

CONFRONTING THE DARK:  
  
VOLUME 1:  
‘THE ART OF DYING’ (A NOVEL)  
  
AND  
  
VOLUME 2:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH IN AUSTRALIAN FICTION  
(AN EXEGESIS)

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**VOLUME 2: Representations of death in Australian fiction**

## INTRODUCTION

“Confronting the Dark” is an interrogation of the following questions: is it true that death is a taboo subject in contemporary Western culture, and how is dying currently practiced? Further, how might a fiction writer approach the subject of death, and what kind of representations of death have been attempted by Australian writers? I began writing my novel as a fictive response to my father’s death in 2009 and my creative practice immediately began to raise questions about not only the significance of death for the dying and their loved ones, but also its meaning for creative writers such as myself. What was I articulating in the novel? Canadian author Margaret Atwood says:

. . . not just some, but *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead (140).

My novel, *The Art of Dying*, is about a dying man who discovers the secret behind his childhood traumas. Gerard Calligan, the main character, has terminal cancer. He returns to the country town of his childhood, restless about the traumatic events that occurred in the post-war years: his mother’s abandonment of him on his Grandpa’s farm; the constant bullying he endured at school by the students who believed he was illegitimate; the drowning of his cousins Denis and Johnny. Convinced that his life has not been affected by the family curse his uncle believed in, he carries the key to the family safe, and as he becomes enmeshed in the lives of his new neighbours, he braces himself to visit the old homestead and confront whatever secrets about his life the safe holds. Without doubt, the novel was motivated by ‘a fascination with mortality’ on my part and prompted by questions that arose for me during the grief process, such as, ‘Where have you gone?’ and ‘What was it all for?’, typical questions that focus on the nature of human finitude and the meaning of life. I chose the title, *The Art of Dying*, after the fifteenth century *Ars moriendi*, a Christian text that contained instructions for the dying and their loved ones on how to have hope and avoid temptation, proper behaviour, and appropriate prayers. During later drafts, this title encouraged greater focus on the thematic questions.

This exegesis, “Representations of death in Australian fiction,” uses practice-led research as a methodology and includes a literature review that considers contemporary ways of thinking about death and the development of this thinking over the past few centuries due to the transformations brought about by modernity. It reviews various philosophies of death that have been of interest to writers and presents a case study of two Australian novels by considering their particular treatment of death.

In the first chapter, I discuss practice-led research as a methodology, in which the artefact stimulates and motivates the theoretical inquiry. Choosing death as a major theme of the novel prompted a literature review detailed in this chapter, beginning with the influential work on death by French cultural historian Philippe Ariès and the critique of Ariès by German sociologist Norbert Elias. I then discuss my review of philosophies of death, including current analytic approaches to death in contrast with death in existentialist theory, in preparation for their application to the novels I read closely in the next chapters. I make suggestions here as to the relevance and context of my research and its connection to the narrative of death in Australian fiction and in my own novel.

Chapter 2 is a case study of the Helen Garner novel, *The Spare Room* (2008). This novel was chosen as a representation of death in which there is a great deal of anxiety about facing the inevitable. With my focus on existential theory in which anxiety about death leads to an authentic life, I critique the treatment of death in *The Spare Room* in light of the literature review, including: German philosopher Martin Heidegger's ‘being-towards-death’, particularly the issue of authenticity in facing mortality; Norbert Elias’s idea that the changes to Western attitudes to dying since modernity have placed the dying and their loved ones under “exceptional pressure” (27); analytic philosopher Shelly Kagan’s claim that dying is hard for people who’ve failed to achieve their life goals; and, finally, Heideggerian scholar and psychologist Lou Agosta’s work on empathy as a foundational way human beings are able to authentically be with each other as one of them dies. I claim that *The Spare Room* is an important literary statement about death as it is currently approached.

In the third chapter, I present a case study of Patrick White’s *The Vivisector* (1970), chosen because it ends in the death of the main character, and has particularly Nietzschean themes. Further to my overview of existentialist theory in Chapter 1, particularly that of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, I review Nietzschean readings of Patrick White and the recognition by critics such as Ann McCulloch (1980, 1983) and Michael Giffen (1999) that White shared Nietzsche’s concern

about the nihilistic tendency inculcated by modernity. Critic Ingmar Björkstén has said *The Vivisector* describes “the complete cycle of human life” (103) and I make the claim that the novel encapsulates the Heideggerian idea of ‘being-towards-death’, following the description I give in the first chapter. I also use my review of Nietzschean active nihilism and the Heideggerian ‘event of being’ to speculate that the artist Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* represents both of these philosophical ways of being in spite of and with the deep awareness of human finitude and because of the desire for meaning in life in the face of death.

In Chapter 4, I link these ideas to my own novel *The Art of Dying* and present a brief case study of its construction and development. After her assertion that writing is always motivated by mortality, Margaret Atwood goes on: “Where is the story? The story is in the dark . . . Going into a narrative – into the narrative process – is a dark road. You can’t see the way ahead” (158). I discuss this idea of creativity, and whether the artefact is inspired versus crafted, in light of the reflexive agency required for creative writing research and I frame this chapter using Graeme Harper’s suggestions for four exploratory avenues that help writers consider their writing process: creative writing habitat, the creative domain, activities, and the artefact.

I conclude the exegesis by restating the causal relationship between Western anxiety about death and authenticity, having found these elements drawn together across many areas of scholarship about death. I liken authenticity to Patrick White’s idea that humans “muddle” towards an experience of “the core of reality” (1989:19-21) and speculate that there is a similarity between this idea and Heideggerian being as eventful, occurring again and again as experience emerges and offers flashes of illumination that the recipients of these moments generally regard as meaningful. I find that the dying characters in the two Australian novels I study experience the living of the dying as meaningful in this manifestive way. In light of my reading and writing about death, I conclude that facing death is a confrontation with the unconditional. There is terror, depending on what one believes, either of what awaits or of future non-existence. There is also the shock of mortality, the anguish of mistakes, and the heartache of unfinished business. Nothing about death is certain. Death cannot be controlled by anyone who comes into contact with it. Death demands a response, and provokes thoughts, ideas and emotions that could not have been predicted. I contend that the novels I study by Helen Garner and Patrick White ultimately make a Nietzschean affirmation of life.

## CHAPTER 1

### Practice-led research and the literature of death

For creative writers in the academy, it is reasonable to use practice-led research as a framework for a doctoral thesis: the artefact stimulates and motivates the theoretical inquiry. Practice-led research is the practice of writing creatively while developing critical responses to that practice. According to Jen Webb (WSU 2015), practice-led research is a research paradigm that creative practitioners use because they are both creators and knowledge makers. Artists as researchers fail, however, “if we fail in the production of knowledge” (WSU). This notion is the site at which the research anxiety arises. Creative writers often write what they are inspired to write; they find their subject matter, or indeed it finds them through largely unconscious processes (a subject I will take up in Chapter 4). They sustain the energy to produce an artefact by choosing to write about something that deeply concerns them. Practice-led research seems natural, therefore, because it allows the writer to follow whatever research paths the artefact suggests are worthy. So far, so good. But what of knowledge production? Is the knowledge produced by creative writing researchers contained in the artefact or the exegesis, or both? Becoming a researcher requires progress from being a knowledge consumer to a knowledge producer, having the ability to display original and critical thought. For me, the artefact contains my original thought; the exegesis is a critical inquiry into a topic that is interesting and useful for me as a writer of this particular novel. It gathers a diverse, interdisciplinary range of scholarship and applies it to fiction writing about death. I claim this by defining interdisciplinarity in a rather loose way, following philosopher Ian Hacking, as one who applies her mind and skills where interested, who “dabbles” in fields of thought (2009).

In *The Marketplace of Ideas*, Louis Menand says that, “The ability to create knowledge and put it to use is *the* adaptive characteristic of humans. It is how we reproduce ourselves as social beings



and how we change” (13). He claims that the most important function of the university doctoral system is not, in fact, knowledge production but the production of knowledge producers. According to Menand, “The world of knowledge production is a marketplace” and he charges academics “to serve the public culture by asking questions the public doesn’t want to ask, investigating subjects it cannot or will not investigate, and accommodating voices it fails or refuses to accommodate” (158).

In asking questions about death a paradox arises. Death is considered a taboo subject in contemporary Western culture, according to the literature presented here. While playwright Peta Murray and clinical psychologist Kerrie Noonan started The GroundSwell Project to “develop innovative arts and health programs that create cultural change about death and dying”, Murray says that “the idea of death being a taboo doesn’t reflect the experience we have had in the community. We have witnessed a great willingness to talk about death and to engage in death education especially when the context allows for normal everyday conversation” (2017). Clearly, death appears again and again in novels by Australian fiction writers. With these two thoughts juxtaposed, I have endeavoured here to review literature of death and use this summary of ideas to ask questions about the way in which death appears in fiction and how that reflects prevailing norms and practices. I do this as a Claude Lévi-Strauss “bricoleur” using a finite “set of tools and materials” (17) consisting of whatever is at hand:

Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem . . . And the decision as to what to put in each place also depends on the possibility of putting a different element there instead, so that each choice which is made will involve a complete reorganisation of the structure, which will never be the same as one vaguely imagined nor as some other which might have been preferred to it (18-19).

If writers are knowledge makers, as Jen Webb suggests they are, then it is through the ability of artists to know their culture deeply from within as a finite set of tools and materials, and to reveal it in their work, via “a new arrangement of elements . . . in the continual reconstruction from the same materials” (Lévi-Strauss: 21) that the culture is made known and recognised. This, I contend, is what the Australian novels I’ve chosen to study here have achieved.

But first, the research process . . .

The practice of writing about death led me toward research into existentialist philosophy, primarily Martin Heidegger's 'being-towards-death', where foresight enables a way of being at its most authentic. I also researched Shelly Kagan's course on death at Yale University, which examines the received view of death by contemporary analytic philosophy. I then considered changes in the Western view of death wrought by modernity. This literature review begins by considering these changes. Phillipe Ariès and Norbert Elias are widely referenced in regards the history of changing attitudes to death and dying in the West.

### **The Western attitude to death**

French cultural historian Phillipe Ariès (1914-1984) is the standard reference in regards the history of attitudes toward death and mourning in the West. In *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974), he coined the phrase "tamed death" to describe death in the Middle Ages, a time when dying people generally had an inner conviction that death was approaching and it was time to prepare. One waited for death lying down, expressed sorrow over the end of life, pardoned companions who were present, offered prayers, received religious absolution, and then lay in silence until death occurred. Dying was active, "a ritual organised by the dying person himself" (11). It was also a public ceremony with no great show of emotion.

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, only very gradual changes occurred. These include a new concern for the individuality of each person; each person was now thought to be judged according to the way their life had been conducted. By the late Middle Ages, it was believed that the entire life flashed before the eyes of the dying person and great moral importance was attached to how the dying person behaved. A second gradual change began when, in the eighteenth century, the death of others was mourned with greater passion: "Emotion shook them, they cried, prayed, gesticulated . . . Certainly the expression of sorrow by survivors is owing to a new intolerance of separation" (59). According to Ariès, modernity has "witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional feelings . . . Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden" (85). Death has replaced sex as the taboo subject to the extent that family members began to choose to keep the terminal nature of their illness from the dying person:

One must avoid – no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society's sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person – the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion

caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem so (87).

People now commonly die in hospital where dying has become a technical phenomenon. Funerals are discreet and outward signs of mourning have disappeared. Grief is kept secret: “A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty. But one no longer has the right to say so aloud” (92).

German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) began a research tradition known as Process Sociology. One of its principles is that “Human beings are born into relationships of interdependency. The social figurations that they form with each other engender emergent dynamics, which cannot be reduced to individual actions or motivations” (Loyal & Quilley: 5). Accordingly, his contribution to death studies, *The Loneliness of the Dying* (2001), takes the view that the contemporary individualism and isolation creates an issue for the dying:

Too often, people today see themselves as isolated individuals totally independent of others. To further one’s own interests – seen in isolation – then seems the most sensible and fulfilling thing for a person to do. In that case, the most important task in life appears to be seeking a meaning for oneself alone, a meaning independent of all other people. No wonder people seeking this kind of meaning find their lives absurd (34).

Elias critiqued the work of Phillipe Ariès by suggesting that Ariès’ selection and interpretation of death in the Middle Ages was shaped by his preconceived notion that “tamed death” meant peaceful death. Medieval life was “passionate, violent, and therefore uncertain, brief and wild” (13), says Elias, and dying has always been painful, though modern medicine provides more relief for that pain than ever before in history. Certainly, death and dying were more openly discussed in the Middle Ages; however, there were times when the fear of death was overwhelming: “Fear of punishment after death, anxiety about the salvation of the soul, often seized rich and poor alike without warning” (15), and, of course, the Church encouraged the fear of hell as an official doctrine. The change most important for Elias is the high degree of participation in death in the Middle Ages.

The process of individualisation since the Renaissance, is, for Elias, at the crux of this change. For human beings, meaning is a social category, constituted by people in groups and mediated through language. The notion of a meaningful life depends on a person’s significance for others. Dying people need “more than ever the feeling that they have not lost their meaning for other people” (58). The meaning found in death by the dying also depends on their way of living, a connection

Ariès failed to make, according to Elias: “Dying becomes easier for people who feel they have done their bit, and harder for people who feel they have missed their life’s goal, and especially hard for those who, however fulfilled their life may have been, feel that the manner of their dying is itself meaningless” (62).

### **Analytic philosophy of death**

Analytic philosophy originated at the turn of the twentieth century as a break with British Idealism, when G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell returned to the language of symbolic logic, philosophy’s ‘linguistic turn’, in an effort to provide logical clarification of thought in ordinary language. It dominates contemporary philosophy in some regions and takes a materialist or physicalist view of death, such that the end of a biological organism is the end of existence. Despite the fact that the religious and philosophical idea of the immortality of the soul has been the most prevalent belief throughout human history, the physicalist tradition also has a long history, beginning with the ancient Greek hedonist philosopher Epicurus: “So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist” (Feldman 2010: 708).

Wide contemporary acceptance of the strong materialist view has occurred due to philosophical, social, and religious change allied with scientific advances in recent centuries, particularly the work of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), which instituted a new mathematical and mechanistic view of the universe. Nonetheless, contemporary philosophical challenges to the Epicurean view that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies are common. In “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death” (1991), Fred Feldman suggests that the Epicurean argument rests on “The Existence Condition” that a person has to be alive to experience misfortune:

... most of us cannot help but view (this) as sophistry. Except in cases in which continued life would be unbearable, death is taken to be a misfortune for the one who dies. We cry at funerals; we grieve for the deceased. Especially when a young person dies, we feel that she has suffered a great misfortune. And it apparently seems to most of us that our attitude is perfectly rational (205-6).

Shelly Kagan offered a course on death at Yale for many years. In his book *Death* (2012), Kagan writes that humans have different tendencies concerning death: we deny the nature of death and instead believe in souls that have an afterlife; we respond to the fact of death by living appropriately; or we disregard death by not thinking about it at all. Kagan says death is pervasive,

inevitable, varies from person to person in its timing, and is unpredictable and therefore hard to plan for. He suggests people are afraid of the process of dying rather than of being dead. Kagan believes that the idea that we die alone is a necessary truth: “nobody else can undergo my death for me” (201), but nobody can have a haircut on your behalf either so this is merely a way of saying everyone dies. Philosophically, on the ‘deprivation account’ of death, what matters now that longevity has increased over the past few hundred years is that life can be too short. Life itself has value and it is considered good to live until we are satisfied we have gotten all of the good life has to offer. Kagan also suggests that “narrative arc” or a good versus bad story of life is important. He believes that living authentically in the face of death and living life to the fullest, being grateful for life and finding meaning in it, is the proper way to live in the face of death:

. . . given how incredibly rich the world is, how many things it offers us, how many choices we have in terms of what’s worth going after – and given how very difficult it can be to achieve many of these things . . . we don’t have that many chances; we don’t have all that much time. So we’ve got to pay attention. We’ve got to be careful . . . Pack as much in as you can, *while* you can (306-7).

### **Narrative of Death**

Essentially, then, there is concurrence between analytic philosophy of death and the view of Norbert Elias in regards to the narrative of death and, in fact, the way ordinary people speak about death also tends to be in agreement. For survivors, early death is deemed catastrophic, suicide is an appalling misfortune for the loved ones left to deal with the emotional fallout of the loss, and in spite of the loss, most console themselves after the death of the elderly with very common ideas, for example, that their loved one experienced a long, happy life or that they lived life to the full. Death is widely reviewed in regards to whether life has been lived fully, lived well, and lived meaningfully, and whether life goals have been achieved, how setbacks were negotiated, how loved the person was and what is being left behind that has ongoing value for others.

In the *Handbook of Death & Dying* (2003), Diana Royer says, “Literary treatments of death reveal much about individual writers and the culture within which those authors write” (998). The writing of death is often autobiographical; literature is used by authors to “work out their personal loss” (1000). The aspects of death Royer describes in “Cultural Concern with Death in Literature” (998) include: the examination of social ills such as poverty that caused premature death (in Charles Dickens); individual and communal grief; cultural attitudes toward women and their illnesses (death of the beloved); women who die as a result of their love for a man or through submission

to male desires; experiences of grief; death of a parent (in Virginia Woolf); death in war (including the sacrifice of life, the need to justify human loss, regret for loss of life, admiration of individual valour, the horrors of war, dark studies of human nature under the duress of war, and the imminence of death in war); suicide studies; and murder mysteries. There is no discussion of representations in literature of dying of old age, dying of terminal illness, or dealing with the psychological issues of facing death, such as the fear of time running out or unfinished business.

Royer says:

Writing and reading about death can help one explore and expiate fears, curiosities, even desires about death. They can help one make sense of what appears to be senseless loss. They can urge social reform to prevent future deaths. They can reassure that death served a useful purpose, or they can convince that there was no good reason for a person's dying. Literature about death may serve best in teaching an acceptance of the unpredictable and seemingly random nature of mortality (1007).

Writing about death in novel form was, for me, a question of how the living of the dying is undertaken by someone with a terminal illness. How are issues from the past confronted? How are conversations about one's prospective death to be undertaken? My exegetical research has tried to examine how death is approached in the culture in which we live, the existential issues of dying in a secular world, and the reasons for and consequences of these. In a period in history more extremely individualistic than ever before, I wondered if questions of meaning were relevant or necessary. Is it possible to feel, as death approaches, that life has meant something? Once the individual has gone, what meaning do their life and death hold for others? And, finally, how are stories of death told by storytellers in fictional forms?

In 2015, I presented at the inaugural Australasian Death Studies Network conference, "Death, Dying, and the Undead: Contemporary Approaches and Practices". The network itself, a multi-disciplinary group of scholars, was set up because "Despite being imaged all around us in popular culture and the media, death and dying are, it often seems, the last taboo subjects in modern society" (2017). As noted above, Phillipe Ariès considers death to have replaced sex as the taboo subject in modernity. American palliative care consultant Stephen Jenkinson goes as far as to accuse Western culture of being "death-phobic" and claim people must now "die not dying" (85), refusing to discuss impending death, unable to tell the truth about what is happening to them and how they feel about it. It now appears that death is the taboo subject that everyone is talking about. The Death Cafe movement was started to help people get together over tea and cake to talk about death and there have now been over 4000 Death Cafe gatherings around the world (2017). That the West is death-phobic has begun to seem immaterial. Perhaps the question should be, 'Is all the

talk affecting the practice of dying?’ or, for me, ‘What difference has it made to my critique of the Australian novels I read and the writing of my own?’

Patrick White wrote about death and dying many times, and the living of the dying was often the subject he chose. In *The Vivisector* (1970), Hurtle Duffield is terrified of leaving unfinished business. He is driven, as death approaches, to finish his God paintings as if this will make his life mean something. A different kind of unfinished business is at issue in Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room* (2008). The dying Nicola needs to be told her life has been meaningful, that she is inspired people and brought love and happiness into people’s lives. As representations of the living of the dying, perhaps they show that it is, at least in this moment of human history, less important to acknowledge that death is fast approaching than it is to gather yourself and your life together at the end and make an affirmation. Perhaps, as people approach death, however long it takes, it is discovering that life has been worthwhile that is the main task during the living of the dying. In my novel *The Art of Dying*, Gerard gathers his memories, relives his traumas, finds out a secret, and discovers the ability to view his life as ‘perfect’. It can only be perfect because he takes it all into himself; he becomes whole by embracing it all and seeing it as having been a life worth living, not for those looking on from the outside, not for those left behind, but immanently.

### **Existentialism**

It is in light of these reflections that I began to consider existentialist philosophy as relevant to the questions I was asking about death as it is approached in the novels I critique and for the affirmation that my own novel became. For existentialists, death and authenticity are intertwined. Authenticity, or becoming oneself, is a responsibility for existentialists, necessitating the development of resistance to the seductive conformity of modern society. It is a task the individual sets out to achieve in view of human finitude which leads to anguish and deep reflection on what it means to live or to have being.

In researching the tradition of literary criticism on Patrick White, I found many Nietzschean readings of White, but few on his novel *The Vivisector*, and none specifically relative to death as a theme. The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) occurred in an important juncture in which the religious foundation of life and, therefore, attitudes towards death and the afterlife, had changed irrevocably. Unlike the “father of existentialism” (McDonald 1) Søren Kierkegaard, who was a Christian, belief in God for Nietzsche was untenable: “God is dead! God remains dead! And

we have killed him!” (Kaufmann 1954: 95). Nietzsche introduced the idea of the “overman”, the one who overcomes the human tendency for otherworldly religious consolations, the ideal self who does not deny the inherent suffering of life and the trauma associated with death, but rather affirms that *this* life is meaningful and worthwhile. Thus, seeing the value of life in the face of its difficulty becomes an existential choice: “it is up to man to give his life meaning by raising himself above the animals and the all-too-human” (115). For Nietzsche, nihilism was not a proclamation but a diagnosis. Once God became a figuration of belief rather than an absolute, objective entity that provided the meaning and purpose of human existence, the moral, religious and metaphysical consequences needed to be explored. Nietzsche predicted that the absence of faith in an afterlife that provided meaning for human suffering would lead to profound pessimism.

For Nietzsche, following the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, everything is in a state of flux or “becoming” and in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Kaufmann 1954) he describes the struggle and challenges of accepting “eternal return” or what Deleuze calls “the being of becoming” (71): “Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again” (Kaufmann 1954: 329). There is a recognition that the incessant nature of life’s coming-to-be and passing away is felt by human beings as a great suffering. In Nietzsche, suffering is not justified; life must be lived in its becoming, by saying yes to all of it, even if that means it is “all woe” and contains only a “single joy” (435). Life, in other words, “becomes”. comes to be and passes away, and through this, human beings “are”. Ultimately, then, Nietzsche sought to discover whether existence, with its suffering and finitude, has meaning if there is no God to provide life with a purpose or a justification. Despite its constant flux, is existence “holy enough by itself”? (Deleuze: 16). Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche recognises that “modern man” has a tendency to hide from “the horror and absurdity of existence” (Nietzsche 40); life’s finitude is terrifying. He offers the challenge of returning “eternally to this same, selfsame life” (Kaufmann 1954: 333) as a philosophical mind game: rather than assuming a heavenly afterworld, each person should aim to live a life that he or she would choose to live again: “Was *that* life?” I want to say to death, ‘Well then! Once more!’” (430).

Like other existentialists, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) emphasised the irreducibility of individual experience. Part of the ontological structure of “Dasein” or human existence as ‘being-in-the-world’, however, is its proneness to inauthenticity. Embedded as we become in the ‘they-self’, we begin to speak about death as something objective that can happen to others:



But although we evade death in everydayness, this evasion is still a way of being-towards it . . . Our public stance – our chat – does not deny death’s certainty, but misinterprets it so as to remove its sting. So I conceive of my death as an event lying ahead of me on a time-line. I concede that this event is certain to happen, but I diminish this certainty as merely empirical . . . I take away from death’s certainty a most important aspect . . . ‘*that it is possible at any moment*’ (Richardson 150).

Heideggerian ‘being-towards-death’ is, therefore, not a way of dealing with death on the death-bed; we are always being-towards-death even when refusing to face our own human finitude. Death is the very thing making us anxious, and facing the “indefinite certainty of death” (Macquarrie & Robinson 310) gives Dasein the possibility of being called back from its lostness in the they-self to “one’s *own Self*” (317). As I discuss in Chapter 2, I find Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room* to be a fictional representation of Heideggerian anxiety about death and the process of coming into authentic recognition of one’s self as valuable and one’s life as having been worth living.

Being, for Heidegger, is not an eternal, stable structure, or God, but an opening, eternally recurring, as Nietzsche describes. Being is manifested in its ‘becoming’, an event or happening within lived experience:

Heidegger, very early on, was animated and guided by an exceptionally vivid sense of how things are manifest to us in an “eventful” way, how they address us and even “speak” to us, as it were . . . to renew the question of Being was to recover the experience of Being as manifestive, as showing itself from itself, as unconcealing, as shining-forth, as opening and offering itself, as addressing and claiming us. This is the “meaning” of Being that Heidegger sought (Capobianco 9).

In describing *Ereignis*, the event of being, Heidegger says: “The clearing belonging to the essence of Being suddenly clears itself and lights up. This sudden self-lighting is the lightening-flash. Its brings itself into its own brightness . . . the truth of Being flashes” (Lovitt 44). The dying character in *The Spare Room* has the meaning of her existence unconcealed via her terminal diagnosis and through her relationships with others in flashes of illumination. For the artist in *The Vivisector*, this happens through the creation of his art, and the meaning revealed in flashes of illumination is what he continues to seek until his last breath. In my novel *The Art of Dying*, an opening occurs through an ongoing assessment of memory, everyday lived experiences, and new and old connections with others. Meaning ‘shines-forth’, in Heideggerian terms, as the moment of death culminates in a Nietzschean affirmation that *this* life that he has lived is a worthy thing. My engagement with death in the novel investigates the way in which the ability to face life and death authentically is tied in with the desire to become “the authority for your own life” (Osbon 162), as

mythologist Joseph Campbell suggests, and in doing so, find meaning outside the structures of religious interpretation. This essentially became the character's existential journey as death approaches. While analytic philosophy of death also contains an affirmation of the value of human living and confirmation that living authentically in the face of death is important, it is existentialist philosophy that provides more specific discussion of what authenticity entails for individuals who recognise their existence as a subjective, personal experience. Central to this is the Heideggerian event of being, in which there is an opening to the truth of being.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Helen Garner: the terror of death and the community of the living in *The Spare Room* (2008)**

Helen Garner spoke about her novel *The Spare Room* (2008) at an author event in 2010, calling it her “conversation with the world about the terror of death”. After experiencing the death of my father in 2009, this terror of death, both for the dying and their loved ones, was a theme I was drawn too. In Heideggerian terms, the novel describes a confrontation with human mortality, in which dealing with terminal cancer causes a breakdown in the ‘everyday’ way of being-towards-death. Garner acknowledged the “silent power struggle” between the dying person and her carer, and the “loneliness of bearing the truth” (Garner 2010) when the dying person won’t speak about her death, which German philosopher Martin Heidegger variously calls “evasive concealment in the face of death . . . fleeing it or covering it up” (Macquarrie and Robinson 297). This chapter is a case study of *The Spare Room* as an important literary statement about death as it is currently approached, the reason the novel was chosen. I critique the treatment of death in *The Spare Room* in light of the literature review, including Heidegger’s ‘being-towards-death’, particularly the issue of authenticity in facing mortality, Norbert Elias’s idea that the changes to Western attitudes to dying since modernity have placed the dying and their loved ones under “exceptional pressure” (27); analytic philosopher Shelly Kagan’s claim that dying is hard for people who’ve failed to achieve their life goals, and finally, Heideggerian scholar and psychologist Lou Agosta’s work on empathy as a foundational way human beings are able to authentically be with each other as one of them dies.

In the novel, the character of Helen prepares for a three week visit from her friend Nicola, who has cancer and needs to be nursed day and night. This “conversation with the world about the terror of death” is also, according to the author, a conversation about anger, about the dying person

being “angry to be dying” and “the living person raging against the dying” (2010). Garner says that she had to work hard to resist the urge to downplay the anger as she wrote and indeed Garner portrays the character of Helen as almost unbearably ashamed of herself: “I was sick with shame, raging at myself for raging, raging at death for existing, for being so slow with her and so cruel” (2008: 194). The author was relieved when readers who had been carers thanked her for being honest about the anger but found that “others who haven’t had the experience found it repugnant”, and she describes the anger and helplessness as a “taboo subject” (2010). As palliative care consultant Stephen Jenkinson has suggested, carers of the dying are in dire need of a language with which to speak to the dying about what is happening to them (324-5).

Nicola, the dying character, desperately tries to keep her impending death at arms’ length, struggling to maintain what Heidegger calls everyday or inauthentic being-towards-death. There is a sense that what is at issue for Helen is not just that her friend Nicola could be approaching the end of life; her way of living is also the problem:

I saw that I had been working towards a glorious moment of enlightenment, when Nicola would lay down her manic defenses; when she would look around her, take a deep breath, and say, “All right. I’m going to die. I bow to it. Now I will live the rest of my life in truth” (2008: 95).

Nicola admits that her evasiveness about the truth of her illness is because she hasn’t yet managed to make her life meaningful, something Helen denies. Heidegger says that “because Dasein is *lost* in the ‘they’, it must first *find* itself. In order to find *itself* at all, it must be ‘shown’ to itself in its possible authenticity” (Macquarrie & Robinson 313). Helen’s friend Leo warns her that perhaps Nicola is coming to her because “she wants you to be the one ... to tell her she’s going to die” (Garner 2008: 9). Helen, as authentic Dasein, becomes Nicola’s voice of conscience:

‘I wanted to say this. You’re using that bloody clinic to distract yourself.’  
Like an old, tired dog she heaved up her head. ‘Don’t say it, Hel.’  
‘From what you have to do.’  
She raised one palm. ‘Don’t tell me.’  
‘You’ve got to get ready’ (140).

Of authentic Dasein, John Richardson says: “when I’m authentic I care especially about others’ essential end, which is to become authentic themselves. So I become their ‘conscience’, i.e., some kind of impetus or inducement to face the basic choice of themselves” (171). Helen’s fury seems to come out of knowing another, authentic Nicola who has become lost: “We can’t find you anymore,” Helen tells her, “Where have you gone?” (Garner 2008: 141).

We conceal death from ourselves because it makes life meaningless in the sense that it becomes pointless to work towards our goals. This is Heideggerian *angst*:

But in anxiety the threat comes “from nothing and nowhere” ... (Anxiety) is of or about a threat to our very ability to have projects ... (It) deprives *das Man* of its tranquillizing effect: the assurance that in “doing what one does” I am doing what’s really worth doing (Richardson 141-2).

This, known as the existential crisis, finally arrives for Nicola when a specialist reveals that a tumour has eaten away her C7 vertebra. A breakdown in the everyday way of being-towards-death ensues: “All day she kept dissolving into quiet weeping ... The hard, impervious brightness was gone. Everything was fluid and melting. There was no need for me to speak. She looked up at me and said it herself ... ‘Death’s at the end of this, isn’t it’” (Garner 2008: 176). This breakdown creates authenticity of being, in which physical demise is as possible as ever but the event itself loses its relevance. The timing and circumstances of death become less important than how I cope with it. Death, in its constant possibility, is a threat to the achievement of everything that I choose to undertake and yet, not only can I choose to pursue my projects anyway, the way I apply myself to a course of action, how I am in the doing of things becomes paramount. For Nicola, this is an event of being in which she experiences the truth of herself, “a potent experience of illumination” (Richardson 272).

### **“Exceptional pressure”: death in modernity**

Helen’s role in the novel as I have described it, however, takes the conversation about death beyond the subjective experience of the anxiety of the dying character and her denial that death is approaching. What Garner describes as the conversation about anger in the novel is a confrontation with the difficulty people now experience in talking about death and dying. This difficulty, according to Norbert Elias, has occurred as a result of changing attitudes to death since the advent of modernity. There has been a “shift towards informality” (27) such that the traditional way of handling death, including ritual practices, phrases and gestures, has become embarrassing. People tend to be suspicious that the traditions and rituals surrounding care for the dying and mourning for the dead consist of unconvincing or feigned emotion:

The concern to avoid socially prescribed rituals and phrases increases the demands on the individual’s power of invention and expression. This task, however, is often beyond people at the current stage of civilization. The way people live together, which is fundamental to this stage, demands and produces a relatively high degree of reserve in expressing strong, spontaneous affects

... Thus, unembarrassed discourse with or to dying people, which they especially need, becomes difficult (27-8).

It is not until Helen is put under what Elias calls “exceptional pressure” (27) that she is able to confront Nicola with the need to approach death authentically.

Garner’s novel asks quite specific contemporary questions about the fear of death and the need to find meaning in life in light of human finitude. Elias says that “people today see themselves as isolated individuals totally independent of others” (34) and Helen reflects at the start of the novel that this is the case for Nicola: “Why hadn’t someone warned me? But who? She was a free woman without husband or children. No one was in charge” (Garner 2008: 15). The problem then becomes, according to Elias, that people seek meaning for themselves alone rather than in what they mean to others. Nicola, faced with a medical system that can no longer offer her any treatment, decides to fight the prospect of death by having faith in alternative treatments. She “won’t give up” (106), she tells Helen, because she has wasted her life. Helen presents the meaning of Nicola’s life as being contained in what she means to others: “You’re so dear to us” (141), “When people are with you they feel free. Don’t you know that? You think this is waste?” (144).

The approach of Elias, a sociologist, is similar to that of Shelly Kagan, an analytic philosopher: dying is hard for people who’ve failed to achieve their life’s goal and easier for those who’ve fulfilled it. Primarily, however, Elias contends that the loneliness of the dying in the contemporary world is their feeling of insignificance for others. The process of dying is isolating and meaningless, “if – still living – they are made to feel that they are already excluded from the community of the living” (66). Helen’s care for Nicola and her willingness to speak openly about death brings Nicola to the truth of herself (the event of being in Heideggerian terms). This releases Nicola to gather her many friends around her as she dies, allowing them to care for her. In the end, Helen’s life is dull and boring when she’s not in the presence of the dying Nicola. As Elias says: “Death hides no secret. It opens no door. It is the end of a person. What survives is what he or she has given other people, what stays in their memory” (67). Garner’s novel, then, is both a suggestion that there needs to be a recovery of the ability to speak openly with the dying about their death, and a recognition that life has meaning for the dying if *they* have meaning for other people.

In detailing Nicola’s manic search for an alternative treatment that will save her life, Helen Garner reveals the way in which the dying collude with the lie that they are not dying, as gastroenterologist Seamus O’Mahony has described in *The Way We Die Now* (2016). *The Spare Room* also explores

what palliative care consultant Stephen Jenkinson calls “Thou Shalt Not Give Up”, a typical approach for the dying individual who must agree to receive every possible treatment on offer in order to avoid death, while also taking on the task to “die not dying” (85), complete the living of the dying without acknowledging that it is happening. Garner reveals Nicola at ‘ground zero’, where she will discover if her life “was a worthy thing” (Jenkinson 99); her terror is that it hasn’t been and she must, therefore, find a way to get “More Time” in order to make it so. Her choices, in Shelley Kagan’s terms, have not been careful enough: “I’ve wasted my life . . . I made nothing of myself. I was sloppy. I never stuck at anything. I failed and just kept moving” (Garner 2008: 107). Helen’s gift to Nicola is the revelation of the immense value her life has had for others.

### **“Being-with”: empathic care of the dying**

Recent studies by psychologist Lou Agosta into interpretations of empathy in philosophy suggest that empathy has been a neglected and under-theorised area of research. According to Agosta, while Heidegger focused on the inauthentic relationships between people and the process of coming into personal authenticity via a confrontation with death, Heideggerian “being-with-one-another” never acknowledges the possibility of authenticity in relationship:

The hermeneutic of empathy is supposed to provide the presupposition for understanding the other, but, according to Heidegger, empathy itself is not “primordial”. “Being-with-one-another” falls into busy distractions of the everyday “rat race,” role playing, or keeping up with the Joneses. This is what human beings do. It is a part of the way humans were designed. It is normal. It is not “bad” or “pathological”. It is one of the possibilities that human beings already possess. But it is a refuge and a substitute. A substitute for what? For authentic human interrelations! (21).

Nonetheless, what is useful in Heidegger’s account of being-with is the way in which one Dasein relates to another. His word for this is usually translated as solicitude, and it means a certain kind of care such as “prenatal care,” “taking care of the children,” or social welfare: “Even “concern” with food and clothing, and the nursing of the sick body, are forms of solicitude” (Macquarrie & Robinson 157). In *The Spare Room*, Helen’s solicitude begins with the first sentence as she prepares Nicola’s room before her arrival. Heidegger describes a number of modes of solicitude including deficient and indifferent modes and these all make an appearance in the novel. Helen expresses the positive modes. At first, she ‘leaps in’ for Nicola in Heideggerian terms, being *for* her, and taking away her cares: “I thought, I will kill anyone who hurts you. I will tear them limb from limb. I will make them wish they had never been born” (Garner 2008: 28). Then she begins to ‘leap ahead’ of her, which Heidegger says is:

. . . not in order to take away (her) “care” but rather to give it back to (her) authentically as such for the first time. This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care – that is, to the existence of the Other, not to a “*what*” with which he is concerned; it helps the Other to become transparent to (herself) *in* (her) care and to become *free for* it (Macquarrie and Robinson 159).

Helen’s role in giving Nicola a conscience call, then, is this kind of leaping ahead in which Helen tries to draw Nicola towards authenticity. Deficient modes of solicitude occur when people are inconsiderate or “in the indifference of passing one another by” (161), which is what Helen notices at the alternative treatment clinic. When they arrive the first day, the professor they were booked in to see has taken off to China without explanation, they are kept waiting for three hours, the treatments are explained parochially, the doctor’s office is a disorganised mess, and the equipment is rusty. A contrast is drawn between the positive solicitude of Helen and the deficiency of the clinic staff, a distinction Nicola fails to see: “These people are different. I believe in them. Their theories are solidly based. And they really, really care about me” (Garner 2008: 105).

Helen is an example of authentic being-with-one-another, neglected by Heidegger but hinted at in his special hermeneutic of empathy and in the kind of solicitude that leaps ahead, freeing the other to be authentically itself. Agosta, however, takes this kind of being-with in an interesting direction. He discusses empathy as receptivity: “empathy does *not* try to fix the other . . . From an ontological perspective, empathy ‘lets it be’ . . . In a sense, entering into the empathic reciprocity ‘in the right way’ consists in realising that one is in an on-going inquiry with the other about what it means to be a human being” (44-5). What is concealed in Helen’s account of Nicola’s visit is that the story is not just about Nicola’s road to authenticity and Helen’s anger and shame; there is something quite specific happening for Helen below the overt expressions of the way in which Nicola affects her. For Heidegger, authentic being-towards-death is “individualisation through the encounter with death” (58). Agosta believes that authentic being-with is, the process of “humanisation through empathy” (58). Ontologically, the other creates the possibility of empathic shared humanness; they are “fellow travellers on the road of life” (61). Agosta concludes that “the empathic individual gets her or his own humanness (being human) from the one with whom the empathy is occurring” (xii).

Thus, in Nicola’s fleeing from death, Helen sees that she herself has lost something: “I loved her for the way she made me laugh. She was the least self-important person I knew, the kindest, the least bitchy. I couldn’t imagine the world without her” (Garner 2008: 65). In being-with each other, Helen and Nicola together make an inquiry into what it means to be human, what it is to have



being. In the end, Helen is more alive, more human, when she is with her dying friend. Thus, according to Agosta, “empathy is ontological, and its withdrawal or absence is an ontological crisis (‘who am I?’) that renders individuals (and communities) vulnerable to breakdowns that are dreaded as much (and sometimes more) than death itself” (60). We dread the death of the other not just because it has the ability to shock us out of the they-self into a realisation that our own death is also possible in each moment, as Heidegger says, but also because our own humanity is diminished by not having them with us. We are bereft, not just in missing them but in losing something of ourselves: who we are when we’re with them. Concealed beneath Helen’s story of anger and shame is one in which the two friends have together chosen a “kind of life, a possible way to be” (Wheeler 2014) showing that, beyond Heideggerian being-with, empathy is a foundational way human beings are authentically with each other.

In *The Way We Die Now* (2016), Seamus O’Mahony agrees with Stephen Jenkinson that dying is hard and probably impossible to do well; the contemporary idea of the “good death” might not be something the dying can accomplish without support and changes to the way dying is approached, spoken about and lived through and with: “We expect too much of the dying. They are too tired, too spent, to be ‘spiritual’, to do ‘death with dignity’ . . . Their courage waxes and wanes” (O’Mahony 261). Dying is a momentous life event in which, sometimes before the end, we are invited to come into our own, very much as Heidegger described *Ereignis*. For me, what Helen Garner has achieved in *The Spare Room* is to show the way the dying may not always confer meaning on their own lives but rather have it revealed to them by others:

While many late-moderns continue to believe (with Nietzsche) that all meaning comes from us . . . Heidegger is committed to the more phenomenologically accurate view that, at least with respect to that which most matters to us – the paradigm case being *love* – what we most care about is in fact not entirely up to us, not simply within our power to control . . . For, only meanings that are at least partly independent of us and so not entirely within our control – not simply up to us to bestow and rescind at will – can provide us with the kind of touchstones around which we can build meaningful lives and loves (Thomson 22).

*The Spare Room* discloses death, in its singularity, as an existential condition that requires a response from human beings. In facing death, there is the possibility of creating permanent changes in the lives of the dying and their loved ones.

## CHAPTER 3

### Patrick White: active nihilism and the event of being in *The Vivisector* (1970)

Ingmar Björkstén describes Patrick White's basic theme as "mankind's search for a meaning for, and a value in, existence" (116), the existential problem. Like many other White novels, she says that *The Vivisector* (1970) explores "the complete cycle of human life" (103), and, with the main character dying at the novel's close, I wanted to delve into White's approach to death, and life's meaning in light of human mortality. It follows artist Hurtle Duffield from birth to death via a "path of suffering" (116) through which Hurtle, like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, can only be redeemed by what is created: "Creation – that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's growing light. But that the creator may be, suffering is needed and much change. Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators" (Kaufmann 1954: 199). Thus, Hurtle's art is only possible though the impermanence and suffering inherent in his experiences of life. Further to my overview of existentialist theory in Chapter 1, this chapter presents a case study of *The Vivisector* and reviews Nietzschean readings of Patrick White and the recognition by critics such as Ann McCulloch (1980, 1983) and Michael Giffen (1999) that White shared Nietzsche's concern about the nihilistic tendency inculcated by modernity. For Nietzsche, "art is the distinctive countermovement to nihilism" (Krell 73) and Hurtle is a Nietzschean active nihilist whose task is a clearing, or act of negation, in which existing values are questioned, cleared away or displaced, sometimes violently. This clearing for Hurtle is manifestive, in Heideggerian terms; he receives sudden flashes of illumination throughout his life and is also, therefore, a fictional rendering of authentic being-towards-death.

Michael Giffen (1999) says that White clearly works through the concerns of Nietzsche in his fiction, especially the "vacuum left in the Modern world due to the decline of religious ideals" (10). Ann McCulloch also reads White through a Nietzschean lens. She says that, for White, "there

is ‘another world’ but, whereas Plato believes the *real* world is transcendent to the lesser reality of the world of sights and sounds, White believes it is immanently present within the phenomenal world” (1983: 2). According to McCulloch, Hurtle Duffield, the artist, “is born out of the experiences of all elected character in earlier novels” (64), who are “part of White’s experiment towards finding that human being who can reveal the inner truth of this world in words . . . and his search for what is most authentic for the human being” (6), the existentialist project. As a Nietzschean creator of new values, the active nihilist takes on the self-overcoming required of the overman. Hurtle is forced to recognise Heraclitean impermanence when he is given up by his birth parents for adoption by the Courtneys: “From what he had experienced already, he couldn’t believe anything lasted” (White 1970: 91). He resists the totalising notion of his adoptive mother Mrs Courtney that he would now live with them “For always” (91).

### **Active nihilism: “a violent force of destruction”**

According to William Walsh, “the metaphor at the heart of the novel is art as cruelty, art as the torturer of accepted realities . . . Art as the knife and the artist as the tormented and disciplined surgeon” (128). He acknowledges that other commentators take this vision to be cruel, but confesses that he finds it “implacably accurate and just” (110). Hurtle, the artist as vivisector, cannot confront his world passively but must perform the task of the active nihilist, a task Mrs Courtney recognises during Hurtle’s childhood: “‘You, Hurtle – you were born with a knife in your hand. No,’ she corrected herself, ‘in your eye’” (146). Nietzsche’s Zarathustra declares that the overman creates a difficult, new vision, incomprehensible in its originality: “you too will be frightened, my friends, by my wild wisdom; and perhaps you will flee from it” (Kaufmann 1954: 197). The new values of the artist-philosopher cannot be complacently accepting of the old order of belief, including God and the Christian afterlife, but come sweeping through like “a violent force of destruction” (Kaufmann 1967: 19). The process of vivisection, whereby the artist deconstructs the lives of those around him in order to create, is also deemed to be a cruelty in the novel itself. When Hurtle’s teacher, Mr Shrewcroft, commits suicide, Maman connects Hurtle’s bloody painting of the event with her cause against animal vivisection in science, suggesting that any investigation of the deeply hard parts of human life is as brutal as a dissection of a sentient being while it is alive. Indeed, his prostitute-lover, Nance, accuses him of “makun use of yer in the name of the Holy Mother of Truth” (White 247) but Hurtle himself has always recognised what he’s doing: “he realized he was the prostitute: he was seducing Nance Lightfoot into giving him, not money, not her actual body so much as its formal vessel, from which to pour his visions of

life” (203). In Nietzsche’s view, however, there is no pessimistic art. Art is not about a Platonic transcendent world which is more ‘true’ than this one: “(Artists) have not lost the scent of life, they have loved the things of “this world” – they have loved their senses . . . art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence*” (Kaufmann 1967: 434).

Hurtle, as artist, takes a receptive stance towards the unfolding of truth, aware of himself as being-towards-death, but only able to know death as a mystery that reveals something about life. He confronts this mystery when he enlists: “At the height of the bombardment he felt he only believed in life. At its most flickery, with the smell of death around it, life alone was knowable” (White 172); and, as he takes up a squalid life after the armistice and becomes Duffield again, the links to his adoptive family are broken at the news of Mr Coutney’s death. Each time, after experiencing a death, Hurtle must wait until a rebirth occurs, as Nietzsche says: “One must pay dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive” (Kaufmann 1954: 660). After Nance’s death, illumination occurs in conversation with the married, homosexual grocer Cecil Cutbush, after which Hurtle paints “Lantana Lovers under Moonfire” (White 334). When his Greek mistress, Hero Pavloussi, dies, Hurtle’s rebirth comes in discussion with the printer Mothersole on the ferry: “He remembered another occasion when he had risen from the dead, by seminal dew and the threats of moonlight, in conversation, repulsive, painful, but necessary, with the grocer Cutbush: and now was born again by grace of Mothersole’s warm middle-class womb” (405). The arrival of his “spiritual child” Kathy Volkov, a young musician, and the reappearance of his sister Rhoda, who moves into his house, also allow him to “plumb the depths” (444) and make it possible for him “to convey what I have to” (450). Rebirth, however, is always a trauma: “there were the days when he himself was operated on, half-drunk sometimes, shitting himself with agony, when out of the tortures of knife and mind, he was suddenly carried, without choice, on the wings of his exhaustion, to the point of intellectual and – dare he begin to say it? – spiritual self-justification” (470).

In old age, Hurtle suffers a stroke in the middle of the street. He loses much of his speech and the function in an arm, and his physical ability to paint is compromised. It is a kind of death in life that Hurtle must now struggle with: “This was his great fear: that he would find himself parcelled again on the pavement before he had dared light the fireworks still inside him” (562). Life is thus a series of deaths for the artist, against which he must choose to keep starting again, failures against which he strives to endure. The novel reaches to the heart of creative endeavour, the cycle of life and death through which the artist works. The prospect of death is always terrifying; it means

“work unfinished” (270). The appearance of the “psychopomp” (597) at his Retrospective, whose function is to guide souls to the afterlife, brings about another psychospiritual rebirth and serves as a promise to the artist that the work gestating inside him will find its way into life. Both his past work and his current artist-self have been revived and can now re-enter the womb. This is no guarantee, however. Birth is arduous:

Himself a blank at times, the live hand clamped by his knees, he would sit teetering on the edge of the bed, dreading the desert he had to cross. Experience never lessened the prospect of tortures, the possibility of failures, even death if the spirit refused to accompany him. Just as you can twist the tail of human love once too often, perhaps the creative spirit couldn't be flogged into climbing that additional inch. In which case: o God, have mercy on us. (He would look round afraid somebody might be tapping his thoughts.) (601).

### **The event of being: sources of strength**

Contemporary Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo uses Martin Heidegger's concept of being to describe being as “an event or occurrence” such that “objects of our experience are given only within a horizon”, or light, in which being is an opening, eternally recurring, as Nietzsche describes, rather than an object or an “eternal and objective order” (2002: 21). This is what the young painter Don Lethbridge who assists Hurtle after the stroke, tries to say when asked about the work: “there's a point you can't sort of talk beyond. You can only do. Or *be*, sort of” (White 595). Following Heidegger, Vattimo says that the artwork, “As an event, opens and founds a world” (2008: 157), and is the “setting-into-work of truth” (Hofstadter 38) that changes one's existence:

Nonetheless, since dwelling in the world founded by the work signifies rearranging one's own existence and “vision of the world” in the light of the disclosure of being that has happened in the work, this means also that the work should be conceived as an announcement of truth (Vattimo 2008: 159).

This truth, for Hurtle, is the “fireworks still inside him” (White 562), his God paintings, rumours of which have reached the public gathered at his Retrospective. He hears people discussing the God paintings:

‘God is dead, anyway. Anyway – thank God – in Australia.’

‘Only hypothetically, Marcus’ (589).

White pokes fun at the banal complacency of the Australian passive nihilist who must use ideological masks and disguises to conceal the absence of given, objective structures in a denial of life. White knows that this is not how the artist can live; more is at stake and courage is

demanded: “Nietzsche took it to be an *ethical* necessity, for himself and anyone he was disposed to respect, not to esteem these illusions . . . he means that we possess art so that we can possess the truth and not perish of it” (Williams xix).

Hurtle’s objective is to “paint a picture which would refute all controversies, even convert his sister’s scepticism . . . trying to find some formal order behind a moment of chaos and unreason. Otherwise it would have been too horrible and terrifying” (White 516-17). Nietzsche says:

God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures should be limited by what is thinkable. Could you *think* a god? But this is what the will to truth should mean to you: that everything be changed into what is thinkable for man, visible for man, feelable by man. You should think through your own senses to their consequences (Kaufmann 1954: 198).

Hurtle attempts to think, see, and feel through to that point of formal order by attempting to paint a colour: “All his life he had been reaching towards this vertiginous blue without truly visualizing, till lying on the pavement he was dazzled not so much by a colour as a longstanding secret relationship” (White 616). There is a touch, here, of Heidegger’s view that modernity is an age of “regretting the absence of gods” (Richardson 339); for Heidegger, when gods are absent human beings cannot recognise how things and people have meaning and purpose beyond the way in which they are “enframed,” set into place and controlled, as resources to be put to use. In abandoning his Retrospective in order to return to work, Hurtle refuses to be used by the recipients of art in this way: “were they trying to force the creative spirit into its coffin?” (White 598). In order to find meaning or a “religious dimension of experience lying quite apart from belief” (Richardson 340), Heidegger insisted that it must come by recognising an intentional world to which our own meaning and ends must defer. White himself said:

Religion. Yes, that’s behind all my books . . . everyone has a religious faith of a kind . . . I have the same idea with all my books: an attempt to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial. The realistic novel is remote from art. A novel should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience; it shouldn’t set out what you know already. I just muddle away at it. One gets flashes here and there, which help (1989: 19-21).

The novel ends with the literal death of the artist; there is suffering and the individual is destroyed, yet life’s regenerative power is a cause for celebration. T.G.A. Nelson says:

. . . the ending of *The Vivisector* is shot through with hope . . . it also, especially at the end, hints powerfully at other sources of strength for some individuals – chiefly artists and those who make contact with them – who are struggling with the tragedy of life . . . Duffield cannot be regarded as a

failure. His exuberance, his independence, his irreverence last until the end; his paintings live after him” (97-8).

Most particularly, as Nelson also point out, “The likely incomprehensibility of the (final) painting to ordinary human beings does not matter” (97). Hurtle experiences his last painting as a triumph in its becoming: “he was being painted with, and through, and on” (White 1970: 614). It is the “process and experience” (Nelson 97) that comes to matter, the life that is lived rather than the end, which nonetheless, must happen. The final event, a moment of Heideggerian *Ereignis*, the coming into view of the truth of being, reveals, as Heideggerian scholar Iain Thomson says, that “the way that entities reveal their being is never entirely within human control or simply a product of our own representational capacities” (76). Inexplicably, Hurtle’s “crab’s claw,” the stroke-affected hand he tries to paint with, surprises him with “daringly loose strokes of paint, which might have looked haphazard if they hadn’t been compelled, (and) he experienced a curious sense of grace” (White 614). Says Richard Capobianco in *Heidegger’s Way of Being* (2014):

Yet the way remains open for us to take up and take to heart this marvellous matter of *the truth of Being* – Heidegger’s distinctive way of calling us back to the experience of Being as manifestation; to the experience of things as they emerge and meet us and, as we say in English, “fill our senses;” to the experience of ourselves “vibrating back” from things, as Walt Whitman put it. The nearness and vividness of what is, and the astonishment and joy and thanksgiving that this calls forth in us. The dynamism of all things, both made and found, both of the exuberant city and of the serene wooded path, *all beings and things* as they emerge and linger in their appearance – but also wane, falter, and pass away (26).

Through the experience of being as manifestive, Heidegger believed it becomes possible to be aware that our lives are more richly meaningful than we can accurately represent.

Heidegger is famous for declaring that “Only another god can save us” (1966: 57). He was not suggesting the possibility of the return of the ontotheological creator God but of “postmodern gods” (Thomson 216), a world charged with higher meaning, “a religious aspect in all our experience and practice” (Richardson 351). It is in this sense, that one may interpret Hurtle’s God paintings, rather than through the perception that there is a “struggle to express a transcendent immanence” (McCulloch 1983: 97). Björkkstén says:

White peoples his world with what is well known, but shows at the same time how little known it is. By means of his knowledge he brushes against our sense of security. Our confidence in the presence of what we have persuaded ourselves we have control over by means of our knowledge is replaced by an increasing sense of insecurity. From this the compulsion to reconsider is born. The whole of the system that we have built up by experience, expectations, and prejudices is exploded (122).

The explosion of our expectations, the sense of insecurity, is positive from the point of view of Heideggerian postmodernity. As Hurtle approaches death, with his psychopomp beckoning from the river bank, Rhoda points out that his paintings too are gods, “which could fail you” (White 518). Hurtle admits to himself that he is not in control of the meaning behind them: “Though they were horrible and frightening, the secret drawings and occasional paintings of this period were what sustained his spirit; even when he couldn’t always grasp the significance, he could bask in his own artistry” (519). In fact, the paintings *are* manifestive; they push back against him: “All along that side of the deserted gallery the pictures had revived: the Duffields. There was scarcely time to glance at them: never look enough at your own paintings” (597). This does not mean the artist has failed to capture something meaningful about life, or life in the face of death. Hurtle sees how his art has been an attempt to convey the eventful nature of life. There is change and flow and through this his life has been something. Hurtle has always been aware that there are moments in which his paintings die and moments in which they revive, both as he paints them and later when he looks at them again. The process has been a source of strength; the attempt to light his own fireworks has given life its value: “there were occasions when, confronted with the board, his vision would leap out at him and he was liberated afresh” (616).

What kind of representation of death, the living of the dying, the worthiness of a mortal life, has Patrick White attempted in *The Vivisector*? Throughout life, Hurtle had felt a “terrible void” inside him and the purpose of his art was to “arrive at the truth” (517). Towards the end, he paints out the death “which had stroked him” (565), and then attempts “The Whole of Life” (607). He knows he is not like everyone else, the Heideggerian “they”: “happy human beings who hadn’t preserved themselves for a final statement of faith they probably wouldn’t be capable of making” (602). His final painting is to be the crossing of a desert, a reach for a “hinterland of infinite prospects” (614). Much like White described his own creative process, Hurtle muddles away at it, getting flashes here and there. He considers his life’s work, on display at the Retrospective, to be nothing less than entire walls “covered with affirmations” (610). Hurtle the active nihilist has attempted to vigorously cut through everything that didn’t make sense to him and to make a Nietzschean affirmation of life through his work. *The Vivisector* can be thought of as a portrait of the Heideggerian event of being, not life backed by an enduring ‘Being’ but being as an event that occurs again and again and is “worked out in me” (572), to which Hurtle has had to “surrender his will” (566) as he tries to paint his final work before death arrives.



## CHAPTER 4

### Writing *The Art of Dying*

It's on the strength of observation and reflection that one finds a way.

So we must dig and delve unceasingly.

(Claude Monet, 1840-1926).

In their introduction to *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (2013), Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper say that “creative writing research highlights the importance of writing as a widely undertaken human practice and it contributes to the sustainability of that practice by improving our knowledge about how it occurs” (9). The difference, according to Paul Dawson, between a creative artefact written for a PhD and “the literary work it would otherwise be if it were not written in the academy” is the “reflexive nature of the investigation” (10). Reflexive agency means that the effort to observe and reflect on the writing process comes to affect the writing process itself and this must have consequences for the production of the artefact. It is the process, therefore, of generating new insights into *how* the artefact is produced that is the real purpose of creative writing research in the academy, despite the notorious difficulty writers have in articulating what they've done and how they've done it, and despite the need for these insights to be articulated within a framework of contemporary theory and practice as opposed to a reflection on the writing “journey.”

In “Are writers really there when they're writing about their writing? and can we theorise about what they say and do?” (2009), Mike Harris describes the development of creative writing as an academic discipline, saying that theorising the process of writing was fraught at the height of poststructuralism thanks to Roland Barthes' “Death of the Author” (1977). Nonetheless, “writers persistently claimed that they wrote their own works, stubbornly asserted that these works were based, at least in part, on personal experience of a real, observable world, and continued to talk

about things like craft and inspiration as if they really existed” (Harris 32). Harris analyses what poets say about their process of writing in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words* (2003). One group declares a lack of agency, that they were inspired and didn't know what they were doing; another, that there is planning, intention and reliance on craft; and a third group admit to “both conscious and unconscious processes” (Harris 39). Harris makes two conclusions. Firstly, there are two stages of composition, one in which there is a “flow of inspiration”, usually in the beginning, and a second in which the work is crafted and “the cutting, the revision (and) the spell checking” (41) occur. Secondly, in regards to Barthes’ ‘birth of the reader’, Harris rightly points out that a writer becomes the reader in the revision process and, like any reader of the work, will “find meanings, associations and combinations that the writer did not intend, or know about” (43), even though the writer and reader are, in this case, one and the same.

The reflexive agency required by a doctoral thesis in creative writing can be problematic if there is resistance to the possibility of articulating anything at all about the creative process, a notion that might be masking the fear that consciousness about process will somehow stymie the muse. Following on from that, resistance arises to the prospect that consciousness about process will change the artefact in undesirable ways, as if the inspired work is better than the one that has been carefully crafted. In reality, even without formal reflexivity, a creative artefact is always likely to be a product of both inspiration and craft, planned and unplanned writing events, intentional and unintentional activities. Author Stephen King is renowned for criticising the notion that the creative artefact comes “out of the ether” (52), yet he also declares that “stories are found things, like fossils in the ground . . . relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible” (160). King’s book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* repeatedly mentions both technique and intuition, craft and instinct.

With this in mind, the following discussion of the process of writing *The Art of Dying* will be framed by the four exploratory avenues that Graeme Harper suggests in “The Generations of Creative Writing Research” (2013) as a way of posing questions about method: creative writing habitats, the creative domain, activities, and the artefacts of creative writing.

## Habitat

Harper asks, “As creative writing is, among other things, a physical event, investigating physical elements associated with it cannot but be in tune with the general sense of creative writing. But to what end?” (139). He suggests that we are curious about famous authors and their writing spaces, but not about our own writing habitat and the effect it has on our writing process: “What is the impact of the stack of books beside you while you write, what is the relationship between the space you’re writing in and the spaces just beyond it, what difference does it make if you are writing on your laptop or in a notebook, in a room or on a bus?” (142). In an Adelaide Writers’ Week conversation in 2016 about the poet Ted Hughes, Jonathan Bate and Max Porter both reported the appearance of crows in their gardens while researching and writing about Hughes’ *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970). Porter called this phenomenon “inhabitation”, as if the writer comes to inhabit their subject matter to such an extent that it may physically manifest in a way that the writer finds meaningful. Graeme Harper asks about the impact on the writer of the space they inhabit. Perhaps inhabitation might include not only the physical space, but also mental and emotional spaces and the flow of influence between these in the writer’s life. How words manifest on the page is impacted by the writer’s inhabitation of a world. In Heideggerian terms, this equates to the question of the writer’s being-in-the-world. As Harper asks, “what is the impact of the stack of books beside you while you write?” so one might ask, “what involvement do the books have in the writer’s everyday patterns of activity?”. Michael Wheeler says:

Crucially, for Heidegger, an involvement is not a stand-alone structure, but rather a link in a network of intelligibility that he calls a *totality of involvements* . . . And this radical holism spreads, because once one begins to trace a path through a network of involvements, one will inevitably traverse vast regions of involvement-space . . . The result is a large-scale holistic network of interconnected relational significance. Such networks constitute worlds, in *one of Heidegger's key senses of the term* (2011).

To begin with, I worked at a desk in a small office surrounded by four bookshelves overstuffed with books on literature, philosophy, theology, and psychology, including many that had been in my father’s collection. Propped against the books were black and white photos of Dad’s family going back to the mid-nineteenth century, and bits and pieces I’d collected from his property before I’d sold it: the two sheep earmarkers that had been used on the property for decades to make the registered earmark; Grandpa’s 2nd AIF Rising Sun badge that I’d found on the floor of the stone cottage the family had lived in during the 1950s along with school books and magazines from the

40s and 50s that had belonged to Dad and his two brothers; and a collection of family rosary beads, including the ones that I describe in the novel. As I wrote, it didn't matter to me whether the desk was clean or cluttered; often it was piled high on either side of my laptop with the notes I was consulting. The floor, too, was usually a sea of books and ephemera including family trees that I used to create my own fictional ones, and maps of the properties Dad had worked on in the Cunnamulla area of Queensland during the 1950s and 60s. I dug out Dad's payslips from UNGRA, the United Graziers' Shearing Company, and carefully researched the two properties he'd worked on as the expert/woolclasser for a few weeks during the 1956 Shearers' Strike. I painstakingly typed out the entries Dad had made in his tiny 1950 diary using a magnifying glass, and used this record of activities to create my chapter for that year. Amongst all this activity, my dogs would squeeze in and find a space to nap. A cat or two would be curled up on the little red velvet lounge that I'd placed against the one spare wall of the room; sometimes I'd tolerate one on my knee. While the room felt like a warm and cosy cave, a womb even, from which I would birth this creative child I so desired, there were times when I thought I'd die in there covered in cobwebs, still working on the same story. In other words, there were times of trust and times of overwhelming impatience. It was a solitary affair and I spoke to no one about my work on a daily basis. Now that my writing habitat has changed, it seems to me that the first draft of the novel is very much a product of the physical, mental and emotional space I inhabited in those years.

The process of writing was a long one; the first draft came in at 130,000 words, more than twice the required length for a PhD novel. It mirrors my experience of grief when my father died in 2009. It was scattered and messy, it wailed and wallowed, it felt like the end was never going to come. Vast sections of the novel were lacklustre. I read Kate Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River* (2008) and was reassured: "I had about a hundred pages of writing. Some bits were lively, but lots of it was dry and dead. Never mind. I could fix it up later" (151). I gave no thought to the writing process other than to keep going and, indeed, endurance became one of the words I continue to use to describe a way of moving through grief. My daily process was to spend half an hour in a meditative state at the start of the working day in a conscious evocation of openness, to what I couldn't say. My only concern was to write through to the 'end'. Once I'd managed to pour my vision out to its completion, the novel was revealed to be a Nietzschean affirmation that life had been worth living, that, despite the trauma and sadness throughout, as a whole, the living had been good.

Jeri Kroll says that “The Creative Writing Laboratory is any literal space where a writer works, including built environments such as offices, classrooms (home of the workshop), studios, libraries, museums, theatres and any area in the natural environment. The Laboratory also includes the writer’s imagination” (109). There was, for me, a constant and complex interplay between the collection of books sitting on the shelves around me, the internet searches I made, and the words that ended up on the page, erupting, as it were, from my mind. This interplay included research for factual references in the novel (images of cars, instructions for saying the rosary, the parade of the 16th Brigade of the 2nd AIF through the streets of Sydney on 4 January 1940 before embarkation on the 9th), broad ranging research on the topic of death for the exegesis (early texts included, for example, works by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, and C.S. Lewis, and Shelly Kagan’s Yale course on death), and the fiction I was reading or rereading. When poststructuralist Julia Kristeva introduced the term ‘intertextuality’, she referred to a horizontal axis between author and reader and a vertical axis between texts, such that the many that came before “impose a universe” on the one being written (Chandler 2014). This vertical description suggests the image of some kind of textual ‘Heaven’ sitting above the writer to be drawn on, intentionally or not. Kroll, however, suggest that intertextuality occurs “rhizomatically” for authors, an analogy from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987):

A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed. Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another (9).

According to Kroll, the rhizome provides a “flexible template for how non-traditional research operates” (117). It seems particularly suitable for the interdisciplinarity that can occur and is encouraged in practice-led research. It is perhaps relevant to view the intertextual play during my years of writing in a ‘cave habitat’ to have been caused through the rhizomatic growth around and underneath my desk, anchoring me to the chair, grounding me in stories of death, my family history, and my own life, and pulling me down to earth after my experience of grief. It is, at least, another way of visualising the spread of influence in Heidegger’s radically holistic network of involvements. The inhabitation of the writer in a world thus provides for the possibility of

intertextual relational significance that the writer does not intend or know about, as Mike Harris suggests.

I finished the novel and exegesis in the Main Reading Room of the National Library of Australia, a vast sea of desks with a high ceiling and many windows. Clearly, this is quite a different writing experience. In *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (1990), Stephen Nachmanovitch says:

There is a phenomenon called entrainment, which is the synchronisation of two or more rhythmic systems into a single pulse. If a group of men is hammering on a building site, after a few minutes they fall into the same rhythm without any explicit communication . . . We can play together without even playing together. For writers, art colonies or libraries are often good place to work, because even though the people around us are total strangers and are all doing their own private work, the silent rhythm of working together strengthens everyone's work energy. We feel a self-reinforcing entrainment of our concentration and commitment to *be* with our work (99-100).

This has benefitted me in the editing phase in which it was necessary to be less in my own creative cave and more open to other influences and critiques, to receive and make use of criticism. The very physical act of looking around serves to subconsciously reinforce that other people and their views exist, and that, like the openness of the Main Reading Room, my mind needs to be open and the novel needs to be out in the world connecting with its readers. According to Virginia Woolf, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (6), and though the essay is hardly about habitat, beyond its critique of the history of women's writing and its feminist call that women take up writing “for your good and for the good of the world at large” (108), it suggests a need to take up space in the world as a writer, or what could be called the acknowledgement of inhabitation. Not only do I now physically pursue the act of writing in a public space, I present myself as a writer and researcher within my writing habitat, an evolution in my self-identification. It is an acceptance of writing as my creative domain, a subject to which I now turn.

### **Creative Domain**

Creative writing sits within the sphere of the human activities of creating, and Graeme Harper asks that creative writers engage with ideas about creativity as such – “Are there modes of engagement with what is around us that could be defined as specific creative modes?” (143) – and further, how do “creative writers engage with the world, develop their works to reflect something they think, feel, imagine, or have experienced” (144)? Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

regards creativity as a source of meaning for humans; it is fascinating because “when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life” (2). He is well-known for defining creative flow, in which consciousness is intensely focused, self-consciousness disappears, time is forgotten, and the activity is autotelic, an end in itself. He believes that success in a creative field requires talent, training and luck but also “access to a field” (54):

Someone who is not known and appreciated by the relevant people has a very difficult time accomplishing something that will be seen as creative. Such a person may not have a chance to learn the latest information, may not be given the opportunity to work, and if he or she does manage to accomplish something novel, that novelty is likely to be ignored or ridiculed” (54).

Creative writing research is produced, therefore, from within a creative domain, that of whichever university department encompasses the creative writing discipline. This domain provides another way in which a writer inhabits their identity as a creative person. Csikszentmihalyi makes the case that habitat and creative domain are connected:

The second reason why a place may help creativity is that novel stimulation is not evenly distributed. Certain environments have a greater density of interaction and provide more excitement and a greater effervescence of ideas; therefore, they promote the person who is already inclined to break away from conventions to experiment with novelty more readily than if he or she had stayed in a more conservative, repressive setting (129).

In seeking to be part of the university creative domain, I was seeking a community, living, as I was then, in an academically and somewhat creatively isolated rural town. There were a number of positive aspects, for me, in being part of this domain, initially via access to The University of Adelaide Library, the induction program, and attendance at Departmental seminars. As far as the writing process is concerned, the main benefit during the writing of the first draft turned out to be the most basic, the need to cut the novel down to fit the word count, which had a major impact on the writing process and the finished artefact in terms of structure, points of view, character development, dialogue writing, and style. It will, no doubt, change the planning process for the next novel I write; I’m unlikely to let another first draft wander so aimlessly.

I had expected feedback to play more of a role in the process of writing the novel than it did. I had three family members read the third (radically shortened) draft and their response was, predictably, positive. Kate Grenville remarks that, “It’s no good asking friends and family to read your manuscript. If they say they love it, you don’t believe them. If they have criticisms, it stings. It puts friends in an awkward position if they hate it, and it’s asking a lot of anyone to give up the

amount of time it takes to read a manuscript and think about it” (210). I asked a few friends to read the third draft, ones who had continued to express interest in my progress and persistently offered to read it. The one who did read it is a woolclasser and farmer and I was hoping that she’d pick up any glaring shearing industry mistakes on my part; she didn’t mention any.

The creative writer also works within the domain of literature and its subdomains, according to Czikszentmihalyi. As far as creativity is concerned, why write instead of doing something else? I had spent years taking part in other creative practices. I am a musician and singer/songwriter, musical theatre performer and director, amateur actor, dance teacher and choreographer, as well as a business entrepreneur, an activity that requires a substantial amount of creativity of a less-recognised variety. I love literature and did very little else but read as a child, but this is not in itself indicative of a writing vocation; perhaps all people who attempt to write should be readers, but they’re not. Czikszentmihalyi says that the writers he interviewed “have an almost religious respect for their domain . . . (and) are all involved in creating imaginary worlds that are as necessary for them as the physical world they inhabit” (239). In some ways, I find writing more challenging than the other creative practices I’ve worked in, but it is also more rewarding. I care less about my creative productions in other fields and I have less ability to construct a world in them. So, while writing is more difficult, perhaps I’m better at it or, at least, I tend to bore myself less often. I seem to have more ability, in writing, to be original. Stephen Nachmanovitch says “Originality does not mean being unlike the past or the present; it means being the origin, acting out of your own centre” (179), a Heideggerian call to authenticity.

So, while the creative domain in general is said to be the domain of creative people, it might also be the domain of those who strive more strenuously to be authentic. Czikszentmihalyi suggests that “Most of the suggestions derived from the study of creative lives can be implemented by anybody regardless of age, gender, or social condition” (344). His steps for enhancing personal creativity include: the cultivation of curiosity and interest; having daily goals to achieve and erecting barriers to distractions; making time for reflection and relaxation; the shaping of work space (in Graeme Harper’s terms, creative habitat); and finding a way to express what moves you. Of this last, he says, “Creative problems generally emerge from areas of life that are personally important” (364). The question being asked by a creative work should arise from the authentic concerns of the writer if the answer provided by the work is to make connections with the reader.



Heidegger describes art, the creative domain, as “the setting-itself-into-work of truth” where it “breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual” (Hofstadter 70). In describing the writing of a poem, Nachmanovitch describes a surge of emotion often leading to tears and he says, “I believe that the tears are tears of *recognition* . . . what I sense is not merely the satisfaction of accomplishment but rather a direct realisation that the world is one and I’ve connected with the world” (111). This is openness, creation as a receptive stance which invites the world to reveal itself, the experience of being as manifestive. Finding one’s creative domain is not the hard part. Writing continues to be challenging because it means dwelling in a world that pushes back at the writer. It requires surrender to the urge to create new life and love for the unfinished work. Nachmanovitch goes on: “This Desire is more than pleasure or joy; it is a reach for the unknown” (167).

### Activities

Graeme Harper says creative writing begins and continues with actions, even if some of these actions inhere in the mind via the imagination. The artefact may be produced at least in part by some unconscious activities, but it then becomes the evidence that an activity has taken place. According to Kim Lasky in “Poetics and Creative Writing Research” (2013), in order to “articulate the knowledge involved in, and engendered by” (16) the process of writing, a poetics is needed, a way for the writer to describe what they’ve done in the process of creating the artefact and what has been learned:

. . . poetics has become the means by which writers formulate and discuss an attitude to their work that recognises influences, the traditions they write within and develop, the literary, social, and political context in which they write, and the processes of composition and revision they undertake. The word *poetics* shares *poet’s* etymological roots in the Greek *poiesis*, which means to create, to make (Oxford English Dictionary). So, the concept of poetics offers a useful means to articulate those processes involved in the making of a work . . . the concept of poetics allows for the articulation of the various kinds of insight encountered during the writing process (17).

Professor Warwick Mules, however, says that he takes *poiesis* as the “shaping force” of both humans and nature, of life itself. Without *praxis*, a “doing”, it would not have any direction (2015). Graeme Harper says that at least some of the activities can be articulated: “revising or editing, or our actions associated with creating character, or our actions associated with the relationship between form and content in the writing of a poem . . .” (Harper 146). Indeed, many author rules for writing give advice about what ‘to do’. Kate Grenville, in her “mantras about writing”,

includes: “*Never have a blank page*”, “*Don’t wait for the mood*”, “*fix it up later*”, and “*Don’t wait for time to write*” (145, italics in original). If these activities are the basis of describing a writer’s poetics, then it is *praxis* that helps articulate *poiesis*, the doing that articulates the making, the practice leads in a process of reflexive agency. While this requires intentionality, the intention to create an artefact, the intention to notice the process of creation, and the intention to use that process of reflection to alter and refine the practice, the artefact itself may still unflinchingly present itself in a way that surprises its author. In *Searching for The Secret River*, Grenville describes the process by which the family history she was researching involving the first settler at Wisemans Ferry asserted itself as a novel. She’d been “trying so hard to control it”, she’d been “presumptuous” (170), but the story “had to be allowed to speak for itself. My job was to get out of its way” (171). Nonetheless, reflexive agency ensures that the uncalled for, the unplanned, the elements that appear to emerge from the unconscious, can be acknowledged, I think, as part of the writer’s poetics. Lasky goes on to say that: “the concept of poetics helps address the difficulty of assuming an uncomfortably artificial critical stance by encouraging students to see themselves not as a critic of their own work but as an informed practitioner articulating knowledge and beliefs” (24). I would add, however, that the writer articulates not only what they know and believe but also what they didn’t know they knew, what is revealed, what catches them off guard. This is the process of confronting the dark, as Margaret Atwood describes. Practice-led research cannot be a straightforward proposition, then. It is messy and complicated, its activities are half-intentioned and half-discovered along the way.

The entire practice led process was for me, as I’ve introduced, a means of interrogating the meaning of death, reviewing death literature and offering a critique of two particular representations of death by Australian novelists. However, death was never the only thing *The Art of Dying* was about. What prompted the writing in the initial stages had less to do with my father’s experiences of terminal illness or the manner of his dying, and more to do with my desire to honour his life by writing about a rural, postwar, Catholic childhood and the emotional and spiritual reflections of the man who lived that type of childhood as he approached the end of his life. What did it *mean* to live *that* type of life? Patricia Hampl, in describing memoir, calls this commemoration:

... the idea that every life is sacred and that life is composed of details, of lost moments, of things that nobody cares about, including the people who are wounded or overjoyed by those moments. I don’t think people allow themselves to value their lives enough. They ignore and discard these fragments. I would like my writing to be precise enough, detailed enough so that the attention I bring

to bear on something unlocks a door to the reader's life. In that way, by honouring one's own life, it's possible to extend empathy and compassion to others (2017).

This idea of valuing life in its fragments influenced my approach to the novel. I wanted to capture something about my father's life in a work of fiction in which he didn't actually appear, a novel that wasn't actually about anyone who'd really lived. Most particularly, I was interested in the way in which our "selves" of other life moments are with us, perhaps always, perhaps covertly.

I utilised prior family history research, particularly my late maternal grandfather's Second World War and prisoner of war experiences, as well as my father's verbal stories and ephemera from his time as an expert/wool classer in the Cunnamulla area from 1956 to 1966. I spent weeks further researching the history of the Australian sheep and wool industry and the 1956 Shearers' Strike. I described the cars of the 1950s with the help of my father's collection of Modern Motor and Wheels magazines from their first editions in the early 1950s and onwards. I referred to aspects of my own childhood, including my rural and Catholic upbringing, and my experiences as a survivor of child sexual abuse. I was motivated to describe how my father's Catholicity had evolved and this was clarified by a discussion with my uncle on his deathbed in 2015. My own poetics, then, has involved, as Kim Lasky suggests it may, a complex interplay between experiences, observations, conversations, encounters, instincts, experimentation and review, rethinking and rewriting, the testing of beliefs, research and reading across disciplines such as theology and religion, philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, literature and literary criticism, as well as a constant return to creative writing pedagogy and author interviews.

The next stage of the practice was redrafting. Unlike the now clichéd "kill your darlings" advice, in which a writer is warned of how painful it is to rewrite and delete, the second draft was astonishingly easy. I removed eight characters and everything not written from the point of view of the main character. The third draft, however, in which the real rewriting process got underway, was painful and difficult. By this stage, personal problems had set in, my marriage failed, and failure in general became a deeply considered emotional issue. Once again, I was contemplating if I'd ever reach the end. Did I want to? What happens after the end? What was my life to become? I had spent so long studying the Heideggerian call to authenticity demanded by the fact of human finitude that it seemed now to seep into my consciousness as a necessary way of being. Not only was I asked by my supervisor to cut away pieces of writing I'd long regarded as my best work, I felt compelled to slash away at my life as if I were the old quince tree down by the creek, overgrown with so much dead wood that it was impossible to get close enough to the branches

bearing fruit in order to pick some of it. Some days were full of hope and the writing felt easy and inspired. Other days were very dark and I was full of resistance to the process. Often, I felt like I was losing sight of who I was. I lost faith in the novel completely and wondered if the years I'd spent on my dissertation had been a waste of time.

Having essentially lost control of the path my life was now taking, the most feared thing that a perfectionist can let happen to themselves, Heideggerian *Ereignis* began to take on more importance in my critical thinking. It did indeed seem that things had manifested to me 'eventfully'. Life had opened and was offering itself in a way that I couldn't control. If my life had meaning in light of my experiences with death, everything I'd read about it, and my attempt to write about death in a fictional work, then it was 'unconcealing' itself and addressing me and I had no power over the process at all. I was not passive. I brought with me a "background understanding of a world" (Richardson 363) but in order to come into my own it was necessary to invite the world (and the work) to reveal itself.

I'd spent many years exploring the ways in which humanity had approached and coped with death, and, more particularly wondering how my father's religious and spiritual life had impacted his death and whether this required a critical interrogation on my part of the connection between death and the sacred, death and religion, death and God. I then came upon a recent work by American philosopher John D. Caputo called *The Folly of God* (2016), in which he discusses belief in a Supreme Being as a folly and suggests a "weakening" of God, "a divine 'perhaps'" (3). This appeared to be in line with the Nietzschean diagnosis of the death of God as well as contemporary European philosophical approaches I'd studied, such as the "weak thought" of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, a theory Caputo discusses. Caputo describes his idea of "the unconditional" as "what we are dreaming of, what we are praying for, what we desire with a desire beyond desire . . . what makes demands upon *us* (in the accusative), unconditionally . . . (and) what we are provoked by, what is calling to us and to which we respond" (29-30). More than anything, I was struck by the way in which this echoed Heidegger on the "unconcealment" of being, how being is "manifestive," and that being is not an eternal, stable structure (a strong rather than weak proposition) but an opening, manifested in its becoming. Caputo says:

The unconditional is more what has us than something we have. When it comes to the unconditional, the unconditional always comes first and we never have the initiative. Even when we affirm the unconditional, in the nominative, that affirmation comes second, in response to the prior call the unconditional has paid us (29-30).

If the creative domain is a surrender to the urge to create new life and a reach for the unknown, as I've said above, then likewise, the activities the creative writer undertakes, what one *does* as a writer, is not just to surrender or to reach but also to answer the call, to respond. This is what those who study creativity attempt to trace. The call comes from everywhere and nowhere, from the unknown, the unconditional, the Absolute in whatever form the writer believes it to be. In ancient Greek philosophy, it is “a limit” and “a possibility of thought” (Mules 2015).

Contemporary European philosopher Alain Badiou says that his entire philosophical undertaking is “simply to account for the possibility of change” (2013: 127). As such, he theorises the new, reformulating the Heideggerian event, as a rupture in the destiny of being, a disruption to the repetitive cycle of knowledge. For Badiou, it is the “event” which introduces something new. It is “unpredictable, incalculable” (2005: 46) and arises out of “the void”, which can never be discerned within a situation. The event is “surprise, upheaval, indeterminacy” (2013: 133), and it arises from four areas of human reality: politics, love, art, and science. For Badiou, the development of quantum mechanics forced contemporary materialism to come to terms with “the question of chance”, “the possibility of randomness”, and “the possibility that something occurs that couldn't be foreseen or calculated, nor reincorporated on the basis of the existing state of things” (124). Badiou has been accused of introducing a “miraculous element” into his materialist philosophy (126) but he negates the need for the transcendent, saying “philosophy must include, both in its conception and in what it proposes, the conviction that the true life can be experimented with immanently” (129). Human beings are charged with being faithful to the event, the rupture of the new, when it occurs because it is *for* them and *by* them that the event happens; materialism reduces human beings to matter but within them there is “something else.” According to philosopher and interviewer of Badiou, Fabien Tarby:

. . . the event is the occurrence or the flash, the dazzling revelation or an instant, of the void subjacent to the situation, buried in the structures . . . Human beings assume the event and find themselves changed because of it. They become *subjects* of the event. Being faithful to the event consists in seizing this chance. It consists in no longer being merely the animal entrusted, up to its dying day, to meaningless being; it consists in creative humanity” (142-3).

This is why Badiou is a Platonist, a philosopher of the Idea. The tendency to be exceptional and the tendency to exist merely as the human animal exists in all of us: “We are permanently caught in this body and this mind that are ours, and yet we are, at the same time, disposed towards the best, but also the most exigent – to Ideas” (147). We are all, always, coming to terms with and fluctuating between these possibilities, being satisfied with what there is, opening to something

else. Unfortunately, this neither offers an explanation for creativity nor provides the creative artist with an instruction manual for how to be original. Ultimately, it is saying that human beings must open themselves to “receive” the event and then make the effort to bring the truth of the event into form by being faithful to it.

Perhaps this is the reason, as far as activities go, that creative writers often come back to what seems elementary: the writer’s toolbox of vocabulary, grammar, and style as described by Stephen King; the writing routines and strategies to facilitate flow as per Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; the dos and don’ts of famous authors; the attention to habitat and finding a creative domain that Graeme Harper suggests might help. Openness to the void is hard to describe. Perhaps all do it in their own way. Csikszentmihalyi suggests the basic injunction of the ancient Greeks to ‘know thyself’, saying: “It is astonishing how little most people know about their feelings . . . As opposed to this state of chronic apathy, creative individuals are in very close touch with their emotions” (357). Once again, the Heideggerian call towards authenticity. Know the kind of space you write well in, your habitat; know the creative domain to which you are called to belong, and the field your innermost being needs to create in; know the activities that stimulate your flow, to which you respond most proficiently, and through which you are most rewarded with an artefact that you *know* is yours, that you *know* arises from your deepest self, that expresses something meaningful to you.

Knowing these things takes a while to establish. If creative writing research is embarked upon before one knows, then this is what one learns, I suppose, through trial and error over the course of the years spent in the program. I don’t consider, in reflection, that any of the activities I did in order to write my novel were mistaken. I wrote consistently and let the writing rest, sometimes for months, as I worked on the exegesis, so that I could go back to the novel with fresh eyes. And, yes, I was often discouraged. Fabian Tarby describes effort and endurance as part of Alain Badiou’s ethics: “(Ethics) isn’t a body of predetermined moral rules. It consists in carrying on, in continuing on the path opened up, for me, by an authentic event” (2013: 154).

### **Artefact**

Graeme Harper discusses types of artefacts created by writers, including less recognised products such as diaries, letters, and the many drafts created on the way to the publishable or examinable

piece. He does this as a reminder that research into creative writing possibly should take into account work other than that which is interpreted by “*post-event* critics of creative writing – that is, those who only approach the artefacts of creative writing after they are produced, or from outside the actions of creative writing” (150). I have to admit that this seems pedestrian to me. If creative writing research requires reflexive agency, then each iteration is and has been relevant. In reflecting on the latest draft, whether in writing notes in the margin of the printed text, in a journal piece, or in an email or verbal discussion with a supervisor, these reflections, as artefact, are used *intentionally* to write the next draft. It would be alarming for these prior drafts to be studied by others for evidence of process or method. One wants to be judged on what one considers to be the best of oneself.

Scrivener (2000) describes the reflexive agency of creative writing research as reflection in action:

According to Schön it is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the "art" by which practitioners deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict . . . . New discoveries call for new reflection-in-action. The process spirals through stages of appreciation, action, and reappraisal, whereby the unique and uncertain situation comes to be understood through the attempt to change it, and changed through the attempt to understand it (8).

It is the artefact itself, and not merely the critical enquiry that accompanies it in the exegesis, which displays this process. Each iteration is new and demonstrates reflection in action. The artefact is a realisation of the process of reflexive agency. The years spent writing and rewriting should surely produce an artefact that is somehow better than it would have been outside of the academy or what is the point? This question was never sufficiently answered during my PhD years. At Creative Ecologies in 2015, a retreat at Western Sydney University aimed at advising creative writing researchers on how to write their exegesis, one academic said the artefact may fail but the exegesis may not, as if the point was really the critical inquiry or, at least, the purpose of creative research is to notice and expound on the failure, if that is what occurs.

I cannot make claims about *The Art of Dying*, but I don't consider it to be a failure. It is better, in my opinion, than it would have been had it not been written as a PhD novel. I always considered that it was worth finishing. The point of the process turned out to be Gerard's final line in the novel. From that line, the strength of my own philosophy grew. When Alain Badiou says that “philosophy must include, both in its conception and in what it proposes, the conviction that the true life can be experimented with immanently” (2013: 129), there are a couple of things he is declaring: philosophy begins with the position that there are truths; these truths arise from within

(he thus excludes here the Kantian imperative which is imposed externally); truths lead to a “vision of life” (128); and this vision is that discerning and participating in the truths of life is valuable for human beings. Philosophers throughout history have said this same thing in many ways, according to Badiou. The Platonic insistence that the philosopher is the happiest citizen, the Aristotelian good life or *eudaemonia*, the overman of Nietzsche, all declare with Badiou that seeking the true life “is a matter of an affect, which indicates, or signals, immanently that life is worthwhile living” (130).

That life is worthwhile living . . .

While this seems obvious, this is the discovery I made in writing a novel about death. Whether the novel has any value other than as an affirmation for me personally is not for me to say. As an artefact, the novel now exists, and this is pleasing to me. Stephen Nachmanovitch says, “The formula for creation is simple. Just identify our impedimenta, and set them down, like setting down an over-burdened suitcase that we have been carrying for far too long” (194). And it is true, I lugged around that grief for far too long; I’ve set it down now and it feels good.



## CONCLUSION

### Writing about death: the living of the dying

Perhaps the deepest reason why we are afraid of death is because we do not know who we are . . . Without our familiar props, we are faced with just ourselves, a person we do not know . . . we have tried to fill every moment of time with noise and activity, however boring or trivial, to ensure that we are never left in silence with this stranger on our own (Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*: 16).

In order to conclude, let me draw together this statement by Rinpoche with the end point of the previous chapter. The Tibetan teacher echoes Heidegger by placing Western anxiety in the face of death and inauthenticity into a causal relationship; Alain Badiou declares that seeking the true life is the very thing that makes life worth living. Truth, for Badiou erupts out of “nowhere”, the void. Those subject to the event must be open to it, recognise and name it, and then have fidelity to it by living in a way that recognises that the event has occurred. Always, in light of the event, life cannot go on as before; the event changes everything. Heidegger calls the receptive stance necessary to receive the event “a kind of ‘releasement’ that opens us to things” (Richardson 360). The notion of releasement is, in some ways, analogous to Rinpoche’s description of the practice of mindfulness; all of us, Rinpoche claims, experience moments of illumination:

These could be inspired by a certain exalting piece of music, by the serene happiness we sometimes feel in nature, or by the most ordinary everyday situation. They could arise simply while watching snow slowly drifting down, or seeing the sun rising behind a mountain, or watching a shaft of light falling into a room in a mysteriously moving way (50).

Whereas Badiou believes that events are rare, for Heidegger they occur when and as human beings ‘dwell’: that is, live the ordinary moments of their lives. To reiterate what Patrick White has said, the core of reality is reached, or at least reached *for*, by muddling away at it, and through this, flashes of illumination sometimes occur. Throughout this exegesis, I have returned many times to

Heideggerian being as manifestation, and I return to it again here: “to the experience of things as they emerge and meet us”, as Heideggerian scholar Richard Capobianco describes the truth of being (26). What White called the core of reality was, for Heidegger, “a source of meanings and ends greater than our own” (Richardson 350), meanings that we cannot control and that are not merely a matter of belief.

There are many more things that could be said about death than I have attempted, and certainly, I have not exhausted the implications of death as it thematically occurs in the two Australian novels I’ve studied. What I have tried to shed light on is the way in which the living of the dying has meant an exploration of authenticity for these two novelists. Authenticity emerges in flashes of illumination in which the character is offered a glimpse of the core of reality in a way that is meaningful. In *The Spare Room*, Nicola begins in a state of terror about the possibility of death. She seeks out her friend Helen, somehow knowing that Helen is the one person in her life capable of calling her towards authenticity. In her state of panic, Nicola cannot see the significance of her life until Helen reveals it to her. In *The Vivisector*, Hurtle muddles away at life as death constantly vies for his attention. He seeks to pour out his vision through art, making a statement of faith about *this* life, an affirmation that being in the world is worthwhile despite the suffering he himself sees clearly and feels acutely. There are moments which fill our senses, meet us and call us forth, and it is for the experience of these moments that Hurtle endures.

Writing about death was, for me, an attempt to work out my personal loss, as Diane Royer says in *Handbook of Death & Dying* (2003). I believe the novel is a commemoration of my father’s life and that I have honoured his living of the dying, offering an account of the existential territory he attempted to traverse as death approached. I believe, also, that writing about death occurs for primarily existential reasons. Writers are asking questions about how human beings feel about their impending death, how they cope with life goals and the possibility of unfinished business, and how the death of the other affects the lives of those who remain. During the years I wrote about death, I turned to existentialist theory as one of the vast resources of human thought regarding anxiety about human finitude and the tendency towards authenticity that many people experience when death ‘confronts’ them, as it seems to, even though death is always a possibility in every moment of life. John Richardson says:

The second main lesson many draw from Heidegger is the existentialist adjunct to his phenomenology: in brief, the idea that we’re challenged to become a self through facing and making a groundless choice . . . The idea of humans as confronted with a deep lack or “nothing,” and of

authenticity or freedom as facing and “living in the light” of this lack, was absorbed by many philosophers – and many “civilians” – as the ultimate character of our human situation (365).

I have found that recent studies on dying are broadly comparable to the existential project. Kent L. Sandstrom outlines studies by himself and others in “Coming to Terms with Death and Dying: Neglected Dimensions of Identity Work” (2003), including the study by Charles Corr on the universal tasks involved in coping with dying. Like the Heideggerian view that we are always being-towards-death, Corr “stresses that coping with dying is not merely a phenomenon that arises at the end of an individual’s life; rather, it is a process that encompasses all of a person’s life. It is also a process engaged in by all of the significant others who are drawn into the person’s experience of dying” (Sandstrom 469). Sandstrom’s work on the preservation of self-identity and self-worth after HIV/AIDS diagnosis suggests that terminal patients develop certain strategies, including: compartmentalization, in which “persons with AIDS acknowledge its presence in their lives but downplay its salience for self” (470); embracement, where patients highlight the unexpected “blessings” of their illness and reflect on the meaning they have discovered through it; empowerment, becoming advocates for change or seeking to “accomplish something socially meaningful while they still can” (471); intense presence, an adaptive strategy in which terminal patients become absorbed in the present, appreciate ‘the little things’ and see each moment of their lives as sacred; and autonomy, actively make arrangements about their care, writing advance directives, or attempting to control their ‘postself’ via writing autobiographical narratives, giving attention to interpersonal relationships or actively reviewing their legacy and accomplishments. All of these strategies suggest an effort on the part of the dying to deal with their anxiety about death and issues around authenticity: self-identity, self-value, life review, and significance. These are, without doubt, the issues dealt with in the novels I’ve studied and by my own dying characters.

These strategies are not merely an attempt to control the death experience, but to accept and even to embrace the uncontrollable. Philosopher John D. Caputo says that humans have dealt with contingency in two ways: conditioned constructions such as the “Supreme Being” type God of high theology; and the unconditional or what he and others call the “weakening” of God, “a divine perhaps” (3). In light of my reading and my own creative work, it seems to me that facing death is a confrontation with the unconditional. There is terror, depending on what one believes, either of what awaits or of future non-existence. There is also the shock of mortality in a period of history in which death is mostly hidden, as well as the anguish of mistakes, and the heartache of unfinished business. Nothing about death is certain. Death cannot be controlled by anyone who comes into

contact with it. Death demands a response, provokes thoughts, ideas and emotions that could not have been predicted, and I echo Caputo's language here, in that it has us much more than we have it. Resoundingly, I find that increased awareness of death coping strategies and knowledge of the way others have attempted to negotiate the living of the dying, whether through literature or other mediums, are valuable for human beings. There is a possibility that knowledge might lessen the terror, and work as a call to authenticity.

Heideggerian scholar Richard Capobianco calls for a "meditative thinking" that he calls the Being-Way, an awakening "towards all beings and things in their temporal unfolding" (96). The pronouncement of one's imminent death is an event, a call. Often, for the first time, a dying individual will choose to spend time with the self that Rinpoche describes as the stranger. Capobianco goes on:

Death, for example, our mortality, we come to see differently – not "tragic" in itself, not "evil" or "absurd," not a great enemy that must be overcome, conquered, defied. To embrace the Being-Way is to embrace that we, like all beings, arrive, linger, and depart. We come-to-pass and we pass away. The joy is in our passing this way at all (97-8).

This I contend is what Helen Garner and Patrick White have conveyed in their novels: the joy in having a life.

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