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The writing workshop or deferred effects

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ABSTRACT

A creative narrative which explores Nicholas Royle's expression in his work *The Uncanny* (MUP 2003) that 'any reading or teaching worthy of the name does not happen when it happens: it is bound up with a strange experience (which may be the very impossibility of an experience) of deferral, of ghostly time' (p.57).

KEYWORDS Creative writing; fiction; deferred effect; Freud; Carlo Rovelli; Derrida

Psychoanalysis teaches, then, that the time of teaching is irreducibly strange: what passes does not pass when it passes. The meaning of an experience, the experience of a teaching, does not belong to the present. Nor does it belong to any other time. It is never at home in time. (Nicholas Royle, 'Literature, Teaching, Psychoanalysis' in *The Uncanny*, 2003)¹

Past present

You first started writing this years ago, somewhere near the turn of the twenty-first century. You will have been in a classroom at the edge of the Downs, sitting, notebook open, not writing. You will have been gazing out of a sash window that wouldn't open, watching rabbits lollop improbably around. Watching gulls dancing to trick worms up from their holes. Worm holes. Moloko's Sing it Back will have been drifting over the hillside. You will have noticed the hollowed, lightning-struck stump of an ancient oak. Your pen will have been hovering above the lines on the paper, lines like telephone wires empty of resting birds. What to write? What kind of assignment will this have been? How would it be meaningful? You will not have been certain if this was story or a poem. It will have been hot and someone in the class will have kept failing to prise the window open. Each

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member of the class had their project. Miri with her feminist noir detective novel; Ant with his comic strip; Darshana with her spiralling, jazz-like poetry; Finn with his deep-sea horror that always went too far; Cass with their vampire stories set in Westminster. You will have praised each other's use of imagery. Wondered if there could be more 'show' and less 'tell', tried to avoid the clichés like the twist where the narrator was a ghost all along.

You will have had your own project, for sure, but you had ventriloquised so many voices none felt quite right coming from your body. You will not have given a thought to the fact that inside that writing body the children you might one day have were already there, like stars in the galaxy, waiting to become.

You will have stared at the rabbits, the gulls and the dark bole of the tree and pressed the pen deep into the paper and tried to describe what you knew.

Present present

Derrida says in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing':

There is no present text in general, and there is not even a past present text, a text which is past as having been present. The text is not thinkable in an ordinary or modified form of presence.

If there is no present text, what is this, this present that you are writing into? It is made of other texts, consciously or unconsciously arising, woven together in new forms. Derrida also says that "The unconscious text is already woven of pure traces, differences in which meaning and force are united; a text nowhere present, consisting of archives which are always already transcriptions. Originary prints' (Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', p. 92).²

But what if time itself is not what we think it is? Only an experience that seems present, that appears to move forwards? In physicist Carlo Rovelli's book *The Order of Time* (2018) the trace is determined by the entropy of the past – the irreversible process of energy degrading into heat:

In this way, computers heat up, the brain heats up, the meteors that fall into the moon heat it; even the goose quill of a medieval scribe in a Benedictine abbey heats a little the page on which he writes ... It is the presence of abundant traces of the past that produces the familiar sensation that the past is determined. The absence of analogous traces of the future produces the sensation that the future is open. (p. 145)³

Between Derrida's 'trace' and Rovelli's 'trace' you might be onto something, here, now, in the present of the writing, a writing which troubles the linearity of time.

You are returning, it seems, some years later, walking the hills past the room you once wrote in, on the other side of the window that would

never open. But it is propped open now, with a book, and you glance discretely through to see a full class and a teacher, gesturing. You cannot hear their voice, only the tenor of it, the rhythm. The students make notes on their laptops. Some are scrolling images and chats. One or two scribble on notepads. Whilst you cannot make out the teacher, you can hear the students' voices. You listen as they share their work, catching snatches of their conversations:

Could you try re-writing it in the first person?
 Would it be better in the past-tense?
 The idea was rather abstract ...
 It's very atmospheric, but it has no plot.

This is the workshop, where the work is dismantled and examined, where what is there might be drawn out and what should not be there is written away, edited, deleted. How to do this? Is it even possible? What happens to these deletions and earlier versions: do they exist elsewhere, imprinted or floating free, giving rise to a parallel universe? 'Workshop' makes you think of carpentry, of dove-tails joints and planed oak. Of rummaging inside a car-bonnet. Or of Victor Frankenstein and his 'workshop' of 'filthy creation' which only comes into focus after he has finished making his monster and brought him to life. After the jump-start.

Should you go back to Finn and Darshana and Miri, knowing what you know now? Should they take their published works from the shelves and try again?

How many more books do you need to read before you know what to do with words? You glance at the teacher, now silent in the room, writing in their own notebook, their face familiar as your own.

The important thing is not inside the classroom, but outside; the scorched tree is still here, gnarly like sinew and bone. Knotted oak, not cloven pine. An echo comes from it, a whisper. The rabbits are not here, but beneath you, burrowing away. You sit by the tree, draw a notebook from your pocket, and begin.

Future Present

... any reading or teaching worthy of the name does not happen when it happens: it is bound up with a strange experience (which may be the very impossibility of an experience) of deferral, of ghostly time. (Royle, N. *The Uncanny*, p. 57)

You will return. Again. When you do, the window will be wide open.

The children you didn't think of will now be born, and when they are, they swivel their slate grey eyes to meet yours and you know them, as if you had met them a long time before. As if not giving birth but attending a reunion.

Freud says in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*: ‘it is wrong to call the feeling of having experienced something before an illusion’ (p. 329/295).

You will expect the writing room to have fallen into disrepair, crumbling plaster, broken glass. You assume you will visit at night, or in the winter, when the room is dark, your torch drawing the shadows out, you yourself the ghost at the door. But this will not be the case.

It will be midsummer, the longest day, as it has always been. You’ll sit in the window ledge, legs dangling over the side. You’ll face a class full of writers. Or an empty space with a screen full of squares, a person each in their own room, like the cross section of a high-rise. Or a flashing cursor, waiting for a question or instruction.

Or, the room itself will be gone, absorbed into the hillside, covered with clover and foxgloves, dandelion clocks droning in the breeze. Underground will be criss-crossed with burrows and mycelia, thousands of rabbits tunneling beneath your feet and the rhizomes of mushrooms and wild plants. Gulls will float above or tap-dance on the soil. The hollow tree will be there still, a portal that you might enter, should you choose to.

Or the room will be full of writers, reading to one another, pieces they didn’t imagine they could write. Or they will have abandoned the room and be outside, on the hillside which teems with life. Always with life. They will be there, reading their warm marks on the page.

Is this what you have written? That network of roots and burrows will spread out, from the downs, through the city, through the country and beyond, to be under your feet wherever you go. And you will write this: about them and where they will go and what they will do next and the marks they will leave.

Notes

1. N. Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
2. J. Derrida, ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’, in *Yale French Studies No. 48* (NH Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972).
3. C. Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (London: Penguin, 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).