# PREPARING A LABYRINTH:

## WRITING THE SELF IN THE WORLD

Volume 1: An exegesis

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**Certificate of Authorship/Originality**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

At the heart of philosophical investigation is the question of what it means to be a human being. This is not simply a matter of ontology, but a matter of definitions, language, ethics, relationships and responsibilities. What it means to be, how to live according to sound epistemological and axiological frameworks, and how to articulate this, are questions that perhaps will never be answered in a satisfactory manner. This submission constitutes my contribution to the long discussion, and is presented as three separate but related research products. The story I found myself telling, in the essay and the two creative manuscripts, is one of ambiguity and uncertainty, of the human body, and of the being that is always shifting between self and other, nature and culture, living and dead.

The exegetical essay, Preparing a Labyrinth, lays out the intellectual and creative pathways I have travelled while engaging critically with questions of the body, truth and narrative. The short story collection, *Ways of Getting By*, addresses the pragmatics of being in a troubled world, and the material consequences of apparently abstract choices about the 'right thing to do', or 'ways of getting by'. The fiction manuscript, The Idea of Gravity, similarly addresses the effects of decisions about ethical problems, and looks too to the effects on subjectivity of the workings – and the disintegration – of the body.

All three works are the products of a research process that combined some of the classic formulations of early twentieth-century phenomenological thought with contemporary insights from biologists, neurologists and scholars of the virtual world of IT, and my own observation, archival and phenomenological research methods. Using this material, I have generated a mass of creative and qualitative data, and used it to examine a perspective on the nature, and the ethics, of being, that resulted in the thesis presented here. All three elements take seriously the labyrinthine properties of language and its role in constructing our sense of ourselves and of the world in which we live. All use language as material to craft a way of sensing the social and natural world. All three, too, take seriously the place of death in society as 'the problem of the subject' (Certeau), that which is 'too cruel anywhere' (Shakespeare), and is yet always there, at once the great inevitability and the great uncertainty.

# Preparing a Labyrinth

*What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing – with a rather shaky hand – a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again?*

*Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p17*

## *§1 Writing a labyrinth: An introduction*

> Labyrinth, *noun*; 1 An intricate structure of interconnecting passages through which it is difficult to find one's way. 2 Greek Mythology: The maze in which the Minotaur was confined. 3 Something highly intricate or convoluted in character, composition, or construction: *a labyrinth of rules and regulations.* 4 Anatomy: a group of complex interconnecting anatomical cavities. [Middle English laberinthe, from Latin labyrinthus, from Greek laburinthos; possibly akin to labrus, *double-headed axe, of Lydian origin*.]

### §1.1 On labyrinths

Labyrinth: the dictionary provides the definitions; readers redefine it to suit themselves. It is a popular image for cultural and literary theorists. The term appears over and over in writings by Bataille, Bakhtin, Blanchot, Certeau, Derrida … these and many others have written about the labyrinth. Some have, at least in the eyes of some readers, written labyrinths of their own. Nietzsche keeps coming back to it (as though he is always clutching Ariadne's thread, always winding his way back to tell us one more thing about the labyrinth in which he is always almost mislaid). Foucault is intrigued by it too. The labyrinth is myth, magic and threat. It is an intricate structure, a clever human device: something convoluted; something almost anatomical; something with violent potential, *possibly akin to labrus, a double-headed axe*. Double-headed: like Janus, perhaps, who simultaneously looks forward and back, or side-to-side: who sees both sides. The labyrinth twists, it folds back on itself, it reaches dead ends, it arrives at unexpected intersections.

That is not the only variety of maze: Borges wrote in 'Death and the Compass' that a labyrinth need not be labyrinthine. It can be a straight passage that nonetheless traps the unwary in complexities of thought, intricacies in which thinkers lose themselves (1998: 121-22). This is my kind of labyrinth: somewhere to lose oneself and then return, changed.

This essay constitutes a kind of experiment, one in which I attempt to pursue various paths and unwind my version of Ariadne's thread through a labyrinth of literature, and attempt to draft a map of a particular kind of thinking. This is an exercise that resembles sometimes Foucault's deformed itinerary, sometimes Borges' straight passage. The map/exercise becomes a labyrinth of my own: a space where every question raises

another question with no assurance that any will be resolved, and where every thread of thought leads north, south, east … pick your own path. Seek the centre of your own maze.

At the heart of every labyrinth, I suspect, lies a dangerous treasure, a cache of gold and gems: you just have to find the way to the heart, past the turns and twists, past the possible dead ends, past the unexpected fissures into which the unwary could fall. The bold can make it past the Minotaur and reach the prize at the centre. But what must I give up to gain the treasure? What must I leave behind, in exchange?

I have found gems here and there, around the turns and down the blind alleys of this particular labyrinth, this thesis I am writing. What I have not found is a confident clarity; instead, in among the treasures, is only shadow. My labyrinth, like every labyrinth, is finely poised between enthusiasm and loss, passion and death. I want to know more about these dark treasures, to explore the fears they raise, and so I write.

§1.2 On the contents

Attached to this essay are works that emerged out of this labyrinthine process. The first is a collection of short stories connected by the therapist-narrator who tells about the lives of her clients. Titled *Ways of Getting By* (Ginninderra Press 2006), it begins with a flawed annunciation – a virgin birth ending in the delivery only of light – and ends with at attempt to adjust to the inevitability, not of death, but of growing old. It offered no answer to the labyrinth, though it provided me room for thought.

The other piece is an unpublished manuscript that, like the short stories, attempts to chart a passage through the maze that is my view of the world. I began thinking of it as a story when, about a decade ago, I was reading the *Weekly World News*, one of those tacky tabloids that contain not ‘news stories’ but ‘new’ stories –

*WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO LIZARD BABY!*

*THE ANTI-CHRIST IS ALIVE AND LIVING IN THE US!*

*BOOZE CURES THE COMMON COLD!*

And this one, '*PENNSYLVANIA DOCTOR KEEPS WIFE'S SEVERED HEAD ALIVE FOR 7 YEARS!*' (Sandra Lee 1996: 24-25). This one, complete with images:

Spread across two pages was the story, illustrated by a photograph of a woman's weary face set in a decapitated head. Her eyes look slightly bruised. Electrodes are attached to her temples, tubes are fed up each nostril, a collar of what looks like birdseed surrounds her neck, and the whole combination of head, tubes and aquarium, or cake cover, or whatever – something to seal her in a sterile environment – rests on a tabletop.



The story does not elucidate the cake cover, or the birdseed, or why in a husband-and-wife/life-and-death story neither the word nor the tenor of 'love' can be found. Surely, generic expectations told me, this should be the story of a man prepared to breach every formal and informal code of practice because he cannot bear to lose the woman he loves – a Frankenstein trope. Surely it's the story of a woman prepared to sacrifice everything: her life, her body, her freedom, and even her death, to satisfy the man she loves – a Gothic trope.

I remember reading somewhere that every story is a love story; a variant perhaps of Lessing's 'Love inspired the first artistic effort' (1984: 12). If that's a fair definition of

*story*, then this article did not fit the bill. It focused entirely on scientific enthusiasm. It did not touch on their relationship before and after what I think of as 'the event', what the husband (the 'husband') called the 'very intricate surgery that required six hours' in which her head was severed from her body. It did not touch on how someone could possibly survive in that state for seven years, undiscovered by the authorities and – an even more unlikely proposition – without falling into despair or insanity.

The look on her face is what arrested me when I first turned the page to their story. And then I was captured again by the language he used to describe their history: a language that erased love, or family feeling, or sorrow from the story. So I wrote my own version of her life. Like the other two pieces, this work is an attempt to think out loud, to plot a path. Like the other two, it is concerned with the concrete – with bodies and places. All three pieces are concerned with relationships and obligations. All three attempt to find certitude, but without (much) success.

In this essay I explore issues similar to those in the three attached works, but tackle them from a perspective closer to philosophy than creative practice. I have been thinking through the issues during the period of writing the creative works, and the more I wrote and thought, the more questions emerged – new passages in the labyrinth I was creating. What I wish to do here is lay out some of the thinking and reading, some of the twists and turns I have negotiated as I paced and slept and wriggled and struggled through the labyrinth during the course of my candidature. I do not wish to discuss or analyse what is contained within the creative element, describe the narrative and technical approaches used, or offer a reading of my work that could be identified as literary criticism. It is, I think, for readers to make discoveries for themselves, not for writers to tell readers what they are seeing. Rather, I want to explicate my wanderings through the labyrinth, and to offer some small contribution to the story of what it means to be a human being. I want to put the body back into thinking.

Human being, in the conventional understanding of what that means, is not a straightforward matter. It is ambivalent – by which I mean, rich in both complexities and disappointments, never straight, always labyrinthine. In writing my works – the creative and the exegetical – I wanted to think out loud about incongruence and ambivalence, and about what it means to *be*. I paid attention to little things – the

quotidian, the ordinary. But in reading, researching and writing them, some of what might be called ‘big’ issues emerged. Truth, for instance. Each of the three creative works is simultaneously true and not-true; each is sourced in lived experience, but reconstituted as confabulation. Time emerged too, because time has been ticking away throughout the course of my candidature, because the stories I have written attempt to fold time back and forth, and because writing is a temporal art. And, hand in hand with time, is the notion of space, since the two are close cousins, two sides of the same coin. Time and space constitute the dimensions in which we live and move and have our being in the quotidian world and in story, and this is the third ‘big’ issue that drew my attention – perhaps the biggest, in fact: what it means to be, and how we become. In this I take my lead from Michel Foucault who wrote:

> The goal of my work during the last twenty years has not been to analyze the phenomenon of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. (Foucault 1984: 7)

Of course I am not concerned in this essay with such Foucauldian concerns as biopolitics, or the workings of power, epistemes, discourses or practices of social realization. But I am concerned with how to make sense of some of the ways in which people can be understood as human – as subject; and all the complexities and perplexities that attend that state.

In the process of this discussion I raise the quarrel between dualism and monism, and attend to the disjuncture between the *cogito* and the measures for being and understanding being that have emerged in recent neuroscientific and biological writings. I extend the fuzziness of the logic of such works to another facet of human being – signification, or how we make meanings among ourselves – by looking at language and its functions. How do people construct story out of experience or observation, how do they convert the non-linguistic into words? On what tropes do they rely, what twists and turns do they deploy to navigate through concepts and consciousness to the narrative form?

Perhaps the twistiest of the stories humans tell is the story of death and its relation to life and the living. In the last section of this essay I pay attention to what we might

mean by death and how we treat – and regard – the dead. This was a point of considerable concern to me throughout the process of writing, since the idea of death, or not-being, runs through each of the creative works (or at least, it ran through my head while I was writing). As beings that are formulated entirely from language, can my characters be said to be either alive or dead? Whether alive or dead, fictional or 'true', is it valid to subject them to death, and to subject my potential readers to death?

Despite my concerns, I have allowed my works to linger over the idea of death because it is, one way or another, the end of every story. Indeed, it is for some commentators on writing (Blanchot, for instance) the whole story, the whole reason for writing. The idea of death possesses me, as it possesses many producers of story.

But how to engage with the complexities of meaning and being that run through any narrative? Let me start by attempting to tease out some aspects of the truth-value of creative writing. Stories have their truth, as do newspaper articles in trash tabloids and in the 'quality press'. But the conditions and contexts in which each form means truth, or is read as truth, vary considerably. This does not prevent writers and readers from seeking it out, as Nietzsche knows:

> The will to truth, which is still going to tempt us to many a hazardous enterprise; that celebrated veracity of which all philosophers have hitherto spoken with reverence: what questions this will to truth has already set before us! What strange, wicked, questionable questions! (Nietzsche 1990: 465)

Truth is wicked? Yes, perhaps. There is nothing innocent, neutral or natural about 'truth' or the imperative to find, assert and display it. There is always more to truth that meets the eye, and more at stake. Fiction or nonfiction, quality or gutter press, poem or lab report: their veracity has been contended and critiqued in many places, and in many ways, through the history of philosophy, or critical thinking. Michel de Certeau is very clear on the notion that truth is an effect of practice, and that even such ordered and organised fields as science and historiography are predicated on fictionality, and use fictional attitudes, approaches and techniques – the *what if?* move – when articulating inventiveness and experiment. Every piece of writing, Certeau argues, whether scientific or speculative, is a representation of reality and not reality itself (Certeau 1986: 201). Whatever the truth claims, the implied audience, or the function of the

writing, every piece must meet generic conventions, capture the reader's attention, unfold by way of scene and argument and narrative, and achieve a satisfying and decisive conclusion. This is easy to see in the novel form, but it is also evident in science or in historiography which, like fiction, must use narrative devices. It must take a moment of reality, and organise it so that it will be as convincing as possible, seduce its readers by being engaging and authoritative; it must pass itself off as real and reliable because of the voice of the narrator (fiction), or the credentials of the writer (nonfiction). The difference between the 'true' and the 'made-up' is thus qualitative, not quantitative, ideological rather than actual. All texts are, to some extent, story; each story starts somewhere, in a time and place – that is to say, a context; and no story is capable of telling *the truth, the whole truth and only the truth*.

§1.3 On an approach

I do not mean, in this, to wander into bad postmodernism ('anything goes!'), or into impossible relativism. I do not attempt to throw out the whole world of empirical knowledge, or rational thought. Of course facts can be measured, and arguments built. But the acts of measuring and building are predicated on the measurer's or builder's point of view, which emerges from their place and time. And how they convey the fact or argument is a matter of narrative construction. One of the great values of philosophy, for instance, is its commitment to investigate the terms by which something comes to be 'true'. Contained within this imperative is the belief, or at least the hope, that in analysing the stories of human engagement in the world, superstitions can be emptied of their power, and people freed from the chains of unconsidered thought. This does not mean that every assault on the normative landscape is based on reason, of course; consider the following example:

> Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. (Marx and Engels 1965: 23-24)

This paragraph, taken from the Preface to *The German Ideology*, follows a little diatribe against the vapidity of German philosophy, and the intentions of the authors 'to debunk and discredit the philosophical struggle with the shadows of reality' (23). It sums up

what Marx and Engels identified as the failure of philosophy, a chasing after shadows rather than a practical engagement with the world of things. But from the perspective of a 21st century writer, I find it a captivating image. The boldness of its statement charms me with its reframing of social and natural 'laws', and worries me in its unreasonable reason. I share with that 'valiant fellow' the desire to see people liberated from the chains of unsubstantiated concepts; but of course, in the end, I must agree with Marx and Engels. All the iconoclasm, and indeed all the reason, in the world will not prevent people from drowning. 'Proof against any danger from water' consists not in freedom from superstition, but in knowledge, technical capacity, and the ability to observe and make sense of what is seen. The drowning do not need to reflect on the idea of gravity; they need the ability to swim, fitness, warmth, a sufficiently calm body of water, and so on.

The valiant fellow fails when his idea is measured against logic, reason or empiricism. But for me at least he succeeds in producing an idea with the potential to shift the terms of thinking. His idea does not obey rules of logic or 'truth', but it reminds readers that truth is – or may be – an idea. Truth is belief, effectively, and beliefs ought to be investigated if they are not to drown us in worn-out rules. His wacky idea touches on truth only glancingly, but it contains a writerly imperative. It is as though some writer asked: *what if it were not true that gravity has effects? What if gravity were only a superstition?* Once this has been postulated, the relation of both gravity and water to me has been changed: the postulation moves me away from the truth demands of empiricism, and into the truth demands of story.

Marx's protagonist is indeed a valiant fellow: it takes courage to engage with truth, to look at the normative landscape from a different point of view, and to challenge the unexamined truths of any episteme. It takes courage to investigate the ideas and knowledges that possess us and guide our behaviour. It also takes imagination to place oneself outside the zone of 'everything that is the case' and treat it not as natural, or true, but as stuff, the material of thought.

Inspired by that valiant fellow, I have attempted to test out at least some of the beliefs that possess me in the process of writing the creative works attached. This has required me to look both directly and obliquely at the views I hold of the world – or rather, Marx

would say, the views that hold me. My choice of story as the factory in which to trace these views, these lines of thought and these superstitions is a valid one, I would argue, because it is one that comes with a long history. People have always told stories to make sense of their world – and who but humans tell stories? Certainly not nematodes and flat worms with whom we share some physiological and cognitive properties; nor the dolphins who charm us with their smiles but are actually only there to ride the slipstream from our boats, or bludge fish from us. To be human is to think in stories; it is our environment. Roland Barthes wrote:

> narrative occurs in all periods, in all places, all societies; narrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, there has never been, any people anywhere without narrative; … narrative is *there*, like life. (1988: 95)

This raises a further issue: the responsibility directed not just at investigation, but at responsibility. Mere iconoclasm could lead to people leaping, like Ophelia, into a body of water, and not floating but drowning. It is incumbent upon (responsible) writers to take very seriously how they frame and shape the narratives that form part of life so that they contribute to thought, rather than being an idle distraction. As writer, I ought to take seriously the responsibility to make and direct works that will treat delicately the *strange, wicked, questionable questions* necessarily threaded through any story. Every new line and paragraph, every new scene, needs to come under consideration, to be wrenched away from the belief systems that would otherwise possess both story and storyteller, and needs to be shaped into something that is true to and for itself.

Easier said than done. Laurie Anderson's piece, 'The Salesman', points to the difficulty involved in pinning down the actual within the imagined:

> … the first really strange stories I remember hearing were Bible stories. And these stories were completely amazing: about parting oceans, and talking snakes. And people really seemed to believe these stories. … So in a way I was introduced to a special local form of surrealism at an early age and there was always a question in my mind about what's actually true and what is just another art form. (Anderson 1995)

*What is actually true, and what is just another art form*? In the case of the fictional manuscript attached to this essay, my starting point was an article in a tacky tabloid. Of course the article is not true. Those newspapers are much closer to art than news; they occupy a generic domain that is committed to sensation, not event. But *people really*

*seem to believe such stories*: look at the sales figures for tabloids; observe the audiences on Oprah's or Jerry Springer's shows; discover that many American citizens are convinced that the USA won the Vietnam War. People will believe anything.

Almost anything. They will believe anything that delivers a sense of truth. This is what every sort of writing must do, if it is to work. All writing is 'made up' because it does not emerge fully formed from Zeus' brow: writers construct it. But only some writing is 'actually true', and readers learn what is and what is not, and in what respects it is or is not true, by internalizing the taxonomical principles of genre. Fiction: made up, but true in terms of the world it constructs. Nonfiction: actually true; verifiable and reliable.

Yet these categories let themselves down, they leak into each other's space. Sandra Lee's tabloid story about the Pennsylvania doctor and his wife is neither one nor the other. It is a parody, if anything: it follows most of the generic conventions of news by deploying point of view, narrative flow, beginning-middle-end, reference to experts, quotes from bystanders, photographs, headlines, columns, pull quotes. It purports to tell us something we don't know, and thus to bring events to light. Of course its content is unlikely, and even risible, its events highly improbable – but so too is the mainstream news, very often. How probable is it that each month an entire village in the Third World is wiped out by avalanche, mudslide, flood? It's impossible; it's too much to take in, too much to bear. How probable is it that world leaders can lie again and again, on the public record, and not be called to account? It's impossible; it's far too unlikely; too much against both law and norm. How probable is it that a woman can survive for seven years under an aquarium *sans* body, *sans* company, *sans* agency? It's impossible; it's far too unlikely, it runs counter to the laws of physiology and psychology.

It's not just the domain of writing that suffers from this uncertainty. In the community too, truth has its complexities. I grew up in Africa, where people actually died after being told they had a snake in their chest, or because someone had left a knife on the windowsill outside their room. It's impossible, it's unlikely, it's just magical thinking. They died anyway. And even science, that most disenchanted domain, falls down when it comes to avoiding the contamination of the true by the not-true. Think of flatworms that pass their knowledge and memory on to their cannibalistic fellows. Think of how a mouse in Utah learns to run a maze and suddenly there is a jump in IQ levels for the

world population of mice. It's unlikely, it's impossible, it's against nature. And yet all those stories have their truths.

§1.4 On ways of knowing

We may not know what truth is, but the truth-concept carries a great deal of weight in Western thought. We find it articulated in the writings of the ancients: Aristotle, for instance, who gives over much of his work to the question of truth, and explains in intricate detail how the soul is connected to truth through intellectual, intuitive and moral virtues – through sensation, reason and desire (Aristotle 1953: 172). He doesn't beat around the bush, axiologically: he unabashedly names truth as good, and falsity as bad, at least within the intellectual domain. This is because the interconnectedness of language and reality means what we say and how we think form a gateway to understandings of reality and, hence, all people in a position to say something have a responsibility to say and do it in such a way that they achieve the end of 'doing well' (1953: 173). In Aristotle's *On Interpretation* he continues this concern with the ontology of truth, and how it can be determined. He lays out the many ways in which a sentence can become a proposition, and how the validity of a proposition can be determined: what counts as true, and what as false, and in what contexts. In Book 2, Chapter 3 of his *Physics* he lists the four causes for being, and hence for what can be said to be true of a thing: truth that comprises both its being, and how we understand it. The *material* cause is the stuff out of which it is made, and without which it would not be; the *formal* cause is the design, or pattern, or 'essence' of the thing, without which it would not be in that way; the *efficient* cause is the agency that brought the essence and the materials together to give it its form; and the *final* cause is its end, or purpose, which is also its origin, since it would not have been brought into being without that purpose. 'This then,' Aristotle goes on to write, 'perhaps exhausts the number of ways in which the term "cause" is used' (n.d.).

Perhaps. Certainly, given the knowledge basis back in 350BCE when he wrote this work, though contemporary science, and perhaps philosophy and semiotics too, would undoubtedly find more uses for the word, and more explanations for being. Be that as it may; a 'cause' is not truth in and of itself, but merely associated with it, in Aristotle's analysis, because having an existence measured by the causes implies, and in fact

demands, *truth*. This is not far from Popeye's 'I yam what I yam'. It is what it is, the sum of its causes.

This concept is appealing because it limits being, or delimits it. It provides the security of knowing, it takes us out of the underground passages of the labyrinth and into the clear light of the laboratory. Unfortunately, it doesn't hold up under the pressure of argument, because neither 'truth' nor 'existence' is straightforward or unitary. Perhaps we can draw a logical connection between existence and truth; but before we do so we have to ask what is meant by existence. Is a tree alive, or an ocean? Perhaps, in Aristotlean terms – but then what about their final cause: what is the end or purpose of a tree or an ocean?

If the ontological status of such objects is ambiguous, maybe we should put them aside and look only at the existence, and hence the truth, of sentient beings. We know that people and animals have cognitive and affectual capacities; we know that they are able to establish some sorts of understanding about life, the universe and everything; and so in heuristic terms it is possible to announce that they have existence and hence truth. But does this accommodate the dead, those who undoubtedly have had existence, and who very often continue to make contributions long after the report of their death? The dead *have been*, we might say, rather than *are*; but they often manage to combine those two tenses: think of Martin Heidegger whose works continue to emerge, posthumously, or Frank Sinatra who is now (2006) performing at live concerts several years after his funeral.

Of course the dead are dead. But the living find it difficult to let go of them; we keep the dead with us in a way that blurs the line between the quick and the dead. Voltaire seems to resist this, because he is very explicit about the distinction between them. Think, for instance, of his maxim in 'Cannibals': 'We have more respect for the dead than for the living. It would be better to respect both the one and the other' (1901: iv.1). There is *one* state – living; and an*other* – dead; two different kinds of being. Voltaire treats them as having claims on society, but not as being both of the same order. All the same, if the dead are capable of making claims on, or of demanding respect from, us then they must 'be', in some sense; a nothing can have no claims on us. But if they *are*, the dead, then what sort of existence do they possess?

These ambiguities are not just an intellectual game equivalent to the problem of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Their lack of clarity, their seeming impossibility, affects how societies and individuals engage the notion of truth, and consequently categorise and treat one another. It is not clear that the human intellect has the capacity to resolve such ambiguities, especially given our incapacity to focus for very long on anything that doesn't engage us, or to confront honestly things that, if resolved, may not be in our interest. Nietzsche wrote (cynically, scornfully) about the human capacity for thought and development of knowledge:

> Throughout tremendous periods of time the intellect begot nothing but errors; some of them proved useful and preservative of the species; he who came upon them or inherited them fought his fight for himself and his posterity with greater good fortune. These articles of faith, which have been repeatedly handed down and have finally become almost a basic component of the human species, are for example the following: that there are enduring things, that there are identical things, that there are things, material, bodies, that a thing is what it appears to be, that our willing is free, that what is good for me is good in itself. (Nietzsche 1977: 58-59)

Of course, he was always bleak when it came to considering his fellow human beings. Other philosophers have been more sanguine about people's ability to establish the difference between truth and not-truth despite the inherent ambiguities, and despite self-interest. The neo-Augustan positivists, for instance, looked to logic and argument, and asserted that something is true only if it can be demonstrated to be true. Such demonstrations are found in mathematical formulae, legal judgments, philosophical propositions or empirically verifiable perception; but are never, and can never, be found in other matters that people often consider at least as true as empirical evidence and sometimes of greater truth value – matters like memories, dreams, or faith.

Like Aristotle, Nietzsche and virtually all other philosophers, Martin Heidegger tackles the question of truth and its being. In his essay 'On the Essence of Truth' (1993 [1943]) he says that we need to understand what truth *itself* is before we can begin to discuss whether some *thing* is true. That is to say, we need to know truth before we can test it. For an example of knowing and testing truth he suggests that one imagine two coins lying on the table. If I look at them, and notice that they are identical, then I can say things about them that accord with their being; I can say, for instance *'the coins are round'*, and this is true because it is empirically observable. Its truth status is that just as

there is accordance between coin and coin, thing and thing, so too there is accordance between coin and statement. Or again, I can say that the coins are made of metal and since they are, the statement can be considered true.

But this is not enough of an argument. Yes, the coins are round: but the statement has no spatial quality, so there is no accordance *as such* between statement and thing. Yes, the coins are made of metal: but the accordance, or correspondence, is again incomplete because a coin is a concrete thing, and a statement is abstract, and hence without material being. What is the relation between thing and statement which allows us to reply, *Yes, that's true!*? Heidegger locates it in the notion that the relation of accord between statement and thing rests on the extent to which things disclose something of their quality and hence their identity. When I say, 'the coin is round', or 'it's made of metal', something about the coin is unconcealed, or disclosed. For Heidegger, 'Considered in regard to the essence of truth, the essence of freedom manifests itself as exposure to the disclosedness of beings' (1993: 126). This disclosedness may, of course, be materially and empirically verifiable, or it may be abstract, dealing only with inner being. Either way, Heidegger says, '"Truth" is not a feature of correct propositions that are asserted of an "object" by a human "subject" and then "are valid" somewhere, in what sphere we know not; rather, truth is disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds' (1993: 127).

This may not initially appear helpful to anyone writing a novel, particularly a novel based on a story in a tabloid whose content appears to have no correspondence between itself and any lived actuality. But it does suggest a gap that may emerge in the passages of any labyrinth – a way out, based on creative approaches to truth. As David Hume writes:

> Tis an established maxim in metaphysics, That . . . nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist. We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible. (1739-40, Book I, part ii, §2)

And in a similar vein Michel de Certeau writes:

> In general, every story that relates what is happening or what has happened constitutes something real to the extent that it pretends to be the representation of a past reality. It

> takes on authority by passing itself off as the witness of what is or of what has been. It seduces, and it imposes itself, under a title of events; which it pretends to interpret ... How can readers resist discourse that tells them what is or what has been? (Certeau 1986: 203)

Which implies yet another perspective on truth: that truth is in the telling, proof in the pudding. There is a certain, if limited, validity to this perspective, one that is helpful to writers of fiction. Because after all no reasonable person would read the short stories I have written and accept that they are empirically true: that it is feasible to be raped by an angel, or that someone can peel back their own skin, or that Althusser's dead wife can cohabit with a lonely woman. No reasonable person would read the tabloid article that seduced me, and imposed itself on me, as 'something real'. Nor would any reasonable person accept that a woman without a body is undoubtedly, truthfully, alive. But someone could and did – me, the author of those short stories; and Sandra Lee, the author of my tabloid article. We both formed ideas and 'from thence concluded that such a [woman/event/action] may actually exist'; others (reasonable people) 'regard it as impossible'. And quite rightly. But the characters I imagined, and the woman Sandra Lee imagined can come to life, of a sort, in the telling; can become possible; can approach a sort of reality, a sort of truth.

Of course the capacity to read a head in a jar as feasible is not just a matter of strange thinking, or the absence of reason. Rather, the idea that a person can exist without their body is a well-established trope in both popular creative production and philosophical thought. It is more often conceived as a 'brain in a bucket' than as a 'head in a jar', but the logic of a self capable of existing in the absence of a body has motivated considerable thought and production: mostly in the realms of popular culture and philosophy. Roald Dahl's short story 'William and Mary' has the eponymous William alive only in the form of a brain and an eye, being tormented by Mary who delights in taking her revenge on him for an unhappy marriage. Usually, though, the disembodied brain is more active, as seen in any number of examples from the film world: schlock-horror B-grade movies like *The Brain from Planet Arous* (1957) or *The Brain that Wouldn't Die* (1963), as well as comedy like the Steve Martin vehicle *The Man with Two Brains* (Carl Reiner, 1983), or art house films such as Jeunet and Caro's *The City of Lost Children* (1995).

The disembodied self, the ‘brain in a vat’, is also a staple of post-Cartesian philosophy. Writers from Hilary Putnam (1992) to Bredo Johnsen (2003) have taken up positions on Descartes’ anxiety that all the world is just an effect of the ‘evil genius’ deity who deceives us into believing that there is a phenomenological reality (in which regard, see also *The Matrix* movies). But for my purposes, in writing this work, I am less interested in the schlock-and-philosophy notions, and more concerned with character. For me, the truth of Lee’s story is grounded on the look on the face of the woman in the photograph: the look of someone who has seen her own disaster; the look of the disaster that is always lying in wait, ‘the infiniteness of the threat [that] has in some way broken every limit’ (Blanchot 1986: 1). It is the look of the future – anyone’s future. For most of us, while we are alive, the disaster never quite arrives. Like our own death, it is in the future, in the place of the disaster: the future, the space that houses dreadful anticipation. Still, the idea of it, or more rarely its actuality, crops up from time to time to trouble the present. The present time.

## *§2 Writing in time*

*Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition*
*is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories,*
*and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others*
*– and ourselves – about who we are.*
*(Daniel Dennett 1991: 418)*

### §2.1 On 'us'

We tell stories about ourselves, Daniel Dennett writes. The stories are designed to set up a protective barrier, to help us blend into the environment, to give us a sense of control over the environment and over ourselves. Story-telling is a *fundamental tactic of self-protection*. But each story that is told contains, in shadowy form, a counter-narrative, a resistive alterity that works against the possibility of control that the original telling promised. I tell my story; in that story I shape the conditions for being and relating as they seem right to me – as they suit me. It becomes my truth. And then I hear someone else's story, and it knocks mine out of the ring. I am disrupted, discombobulated, disturbed, outraged, or astonished. My story did not exist in a vacuum, or uncontested. Like every story, it carries its own potential undoing, because every story evokes, or provokes, a response.

One great narrative-response, one great assault on the dominant story of the correct order of being, came on 11 September 2001 with the assault on Washington and New York by Al Qaida operatives. It was a blunt and brutal response to the story of American hegemony, Western values, and the rule of empire. But like any story, it provoked counter-responses of its own. One of these was the essay produced by the New York-based novelist, Don DeLillo, who wrote a troubling, troubled account of what it felt like to be within the reach of the Twin Towers, to watch them fall, to smell the smoke and the death, and to wonder what we all wonder in moments of calamity: *why is this happening to me?* The core of his account, and of his answer to that question, was 'We are the astonishment' (DeLillo 2001: 37).

Who he means by 'we' at first blush seems both self-evident and unproblematic. He means, surely, 'everyone who is human'. However, given the context of the writing

(just weeks after the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington), it is a little difficult to visualise a 'we' that is one undifferentiated group of people who hold in common their human being. Even at the best of times the tendency among human beings is to resist any undifferentiated collective identity, and rather to see themselves as occupying specific, localised realms. One realm is affect, which in the case of 11 September 2001 emerged (for Americans, and most people in the Western world) in the form of terror, anxiety, rage and guilt. Another is the realm of politics – national, international and local. Others are family, profession, sexuality, ethnicity and so on – all the usual suspects we use to delimit 'us' and differentiate 'I' or 'ourselves' from 'everyone else'.

This is not the impression given by the DeLillo article. He uses the pronoun 'we' quite unblushingly – as I know I often do myself, and despite the fact that, as Emile Benveniste has pointed out, 'we' is an impossible term, as is any personal pronoun. Personal pronouns make sense only in relation to 'conjunctions of past usage(s) with present appropriation' (Benveniste 1971: 291), and so are instances of discourse, not effective deictics. Their capacity to refer is limited to the moment, a language game that allows the speaker to constitute forms, and moments, of subjectivity. Nonetheless, in this section (*pace* Benveniste) I want to start from the pronoun 'we', and trace out who 'we' might stand for in DeLillo's sense – the sense that what constitutes 'we' is manifest and made up of astonishing individuals – and then to consider what comprises an individual human in a community of individual humans.

We all ('we all') know where the answer starts for post-Enlightenment people, and especially for thinkers: with *cogito, ergo sum*, Descartes' contribution to the long debate about human being (Descartes 1968: 53). Twentieth-century thinking on identity, however, has radically problematised both Descartes and all the commonsense and dualist notions of the self. No longer is there ready agreement that being a self means being a soul (thinking or believing) who inhabits a 'vessel' body; or that a self is something grounded, unified, knowable and known. Instead, ideas of the self and experiences of being ramify across contexts and concepts. Individuals may be aliens, gods or monsters; or the entirely commonplace folk next door; or terrifying threats; or potential customers. It may be those with only a virtual existence: inhabitants of MUD universes, 'v-actors', transhumans, clones, Six Million Dollar men; all those who are not really human, not really machine, and not really cartoon either, but capable of

straddling all those formations. In this environment where the interface between human and machine or material and ephemeral has fallen away, the very idea of human being begins to take on shades of Foucault's famous declaration of the 'death of the subject', the last words of his *The Order of Things*:

> As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (Foucault 1973: 387)

And woman would be erased too, one might guess.

Our anticipated disappearance is often sheeted home to the effects of production and communication technologies, and to neoliberalist notions of development on a global stage. Guy Debord places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the 'modern conditions of production', and complains that 'All that once was directly lived has become mere representation' (Debord 1977: §12) – a reduction not to the body, but to the virtual. Don DeLillo reiterates this, attributing at least part of the problems of the world to 'The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet [which] summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there' (DeLillo 2001: 33). From this perspective, it is not just the subject that is at risk, but the present and past as well. In its intimation that we are dissolved into virtuality and not reduced to the body, DeLillo's view of the temporal effects of global technology is one that sees us as capable of experiencing only the future, not the present.

## §2.2 On time

He is not the first commentator to have had trouble with time. It is an ancient problem:

> *What then is time?*
> *Provided that no one asks me, I know.*
> *If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.*
> *(Augustine, Book 11, §14)*

Time: that's what stories are made of. Past, present and future. It's only common sense. Start at the beginning, says Alice's Red Queen, go on until you reach the end, and then stop. This is a Western truth: that time is beginning-middle-end, past-present-future, tick-tocking away in measurable and stable increments.

Every culture has some understanding of time's intervals, and some means to measure those intervals. Nature agrees: the tides shift regularly, the moon pours itself back and forth, comets pass the earth's orbit at measurable intervals. But all the same, time is as much an idea as an actuality. 'An hour can be forever,' Kurt Weill announces in his song 'Mon Ami My Friend' (1999: 233); a year can slip away unnoticed. Time is fluid; it can't be pinned down. Derrida insisted, 'In a certain way, it is always too late to ask the question of time. The latter has already appeared' (1982: 42).[1] As soon as you mention the moment, it has already passed.

Still, time remains central to writing – to the narrative logic in prose, and to the rhythm and breath of poetry. GE Lessing centuries ago established the doctrine, however problematised it may have been by subsequent thinking, that the literary arts are temporal, and the plastic arts spatial: 'Succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter' (1984: 91). Though space has been enthusiastically imported into writing over the past decades, it is still reasonable to argue that writing cannot exist without time, that narrative is an art of time, of beginning-middle-end, of temporal connections. But time has its complexities, and in 1600 years of thinking about it we haven't come far from Augustine's quandary. For Heidegger (1949), time is 'evidently of an altogether different nature which neither has been recalled by way of the time concept of metaphysics nor ever can be recalled in this way,' and hence is in the nature of a secret – an idea Thomas Mann explores in his *Magic Mountain*. But it is a secret we need to know because, drawing from Heidegger's monumental *Being and Time*, and looking back to Aristotelian logic, we could say that time is the form of human life, 'the first name of the truth of Being, and this truth is the presence of Being and thus Being itself' (Heidegger 1949).

[1] Frederic Jameson (2003: 697) provides his own translation, from Derrida's *Marges de la philosophie* (1972: 47), and because I find his a bit more fluent, I include it here: 'In a sense, it is always too late to talk about time' ['D'une certaine manière, il est toujours trop tard pour poser la question du temps']

‘Being’: a present participle; an ongoing present; similar to the Greek aorist tense that expressed time indefinite. *Being* in this sense seems to have the capacity to rupture the truth of time, its tick-tock/on-off properties, its necessary flow from past to present to future. Augustine mounts a long and complex argument in this connection, insisting that we can have only the present. The past, he writes, exists as a kind of present, which we call memory; similarly, the future exists for us only in and as the present, as anticipation. He concludes:

> What is by now evident and clear is that neither future nor past exists, and it is inexact language to speak of three times – past, present and future. Perhaps it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come. In the soul there are these three aspects of time, and I do not see them anywhere else. The present considering the past is memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is expectation. (Augustine 1991 Book 11, §20-26)

No past-present-future then, or beginning-middle-end. We have only the present, though it is constantly shifting its ground.

Of course Augustine does not deny the actuality of time in the natural environment; his notion of the ongoing present describes how the ‘soul’ experiences time – its own history and memory; to what it is presently attending; what it anticipates. In this he seems rather ahead of the game: contemporary scholars of life writing consistently point out that life is all middle (or present), even as they urge biographers and autobiographers to impose on the lives they write a temporal logic of beginning, middle and ending. Yet art routinely messes around with time. Paul Virilio discusses this extensively in his 1994 publication *The Vision Machine*, describing how photography falsifies time by freezing it (1994: 2), or how theatre by its use of retrospective time sets up what he calls an ‘artificial memory’ (1994: 3). Art cannot reproduce the unfolding of time in the physical universe because people, the beings who make and consume art, cannot conceptualise it. Virilio extends this, providing evidence of the lag between perception and mental processing of what was perceived (Virilio 1994: 8), and showing that the effect is of a present apparently frozen in cognitive terms, a present frozen or at least arrested by physiological properties. Drawing on film and the disjuncture between time takes, exposure time and projection time to exemplify this, he writes:

> The problem of the objectivisation of the image thus largely stops presenting itself in terms of some kind of paper or celluloid *support surface* – that is, in relation to a material reference space. It now emerges in relation to time, *to the exposure time that allows or edits seeing.* So the act of seeing is an act that proceeds action, a kind of pre-action. (Virilio 1994: 61)

This raises another level of complexity, and of the seeming impossibility of resolving physical time, technological time, experiential time, analogue and digital time … Time seems to be running out of representability, if not actuality.

Not all philosophers agree with this, and Frederic Jameson is one of the better-known detractors. In his discussion of the historical debate on space and time, space vs time, he combats the idea of the end of temporality, and outlines why time seems to have been reduced to the present: because unlike Augustine, he does not see the collapse of past-present-future into present as inevitable. Rather, for Jameson this reduction to the present is the effect of a congeries of interests: mass media that exhaust the stories of time; capitalism that looks to future/s of speculative profit rather than building tangible and productive assets; communication technologies that provide instant information; shifts in education policy that forget or reframe history; and geopolitical relations that render the world so spatialised that there is no room for temporality.

Something similar emerges in the writing of Guy Debord, who like Jameson sees the mass media, the site of contemporary capital, as that which arrests viewers, freezes them, isolates them from one another, from the points of communication and, arguably, from the flow of time. 'Separation,' he writes in Thesis 25 of *Society of the Spectacle*, 'is the alpha and omega of the spectacle' (Debord 1977: §25). The effect of spectacle is thus simultaneously the production of the many as passive observers – those stuck in the present – and the institution of the few as those 'sacred' and privileged subjects able – in the double sense of 'permitted' and 'capable' – to accomplish what everyone else cannot. They *do*, in time and place, while we, sealed off outside social time, watch them doing what they do. Not unlike the woman in Sandra Lee' tabloid article, who can only watch, isolated and literally cut off, sealed in her goldfish bowl, incapable of action, simply *being* as time and place move by. Like her, Debord might say, Jameson might say, we are locked in a present – not the Augustinian present that incorporates past and future, memory and expectation, but simply a *now*, and *now*, and *now* which is

orchestrated by the media, by global capital, by forces outside our scope. Jameson goes on:

> Whether it was ever authentic to see one's self as shaped by fate, whether Athenian tragedies that coordinate a blinding present of time with a revelation of destiny are to be taken as signs of a relationship to Being we ought to envy, modern existentialism has certainly taught a very different lesson; its insistence on our temporal imprisonment in the present discredits ideas of destiny or fate and renders the ancient view of biography alien to us. (Jameson 2003: 709-10)

His use of the term 'imprisonment' is a telling gesture: for Augustine, the present is a rich weaving of present, past and future, full of possibilities, tested against the sense of how the individual subject might face god or destiny, and understanding the inflection of all that makes up the past on the person in the here and now. But for Jameson it is an evacuation, an emptying out, a ceasing to think. For Jameson, the reduction to the present is without the consolations of memory or the hope of expectation. All we have, when reduced to and imprisoned in the present, he insists, is the body, alienated and empty.

This is similar to DeLillo's concerns, and each writer has a point. Contemporary culture, woven through as it is by digital communication technologies, does have the capacity to 'disappear' the body, and thus erase particular memory (and with it, the past), prescribe present being (and with it, Augustine's notion of the present as attention), and inscribe predetermined futures (and with it, Augustine's notion of the future as expectation). DeLillo has a bet both ways, though, because as his argument unfolds he establishes an uninterrogated binary relation between the cool (affect-less) new technologies, and the hot (savagely wild) old religions, setting the 'utopian future of cybercapital' against the medieval thinking of religion, technology versus ignorance, the instantaneity of communication versus violent tradition. Finally, reorienting his previous articulation of our relation to time as time-future, he seems to set the future to one side, and conflate history with the present: 'Whatever great skeins of technology lie ahead, ever more complex, connective, precise, micro-fractional,' he writes, 'the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cut-throat religion'.

This argument is on somewhat shaky ground, particularly given the numbers of reports that indicate Al Qaida operatives maintain their planning and communication through technological networks, and in the evidence of the rapid uptake of new technologies by pretty well all the established religions. Perhaps we were indeed catapulted by terror back into an idea of the past. But if so, we managed to continue co-existing in the present and anticipating the future. Because it seems to me that despite the ongoing preoccupations with terror and faith,[2] the attention of the average Western citizen remains on a path that sweeps into a future of increasing technological investment. Indeed, in the light of what we witness in popular culture, popular science and popular warfare, it seems almost that the embodied human is going out of fashion, in favour of that which is created by the 'great skeins of technology' that lie ahead, and inflect our understanding of what it means to be human.

§2.3 On being in time

The question of what it means to be 'we' occupies DeLillo, and me, and many other writers and theorists and people in their everyday lives – and there's nothing new about this. It has been happening since people began to think self-referentially. The lines of argument can, in their most simplified form, be divided out as taking one of two alternatives. Either we simply *are*, usually in relation to God, and hence a little lower than the angels and considerably higher than everything else; or else we are consciousness inhabiting dumb flesh, and in that consciousness we possess conceptual and rational capacity, and hence are considerably higher than everything else. Different starting points, same outcome; which in each case privileges humans over all other forms of life, and also separates being from the body.

This attitude seems to have been given even greater focus by the Enlightenment, and the excitement in that period about logical and instrumental thought, such that the mind, perhaps necessarily, overrode the excitement that is attendant on incarnation – being in the body; *being* the body. But only for a while. By the late nineteenth century the body had re-emerged, returning on the shoulders of people like Charles Darwin, who moved

[2] As I write this, the Muslim world is nightly on the media about what one news broadcaster has headlined 'Cartoon violence' – the enraged response to the Danish cartoonists' depictions of the Prophet – and talking heads discuss the agonistic relations between freedom of expression and religious/cultural sensitivities.

humans down the Great Chain of Being from our earlier spot, a little lower than the angels, to where we are now, a little higher than the apes. In the same period Sigmund Freud and his colleagues illuminated or at least identified the dark interiors that constitute the self, Karl Marx excoriated capitalism and its vampirisation of Enlightenment principles, while Friedrich Nietzsche responded to the *what am I* question with a critique of Cartesian logic. Three centuries earlier Thomas Hobbes had complained that the Cartesian logic relied on an infinite regress (in his *Objections, II,* nd); now Nietzsche pointed out that the philosophical premises about the connection between identity and thought are flawed. He argues it thus in section 16 of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> When I analyse the event expressed in the sentence 'I think,' I acquire a series of rash assertions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove – for example, that it is *I* who think, that it has to be something at all which thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of an entity thought of as a cause, that an 'I' exists, finally that what is designated by 'thinking' has already been determined – that I *know* what thinking is. (1990: 470)

In other words, for there to be thinking, there need only be thoughts, not a thinking thing. Nietzsche continues this line in *The Will to Power*, where he writes that 'It is merely a formulation of our grammatical habits that there must always be something that thinks when there is thinking and that there must always be a doer when there is a deed' (1968: §484). Any idea that the self is an enduring substance would amount to what he calls a 'the soul superstition' (1968: §487); for Nietzsche, the self is a pattern, a system, a relationship of organic forces. So much so that he flipped the Cartesian cogito, changing it from '*cogito, ergo sum*' to '*Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum*' (Nietzsche 1974: Book Four §276).[3]

Such thinkers led Western subjects into the twentieth century with a dramatically different sense of what it means to be human, offering alternatives like: I am a citizen, living under Leviathan; I am also an *hommelette*, slipping away from form; I am also desire, searching for what might fill my lack; I am also embodied, marked by difference and privilege on the basis of physiological features; or, more recently, I am machine; I am pixels. The variety apparent in these perspectives is undermined by the ways in

[3] Ambrose Bierce took the ludicrous possibilities further, including it in his *Devil's Dictionary* under the heading 'CARTESIAN' as *Cogito cogito ergo cogito sum* – 'I think that I think, therefore I think that I am'.

which all, to various extents, remain grounded on a trust in the centrality of mind; and on the human capacity to understand selfhood from the outside, as it were. Thus they remain dualist, depending on a lingering trace of the *cogito* in the sense that they call up a stable yet ephemeral inner being. This can't hold water because, as we've known since the postmodern moment, there is no stability, no solidity. As novelist John Updike wrote, 'Not only are selves conditional, but they die. Each day, we wake slightly altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead' (Updike 1989: 211). This doesn't seem to stop people trying to pin down some essence of the self, which is in many ways a Cartesian impulse, and carries the Cartesian problem of relying on the soul superstition and overlooking the extent to which the subject (the whole self) is polyvocal, polycephalous, polymorphous, and in all these pluralities, necessarily also the site of competition. The main issue is that the Cartesian posture separates the subject (the ego) out from the object (the body, the external world, the environment), and in this process 'forgets' the intelligence of the body, and ignores the question of how it is possible for a subject to know an object without, at some level, internalising it.

I do not suggest that the centrality of the body is universally accepted among theorists. Back to Jameson, for instance, who has argued strongly against a body-focused approach, complaining about:

> the proliferation of theories of the body nowadays and the valorization of the body and its experience as the only authentic form of materialism. But a materialism based on the individual body (and encountered again in contemporary research on the brain and the philosophy of mind and on drugs and psychosis) is to be identified as a mechanical materialism descended from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rather than a historical and social materialism of the type that emerged from Marx and from a properly historical (nineteenth-century) worldview. … The problem with the body as a positive slogan is that the body itself, as a unified entity, is an Imaginary concept (in Lacan's sense); it is what Deleuze calls a 'body without organs,' an empty totality that organizes the world without participating in it. We experience the body through our experience of the world and of other people, so that it is perhaps a misnomer to speak of the body at all as a substantive with a definite article, unless we have in mind the bodies of others, rather than our own phenomenological referent. (Jameson 2003: 713-14)

I have included this substantial quote because Jameson would probably see me as one of the guilty when it comes to the contemporary theoretical focus on the body. Let me first agree with Jameson that there is 'a problem with the body as a positive slogan' because the body *is not*, in the Lacanian sense. Rather, the body is an idea that is mobilised variously for various operations: an idea that is internalised, and perceives the body (the

whole self) as coherent rather than fragmentary. The body is, of course, practically speaking a part of the real: it obeys physical imperatives (growing, breathing, dying); it has a phenomenological presence; and it is tangibly accessible. But on the other hand, it *is not* because we access it only through ideas of the body and what it might mean for 'me'. It is not the body itself we know, but an image of the body, an idea of it. We know from Lacan's work that the unitary self is the product of an imagined bodily coherence and unity (Lacan 1995), and to this extent the body is Imaginary because, in Zizek's terms, it is 'the fundamental fantasy itself, the decentered imaginary scenario inaccessible to my psychic experience' (Zizek 2001: 98). We are body and mind; we are physical beings and thinking machines; and being both in and of the body, we cannot access it in terms of what it is itself. We can only occupy positions with regard to the body that enable us to perform certain identities, roles and functions.

Having said that, let me depart now from Jameson's all-encompassing rejection of the sorts of theoretical attention being paid to the body, and suggest that he is being a touch reductive. Certainly my attention in theoretical terms, and in terms of my creative writing, is on the body in the present of time, and in pursuing this interest I draw on 'contemporary research on the brain and the philosophy of mind'. In some ways I am a phenomenologist, because it is sensual being that interests me. Rather than considering the body an 'empty totality' delivered to us through 'our experience of the world', I would argue it is possible to envisage the obverse: that the world is delivered to our consciousness through the sensual and sensory experience of our bodies. The intelligence of the body and the brain together, and human beings' intersection with their environment, for me afford valuable philosophical points of discussion. I differ too from Jameson's anathematising of theorists and their concern for the body in his easy conflation of ' theories of the body' with a belief in authenticity: why should a focus on the body necessarily rely on a notion of authenticity? Why should anyone working on ideas of the body necessarily treat it 'as a positive slogan', 'a unified entity'? Like many working in the same area, I have not forgotten my training in poststructuralist thought, but still remain alive to the complexities and multiplicities of being and ideas of being. Nor do I resort to a simple mechanical materialism, but rather attempt to trace lines across and between the mechanical, historical and social forms of materialism that Jameson sees as divided. The current focus on the body takes many forms, and not all of them identify the body as the positivity that organizes our experience of the world in a

self-sufficient, autonomous manner. Rather, it is one of the elements that make up ‘all that is the case’ (Wittgenstein) and hence one aspect of the forms in which we think and live.

It seems to me, in reading Jameson, that his profound, impassioned and historicized reading of the contemporary world positions social, economic, technological and political formations only in bleakly negative terms. Since I too am a child of the mid-twentieth rather than the twenty-first century, my first reaction to ‘new things’ also tends to be a touch bleak: ‘I like your old stuff better than your new stuff,’ the Brisbane band Regurgitator sang, and it applies to historians and philosophers as much as to fans of contemporary music. It seems to me that Jameson has not avoided this attitude in his analysis of the question of experiential temporality. Where Augustine is perhaps too starry-eyed about human being and time, Jameson is perhaps a touch curmudgeonly, and risks throwing the body out with the bathwater. Certainly, I agree that the body should not be read as ‘a substantive with a definite article’. But I do see value in analyzing it as part of that indefinite collocation that we experience, individually and in groups, as humans and as organic forms interacting with other organic and mineral forms. In short, why not use the body to consider life, irreducible to a totalizing definition or experience, life lived in an ongoing analogic relation with the mind, society, the environment, memory and history, and with anticipation of what is to come?

I am not alone in this perspective: many theorists have elaborated on the relationship between people and ideas, abstractions and actualities, representation and its object. It is this sort of discussion that allows us to understand that in images, icons and other signifiers can be found a reminder, not an actuality; that there is a material world; and that at some level the material world intersects with the abstract. This, it can be argued, is the case for human being as much as it is for signification. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, whose writings locate being in the materialist dimension of the habitus, argues that we always embody both physical and social identity because:

> this body which indisputably functions as the principle of individuation (in as much as it localizes in space and time, separates, isolates, etc.), ratified and reinforced by the legal definition of the individual as an abstract, interchangeable being, without qualities, is also – as a real agent, that is to say, as a habitus, with its history, its incorporated

> properties –… open to the world, and therefore exposed to the world, and so capable of being conditioned by the world, shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence in which it is placed from the beginning. (Bourdieu 2000: 133-34)

We are physical, material creatures, not dreamed-up essence. However, that's not the end of the story. Humans are an astonishing blend of nature and culture: the physiological matter that is flesh, the chemical conjunction of elements and neurons, and the technological ramifications of our organisation and function. But signally, we are cultural – which is to say, language based, called into our cultural being by linguistic means.

## §2.4 On becoming

Perhaps the best-known discussion of this is Louis Althusser's thesis, summed up in the term 'interpellation', the notion that identity is formed through the material conditions of ideology. His example goes like this: someone knocks at my door. I say, 'Is it you?' and when the caller says 'Yes' and opens the door, it is indeed 'you' (1994: 129-30). The one named 'you' has identified himself or herself as a distinct individual, cut out of the herd of possible 'yous', arrested by the pronoun. Interpellation is all about naming ('inter[a]pellation' – named within [a system]); and recognising that name, and all the things that go with it: especially the constitution of subjectivity and the realisation of the 'me' that has a social role and function. Althusser explains this in his famous essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', writing: 'Ideology is a "representation" of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1994: 123). This is a 'real' thing in itself, of course, however imaginary might be the relations it constructs. Though ideology may indeed have no history, may be in the nature of a dream (Althusser 1994: 120 et seq.), still it has 'a material existence' (1994: 125). It is material in that it produces us, constitutes us, calls us into being for particular purposes, and 'enlists' us into systems of belief and hence of practice. The implication, then, is that in all that subjects do, and all the roles they fulfil, they are constituted by the words that name them and their roles; and they perform that doing and being in the belief that there is a concrete and necessary relation between the name of that work or role, and the function it identifies. In short, subjects are interpellated by the social system in which they *are*; and at the moment they individually respond to the processes of naming, they are enlisted into a particular form of identity, and the practices that go with it. For

Althusser, the subject is seized by ideology (possessed by it; and so always in the process of drowning). But that's not the only story; we are not simply emptied and filled like washing bowls, at the whim of social authorities or ideological capture. We are also things that think, as Descartes pointed out; we are also self-organising systems, as biologists point out; we are also, and always, contingent, in a process of change, in a state of becoming. So while bending the knee to Althusser, I would say not that we are seized by ideology, but rather, and more broadly, by the whole system in which we live, with all its discourses and practices, and hence subject to nomination as well as to biological necessities, neurological blips, environmental contexts and technological interventions.

In recent decades it is the latter that has attracted significant attention from many researchers into identity and being. Certainly, technological advances have informed shifts in thinking about identity, because they inflect and frame notions of reality and identity. Photographic images, for instance, offered what appeared to be reality rather than mediated representation; and in many ways this naïve idea has lingered, despite half a century of deconstruction. Photos remain markers of truth and 'being there'; they secure our personal memories; they stand as witnesses in courts of law, and as witnesses to history despite what we know about their capacity for mutation – the Stalinist regime's airbrushing of photos, for instance, or in the photograph that sparked my investigation, the framing that evacuates the woman's body from the shot. In the frozen records photographs provide of surfaces of space and matter lies the implication that human being is stable, and identifiable, across time and cultures and genres – indeed, that the individual humans recorded in photographs have an existence that continues indefinitely in a permanent present. Paul Virilio writes, about this reality-effect, 'It's a bit like the baby who, in the photographic print or the Lumière brothers' film, has gone on guzzling his food just as hungrily since the beginning of the twentieth century, even though he long ago died of old age' (Virilio 2000: 34-35).

Photography's main role in problematising being was initially concerned with the location of identity. It was, in a way, as though we were all going through Lacan's mirror stage when looking at photographs of ourselves (*that's me, over there in that picture … but then who is it over here, saying 'that's me'?*). It also, of course, raised the question of temporality: when does being end if the person continues, indefinitely,

frozen in time? With the new technologies now available, both being and questions of being extend well beyond the early prospects offered by photography, raising not only the question of who and where the subject is, but also raising questions about where life begins, and thus problematising the boundaries of human being. This can be seen in the old quarrels over abortion or euthanasia, and now over new possibilities raised by cloning, or cryogenics. Baudrillard writes:

> Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear by proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary mode of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal. (Baudrillard 1993a: 4)

Is a cryogenically frozen body really dead, or just waiting? Is a clone a new person, or the old one shifted into a new space? And what do we do about new formations of human beings – because other kinds of people are (quasi-)human too. Mary Shelley's monster, Isaac Asimov's robots, Cynthia Ozick's golem: all have something uncannily 'us' about them; and their descendents – Lara Croft/Tomb Raider, characters in any *manga* cartoon, or the beauties represented in Julius Wiedemann's 2001 *Digital Beauties* – are as 'human', and as sexually desirable, as any human celebrity. To confirm this, ask any adolescent; or check the proliferation of online beauty competitions and pornographic sites featuring these 'beings'. In November 2003, for instance, the 'Miss Digital World' beauty contest was held, and showed beautiful women who are in fact no more than ephemeral images built up from marks on a screen. Sean Dodson, reporting on this competition in the *Guardian* newspaper of 6 November 2003, noted a little dryly that while the beauties competing are entirely digital, they still have to have been granted a date of birth by their manufacturer/artist; and like any other beauty queen they must have body statistics, and must never have been used in pornography. It is perhaps worth noting that gender politics remains pretty stable in the transition from 'real' to digital world: Dodson notes further, 'All but one of the digital models are women, and all of the creators are men' (2003: 23).

Such works and practices call into question what is human and what machine. Yet while this is a curious intersection of nature, culture and identity, it's not particularly new. The ideas have been around as long as more-or-less modern technology has been with us. There always has been a very permeable boundary between ourselves and the

technologised world we inhabit, and this is frequently a disturbing concept, its capacity to upset us exploited in films like *Alien* or *Terminator*. As Ollivier Dyens writes of such films, 'We could not believe the screen's bright and shiny images, yet it was impossible to deny; the special effects were perfect, deception became a reality' (Dyens 2000). In such works, the cyborgs are so far beyond humans in terms of their machinic power, so implacable due to the absence of human affect, and so visually indistinguishable from people, that they encapsulate the ongoing dread about who really is 'we' – and of what 'we' might be capable.

The concern about who and what is real doesn't go away, and a conservative thinker like George Steiner insists this can be sheeted home to the breaking of what he termed the *covenant between world and word* by Western modernity, and its effect of exiling us from the Real by immersing us in the realm of signification (Steiner 1989: 93). While this is a problematic position, it can act as a useful reminder about the incredible significance of the Real as that which evades linguistic finality. The broken covenant between word and world, and the anxiety attendant thereon, is also evident in neo-Luddite reactions to late twentieth century communication technologies. Along with celebratory comments about the collapse of space and time effected by these technologies are anxious reports on what Paul Virilio terms 'instant transmission sickness, … "Net junkies", "Webaholics" and other forms of cyberpunk struck down by IAD (Internet Addiction Disorder)' (Virilio 2000: 38). The extraordinary possibilities opened up by these technologies are frightening as well as fascinating, and motivate not only science, but also superstition and anxiety, as DeLillo again insists:

> Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim the future. We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think. (2001: 37)

But though humans are technologically informed, we are not just informational units, or everyday machines. The science writers Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen describe human brains, analogically, as being like Motie computers: in constant change, capable of 'constantly rebuilding themselves' (Stewart and Cohen 1997: 150). Like PCs and Macs, we humans encode, evaluate, manipulate data, and store material in memory; but like Motie computers, we are remarkably fluid. We are not confined to digitality but are

capable of analogic thought and practice, and thus capable of *poiein* (making, or doing) and undoing. We combine the rationale of technical, scientific and imaginative thought with what Virilio (1994: 28) terms the 'shipwreck of reason'.

Let me return to Don DeLillo's anguished essay, which he wrote while still reeling from the 11 September attack on New York. For him, being is grounded in narratives and counter-narratives. These, he writes, are the tools by which humans make sense of the world that is nature, and culture, and technology; and that is marked by the return of the real, and of history, at the most shocking and unexpected moments. There is something 'autopoeitic' about his view, because it seems to frame humans and our worlds in terms of the story of individual systems interacting with their environments as visceral people: not as amoebae or pebbles. It understands the centrality of language, on the one hand, and of the ways we reach out to one another in violence or tenderness, on the other. And it pins being – or, rather, understandings of what it means to be the astonishing 'we' – down to stories, and the ways we imagine and organise our inter-being:

> The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative …
>
> Language is inseparable from the world that provokes it. The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel.
> For the next 50 years, people who were not in the area when the attacks occurred will claim to have been there. In time, some of them will believe it. Others will claim to have lost friends or relatives, although they did not. This is also the counternarrative, a shadow history of false memories and imagined loss. (DeLillo 2001: 37)

So it could be argued that being is not Cartesian, not mechanical or technological, not straightforwardly phenomenological or semiological or narrative, but is all these things at once, grounded in our grounding in a physical universe, and in the extraordinary properties of our bodies, brains, and minds interdwelling within culture. Long, long before the internet, or the Dow, or Lara Croft, or even *I, Robot*, Voltaire wrote:

> All animated bodies are composed of levers and pulleys, which act according to the laws of mechanics; of liquors, which are kept in perpetual circulation by the laws of hydrostatics; and the reflection that all these beings have sentiment which has no relation to their organization, fills us with wonder. (Voltaire 1901: 109)

In fact, he might have said, we are the astonishment.

## *§3. Writing matter*

*… the road to Einstein is a road mapped out*
*by privilege complicit with "wetware", not by wetware alone.*
*… The key to our intelligence is neural nests, not neural nets.*
*(Ian Stewart & Jack Cohen 1997: 164).*

### §3.1 On wetware

This brings me to the question of post-biological notions of being, a theoretical field associated with writers like Donna Haraway and N Katherine Hayles who associate the body with digital information and techno-scientific taxonomies of being, and who look to cultural, rather than biological forms of evolution. It is an enticing perspective, and a useful response to the recognition that bodies are no longer the stable and carnal terrains they were once assumed to be; that rather they are liquid, plastic, plural. But it seems to me that post-biology remains, like so many other perspectives on being, profoundly dualist (or, rather, multiplist) because, like the cogito and its companion positions, it identifies the wetware body as not 'me' but simply the terrain on which various 'me-nesses' can be played out – me-nesses that, one must assume, are ephemeral, transferable, and hence distinct from the flesh.

This is another Cartesian posture: though it comes from a different premise, it too refuses the notion that the self is invested in biology, and it too finds the notion of embodied selves as being too restrictive. As so many sci-fi novels and movies show, 'The meat-body is a too-human, too biological body, a body that is too easily limited and defined, a body whose only possible future is putrefaction' (Dyens 2000); so, why not remove the mind, and locate it in a machine? Why not, like the doctor in Sandra Lee's tabloid story, discard the body and preserve the person in a *Futurama*-style jar?

This perspective reduces people to information media, and hence is deadly and deadening in its attitude to human being. Indeed, Scott Bukatman uses the phrase 'Terminal Identity' to describe the process that results in us becoming information, spreadable through communication technology networks: 'terminal being the end; fatal, point of arrival, etc' (1993: 69). But this 'terminal' notion of selves as transferrable

information is not the only way of understanding contemporary being, because people aren't really technological: at least, not as technology currently operates. We are mosaics or networks as well as surfaces or storehouses; we incorporate both cultural dynamics and viral colonies; we operate at genome levels well beyond the capacity of human sight, and at neuropsychological levels beyond the capacity of most forms of science. We are technological entities too, with the border between organic and inorganic increasingly difficult to identify, let alone police; yet our minds are not (precisely) like machines, and our bodies not simply terminals for an infinitely transferable self.

Because of this the reduction of being to the monist vs dualist argument can be understood as not much more than a category error, a reduction of thinking and hence of being to a single model. The scientists tell us about the play between the various categories and conditions in which we live:

> Our minds lead a dual existence. Descartes' mistake was to view this as a duality of *materials*, which it is not: it is a duality of interpretations, just as a map can *be* a sheet of paper but *represent* a world. Features of the outside world are converted, via our senses, into 'figments' in our brains. On one level (brain) these are ordinary real-world processes involving chemicals, electrons, whatever; but simultaneously on another level (mind) they are mental maps of a very different order of reality, tigers, and cows and people's faces. (Stewart and Cohen 1997: 189)

Given this, is it possible to move away from the simple dualism/monist argument, and instead attempt to assemble a useful model of the embodied being, one that participates in the cultural, genetic, biological, technological, plastic-and-liquid states; a model that is workable rather than something that seems designed primarily to fascinate philosophers and writers of sci-fi? This seems, initially, imponderable: psychologist Mark Freeman pointed out that 'Much of human experience seems characterized by a kind of essential secrecy and, strictly speaking, indeterminacy' (Freeman 1993: 5), because we live in culture and in language. But we also live in the physical environment, and are made as by it as much as we are made by cultural and linguistic elements. So, before we turn ourselves simply into bits of information, or bits of technology, it's worth taking up the realisation that we are always both material and biological; emerging, as do amoeba and other minimal life forms, out of the basic

materials of the universe; and evolving according to traceable patterns within the laws of physics.

The biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela offer some ways of understanding being that retain this phenomenological import within their scientific paradigm. They describe human existence – indeed, all cognitive existence – as autopoiesis, which is widely defined in scientific dictionaries as the process whereby an organization produces itself. Autopoietic theory builds on the concept that living systems are engaged with the domains in which they operate, and that all autopoietic activity is context-bound. It recognizes the complexities of being, and the ways in which 'systems' (individual living beings organizing themselves within a physical space) adjust and adapt to their environment, in the process contributing to the organization and structure of both themselves and their environment (Maturana and Varela 1980: 78). Their argument is that cognition is not the Cartesian 'soul superstition', or the machinic logic of postbiology, but something that emerges from a mix of circularity and complexity on the part of systems. It is a biological phenomenon, the function of the information-processing activities of the brain (Maturana and Varela 1980: 9). Neuroscience supports this, as Antonio Damasio insists, in showing that 'life' – and its correlative for people, the sense of self – arises out of the interactive responses of the (embodied, 'body-minded') brain to itself (Damasio 1995: 243). No thought without a body, that is. Cognition is, for Maturana and Varela, and for Damasio, what is going on all the time that a living system is alive and adjusting to its contexts. We are all *systems*, in this perspective: from amoeba through freshwater prawns to Einstein, we exist and form ourselves (autopoeitically) by interacting with our environments (Maturana and Varela 1980: 35), and adjusting to the conditions in which we find ourselves.

This should sound very familiar to anyone trained in late twentieth-century theory, but what is particularly useful is that it takes what poststructuralist writers been saying about the ephemeral – the protean subject, the contingent context – and shows that this applies at the most fundamental biological level. Douglas Fox describes this effect in one of the lowliest of living creatures: the fruit fly, that much-tormented subject of science. Scientist Ralph Greenspan inserted electrodes into a fruit fly's brain to measure

any changes in brain activity connected to what was happening in the fly's environment. What he found was that:

> the fly is paying attention. That might not sound too impressive. Even a fruit fly needs to be able to focus on important stimuli – how else would it find food or avoid danger? But there's more to it than that. The brainwaves that Greenspan has found look uncannily like the ones you see in a human brain when it is paying attention. (Fox 2004: 32)

We may be thinkers, 'things that think', but in this we aren't so very different from fruit flies, a notion supported by Maturana and Varela who write 'Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition' (1980: 13). And cognition always includes emotional and aesthetic capacity. Melanie Swalwell (2002) describes the importance of embodied sensory experiences in bringing the processes of cognition to light, and hence of aesthetic factors in how we perceive and conceive our world. Barbara Stafford develops a similar concept, writing:

> In the widespread postmodern denigration of the aesthetic, what is forgotten is that from Leibniz to Schiller, the term connoted the integration of mental activity with feeling. Aisthesis, as perception or sensation, has in post-Cartesian and especially post-Kantian thought become separated from cognition. Rediscovering its pragmatic capacity to bridge experience and rationality, emotion and logic, seems all the more important in the era of virtual reality and seemingly nonmediated media. (Stafford 1996: 52)

We rediscover its capacity when we start with the premise that cognition generally involves the creative shaping of our conceptions of the world. We rediscover its capacity in considering how metaphors drive the cognitive process: like jumper leads kickstarting a battery, they force open fresh pathways for thought and practice. We rediscover its capacity when we recognize that art, by reinforcing ways of looking at the world, is necessarily a cognitive process. So, though we may be informational systems (*a la* radical post-biology), and though we may be 'things that think' (*a la* Descartes) we are much more than technological units, or the cogito; we are biological systems that interact with our environments, and with each other.

Thinking may be akin to information-processing, but this does not mean thinkers are like computers; it is as much a biological as a technological phenomenon. Cognition is part of the activity of the brain *and* the body; and in the act of information processing we can identify systems (from Einstein to amoeba) that respond to their environment both synchronically and diachronically, and through processes and moments of

interaction. Humans, though, are more than amoeba, and more than simple biological matter, the stuff of the universe because (as far as we know) biological matter doesn't mourn, or dream. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, in this regard: 'man, as opposed to the pebble which is what it is, is defined as a place of unrest (*Unruhe*), a constant effort to get back to himself, and consequently by his refusal to limit himself to one or another of his determinations' (1962a: 66). We are not, and thanks to language cannot be, 'what we are'; instead, we must *become*. The constant effort to become is marked by linguistic interaction, that to-ing and fro-ing by which people orient themselves to one another and to the meanings and understandings they make. We are not just machines because we have genuine (if often flawed) passionate memories. We are not just material because we are never just 'what we are', but always 'a place of unrest'. Nor are we just cogito, because we experience both qualia – the 'feeling of what happens' (Damasio 2000) – and affect. These qualities depend on phenomenological existence, and on the ability of people to interweave their lives and ideas with others. Thus we can be, and often are, matter and culture, nature and machine, at once.

This is useful for writers and other creative practitioners. If life is truly messy and constantly shifting, then our creative patterns of thought and creative practice can be put to work to provide us a way of living. Jurij Lotman certainly takes this position:

> Art – and here it manifests its structural kinship to life – is capable of transforming noise into information. It complicates its own structure owing to its correlation with its environment (in all other systems the clash with the environment can only lead to the fade-out of information). … [because art is] … a particular type of play between redundant order and informative surprise. (Lotman 1977: 75)

The argument that art is akin to life is not one I intend to address in this essay but I include the quotation because of the idea of being as a state of continual organization through information, and continual surprise. The 'noise' Lotman and every other commentator on 'the modern life' identifies can be reframed as information at the point at which order meets astonishment. This meeting is not the one recounted in DeLillo's appalling, appalled experience of the attack on the World Trade Centre, but the oscillation between one form and another, between brain and body, between human being and the environment, that constitutes life – and, for Lotman, art. I find this a point of consolation, given the chaos in which I find myself living. That chaos not simply the

consequence of my own organisational inadequacies, or an effect only of geopolitical terrors; I experience chaos because it is not possible simply to say 'I am', and for that utterance to contain workable meaning. My life is inevitably messy; my being is inevitably plural and often contradictory; and my experience of the world is one that tends to noise rather than to significance; but this need not be a problem. As the physicists assure us, there is order in chaos; or rather, order emerges out of chaos. The world looks chaotic because our systems are complex. This complexity is not actually a matter of disorganisation: as N Katherine Hayles writes: 'An important turning point in the science of chaos occurred when complex systems were conceptualized as systems rich in information rather than poor in order' (1991: 66). While the chaos may generate some stress or distress, it can also give us advantages not found in simple situations, because out of complexity come emergent phenomena, ways of bending or breaking what appeared to be rock-solid rules, and hence new ways of interacting with, and living within, the chaos (Stewart and Cohen 1997: 73-74).

In other words, we are not just body, or just mind, or just soul, or just ideologically constituted subjectivity. We are all these things and more, all to-ing and fro-ing between mental and material structurations, all of which are all open to adjustment through the cognitive function of the self that is in-the-world. Cognition, in these terms, is not a Cartesian but a biological phenomenon, one understood as information-processing rather than solipsism, a feature possessed by every living thing that is embodied, in an environment, and capable of some quality of interaction. Whether people or plants, living beings work cognitively, thinking in a human or plantly way, because this is what living things do.

## §3.2 On chaos and complexity

Here again I draw on Maturana and Varela's term, autopoiesis, and particularly their definition of it as 'a way of establishing and maintaining a system's boundary by selecting meaningful elements (distinctions the system can use) out of an otherwise indistinct, "noisy," environment' (cited Tabbi 2002: xxiii). Like plants and flies, humans can – in the sense of having the capacity – select out of the noise about them only those things that are meaningful at a particular moment. This is a specifically cognitive act. When someone – human, or fruit fly – pays attention, focuses on

something, everything else is blocked out. The noise is muted, and the brain begins to work in a synchronous fashion. This is the matter of consciousness, a ‘continuous 10,000-way conference call’ (Fox 2004: 34) in which each sentient being is alive to something, and engaged.

So although we do live in an unstable physical biosphere that is full of noise and full of chaos, our cognitive capacities, and our consciousness, brain and body interacting, can find in that chaos and all its noise the hidden ‘deep structures of order’ (Hayles 1991: 1). As human beings, like all living creatures, orient ourselves to the ever-adjusting environment, we can *be*; we can shape our own identity, practices and inner worlds out of the jumble and cacophony that surrounds us.

How, in all this noise, can we resolve anything? In the previous chapter I discussed the idea, raised by Don DeLillo, of astonishment, and suggested that it may come about as an effect of observing or experiencing the unexpected juxtapositioning of elements. Does *this* belong with *that*? – unlikely, surely, but there they are, side by side, drawing attention to something that would not be visible to either alone. Astonishment is the effect of the unlikely. It is also a matter of qualia – the state or feeling of being. We *are*, because we feel *what is* without knowing it, and without being able to articulate it in language.

And yet we attempt to articulate it, and to find words and phrases to make sense of our surprising, confusing world. Astonishment is thus also a matter of metaphor. You are astonished? Well then, we might say you are ‘thunderstruck’, struck by thunder, which in actuality would render you not astonished (or not for more than a fragment of time) but dead, or at least unconscious. This is based, perhaps, on the Anglo-Saxon term for unconsciousness: being ‘stunned’, a word that in this sense becomes a vehicle, moving the user from one state to another, very different, like analogical state. We explain astonishment, like other states or objects, by using other words, often unexpected words, and by juxtaposing words and ideas in often unexpected combinations. This is language: and, much like being, it is a matter of ambiguities, uncertainties, unexpected chasms here and bridges there.

Much like the relationship between organisms and their environments, language and the world interweave and interact, and in the process build, for language-users, a sense of the world and of the self. Language is the medium we use both to describe the world and to make it; but it is not a stable material. Sometimes it is transparent, other times highly opaque. When it comes to creative communication, it is rarely transparent in form, but more likely to allude and elude, to be analogic rather than direct, to be ambiguous and 'noisy' rather than calm and clear. Creative works, unlike government reports or bank statements, move around the issues, they criss-cross, they fold time in on itself, and push the mind to make sense; and thus they perform a cognitive function, requiring the observer to see the world differently (Tsur 2002).

Given the complexities and ambiguities of both language and being, why write? For Milan Kundera the answer is clear when fiction is the work being made, because in his eyes fiction is an ethical response to the way the world is. He wrote, 'The novel's *raison d'etre* is to keep "the world of life" under a permanent light and to protect us from "the forgetting of being"' (1988: 17). Only a novel that demanded attention and engagement could have this outcome, I daresay; but it is something to which novelists can aspire.

Not too far from Kundera's answer is Maurice Blanchot's; he sees writing as a way of testing, and critiquing, the truths of society: 'There can be this point, at least, to writing: to wear out errors. Speaking propagates, disseminates them by fostering belief in some truth' (Blanchot 1986: 10). I would have thought that writing was every bit as capable as is speech of fostering belief in some truth, but it is worth noting that literature is an art capable of critique. According to John Carey (2005: 181), it is perhaps the only one with this genuine capacity because critique happens in language, in the construction of thesis/antithesis/synthesis, in the push and pull of ideas made into sentences, and hence made concrete.

But can a sentence represent, or reflect, something concrete? Yes, according to some commentators, mainly because of the associations possible between writing/language and the built environment. Earlier in this essay I discussed the problematics of time, and Lessing's dictum that the literary arts come under the laws of the temporal domain. This is because narrative must unfold over time, while visual and plastic works reveal themselves to their audiences in space: both in the way they represent and occupy

space, and in the way they require audiences to move up to and around them. But time and space are, of course, siblings, and Lessing's dictum overlooks the degree to which time and space are interwoven. In many ways we understand space *through* time, tacitly knowing the dimensions of a building or field, for instance, by how long it takes to navigate. So while written forms may be conventionally associated with temporality, they do have spatial potential. In the 1940s Joseph Frank explicated the connection between writing and architecture as the work of using syntax to build a structure that would produce a sense of spatial relations; and after all, though language does indeed 'proceed in time' (1996: 64), time is in fact 'not time at all – it is perception in a moment of time, that is to say, space' (1996: 71). A decade earlier Mikhail Bakhtin had introduced the concept of chronotopes (literally, 'time spaces'), to bridge time and space. In the concept of the chronotope, Bakhtin writes:

> spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin 1981: 84)

Many writers, narratologists and other commentators have followed suit, seeing words, and the spaces between words, as lobbies and passages where meaning might circulate, seeing the interwovenness of space and time as not only a matter of textual enrichment, but also the very structure of writing. Like these writers and thinkers about writing, I want to break with Lessing, and draw attention to the quality of space in story. Heidegger did just this in his response to Hölderlin's 'Root of all Evil' – particularly the lines 'Full of merit, yet poetically, man / Dwells on this earth' – by writing, 'Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building' (Heidegger 1971: 213). Poetic creation as an analogue for making built space? This thought parallels William Carlos Williams' notion of poems as 'machines made out of words' (1969: 256). It also parallels Kurt Vonnegut's understanding of his writing as a kind of architecture. Vonnegut explained that he and Donald Barthelme, as writers and the sons of architects, were also:

> aggressively unconventional storytellers. … As sons of architects, Barthelme and I tried hard to make every architect's dream come true, which is a dwelling such as no one has ever seen before, but which proves to be eminently inhabitable. (Vonnegut 1991: 55)

Here is an example of metaphor being put to work to make something seem what it is. I doubt Vonnegut intended to suggest that he and Barthelme were actually building dwellings. Rather, like Hölderlin, he was using a metaphorical gesture to convey a sense: affect, qualia, or the feeling of things.

§3.3 On metaphor and complexity

But what, precisely, is metaphor? ‘There is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention,’ writes Donald Davidson (1978: 45). It is about knowing, observing, paying attention. It is also about ordering chaos: about structuring and organising the world. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their masterful work *Metaphors we live by*, insist that metaphor lays down the cognitive patterns that allow human beings to see, read and negotiate the world. Spatial metaphors emerge from actual spatial conditions, and thus perceptual experiences will lead reliably to symbolic representations because ‘the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5). In this reading, metaphor belongs in the category of substitutionary representation, and emerges from real-world events that become ‘grounding metaphors’.

To explain the relationship between experiential or observed phenomena and metaphor, and to describe how the things we see and feel gradually develop from direct to purely analogical connection, they use the example ‘Harry is in the kitchen’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 59). Harry is a real-world person, who can be perceptually observed in an actual place. To say he is ‘in the kitchen’ is not a metaphor, but a simple description. That description, though, provides us with the notion of a container for Harry. This can be abstracted from the real-world perceptual domain to a more metaphorical one; we can then say, for instance, that ‘Harry is in love’. Of course Harry is not in a physical container called ‘love’ as he was in a physical container called ‘the kitchen’, but the idea of being *in* carries through. This second container is more abstract; you could not paint a picture of Harry in love that would simply and without additional information resemblance ‘love’ – since love is itself an abstraction and cannot be resemblance.

Their argument is that the perception of a real-world phenomenon can, if it becomes a grounding metaphor, provide a basis for genuinely representational – that is, arbitrary

and abstract – communication. Every time we use the term ‘in’ to describe someone’s state of mind or other condition, lurking behind it is the real-world, perceptual and sensual sense of an enclosed space. Lakoff and Johnson are not alone in this view: neurologist Richard Cytowic too insists that metaphor should not be thought of as ‘merely language’, but as our way of being in the world. Because we have bodies that are physically oriented in space, we also have conceptual orientations that ground the systems of the mind, ‘not defined by fixed properties but in terms of how we interact with objects’ (Cytowic 1993: 206-07). He explains this by drawing on examples of everyday communication that demonstrate the nexus between physical and conceptual orientation: we understand love as being, say, a ‘bumpy road’ in a relationship that is ‘going nowhere’; we might have lofty thoughts’, or be ‘in the depths of despair’. For Cytowic, our physical being is, or at least informs, our conceptual being – and it does so through the metaphors we use to understand the world, and the self in the world.

A problem in Lakoff and Johnson’s, or Cytowic’s, or many other writers’ notion of representation through metaphor is that their concept requires a commitment to the metaphysics of presence. It implies that all the terms of our representation are based in an actuality, and that behind the veil of the representation, the reality can be glimpsed, if you just look carefully. Certainly it can be argued that humans can communicate because of the uniformity of the human brain: just as everyone’s heart beats in much the same way, so too everyone’s brain categorises and represents in much the same way. But this does not support the notion of a presence behind the spectre of language. If metaphor is really just a matter of neurology, and if language is necessarily grounded on the Real, then why do I not understand, say, Russian? Why do the symbolic forms of ancient Egypt not look naturalistic to my eye? There is a necessary gap between my internal representation of the social and physical world, and yours; because however must you and I might have in common, we also differ. Meaning, then, is more than the processes of the brain. It is also an effect of social reality, the formation of identity through social roles and functions; in short, it is an effect of what Pierre Bourdieu termed ‘the habitus’. As van Oort complains:

> this explanation of how metaphors are grounded in the real world is really no explanation because it assumes precisely what is at issue, namely, the difference between a symbolic reference system and a reference system based on perceptual categorization. (van Oort 2003: 246)

This is not to say that perception and representation are never connected, or that there are not good precedents for this approach to understanding the origins of language. But it is to argue that that words remain free to align in many ways and to stand in for many possible real-world phenomena, whether there is a causal relationship between the word and the phenomenon or not.

This takes me back to the notion raised by Hölderlin, Heidegger and Vonnegut that there is a likeness between language and built space. I would argue that it is likeness only, not actuality, that grounds the sentence. As Frederic Jameson reminds us: 'words are not, and never can become, things' (1997: 260). But words and things can have an analogical relationship, the capacity to rock to and fro between the abstract and the concrete, the near and far. Indeed, just after making that assertion, Jameson falls into the same metaphor and describes a building as a sentence:

> the words of built space, or at least its substantives, would seem to be rooms, categories which are syntactically or syncategorematically related and articulated by various spatial verbs and adverbs – corridors, doorways and staircases, for example, modified in turn by adjectives in the form of paint and furnishings, decoration and ornament. (1997: 261)

Language, for Jameson, when constructed through the building blocks of words and sentences into the edifices of story, essay or poem, comprises 'the grammar of the urban' (1997: 261). Another metaphor. They are, it seems, inescapable. I am reminded of a short story by Donald Barthelme, where the relationship between metaphor and truth was discussed. A character, Mrs Davis, sings a long and very strange song, and after a brief pause the narrator continues thus:

> 'Is that true,' I asked, 'that song?'
> 'It is a metaphor,' said Mrs. Davis, 'it has metaphorical truth.'
> 'And the end of the mechanical age,' I said, 'is that a metaphor?'
> 'The end of the mechanical age,' said Mrs. Davis, 'is in my judgment an actuality straining to become a metaphor.' (Barthelme 1983: 591)

Writing works the other way: its materials are metaphors straining to become actualities, and deployed in an attempt to call an idea into form, or into an idea of form. Because it remains only idea: an actual room, for instance, cannot be fully described or depicted; it exists for readers as writing-space, a place in their imaginations and always

partial, called up by gestures and snatches of description. Writing-space points towards a fullness that is not actually there, but yet has cognitive functions because it provides both writers and readers with a way of thinking.

This is cognition because it is in using language and ideas that the brain is brought into play. Metaphor is to language, perhaps, as cognition is to being: a matter of finding connections, adjusting to situations, and acknowledging environments. Metaphor is also cognitive because it makes the world visible in different ways. Once something is spotted and a metaphor brought into use to describe it, something new has been learned about the world (Kittay 1987: 2-3). In this respect, metaphor occupies the place between: it is neither one thing nor the other; neither made up nor real; neither imaginary nor concrete. It can seem concrete, but only at the point where we forget that it was once no more than a poetic description of a something. It is not necessarily true.

## §3.4 On metaphor and cheating

Metaphor has been discussed down through the centuries, and the literature seems to fall into one of two main themes: on the one hand, that metaphor is a characteristic of language, and on the other, that metaphor is deviant usage (Ortony 1993: 2). The latter holds that metaphor is simply figurative writing: all it does is describe, decorate, and perhaps apply a bit of a flourish to a sentence. This perspective is based on an attitude that comes down to us from the ancients; for instance, from Cicero, who in 55BCE wrote:

> As clothes were first invented to protect us against cold, and afterwards began to be used for the sake of adornment and dignity, so the metaphorical employment of words began because of poverty, but was brought into common use for the sake of entertainment. (Cicero 2001: Book 3, §155)

He was not alone. Thomas Hobbes identified the use of metaphor as an abuse of language because it involves using words ‘in other sense than that they are ordained for; and thereby deceive others’ (1901: 25), and he distinguishes ‘Metaphors, Tropes, and other Rhetoricall figures’ from ‘words proper’ (1901: 36). Hobbes concludes:

> The Light of humane minds is Perspicuous Words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; *Reason* is the *pace*, Encrease of *Science*, the *way*; and the Benefit of man-kind, the *end*. And on the contrary, Metaphors, and senslesse

> and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui*; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt. (1901: 37-38)

Locke, with a similar disdain, insisted that:

> all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats. (1975: Book 3, Chapter 10)

Let me pass over the easy reduction to a binary right/wrong, and attend instead to their notion of the 'good use' of language. For Locke and Hobbes and their descendants, writing should be clear and unadorned, univocal, to the point, and not given to drawing associations and relations that aren't unambiguously proven by the body of the narrative. The writing they distrust is the writing your mother warned you against: words that can't be trusted, that lead you up blind allies; writing that is 'elusive', 'a drifting meaning' (Certeau 1986: 202-03); and worst of all, writing that informs our experience of reality by capturing our imagination, though it neither does, nor can, present reality to us. This relies on the careful division of writing into genres, and particularly into the meta-genres of literature, criticism and reportage (*inter alia*), which comes out of a long history in the west of splitting writing between 'inspired' (creative) and 'rational' (critical) forms. This is not just a nominological or typological exercise, but in fact produces a landscape of linguistic value within which 'inspired' forms, writing that relies overtly and consciously on metaphorical gestures, is writing that refuses to communicate clearly, writing that cheats. Fiction cheats, in this respect; poetry cheats.

Of course the neoclassicists are cheating a little too, since despite their assertions they use metaphor extensively. It was Hobbes, for instance, who thought up the idea of *the sword of Leviathan* – a metaphor, if ever there was one; and even in his most portentous anathematising of metaphor, he uses figures to make his case. What is *ignes fatui* (literally 'foolish light' – a will o' the wisp) but a metaphor? Words are not light in actuality, though they may be, metaphorically. But though Hobbes may be disingenuous in his attitude – at once condemning and using figures of speech – what else could he do? All writers do it all the time, whether writing fiction or theory, because as Nietzsche

insists, ‘The drive towards the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instance dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself’ (1873). This is a second theme that emerges in the literature on metaphor: that whether we see ourselves first as poets or as philosophers, and however much we may value the rational, we constantly use the inspired mode in our work. As we must: Giorgio Agamben reminds us:

> the split between poetry and philosophy [the spilt that emerges out of Platonic thought] testifies to the impossibility, for Western culture, of fully possessing the object of knowledge (for the problem of knowledge is a problem of possession, and every problem of possession is a problem of enjoyment, that is, of language). (1993: xvii)

Whether writing poetry or philosophy, we are swimming in figures, not in the Real. We even talk about communication in highly metaphorical terms, as ‘making someone see’. Our elaboration of the whole world of intellectual history depends on a visual metaphor, with the word ‘theory’ itself coming from the Greek word *teorin* (to see). All the same, we place metaphor in general and symbolic (creative) writing at that end of the (academic) writing continuum that has low modal value – or little apparent transparency to ‘reality’. But it’s not all bad news because, it seems, central to our intelligent, observant being-in-the-world is an ability to create and deploy metaphors. Shelley made this point long ago, writing of poets that:

> Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them become through time signs for portions and classes of thoughts, instead of pictures of integral thoughts. (1887: 4)

In this he anticipated twentieth-century thinking about metaphor, and elaborated a third theme in the literature: that metaphor is a productive, cognitive work of language, cognitive not in that it provides new information about the world, but in that it requires of us that we rethink, reimagine, and adapt (to) the information we already have. ‘Hence it is at the source of our capacity to learn and at the centre of our creative thought’ (Kittay 1987: 39). It is also a source of our uncertainty in the world, because though it may be, as Ken Hillis writes, ‘one of our most valuable intellectual tools, yet it is also at the heart of the apparent dichotomy between reality and consciousness’ (Hillis 1999: 134); or, in Steiner’s terms, between *world and word*. Metaphor is not, as is often assumed, the identification of ‘implicit similes’, or the statement of similarities in poetic

forms; rather, as Max Black points out, it creates the similarity (1962: 27). There's no actual connection between red roses and love, for instance, except that metaphor first brought it to attention, and then attached to the idea (a red rose/love) developed a host of rituals and conventions ('one perfect rose'), literary history ('my love is like a red, red rose') and tradition (the red rose of York – et cetera) that have grounded it in what appear to be both necessity and actuality.

What is real, and what is made up? Is it possible to tell the difference?

> Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life. (Bakhtin 1981: 292)

Not that discourse actually does live, as such (*pace* Bakhtin) – not in the sense of life I have been describing. But discourse, and the words in which it is uttered, seem to attract almost as much scientific attention, and come in as wide a variety, as biological life. One form is a brand of metaphor known as catachresis, and usually defined as 'the incorrect use of words'. I prefer to use it in the traditional rhetorical sense of transference: that is, to define catachresis not as 'the incorrect use of words', but the 'incorrect' use of words, a promiscuous use of words, the extravagant application of words in unlikely juxtapositioning to craft metaphors that, by virtue of their unconventional nature, convey images and ideas with great effect. In Max Black's terms, we use metaphor-as-catachresis because it allows 'the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary … [it] is the putting of new senses into old words' (1962: 33).

It is not the sort of writing that academics traditionally choose, because being both explicitly metaphorical and 'incorrect', it does not readily translate into clear statements of ideas or empirical evidence. Nor is its concern the construction of a coherent argument. Rather, it is a transformative mode of writing. We use metaphor – and its sub-form, catachresis – not for transparent communication, but to direct attention away from the vehicle toward a topic, and thereby redirect, or transform, readers' understanding of that topic. Unlike conventional academic writing that is meant to keep attention on reason and logic, the sort of writing I'm concerned with here blurs that sort

of attention. It encourages a Barthesian technique of reading whereby the reader skips, glances away from the page, speeds up and slows down, is caught in their own mind and imagination as much as in the body of the text (Barthes 1975: 12). This sort of writing carves out a transitional space between language as meaning and language as a 'thing in itself'.

It could be argued, of course, that there is no difference between metaphoric and strictly communicative language – that all language is metaphor, that metaphor simply *is* language, which is certainly Nietzsche's view:

> What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions – they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (1873)

Following this line, we can argue that there is no 'linguistic outside'; we only have access to the material world through language, and hence can never speak actuality, can never speak literally. We can only *re*fer and *in*fer, so 'reality' is necessarily framed within systems of analogy and association. Decades of work on theories of communication and semiosis have demonstrated this; and the ancients had come up with the very same notion:

> The definition of language as a sign is not, as is well known, a discovery of modern semiology. Before its formulation by the thinkers of the Stoa, it was already implicit in the Aristotelian definition of the human voice as *semantikos psophos*, 'significant sound'. (Agamben 1993: 125)

That is to say, language has always been metaphoric – or, specifically, figurative rather than literal – at base.

This may sound like cheating: I can't, surely, say that metaphors are catachrestic and then, without missing a beat, insist that metaphors are at the base of all linguistic utterances? But in fact both statements are valid if we accept the idea that metaphors have a life cycle:

> Creative and alive in the first phase, a word belonging to one conceptual domain is extended to another domain ... in the subsequent phase the metaphor is sufficiently familiar for the interpretive path to become established and less complex; in the third phase the metaphor is described as being already 'tired', indicating that a direct link is formed between the two domains; in the fourth and final phase the metaphor is extinct and one can no longer trace the metaphorical origin of the expression. (Kundera 1988: 17)

So in their first phase, metaphors are indeed catachrestic: thoroughly and obviously figurative, fundamentally decorative, belonging to another domain. Subsequently, through social use, they move in a metamorphic manner to become something that is gradually incorporated into literal language, until it is dead as metaphor – they retreat to transparency. 'Jumbo jet', for instance, was purely metaphorical when first used to refer to aeroplanes. We can trace a process of taking the vehicle (elephant a.k.a. Jumbo/a very large creature) to direct our attention to the topic (jumbo/a very large aeroplane), and thereby transforming our sense of the topic-object: it's really, really big; it can be as comfortable and as gratifying as are childhood memories of Babar; and it can fly, like Dumbo. Over time it has moved from being a catachresis ('*How on earth can a large flying machine be like a huge mammal?*') through the stage of evoking an 'of course!' from audiences, till finally it's just the name of a kind of aeroplane. There is a life cycle, then, in which the metaphor moves from being an instrument of enchantment to an instrument of clarity and then finally – at their death – an instrument of literality where the signifier is identical with the signified.

This must be the case for all linguistic communication. We never, in language, call up the thing itself, only a referent for it, and make sense of that referent by means of other referents. Language is smoke and mirrors, and the actuality of the world can only be made to seem, not to be, in communication. The signifier doesn't in fact stand in for the signified because what 'signified' means – the thing itself – cannot enter language. The signified is just another signifier. So we can argue that all instances of language use are metaphoric, though some are overtly and even flamboyantly so, while others (depending on the point in the life cycle at which they appear, and the context in which they are used) obscure their metaphoric nature under a figurative death.

§3.5 On getting it wrong

Whatever may be known and acknowledged about the relationship between linguistic meaning and metaphor, writers, communicators, and theorists of writing or communication still make a discrete category out of metaphor in its first phase of life, when it is bright and sparkling and designed to transform thought and image rather than communicate transparently. In doing so, we quarantine it off from more serious and more referential forms of writing – that is, from metaphor in its dead state. We can identify this quarantining process, in that metaphor *as such* is more likely to be part of a creative writing than a communication course. We see it again in the tendency to associate metaphor with figurative writing (poetry, novels: *made up things*) rather than philosophical writing or reportage. Yet whether writing figurative or philosophical texts, and even if we agree with the neo-classicists about metaphor's tendency to obfuscate or over-adorn, and see it as an addendum to, rather than an integral part of language, it is worth taking metaphor seriously. Aristotle wrote, 'Strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh' (1990b: 662), and whether the creative or theoretical mode is on the table, freshness (originality) is valued. So we can, and must, use metaphor; and we may lay claim to its critical as well as its figurative value.

It is important, though, to use figures with care, not just because overadornment is irritating and may well confuse our argument or image – we are, after all, the descendants of that great minimalist, Ernest Hemingway – but also because figurative writing carries with it a great power. Techniques like catachresis easily capture our readers, because though such language may be less accessible of interpretation than either conventional academia or conventional fiction, it surprises and attracts readers. These forms may thus be doubly powerful because doubly communicative, offering a back as well as a front door to the labyrinth of language. Because it doesn't obey the conventions of either academic or creative writing, it isn't subject to the interpretive rules of either field: but nor is it easily dismissed, because its imagist power means such writing can convince. Gemma Fiumara writes:

> Metaphors can … be arresting inasmuch as they compel as well as invite us to enter their figurative ground in order to grasp them. In fact the copular 'is' which could be described as creating connection may as easily involve an 'abuse' which entraps the interlocutor. Metaphor both opens and forecloses. Its radically perspectival nature – its

> capacity to creative perspective through incongruity – can also turn into a restrictive perspectivism. (1995: 134)

That is, we should by all means use 'promiscuous' writing to break the straitjacket of objective logic and to push language in its creative ('inspired') as well as its rational mode; to capture our audiences more intensely; to be more overt about the interface between our academic and our emotional identities. But we need, then, to be very sure that both the narrative and the argumentative logics are sound. Although writing that consciously seduces, or that aims to inform without sticking to the generic rules may at first blush appear untrustworthy, it is still making a series of truth claims, and still has a number of ethical and epistemological obligations. At the same time, it offers the sorts of pleasures that are independently provided by both main genres of fiction and critique: the pleasure of poetry, the pleasure of logic and knowledge, and the pleasure of language *as* pure language, as play. In Bakhtin's terms, 'It is as if words had been released from the shackles of sense, to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and establish unusual relations among themselves' (1984: 423). If we remain aware of the potential abuse of metaphors, especially in the first phase of their life cycle, in their consciously decorative figurative way, then we should be able to exploit all its possibilities, to write more consciously and less lazily, to be less reliant on metaphor alone or transparency alone to make a point, and more alert to the need to find not just the right word but the right accent for each piece we produce.

How might this work in practice? I noted above that a metaphor is the extension of a word or phrase from one conceptual or discursive domain to another. What this points out is that a given word may be used in virtually any sentence, virtually any text. But as Bakhtin pointed out, in the epigraph to the section, its meaning and social value will change radically, depending on the context of that use. 'Inspiration' conveys one thing for scientists, another for philosophers, another again for artists, because each group occupies a different discursive domain, with different hierarchies of value. The critical thinker Volosinov used the same concept in discussing the power of language to produce and reinforce ideas about reality and truth:

> Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various classes will use the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of class struggle. (1973: 10, 23)

His point is that the whole community, regardless of class or other social markings, uses the same language. But while the words may be identical, their articulation varies depending on who is using the word; and that articulation – or accent – signals who is speaking, and whether anyone (important) is likely to listen to them. We can extend back into our own domain this concept of varying accents in the same sign, and its corollary of varying modes or values of its expression: just as there are accents that, particularly in Volosinov's mid-twentieth century world, shaped people and their utterances as being of a particular type and having particular value, so too each genre may have or demand its own accent. Think of the accentual difference demanded by a poem versus a philosophical piece, and what happens if the poem or philosophical piece is printed in the wrong place, or if it has the wrong mix of accents.

An article by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'For the Etruscans' (1987), does precisely this, because the sudden intrusion into a critical text of family discourse, poetry, reflection and introspection ruptures the argument, and undermines the power of the academic domain to secure meaning: out-of-place, or disobedient writing, disrupts the ability of discursive domains to restrict the flow of language, to 'stabilize, freeze, suture language to a univocal meaning' (Hall, 1993: 15). DuPlessis wrote, for instance, in her essay on women's writing:

> What holds civilization intact? The presence of apparently voiceless Others, 'thoughtless' Others, powerless Others against which the Law, the Main, the Center, even the Diffusions of power are defined.
>
> > **Throughout the ages the problem of woman has puzzled people of every kind ... You too will have pondered this question insofar as you are men. From the women among you that is not to be expected, for you yourselves are the riddle. [Freud]**
>
> A special aptitude for cryptography. The only ones barred from the riddle. Ha ha. His gallantry is hardest to bear. Not to think about the riddle is to remain the riddle. To break with what I have been told I am, and I am able to? am unable disabled disbarred *un sous-développé, comme tu dis, un sous-capable* ... What happens at the historical moment when the voiceless and powerless seek to unravel their riddle? ... ANS.: We are cutting into the deep heart, the deepest heart of cultural compacts. They have already lost our allegiance. Something is finished.
>
> Now did I go downstairs, now did I cut up a pear, eight strawberries, now did I add some cottage cheese thinking to get some more or even some ricotta at the Italian market so that I could make lasagna so that when B comes back from New York he would have something nice and so I wouldn't have to cook again for days ... now did I and do I wonder that there are words that repeat in a swaying repetitive motion.

> Deliberately breaking the flow of thought, when it comes to change, and with food, with dust. With food and dust. (DuPlessis 1987: 261)

The writing itself is Bakhtinian in that the words are 'released from the shackles of sense'; it's metaphor; it's poetry of a kind; it's feminism; and it's philosophical. Above all, it is capable of capturing my attention, and if it doesn't necessarily change my mind, at least it transforms for me the possibilities of thinking, and of writing. Because above all, metaphors are in some regards transformative:

> In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor' – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories. (Certeau 1984: 115-16)

But not only transformative. Metaphors:

> do not transfer understanding from one sphere or thing to another along the lines of an empty conduit. Rather, they initiate a three-part dynamic among themselves and the two disparate things they link. The power of metaphors resides in their assumed cultural bias and ability to inflect meanings through the associations they create between themselves and one thing, and then between themselves and the second thing being associated with the first. (Hillis 1999: 134)

They allow us to find connections, associations and transitions among the various aspects under which we live by focusing our attention, directing it toward a topic, and transforming our interpretation of that topic by the force of the metaphoric vehicle used.

I cannot read such work in a straightforward manner because it keeps calling attention to itself; I am required to ask, continually, 'What's going on here?' This sort of writing offers an alternative approach to writing, for readers and writers. Because it is multiaccentual, polyvocal and circumlocutory, and because it refuses obedience to discursive domains, it offers a chance of unsuturing language from just one preferred or privileged meaning or use. It allows writers to straddle the borders of the genres and, hopefully, to do what they do best – use language to craft a world of imag/e/ination and/or argument that is fresh, convincing and delightful to readers. And at the same time, and again hopefully, because of its promiscuous appearance it will be less likely to claim the high ground of authenticity, and so less likely to impose its will on readers. All it will do (hopefully) is point to some issues that are worthy of attention, but that

cannot be subject to, or taken as, the only way of seeing. In short, when we undertake ‘promiscuous’ writing, when we write across genres and domains, and when we deliberately use catachresis not as a point of rhetoric or adornment but as a way of articulating the unarticulated and the inarticulable, we may be able to unstitch language from discursive domains, and hence make visible the labyrinthine properties of language and of culture and, perhaps, some way of escape.

## *§4 Writing death*

*… I see what's really always there:*
*Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,*
*Making all thought impossible but how*
*And where and when I shall myself die.*
*Arid interrogation: yet the dread*
*Of dying, and being dead,*
*Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.*
*…*
*And so it stays just on the edge of vision,*
*A small unfocused blur, a standing chill*
*That slows each impulse down to indecision.*
*Most things may never happen: this one will,*
*…Being brave*
*Lets no one off the grave.*
*Death is no different whined at than withstood.*
*(Philip Larkin, 'Aubade', 1977)*

### §4.1 On the quick and the dead

Death is of course the heart of the labyrinth, the big silence that continually shouts, or whispers, or at least draws attention to itself. It is the gap that can't be sutured, the knowledge that can be neither known nor forgotten. It is what seems to undo or overcome language, what undoes the possibility of being, what disturbs the living and problematises the value of truth, or time, or space. It can't happen; it will happen. It can't be escaped, whether *whined at* or *withstood*.

Writers and artists are often absorbed by it, focusing on death, painting or writing the dead and bodily remains, re-enacting others' deaths, anticipating their own. Psychologist Lisl Goodman found in her extensive series of interviews with scientists, artists and others that artists (by which she meant any person working in the creative field) have tended more than have members of other professional groups to deal directly, and develop an intimacy, with death: often with a degree of serenity if not equanimity. Goodman draws her answer to why this is so from Michel de Montaigne, who suggests that the problem of death is the problem of incompletion. The person who dreads his or her death has not been actively engaged in bringing his or her life to completion (1981: ix). Montaigne wrote:

> It is not against death that we prepare, that is too momentary a thing; a quarter of an hour's suffering, without consequence, and without damage, does not deserve especial precepts: to say the truth, we prepare ourselves against the preparations of death. Philosophy ordains that we should always have death before our eyes, to see and consider it before the time ... [but] I never saw any peasant among my neighbors cogitate with what countenance and assurance he should pass over his last hour; nature teaches him not to think of death till he is dying; and then he does it with a better grace than Aristotle, upon whom death presses with a double weight, both of itself and of so long a premeditation (Montaigne 1923:§XIX)

A fully lived life, lived in the awareness and consideration of death, gives all that is needed to die well, and without fear. If you live well, in short, you will die well; and perhaps artists can do this because unlike philosophers, they do not brood about their inevitable death, but die in the making of their work. *Get over yourself,* he seems to be saying, *and get on with life*.

Montaigne is confident that there is death, and not-death, that they can be distinguished one from the other. And he is in good company. Although throughout history there has been evidence of the infinite permeability of the line between life and death, and although all of science and philosophy instruct us in their analogical relationship, still we distinguish them, and consider that we, the quick, are entirely distinguished from the dead. *She was alive*, we can say, *and now she is dead*. Every coffin that glides towards the fire or is lowered into the freshly dug grave insists on the ineradicable difference of our two states of being, dead and alive, and insists on the finality of death, an end beyond which there can be no redemption, no cure. No coming back.

Death: *the last gasp; the last hurrah; the big sleep; the long goodbye; an awfully big adventure.*
*She's pushing up the daisies, he's resting with his fathers, she's shuffled off this mortal coil, he's snuffed it, she's at peace.*

It's a huge cliché. There's so much to say about it, and so little that hasn't been chewed over until it's lost all flavour. Not surprisingly, given the volume of death and our intimate, sometimes grateful, sometimes careless, often appalled response to it.

*-What! In our house?*
*-Too cruel, anywhere.*[4]

[4] Between Lady Macbeth and Banquo: the lady of course attempting to present a face of innocence on the

That's what it comes to, as Shakespeare's Banquo knew in the abstract with regard to his king, and would too very soon in the concrete with his own murder: death is too cruel anywhere. Death is the something I don't want to know about. Every religion reminds us, every news bulletin tells us: there's been another death, another great ending, another final point. All conspire to advise us that we are *this*, not *that*, quick, not dead. Because you have to be one or the other. Make up your mind.

And yet it's not that simple, and never has been. Despite what we know about the space between life and death, as headstones at any cemetery show, death is something frequently denied: *He is not dead, but sleeping. Absent from the body, but face to face with the Lord.* Just as death is the absolute and definite obverse of life, so too it is an impossibility, and most of us hold these irreconcilable beliefs comfortably. I may die, I tell myself, but I'll come back: resurrection, transmigration of souls, reincarnation, glorious eternity.

## §4.2 On the wound of death

Observing and identifying the point between life and death has never been straightforward. Ask John Donne (1971 [1633]: 84):

> *As virtuous men pass mildly away,*
> *and whisper to their souls, to go,*
> *whilst some of their sad friends do say*
> *the breath goes now, and some say, no;*

Those were simpler times, we might say, given that a person was announced to be either quick or dead on the basis of the movement of the chest as air flowed in and out, or the throb of the heart beneath the breast. It was nonetheless difficult for our ancestors to tell with confidence who was dead, who alive; and it is considerably more difficult now to draw a line between the fine points of life and death even with – or because of – our sophisticated technologies of measurement. Doctors and ethicists spend considerable energy trying to determine the moment of transition, not always with certainty. Was the American woman Terri Schiavo dead or alive? Both. Neither. She was in a nowhere

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discovery of the murdered King Duncan; Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene III

place, somewhere in-between. In this sense, death is rather like statistics: where, for instance, does *two* end and *three* begin: is it at 2.5? Is it at 2.95? 2.99? 2.995? There is no universally satisfying answer. There is only the knowledge that at some point, probably when you momentarily glanced away, *two* became manifestly and undeniably *three*; that as some point, probably as the nurse looked away, life became death. The heart falls silent, the EKG line on the monitor flattens out, living flesh begins to decay, and the person who looked out at us through the eyes in the skull has gone.

Doctors, scientists, statisticians – they can't draw a certain line between yes and no; they can't provide an answer to death, the ultimate question that fascinates because it is, Michel de Certeau pointed out, 'the problem of the subject' (1984: 192), a problem that won't let us go. Because it is, in everything, a paradox, at once the great inevitability and the great uncertainty. 'No one is sure of dying', writes Maurice Blanchot. 'No one doubts death, but no one can think of certain death except doubtfully' (1982: 95): *it won't – it can't – happen to me*. But even while I cling to this thought, I know that *unresting death* will indeed come for me because it has come for everyone else throughout history; because it is metonymically part of life, and simultaneously life's Other. As Other, death constitutes the limit and the boundary of both life and meaning: the limit because it marks the end of self-awareness; the boundary because it removes the human subject from the symbolic order, and returns it to the Real. Knowing that death is always *a whole day nearer* undermines my confidence in myself as a subject because I know that despite my best efforts and all my strategies, I can't escape it; and I know that no matter how I try, it will reduce me and return me to the a-social.

We are born into the Real: inarticulate, not quite human, and certainly not social. With the acquisition and appreciation of language and its rules, and of discourse and its rules, we become truly human. And yet this human status is contingent and temporary, dependent on death's delay; that inarticulate infant is still lurking somewhere in our being or our subconscious as a continual reminder that we once were, and will inevitably again be, neither human nor social. Death dissolves meaning because it is itself beyond language, beyond signification, and beyond the symbolic order. As such it always escapes knowledge, and remains for us as the 'un-canny', the thing 'beyond our ken': in Certeau's words, 'a wound on reason' (1984: 192).

Death constitutes this ‘wound’ because it is in an anterior relationship with discourse: as signified, it is beyond meaning; as signifier, its meaning is always in flux. Death thus draws attention to the tenuous connections between reality and representation. This is, of course, not a novel idea; the convention of a ‘natural’ connection between referent and representation has been thoroughly laid to rest because, as is demonstrated by contemporary linguistics, language is a system of difference, and not of absolute terms, and hence there is no necessary connection between term and referent, and no final meaning. In fact, the signified itself has been laid to rest: rather than a signifier calling up the thing signified, linguists and communication theorists now understand there to be only an endless sliding of signifiers over one another, a juxtapositioning of decontextualised signs in which, since the signs *can* mean anything, they *in fact* mean nothing. These are now the terms for meaning-making, and hence for representation: that meaning is only possible because there is meaninglessness, ‘There is language, there is art, because there is “the other”’ (Steiner 1989: 137).

Taken to its logical extreme, this meaninglessness would be unbearable; people must be able to communicate, and so must behave as though signs have consistent and shared meanings, and as though there were an epistemological basis for, and a teleological focus to, everyday practices. The Real provides, or can be claimed as, the grounds for the meaning of these otherwise free-floating, neutral, contextless signs, but calling on the Real to guarantee meaning is a dubious act, because it opens a door onto the inarticulable – that which is irreducibly beyond language, Nietzsche’s convoluted labyrinth, not Borges’ straight passage. Consequently, any attempt to use the Real as a guarantor of meaning ushers in the loss of all meaning because it places it in, and dependant on, the Outside.

This constitutes a ‘wound on reason’ that cannot be sutured. If language is predicated on difference, and not identity, and if meaning is reliant on meaninglessness, then the assertion of an unbridgeable divide between life and death, of *absolute* life, or *certain* death, can’t be sustained either. The dead, by being life’s Other, provide for the living that difference which names and confirms *my being*. But the slipperiness of signification means that in the process of providing the guarantee of my life – my *aliveness* – the dead simultaneously call me to, and recall to me, my own death; and the various signifiers I hold up as talismans to keep death in exile simply call it back into

social life by naming it and focusing on it. Death as signifier slides across life, infecting and problematising it. Similarly, the attempt to bracket death off as the Other simply reminds me that self and other, death and life, are always imbricated within one another, and depend on each other.

An effect of the paradoxical uncertainty/certainty of death is that for most of us death is both there and not-there, a *small unfocused blur*. This blur must be blotted out because it is a stain on consciousness, a remainder of the Real, and a reminder of our own disintegration and expulsion from the world of meaning that spoils the present and makes it difficult to concentrate on being-in-the-world. And despite our denials, we know we will die; as Heidegger tells us in *Being and Time*, being human is 'being-toward-death', and this we can't escape. In the interests of asserting our own being – not a 'being-toward-death' but a visceral vitality – we avow life and disavow death, but we know in a certainly-uncertain way that at the end we will fall back to the prelinguistic, asocial state, and further back, into the state that is no state, where we are unable to say or even think: 'I am, and I am dead'.

If we cannot contain death's negative energy within symbolic logic, we will find, like Larkin's poetic persona, that it makes *all thought impossible but how / And where and when I shall myself die*. So, not surprisingly, the dominant contemporary response to *my own* death is to switch it off: not to think it, not to speak it, not to know it. If death intends to put me outside the world of meaning, well then, I will treat it in the same way – as that which can't be (spoken). We do this in various ways. One way of controlling death and focusing thought is to do, insistently, the thing that makes us human – we speak, or write, or paint, or dance. In short we make representations, and thus assert meaning because in making the noise that proves we're alive, we can insist upon presence, a presence that takes its identity and value from its correlative: absence, the absence which death constitutes.

Another way of containing death is by focusing on its vast anonymity – for instance, as it strikes the unnamed, unknown thousands on flooded Indian plains; or by reducing it to entertainment, as presented in the *Die Hard* movie genre with all its gratuitously risible deaths. Or, when death can't be excluded from the present, we can contain it

within the bodies of the dead and dying, whom we then consign to the Outside. Certeau writes, dreadfully, of how hospitals manage the dying:

> The dying are outcasts because they are deviants in an institution organized by and for the conservation of life. An 'anticipated mourning', a phenomenon of institutional rejection, puts them away in advance in 'the dead man's room'; it surrounds them with silence or, worse yet, with lives that protect the living against the voice that would break out of this enclosure to cry: 'I am going to die'. (1984: 190-91)

And Zygmunt Bauman writes in similar terms of funerals, which are the machinery for the management of the dead:

> Funerals differ in their ritual, but they are always acts of exclusion. … They expel the dead from the company of the normal, innocuous, these to be associated with. But they do more that that. Through applying to the dead the same technique of separation as they do to the carriers of infectious diseases or contagious malpractices, they cast the dead in the category of threats that lose their potency if kept at a distance. (1992: 2)

But while we may thus seek to contain and then exclude death in the bodies of the dying and the dead, we never achieve success. Anything repressed, Freud insists, will always return, and we see death's return in the efforts expended to build cemetery walls and gates, and in the memorials raised to the great dead or moments of great death, all of which remind us that death is *really always there*; that we can't keep the dead at bay even with bricks and mortar; that death can't be finally exiled from life.

## §4.3 On the undead

Is there really a break between living and dying? Yes, in some ways. The living are both time-bound and time-rich. Present, past and future, we experience it all in a complex concatenation of tenses, we hold dreams and memories in trust, we attend to the moment, we anticipate what is to come. The dying, once reconciled to their death, are apparently in the present only: *this* breath, and *this* breath, and *this* breath, and there, is that the sun coming up again for another day? The dead are in an entirely different social zone. Voltaire said about them: *On doit des égards aux vivants; on ne doit aux morts que la vérité* [We owe respect to the living; to the dead we owe only truth],[5] a

[5] Voltaire wrote this in his *Oedipe*, and reprised it in his 'Premiere Lettre sur Oedipe' in *Oeuvres* (1785) vol. 1

reminder that though we may shut out the dying and exile the dead, we remain in a condition of obligation to both parties. The dying are still alive: we owe them respect. The dead – they need nothing from us any more, but still we owe truth them truth. We, who do not really know what truth is.

There is doubt, though, about the genuinely ontological distinction between living and death, life and death. It is a fraught subject, because the break between the categories is both too radical, and not radical enough. I think here about zombies, and the other undead – vampires, werewolves – that haunt our movie and television screens, our dark dream, the creatures who are somewhere between numbers 2 and 3, neither dead nor alive.

Zombies. The sets, props and characters for all those cool movies – George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); Sidney Salkow's *Last Man on Earth* (1964); Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002). Or see them parodied in Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004); or transmuted into the mediated medicated half-dead of Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002). Zombies: the most disgusting creatures dreamed up by human thought: cannibalistic, insentient-yet-conscious bits of flesh decaying on the hoof.

Still, they attract enormous creative and intellectual attention. At a cultural studies conference recently I heard someone say they are 'whitey's way of expressing the terror of alterity' – though I was not convinced by the easy association of zombies with racialisation, the notion of alterity as something frightening seems a valid one. A graduate student in my School insists 'Zombies are cool' – and the ongoing popularity of zombie movies suggests there is a certain cultural cachet associated with the form. These are just two attitudes; there must be as many ways of approaching and evaluating zombies as there are people who approach and evaluate; and those people include novelists, movie-makers, cultural theorists, adolescents, philosophers, and the mass of fans, each of whom has a solid idea about what constitutes a zombie, and what constitutes a zombie text. Because the idea of zombie travels so widely, and across so many fields, it has become a very familiar trope, one that participates in narratives of the body and being, of life and death, of good and evil; and forces us to think about alterity, racism, species-ism, the inescapable, the immutable. Thus it takes us to 'the other side' – alienation, death, and worse-than-death: being not-dead, but no longer *you*.

Although zombies are, of course, a novelistic fantasy, we know enormous amounts about them – their tastes, appearance, biology, reasons for their emergence, how to neutralise them, why we should despise and fear them. This knowledge comes in large part from the armies of fans who, driven by some anthropological urge, have studied and recorded their ontology and behaviour. Thus we know, for instance, that zombies are hungry: unrelentingly, unquenchably, and (relatively) indiscriminately. When they see their environment, they see a place whose only observable features are food. They are also utterly implacable because they are, as philosopher David Chalmers writes (1996) 'all dark inside', lacking ethical or affective judgments.

They are also, and disturbingly, like us, and as such can act as springboards into ways of understanding the ontology of the subject and the space between life and death. Like humans, zombies seem to prefer to live in groups, within built environments; like us, they actively colonise spaces for themselves. Their points of origin may remain obscure, but we typically come across them in the most ordinary and safe environments – on our own home ground. Indeed, there is always something 'nearly me' about the monster. The transmission of zombie-ness between us and them is one instance of our closeness: viruses (mostly) travel between like species, and the job of the average zombie seems to be, (a) eat as many people as possible, and (b) infect as many people as possible. So once they have arrived among us, carrying some kind of virus, they metastasise rapidly, devastating cities, decimating populations. The idea of zombie, underpinned I think by our incapacity to assimilate the concept of death, has similarly ramified, or metastasised, infiltrating culture at a number of levels.

Chalmers has identified a number of 'turns' – or categories – of zombie, the better known being the Hollywood form (reanimated flesh-eating 'corpses'); the Haitian form (living people deprived through magic or medicine of soul and freewill); and philosophical or p-zombies (which look like humans, but lack consciousness). What interests me more than specific categories of zombie, though, is the zombie-as-trope. This emerges regularly in myth and literature across cultures. I think here particularly of the Shadow in Ursula Leguin's *Wizard of Earthsea*, the golem in Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers*, or the *shletl* golem (on which Ozick's was based). They are all human/not human. They are hungry for something we can't identify but that appears to

be ‘me’. They each possess the ability to metaphorise the shadow self of humans, the part that always returns to bite us and that we can never keep fully repressed. The part of me that will betray my own identity, my own being; that will deny both life and death and subsist instead in some halfway point where time, humanity and affect are lost, and death is the only possible way out, but not a safe way, because its own certainty and finality are called into question by the very existence of this shadow, this zombie-trope. Hamlet knew this: death was not an answer because ‘in that sleep of death what dreams may come’.[6] The shadow, the zombie idea, waits beyond the grave, because it is part of our bodies and minds, our essence, our own dark insides.

The notion of the ‘zombie’ within each of us is present outside of trash culture; it can be found in novels like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its movie spin-off, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) where the zombie trope is mobilized as a critique of colonialism, and where the mindless brutality of the colonizers and soldiers ends only in horror and fear. It may be metaphorised as fear of the self, seen for instance in Boris Sagal’s 1971 film *The Omega Man* where the difference between zombie and human is very subtly drawn; and where the human, Charlton Heston’s Robert Neville, is more savage, more frightening, than his zombie *bête noir*, Matthias (Anthony Zerbe). It may, and often does, manifest a fear of the other, as in the *Alien* film series, where the most frightening thing about the other is that it is very like me. The acid- drooling monsters are of course horrifying; but more disturbing still, because closer to home, is the affectless android (a zombie-type) prepared to destroy his fellow crew without batting an eye; or the company man, who will alienate every value, and every living thing, for the sake of the company’s profits. Zombies are (almost) us – as Dr Logan insists, in George Romero’s *Day of the Dead* (1985): ‘They *are* us, they are extensions of us, they are the same animals’. Yet they are not identical to us: they are the undead – the walking dead; and like the really-truly dead, they must be exiled from the community of the living. Only in finding a way to ignore, overlook or eradicate them can we forget the fact that as they are, so too I will be. As Shaviro writes, ‘The hardest thing to acknowledge is that the living dead are not radically Other so much as they serve to awaken a passion for otherness and for vertiginous disidentification that is already latent within our own selves’ (Shaviro 1993: 98).

[6] from Hamlet’s famous soliloquy in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II

This thing within our own selves can be understood as hunger – and after all, zombies are always hungry, always looking for someone to eat. They are motivated – in Freudian terms – by drive, which in some contexts is read as another word for instinct, the compulsion to perform that is not associated with logic or even, necessarily desire, but a propulsion of the body, something outside of thought. It is for Freud, 'our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. In our work we cannot for a moment disregard them, yet we are never sure of seeing them clearly' (Freud 1974: 95). Drive, that is, lacks an obvious generative structure and does not pertain to biological necessity, so it has the potential to strip away our cognitive functioning and to reduce us to some sort of machine. It also lacks the logic of desire, being rather the unthinking response of the subject to what Lacan (following Freud) has called 'the Thing' – the 'little a' (Lacan 1992: 51-52). The 'little a' – the other – is what emerges in the primordial void created when a person leaves the world of sensation for the realm of language (the symbolic order). The Thing (the object *a*) created in the moment of inscription as subject of the symbolic order remains as a hollow in the self (the 'dark inside'), which renders us always Other to ourselves. From this point, we can never be fully 'at home', because there is always something else in there with us, lurking.

Any liminal space or condition has its horrors. The undead may generate for us a particular notion of the grotesque, of that which can be rendered funny but always with a bit of horror attached: *What if this were true?* And it has its true effect, I suggest, mostly because the notion that there is an absence-presence within – something uncanny, or 'beyond our ken' about ourselves – is not just a truism of cultural theory; it is also a physiological principle. Neurologist Richard Cytowic wrote that we are never free agents because there is, buried in our brains and our cognitive functioning, the inexpressible, the unconnectable, the thing that makes us work as beings, yet which we cannot access. 'Part(s) of us,' he writes, 'are *inaccessible to self-awareness*, the latter being only the tip of the iceberg of who and what we really are. The "I" is a superficial self-awareness constructed by our unfathomable part' (Cytowic 1993: 170-71). Something is within us, then, that is 'unfathomable', not susceptible to conscious thought, incapable of deliberation. It is something that undermines the assurance we might otherwise have of our own character, identity, subjectivity; it is an

unacknowledged Thing within that may well have the capacity to *zombie* us from the start of our career as subjects. On the other hand, at least if reading it from a Lacanian perspective, as the object *a*, it has a certain allure. There are times when I would like to do precisely what I want to do, not what I ought, or must, do. There are times when I'd love to give in to or give myself over to the id, the drive to satisfy something I cannot articulate, even to myself, but that I know is not acceptable in terms of current social norms. The object *a* fascinates because it gestures towards who and what I might be: someone with the capacity to reject the symbolic order and return to the wildness of the id. Knowing that this is a possibility impels me to consider the limits of the regime of truth in which I am myself constituted: the regime that requires particular behaviours of me, that requires particular modes of thought, particular (epistemic) criteria for knowledge and identity, that establishes a normative landscape in which I must live, that constructs me as a self. Yet within that normatised self is the wild thing, the zombie, the part that refuses both life and death, that exists only to consume. It is outside the norms that govern recognisability – which is perhaps why cognitive scientists have not yet isolated and named it – and yet it is, arguably, as much me as are my tastebuds, my sensitivity to pollen, or my fear of the dark.

Is it possible to grasp that zombie that is part of me? Not, I would say, without more loss than it is possible to bear, and remain human. It is there; I experience, phenomenologically, certain longings, certain undefinable sensory moments. It points to an opening in the otherwise closed circle of the self and its possibilities of being. But I cannot pass through that opening, not if I wish to remain human, and alive. Once zombied, there is no going back – every movie shows this, again and again. Even the hero cannot recover from the infection, but is lost to society and to self, trapped in perpetuity between life and death.

## §4.4 On the space between

This is what haunts the trope of zombie: the fear that the unfathomable 'something' will not take me to unrestricted pleasure, or to all the promise of death, but will strip me of everything. Because death is the ultimate unfathomable, the only way to regain what we've lost, to fill the void. The problem is, of course, that at the point of death, when the subject is returned to the void, it's too late to know or articulate this recovered

fullness, so the Thing remains just out of reach. Like death it haunts us, reminding us of the risk that we could end up trapped in the labyrinth that is the unnegotiable space between physical and symbolic deaths.

> The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. It is the incarnation of this world as the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which new shoots are preparing to sprout. (Bakhtin 1984: 27)

We are always surrounded by death, and the possibility of death; we are always in the space between: between life and death, between human and material, between 2 and 3. The discomfort this generates unsettles our present enjoyment of life, and our enjoyment of, or even experience of, the present. Contra to Augustine's description of the soul's experience of time as a perpetual present, the certainty of death forces us back into the past, to re-experience deaths we have attempted to forget, and into the future in a haunted, haunting anticipation of death. In Certeau's terms, we might call this a 're-bite': writing about the 'uncanniness' of a repressed history, he pointed out that we can never silence the other: 'The dead haunt the living. The past: it "re-bites" [*il re-mord*] (it is a secret and repeated biting)' (Certeau 1986: 3). Death's presence in the everyday world, with all it signifies of the loss of being and meaning, bites us, and bites again, potentially calling into question the value of all we can say and do, vitiating our energies, aspirations and anxieties:

> In death the intractable constancy of the other, of that on which we have no purchase, is given its most evident concentration. It is the facticity of death, a facticity wholly resistant to reason, to metaphor, to revelatory representation, which makes us 'guest-workers' in the boarding-houses of life. (Steiner 1989: 140)

As 'guest-workers' we can never be at home. And this 'problem of the subject', this 'wound on reason', has the capacity to render social life impossible because it upsets the verities. The guarantee of identity that is provided by the *entre-nous*, the permanency that is implied by the social contract, and the social structures that paper over ruptures in meaning and being are all undone by the *always there* of death. This is because the more I invest in disavowing and repressing the experience of such ruptures and the certainty of my own death, the more they colour my consciousness: in my

efforts to exile death, I keep it in the forefront of my mind and give it form and presence.

Unsuccessful attempts to control or keep the dead at bay through excess, funerals, hidden hospitals wards or silence are not the only viable approaches to death. For those cultures that frame death as an ontological adventure or privileged state (Vikings gloriously entering Valhalla, Native Americans returning to their ancestors, Christians coming face to face with God), death doesn't necessarily open, or draw attention to, an impossible void. 'The irreversibility of biological death,' Jean Baudrillard writes, 'is ... specific to our culture. Every other culture says that death begins before death, that life goes on after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death' (Baudrillard 1993b: 158-59). And in fact death doesn't exist as such in the material world – of which we too are part. Individual organisms die, but their component members break down into other forms of being; genetic codes don't die – they pass from one individual and one generation to another. Death is in life, and life in death. Nor does it 'really' exist socially: we are dying from our first breath, yet even after physical death we aren't properly exiled from the place of the living but retain a toehold there, as memories, or as revenants. Death lacks authority in the world of creative or symbolic production too – Hamlet dies every night on stage, for instance, and we speak of him always in the present tense. Death, therefore, only counts in the space of the individual conscious subject, and even then only as the future made present, 'a myth experienced in anticipation' (Baudrillard 1993b: 159), one that knocks out the body, but can't (for that moment which constitutes memory) touch the symbolic being.

Subjects in the post-Enlightenment and post-Christian world can't easily accommodate or countenance such plurality, instead drawing a solid line between life and death because death is the confirmation that 'nothing is'. All the same, if life is predicated on an irreconcilable set of necessities (death-in-life, life-in-death), then in the recognition and embrace of certain death and my inevitable expulsion from the symbolic order I am set free to be alive, for the moment, to mean and to make meanings. Schleifer writes, 'Such a revelation of the other in the same is the secret melody of death and materialisms … It makes the accidents of existence, including the material "accidental" formation of codes of signification, and including contingency and death, resonate in art' (1990: 49-50). Although the 'revelation of the other in the same' may be, as

Schleifer continues, a ‘negative understanding’, nonetheless language and other codes of signification (such as art) offer ways of addressing death, of acknowledging the other in the same, of bringing into focus Larkin’s *small unfocused blur* – and in the process, making it possible to go on.

That Schleifer singles out art as the site in which death and contingency resonate should not come as a surprise. Art – including creative writing – is a form of communication that is simultaneously privileged, and outside the conventions of everyday language. This vexed relationship to discourse arguably allows it to articulate, or at least approach death in a way that can’t be sustained in everyday discourse. I noted above the impossibility of denying, or quarantining, or even embracing death-in-life, life-in-death, in everyday discourse or understanding. But nonetheless, we are constantly being called on to confront it and, Steiner writes, ‘All aesthetics, all critical and hermeneutic discourse, is an attempt to clarify the paradox and opaqueness of that meeting as well as its felicities’ (1989: 138). To the extent that one is prepared to meet death, or to clarify life’s contingencies, art provides an ideal starting point because it already ‘understands’ (identifies with) death. There are, for instance, several parallels between contemporary art and death: both are frequently opaque; both are frequently self-referential; both are frequently not-quite respectable; both belong ‘elsewhere’, and are frequently excluded or repressed; and both must be disguised in order to occupy a place in society. Death, as I suggested above, may be disguised in popular film as entertainment, or in news footage as something that happens only ‘over there’. Art is popularly disguised in several modes: as that which presents me to myself and others; as a significant industry and contributor to the economy; or as a container for personal and collective memory. This effectively sanitises artistic practice, and sends into exile its more contestatory manifestations – political art; avant garde work; the ob-scene; or representations of the dead. Yet the unsanitised forms that so often attract protest and funding cuts and other forms of censorship are the gestures that bring the silenced, the abject, and the meaningless into the social-symbolic order. In demonstrating Nietzsche’s thesis that aesthetics is ‘applied physiology’, and in representing the insides as well as the surfaces of individuals, ‘unsanitised art’ undermines the hierarchical arrangement of inside and outside, or living and dead.

Sandra Lee's tabloid story is an instance, however ludicrous, of a creative attempt to address and represent death-in-life, life-in-death. It is worth some attention at least, because this gesture can restore an attitude to the dead and to human remains that has little place in contemporary western society. In representing the dead/undead as subjects, and hence insisting that they have a place among us, the law of exile is contradicted. The representation of the (un)dead points out that they are subjects similar to any other subject: not the exiled, not the object, but an aspect of *being* and hence more verb than noun. And more than this; it also tests out the notion that death is necessarily a troubling of the symbolic, or necessarily and straightforwardly a return of the repressed. Because that foolish story, those poorly mocked up photographs, and my storying of it all insist on the materiality of being (dead or alive) they give the inarticulable a form, and draw attention to the corporeal state as an identity-in-itself.

This again tests out the apparently self-evident aspects of death's relation to the subject, and to life, because it problematises the intellectual tendency, which dates from the Enlightenment, to privilege reason over the sensate. I would like to explore the concept of reason and its correlative, the idea, in the light of the social functions of death and representations of the dead. I suggest, in the first instance, that the modern reification of abstract ideas may be another way of keeping death at arms length, because if ideas are really as material as the material world – a tenet of post-Enlightenment thought – then death can constitute no real threat to *me*: in these terms, 'I' am simply an idea of 'I', and not dependent on concrete existence.

Schleifer writes that modernism articulates 'the *materiality* of signification, the materiality of the "idea"' (1990: 57). In fact, of course, ideas do not have concrete being, and people do: *I* may indeed be understood as a 'material idea', but in fact am not an idea alone, but first an actuality. My body is absolute and finite; it carries the record of decline and death, and will in time reduce me to nothing more than the building blocks of matter, and perhaps a temporary (post-death) identity as the face in someone else's photograph. Consequently I argue (*pace* Schleifer), that being is more than material or materialised idea; it is also, and perhaps primarily, corporeality. Nietzsche puts this corporeal effect quite graphically, problematising abstract existence because for him, existence is: 'an imperfect tense that never becomes a present ... ; "being" is merely a continual "has been", a thing that lives by denying and destroying

and contradicting itself' (Nietzsche 1957: 6). This continual 'has been' is that which is inscribed in the body, because it is the individual concrete body which *has been* – which dies. The abstract (the idea of *me*) and the general (the body's component parts) cannot – or at least need not – die. At least, the abstract will not die as long as the dead are memorialised by the living; and the general does not die, providing one accepts as a form of life its translation into other kinds of being: atoms and fluids and cellular matter breaking down into nature.

In short, I identify in this modernist privileging of the abstract over the concrete a quasi-religious attempt to escape and/or repress the Real, because as with Cartesian dualism, it posits the living body as merely the hostage of the abstract 'I', a tent for existence rather than existence itself, and privileges self-awareness over other properties of existence. A close look at the dead problematises notions of existence because they, the dead, exist, yet are manifestly no longer symbolic subjects, nor a set of ideas and desires and aspirations. Rather, they are flesh, raw material that has a presence, an existence of its own. The body changes at death; it is more than the departure of self-awareness, but closer to transmutation, transmogrification, and becomes both like and unlike *me*. This serves as a reminder that self-identity cannot be tied simply to mental consciousness. It is inscribed in the body because we are, in the first instance, physically functional human animals, as much process as processor. Philip Mellor writes, 'self-identity is … constructed within the biographical and biological constraints of the body, which limit the extent to which reflexively applied knowledge and reflexively constructed identity can be sustained' (Mellor 1993: 27). If we are not just abstract ideas, but concrete material as well, and if identity is tied to the body rather than a 'soul' or 'mind' or even memory (Mellor's 'biographical constraint'), then with the death and decay of the body comes, necessarily, the death and decay of self-identity and the emergence of the being of alterity. The bodily remains are dispersed into these new forms of being, but my awareness of this is impossible – the *I* disappears into the Real.

## §4.5 On writing the dead

Here I think I can begin to understand why the dead are so attractive to artists – how they lure us to look at them, consider them, represent them. As present, concrete entities they offer a way of confronting and exploring the boundaries of meaning and being –

not of stitching up the wound on reason which death constitutes, but of acknowledging the interwovenness of death and life. Being dead means being set free from the constraints of the symbolic order so that the body can become a thing-in-itself, not subject to the dream world of angels (all ideas and abstract form) but manifestly the constitutive elements – tissue, fluids, organs – of 'real' being. I feel confident – a confidence based on affect and not hard evidence – that if I can attain this understanding, and build an intimate relationship with death that will allow me to become literate with respect to the corporeal, and to develop fluency in the articulation of the inarticulate (and inarticulable), then I will be able to face – or better, master – my own death. Studying death, exploring death and confronting death offer the possibility of understanding it; controlling the significatory act provides the illusion that I can resist death's significatory power over my identity and, perhaps most of all, that I can hold it back.

But can I really? This takes me into the territory of the psychoanalyst, particularly that view on identity which posits that the self emerges as already-fractured at the point at which the infant first recognises (identifies) itself in the mirror as a subject. The infant here sees itself as whole, and ideal; but that moment of identification is also the moment which forces attention on the space between the physical and the reflected selves which constitutes the first split in identity – *I am here, and I am there ... which I is me?*

The distance between the artist and the object of the work (the dead) can be understood as a metaphor for this space. As such, the act of making cultural representations of the dead foregrounds this primary rift in identity: *there is the dead, over there; and here I am; what lies between?* However, if an artist approaches the making of work as a physical or fully embodied activity, then the process of considering the dead can function as a way of 'reaching down into biological potentiality' (Fuller 1981: 187), and temporarily forgetting both the problems of identity and the wounds on reason. Rather than being overwhelmed by the anxieties of death, or being absorbed by the external world, such practice offers a stage on which to explore this rift in being.

In taking death as subject I position it as an object of my gaze and, at the same time, as something that produces its own self-presence in the moment of being framed and formed as a thing-in-itself: the subject of the work. This defamiliarises the

understandings of being which are inscribed in everyday discourse and everyday performances of identity, because in the presence of two self-presences (the artist and the dead), the differences between self and other, living and dead, are blurred. I am 'I', the artist who brings to the object of the work a controlling and measured consideration; and at the same time I am 'me', that which identifies with the object, and is experienced as both gazing and gazed-at. This act of simultaneous identification and objectification allows the artist to recognise life-in-death and death-in-life, with its vicarious chills (because I identify with the dead, the dead is me) and its consolatory gestures (because I can contemplate the dead, the dead is not me).

This two-handed looking (being at once subject and object of the gaze) is a consistent feature of creative work because, to paraphrase Graham Greene, writers may empathise with human being, but must retain some ice in the heart in order to maintain the objective distance necessary to overcome pity and fear, appropriate the raw stuff of human experience, break it down into component parts, and return it in the guise of art. The chill of this gaze provides a mediated space in which the writers can work more effectively, because too close an identification with the dead would mean the risk that the work would become pathological, self-indulgent, or incoherent. This is similar to the story of Perseus carrying out the task of slaying Medusa. The legend tells that, by looking at the gorgon's reflection rather than directly at her, he was able to evade her fatal gaze and overcome her horror. So too the artist who takes a viewing position that objectively frames the dead/death can both confront and evade its pathological return. It also enables the artist to move beyond the conventional reaction: rather than seeing in the dead the Uncanny, one can identify the traces of both death and life, of me and not-me. In the dead body can be seen, as in Perseus' mirror, the body objectified, the abject rendered safe – framed and legitimised. So, like the coroner's work, the artist's involves gaining control over death in its guise as Larkin's *standing chill / That slows each impulse down to indecision*. Through the application of knowledge, classification, and categorisation, I can sidestep that anxious indecision, and shift my perspective on the dead. Rather than viewing them as remainders of the human which remind my of my own not-quite-human *thingliness*, I see them as machinery, or the building blocks of matter, or human subjects and the space of memory, qualia and affect. The dead subject is transformed from corpse to form, to matter, and to narrative potentiality.

It is important for writers (or artists, or dancers, or musicians) who engage with death and the dead to find this mediated space, this knowing gaze, because each practice of artistic production is a kind of death itself. In the act of making work, something of the artist is transferred out of the self and into the work. As Roland Barthes wrote so famously, creative production is 'that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (1977: 142). That is to say, making aesthetic works involves confronting one's own contingent existence, and confronting death itself; and I must establish the terms of engagement if I am to be able to function effectively. Maurice Blanchot gives considerable space to this issue in his critical writings. Particularly, he discusses Kafka's view that:

> you cannot write unless you remain your own master before death; you must have established with death a relation of sovereign equals. If you lose face before death, if death is the limit of your self-possession, then it slips the words out from under the pen, it cuts in and interrupts. (1982: 91)

If I am not death's equal, I become its captive, falling under its spell, and risking the loss of aesthetic and intellectual potential because I now belong to the Real rather than the symbolic order. This does not mean, though, that I should deny death, or maintain a stoical attitude, refusing to give in to terror in the face of one's own disintegration. Rather, Blanchot suggests, one must undertake to *live* death, to 'be the figurers and the poets of our death' (1982: 126). (More easily said than done, I suspect, but in its opaquely poetic phrasing, it does offer space for contemplation and consolation.) Most significantly, one must assert existence in the face of death. We can do this confidently because, if the artist's self-identity is in fact leached out into the work, then we know we can die without ceasing to be: the 'I' remains present in the work, and the work remains as the trace and marker of self-identity – the guarantee of life-in-death, and life after (actual, material) death.

This provides creative practitioners with a drive to make work, to secure their own self-awareness, and their own status as subjects and not just as matter. And, because looking at the dead necessarily brings to mind our own death, such practice also provides the impetus for expression. Certeau writes that there is:

> a first and last coincidence of dying, believing, and speaking. … There is nothing so 'other' as my death, the index of all alterity. But there is also nothing that makes clearer the place from which I can say my desire for the other; nothing that makes clearer my gratitude for being received – without having any guarantee or goods to offer – into the powerless language of my expectation of the other; nothing therefore defines more exactly than my death what *speaking* is. (1984: 193-94)

We can speak (or draw, or write, or dance) because we know that this expression is going to cease, finally and irrevocably; we can desire because we know that desire too is always and only of the moment, and gives that moment its vitality. This makes death particularly significant for creative practitioners: without the assurance of death, we have no material being and as a correlative, no symbolic being.

*My own death*, therefore, can become an alluring undercurrent to my life and by extension, my aesthetic and intellectual practice. But what of the dead? We are not supposed to be close to them; some forms of contact are utterly proscribed (necrophilia, for instance); others are sanctioned as morbid or unhygenic; and these limitations are codified in most societies to become not just norms and mores, but the object of judicial attention. And except for those people in western societies who have embraced the tradition of the wake or *tangi*, we hide our dead away, and if we glimpse them at all, it is in the sanitised and cosmeticised environment of the satin-lined coffin in the silent chapel. They are, Baudrillard argues (1993b: 127), 'hounded and separated from the living', because in their unarguably other state (*nothing there but flesh*), they remind us that we are only flesh too. If, however, we are able to transform them through creative work, then their necrogenic power is subdued because they are re-identified as simply matter. Then, too, they offer us a way of managing our own anxieties about death, because although they remind us in their unmediated state that *as they are, so we will be too*, once they are framed within a narrative space they become materialised as objectified subject, as the cogs or machinery of matter – something that is stable and consistent, something that is not like thought and not within the symbolic order – and, as a corollary, not like me.

This notion of the material is important because the corporeal body, whether dead or alive, has a central place in cultural production. In poems, for instance, the body manifests in the breath and rhythms of reading; in novels it appears in the form of the characters; in visual and plastic art it emerges in figurative work, or in the metaphorised

figure. The body is also central to the experience of self-identity because it is, as William James writes, ‘the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles around it and is felt from its point of view’ (1967: 284). Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in similar terms that the body ‘can sense itself and this anonymous tacit *cogito* is the foundation for the explicit *cogito*, the emergent experience of selfhood and subjectivity which set the body apart from objects’ (1962b: 148). This phenomenological view is in startling contrast to the contemporary standard where virtuality takes precedence over materiality, and meaning slips into pure difference and pure contingence. But it does reminds us that in this condition of uncertainty, the one remaining verity is the body. Hold a stethoscope to it, and you’ll hear the pumping and grinding of the organs, or the blood whooshing under the skin. Or if the body’s dead (as it will be, one day) then it’ll certainly putrefy. Because of this inconstant constancy the body is, as Nietzsche has said, the place where truth can be found.

The act of making art is thus an amalgam of the physical and the conceptual: the self, embodied, expressing itself in the work. And given that we can’t identify clean demarcation lines between I and me, self and other, two and three, life and death, the representation of the dead body or of bodily remainders need not be seen as a grotesque Bakhtinian spectacle, but as an engagement with being. Certainly it may be a pathological moment, because death is unavoidably both loss of self, and the ultimate loss of inspiration; and the dead body stands as a visible reminder of the permeability of the boundaries between living subject and dead object. Still, what we can identify in representations of the dead is the force and flow of life: the building blocks of being, organised in a set of organic connections which, laid bare, allow us to trace the imprint of the original person and to follow and probe the flows of form and life in general.

## *§5 Walking through the labyrinth: A conclusion*

### §5.1 On the grotesque

I started off this work of writing with some strange, wicked, questionable questions. In my fiction I placed characters in great danger, I let some die and others mourn, I allowed peculiar things to happen to them and their bodies (heads placed in jars, fingertips turned to asbestos pads). I let the grotesque enter my writing.

What is meant by 'grotesque' varies across texts and orientations. For Bakhtin, it means the world turned upside-down, and every Bakhtinian commentator since has reflected on its comic and transgressive elements. This is not all that is held in the term, though. The carnivalesque grotesque that attracts – that demands – our attention and absorbs us into the body of the carnival, is a very different creature from the grotesquerie that forces me to look away, discomforted, saddened and ashamed. This latter sort occupies a place between two stools: neither one thing nor the other, neither comic nor tragic. This state of in-between-ness is grotesque because it is difficult for observers to observe it. It is this grotesque in-between, the misplaced, that I experience if, while walking down the street, I see a stranger in the middle of a fugal state. *I don't want to see it, I don't want to know, I look away.* A disjuncture; an intrusion into the connectedness that is part of being human, part of being alive. Something that ruptures the glance, interrupts the gaze. It is the process of observation, according to philosophers and biologists, that is the starting point for communication, for exchange: 'Everything said is said by an observer' (Maturana and Varela 1980: 8). If I don't say, did I see? Can I retain any connection to the other? Maybe a good person would both observe and speak – get involved, call an ambulance; but me, I want it to be and to stay outside the frame of reference of my own life and actions. It is grotesque, but not entertaining. It ruptures but does not contain the possibility of healing.

In this type of the grotesque, things are not as they seem or as they 'should' be. This grotesque thing does not invite interaction; does not incorporate the observer within the community of the upside-down world. Instead, it repels. The only responses seem to be: (a) walk away; or (b) attempt to put it right, to restore order. This is the grotesque I might experience on, say, hitting a kangaroo while driving my car. I stop; it is there on the ground, writhing, whimpering, dying. It is not as it should be – alive and fleeing, or

dead and quiet. It is in-between, it is a foreshadow of my own death, it brings disaster into the moment. The most tender-hearted of people will want to kill the dying creature, ostensibly to bring its suffering to an end, but mainly to bring to an end the horrible knowledge it constitutes, to escape the place it occupies, the place no one should be.

A gap, then, in Bakhtin's picture of the carnivalesque-grotesque, the pregnant, senile, laughing hag (Bakhtin 1984: 25-6), that which makes you shudder and laugh. The grotesque is not always funny. It's not always transgressive. It's not always emancipatory. And worse: the grotesque does not necessarily, or always, fulfil the role Bakhtin imagined, of enacting community by drawing everyone together in the ludic and ludicrous public event. Sometimes, instead, the grotesque moment degrades the participant. Sometimes the grotesque plays the part of the freak, one that is spectacle rather than co-participant, and so alienates instead of binding (Russo 1994: 63). It is not carnivale; it is more like a script written by Kurtz ('The horror! The horror!').

Bakhtin's more benign portrait of the grotesque is a fairly recent one, since the term and its connotations have been around for quite a long time. The word emerges first, according to Philip Thomson (1972: 12), in the late fifteenth century where the term *grotte* (Italian for 'caves') and the related adjective *grottesco* and noun *la grottesca* were used to describe decorative elements. It made its way to the English, via the French *crotesque*, by the mid-seventeenth century, and again was used to describe ornamentation, especially of anything that seemed:

> ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one – a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid. (Kayser 1963: 21)

Which is to say, not just the world turned upside down, but an alien, defamiliarised and potentially threatening world. A world that is both distracting and disturbing. A world that exceeds the limits of description and the bounds of taxonomy, because it 'subverts the conventional logic which underlies that process' (O'Gara 1996). The grotesque cannot be pinned down under the floorboards of nomination or classification because it provokes what Thomson (1972: 2) terms 'incompatible reactions', a tension between

humour and horror. The grotesque in this telling exists to produce effect – and often the effect is of shock. This is not necessarily a bad thing:

> Because of the characteristic *impact* of the grotesque, the sudden shock which it causes, the grotesque is often used as an aggressive weapon… The shock-effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective. (Thomson 1972: 58)

This is perhaps the allure of the grotesque for a contemporary writer: the promise it offers of forcing a reader to step outside the quotidian comfort of their everyday life, forcing them to confront alterity, driving them to be 'valiant', in Marx and Engels' terms, about the epistemological and ontological basis for their world. A large claim, I know, and one whose high principles are easily undone by the actual effects of reducing a character to something grotesque. Is it useful to contribute to the many stories and images of women degraded, of young men damaged by their society? Surely there are enough instances of people made spectacle in literature, film and the news media to keep us all going for quite some time. A grotesque narration risks contributing to the generalised hostility any society offers the dominated, because what the grotesque instantiates is degradation.

Still, Bakhtin does find in degradation a kind of liberation:

> Degradation means here coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. (Bakhtin 1984: 21)

I too am given to iconoclasm – to the bringing down to earth of lofty things; I too am engaged by the rich potential that emerges from recalling human beings' corporeality. I am not, however, confident that degradation is the way to achieve 'something more and better'. Something is at stake in our world that was not at stake in Rabelais' world of medieval carnivals and the temporary inversion of social identities. The history of the past century does not encourage the association of degradation with amelioration. I do, though, appreciate Bakhtin's notion of the transformative possibilities of the grotesque:

> The grotesque image refers to a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence.

> For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (Bakhtin 1984: 24)

Where it is deployed in a way that acts as a reminder of time and ambivalence, I am on its side. Where it recognises the contingent, messy, fragmentary nature of being, I am on its side. Like Donald Barthelme said, 'Fragments are the only forms I trust' (1971: 496).

## §5.2 On cleaning up the mess

I started off this work of writing with a mess, a/mazed by the muddle of years of papers and books and notes, the muddle of all the matter that is in my head, all the chaos that is inevitable for human being/being human. It is, I hope, as Katherine Hayles describes: not really chaos but the presence of a plenitude of information. In making this essay I have attempted to sort and organize and catalogue and quantify: to *audit* the maze. This is what people do: we keep records, fragments, slips of paper; and we use them to catalogue our lives. Do you remember the slide shows of the sixties and seventies? – *'this is us in Barcelona, this is us on the ferry from Athens'*. Do you have your own photo album from any decade at all: *'Aunt Kate, Muriel and ?? outside the cottage in Bathurst, 1937'; 'Sam taking his first steps'*. Many of us do. Many of us also have, in proliferating files and folders, our virtual catalogues and digitized memories: *Admin; Book proposals; Committees; My music; My pictures; Poetry; Professional; Stories*. We keep our memories, and our knowledge, stored away. Those postcards and unsorted photos in the box in the cupboard in the spare room. Those files never fully checked, but burned onto CD-Rom for safekeeping until such time as I get around to sorting them. The unfinished letters, half-done sewing projects, the beginnings of short stories, the notes for the novel I will one day write, the old letters from lovers I have almost forgotten, the broken jewellery I will one day repair. They are fragments of life, fragments that propel us into stories. Joan Didion, in her book about surviving her husband's death, writes that she found meaning in 'Setting the table. Lighting the candles. Building the fire. Cooking. … *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*' (2005: 190-91). This is what we have: fragments. Bits detached from the whole; the bits of us that do not go into death, the bits left after the disaster has blown through.

There is always something left, if only fragments. Often the remains are a tangled web, a labyrinth, something into which I might fall and never be seen again, somewhere I might be consumed by the minotaur. Somewhere to lose myself, or be lost.

In all the sorting and organizing and classifying and mapping I seem to have come up only with uncertainty. I cannot find clear points of delineation between 2 and 3, between life and death, between body and brain. Everything on which I have reflected seems either to be woven into a loose connection, or to fall between two stools. Does this matter? I don't think so. I think it is a valid observation about being human – or human being. It has given me the opportunity to deal much more consciously and closely that I usually do with what we might call the 'uncertain word', words like 'should', 'might', 'perhaps'; words with low levels of modality; and hence to move aside from the more structured, perhaps more confident, tone of an academic. Like the Fool in the tarot pack, I feel myself balancing on an edge – not quite falling, but not quite secured.

Let me end with a quotation from the artist Laurie Anderson, from her album *Big Science.* She sings – or rather, speaks – about these very issues of ambiguity and uncertainty, and of the human body and of the being that is always between two and three, between loss and reclamation:

> You're walking, and you don't always realize it, but you're always falling. Each step you fall forwards, slightly, and then catch yourself from falling. Over and over again, you're falling and then catching yourself from falling. And this is why you can be walking and falling at the same time.

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