



**KNITTING A NOVEL:
A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW**

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DEDICATION

for Dr Susan Hosking

My mother would have no truck with patterns, even for a child learning. We simply cast on and led away. To some people this seems peculiar and I see now it is puzzling—I am even a bit surprised myself—but at the same time it seemed utterly natural. When I got to a difficult bit, such as gathering in the waist, my mother would take the needles, show me how to knit two together, knit four, then knit two together, and off I'd go, as she'd pass it back. Then she would say, 'I think the bodice should be in moss stitch. You do one purl one plain for that. See, I'll show you. Put the wool over the needles to change the stitch. That's right.' So, fearing nothing because I knew nothing, off I'd go. Arm holes the same.

'You'll need to decrease now, I'll show you how to cast off. See, only four stitches to cast off here, one each side at first. Then one ordinary row, and next row cast off two, then one. Then go straight up. See, it'll make a shape to set the sleeve in. Good girl. Off you go.' And later, 'Now the neck. Count the stitches, I'll divide them for you. Put the six central ones on this safety pin.' Truly, I see now, untrammelled by expectations other than I could do anything she asked of me, I could have mastered a computer if we'd had one, or a language like French, or Russian...The language of knitting was a world of its own, with all the wonderful names of stitches, feather and fan, blackberry, cable, moss, Vandyke.

Kate Llewellyn, *The Floral Mother* (136)

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Knitting* explores issues of grief, women's work, friendship and grace. The two main characters, Martha (a generous artist with little paid work) and Sandra (a highly-strung academic with an interest in textiles), slowly develop friendship across a social divide. Both have experienced the loss of a partner, Martha in her youth, and Sandra more recently. Martha appears to wear her grief lightly, but Sandra, still feeling 'covered in glass' finds it difficult to move on. Committed to the joint project of mounting an exhibition of retro and contemporary knitting, they find themselves also committed to sustaining each other. Each has a history to be addressed, and each, out of that history, damages the other, Sandra by selfishness and obsessiveness, and Martha by passivity. Ultimately both need external help. The novel can be read superficially as cause and effect and resolution, or more deeply as a theological reflection on the nature of grace given to and shared by flawed human beings.

The novel was accepted for publication well before submission for examination and so had the attention of readers both in the academy and in publishing. Suggestions from both were gratefully received and many were incorporated into the novel. There were no structural changes as a result of these comments: changes were mainly in expansion (about 6000 words) and in smoothing continuity. The version of the novel offered for examination is certainly all my own work, a draft which took these comments into account, but which precedes the intensive line editing undertaken with the publishers' editors.

The exegetical essay *Knitting the Novel: a Retrospective View* both chronicles and explores two parallel journeys, the journey of writing the novel *Knitting*, and the journey of my development as a writer, not only as novelist but also as essayist.

Part A is a consideration of two sets of metaphors, mapping/journaling, and knitting/fabric, which have provided a basic framework for my consideration of process in both the novel and the essay. Part B documents autobiographical elements at work in the novel, then contextualises them via a discussion of the work of other influences—particularly painter Grace Cossington Smith and textile artist and theorist Diana Wood Conroy. Part C consists of two examples of the kind of meditation and mulling process generated by research, which may or may not ultimately find expression within a novel. Part D demonstrates two samples of exploratory technique; a reflection on primary records kept during the early phase of novel writing, and a short sample of one of the ways in which a character or other aspects of the novel can be explored (and in this particular case resolved) through a creative tangential approach. In the conclusion I return to the metaphors of journey, map and journal and, with the particular journey of writing this essay completed, adjust my earlier definitions.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

Neither novel nor essay contains any material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief this work contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the essay.

If accepted for the award of the degree, this work will be available for research purposes by arrangement with the author or with the author's appointee, the Barr Smith Library. Publication rights for a subsequent version have been granted to publishers, these being (at the time of submission) Houghton Mifflin (USA), Penguin (Australia) and Penguin (UK).

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I would also like to thank those editors and publishers who read an early draft of the novel and offered many helpful suggestions: the enthusiastic Robert B. Wyatt, Jane Rosenman and Peg Anderson of Houghton Mifflin (USA) and Clare Forster and Nicola Young of Penguin (Australia). The novel was accepted for publication well before submission for examination and so had the attention of readers both in the academy and in publishing. Suggestions from both were gratefully received and many were incorporated into the novel. There were no structural changes as a result of these comments: changes were mainly in expansion (about 6000 words) and in smoothing continuity. The version of the novel offered for examination here is all my own work.

To Russell Bartlett and Dr Patrick Allington, my grateful thanks for their assistance with proof-reading.

Lastly, I want to express my thanks for the support of the University of Adelaide and my appreciation for the provision of an Australian Postgraduate Award which gave me a stretched-out space in which to learn and to write—a rich experience indeed.

INTRODUCTION

The twin journeys of novel writing and exegesis writing are to some extent superimposed, occasionally identical, at other times very different. Both journeys can be understood through two metaphors, mapping/journaling, and knitting/fabric/garment construction.

When I began the novel and the early part of this essay my reference points were to do with maps and mapping, patterns and pattern making, and I still find the word 'journey' dominates my thinking. As the work progressed it became clear that my writing method is rather more organic, executed through the gradual generating, accumulation and expansion of fragments, and the knitting of these together towards a whole, like a kind of patchwork garment. It was tempting to reject the first frame of reference and embrace the second for the sake of easy cohesiveness, but to do this would deny a good deal of early process, including the strong sense of journey and palimpsest. The larger journey of writing a novel is fed by many small journeys of investigation, with reference to those who have gone before, and writing an exegetical essay after a novel is rather like drawing a second map over the first.

So, while acknowledging that knitting and mapping is an uneasy juxtaposition of metaphors, I have retained them both as integral to this discussion. In Part A I begin with maps and mapping but with the novel taking shape, soon find myself slipping into the more organic metaphor of knitting, and associations with fabric. This very transition, its essential awkwardness, and the questions it raised for me about male and female methodology, have been part of the process and

therefore merit documentation in an essay such as this. Besides, the writing of any large work, either novel or essay, is rarely a smooth process; false starts and bad fits are to be expected. Failed experiments help to define the experiment that works. With hindsight I see that I tried to define the parameters of the exegetical essay too early (at the same time as I was beginning the novel); attempts to theorise revolved around vague notions of Australian landscape, spirituality and women's fiction. The focus gradually shifted to research into the history, cultural significance and representation of knitting, and my own positioning within this textile landscape. Some of these themes have continued through to this essay, but then there was a further shift; the key area of interest became the study of the process of writing, and what it might teach me for the next creative work.

So this essay takes a meandering journey, through the landscape metaphor, on to textile theory and various cultural influences that impacted the novel (Part A), then through a reflection on family and personal history (Part B). The essence of Parts A and B is subjected to the invisible process of thought, association and creativity and re-emerges in Part C as a sample of two creative nonfiction reflections which may (or may not) be further transmuted into creative fiction. Part D offers a study on the process of writing that began the novel, and discusses the notion of 'reflexion', a vertical excavation of layered knowledge (like geological layers, but also like layers of felt) that have been deposited by a broad spectrum of research: accidental, coincidental, and deliberate. In the conclusion I return to maps, journals, knitting and fabric.

PART A: THE JOURNEY-WRITER

Novel and essay, map and journal

In the first chapter of his book *Creativity* Kevin Brophy reflects on the tension between longing for a map and the varied experience of having one. He describes a bicycle journey where he plans a route based on a map; during the journey he finds himself in unexpected places. Maps and memory do not serve to deliver him to his destination via the most direct route, but they do encourage journey and exploration (7-9) after which, ironically, he finds himself back at the very road he had been trying to avoid. Many writers could relate a similar creative journey—sometimes the hard and dangerous road is the very one which must be taken to reach the destination. At the end of this journey Brophy finds himself facing a rather resistant group of creative writing students concerned with beginnings and endings, which he interprets as ‘the desire for maps (in the forms of assumptions, rules, craft or techniques)’ (15).

Can the experience of creativity, of journey/garment construction/novel-making/essay writing, ever be properly mapped, the retrospective pattern accurately recorded? A creative experience is not a simple process, the paths between thought and deed often invisible, obscured by a kind of creative fog. One takes the road with the freshly painted signpost, only to find that just over the hill lies Chaos Valley. In that difficult and often lonely place, where form, content and direction swirl together, a base camp must be established. Then supplies must be found and collected, and a good deal of survey mapping done before one can choose and package the right supplies for this particular journey. After that the task is to find a viable road away from the chaos, through the broad and perhaps

dangerous territory of writing, to arrive, finally, exhausted and depleted but also exhilarated, at the welcome lights of Completed Work. The journey will have unfolded as a series of adventures that has probably involved dead ends, detours, and unexpected picnics. The creative work, in this case a novel, can thus be seen as a map of the journey, a strip map of particular choices through a broad range of possibilities. The first draft may be a very messy map, and perhaps extraneous detail must be cut away, or gaps filled in, before others are able to properly appreciate the journey that has taken place. Meanwhile, many other 'side maps' may have been generated in the process, and the journey-writer may well find them interesting enough to warrant a return visit at some future date.

For this section I will draw on two journey metaphors for a discussion of both novel and exegetical essay, metaphors which originated in reading Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay*: the explorer's *map* made in the process of charting new territory, and the explorer's *journal* (xx-xxiii), which incorporates something of the mapping process but supplements the map with the explorer's personal experience of process, thereby offering something of the explorer's self. The novel, I suggest, is a process of mapping new territory, while a retrospective essay such as this is a reflection on the mapping process; a map, if you like, of a map. For the sake of simplicity I shall hold to the word 'journal' with the broader spectrum of information that that word implies. For the most part this essay is a retrospective journal, though there will also be reference to notes written *in situ*.

In his book *Maps of the Imagination: the Writer as Cartographer*, Peter Turchi explores at length the ideas of journey, map and mapping, his words supplemented with beautiful colour plates of maps and illustrations to deepen and

expand his argument. Turchi quotes writers who use mapping and exploration imagery to describe the process of writing, for example, Emerson: 'The writer is an explorer. Every step is an advance into new land' (11), and Graham Greene: 'If this book of mine fails to take a straight course, it is because I am lost in a strange region; I have no map' (13). One does not have to look far to find others, for example, Thomas Keneally: 'Our unconscious is putting up an agenda for us...We discover that agenda rather than consciously participate in it...it's an uncovering process...the discovery of crucial images...that's done, in many cases, without deliberate plan' (Woolfe and Grenville, 193), Elizabeth Jolley: '...I am making the character, exploring the character. ...I really have to wait till I explore and find out something. Writing is a mixture of exploring and inventing' (Woolfe and Grenville, 157) and perhaps, most tellingly, Annie Dillard:

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a wood-carver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins.

The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions, to an epistemological tool. The new place

interests you because it is not clear. You attend. In your humility you lay down the words carefully, watching all the angles. (3-4)

It is clear that when attempting to articulate the writing experiences maps and exploration spring readily to mind, but for all that, creative process is not easily mapped. Even Paul Carter, exploring themes of geographical cartography, surely defined by clear 'facts' of coastline and mountain, and further clarified by the consensus of multiple explorers, finds himself among soft edges:

[This book]...is concerned with the haze that precedes clear outlines...the book's subject is not a physical object, but a cultural one...not the geographer's space, although that comes into it. What are evoked here are the spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence. It is a spatiality as a form of non-linear writing...the literature of spatial history—the letters home, the explorers' journals, the unfinished maps—are written traces which, but for their spatial occasion, would not have come into being. They are not like novels: their narratives do not conform to the rules of cause-and-effect empirical history. Rather, they are analogous to unfinished maps and should be read as records of travelling (xxii).

One could argue that not all novels conform to a 'cause-and-effect empirical history', but whatever our view in this regard, there is a sense in which both novel and essay are records of travelling. The journey of novel is a journey through an

imaginative landscape, where exploration of many kinds takes place: the broad explorations of culture, history, society and spirituality, the questions raised by the writer's engagement with life and living, or the more specific exploration of character, a kind of psychological landscape. There may also be an exploration of the physical landscape and its impact on plot or character. Details are added as they are discovered or invented, and each detail contributes to the wider context. The novel thus becomes a slowly unfolding map, a map-in-progress. (I am assuming a certain methodology here, which is writing as a process of discovery, rather than following a predetermined plan.)

This exegetical essay, on the other hand, is more like a traveller's journal, a story written for the self as well as the academy, with a certain demand for positioning oneself as writer and mapmaker within a broader cultural and historical landscape, as well as in relation to the landscape of the novel. The essay is also a representation of research into the novel's subject matter (a different territory again) but more importantly it is an examination and representation of process, in this case the process that accompanied, and at times was generated by, the journey of writing the novel *Knitting*,

Does a 'clear outline', a clear map, ever emerge? Yes, in the sense that both novel and essay may be 'finished' and that they exist in time and a geographical space. But at the same time both novel (map) and essay (journal) have something of Carter's 'haze' about them. The 'clear outline', if it is ever formed at all, is surely only formed in the reader's mind, and even then must be recognised as a variable, since after completion both novel and essay are read, or mapped afresh, by new explorers, the readers, each with different criteria and

different emphases—supervisor, examiner, colleague, mentor, librarian, publisher, bookseller, publicist, partner. Each reader brings their own map and their own geographical intent to the reading experience, over-writing the author's original meaning with their own. Maps upon maps. Palimpsest.

Although I will continue with the idea of essay-as-journal, it could also be argued that the exegesis is a map of the map called 'novel'. While this idea appeals, it too quickly becomes a complex concept, like the repeating images that occur when two mirrors are faced towards each other. The essay might be a map of the novel, and may indeed generate a second novel, but the exegetical essay is also an entirely different and discrete exploration in its own right. Sister works, perhaps, novel and essay, map and journal.

The metaphor *journal*, like *map*, has its own particular layers. In Chapter 6 of *The Road to Botany Bay*, entitled 'A Thorny Passage', Carter challenges our reading of the map-maker's journal:

The seamlessness of the journals is a literary illusion. Unfortunately, though, it has too often been taken at face value, with the result that the reflective attitude the explorer and settler literature embodies has been overlooked. Instead, the historical experience...has been subjected to...mythologizing, as if the explorers did not criss-cross their own tracks a hundred times...(173)

Most of the writing I have undertaken in this essay is a reconstruction of an earlier exploratory experience, which I cannot pretend to revisit accurately. Unlike the explorers who reflected on journey at the end of a mere day or so, when

memory was reasonably fresh, I am writing months and occasionally years after the journey, so this retrospective journal, the exegetical essay, is certainly 'illusory'. The intense phase of novel development became all-consuming and there was little energy left for note-taking along the way. The records that did survive were written almost by chance, like an explorer's hurried scribble when the weather turns bad, quick journal notes or email dashed off to self, supervisor, mentor, colleagues, in the middle of a galloping ride.

Carter says that seamlessness in explorers' journals is the illusion, that too often the reflective attitude has been overlooked (173). Plenty of reflection occurs of course, but again is largely unrecorded, except in its final form. Reflection on work and process is like a background music, accompanying one through life, walking, thinking, being, constantly occupying headspace, that loose and amorphous kind of mulling familiar to all creators, impossible to order or record. This reflection is an occupation of shifting territory, an internal landscape subject to earthquakes and tsunami, sudden charges of adrenalin, of discovery and also often of being lost. The tracks do indeed 'crisscross themselves a hundred times'.

If this essay appears to be any kind of coherent journaling, it is because vast quantities of loose ends have been omitted. Here I find myself sliding towards a different metaphor—wool, knitting, fabric. Looking backwards now the research appears like a piece of felt where various fibres matt together to form a single material. Childhood, identity, incidental and directed reading, interstate tourism, chance encounters, a lifelong interest in knitting and writing were all part of 'research', and their mingling is evident in both novel and essay. This essay/journal can only, at best, hint at the experience of exploration through quick sketches, brief

notes, and the telling of particular stories, rather than reconstruct it. If I, as journal writer, offer my reader such sketchy details, I have even less control over reader response, as noted above. Features important to me and noted in the journal may be remembered by readers as interesting and useful landmarks, or else entirely ignored. The intersection of journal or map with the reader's experience is a fold in the paper where anything can happen.

Peter Turchi suggests that there are two separate but overlapping acts in the process of writing:

One is the act of *exploration*; some combination of premeditated searching and undisciplined, perhaps only partly conscious rambling. This includes scribbling notes, considering potential scenes, lines, or images, inventing characters, even writing drafts. History tells us that exploration is assertive action in the face of uncertain assumptions, often involving false starts, missteps and surprises—all familiar parts of a writer's work. If we persist, we discover our story (or poem, or novel) within the world of that story. The other act of writing we might call *presentation*. Applying knowledge, skill and talent we create a document meant to communicate with, and have an effect on, others. The purpose of a story or poem, unlike that of a diary, is not to record our experience but to create a context for; and to lead the reader on, a journey.

That is to say, at some point we turn from the role of Explorer, to take on that of Guide. (12, Turchi's emphasis)

Most writers will recognise this double process: explorer/guide, pouring/shaping. Nevertheless, even with a competent Guide, the journey for the reader might be quite different from that which the writer anticipates.

This exegesis is demanded by the academy, but along the way has become an important letter home to the self, a meandering journal that records the journey, but which also attempts to answer certain questions: 'Where am I? How did I get here? By what route? Could I have come more directly with less cost?' This examination of practice is a further kind of exploratory research.

Two earlier novels and two substantial nonfiction works (only one of which has been published) taught me something of process and technique. The chief difference between those works and this (novel and essay) was that, through the academy, there were significant interventions.

In fact, without the academy, this novel may not have been written. Unlike previous work, where I felt I had a critical mass at the starting point, the novel *Knitting* began with the thinnest of threads, a single line of sticky cobweb. As much as I liked Martha as a character, she seemed a thin and tatty bit of yarn with which to begin a major work. Even though I was excited by the initial piece of writing (a mere two pages) it didn't seem to have much potential, existing more as a one-off doodling; it was only the enthusiasm of supervisor and colleagues that made me persist. So, looking back over subsequent developments, this lesson was reinforced: that any writing that has that sense of excitement and energy attached to it is worthy of persistent exploration, even though it may not easily 'reveal its secrets', a phrase used by Adelaide painter Dieter Engler about painting. Perhaps, given time and space, a novel can always begin this way, from nothing much at all.

The second significant intervention was the mentorship with Nicholas Jose, begun when the writing was about two thirds done, the final shape clear in my mind, but when I was a little stuck and had descended into a kind of tilting at shadows, trying to write something 'acceptable': that is, something that did not flaunt unspoken rules (my background was in children's and young adult writing where characters should solve their own problems) and would therefore find a publisher. The value of the mentorship at this critical stage (and rather low point) was two-fold: firstly, the affirmation from someone industry-experienced was hugely energising, and secondly, the questions asked gave me a much needed opportunity to reflect more objectively on both the work and my relationship to it. There was a third benefit later in that Jose also offered an international publishing contact.

As for rest of the journey—it is all haze, scribble, fragments of map and pattern, loose threads. When one begins a new journal, however retrospective it may be, the pages ahead are blank. One does not know what one will find, and perhaps not even what one seeks. The few times I attempted journal records towards this essay while I was writing the novel, I felt that I might be wasting time and energy, that what I was recording could well turn out to be a series of impasses. And while this process can be defining in itself, an exegesis can hardly have 'places I didn't go' as its main content. As it was, I did record a few significant moments, though I rarely had a sense of their importance at the time. The writing of process notes sometimes seemed a pointless exercise because the journey itself was often so tenuous that attempts to journal it seemed based on false premises. In this sense all new writing is, to some degree, concerned with Carter's

'haze that precedes clear outlines' (xxii). And there is this too, that perhaps my attempts at records were far too self conscious, skewed too much towards being *meaningful*. I wish now I had kept more notes that began simply 'Today I am thinking...'

The essay presented here (via a very circuitous route) is, at best, a rudimentary collection of notes and fragmentary maps, expanded upon, but at the same time lacking all kinds of important definition, a journal that may be better understood by what it lacks rather than what it documents. For example, I read fiction about knitting: Marelle Day, *Lambs of God*; Ruth Rendell, 'A Needle for the Devil' (*The Fever Tree*); A.S. Byatt, 'Art Work' (*The Matisse Stories*) Jodie Kewley, 'Knitting'; Elizabeth Stead, *Knitting Emily Bridget*): biographical pieces (Kate Llewellyn, 'Knitting' (*The Floral Mother*); Lily Brett, *New York*; Helen Garner, *Postcards from Surfers*) and a few poems, (Vera Newsom, 'Knitting a Scarf' (*Emily Bronte Recollects*); Jennifer Compton 'Knitting is an Art Form' (*From the Other Woman*) and Peter Lloyd, 'Wool'. I also read a surprising number of books which linked knitting and spirituality (*The Knitting Sutra, Zen and the Art of Knitting, Knitting into the Mystery*) and books by young women writers reclaiming old ground (*It's My Party and I'll Knit if I want to*; and various Stitch 'n' Bitch productions). There were some solid historical works: Heather Nicholson's *The Loving Stitch*, a history of knitting in New Zealand, and Bishop Richard Rutt's superb work, *The History of Knitting*. Besides this reading, I collected many knitting patterns from the last 100 years, having a good supply already from the family archives, and being readily helped by friends and relatives.

For a while I toyed with a variety of options for this essay, or for a much larger work, the other two main contenders being an Australian history of knitting (which has never been written) and a cultural studies approach to knitting in contemporary society; the last five years have shown a huge increase in knitting and handcraft, and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that there was a significant surge after September 11, 2001. I also considered researching contemporary Australian designers whose work is based on knitting/crochet (Jo Sharp, Lorinda Grant and Prudence Mapstone) and/or the work of knitting textile artists (Bronwen Sandland, Ruby Brilliant), who use knitting to examine issues of society and environment.

As fascinating as all this was, in the end it was of more interest, and more relevant to my future work, to examine the process of writing rather than the subject matter, or even other writers' representations of the same subject matter. Exposure to these works no doubt added grist, but the only direct influence I can see is perhaps the idea of knitter as artist in A.S. Byatt's short story *Art Work*. In *Martha*, and perhaps also in *Cliff*, there may be a touch of Kate Grenville's *Lilian* (*Lilian's Story*), a novel I happened to be revisiting in the early stage of writing. On the other hand, *Martha* may have emerged similarly without this reading—the first fragment, the mad hospital monologue, was written four years before.

Every time I revisit the story of writing the novel, in this essay or in speaking to live audiences, I'm aware that there are many parallel stories that can be told. The stories overlap and are fuzzy at the edges; a small change in emphasis may mean a large change in implication. There's the story of the research, or the history of knitting women and family, or a different history of grief (which fed into Sandra

but is not chronicled here), or the history of learning to write. And this story, this telling, is but one of them. As Kevin Brophy says:

It is difficult to put aside the map even when I know that its bright colours and simple symbols are deceptions. Creativity seems to be enacted in the loose play of the bad fit between map and landscape, in that beginning pause which holds for a moment some tension between attraction and repulsion, desire and fear, the known and the unknown, the self and possible selves. (4)

Creativity may be enacted in loose play, but can also spring from moments of 'reflexion', a study of what Professor John Took, quoting Kierkegaard, calls the 'infinitely contentful character of the moment' (personal communication), an idea which is explored further in the final section of this essay.

So if creative writing is a journey into unexplored territory, then the novel is the map of the territory, and the essay is a journal of progress and process. There are also, along the way, moments of 'loose play' and 'reflexion', in which core samples of experience are examined by a strange mix of self (author) and possible selves (created characters).

A different kind of mapping

In her book *Rewriting God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction*, Elaine Lindsay suggests that exploration and conquering country are male metaphors and, at least in the area of spirituality, they have given rise to a concentration of male representation. In the introduction she comments; 'When I came to research Australian Spirituality as it is articulated in works of popular theology and cultural comment...apart from Veronica Brady, women's voices were absent' (ix).

Lindsay argues that the most popular paradigm of Australian spirituality, Desert Spirituality, has been constructed from 'biblical resources and from a variety of male texts and male experiences' (including, of course, exploration and map making), and that amid this 'malestream' the one female commentator, Veronica Brady, herself draws almost exclusively on male texts (x). Women's alternative paradigms of spirituality, Lindsay says, have been ignored.

Landscape, mapmaking, theology/spirituality, fiction. These were my preoccupations before writing the novel, and, at the very beginning, summarised what I thought would be the main topic of this essay. In the process of writing, much of the landscape aspect dropped away, except as a metaphor in relation to writing. Aspects of Christian spirituality are embedded firmly in the novel (roses-as-blood, fire, water, baggage, sin-sickness, grief, healing and themes of grace and redemption), and could easily have been explored here, particularly the work of Elizabeth Jolley (*Milk and Honey*), Helen Garner (*Cosmo Cosmolino* and *The Feel of Steel*) and Tim Winton (*That Eye the Sky* and *Cloudstreet*), but again, the

examination of writing process seemed more needful. Certainly Winton's magic realism passages (though I prefer the terms 'visionary' and 'transcendent') gave me both the vehicle and the courage to write the cherries scene, and the scene of the profound kiss. Similarly, the ending of Elizabeth Jolley's *Milk and Honey*, with its surprising possibility of new beginnings after appalling dysfunction, is surely another demonstration of grace at work. In my own writing, one particular aspect of spirituality exercised me a great deal, and the simplest way to present it is through a note made in my writers' journal when mulling on the 'What agency is at work here?' question raised by Jose:

But of course THAT has been the crux of the difficulty I have had in focusing this, that I am so conscious of the degree of Christian offence in the Australian psyche (too influenced by Manning Clark and John Smith no doubt) that it has completely stymied me: i.e. we have been a terrible bunch of wowers and whackers and killjoys and critics—none of which is in the spirit of the NT [New Testament] Jesus—and I am so ashamed/ embarrassed by the church's behaviour over so many issues, from Aboriginal missions to Catholic boarding schools, that I am sensitive about saying 'yes, I'm one of those'. I am one of those, sort of, BUT I want to yell, BUT BUT.

So maybe this book is that. My BUT. And that is why I have been struggling over who the main character is because it is neither Martha nor Sandra, but God in that continual, wonderful, surprising, incomprehen-sible pouring out of grace. I have been avoiding that

fact. I have been, as Nick says, shuffling things around trying to make it strong by sequence, without admitting—indeed avoiding—the conscious knowledge that it is my central belief system which is the backbone to this book...And of course the M/S [Martha/Sandra] struggle will still be there—the technical difficulty of how to handle the characters—but I suspect that will ease as I am more honest.

These sorts of questions and their answers affected the core content and the final structuring of the novel. In the end I took what at the time seemed to be a technical risk, and had my characters rescued by a third party, the Cleaner.

Back to maps and landscape. In the attempt to articulate process I have returned to maps and landscape, familiar and popular metaphors; male metaphors, perhaps, but certainly a useful way of charting experience. I'm not convinced that they are entirely male metaphors—Dillard and Jolley are natural in their use of them, though perhaps less specific than the male writers.

Perhaps, as Susan Hosking has suggested, geographical maps are traditionally men's work, while women map something different in other ways (Hosking, 2004). Jennifer Murray suggests this in her discussion of the quilting metaphor in Atwood's *Alias Grace*:

Quilting, quilt-in-process, quilt-as-pattern-to-be-interpreted, women and their relationships to the quilt-as-object—the metaphor is extensive and is crafted into Atwood's version of the story of Grace Marks to a multitude of meaning-producing effects. Margaret Rogerson examines some of these effects by

studying the patchwork motif in the novel, 'situating it within the cultural and literary history of patchwork'. The history I am concerned with here, however, is not that of the patchwork as a cultural object, nor am I preoccupied with the question of historical veracity, but rather, I intended to explore the present meaning effects produced by Atwood through her use of the patchwork quilt as a unifying metaphor in her rewriting of the history of *Grace Marks* (65-66).

Perhaps women find and make patterns, charts and metaphors with fabric rather than maps, perhaps they prefer an iconography that originates in the domestic sphere—weave a story, get in a knot/tangle, find the thread, unravel a problem (compare Dorothy Jones quoted below p. 33). Certainly women poets have drawn on fabric metaphors such as these: Elizabeth Barrett Browning; '...For frequent tears have run/The colours from my life, and left so dead/And pale a stuff...' (32); Emily Dickinson; 'I felt a cleavage in my mind/As if my brain had split;/I tried to match it seam by seam/But could not make it fit' (167); Judith Wright, 'blood's red thread still binds us fast' (97); and other poems where something made from fabric is the subject of the poems; Joanne Burns' *The Library of T-Shirts*(98), and Silvana Gardner's *The Burial Dress* (189). Then there are the novelists who centre their work around the meanings of fabric—Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*.

A chart is different from a map. It is a kind of a map, but it may also be an embroidery or weaving chart, or a pattern for knitting. Notes are often written in the margins. Late in the research process I came across Elizabeth Wayland Barber's

book, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*, in which she offers a fascinating record of her own process, a kind of a map making, but using methods which are more typical of what has traditionally been called 'women's work' associated with textiles. Barber, female linguist and archaeologist, lists her research methods in this order: looking, tracing, drawing, paying attention, colouring-in, weaving, deducing, collecting, mapping, charting. Mapping occurs, but it is only one of many tools available, and is generic rather than imposed:

'I inspected photographs of the Venus of Lespugue a dozen times, but it was not until I made my own tracing...that I noticed the marks showing that the strings of her string skirt were fraying out at the bottom, telling me that the sculptor knew of string made from twisted fibers twenty thousand years ago. The act of drawing forced me to pay attention... Similarly it was not until I decided to color by hand my photocopies of all the known Mycenaean frescoes showing clothing that I began to appreciate how frequently a particular border pattern occurred on the frescoes as well as on the clothes and how easy it would be to weave it. That, in turn, prompted me to try to weave it, and during the relatively slow, step-by-step process of doing so I realized that I was making just the sort of band that I had seen—but not thought about— in black-and-white photos of rural women of this century starting their cloth on a warp-weighted loom in the traditional way. Except for color, the designs were the same between modern Norwegians and the ancient Mycenaeans.

Mapping and charting help, too. Even after I had worked for ten years collecting the descriptions of every fragment of prehistoric cloth and textile tools that I could find in the archaeological literature of Europe and the near East, I had no idea that these data separated into three main zones of development—until in desperation I sat down to map the evidence. To my astonishment, the distribution of fiber use and loom types exactly correlated with the types of pattern weaving for which I had data.

The acquisition of facts in a tough subject seldom goes in a straight line—that is, it seldom goes where you think you want to go with it. (294-295)

There is not space within this study to explore whether male and female methodology demonstrates fundamental differences, though it would be an interesting line of inquiry. Certainly this approach resonated with much of my own experience in researching the novel. I read widely—textile history, knitting in literature, knitting in contemporary society, novels and nonfiction exploring spirituality, and a few recent works combining knitting and spirituality. I went to textile exhibitions, I stared at a couple of hundred knitting patterns, tracing not with my hands but with my eyes, and did a good deal of the mental arithmetic required by knitting. In other words, I gave it my close attention. I designed garments. I spoke to textile artists. I knitted as I wrote, to keep the writing grounded: concurrently with the novel I produced two jumpers, two pairs of socks and half a scarf, and more ideas than I will ever need. I talked to relatives about their World

War II knitting experience. (My great grandmother and her sister, I discovered, each knitted a sock a day at one time, quite an achievement.)

Many strands from real life influenced the novel—a timely lace exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, an allergic reaction to thrips in Wollongong, a holiday at Pt McDonnell, the sighting of a red bike, a story from family history, the first shocking experience in our youth of losing a contemporary in an accident. And while these events in the novel have recognisable links with real life, and largely spring from the domestic sphere, the writing process has transformed them into different kinds of events, with different meanings. No doubt there are many other links entirely lost to memory.

So if I change my mapping metaphor to a more domestic, traditionally female one, I can restate my intention differently, going beyond map making and even chart making to the metaphor of knitted cloth. I can say that by this method, from this tangle of hundreds of threads, from a collection of varied experience, chance encounters, conscious and unconscious thinking, a strange kind of a fabric emerges, called a novel. It is all construct and artifice, but there is also an element of mystery in the origin—that drive to articulate and explore and to create freshly something beautiful from the strange shimmering threads of only half understood emotional and psychological territory.

In the novel I wanted the appearance of seamlessness, but now the reverse is true; in an essay such as this the seams are important, for they indicate the variety of subject matter, and the loose ends which fray into further possibilities even as I write. In one sense the exegetical essay could be called 'the novel turned inside out'; one simply hopes that the seams hold good for wear and tear, and that

those loose and fraying threads will be accepted as integral to the design. There is no other way to deal with them.

So besides being a map-maker's journal, the essay is also a knitted afghan, made from a collection of sample swatches knitted in different styles, partially felted by the rough and tumble of thought and construction, linked by repetitions of colour and fibre, and sewn together (having already served their first usefulness in developing the novel) into a kind of patchwork. In the novel, care was taken to match fibre and texture in an attempt to create invisible seams. The novel needed to be all of a piece, and because it is a traditional narrative, the ends are darned in, though a different kind of postmodern novel might want a few ends showing. But this exegetical essay, the reverse side, shows the seams as features in their own right, and the variation in pattern, texture and colour is emphasized rather than diminished. The wrong side remains untidy, though now, in the process of assembly, I see that even on the wrong side colour and fibre and certain repetitions often blur the seam edge. Each swatch was/is important, like a tension sample that is rejected for the moment, but valuable for the experimentation it represents, which helped to define direction, and which may also provide a reference for future work.

The novel will undoubtedly receive more attention than the exegesis. Not too many people will look at the underside of the novel, at the elements of play and exploration and experimentation, to understand the writing process through this very different fabric, the exegetical essay. And just as neither the map nor the journal is a comprehensive representation of process, neither is the afghan—at best it is a sample of the samples, the seams loose and lacy, the holes as

important as the fills. Nevertheless I hope that any reader who chooses to handle this exegetical fabric, the rather misshapen afghan made by experimenting with different yarns and different needles and producing work of varying tension, will enjoy it for what it is, a window into a much larger work in progress, the work of learning to write—a work with no end in sight.

One last comment for this particular swatch. For most of the writing I have seen myself as separate, attempting to be objective and 'on top' of the maps/patterns/charts I am creating—a novel, a plot, an essay, an argument. But there is this to note: I, too, am being charted by this process. The creative act of mapping/journaling/knitting/writing flows out of the knitter/writer, but changes her as well, becomes part of her history, part of the physical experience of the body, part of her psychological and intellectual history, subtly—or even profoundly—impacting all subsequent work.

PART B ORIGINS

The knitted self

Tess Brady commented in her TEXT essay, 'A question of genre: demystifying the exegesis' that research skills for fiction writers are different from writers in more traditional disciplines:

I needed to acquire a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines. I needed to function a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours...

This bowerbird researching requires its own skill. The skill to locate quickly, sort through, and accurately select...knowing where to look...

For example, I did not need to become an archaeologist in order to make use of the Ingstad (1970) research on a Newfoundland dig. I had to know where to find the article, and then I had to take time to read it, navigating my way through the discipline's jargon. But the real time was spent thinking about archaeology. Once I had comprehended the article and its issues I needed to work out which particular aspect of it could represent the whole in a way that could be told in a novel. (2-3)

Like Brady, I have done plenty of research into the subject matter, but 'research' for the fiction writer is hard to define, because it incorporates this 'thinking about' which is not, on the whole, measurable, but which takes a large proportion of production time. What I offer here in Part B is an example of the research process and the thinking that accompanies it, rather than a true cross-

sectional representation of it. For example, it does not include wider reading already mentioned.

Knitting is now touted variously as mantra, relaxation, spiritual awareness, an agent of healing, and a means to access the creative self. All of these may be true to some degree, but I can't help but think that women from sixty or seventy years ago would be rather bemused by its sudden importance. Research into the origins of the new trend showed that a significant factor was a public relations exercise by a yarn company anxious to increase their sales figures. While it's easy to be cynical about such a marketing exercise, the huge surge in popularity indicates that there was also a receptive cultural space, so that the public relations exercise tapped into a widely perceived need to be safe, warm, comforted, relaxed, creative, meditative.

However, for this section I want to take a more personal approach, reflecting on the place of knitting in my own history, and in so doing tease out several parallel strands which have been plied together in the process of life and living.

The first strand is the subject of knitting itself. My interest in knitting sprang from an early familiarity. It was a skill learned at home and at school, with various knitting role models in mother, teachers, aunts, grandmothers, great aunts, and once even, to my astonishment, my father. After a long break during my teens I came back to knitting when expecting my first child; after leaving the stimulating university environment I was looking for new challenges, and for a while the technicalities of home-based crafts sufficed. It was the '70s and early '80s; spinning and weaving were in vogue. I bought a spinning wheel and then a loom. We would move towards self sufficiency and what better way to clothe oneself than

straight from the sheep's back? There were friends with similar interests. We weren't just knitting; we were making garments for self, partners, children, we were clothing our families and we were also knitting community with our children playing nearby. The sense of a particular kind of 'women's work' was immediate: most of us were one wage families with the woman at home caring for young children. Our sense of community influenced major decisions, including the location when buying a house.

A few years later, strapped for cash with four children and a full time student husband, I began knitting one-off designer garments for boutiques. I enjoyed the task and the challenge—one memorable jumper had a child's view of legs, including farmer boots, some striped socks, and the pièce de résistance, red high heels with fishnet stockings. The pay was seventy cents an hour. I wanted one of those pieces for myself, but never had time to make one. In this period too, I hand spun fleece for a local weaver. She paid me fairly, what she herself earned. But as everyone knows, a living from craft is even more precarious than a living from writing. In the end I gave it away.

Thirty years later I began to read some of Dorothy Jones' essays. They were both familiar and stretching:

...cloth, with its immense semiotic potential, belongs in both the material and metaphysical realms, gathering a wide array of associations—literary, mythic, social and political. Ancient and continuing analogies with language make it a ready metaphor of literary expression. 'Text' and 'textile' both derive from Latin 'texere' to weave. We spin a yarn, weave a story, follow

the thread of narrative and fabricate or even embroider a tale. With the most up-to-date technology we communicate on the *internet* and the worldwide *web* while the metaphors 'seamless' and 'unpick' have been incorporated into contemporary critical terminology'. (2000, 3, Jones' emphasis)

What was I after, back then, knitting away for hours at a time? By the time I was knitting I had made one serious attempt at fiction, and was doing a little freelance editing and writing. We'd travelled. I knew the world was larger than my backyard, but daily life was full, and *real* writing, or the writing of large projects at least, would have to wait, and I consciously put the idea of larger work aside for a later time.

On the other hand, my daily life had a great deal to do with cloth. I cut and sewed and washed and ironed it. I wove, knitted, crocheted and occasionally embroidered. I daily pulled it backwards and forwards over my children's heads and pinned it around their plump little torsos. Although I had a university education and had always been a fiction reader, I now read books on gardening, bread making, craft and spirituality.

But there were other things going on with all that textile industry. There was the tactile pleasure and the act of creating something useful from raw materials, but behind that again something deeper that was characterised by urgency, even drivenness—some kind of attempt to position myself as an educated woman with domestic skills who had made the choice to put children and home-making before career. Or so I tell myself now, reconstructing the fraying cloth of my own young womanhood.

So the first strand, the act of knitting, is perhaps felted rather than plied, into the second strand, that of a woman's positioning, her understanding of her place in the world—conscious or not—her sense of personal, familial, and social history, and with that, vocation and identity. I appreciated and enjoyed what the women in my family had given me, the variety of homemaking skills, and this sense of continuing family history was no doubt helped along by the fact that both grandmothers came from families of six girls. Some of the aunts and great aunts I knew were capable career women, nurses and teachers, who in their retirement wove and knitted and laid cement paths, and finally left their substantial fortunes to Aboriginal and refugee families. So I was not lacking interesting role models, though admittedly these women had not combined work with family, except for my mother, and that of necessity when my father was setting up his first medical practice.

We were the first among our friends to have children. While the friends all advanced with teaching careers, my world became more narrowly focussed around the needs of young children, though in a smug corner I thought that I was also developing parental and other relational skills that many of my friends had yet to find. Any further need I had for significance was answered in the fact that as a pastor's wife I was often privileged to be intimately involved in the deep and raw experiences of other people's lives. I developed a strong interest in grief and grief counselling, but there were no role models for what I wanted to do. I enjoyed pastoral work with my husband, but was not paid (that never occurred to any of us) and did not want to be typecast into the traditional role of pastor's wife, which

seemed to involve a lot of meetings. Nor did I want to study theology; I knew that one day I would have time to write.

As an educated young woman in the '70s I felt keenly the lack of professional status. My one term of early teaching was a dismal failure. My attention was at home, and in the exacting demands of shared pastoral work, where any kind of calamity could literally present on the doorstep. However, whatever skills one developed in this sphere were neither appreciated nor measurable by any secular standards. Life was also very full; the often fierce feminism of that period largely passed me by. I was preoccupied with what seemed like both smaller and larger daily issues: the constant needs of young children, the complicated intricacies of tangled lives, as well as daily participation in a thriving local community.

So issues of identity, and of vocation, were important, but confusing. I enjoyed the odd freelance job, but until I ghosted a major project after the children were all at school, 'work' did not feel tangible—unlike like the domestic work I was doing, which was all too painfully clear. In retrospect it is hardly surprising that the theme of women's work became such a strong thread in the novel.

The third strand was a deepening curiosity in human behaviour. Several close friends had studied psychology and one was a clinical psychologist. I began a slow counselling diploma, one subject at a time, but when it became clear to me that I must choose between writing and counselling, writing won. I completed only half the course work, but the reading and awareness from that time stood me in good stead for writing.

The fourth strand was a developing theology, no doubt helped along by interest in my husband's study, but nevertheless personally pursued, at times with joy, at other times with desperation. The themes of grace at work, Big Grace and little grace, the possibility of change, redemption, resurrection, are all embedded in the novel, easily seen by anyone with familiarity with the subject matter—Martha's pattern 'in your heart somehow', her 'prayer' knitting, a kind of baptism in the bubbling spring, the thrown red rose petals in the church an echo the Old Testament sacrificial lamb's blood being sprinkled on the gathered people, itself a foreshadowing of later Lamb, the Christ. I wanted to write a novel that worked for a secular audience but which also satisfied me theologically. At only one point did these two intentions appear to clash—would the characters resolve their issues on their own, or would they be helped? It was at this point that the mentoring question 'What agency is at work here?' became crucial. In the end I subjected the plot to the theology, though I felt that by introducing the Cleaner who fixes things I was taking a technical risk.

So these four 'research' strands—knitting, vocation/positioning, interest in human behaviour and a personal theological framework, have all contributed to the novel, though of course the engagement with each of them is an ongoing journey.

Research over the last four years has been more particular—the history of knitting, knitting as a cultural phenomenon, knitting in literature, knitting as textile art, knitting as craft. It was tempting at first to think that this essay would be entirely about those things, but to concentrate on this kind of recently collected material seemed to be limiting and indeed dishonest given a lifelong interest. Besides there was a different kind of knitting that I wanted to research, the knitting of words.

Any committed writer is surely engaged in the demanding and ongoing research of being attentive to the work in progress, simultaneously analysing and experimenting. Finding character or voice may involve a whole series of experiments; a great deal of mullock must sometimes be shifted before the opal is found.

For example, the opening paragraph of the novel only had two main drafts, but there was a great deal of experimentation before I knew where and how it would be placed—whether it would be first or third person, whether it was part of a ‘collected papers’, or a section opener, or part of the main text. Similarly, the roses scene in the church, the second scene to be written, was extracted through a huge drafting process: I didn’t keep count of them all but somewhere between twenty and thirty, as I tried to find the voice. Who was telling Martha’s story and from what position? Part of the difficulty was that at first I was trying to tell it from other characters’ points of view, writing in the first person. Attempts in the third person also failed—for some reason that remains unclear I had difficulty in creating and clarifying the necessary space between author and narrator. In the end I stopped trying and attempted other sequences, finally settling for third person omniscient narrator, and with that established was able to go back and write the roses scene as needed.

I am interested to note that I have had a similar difficulty with this essay, where one of the chief demands of this final stage has been to define the appropriate voice, and to strip away inappropriate detail which blurred those same narrator/author boundaries and so weakened the narrative. Now, as I write this, I see freshly that even when one writes in the first person, and the writing is

autobiographical, the narrative voice still must be understood as construct, and construct appropriate to a particular audience.

The final scene of the novel also went through a great many drafts. In early drafts Sandra invited Martha and Cliff to dinner and Sandra—instead of dancing in solitude—surprised them by standing and singing a doxology in a loud voice. The final sentence in the novel went through uncountable drafts; it took three days to get 'right', as I tried to find a few words with the right combination of meaning, rhythm and musicality. Even now, I think that I achieved the first two, but at the expense of the musicality that I wanted. The meaning was more important than the sound.

Further research was conducted amongst peers, through supervision, through mentorship, through editing; each eye on the microscope offered a different observation to be considered. When the first draft is complete there is another kind of research, into architecture, the rise and fall of dramatic tension, the shape of the plot, the executing of denouement. Extraneous material must be cut away: every detail serve its own dramatic purpose. Continuity must be inspected. And is there enough flesh on the bones? At the third-to-last draft the architecture was strong, but the writing was minimalist—almost all the changes were expansions. In the last draft I added 6000 words of new material in bits and pieces throughout manuscript, smoothing transitions and extending scenes to maximise impact.

This kind of analysis and response—in other words, *research*, however informal, into the writing and the writing process—surely accompanies any kind of

purposeful writing. Other readers may make suggestions, but in the end, of course, it's the writer's decision, the writer's risk. One must trust the inner voice.

The art of knitting

Above my work station is a postcard from the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a reproduction of a small painting by an Australian artist, Grace Cossington Smith. I pinned it there in the early stages of writing the novel, but as time went on it became more and more significant, so that now it is the subject of this section. Called 'The sock knitter' the painting depicts Cossington Smith's sister Madge knitting a sock for the war effort. The knitter is sitting demurely in the deregulated lines of what might be a corner, neat, self contained, composed, wearing what is probably a hand knitted cardigan, with hands held in the traditional English method, half way through knitting a sock. Strong colour and strong brush strokes, a pleasing representation of domestic industry.

A closer inspection of both the painting and its history reveals something more subversive. It is a bold work, signifying a confident artist. An unusual work for its period, it 'challenged artistic traditions of its time, through its extreme flattening of the picture plane and use of bright, expressive, broken colour applied in bold brush strokes, to delineate form' (Department of Training and Education, Victoria).

Cossington Smith was born in 1892. I try to think what this means.

My grandmothers too were both born at the turn of the century. There was the swelling demand for women to have the vote, won in South Australia in 1894. Both my grandmothers brought up their children in extremely impoverished circumstances. My paternal grandmother and her six children lived with husband and father on a soldier settler block on Kangaroo Island in a house with a dirt floor.

My maternal grandmother had one child, but because of an early separation and divorce, was a single working mother, a situation that in those days carried a certain stigma. She and my mother were at times forced to live with relatives, and at one particularly low point my mother was put in a children's home.

Both grandmothers taught their daughters knitting and needlework. The knitting of socks, jumpers, skirts and dresses was simply economic necessity. My grandmother knitted socks for my grandfather when he was in France from 1916-18, as she knitted socks for her sons, my father, born during that same trench warfare, and my uncle, who served in the Middle East and Papua New Guinea 1940-45. My mother knitted socks for her fiancée during their long two year engagement.

But the knitting and needlework went beyond 'war comforts' and home necessities into the realm of art. From the paternal grandmother and her sisters I have fine lace doyleys, knitted and crocheted, and a large hand-crocheted tablecloth. My eighty-four year old paternal aunt recently gave me an armful of family heritage items, including the treasured 'fairy knitting' doyley.

My mother was taught knitting and embroidery ('fancywork') as a child by her mother, and in the school class room, and remembers the trial of small hands trying to knit on the difficult combination of thick needles and fine wool. In my linen press is another pile of beautiful work from both my mother and her mother. These items, made to protect the polished wooden surfaces of traymobiles and dressing tables, are not fashionable in today's clean lines and uncluttered surfaces. I don't know what to do with them but I can't bear to part with them either. These few pieces of domestic artwork, beautiful and precious, are part of my inheritance.

Both these grandmothers, like many others who lived through the Depression, had known a family history of a more elegant lifestyle than they themselves experienced. My paternal grandmother's father, an English dreamer, thought his six daughters could be English-style milkmaids in the newly opened mallee scrub of Kangaroo Island. The maternal grandmother's father, also British, also with six daughters, and no sons, was an army officer in the Boer War and the family wastrel, whose British inheritance was doled out to him by lawyers in Cape Town so that he didn't spend it all at once. The rest of the family in London were glad of the distance between them.

So what did these painstaking and time consuming knitted and embroidered works of art mean to the women who made them? The fine knitted doyleys and the fancywork were important at a number of levels—the expression of their creativity, the joy in the making and the displaying, the hope that perhaps one day there might be more to experience than the present drudgery. Items for a hope chest, put away against a happier future.

There is a photo of Cossington Smith standing in the garden and knitting socks during 1915, but her life was much easier than the lives of my grandmothers. Privileged by education, her parents' financial and emotional support, and by Madge's house keeping, she was free to pursue her art. This she did with disciplined persistence, breaking free from past techniques to develop her own style of showing her vision to the world. This was in spite of her beloved teacher Datillo Rubbo's disapproval, scathing reviews in the *Bulletin*, and by respected critics such as George Galway in the *Evening News*. The latter was particularly vicious and described her glowing landscapes of those years as 'a lot of green

frogs hanging out to dry in the sun' (Modjeska, 279). 'The sock knitter', produced by Cossington Smith as a student at the age of twenty-five, is now considered to be the first post-impressionist painting to be exhibited in Australia. Somehow it slipped under the wall of prejudice and criticism to be shown at the Royal Art Society in 1915. At least one writer has been suggested that its very domesticity may have distracted critics from its modernism (Department of Education & Training, Victoria).

If Cossington Smith was disappointed with the critical response, she was sufficiently self-assured to continue working, even when her friend and mentor Datillo Rubbo, 'didn't understand the way I wanted to go and thought I was wrong' (quoted in Modjeska, 258). It wasn't until 1967, when Cossington Smith was seventy-five years old, that she began to get the profile and appreciation she deserved when Daniel Thomas bought seven major paintings for the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As Modjeska says:

for years she was not seen by those who dealt in cultural power. That kind of invisibility can be hard to bear. It can make one doubt the sanity of any artistic enterprise... . But there was one hidden advantage...away from the trends and fashions and expectations, she was able to see without being seen. Invisibility can occasionally produce a powerful, rather unnerving, vantage point. (209)

Cossington Smith herself said that it was just as well the critics hadn't liked her, as it gave her the freedom to paint as she wished (Modjeska, 205). One has to

admire her tenacity, and what must have been an unswerving sense that what she was doing was 'right'. She lived until she was ninety-two, her life defined by what she called 'a continual try' to paint what she 'saw' (Modjeska, 311).

Let me lay another story alongside the story of Cossington Smith.

In 1986 Diana Wood Conroy assisted Jennifer Isaacs in researching material for a Australian Bicentenary production titled *The Gentle Arts: 200 years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts*. They chose to work through families and the family history of objects rather than through more spectacular anonymous items.

Wood Conroy, in an article published six years later in *Object*, 'Outside Looking In: Textiles and Marginality', reflected on the experience of this research:

...the use of domestic textiles as image and source is not always appropriate for artists working in textile media. The 'semiotic' associations (to hark back to Julia Kristeva) of the repressed tradition are still overwhelming... . Although I was working as a professional tapestry weaver making commissioned work for public and private spaces I felt isolated from the critical acceptance of the art world. The nature of the research work I was doing for *The Gentle Arts* exposed the strongly emotional bonds I felt to the intricate work done by my mother, grandmother, and great grandmother—all needlewomen of the first order. It seemed to alienate me even further from the actual social (and modernist) art context in which I was trying to succeed as an artist, without emphasis on gender. In researching *The Gentle Arts* I read story after story of the extreme difficulty of early

settlement, particularly for women. The sacrifices and enormous effort put into domestic needlework for the home made me angry at the powerlessness and restraints placed on so much talent. (5)

A number of points in this passage snag my attention.

Here we have a strange crossing of threads. Cossington Smith was criticised for her modernism; Wood Conroy feels 'isolated from critical acceptance' by both her interest in textiles, and by the particular nature of these historical and domestic textiles.

The first statement, 'the use of domestic textiles as image and source is not always appropriate for artists working in textile media', is quite striking if considered in terms of artistic censorship. Here we have an internationally recognised textile artist and theorist, who freely admits deep emotional bonds to the intricate textiles created by the women in her family, yet who simultaneously denies—or is denied—the use of them as 'image and source'. The reason has to do with what Kay Lawrence refers to as the 'hierarchy of art practice' (conversation 5 August 2004) which in turn has to do with status and economics. These items, because of their strong emotional resonance, surely offer great—perhaps the greatest—creative possibilities, yet the anticipated condemnation from the critical art world dictates the terms. Wood Conroy is not alone; in a footnote she reports on discussions held during 1991 where other nationally recognised textile artists experienced a 'constant bewilderment' in their 'profound sense of marginalisation from the mainstream of art practice', and felt that textiles were 'excluded arbitrarily from significant exhibitions in commercial and public galleries' (32). The external world stifles the inner artistic exploration, or at the very least narrows the field. And of

course there is more, which can be crudely stated thus: she who does not get critical acclaim is not invited to exhibit and is therefore not considered worthy of funding.

As I write this particular section I am concurrently working on the publicity which will accompany the publication of the novel *Knitting*. Like Wood Conroy, I too have been keenly aware of the potential critical response, which will in some ways determine my career.

Even in the relatively removed process of writing a novel about knitting, rather than using knitting as an art form, I have become aware of the uncomfortable coupling of emotionally valued textiles and critical acceptance. I have indeed, in broad terms, used the inherited family textiles as 'inspiration and source'. But when I am asked the inevitable 'What's the novel about?' and I reply simply 'knitting' (although it's about many things besides) the response is varied—surprise, laughter, and sometimes a sudden withdrawal of interest.

As a writer I have more liberty, perhaps, than Wood Conroy, in that the subject of my work is generally perceived to be separate from the creative act—the use of literary devices separates art from object. But still I feel the prickling of similar tensions. It is acceptable to be writing a novel about knitting in a university environment, but there are also unspoken rules: it is not so acceptable to be preoccupied with knitting per se. There are reasons for this, of course—a university is an academic institution, after all. One of the outcomes of the feminist movement is that the subject of knitting can be validly studied within the university environment, but at the same time it is almost unthinkable that in a *serious* academic or corporate environment women would share knitting patterns over

lunch. Our lives are compartmentalised, fragmented, particularly where women exercise any kind of vocational power. Do professional women (other than textile artists) feel it is safe to admit to a practice of traditional domestic arts/crafts in the context of their work environment?

There are of course exceptions: food and gardening. It's trendy to be a foodie, whether one cooks it, consumes it, critiques it or contextualises it. It's earthy and restorative to garden, or at least as Susan Hosking suggested in a recent conversation, the *idea* of gardening or cooking is earthy and restorative, judging by the number of books and television programs devoted to the subject. But quilting? Crochet? Knitting? Sewing? Who would dare?

The quotation from Wood Conroy fairly bristles: 'The sacrifices and enormous effort put into domestic needlework for the home made me angry at the powerlessness and restraints placed on so much talent.' Although I understand the anger, I wonder if it is misplaced. I tread cautiously here, as this is not my area of expertise, and other writers such as Dorothy Jones ('Defining Self and others Through Textile and Text') have demonstrated that cloth and clothing can be saturated with many meanings.

On the other hand, do we accept these pioneer needlewomen as artists? Certainly Wood Conroy seems to see them as artists—'sacrifice', 'enormous effort', 'so much talent'. Did they feel powerless in regard to their textiles, their art? Would not the engagement and demonstration of such skilled work rather be a source of empowerment and satisfaction?

And what exactly is the 'restraint'? The lack of critical recognition? The lack of opportunity in regard to their art? Or that the needlework represents one of many talents encouraged by men to occupy women in a male-dominated society?

Was the art itself constrained? Was it, I wonder, a man or a woman who first made an embroidery pattern of the flirtatious Dolly Varden, the Dickens' character from *Barnaby Rudge*—'the very pink and pattern of good looks'—who loved to dress up?

Certainly Australian women have worked hard—with many men—in extremely challenging circumstances. But perhaps in the midst of this toil, which included necessary sewing and knitting, the decorating of the home (a different kind of necessity) through textile arts offered women a freeing experience of great artistic licence. Nobody made them do it. (Well, perhaps their mothers did!)

As an experiment/exploration I took some knitting into the academic environment, knitting while other Ph.D. students presented their work. The knitting was a sock on four needles and looked more complicated than it was, especially to non knitters. It demanded only a miniscule concentration on my part. The knitting received attention at both ends of the day—at the beginning when I requested permission and in the first few minutes as others became used to the phenomenon, and at the end of the day when it was noticed how much I had achieved. Affirming admiration came from unexpected quarters.

But like many experiments the most interesting result was tangential to the main study. What exercised me most afterwards was the fact that it took enormous emotional effort on my part to take my knitting to the seminar, to stake my bit of territory, to attempt to manage wool and needles discreetly, and to remain alert and

sensitive to the fact that what I was doing might have been offensive, particularly to those presenting. Would they think I was withholding proper attention? I did not wish to offend, but I was curious about how I was being received. And there was a certain dogged defiance at work as well. Knitting is not only what I do, it is part of who I am, as the production of a novel about knitting testifies. And one of the great pleasures of knitting is that it can be done in odd moments, and that it can dilute the potential tedium of other environments—waiting, being a passenger, an academic meeting. Not only does the present moment become more interesting (perhaps bearable) but one finishes up with a new pair of boutique socks.

But the experience went even deeper. I was also trying on a kind of identity—can one comfortably be a knitting academic, or perhaps an academic knitter, in the public space? In spite of the resurgence, knitting is still a relatively rare public phenomenon, so I was also pushing the boundaries of the familiar, and it wasn't comfortable. One cannot knit in public without being noticed, and as a writer, I am more interested in being an anonymous observer: drawing attention to oneself is generally counterproductive.

It seems to me that what lies at the heart of Wood Conroy's 'not always appropriate' is an identity issue. It is difficult to be one's integrated self, unsqueezed by the environment and therefore free to explore creatively, when one's career success is dependent on critical acclaim. The art world and the literary world are similar in this—if an artist/writer is to eat, and continue to pursue art/writing, the work must be marketable, if not critically acceptable. It is a simple matter of economics, and the critics/reviewers determine, to some degree, our ability to continue.

Because this novel was written with the benefit of a scholarship, I was free to take a few risks; I've already mentioned the plot resolution via the Cleaner, but there were other risky elements as well: the title might limit me to an exclusively female audience; the magic realism of the visionary passages are hardly a popular device, and were at odds with the mainly realist settings of the rest of the work. In Cossington Smith terms, to 'paint what I saw' was a difficult and exacting process, in some places requiring many drafts.

Later in the same article quoted above, Wood Conroy comments: 'I observed with great interest how Narelle Jubelin has been able to defuse this sense of incapacity I had felt in dealing with the power of the textiles passed down through my family.' Jubelin's gift to Wood Conroy was to place a very beautiful 1860s Scottish shawl in a much broader context, 'motifs imported from India, silk and wool fibres provided by colonies far from Scotland, associations with a particular style of dress for a particular class of woman, and woven in Paisley by the last remnants of independent skilled craftsmen'. Further, Jubelin used the shawl as inspiration and source for her own work (32).

If Wood Conroy had been similarly emotionally distanced from these domestic textiles, she would probably have been able to give them this theoretical context. But the question that emerges is 'What gives these particular textiles their real significance?' There is the personal emotional significance of textile inheritance, but the relief Wood Conroy experiences when her feelings are validated by other meanings is palpable.

Why did Wood Conroy find it difficult to categorise and contextualise these family textiles? It's hard to know, but at the nub of it, I wonder, the larger matter of

unpaid/unrecognised work, represented in this argument by textiles? Is she tapping into that discrepancy between our collective sense that domestic work of all kinds *is* important, but the simultaneous fact that such work is rarely validated either by a bank balance or by a clear theoretical context—not for most people, anyway. Is she hinting that what we crave is actually beyond ‘critical acceptance’, something more fundamental to do with empathy and a genuine respect for our work, whatever that work is?

The work that Martha does in the novel is largely for love. Sandra is keen to validate it, give a theoretical context, but Martha does not need such validation, even if she might have needed such in the past. Martha is comfortable with herself and her work until she makes her ‘big mistake’, allowing Sandra’s values and feelings to impinge on her own. But this understanding of the novel is retrospective—at the time of writing I doubt whether I could have articulated this thought. Instead something deeper erupted into the novel through these particular metaphors. Even now, with this retrospective view, I only have partial knowledge—other things may yet come to the surface. The emotional and creative driving forces derived from source, inspiration, the very process of making, are mysterious.

Would it have been possible, I wonder, for Wood Conroy to appreciate her textile inheritance simply as things which have a family history and bring her joy, and to allow herself the emotional space to maybe/maybe not explore them as an artist? This is a naïve question, I know, but perhaps what I really want to ask is this: have we lost the capacity for simple pleasure within the framework of our own sense of self, a pleasure that is often foundational to the creative process? Or does

the prejudice and potential criticism of the art/literary world, and our dependence on its validation and economics, cause us to deny—or to take little account—of the emotional power and importance these objects have for us, thereby diminishing our own potential?

Cossington Smith offers us a useful role model. 'The sock knitter' was indeed a significant painting, and the spontaneous approval it evoked must have been affirming and satisfying. But when that approval was soon afterwards replaced with carping and insulting criticism, Cossington Smith continued on regardless. Critical acclaim, enjoyable while it lasted, did not determine her sensibilities or her art, though of course her economic survival did not depend on it. Nevertheless, she, and her supportive family, obviously had enough conviction to continue working in spite of all.

Like Drusilla Modjeska, I find myself drawn to the Cossington Smith story, the story of a woman who 'simply didn't accept the terms'.

What makes Cossington Smith so interesting is that she is that rarity, a woman who simply didn't accept the terms. Or rather, didn't *get* the terms. It wasn't that she didn't suffer from them. Simply that she lived—genuinely and absolutely—by some other rubric. Perhaps it was because she was sufficiently isolated... Perhaps it was because her psyche was peopled with sufficient figures from myth, and was touched with enough of the masculine to carry ambition without shame or self-consciousness. Perhaps it was because she didn't need the admiration of men to make her feel she was a woman. Perhaps it was because Madge relieved her of so much. Or perhaps it was because she was a dweller in that in-between zone, and

understood the meaning of vocation. She didn't escape the grab and tension that inevitably occurs if one is an artist in a culture that allows the way we value and understand art to remain in the keeping of men. When she found a way through, it was not by moving between one and the other, art and life, but by encompassing both in the same fluid gesture.

The reason her work moves me isn't, as I initially thought, that she articulated some inverted version of the rub between life and art, though she certainly gestures to it. And it isn't that she settles the tension, or resolves it, although in a sense that is exactly what the late interiors do. What she does is illuminate them both so that each is held in the other. Are the interiors about art? Or about life? Ridiculous questions. How can they be disentangled?' (339)

Modjeska earlier comments briefly that as Cossington Smith was 'famously well-mannered and a regular church goer, it [is] not inaccurate to refer to her as a Christian' (206). It could be that this comment, made in passing, holds the key to Cossington Smith's settled persistence. She may have felt that in the grand scheme of things she did know who she was, and what she was about and that that gave her the tenacity and strength to persist, with little encouragement, but with that sense of 'vocation' that Modjeska suggests. The textual support (Art Gallery of New South Wales) for the painting 'The Lacquer Room' in the travelling exhibition (National Gallery of Australia, Adelaide, October 2005) notes that 'all her paintings can be seen to be devotional', and certainly many of Cossington Smith's comments can be read as double entendres: 'it has to shine; light must be in it'; 'I'm always so anxious to get the feeling of penetrating light.'

The parallels between writers and painters, writing and painting, have intrigued me for many years, and in such readings comparisons with my own journey are inevitable. Certainly I find parallel personal and writerly meanings in Cossington Smith's interview comment to Alan Roberts (1970): 'I can remember Roy De Maistre saying years ago, "You don't want to make your skies so heavy" and I said, "But the blue is such a very deep blue," and he said, "Yes, it is a deep blue, but you've got to remember that it's also light." And that's just it.' It was a striving to achieve the kind of light (and lightness) which both illuminates and reveals.

Unlike Cossington Smith, but probably like many or even most women, my own life and attempts at art have often been separated by the simple dynamics of limited time and the responsibilities of family, so that either art or life dominates. Oh for a sister Madge! On the other hand, those things which interfere with art can also provide the substance for it.

Perhaps, as Modjeska says, the separation of art and life is indeed arbitrary; one could even go as far as to say 'false'. Perhaps, in the larger architecture of meaning, life and art are exactly the same thing, and the critical affirmation which is so eagerly sought, pleasing and encouraging as it is, may in the end be largely irrelevant.

PART C REFLECTION

Meditation 1: On Felt

Consider felt. It is made by layering wool batts, criss-cross, criss-cross on a flat surface. Bits of yarn and other fibre may be added for decorative effect. Then the whole is rolled up in something large and strong but which still allows movement—layers of nylon mesh or a matchstick blind—and the whole is shocked in hot and cold water, soaped and rolled and pummelled, so that little barbs which are part of a wool staple hook into each other and matt together. Just for good measure, it can be given a cycle in the washing machine. At the end it is pressed and dried.

A novel, an essay, a piece of felt. First one must have the basic fibre, the substance for construction. Then the little barbs on words or wool must be hooked into one another, soaped and rolled and pummelled through a variety of experimental methods, flattened, teased and stretched again with wood or argument, shaped by logic. Sometimes, instead of the layering of batts, a garment is knitted before felting, made loose and baggy before the felting process fuses the separate stitches into an organic whole. While still wet and pliable the fabric can be pulled this way and that to fit the difficult shapes of head or foot, novel or essay. Or it can be dried and the seams stitched before the incisive cut that frees the fabric to sharpen a corner, so that when the knitted novel is turned inside out the exegesis, like underfelt, is neatly parallel and can be seen clearly.

Only felt, strong and durable, can be manufactured by such course and injurious methods. Other fabrics cannot stand the heat.

Meditation 2: on a blue silk vest

When Charles I was beheaded for treason on 30 January 1649 he was wearing a hand-knitted blue silk vest which is now held in the Museum of London. It has stains on the front which are generally believed to be blood, though forensic tests during the 1950s and '80s were inconclusive.

Charles' tastes were modest though early in his reign he wore the grand and elaborate dress appropriate to his status. In later life he dressed more sombrely, and on his way to the scaffold, his outer wear, at least, was black. He had with him a white satin cap to enclose his long hair, hair which he was naturally anxious to keep from fouling the executioner's axe. He died with a self-contained dignity, a traitor to some, a martyr to others. The death of a royal is no small event, and the impact on the nation was profound.

It was a cold afternoon and Charles also wore a linen shirt, and possibly a satin doublet. The King's attendant, Thomas Herbert, wrote in his 1678 memoir that when he rose on his last morning Charles 'appointed what Cloathe he would wear; "Let me have a Shirt on more than ordinary," said the King, "by reason the season is so sharp as probably may make me shake, which some Observers will imagine proceeds from fear. I would have no such Imputation. I fear not Death!"' (Staniland, 2)

It is the nature of relics to exist in multiples. There were at least two linen shirts associated with the execution, and several embroidered and/or satin nightcaps. One linen shirt, now the property of Lord Ashbourne, may well be genuine, as well as the blue silk vest or 'wastcoat' that the Museum acquired, with

documentation, from a collector in 1925. Other surviving garments from the period are also linked to Charles I. Whatever the combination of garments, there is enough evidence to suggest that for his execution, under the black cloak, Charles wore linen and the knitted blue silk-vest. Silk and linen, kind to the skin.

Royal clothing records reveal that in the 1630s the King was supplied with 'fine silke wastcoats' along with 'silke hose' and 'tennis sockes' by the merchant Thomas Robinson (Staninland, 2). The vest in question was handed down through the family of Dr Hobbes, the king's physician. Was the vest purchased on this occasion or another? Had Charles had and cherished it for a long time, or was it kept only for special occasions? Had he cavorted with his wife in his luxurious blue silk underwear?

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Knitting and Hosiery Guilds were commonplace in Europe and England. The craft of knitting, hitherto utilitarian, was now perfected to a fine art. Silk yarns were newly available, and guilders took full advantage of their lustrous beauty, developing exotic garments. The brocade patterns popular in the period were perfect for showing off the sheen of the new fibre and the complex patterns were further embellished by outlines embroidered or knitted in gold and silver thread.

Until the introduction of silk, knitted fabric was frequently felted, a process which blurs individual stitches and gives the appearance of woven fabric. Those too poor to afford a loom could at least make or procure knitting needles, and by felting their knitting could achieve a semblance of woven fabric. With the introduction of silk, each individual knitted stitch came into its own. Textured patterns, mainly brocades, were derived from various combinations of pearl and

plain, the simple binary system which has remained unchanged for hundreds of years, and continues as the basis of knitting.

A silk vest for a king. A silk 'wastcoat'. Knitted exquisitely in light blue, the colour of sky and freedom, knitted in silk, an exotic thread imported from China. Knitted for those engaged in pomp and ceremony, for the moneyed and privileged. According to Mary Thomas, author of an extraordinary pair of knitting books not always accurate but still in print (first published in 1938 and 1943), Charles' 'wastcoat' was knitted by a master knitter, trained for six years: three to learn the trade, and three to travel and presumably undertake research. The apprentice then spent thirteen intense weeks making four Masterpieces. These comprised: a carpet, 4 ells (4.572 metres) square, in a design containing flowers, foliage, birds and animals, in natural colours; a beret; a woollen shirt; and a pair of hose with the 'Spanish clocks' pattern (Thomas, *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book*, 2).

Today on the internet there is a pattern for a 'King Charles Brocade Dishcloth', a dishcloth made with a 12 row pattern repeat, derived from the knitted silk shirt worn by the unfortunate Charles, and originally published in Barbara Walker's 1968 pattern book, *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns*. Barbara Collins, the woman offering this item, writes "I made it in Sage Green Sugar 'n[sic] Cream and it is lovely. I believe that it will show the pattern best if worked in a solid colour. Anything variegated or multi-coloured will hide the pattern' (Collins, 1).

Why did Barbara Collins choose this particular pattern? Because the pattern was notable? Or because of the 'interesting little story' about Charles I that accompanied it in the Barbara Walker pattern book? What is it that I find fascinating? Why do I juxtapose these two items with their patterned connection?

The phenomenon of knitted dishcloths has fascinated me for some time. Australians do not generally knit dishcloths, though if knitting web sites and internet chat rooms are any indication, Americans cherish them. My tentative chat room query about the function of a 'dishcloth' (is it a kind of tea towel?) was greeted with enthusiasm: no, it's a dishcloth for wiping the sink, and hand knitted dishcloths are durable, washable, reusable, absorbent. (What more could any woman want?)

I have my own memories of dishcloth knitting. Although I could knit from the age of five, when I was ten years old my mother deemed me old enough to learn to 'knit properly': that is, to knit holding the right hand needle in the space between thumb and forefinger, so that the forefinger can quickly loop the wool around the point of the needles with minimal shifting of the hand. It was a hard lesson, and like any new skill, took some discipline not to revert to the older, easier but ultimately slower way. Under my mother's encouraging (though determined) eye I painfully learned to 'knit properly'. It was not immediately faster. Nor was the yarn easy on the fingers; it was cotton, probably the thing my mother had spare at the moment, and there were too many stitches per sweaty row for my liking—forty or fifty at least. The rows, under this new regime, took a long time. I still don't like knitting cotton; it doesn't have the elasticity or the ease of wool. I was knitting in garter stitch; there were holes here and there where I accidentally made stitches, the sides wobbled in and out, the garter stitch rows varied in tension. It was the ugliest thing I ever made, the colour an insipid pale yellow. I remember thinking, even then, that it was a stupid colour for a dishcloth.

But my mother and I had our reward. Even my ten year old eyes could see, as I plugged away, that my knitting was rapidly improving. It did become quicker

and easier, and the evidence was there in my hands: fewer mistakes towards the top, and a surprising and satisfyingly even tension. The lines in the garter stitch began to run parallel, instead of diverging and converging around random strangely-shaped holes.

Did my mother ever use the dishcloth? I think she did: I think it had something to do with Mothers' Day. It should have been kept for posterity, because as my mother well knew, I learned more than knitting that day. I learned that perseverance pays off, that practice does make—well, nearly perfect—and that the pleasure of dexterity with new skills is worth the trial of achieving them. It was the same mother standing over me that same year, the year of turning ten, watching and helping as I wrote my first major piece of nonfiction, an enormous project on her birth land, South Africa. It was far bigger and more ambitious than anything produced by my peers, and illustrated with pictorial calendars from distant relatives. I hated doing it, but that too had its reward: first prize, a tin of toffees.

Knitting and writing. Knit one, purl one, write two, edit one, start a new line. If you practice patiently, you achieve a certain elegance; if you persist, you end up with a dishcloth, a composition, a pair of socks, an article, a jumper, a novel. Later, economics was added to the equation; knitting and writing both earned me cash, though, as I have already mentioned, seventy cents an hour for complex patterns, earned during long evenings with four sleeping children, was hardly raking it in. But like two small seed stitches in bright blue silk, knitting and writing both shone with possibility. And here I am, twenty years on, indulging both.

Back to Charles' vest, Charles' 'wastcoat'. There are, it seems, several patterns available, hardly surprising for such an exquisite work. The pattern itself is

available in a clearly blocked graph, but not the construction instructions for the garment. I find myself fantasising about knitting a reproduction; it may have been an undergarment in its time, but it would make fine evening wear today. I could draft my own pattern. Is silk available, I wonder? I eye off small, shiny and expensive embroidery hanks in the craft shop, but then discover they are rayon, not silk. My mother tells me that fifty years ago knitting silk was available. I search the internet. Yes, I can buy mulberry silk tops (silk ready for spinning) \$17.50 for 100 grams (Virginia Farm Woolworks, 2005). Could I spin it finely and evenly enough? Hand-dyed silk yarn is available for \$25 for 100 grams. It is touted as 2/20, a figure I do not understand.

At another website, Dormani Yarns, I find Silk Bourette, raw silk yarn, 450 grams of 4 ply for \$27.50, a veritable bargain (Dormani Yarns, 2005). I could make my garment for under \$100, though perhaps only in raw white silk. In such fine yarn and such a pattern it would take forever to knit; I have just finished a 5 ply jumper, plain knitting, dull black, which took long enough. A gift of love, commissioned by a son, knitted to the old Paton's classic pattern, but hardly a work of art. And if I did commit to knitting the vest in silk, would I be pleased with the result? Would it hold its shape? How would it drape? My knowledge and experience of silk is limited: an orange and black sari I wore in India (too narrow for my height), a couple of clinging shirts, and the mysterious piece of parachute souvenired away in my father's army trunk.

As I consider these questions I realise that the knitter of Charles' vest must have asked himself these same things about time and yarn and finished product. What was the starting point, for him? Not a faded photo, obviously. It may have

started with a commission, or a pattern that grew from pondering, much as my words grow into this essay. Perhaps it was the siren call of silk, the lustrous sky-blue beauty, a yarn impossible to resist. Perhaps he made the pattern for the silk, as it were, built his pattern in an intricate combination of brocade diamonds to show off the new rage of silk yarn. Or perhaps it was to show off himself, his craft, his care, his way with stitches.

I say 'he' because guildsmen were just that—guilds men. Did some of them have women, I wonder, working under the cover of their guild membership? Surely women would have desired these same skills. Perhaps it was a woman who made this garment.

But there is something else lurking in the back of my mind about this vest: the blood. Clearly visible around the neck and on the front of the garment are dark stains. There are several accounts of the execution by seventeenth and eighteenth century historians, who, like any cross-section of writers, approach the subject of the execution with a variety of purposes and styles, some stating a simple outline of events, others milking that same event for full emotional impact, all of them striving for their version of aesthetic. How do I position myself, another writer, three and a half centuries later? As with questions of knitting, little has changed over the centuries; the essential question is what does the event mean to me/us? What do I wish to communicate, and what is the best way to do it?

The event itself would have been far more important to these early writers than it is to me. They were witnesses, or at least would have known witnesses. But for me the execution of Charles is little more than a curious circumstance, an imaginative dalliance.

But the image of blood, this powerful and evocative symbol, this iconography, stirs me at a number of levels. Blood-soaked knitting. And of course the early writers, the historians, are not immune to it either; if they do not mention the blood, it is still implied, and parallels are suggested with Christ's martyrdom:

His Head was at one Blow sever'd from his Body... . Archbishop Usher, from a Window, swooned at the sight of the fatal Blow... .And as the Rumour of his Death spread throughout the Kingdom, Women miscarry'd, many of both Sexes fell into Palpitations, Swoonings and Melancholy and some, with sudden Consternations, expired.

Laurence Echard, *The History of England.*(661)

So after a short pause, his Majesty stretching forth his Hands, the Executioner (who was all the while in a Mask) at one Blow severed his Head from his Body, which being held up and shewed to the astonish'd People, was with his Body put into a Coffin covered with black Velvet, and carried into his Lodging-Chamber in Whitehall.

It must be dreadfully remember'd, that the cruel Powers did suspect, that the King would not submit his Head to the Block....by the Example of his Savior, he resisted not, he disappointed their Wit, and yielded to their Malice.'

Bishop White Kennet, *A Complete History of England*, quoted on History Learning Site (2004).

Even if we ignore the emotiveness of the writing, the execution of a king is highly confrontational. It raises all kinds of issues—the meaning of authority, treason, justice, capital punishment. But for me, knitter and writer, there is in this event a fundamental non sequitur; knitting was never meant for blood, for dying. Knitting is for warmth, shelter and comfort, for covering nakedness, and in the case of this particular vest at least, (and surely representing a vast historical flow of hand-knitted garments) an integration of true functionality with a distinguished art form.

Did the knitter ever know what happened to his 'wastcoat? Did he live in England, or did stories filter through to a home in Europe? What kind of person was this knitter? What would have alarmed him the most—a king's death, or the spoiling of one of his masterpieces? And there is this irony: the spilling of blood, the spoiling of the garment, ensured its survival, its place in history, and the enduring reputation of this skilful knitter, whoever he was.

Kennet's account of the execution already draws parallels with Christ's crucifixion, so that Charles' death is portrayed as martyrdom, drawing on the archetype of Christ's death with those same issues—authority, treason, justice, capital punishment. There are further parallels. At the time of Charles' death there were reports that, after paying, spectators were allowed to go up to the scaffold to dip their handkerchiefs in the blood (Staniland, 1999) as it was believed that royal blood had the power to heal wounds and illnesses. Perhaps this was a corruption/extension of the idea that Christ's blood was shed for forgiveness and healing. There are a number of stained handkerchiefs claimed to be originals, but analysis has shown that the stains are iron deposits from washing water. As

Staniford wryly remarks 'owners of these relics are often loath to bow to scientific or historical certainty'. (1)

Silk is the product of silkworms, the cocoon spun by the caterpillar before its transition to moth. For silk to be spun from the cocoon, an unbroken thread 300 metres long, the cocoon must be immersed in boiling water, killing the developing moth. So here are more grand themes: metamorphosis, sacrifice and once again, treason. The same person who has tended the silkworms over the eight weeks of their lives, cleaning the containers, nurturing them with fresh mulberry leaves, betrays them to immersion in boiling water. Is the silken thread, spun and knitted into a King's vest, a kind of resurrection? The silkworm would not think so.

For the vast majority of people the death of a silkworm or two is hardly cause for major concern, especially if necessary in the production of one of the most beautiful and remarkable natural fibres. A fibre which breathes and delights the eye, the ear and the skin, a fibre which is warm or cool, self-adapting.

Silk and blood, life and death, metamorphosis. For me as writer, this layering of motif, the playing with theme, the ripple and reflection of association through events and objects (the juxtaposition of squishy white grubs with say, the hard cold steel of the executioner's axe) offer a constant source of fascination.

The exquisite precision and fine detail in Charles' vest demonstrate that this knitter was a master craftsman, fully conversant with the mathematics of his craft. It is possible that he was illiterate, but his guild training would have ensured he was at ease with graphs and numbers, however they may have been represented.

Graphs, numbers, patterns, charts, maps. Here we are again. Knitting in the round.

PART D PROCESS

Casting on

The year was 1997. I had just begun a Master of Arts in Creative Writing. For ten years or so I had longed for just such an opportunity. I had tried my hand at all kinds of freelance writing and editing—magazine, children's non-fiction, ghost writing, column writing—but I could not get fiction published. Something wasn't working, but what? Formal study offered an opportunity to hone my skills and learn new techniques. And there were other factors too: the return to a formal study environment offered the chance to create a space in what had been, and for some time continued to be, a chaotic phase of my life.

I plunged in with a sense of joy. One of the first classes concentrated on the use of specific detail, and I began to look more carefully at things and people. I had always observed body language minutely, but now I began to look at things. It was hard to know how to record these observations, and in my journal the line between fiction and non-fiction often became blurred, as for example, in the following journal entry.

A woman asleep on the bus. She had between eighteen and twenty bangles on one arm, and looked handcuffed to the arm of her seat. She was asleep when I got on, and looked a little mad, or half-witted. I was surprised when she woke up and had a normal conversation with the woman next to her.

I'm keeping several different journals at the moment. The effect is fragmentation, compartmentalism. I don't like it.

I don't know how to do this, how to keep track, how to journal in these different areas, how to keep notes. I tried journal keeping on one side of the

page and pasting generated writing on the other side, but it doesn't work. I want to keep a record of the whole of life, but on the other hand I couldn't submit such a thing [a writer's journal being required for the course]. Too much self-revelation, not appropriate anyway. Must think more about it.
(Journal, 18th March 1997)

The whole of life, she wrote. Quite ambitious.

People ask me where I got the idea to write the novel *Knitting*. I don't think there ever really was an idea. However, looking back through the journal I can see the genesis of a piece of experimental writing written during that first Masters year that developed into the novel. In the class Tom Shapcott had given us an extract from Gertrude Stein's *Paris France*. It is interesting to read it now and see how, as I began writing in my journal afterwards, I leapt across the gap into a character that at the time I dubbed 'Mad Martha'.

Stein's piece reads as follows:

Paris, France is exciting, and peaceful.

I was only four years old when I was first in Paris and talked french there and was photographed there and went to school there, and ate soup for early breakfast and had leg of mutton and spinach for lunch, I always liked spinach, and a black cat jumped on my mother's back. That was more exciting than peaceful. I do not mind cats but I do not like them to jump on my back. There are lots of cats in Paris and in France and they can do what they like, sit on the vegetables or among the groceries, stay in or go out. It is

extraordinary that they fight so little among themselves considering how many cats there are. There are two things that french animals do not do, cats do not fight much and do not howl much and chickens do not get flustered running across the road, if they start to cross the road they keep on going which is what french people do too. (1)

I wrote in my journal that I found this piece 'incredibly powerful' and I set myself an exercise, to imitate the style and see what came of it. In fact the intention is recorded clearly.

If you read too much [Stein in this style] it would certainly become tedious, but as a first experience I felt bowled along like a ball in a river. And the roses story is nudging me, quite a few times over the last three or four weeks. I thought I could try this kind of voice—it would suit the mad woman rather well. As Ray [Tyndale] said, Stein loops around like a clover leaf, in and out, in to the centre again. So I will try the roses story like that first, and see if I can get the meaning across. Of course it might not work at all. I might need someone far more objective than mad Martha. But it will be fun to try, looping in and out in a large knitting pattern.

(Journal, 9th April 1997)

There's the word, in the last line, for the first time—knitting—not as subject matter, but as a metaphor to define a particular stylistic attempt. The incident I intended to write was clear in my mind; I would fictionalize a scene that I had witnessed where a woman threw some roses around the church (which also

eventually became a key scene in the novel). I sat down with the intention of writing that. I opened my electronic journal, where I was bunging experimental pieces as they occurred, and began. As I put my fingers to the keyboard, something quite different began to happen. It was no longer 'knitting' as style; it was about knitting, subject matter. At the time I did not see the connection.

My name is Martha. I like knitting. I like the order it makes. If you go *(P1 K1) rpt all along the row, and then back again the same, it makes rib. If you have odd stitches. If you have even stitches it makes moss stitch. Rib is for ribbing, for cuffs and collars and bands on the bottom, for necklines, and maybe to make a pucker in the pattern. Puckers, evenly spaced, drawn in and stretching out, make for interest. I'm interested in knitting. I'm very interested in knitting. It interests me...

Let me come back to this present moment. To see this progression for the first time, as I now write, is a fresh astonishment. I had remembered the impact of the Stein piece, but I did not see how it transformed from one kind of knitting to another. But there it is, in my journal, unconsciously documented. I have never understood, until now, as I have backtracked for this essay, how that transition took place. I did not examine it at the time, I was too stunned, a little flushed perhaps, by what I had just written. It had seemed to come from nowhere, a smooth uninterrupted gush, a total surprise. That piece now forms the mad talk in the hospital scene, virtually unaltered except for a little tidying here and there, and the interspersing of another character's point of view. After I wrote it I added a journal note: 'Where did that come from? That was supposed to be the beginning of the

roses story. There are no roses at all. I thought I'd find out a bit about Martha/Marta and there she is, all finished up with knitting. But that was lots of fun!!'

But this is still 1997, long before I began the PhD. I put it away in the metaphorical drawer. I didn't forget it—the experience of writing it was exhilarating—but I didn't know what to do with it either. Something mad and free and likeable had been let out when I was playing, but what on earth could I do with it?

Some time early in 2001, needing to read for a demonstration of work in progress, I had nothing to show. I printed out Mad Martha and read it aloud. I thought it was too technical to have much appeal, but to my great surprise everyone enjoyed it immensely, and encouraged me to explore this character further. And so the novel *Knitting* began, though of course I didn't realise it then—it was simply an extended experiment that just might have bearing on a novel. I wrote four or five versions of the roses scene, trying it from different points of view, trying to get a voice that was interesting and sustainable. I knew from past experience that the finding the voice could not be hurried, and although I took my time, the roses scene would not come right. I tried exploring in other ways—a fairy story/dream sequence, Martha's childhood, Martha's home, Martha's outings. After a while it became clear that Martha was not going to make a story by herself. There had to be a counterpoint.

Around the same time that I had written the Mad Martha piece another character had popped out unbidden, a page of writing I came to call Glass Woman, now the opening sequence of *Knitting*. The first two paragraphs are exactly as I initially wrote them, except that it was in first person. Again, in this spontaneous

writing, there was the joyful sense of recognition; this is a good and significant piece. So here was a character I could introduce to Martha, someone quite different, someone with her own deep story. There was no magic to this connection—it was a deliberate writerly ploy to try and get more happening. The Glass Woman piece was a distillation of many years of observing my mother's grief after the death of my father, but also carried something of our family experience many years before of caring for my mother in law at home as she died from cancer.

And there too, in the page called Glass Woman, written in Sandra's voice, was the beginning of another character that ended up in the novel: Tony.

The men hugged me as they had always done, freely, in big brotherly bear hugs, and kissed me on the neck, sloppy teasing kisses to try and make me laugh. There was no fire in it, never had been, and never would be either. We had set our boundaries long ago.

And finally, another small piece written in a more detached but compassionate voice, the voice that eventually would belong to Kate, a character only marginally important in terms of dramatic development, but nevertheless a lynchpin, the character who connects all the other characters, and the only one capable of holding a mirror up to Sandra.

Janice was upset because Martha had got into the rack of cassettes we kept for borrowing—some music, but mainly sermons for the Sunday School teachers who missed the service. Martha, in full view of the street, had

hoicked up her dress around her waist, and was stuffing a couple of Gerry's sermons down her pantyhose.

When Martha came to church the congregation sat up. One Sunday Gerry was preaching and Martha stood up in the middle of it and said 'Gerry, will you pray for me? I've got a lump on my breast, right here.' And started to undo her shirt.

These early versions of Martha were too extreme, sometimes silly, without enough depth, but some things were becoming clear: I liked this character; I knew that she would finally confront her former psychiatrist. I also knew that the glass woman would be involved with some kind of culminating and resolving event. So I tried some writing that I sensed would be near the end of the novel, and it was then that Cliff appeared for the first time.

Out in the kitchen Cliff was washing dishes and Sandra was drying them.

'Hey Cliff,' said Martha. 'I was just out there talking with my old psychiatrist. He didn't know who I was.'

'Did you tell him?' asked Cliff.

'Nup,' said Martha. 'But he was eating my lamington. Pity I didn't use some arsenic.'

Cliff flicked some soapsuds at her.

'You're a naughty girl, Martha McDonald,' he said. Martha squealed in delight.

'Shut up you two,' said Sandra. 'They're starting the speeches. And we need some more plates for the cake.'

None of these quoted passages appeared in the final draft, but they all contain the essence of what was to come. As time went on Martha was toned down, became deeper, more thoughtful, her difficult history hidden in her bags—though it's interesting to note that I'd written a substantial amount about the bags before I knew myself what Martha had in them. And in the final draft, right at the end, her last name changed from McDonald to McKenzie. As Sandra would have said, we can do without the hamburgers.

This is a fairly detailed account of some aspects of what was going on in the first year of writing, but it is useful as a demonstration for the lessons learned. Firstly, unpressured time to play was an important element in the early writing. This space—such a luxurious gift—allowed significant writing to emerge, writing that was fuelled and ignited by emotional energy. Another lesson, already learned perhaps, but reinforced, was that one needed to keep writing, and to trust that in that process something important would happen. There were a few blind alleys—an extended dream of Martha's, Sandra's relationship with a feisty articulate aunt—but in the end, the wastage was surprising small, maybe 4,000 words that were not incorporated in some form or another. Even then, the 'irrelevant' writing was still important as a defining process for what did and did not belong. And thirdly, there was that freeing practice, discovered during the Masters program, of writing disconnected fragments, fragments that were important to me on the day, rather than trying to stick with a sequential unfolding plot. (Thanks, Professor Tom Shapcott).

This method paid great dividends; it helped me discover my endings relatively early so that I could then drive towards them (Martha would confront her psychiatrist, Sandra would eventually dance/wear the dress), as well as other significant iceberg tips that could later be linked together to form the structure. It also meant that I was interested and energized by each day's work—I was writing what I felt like writing.

More recently, as I was working on an early draft of this essay, I had a conversation with Professor John Took, a specialist in medieval Italian literature at University College, London. I was bemoaning my inadequate literary knowledge, and he commented that he thought the job of the novelist might be to explore vertically, rather than horizontally. And indeed, perhaps that is what many novelists do; like mining explorers they take a core sample of a relatively limited experience (in horizontal terms) but descend deep into layers of significance and meaning. In a later email exchange he wrote:

I cannot remember exactly the context and content of our conversation, but from what you say it must have had to do with the notion of what Kierkegaard (one of my heroes) calls the 'infinitely contentful character of the moment'. At issue here, in other words, is the way in which, by reflecting on the substance of the moment in, so to speak, its depth-dimensionality, then we might dwell in the inexhaustible truth of that moment—avoiding as we do so the proposal of human experience in terms of a more or less frantic hurrying from one moment to another on the plane of the horizontal (i.e. sequentially). This is one of the things that medieval authors understood

perfectly but which we, alas, have largely lost sight of. To turn back in refection (which is what 're-flexion' means—turning back upon) is to stand in the significance of the instant, of this or that encounter or event, even (on the face of it) the most minimal in kind. Maybe, in this sense (this pre-eminently vertical sense), we are in paradise even now. Unrelieved sequentiality—by which I mean the horizontal and untouched by the vertical—is at any rate the cause and substance of despair.' (1 July 2005)

There is much in this succinct paragraph that deserves thought and exploration beyond the confines of this brief essay, and I cannot do it full justice here. However, it is useful to explore the words 'refection' and 'reflexion'. 'Refection', from which we also get the familiar term 'refectory', is a literary term for 'refreshment by food or drink' (*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*). 'Reflexion' is the act or process or instant of reflecting, and in physics is 'the angle made by a reflected ray with a perpendicular to the reflecting surface' (*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*), which we can loosely interpret as being vertical. So in these two words alone we have the following implications: turning back upon, turning back for refreshing sustenance, illumination from a source of light, the reflection of light, the value of the vertical gaze and the exploration of the present moment, or at least the moment just gone (as one must turn back to reflect upon it).

This email from Professor Took, and the conversation with him which preceded it, was at once both comforting and challenging. While not at all negating the value of a broad and thoughtful education, he challenged my terms of reference and the sense of insecurity and inadequacy. He proposed and indeed

encouraged a different kind of knowledge. 'This is what novelists do,' he seemed to be saying, 'they turn back in a contemplation of the significance of the instant; that is surely the novelist's work.'

For me as writer, this means that a novel is a cluster of vertically explored moments (or incidents), created by the simultaneous acts of reflection and reflexion, chosen from the many possibilities generated by this process for the particular layers of meaning they represent, and gathered into the collective which makes a novel, a collective which drives towards an even deeper exploration than is achieved by the sum of the exploratory parts. There is this too: the concept of the vertical can also serve as a useful editing tool, at least in terms of the literary novel. Writing that does not serve this vertical exploration, simply does not belong. Each phrase must take us deeper towards the core.

The author interrogates her character

Early in the first draft I had trouble developing Sandra as a character. She wouldn't let me in. Her behaviour was two dimensional, she was masked, closed, lidded over. I liked her, but feedback during workshops was that readers found her terse and grumpy, inaccessible. Reader empathy with the main character is an important consideration and I wanted to develop it further; I sensed there was a story in her silence, but she sat there on her gold mine with her arms folded. Eventually, in an act of desperation, I decided to engage her in conversation. I realised I was a little afraid of her, and approached her cautiously.

AB: Sandra. Sandra? I can't get on with the writing. You've stumped me. Do you want to be in this novel or not?

Sandra: It's your problem.

AB: (sigh) Yes I know. But I need help. I want you to be in the novel, anyway.

Sandra: Well then, that's settled.

AB: Why don't people like you?

Sandra: Why don't people like you?

AB: They do like me. But they don't like you. You're no fun.

Sandra: Fun! That's a bit rich. My husband just died.

AB: Yes, I know, you poor old thing. But no-one even feels sorry for you. You're just not very nice. I have to establish some reader empathy. Martha's got it in bucket loads. You don't have enough to scrape on toast. I want the reader to care what happens to you.

Sandra: Your readers aren't my problem either.

AB: But why are you so prickly?

Sandra: Look here. My husband is dead. I have no children. I have lost my deepest level of intimacy, and I don't see any hope for much in the future.

AB: What about your friends?

Sandra: You haven't given me any.

AB: Well, I can soon knock you up a few. Anyway, there's Martha. What about her?

Sandra: Martha is a sweet woman, but she doesn't have any brains.

AB: Knock it off. She's very bright, just not in your terms. She's not academic. What do you want, a knitting history professor? A clone of yourself?

Sandra: I don't trust her. She's dangerous.

AB: Ah, now we are getting somewhere. Sandra the intellectual is afraid of emotion.

Sandra: That's not true. You've got me lying in bed with red lipstick and a black negligee grieving my heart out.

AB: Well, what do you mean, she's dangerous?

Sandra: She's unpredictable. And all that visionary religious stuff. I hear you want to give me some religion. I don't think you'll be able to make it convincing.

AB: That's for later down the track. Besides, that's my problem too. This is about exploring you, now. I'm trying to find out who you are.

Sandra: Look, this is how it is. I helped Martha that day when Cliff collapsed. That was OK. But I didn't want to go on helping her. It was a little excursion into helpsville, but that's all. I don't want to be out there with people. I haven't got over Jack. You're rushing me. I'm not ready. I want some time to hang around here and be sad and moody and remember and get it out of my system. That's how I do things. Give me a break! You're playing psychologist, trying to drag out some deep childhood trauma from the past. It's not there. Martha's the one with the trauma.

AB: How do you know that? You haven't talked to her yet.

Sandra: I can read your mind. I'll find out all about that business, as you well know.

AB: The trouble with you, Sandra, is that you see everything in terms of helping people. Us and them. You don't see yourself as an ordinary part of the community, being helped, helping, ebb and flow, give and take. You're so bloody rigid. It's a kind of arrogance, you know, high horse. That's why people don't like you.

Sandra: Hardly surprising. That's what you don't like about yourself.

AB: You can stop high-jacking this conversation, thanks.

Sandra: This is really all about you.

AB: No, it isn't. I can create anything I like, you and this conversation included. This is not autobiography. This is simply a problem, about getting the reader to like you enough to stick with you. Let me try another tack. If you could do anything at the end of the book, what would you do?

Sandra: Dance.

AB: (surprise) Dance?

Sandra: Yes. On the roof of the Humanities building.

AB: By yourself?

Sandra: No, with Martha.

AB: Tell me about it.

Sandra: On a roof. With balloons and streamers. And whistles. And a feather boa.

AB: My head hurts. What's that got to do with anything?

Sandra: Liberation. Moving on.

AB: But it's not about knitting.

Sandra: Give Martha a few jumpers to throw off the roof. Be divested of all those mistakes. Cleansing.

AB: You'd be horrified. All that wool going to waste.

Sandra: I'd get over it.

AB: Dancing. So this little conversation exercise has turned up something quite unexpected.

Sandra: It's there, you dummy, in the opening pages. Samba and rumba. All you have to do is get me there. Now excuse me, but I have to go back to being miserable about Jack.

This dialogue, unfortunately undated, was an act of desperation, presented here more-or-less as originally written, with only a little editing to remove extraneous material. I'd had no trouble in writing the Martha scenes, which seem to spring readymade, but developing Sandra towards reader empathy was difficult. As author I felt kindly disposed towards her, but it didn't emerge in the writing.

Looking back over this written dialogue, this mini play, I see that I flagged a number of details for later development. In spite of Sandra's denial of psychological trauma, a back story did emerge to explain her controlling tendencies—the enforced absenteeism from her mother's funeral. Secondly, at least at this stage of writing, Sandra thought that Martha lacked 'brains', a dynamic which blinds Sandra to her own exploitation of Martha. But the most important revelation of this exercise, and a genuine surprise, was to discover that Sandra wanted to dance. This then became a support beam for the architecture of the novel—to move Sandra from her current stasis into some kind of dancing.

So the exercise was important in terms of the creative development of the story at hand, but at a broader level it was important to realise that not only could the imagination be used for telling the story, but that imaginative devices could also be used to solve what was essentially writer's block. There must be many ways to do this, of course, but the realisation that one can approach a writing problem obliquely in this fashion was a valuable lesson for future reference. Rather

perversely, I found myself wishing for more writer's block situations to enjoy the process of solving them.

Conclusion/casting off

As I write this essay in Australia towards the end of 2005, there is a map being knitted on the other side of the world, 'The Knitting Map', a vast textile art project in the city of Cork, created over the full calendar year, involving knitters from several communities and creating its own community as it proceeds. The pattern for this map is derived from data from complex technological sources: a satellite view of the earth, local video cameras, and sensitive meteorology equipment. Weather, traffic/people movement and seasonal changes are monitored, recorded and translated into knitting patterns which appear on computer screens in front of twenty-five knitters, who work in relay, in two to four hour shifts. Patterns are updated every ten minutes. The long strips of knitting so produced are sewn together to form an enormous artistic representation of the city. The knitters are knitting a giant map, an enormous cartography, which makes its own particular and slowly expanding journey across the warehouse floor.

In this representation of the city of York the scientific data is mixed with the unpredictability of human behaviour, both in terms of data input (the cameras monitoring traffic movement) and in the construction of the representation (the knitting output). As with any journey, there is more than one 'landscape'—the landscapes of weather, seasonal change, human behaviour and human experience. The artistic output is surely both map (via the exploration of the knitting experience and the recording of the new territory via an ever-changing combination of weather, human behaviour and time) and journal (the knitted map as a record of travelling).

When all is said and done, perhaps my definitions of novel and essay as exploration and journey are rather too neat. The first creative experimental fragments towards the novel *and* the first notes towards this essay—the dual records of exploration and journey—were both written (or interwoven) into my writer’s journal, a united record of travelling. Perhaps, in the blinkered attempt to articulate the writing experience as outlined in Part 1 of this essay, I have, like the explorer William Breton “received quite a false impression of these regions” (Carter, 146), so that it was ‘not a matter of marking out new boundaries, but one of establishing symbolic enclosures. It depended on establishing a point of view with a back and front... .Boundaries were the means of expressing this ambition, or articulating presence’ (Carter, 168).

The novel and essay, I now suggest, are more like the knitted map of *Cork*, all of a piece, and ideally should be published top to tail like Kate Grenville’s book, *Dreamhouse/ Bearded Ladies*, so that whichever end one starts, it is the beginning, different entry points to the same territory, the terms *map* and *journal* merely arbitrary separations that may be more accurately represented by a single chart, a single volume, and either or both can be read as exploration, and/or journey. The lines blur, the strands felt together: all that remains, as noted earlier, is the reader’s experience, the reader’s opinion. We are at the fold of the paper, the new blank page, or the end of a row—the place where anything can happen.

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