry's value lies in what it *does* rather than what it *is*? And an important sense in which *not* having an answer to the question "What Are We Doing the Writing For?" is more revolutionary than having an answer?

RML: I agree regarding thinking about thinking. It feels similar to writing about doubt rather than faith: people who are sure of things worry me, we don't and can't know everything or always be right. There *isn't* one big explanation, one big truth (or Truth), one answer to it all.

I confess as I get older I have regained the militancy of my teenage years. I've returned to the poetry of Julian Beck, Diane Di Prima and Adrian Mitchell, enjoying their anarchic polemic; and I've also been reading lots of European poets who seem to think very differently to how the English, and possibly Americans, do. But I don't want to write

that kind of politicized poetry, straightforward manifestos or call to arms. As your poem points out, "Rebellion would have to be continual to *be* rebellion." (Hix 2023c: 109) I think the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets were right about politicizing language itself, deconstructing grammar and syntax to make words and poetry work differently, to try and get people to *think*.

That feels like a form of dissent in the 21st Century, where a lot of people simply want yes or no answers, books that follow established conventions (if indeed they read books) and television programmes focused on celebrity and the mundane, or murder, romance and violence. That doesn't mean I don't also read thrillers, detective novels, fiction etc. as well as poems, nor that I totally ignore television (although I do my best), but I am still excited by language, by what we can do with this stuff, the webs and strings and associations we can construct or imply.

What are we doing the writing for? I don't have a complete answer and am aware that "Two Pictures of a Rose" in *Say It Into My Mouth* is your way of exploring that same question, and coming up with some possible *answers*, plural. I'm drawn towards many of your phrases:

> What I compose matters less than how I compose.
> (Hix 2023c: 59)
> Action and poetry fall apart
> (Hix 2023c: 94)
> They'll have to say something and mean something else
> (Hix 2023c: 126)
> Syntax is memory trace or conceptual shape.
> (Hix 2023c: 128)
> We can foresee only what we ourselves construct.
> (Hix 2023c: 137)

I disagree, though, with your suggestion that "What can be shown, cannot be said" (Hix 2023c: 123) I have become

drawn to what is perhaps an aside of yours – and I am taking this out of context here – your point that "It will depend on how the question is used" (Hix 2023c: 121). You're writing about dreams there, but isn't it the nub of it all? We can ask as many questions as we like, but some people are content with "yes" or "no" whereas we, and many other poets, often see it as a springboard to *other* questions. You also discuss silence, signs, non-hierarchical structure and posit the idea that "Language disguises thought." (Hix 2023c: 125) Isn't language all we have? (You note that you "make verbal artifacts" (Hix 2023c: 137)) And what about the mysticism that creeps into your work occasionally? (I'm thinking particularly of "It's *because* I don't believe God speaks through others that I listen so intently for God to speak through me" (Hix 2023c: 123)) Is this to do with the fact that "A new world demands a new language"? (Hix 2023c: 139)

HLH: This shows up in a great many ways. One example that happens to be on my mind lately is the phenomenon of police militarization in the U.S. over the last few decades. Clear distinction between military and police has always been a defining feature of a democratic society, ideological and operational alliance between military and police has always been a defining feature of repressive governments. Here in the U.S. there has been a pronounced shift away from distinction and toward alliance. (A concrete example: in 1984 the percentage of American towns with a population between 25,000 and 50,000 that had a SWAT team was 25.6. By 2005, the percentage was 80. (Balko 2013: 308)) This change has coincided chronologically with pervasive use of "war" as a term in naming and describing state activity: "the war on drugs", "the war on crime", "the war on terror", and so on.

Toni Morrison makes the point succinctly in her Nobel lecture: "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."

(Morrison 2019: 104) It's why I share your sense that a poetry of polemic, "that kind of politicized poetry, straightforward manifestos or call to arms", as you just put it, is not the only kind of poetry that operates in or as resistance to structural violence, political demagoguery, and other societal corruptions. Any alternative use of language resists the status quo, not only polemical uses such as manifestoes and slogans and calls to arms.

But I want to keep after your question "Isn't language all we have?" What, for you, is the force of other art forms than poetry? You're also a visual artist: the (fantastic) cover image of *The Age of Destruction and Lies* is a piece you yourself made. And a number of poems in the book have to do with visual art: there's a poetic "triptych for Francis Bacon" and an "Untitled Abstract" and a poem giving instructions on "How to Dismantle a Sculpture". Where is your practice of and reflection on visual art in relation to your ideas about (and practice of) language?

RML: I've always been interested in ekphrasis and writing back to or from visual arts, and I also think we only understand through language, so we actually convert what we are seeing into language when we think about it. "How to Dismantle..." was actually written in response to a crowd pulling down the statue of a colonial hero and throwing it into the harbour in Bristol. It was headline news here and prompted immediate accusations of wokery and mob rule from the right wing government. Of course my poem is a little bit more oblique and framed as an instruction manual. I hope it is amusing but also a subversive commentary.

"Untitled Abstract" is more a painting in words, a description and evocation, whilst "Either a Snarl or a Smile", the triptych poem, is part of an ongoing, fascinated response to the work of Bacon. In this case, it is as much about how his art is perceived as what it looks like: it is part of the art market yet still often talked about in terms of horror and violence, usually seen through the

biographical lens of Bacon's sexual proclivities and lifestyle. Using collage, the poem is overstating the case of voyeuristic and deformed images, that endless fascination with wounds, violence and extremism, whereas actually most Francis Bacon paintings are beautiful, fluid images of bodies and flesh. For me, his portraits are some of the best 20th Century portraits around.

I tend to keep my painting and writing practices separate although I feel they are often both fed by the same books, exhibitions, films and conversations. But I often work in series, sequences or variations, usually answering self-set questions or utilising ideas I have come across and fascinated by. They are both ways to understand things. If you want to understand how landscape can be depicted in paint or responded to then you have to paint it, and understand Land Art, Symbolism, Impressionism, photography and a lot of other art movements and individual artists. If you want to be able to write about it you need to read nature writing, travel writing, adventure stories, psychogeography etc. I'm a big fan of research and information, and my writing and painting are often my way of sieving, re-ordering and assembling ideas.

I'm currently writing a series of poems in response to the work of Anselm Kiefer, initially on the back of seeing his recent *Finnegan's Wake* exhibition/installation in London, but also an exhibition of his lead books back in the 1980s. I've borrowed some catalogues from the university library and also drawn on my own library of art books, as well as what I already know about German Romanticisim, the delusions of Naziism and how Kiefer is trying to use memories, both public and private, repressed and forgotten, to understand not only his nation but also the whole human race. So some of my poems attempt ekphrastic versions of work, others grapple with cultural memory, geographical displacement and society's ruins (physical and mental). Ideas from writers such as Sebald and Hesse seem relevant, as does the catalogue of a site-

specific project by the artist John Newling, whose book had been mis-filed with Kiefer. But his discussion of how we understand a place from different perspectives and how to index it have helped me write the texts, as well as given me the current (perhaps working) title.

Another, longer sequence, which I am struggling to order at the moment, was written in response to the Fluxus movement. So I was able to use chance procedures and formal processes to create some of the work, as well as write about figures such as John Cage and Yoko Ono, who were members of the group. It has some list poems, some instructional poems, some collage poems, some manifestos, some provocative texts and some interventions, too. That is it feels more embedded in what it is about than being (just) a separate commentary about it.

I've been a professional artist and writer now for almost 40 years, and I still don't know if I can articulate how the two are linked for me, or indeed if they even are. Are you any clearer about it? I mean you made flags for one of your covid publications, and you have curated several projects exploring the relationship between visual and lexical arts.

HLH: I'm sure I don't have a sense of the relationship between visual and lexical arts that is any more settled or final than yours, but I take that as a point of sensibility we share, rather than a way in which we both have failed. To repeat your words from a little earlier in this dialogue, "people who are sure of things worry me."

Which makes me want to latch onto your observation about research and information. It doesn't have to define the relationship between visual and lexical arts exhaustively to be an important point of connection between the two. (And to be directly related to our thinking earlier about ways, in addition to polemic, in which political vision can do its work.) If we're in "the information age", with access to what in practical

terms is an infinite amount of information, then how one deals with information is central to who one is. And has political ramifications. The prevalent mode of disposition toward information is passive. The transition to social media feeds and search engine results as the primary sources of information is a shift toward diminished activity and increased passivity. It is a ceding of agency to algorithms that (as Safiya Umoja Noble has persuasively argued (Noble 2018)) reinforce existing forms of aggression in society, and that (as Jaron Lanier has succinctly shown (Lanier 2019)) exacerbate confirmation bias.

That combined capitulation to the worst in our collective social dynamics and the worst in our individual thought processes is politically deadly: it furthers tyranny and undercuts democracy. It's an über-Orwellian form of social control, and it makes a practice of research – actively seeking and selecting rather than passively receiving information – and, as you put it, "sieving, re-ordering and assembling ideas" in a self-determined rather than a received way, a form of political resistance.

Is this linked at all to how you would talk about your way(s) of sieving, re-ordering and assembling ideas in, say, "A Windscreen on to the World" (Loydell 2023: 78-79) , in which there are moments of apparent critical evaluation ("Westway is a 2.5 mile scar with a horrific history"; "Westway marked the beginning of the end"), but the ideas are assembled not into op-ed or a scholarly paper but into a poem?

RML: To be honest, I think it's something I have adopted to survive the information overload I find myself enduring. Some of that is self-inflicted of course: despite not doing social media (apart from showing art and books on Whatsapp) I buy and blag review copies of far too many books, download too much music, am interested in too much. So learning to highlight and extract information is important to me. I also think juxtaposition, collage and remix are critical tools as much as creative ones. Think about how an art work can

look different within various curated exhibitions, perhaps thematically organized or discussing an art movement or gender or race of artist. Simply the different context of my appropriated phrase about Westway, within a sequence of poems, lets the reader think differently about it. The positive and negative reports about how, when and why the motorway was built and how it affected people are still available, my project was to interpret my own memories and association with the road, with actual histories and fictional future possibilities. As we've said before, it challenges the reader.

Is something controlling when it is self-inflicted? Many people choose to streamline their news feed and allow an algorithm to select what is fed to them. Is that different to me throwing the sports or economics section of a physical paper away without reading it, back in the day? I am old and old-fashioned enough to think research is about reading, looking, experiencing and immersion; that doesn't mean other people don't have different ideas of how to experience the world or undertake research, indeed how they live. Surely they actively choose what you call 'diminished activity and increased passivity'? Aren't we being pretentious academics resisting the fact that computers have simply streamlined the search process? Is me finding where books about and by a particular author are in the library any different from reading them online at home? I certainly think there are things to be said about the physicality of books as codexes, and ideas of revisiting them, expectation of them as they wait to be read, etc, and even more about how fine art needs to be seen in the flesh not as a backlist image, but the world has changed. Storytelling has moved, perhaps, to games, film and online television, genres and publishing houses have splintered and regrouped; the problem now is choice, what to read, visit, look at or watch, whereas it used to be where to find out about things and then find them. (Actually those two things still exist: even the big London bookshops have less and less stock, and less and

less small and independent press titles are reviewed.)

I haven't really answered your question have I? "Confirmation bias" is a great phrase, but we are the ones who have confirmed our own biases. We get what we make, feedback loops are us feedbacking what we put in, though I guess there's something to be discussed there about us versus the individual. What do you think?

HLH: I take it that our arrival in "the information age" alters the relative importance of poetry's various functions, in particular by foregrounding its curatorial role. There is already plenty of information out there, and plenty of words. Nobody needs another poem to *add to* that abundance; but we *can* use another poem to select from and re-order it. I want to de-emphasize the points of analogy between my writing and a painter's generating another image on another canvas, and add emphasis to the points of analogy between my writing and a curator's finding and selecting and integrating existing works into an exhibition. And principled in another way that is also a shift in emphasis, a re-weighting. Poetry is obviously an act of speaking, but I want my poetry to be also an act of listening.

And so on. But none of this is news to you. You've been engaged in a similarly aslant-to-mainstream poetic practice for a long time. I think back to earlier works of yours, such as *Ballads of the Alone* (Loydell 2013), and there you are, asking *yourself* the same kinds of questions you're posing *me* here.

> a fascination with fragmentation
> language and lettering on city walls
> *trumpet   weasel   electric   poise*
> it looks like it says something
> you never know just what it means
>   (Loydell 2013: 31)

So let me volley your questions back to you. *Should* we call that authorial voice? What *are* useful terms for thinking about

our own and one another's projects? What vocabulary helps us think well?

RML: You articulate very clearly here some ideas I also share: curating and rearranging the words already around us, engaging in dialogue rather than egotistical self-expression, and yes reading as experience, the world seen via and mediated by texts (often books but also film, television, games, magazines etc.).

I think editing and rearranging become authorial voice yes, but I want to move it away from the notion of individual, important and egotistical voice. I mean, I do think I write differently from other people (though I also know people who use similar processes or end up with similar forms on the page), but I feel my writing is in dialogue or conversation with the texts I take words from. I had my first poetry class this year at university a few days ago, and we were having a discussion on the back of me asking students why they would write something they already knew, or make a poem that didn't strive to say something new or at least in a new way. They were slightly gobsmacked by my statement that I felt that I discovered and found meanings and links in my poems during the writing and editing process and then as a reader once the poem was finished. I want to be the author, not have a voice. The voice arises from the material, for me often a different voice from individual poems.

It's making connections between texts, between critical and creative writing, between different vocabularies, genres and modes of writing, it's trying to understand, edit and connect the language we, certainly I, find myself immersed in. As I've already said, it's a way, my way, of working things out. My series of poems from/after Anselm Kiefer are trying to help me understand his sculptures and paintings, his own curating and presentation, his themes of post-war Germany, decay and destruction, as well as why his exhibition in London moved me so much despite also confusing me with its chaotic, dense arrangements. It's not a

review, it's a response; it's not an essay but it certainly refers to and uses the language of critical material, by and about Kiefer but also from other artists who seem pertinent, or perhaps at odds with his work.

What vocabulary helps us think well? I almost want to twist that round and say all vocabularies can be used to help us think, it's all words and language, but that would be me copping out. I think a fairly reductionist vocabulary, that articulates how the words are arranged, the text formed, on the page (or screen or whatever) is a good place to start. All those things that poems use: metaphor, simile, rhymes, near-rhymes, half-rhymes, assonance, etc. (A student introduced me to a new word yesterday in a peer review session but I can't remember it.) So what is actually written down, how has the author chosen to make their poem? I tend to encourage students to think about Form, Process, Content and get them to step away from their emotional response towards a more distanced and informed reaction from their reading.

I think part of "how the poem works" is about what is implied, alluded to, non-explicitly referred to, and how self-aware a poem is, of the poetic techniques it is using, of displaying or perhaps hiding how it was made. Some of this seems very simple to us, but not to students. So my first session was discussing "What Is Poetry?", using their own ideas but also quotations from established authors, and then reading and discussing a wide-ranging number of "Poems about Poetry". Clearly, a poem about eating a poem isn't literal, it's an extended metaphor, but they found it more difficult to respond to something like David Grubb's 'The Discovery', which begins:

> This is a poem about how a poem often says
> something another way about. The piano is not
> actually on fire but the sun dances across the surfaces
> of music and changes the ambiance of

words and what we
did not expect begins to happen.
    (Grubb 2005: 56)

I like its opening statement, the fact it doesn't actually say "the piano is on fire" but that is an implied image which we think of, and the way the fourth line modifies the third: firstly "the sun dances across the surfaces" which we assume is the piano, but then becomes "across the surfaces of music", which is an abstract image. That's probably pretty basic for us, a fairly straightforward lyrical poem, but finding all that in a few lines after a first read is new to them.

Once we have perhaps been disabused of the idea that poetry involves that daffodil gazing you don't indulge in and emotional outpourings we can start establishing new vocabularies in addition to our basic list of poetic effects. Many of those are now long-established: close reading, notions of archetypes, narrative, perhaps ways to grapple with complexity (I remain convinced that it is often what is regarded as "difficult" poetry that keeps being read; think Pound, Eliot etc.), how thought and language works (which might lead us to A.I. and notions of algorithms and biology, and/or to Wittgenstein), and whatever theory or theoretical lens is useful, be that Freud, Feminism, Deleuze & Guattari (whose ideas of networks as opposed to hierarchies I find pertinent), eco-poetics or the a-theological and media studies writing of Mark C. Taylor, whose books I am very fond of, particularly when he crosses boundaries of form and genres.

Theory and critical writing are tools that inform our poetics, which – as Robert Sheppard says (2017) – can't help but be tentative, provisional and nomadic. He also notes that poems may contain, inform or display their own poetics. Despite my own reading material (though of course I also read for pleasure and that includes novels, science fiction and thrillers) I don't want to make poetry too academic and theoretical. I'm grateful that reviewers of my work

continue to note that by writing what appear to be impersonal poems I can articulate the personal better, and that it's meant to be funny as well as thought-provoking. I regard experiment, collage and textual disruption as playful articulations of thought and language, a genuine attempt to reproduce how we, or certainly I, think and make connections, which isn't very often in a straight line.

HLH: If I were identifying in what you've just said one pinhole through which our whole conversation so far could be viewed, it would be your gratitude to reviewers for recognizing that "by writing what appear to be impersonal poems I can articulate the personal better." It's an underacknowledged but powerful possibility of poetry, a particular instance of seeing through appearance to reality. We could nickname it "impersonality practice": a kind of getting-used-to the recognition that what *looks* personal and what *is* personal might not consistently match.

I do see the recognition spelled out in arguments on behalf of forms of social justice. For instance, in her critique of misogyny, *Down Girl*, Kate Manne argues that misogyny occurs in the *absence* of that recognition. "To its agents," she writes, misogyny can feel "like a moral crusade, not a witch hunt" (Manne 2018: 20). To the agent of misogyny, the pursuit of justice and righteousness seems personal, the enforcing and policing of women's subordination to male dominance seems impersonal. But that appearance masks a different reality. In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander (2020) makes the analogous point in relation to racism. Her critique is of the practice of mass incarceration here in the U.S., and she points out that its astounding rise in the last few decades was made possible by making opposition to crime seem personal and creation of a racialized underclass of marginalized and dispossessed seem impersonal.

Their point is that how I feel and who I am don't match automatically or

necessarily. I don't have to feel like a misogynist to be one, or feel like a racist to be one. I'm not imputing magical powers or moral purity to your poetic practices, but this does seem like a way of validating the distrust you and I have both professed, of the vision of poetry that pretends a transparent relation between feeling and being, as if by professing what I experience as most personal I manifest who I truly am.

Questions of poetic process (do I sit and sip absinthe and record my inward gaze, or do I collage material I've found in existing texts, or…?), I take as related to Iris Murdoch's insistence that "It is a task to come to see the world as it is" (Murdoch 1985: 91). (I'm persuaded of her point, and often cite her sentence. Predictably, I quote it in *Say It Into My Mouth*.) It is a task also to come to see oneself as one is, and how best to undertake that task is a live question.

RML: Yes, equipping yourself as a writer with processes and different ways of writing seems to me not only important as a writer (and to any writer) but also to offer ways to understand the world around us, which is what I feel we are discussing here. It is also outward facing, to readers, because the way we write and the end result, the written, the poem, is evidence of our way of thinking through, in and about our work.

I emailed some excerpts from John Barrell's article about the poetry of Tom Raworth to several writing friends, including you, and several of us have been discussing it. In it he talks about how "even as the poem is attempting to represent the mind as passive and the experience of the mind as an empty succession of events, it is also making a quite contrary attempt to represent the mind as active." (Barrell 1991: 387) It seems to me that even though I've never thought of my writing as passive or inactive, in some ways it is passive simply as a result of being a final version on the page, finished; but what I found even more useful is his discussion later on where he writes:

    Sometimes one line leads to or

follows on from another as if unproblematically a part of the same sentence; sometimes there is a sharp disjunction between them, such that no feat of ingenuity on the part of the reader can connect them. Most often, the lines hover between continuity and disjunction, so that it is possible to read one line as carrying its sense and structure over into the next, but not so comfortable to do so: the sense it makes, the structure it makes, is neither wrong nor quite right.

    And so we read the sonnets with a continual sense of trying things out, improvising meanings, seeing how far a connection will work, how far it makes sense to junk it in order to make possible some other series of connections. The authority and the security offered by the well-formed sentence is continually present, absent, present again; we find ourselves reading at great speed, to try and force through a particular connection against the resistance offered by other possibilities that present themselves. (Barrell 1991: 402-403)

It's always risky to try and state how everyone reads something, but as someone who tends to grammatically and syntactically smooth the edges out of my collage work, I like the discussion of disjunction within sentences, although Raworth and Loydell poems are not very similar. I also respond to "trying things out, improvising meanings, seeing how far a connection will work", as well as the idea all those might have to be junked. It's that notion of tentative understanding and reading, and also continual re-engagement and re-consideration of language, sentence and meaning.

I may be contradicting myself here, although we seem to be agreeing, that writing is personal however impersonal the writing process is or appears to be. I'm not sure where to go with your

disconnect between feeling misogynist and being misogynist. The end result is still misogyny, and a text may contain misogynist or racist statements or language yet not be either of those things. Your book (Hix 2007) recontextualising President Bush's statements was not constructed in support of his right wing views, it was a satirical and political deconstruction through that remix. Although it may provoke unease and consternation, and be an uncomfortable read, Bob Hicock's poem "Nigger" (1995: 60-61) is one of the best anti-racist poems I know. I use it to show my students that rather than preach to the reader, just re-presenting something – in this case a straightforward narrative about the title word, which only appears as the title, being used as a customer leaves a store, and how others, including the narrator's father, react – allows us to decide things for ourselves. It may be a risky strategy, because the N word is still one of two or three that can shock, but it works for me.

I know I've slightly gone off topic, but yes, I agree about how a deliberately political move towards individualism and self-concern, rather than ideas of community and relationship, has happened, even though lockdown certainly reintroduced some makeshift strategies for neighbourhood and familial engagement. But we seem to have a generation, or society, that now mostly feels self-expression and being "liked" (usually on social media by those they have never met) is really important. Actually, although I in no way want empathetic and emotional readings of my poetry ("I know just how you feel"), I do want people to think about things, be they everyday events/situations or national/global issues), for themselves. Aiming for bigger audiences by turning to, say, performance poetry or end-of-line rhymes and formal structures, doesn't seem the answer. But then as we've already said neither of us know what that is anyway.

Conclusion

Only an inconclusive conclusion would be appropriate to a dialogue in which the conversants concur about the value of *not* having answers, and surrender any expectation of arriving at Truth. We *have* attempted, not to arrive at a tidy ending, but to make the conversation itself continuous with the vision of poetry it explores, to make the conversation, like poetry, a form of "impersonality practice", participating in renewal of vocabularies. We have tried to honor poetry's capacity to be outward-facing for the writer and autonomy-enlarging for the reader.

That vision includes replacing the folk theory according to which poetry serves primarily as a medium for "self-expression" and "voice" with a more open and lively relationship between the written and the personal. It includes experiencing poetry's political force more from its ability to host the exploratory and provisional than from its ability to be declamatory and didactic. Both of us actively remix in our work, and we find in that process a way to practice poetry as an art of listening no less than as an art of speaking, to construe it as an art of thinking with, through, and against the contemporary information-saturated media environment. By highlighting shared senses of purpose that inform shared elements of our practice, we have sought in this conversation to articulate a dynamic vision of poetry as a charged and complex medium for writer, reader, and culture.

BIOGRAPHIES

H. L. Hix's recent books include a novel, *The Death of H. L. Hix*; an edition and translation of *The Gospel* that merges canonical with noncanonical sources in a single narrative, and refers to God and Jesus without assigning them gender; a poetry collection, *Constellation*; an edition, with Julie Kane, of selected poems by contemporary Lithuanian poet Tautvyda Marcinkevičiūtė, called *Terribly In Love*; an essay collection, *Demonstrategy*; and a hybrid work, *Say It Into My Mouth*. He professes philosophy and creative writing at a university in "one of those square states." His website is www.hlhix.com.

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