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**Where I'm calling from: alterity and the other I of the unconscious**

Abstract:

As I assess my fractured novel manuscript, a narrative in multiple first-person voices, I engage with writing that I produce at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I encounter writing that is both familiar and strange, known and other.

The sense in which I produce writing that is 'other' to me is intriguing. I recognise that a dichotomy between 'self' and 'self-as-other' exists in my writing and, in this, I am drawn to Derrida's concept of alterity: to the idea that language is ghosted by the trace of the other. I am intrigued by the haunting shadow of trace: by the 'other' that simulates presence and makes the otherwise empty sign 'full' of meaning.

When I acknowledge that my writing is at once strange and other, as well as familiar and known, I realise that the writing that I produce at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition is produced under the delusion of self-presence; it is produced under the delusion that meaning is present to consciousness 'at a given moment'; it is produced when I am both 'I' and 'not I'. This leads me to ask: *What is my attitude to the effects that I produce when I am not I? What is my reaction when the other takes the floor?*

To engage with these questions in the context of my fractured novel manuscript is to engage with the possibilities for meaning that narrative, as a language map, encompasses; it is to engage in an inquiry about the relationship between language and semantic intention; it is to ask how my attitude toward the voice of the other in my writing affects the 'finished' product of the narrative text.

As I tackle these questions, I plot the operation of alterity; I plot the work of the unconscious as it operates at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I ask: *how does the language of my fractured narrative mean?* I ask: *what is the relationship between meaning and authorial intention?*

The concept of alterity explicates the ghostly shadow that lurks behind the sign, simulating presence and making the otherwise empty sign full of meaning. The concept of alterity therefore explains how my writing might be strange to me, in the sense that I am estranged from it (because it is not consciously, logically determined) but, simultaneously, how my writing is familiar, strangely familiar (in the sense of a latent, ghostly shadow, a web of unconscious associations).

Alterity recognises that the present (surface narrative) is infected by a past (primal/generative moment of narrative composition) that I cannot access in a definitive way.

Biographical note:

Julia Prendergast is a PhD candidate at Deakin University in the School of Communication and Creative Arts. Julia's thesis consists of a novel and exegesis. A chapter ('Cockleshell') from the novel was shortlisted for the Lightship International Short Story Prize and published by Lightship Publishing Ltd and Alma books (UK) in November 2012. Julia's work about the nature of authorial intention and the work of the unconscious is available in the following publications: AAWP (2011, 2012), *Current narratives 2011*, *Testimony, witness, authority: the politics and poetics of experience* (anthology currently 'in press', Cambridge Scholars Publishing), *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 2012.

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## **Introduction – my writing as other**

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As I tackle these questions, I plot the operation of alterity; I plot the work of the unconscious as it operates at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; I ask: *How does the language of my fractured narrative mean?* I ask: *What is the relationship between meaning and authorial intention?*

To try to understand the nature of authorial intention and, in particular, the play of unconscious processes at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, is to encounter alterity or otherness, in various guises.

In their introduction to 'Différance', Rivkin and Ryan paraphrase Derrida's argument most succinctly. They suggest that:

[a]ll ideas and all objects of thought and perception bear the trace of other things, other moments, other 'presences'. To bear the trace of other things is to be shadowed by 'alterity' which literally means 'otherness'. (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, 278)

The shadowing aspect of alterity is the haunting trace of the other in writing. The concept of alterity describes how language is ghosted by otherness and the concept therefore captures the mystifying sense in which my writing might be both strange and, simultaneously, familiar. I discuss this process of mystification at length in 'A house with a boat on its roof: the shadowy flux of alterity' (Prendergast 2012). For the purposes of this investigation, I note that Freud unpicks this scenario of strange familiarity in 'The uncanny' when he suggests that:

this factor of involuntary repetition [...] surrounds us with an uncanny atmosphere that [...] forces upon us the idea of something fateful [...] where otherwise we would have spoken of chance only [...] we do feel this to be uncanny. (Freud 1919, 27)

As I encounter the work of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, the 'atmosphere' is indeed 'uncanny' because I recognise that signs in language are employed without recourse to conscious determination and logic. While these signs appear to be disparate, I argue that they are linked at a latent level: they are linked in the context of the latent shadow of alterity.

I unpick this 'uncanny' encounter with my fractured narrative at some length in 'The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know' (Prendergast 2011). In the context of the current discussion, it is suffice to say that I draw from Freud's 'The interpretation of dreams'; I identify a likeness between Freud's 'interweaving of [...] reciprocal relations' between the 'manifest' and the 'latent' content of the dream (Freud 1900, 404, 400, 400) and my identification of the relationship between the surface narrative and the latent structure of the narrative: between the surface map and the trace of the other.

In *Of grammatology*, Derrida writes: 'The trace is *nothing*, it exceeds the question *What is?* and contingently makes it possible' (Derrida 1976, 75). This definition goes to the heart of the question: How does language mean? This is the question that I ask my writing, not what do you mean but how?

I encounter the concept of alterity from the perspective of writing, rather than from the perspective of philosophy. This frames my approach in particular ways. I need to be conscious of '[w]here I'm calling from' (Carver 1989, 278). I borrow this phrase from Raymond Carver, from the title of one of his short stories.

## **Deconstruction as a way of thinking**

Derrida writes:

For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue. (Derrida 1976, 5)

This extract comes from the exergue of Derrida's *Of grammatology*. The term exergue is derived 'from [the] Greek *ex* [meaning] outside + *ergon* [meaning] work' (Collins English Dictionary 2003). Exergue might therefore be understood as something outside of the work that locates it in time and thought. According to this extract, Derrida's deconstructive work is aiming towards something that, as yet, has no language outside of it that is capable of locating it. Derrida (1976, 5) calls this future a 'future anterior'.

The problem is that the reference point in the future, the 'future anterior', is conditional upon an incomplete action in the present. In this instance, the reference point in the future (which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing) is conditional upon an epistemological outlook that is outside these values, and Derrida suggests that there is, as yet, no exergue for such an outlook.

The exergue as outside explains Derrida's position regarding the 'future anterior'. The same Derridean reasoning that prohibits us from understanding that which guides our future anterior, also implies that we cannot fathom that which is outside what we know: we cannot know what we cannot know. When I whittle Derrida's reasoning down to this tautology, I move towards understanding the concept of alterity in the context of sign, word and writing.

As Derrida (1978, 268) says: 'Who will ever know what it is to know nothing?'. The idea is that we cannot escape the context of our knowing. There is no exergue (for that which guides our future anterior) because we are limited by our inability to be outside of a reading that we cannot yet envisage. We cannot envisage a future that puts into question the values of our linguistic codes, because our epistemological outlook is, in the first instance, framed by those very values and shackled by those very codes.

### **Trace and metaphoricity: meaning as desire**

The concept of alterity is a means for talking about narrative effects in the context of a cause (even if this cause is something one cannot put one's finger on, precisely). This constitutes a conversation about meaning as desire.

My desire for meaning prompts me to track the signs in the surface content of my fractured narrative in the context of a shadow: the trace of the other that shadows the otherwise empty sign. The shadow changes shape: it is all and it is nothing, half of all and all of nothing, depending upon where I'm calling from. Derrida unpicks this concept of metaphor as all and nothing:

Being nothing, it does not itself appear, it has no proper and independent phenomenality, and not showing itself, it withdraws; it is structurally in withdrawal, as [...] differentiality, trace. (Derrida 2007, 75)

This extract is taken from the 'The retrait of metaphor', where Derrida defines metaphor 'in the sense of direction — transport[ing] a familiar predicate [...] toward a less familiar, more remote *unheimlich*' (Derrida 2007, 69). Derrida thereby accounts for the metaphorical manoeuvre that allows one thing to become other. To plot this manoeuvre is to trace the ever-shifting shadow of alterity. This constitutes a quest for the unstable 'how' of meaning attribution.

Kevin Brophy refers to the work of Christopher Alexander, an American architect who suggests that 'at the core of all successful acts [...] and processes' lies the quality of being 'alive' (Brophy 2009, 119). Brophy suggests that 'the word *alive* used in this way is of course used as a metaphor, and this is where it fails to truly name the quality we are talking about' (Brophy 2009, 120). This failure to truly name the quality that is being referred to, which Brophy identifies as the premise for the operation of metaphor, is in fact the condition for naming (for attaching meaning to the sign) as it occurs at the primal/generative moment of narrative composition, where meaning is intended without full consciousness.

Brophy suggests that 'you can only understand a metaphor (make the leap of understanding that it requires) if you already understand the quality that it stands in

for' (Brophy 2009, 120). This is a reminder that metaphorical play relies upon a latent chamber of associative meaning and understanding. The surface content of the narrative also relies upon a latent chamber of associative meaning and understanding. This chamber is the trace of the other in narrative.

Otherness cannot be located because it is not a definitive, tangible meaning as presence-in-time fact, but a symptom of one's non-self-present presence in writing: a web of pre-conscious associations that are capable of meaning both one thing and the other. This is the mystifying process Freud outlines in 'The uncanny' where 'the word *'heimlich [...]* develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich* (Freud 1919, 421). A sign's capacity to mean both one thing and the other is precisely the capacity that is afforded to signs in narrative by the operation of alterity, and it is the multifaceted capacity of the sign that accounts for the 'uncanny atmosphere' Freud describes (Freud 1919, 427).

The quality of ambivalence underlies the operation of alterity; the concept explains why the surface of my fractured narrative may appear to be connected in an arbitrary and random manner, when assessed from the logical perspective of the editorial chair. Associative relations determine the shape of the narrative at the primal/generative moment of narrative composition and associative relations occur in the realm of the unconscious. In this way, narrative may be seen to represent an elusive area of language-learning and language-understanding: an area in which 'processes that formulate ideas and shape them [...] are hidden from consciousness', an area in which 'it would seem that some kinds of learning could take place outside consciousness' (Brophy 2009, 48).

It is within the context of learning that takes place outside consciousness that David Whish-Wilson (2009, 85) refers to:

[t]he real shift [that] occurs when self-consciousness is lost [...] the move [...] from propositional language to figurative and symbolic understanding, and feeling.  
(Whish-Wilson 2009, 96-7)

In the context of alterity, the cause (of the sign as effect) is metaphorical; it is other; it fails to truly name. This is why meaning, in the context of the elusive other of alterity, might be explained in the context of meaning as desire. The operation of associative thought, and the production of meaningful language, that occurs in the context of a moment that is outside full-consciousness, is precisely, exquisitely, the very moment that I am trying to 'catch', as I engage with a primal/generative moment of narrative composition.

### **Narrative: the yearning rebuttal against empty self-presence**

At a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, the mind's ability to produce its effects without full consciousness is foregrounded as other: those things that I see beyond when I know, those things that I know without knowing, these things take centre stage. In these moments, unconscious processes make full the otherwise empty sign in ways that I could scarcely have envisaged and this, the

possibility of 'empty' self-presence, is the haunting aspect of Derrida's alterity; this is the possibility that I produce when-I-am-not-I.

Narrative is a yearning rebuttal against the idea that consciousness might be empty, for at the heart of narrative lurk questions: *Do you hear a story? Do you understand?* When the mind produces its effects without full consciousness, when the unconscious takes centre stage at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, these questions metamorphose; they become: *Do you hear the story that I don't mean to tell? Do you understand what I say when I don't understand what I'm saying? Can you see what I don't mean to say?*

The yearning rebuttal against the idea that consciousness might be empty seems to be amplified in these questions, and this is somewhat unsettling, considering that the yearning rebuttal is amplified in questions that take, as the very premise of their existence, the idea that meaning is produced, at least in part, by effects that the mind produces without full consciousness.

An analysis of the work of the unconscious, at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, is an evaluation of this work from the conscious, logical perspective of the editorial chair. This a schizophrenic encounter between self and self-as-other, but it nevertheless leads me to where I'm calling from: to an understanding of Derrida's statement that '[t]here is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1976, 158). This encounter leads me to the realisation that, as I engage with the strange/familiar content of my fractured narrative, I cannot be outside of the work of the unconscious that occurs at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition.

### **Context and the possibility of meaning**

My understanding of the meaning of the surface narrative is based upon the combination of my close proximity to, and simultaneous estrangement from, that surface narrative. In other words, the fact that the text baffles me, despite the fact that I have produced it, leads to an analysis of the work of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition: a moment in which the mind produces its effects without recourse to full consciousness and logic.

Simplistically speaking, the fact that I have produced a text that baffles me invites an analysis of the operation of the 'other' in the 'I'. This is the context that I cannot be outside of as I engage with my writing, and it is this analysis that leads me to Derrida's concept of alterity: to the seductive proposition that signs in language are shadowed by the trace of the other.

Within this context, I approach Derrida's (1973, 93) views about the possibility of meaning 'as such':

My nonperception, my nonintuition [...] are expressed by that very thing that I say, by *that* which I say and *because* I say it. This structure will never form an 'intimately blended unity' with intuition. The absence of intuition – and therefore of the subject of intuition – is required by the general structure of signification, when considered *in*

*itself*. It is radically requisite: the total absence of the subject and object of a statement – the death of the writer and/or the disappearance of the objects he was able to describe – does not prevent a text from meaning something. On the contrary, this possibility gives birth to meaning as such, gives it out to be heard and read.

The context that I cannot be outside of, as I engage with my writing, is my engagement with the work of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition. This context can be paraphrased in the form of the following questions: *What is my attitude toward the effects that I produce without full consciousness? What is my reaction when the other takes the floor?*

The voice of the other seems to be the radically requisite premise that Derrida speaks of: the premise that opens up the very possibility of meaning because, according to Derrida, the possibility of meaning occurs in the context of the absence of intuition, in the context of the absence of the subject of intuition, and this is the state of affairs at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition, where effects are produced without recourse to fully, consciously determined authorial intentions.

Whish-Wilson (2009, 85) refers to ‘the “splitting” of normal consciousness whilst in the creative state’ and therefore to the idea that writing is a collision between work that occurs associatively, at a pre-conscious level, and work that operates with conscious attention to the demands of logic and self-presence. In the context of authorial intention, the question: how does language mean (?) manifests as a payoff between the surface content and the latent content of the narrative, between the registers of the conscious and the unconscious, between the writer’s sense of self-as-I and self-as-other.

As I argue at length in ‘Light the towel: narrative and the negotiated unconscious’ (Prendergast 2012), the unconscious employs signs on the basis of their associative value. In this context, ‘similarity [...] does not mean to the subconscious what it means to conscious reasoning’ (Mavromatis 1987, 178). This is why the surface narrative may appear to be strange: a random collection of signs. I recognise that my fractured narrative is tainted not only by my inability to be outside of my idiosyncratic, associative ties to the language I employ but, also, by the blatant disregard, on the part of the unconscious, for the accepted rules of play within that language system.

Derrida (1980, 59, 63) argues that the law of genre is ‘a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy’; he suggests that contamination is ‘the law of participation without membership’. I suggest that the surface narrative, when viewed from the perspective of full consciousness, is contaminated by strangeness: by the participation of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition. The system of narrative is contaminated to the extent that signs have been deployed without recourse to conscious, authorial intention and, thereby, under the delusion of self-presence. The narrative is contaminated by the ‘imposter’ participation of the unconscious.

As I edit my fractured narrative I become attentive to the operation of the ‘other’ in the ‘I’ and the input of the unconscious at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition. I accept that this ‘other-I’ operates without recourse to concepts of self-



presence in time, and without conscious intention as it pertains to the sign's ability to 'deliver' semantic intention. *Is my editing practice therefore 'hospitable' to the imposter: to the 'other-I' of the unconscious?*

Derrida suggests that:

... 'hospitality' is a Latin word [...] *Hospitalität* [...] of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a [...] word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, 'hostility', the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body. (Derrida 2000, 1)

In my editing practice, the conscious-I is host only to the extent that it is a means for me to articulate the voice of the other as it stakes its claim in my fractured narrative: the conscious-I is host only to the extent that it is a means for me to articulate where I'm calling from. At a primal/generative moment of composition, the unconscious leads the dance; to suggest otherwise would be to put the cart before the horse; to forget that 'metaphors of perception are metaphors' rather than 'the things themselves' (Nietzsche 1873, 264); to forget that I cannot be outside of the work of the unconscious as I engage with the issue of authorial intention at a primal/generative moment of narrative composition; to pretend that we are something other than 'passengers, comprehended and displaced by metaphor' (Derrida 2007, 48). For these reasons, I describe my hospitable editing practice as my faith in 'a vision that I intend beyond when I know' (Prendergast 2012, 9).

### **Conclusion – where I'm calling from: *textor, textum, textus***

'Textor, textum, textus: the Latin terms for weaver, web, and the various structures (whether threads or language) from which these are made' (Williamson 2011, 4). I am aware that both conscious and unconscious forces are at play in the web of my fractured narrative and, in this, I subscribe to Hillis Miller's (Hillis Miller 1992, 233) proposal that:

Each word inheres in a labyrinth of branching interverbal relationships going back not to a referential source but to something already, at the beginning, a figurative transfer, according to Rosseauistic or Condillacian law that all words were originally metaphors.

In a Derridean style of reasoning, Hillis Miller pinpoints the 'always already' metaphoricity that underlies a sign's propensity to mean (Derrida 1978, 211).

It is the complexity of a sign's propensity to mean that Derrida refers to when he suggests that:

...when a text you write comes back to you in one form or another, it is never the same text [...] there is no echo, or, if there is, it's always distorted [...] It can be a very pleasant or very unpleasant experience. It can reconcile you with what you've done, make you love it or hate it. There are a thousand possibilities. Yet one thing is certain in all this diversity, and that is that it's never the same. (Derrida 1985, 158)

I am grateful for the concept of alterity because it questions the very possibility of meaning: 'how hazardous is every word of thought (every thoughtful word) [...] that

addresses itself to Being [?]; without questioning our desire for meaning-in-time: 'Being speaks through every language; everywhere and always' (Derrida 1968, 298).

Alterity recognises that the otherwise empty sign is shadowed by associations that simulate presence. The concept of alterity therefore gives me the means for talking about effects in the context of a ghostly cause. In this way, meaning is constituted in terms of a yearning desire.

Derrida says:

Perhaps the desire to write is the desire to launch things that come back to you as much as possible in as many forms as possible. That is, it is the desire to perfect a program or a matrix having the greatest potential, variability, undecidability, plurivocality, et cetera, so that each time something returns it will be as different as possible. That is also what one does when one has children – talking beings who can always outtalk you. You have the illusion that it comes back to you, that it comes from you – that these unpredictable words come out of you somewhat. This is what goes on with texts. (Derrida 1985, 158-59).

In this, I see an intersection between Derrida's philosophy and my approach to my writing practice; I see a place where we seem to be calling from together, a place that celebrates the unforeseeable in a voice that seems to arise from me but is, of course, other.

A fractured narrative is characterised by dissemination, shifting points of view, and meaning that is riddled with otherness. In these ways I hear Derrida in the context of my writing. In particular, I hear Derrida in the way that my fractured narrative scrambles against the possibility of prescriptive meaning, against the fullness of meaning-in-time.

In Raymond Carver's story, the first-person narrator is an alcoholic, calling from 'Frank Martin's drying-out facility' (Carver 1989, 278). At the end of the story, the narrator considers calling his estranged wife; he says: 'she'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her' (Carver 1989, 296). The final paragraph is riddled with estrangement, fear and desire.

It is within the context of the metaphor of 'where I'm calling from', a metaphor of estrangement, fear and desire, that I approach the concept of alterity as it applies to writing. Alterity represents the sense in which the narrative material I produce is other to me, but it also represents the ghostly language of desire that gives voice to this otherness.

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