

BLACK WATER: AN EXEGESIS ACCOMPANYING ERASURE.

By Patricio Eduardo Muñoz

Submitted as part of the requirement
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Discipline of English
School of Humanities
The University of Adelaide
South Australia

April, 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

An Abstract of the Exegesis	i
Declaration	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Black Water	1
1. Exegesis	2
2. Impetus	14
3. The Short-Short Story	22
4. Space and Place	30
5. A Close Reading	40
6. Ethics	51
7. Conclusion	59
Bibliography	65

ABSTRACT OF THE EXEGESIS

Black Water explores the theory and practices that underpin the creative work *Erasure*. Beginning with an exploration of the exegetical work and its characteristics within the academy, the essay moves on to critically examine the factors that might impel one to write, the role of the short-short story and the issue of ethics in light of censorship and oppression. The exegetical work also examines the concepts of space and place and how they may affect the writing process; it concludes with a personal reflection upon the reasons for writing.

Black Water is a rigorous and critical examination of the creative process. It offers an explanation of the motivations that impelled the author to write and places his work within a broader literary framework.

DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text.

I consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and the embargo on the creative work.

Patricio Eduardo Muñoz

Date:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Professor J. M. Coetzee, Dr. Phillip Edmonds and Rachel Muñoz for their advice and support.

BLACK WATER

“Socrates: So if they are serious they would not expect to write in black water or sow with a pen words that are powerless to defend themselves and cannot adequately teach the truth”

- Plato. Phaedrus. Millis, MA: Agora Publications, 2009. 83.

1. The Exegesis/or, *Consider the Muses*.

“The ancients used to invoke the Muses:

We invoke ourselves.”

- Álvaro de Campos (heteronym of Fernando Pessoa)¹.

I

In a lecture titled ‘The Muses’ Farewell’, presented at the Catholic University in Tilburg in 2000, George Steiner asked: “What is the saddest line in English poetry? Perhaps it is: ‘Nymphs and Shepherds, dance no more’ from Milton’s *Arcades*”². Steiner’s suggestion is not an immediately obvious one; his audience might have offered a line from Gerald Manley Hopkins (for instance: “Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!)/ my God”³). The reason for this initial sentiment is, of course, due to the fact that Steiner asked for the saddest line, not the saddest poem.

In this regard, ‘Arcades’ is a fitting choice. The poem was written and performed between 1630 and 1632 for the Countess Dowager of Derby. It is composed respectively of a song, a lengthy speech by the Genius of the Wood, and two subsequent songs. The poem begins with a sense of wonderment as the nymphs and shepherds encounter the Genius of the Woods: “This, this is she alone,/ Sitting like a goddess bright/ In the center of her light”⁴. However, it is the beauty evoked in the Genius’s speech—an incantation that spans an unbroken 58 lines—that gives justice to Steiner’s decision. Were it not for Milton’s skill in capturing the uniqueness of the Genius, the importance of her mythical role in nature, then Steiner’s chosen line (appearing in the final song) would have had little effect. That

¹ This exegesis uses footnotes instead of in-text citations. All references are noted in MLA format. A list of all cited work can also be found in the Bibliography. Pessoa, Fernando. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Peter Rickard. Edinburgh: University Press Edinburgh, 1971. 123.

² Steiner, George. ‘The Muses’ Farewell’. *Salmagundi*. No. 135/136 (Summer-Fall 2002), pp. 148-156. 148.

³ Hopkins, Gerald Manley. ‘Carrion Comfort’. *Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Robert Bridges. London: Oxford University Press, 1948. 107.

⁴ Milton, John. ‘Arcades’. *Poetical Works*. Edited by Douglas Bush. London: Oxford University Press, 1966. 102.

is, “For know by lot from Jove I am the pow’r/ Of this fair wood, and live in oaken bow’r/ To nurse the saplings tall, and curl the grove/ With ringlets quaint and wanton windings wove”⁵, allows, “Nymphs and Shepherds, dance no more”⁶. The loss is felt.

But how great is the loss? How sad or final is the farewell? Is it indeed measurable? If we are still to believe Hesiod—a shepherd tending his lambs circa 700 BC when he was visited by the Muses—that “every man is fortunate whom the Muses love”, does it then mean that our voices will no longer flow sweet from our lips?⁷ Or have the Muses been replaced by a modern, acutely self-reflective writer, who, like Pessoa (and his many authorial selves), finds solace or despair in consciousness and language? Finally, moving beyond creativity or inspiration, what does it mean to lose this mythic sensibility that afforded us an aura of something *greater* (our own *Arcadia*), or at least *other*, than ourselves?

Steiner’s sense of loss is characterised more so by what he has been forced to resign than what has been taken away or lost. If our admiration of the Muses was founded on a belief that reverence would bring forth wisdom, what role (even an absent one) did they play in the barbarism that characterised the twentieth century? In other words, how effectual was the wisdom we gained? Steiner asks, “And where were the Muses? European humanism proved powerless in the face of bestiality. This bestiality sprang from within the very heartland of high culture”⁸. The cost of our admiration (rephrased as ‘archaicism’ and ‘nostalgia’), in Steiner’s opinion, was too high. The muses have now left, and this time, the break is final.

Steiner perceives a direct link between the production of art and the prevalence of barbarism. He writes, “The more alertly vulnerable our affinities to great art, music, poetry, metaphysics or the Siren-songs of learning, the less acute our hearing of human need, of political savagery, the less empowered our reflexes of action.” Steiner is alarmed by his conclusion: “the humanities do not humanize...they can *dehumanize*”⁹. The crux of the problem rests on the fact that art, unlike the sciences,

⁵ Ibid. 103.

⁶ Ibid. 104.

⁷ Hesiod. *Theogony/Work and Days*. Translated by M. L. West. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1999. 6.

⁸ Steiner, George. ‘The Muses’ Farewell’. *Salmagundi*. No. 135/136 (Summer-Fall 2002), pp. 148-156. 150.

⁹ Ibid. 152.

does not depend upon scrutinised ‘truth-values’. Instead, it engages in imperatives of taste and canons built on degrees of consensus. That is, the basis of art and the humanities, in Steiner’s opinion, is built on unstable foundations. The result is a divide between art and the sciences; and art and a society that is being increasingly driven by scientific discoveries.

One would then expect Steiner to happily brush the Muses off his hands; to gladly renounce such ideology in favour of a scrutinized, attentive regard for society. If this were the case, then surely, he would not have found the line in Milton’s poem all that sad (he may have thought: Arcadia, in light of Auschwitz, does not exist). His sentiments are otherwise. He sees this new state of being, one of post-theological indeterminacy, as a great, yet daunting, emancipation. He asks: “Can there be major art, literature, music and metaphysics within the ‘absolute anonymity’, within the ‘unnaming’ of the word...(or were the) underwriting by the absent presence of god and his Muses, the indispensable guarantor of our European achievements?”¹⁰

In essence: do we need the Muses (even as a conception) to create meaningful literature? The answer should be a definite *no*, and pursued by a welcoming of the metaphysical despair and the ontological nihilism that such a stance fosters. Steiner responds:

I have argued...that such underwriting can alone ensure the possibilities of great imaginative acts and forms. That a reduction of the ‘God question’ to triviality or non-sense will make unattainable the dimensions of *King Lear*, of the *B-minor Mass*, of *the Brothers Karamazov*...Intuitively, I still believe this to be so. But I may be wholly mistaken¹¹.

Steiner has posed a deft and passionate argument. It is important to again recognise his audience. Steiner cannot fully resign to a life without the Muses; even if this relationship is simply one of conjecture. He is, in some ways, similar to Hopkins wrestling with his God. What we deduce from Steiner’s argument is a demand for greater accountability from us: we must carry our burden and work to make

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 156.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 156.

meaningful art—art that may not stop future atrocities, but at least recognise, for what it wholly is, the loss of a human life.

It is worth questioning whether Steiner's proclamation should be taken at full value. As he would admit, he is not the first to declare the Muses' farewell. While we may accede to the social responsibilities of literature, might it be premature to claim, in a universal way, the absences of the Muses? If Steiner's sentiments can be viewed as a resignation, then it necessitates that we pose a rebuttal; a conviction that, so to speak, argues: keep looking, the Muses still remain.

Forming a suitable argument isn't difficult. The work of Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz demonstrates both the continuous presence of the Muses and the existence of first-rank literature that accounts for the atrocities of the twentieth century. It is not my intention to note the varied guises in which the Muses appear within Milosz's work (see, 'Ars Poetica' and 'Secretaries' as examples), nor highlight the manner in which he responded to the events of World War II (see, 'In Warsaw' and 'Dedication' as examples). By offering a close reading of a single poem—'Magpiety'—I intend to show that discussions of the Muses can result in meaningful works that question notions of authorship, inspiration and metaphysics.

Magpiety¹²

The same and not quite the same, I walked through oak forests
Amazed that my Muse, Mnemosyne,
Has in no way diminished my amazement.
A magpie was screeching and I said: Magpiety?
What is magpiety? I shall never achieve
A magpie heart, a hairy nostril over the beak, a flight
That always renews just when coming down,
And so I shall never comprehend magpiety.
If however magpiety does not exist
My nature does not exist either.
Who would have guessed that, centuries later,
I would invent the question of universals?

¹² 'Magpiety' by Czeslaw Milosz is quoted here in full. Subsequent reference to the poem refers to this version. Milosz, Czeslaw. 'Magpiety'. New and Collected Poems (1931-2001). New York: Ecco, 2003. 156.

Montgeron, 1958

The first line of the poem evokes the passing of time between two separate walking occasions. If we are to take the composition date and place as markers, we may deduce that on this occasion, Milosz was 47 years old, and that the oak forest was in Montgeron, France. Milosz has begun his exile; he has been in France for seven years. In this regard, the person who walks through this oak forest is ‘different’ because of age and experience. To better understand just how Milosz may be ‘different’ from his younger self, it serves to briefly highlight Milosz’s views on exile: “New eyes, new thought, new distance: that a writer in exile needs all this is obvious, but whether he overcomes his old self depends upon resources which he only dimly perceived”¹³.

In line two Milosz refers to his Muse as Mnemosyne. It is significant to note that instead of referring to one of the traditional Muses, Milosz chooses to call upon the mother of the nine Muses. In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the Muses are referred to as the “Daughters of Memory”¹⁴. Julia Forster notes that when “the inspiration of the muses was invoked by Greek artists, poets or philosophers they would, in effect, be calling upon both the world’s memory and their capacity to use their imagination to inform their work and composition”¹⁵. It is important to note the parentage of Mnemosyne—Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Heaven). Already, after the first two lines, we have a sense of time and memory as paired concepts.

In ‘Milosz’s ABC’s’, Milosz writes on Curiosity: “The world is so organized that it is endlessly interesting; there is no limit to the discovery of ever newer layers and strata...(curiosity) does not lessen with the passage of time”¹⁶. With this in mind, we can note that the word ‘amazement’ appears twice—once in line two, and once in line three. Milosz expresses his amazement at his Muse’s capability to evoke, through nature, a sense of endless wonderment in him. As a reader, we are beginning to sense a relationship between time, memory, nature and perception.

¹³ Milosz, Czeslaw. ‘Notes on Exile’. *Books Abroad*. Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1976), pp. 281-284. 281.

¹⁴ Ovid. *Metamorphosis*. Translated by Bernard Knox. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 171.

¹⁵ Forster, Julia. *Muses*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2007. 21.

¹⁶ Milosz, Czeslaw & Madeline Levine. ‘Milosz’s ABC’s’. *The American Poetry Review*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (January/February 2001), pp. 9-17. 110.

Milosz then hears a magpie ‘screeching’ and says, “Magpiety?” It is important to note that it is both the sense of amazement and the indescribable ‘high pitched, strident cry’ of the magpies that allows Milosz, with seeming spontaneity, to coin the word ‘magpiety’. That is, without amazement, an oak forest and a magpie would hold no real sense of ‘uniqueness’; would not warrant a new word.

In creating this word, Milosz has borrowed from literature. Magpies are associated with the Muses. In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the daughters of Pierus challenge the Muses, and upon losing, are turned into Magpies: “And even though they are all feathered now, their speech remains as fluid as it was, and they are famous for their noisiness as for their love of argument”¹⁷. It may be said that Pierus’s daughters were turned into magpies for demonstrating a lack of piety. They, in turn, exist as symbols of piety.

“What is magpiety?” We can explain this initially in a very literal way: it is a combination of magpie and piety; it is the abstract characteristic that constitutes a magpie (similar to humanness in man/woman). In line 6-8, Milosz writes of the physical characteristics of the magpie; he falls short of claiming a magpie soul. Line 8 implies that without such qualities (physical traits), Milosz will never be able to understand exactly what magpiety is.

This raises an important concern: if Milosz coined the word, how can he then not understand its meaning? Line 9 and 10 reveal that Milosz perceives a relationship between ‘magpiety’ and ‘nature’; that if the former does not exist, then the latter cannot either. We might then rephrase our reading of “What is magpiety?” posing it less as a question to the reader, and more as if it were posed as a question from Milosz to the Muses. That is: what has Milosz touched upon or revealed? What has amazement, and the Muses, allowed him to name in a single word?

Turning again to Ovid, we find: “A new bird is added to the *species* of the forest”¹⁸. If Milosz did not name a magpie soul, it is because magpiety is akin to such a thing: it is an abstract quality and characteristic that exists and that is common and essential both to magpies as a species and magpies as individual birds. If the term magpiety exists as a word in Milosz’s mind, then it must—in his *realist*

¹⁷ Ovid. *Metamorphosis*. Translated by Bernard Knox. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 185.

opinion—exist as a separate universal quality, perhaps in the mind alone of the divining Muses (a form of universal *ante rem*).

For Milosz, an understanding of personal ‘nature’ is inextricably linked to his perception of his own role as a poet. He writes: “I am brave and undaunted in the certainty of having something important to say to the world, something no one else will be called to say”¹⁹. It is his belief that he has been ‘called’, that poetry is an invocation—a dictation by a daimonion, angel or spirit—that defines his nature. There too, as in magpiety, must exist an abstract ‘Milosz’ quality, a characteristic essential and universal in his being, that rests in the mind of a granting Muse.

Lines 11 and 12 must be read with an understanding of the naiveté that marvelment can induce. Milosz knows well enough that the question of the universals has a long history. Yet, we may ask: who has not stood before nature and felt as if they were witnessing something new or unseen? Did this experience not make you struggle for words or render you speechless? Of importance is not who ‘invented’ the question of the universals, but rather the realisation that we are all capable of exploring the relationship between what we conceive and what nature shows us on any given day.

There is a prevailing sense of gratitude (of reverence even) in ‘Magpiety’, which characterises much of Milosz’s work. On reading the poem, we might ask whether it may in fact be possible for someone like Milosz to truly comprehend the term magpiety. The answer, I believe, is to be found in line 5, in Milosz’s use of the word “achieve”. Milosz chooses the word ‘achieve’, as opposed to ‘have’. The magpies *achieved* their form by challenging the Muses. Milosz will not achieve a Magpie heart, because he will not challenge the Muses. He may look in amazement at the birds, but he has a higher reverence for the Muses.

Finally, we may make a brief structural observation by reflecting again on line 1. There is in this line a sense of laboured speech; could it not have been written effectively otherwise? For instance: “As a man, I returned to the oak forests”; or, “As I once walked as a child, I returned to the oak forests”; or, “I found myself among the oak trees again”. Although these suggestions may hold little poetic merit,

¹⁹ Milosz, Czeslaw. ‘My Intention’. *The American Poetry Review*. Vol. 22, No. 1 (January/February 1993), p. 51. 51.

they do serve to raise an idea that Milosz may have rewritten the first line, after composing the last. There is a deliberate vagueness in the phrases that lends itself perfectly towards the question of universals revealed in line 12. This fact gives the otherwise short poem a well-rounded and profound sensibility.

II

Steiner's essay provides pertinent questions for the Discipline of Writing and the nature of the exegesis. As the debate over what constitutes an exegesis continues, surpassing the decade mark with no sign of consensus near, it serves to reflect upon whether the exegesis has evolved, or simply been led astray from its original path of concern. If it is the latter, we may then ask: at what cost has this waywardness come?

In *TEXT* (October, 2010) Paul Hetherington wrote, "There is no clear agreement about how such (creative) theses should be assessed or what the exegesis should be"²⁰. He cites the suggestions offered by Kevin Brophy (1998), Tess Brady (2000), Nigel Krauth (2002), Jeri Kroll (2004) and Camilla Nelson (2008, 2009). Hetherington finds agreement in Krauth's argument that "Exegetic activity provides opportunity for postgraduate writers to 'speak twice' about the literary nerves of their work, about the creative mechanisms driving it, and about the personal and cultural orientations that inform and frame and guide it"²¹. He poses his own suggestion: the exegetical work as an "independent creative partner of, rather than helpmeet and support for, the avowedly creative work that it accompanies"²².

Suggestions for what constitutes an exegesis are not slow in coming. To Hetherington's citations we might add Milech and Schilo who delineated three separate models for the exegesis: the Context Model, Commentary Model, and the Research-Question model²³; and, Claire Woods, who questions the stated models in

²⁰ Hetherington, Paul. 'Some (post-romantic) reflections on creative writing and the exegesis'. *TEXT*. (Special Issue 8—Symposium: Creative and practice-led research—current status, future plans). October, 2010. Accessed from www.textjournal.com.au on 21/09/2011.

²¹ Hetherington cites Nigel Krauth's article, 'The Preface as Exegesis' (*TEXT*, Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2002). *Ibid.* Accessed from www.textjournal.com.au on 21/09/2011.

²² *Ibid.* Accessed from www.textjournal.com.au on 21/09/2011.

²³ See, Milech, Barbara H. & Ann Schilo. "Exit Jesus': Relating the Exegesis and Creative/Production Components of a Research Thesis'. *TEXT*. (Special Issue 3) April, 2004. Accessed from www.textjournal.com.au on 21/09/2011.

light of the experimental nature of fictive works²⁴. Note might also be made of Nigel Krauth's article of 2011, which not only charted the evolution of the exegesis, but also revealed the development in his own opinions—whereas in 2002 Krauth saw no problem in the writer being also a self-critic and self-reader, in 2011, he views the position as schizophrenic²⁵.

As both writers and academics, we are able to interpret Steiner's concerns from a unique position. At different times we play the role of both the writer who seeks to write meaningful works and the teacher who seeks to form pedagogy that develops informed citizens. The fact that we, as students, are required to write exegetical components that examine our own work simply adds a further level of uniqueness, and therefore vitality, to our roles. To realise the full potential of this position—and to redirect our efforts appropriately—consensus is needed.

It is not my intention to offer a further suggestion as to what an exegesis should be. I will simply state that if we are to continue using the term *exegesis* then we should respect the etymology of the word. Our wilful misinterpretation of the word has led our arguments astray; that is, if the exegesis is as Hetherington suggests—“an independent creative partner of, rather than helpmeet and support”—then it seems something *other* than an *exegesis* and should be named as such.

Hayes and Holladay state that the term “exegesis comes from the Greek verb *exegemai*, which literally means ‘to lead’. Its extended meaning is ‘to relate in detail’ or ‘to expound’”²⁶. In the *Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell and Scott note that

²⁴ Woods, Claire. ‘Making strange with bold moves—what next for student, supervisor and examiner? Or, No Blueprint: Assessing the (creative) exegesis’. *TEXT*. Vol. 11, No. 1. April, 2007. Accessed from www.textjournal.com.au on 21/09/2011.

²⁵ A change of opinion is perfectly legitimate. In ‘The Preface as Exegesis’ (*TEXT*, Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2002), Krauth writes, “Plenty of writers have dared to disregard the unproductive notion that only others can explain their work, and have taken on the multiple role of—what is it?—writer who is self-critic and self-reader”. In 2011, Krauth observes this role as: “There is a schizophrenia apparent in this situation. The researching writer, trying to be creative writer, is forced back to the role of critic distanced from the process, as opposed to being critic inside the process”. This is cited from, ‘Evolution of the exegesis: the radical trajectory of the creative writing doctorate in Australia’. *TEXT*. Vol. 15, No. 1. 2011. It is noted that this second opinion is not given directly, but as a view on the evolution of the exegesis.

²⁶ Hayes, John H. & Carl R. Holladay. *Biblical Exegesis: a beginner's handbook*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982. 1.

English words used to define *exegemai* include: statement, narrative, explanation and interpretation²⁷. In this regard, the task of an exegesis is to

determine and state as accurately as possible the meaning of some document or part thereof...To explain, not to distort or conceal or to add; it is to let the original writer speak clearly through the modern interpreter, and not to make him say what he did not mean to say²⁸.

In the present context, the modern interpreter *is* the original writer. Recourse to our definition should ensure no (post)modernist angst: the writer, being also the modern interpreter, is the best person to lead a reader through the text.

While there should be no limits—in favour of truthfulness—as to what is included in an exegetical work (whether it be mundane, personal, literary or mythical), the findings should be recorded with an awareness of research responsibilities. The Australian Research Council has adopted the research recommendations proposed by the Frascati Manual (Proposed Standard Practice for Surveys on Research and Experimental Development, 2002); its findings serve as a useful guide. The manual defines Research and Experimental Development as: “Creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock knowledge to diverse new applications”²⁹.

Legitimate questions may be raised as to the “systematic” nature of creative works. This is owing to the fact that the creative process may not (at least initially) embody a methodical system or plan. However, the exegesis certainly meets the criteria of this definition; it can fit appropriately in either categories of basic or applied research as defined by the Frascati Manual. As a complete project, the creative work and the exegesis may certainly improve ‘the stock of knowledge’. One may argue that the ‘creative-quality’ of the creative work (the writer’s personal slant on society) can be formulated into ‘new applications’ or discourses of insight

²⁷ Liddell and Scott, as cited from: Filson, Floyd V. ‘Theological Exegesis’. Journal of Bible and Religion. Vol. 16, No. 4 (October, 1948), pp. 212-215. 212.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 212.

²⁹ OECD. Frascati Manual—Proposed Standard Practice for Surveys on research and Experimental Development (2002). Paris: OECD Publishing, 2002. 30.

into ‘man, culture and society’; this, of course, would be complemented by the close relationship of the exegesis to the creative work.

It is not my intention to disparage the role of the exegesis. However, I believe that our discourse as a discipline has shifted in an inappropriate direction. Our lack of cohesion has fostered a sense of neurosis, which has in turn integrated itself into new exegetical works³⁰. This fact alone must alert us to the questionable territory we have entered. We need to refocus our attention on *what position writers and writing hold in society*, rather than argue about *how we should write about how we write*. In this regard, I agree with Steiner’s opinion that our research and teaching methods need to be put to a more rigorous and effective end; one might, for instance, choose to explore writing in the academy and the role of service learning—a practice that is common in the United States, but woefully underexplored in Australia. The potential for students and academics to provide a meaningful contribution is certainly evident. Shouldn’t the Frascati Manual’s specification (“increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society”) inspire us with sufficient impetus?

We can conclude by posing a hypothetical situation: let us say that during a creative writing workshop an instructor asks the same question Steiner asked, “What is the saddest line in English poetry?” There is silence in the room. Then a young girl stands up and replies, “Why limit it to the English language? The saddest line is in fact written in Latin by Ovid in his letter ‘To Posterity’”. She recites: “Thanks, Muse, to thee. Thou art my sole relief”³¹. In a subsequent workshop she offers her peers and the same instructor a poem of equal calibre to Milosz’s ‘Magpiety’.

Let us imagine that this student has just entered university. She is 17 years of age; ahead of her is three years of undergraduate studies, and perhaps, postgraduate

³⁰ See, Bourke, Nike and Philip Neilsen. ‘The Problem of the Exegesis in Creative writing Higher Degrees’. *TEXT*. Special Issue 3. April, 2004. Bourke and Neilson: “This paper speaks to a persistent sense of anxiety being expressed by academics, examiners and Research Higher Degree students in the field of Creative Writing...In particular, this sense of anxiety seems to be directed towards three main areas of concern: the validity of the exegesis, its necessity, and its usefulness”. Bourke and Neilson do provide solutions to what they perceive as a “distinct—and worrying—lack of synthesis”. This is fine. However, the article was written in 2004; consensus has yet to be achieved. Also of concern, is the fact that we are building discourses on the issue of anxiety, and that new Higher Research Students are qualifying their own anxiety by citing these scholarly articles.

³¹ Ovid. ‘To Posterity’. *Ovid Selected Works*. (Ed) Y. C. & M. J. Thornton. London: Everyman’s Library, 1955. 414.

work. The poem is wonderful in its skill, implications and resonance; it strikes us as coming from a mature intellect. What questions would we like to ask this young poet? In what way will we choose to interpret this poem? What contributions can we offer to the education of this gifted student?

I would hope that our questions would reflect the intellectual rigour embodied in her poem. I would also hope that our contributions would encompass the amazement and gratitude expressed, and thus draw us closer to understanding just what the world, and poetry, can offer us.

2. Impetus/or, *Life Story Briefly Told.*

“Cuando una mañana Gregor Samsa se despertó
de un sueño lleno de pesadillas se encontró
en su cama convertido en un bicho”.
- Franz Kafka, *La Metamorfosis*³².

I

The influence of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* on Gabriel García Márquez is well documented. Over the years, Márquez’s own accounts of this literary discovery have varied in description and effect. In the popular *Writers at Work* series, Márquez states: “The first line knocked me off the bed. I was so surprised...I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago”³³. In his biography of the author, Gerald Martin cites Márquez’s reaction to Kafka’s story: “Shit, that’s just the way my grandmother talked!”³⁴ Finally, in an interview with Rita Guibert, Márquez states, “I think the fundamental influence on my writing has been Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*....But what sort of influence? He made me want to write”³⁵. Of note, is Márquez’s reluctance to elaborate upon the broader themes within the short story that influenced his work (Martin, alone, suggests that Márquez may have also been drawn to Kafka’s depiction of the authoritative Mr. Samsa). In essence, Kafka’s tale, and its significance, is reduced to a single sentence; as if, the transformation of a man to “un bicho” (a bug), or a man to “un insecto monstruoso” (a monstrous insect) as it has also been translated, is of such imaginative profundity, as to relegate the subsequent narrative to a lesser significance; Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* becomes a powerful incipit.

Common to all of Márquez’s statements is a sense of the transformative effect Kafka’s story had upon him. In his Nobel lecture, Márquez elaborated upon the

³² Kafka, Franz. *La Metamorfosis*. Edición de Gonzalo Hidalgo Bayal. Madrid: Akal, 2005. 15.

³³ Plimpton, George., ed. *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Sixth Series. London: Secker & Warburg, 1984. 319.

³⁴ Martin, Gerald. *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*. London: Bloomsbury, 2008. 98.

³⁵ Guibert, Rita. *Seven Voices*. Translated by Frances Partridge. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973. 326.

tumultuous history of Latin America; one characterised by colonialism and despotism, which resulted in an “outsized reality”. He adds, “Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable”³⁶. Kafka’s ability to render his own alienation credible provided the younger Márquez with the scaffolding needed to delineate his own solitude. Repeated in a different, yet complimentary manner, Márquez’s reading of Kafka generated his need to write, creating an impetus, driven by a new awareness, which provided the scaffolding for his literary artifices.

This latter remark suggests that the reading process is both an act and an event, characterised by its potential to effect change. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge examines this very notion. Attridge proposes that all people are characterised by a particular ‘idioculture’, which he defines as the “embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and modes of behaviour”³⁷. The qualities that characterise a person’s idioculture include experiences, habits and modes of cognition. Although one’s idioculture to a large extent remains stable, certain components are necessarily unstable and prone to change. According to Attridge, the creative moment is an act, in that we seek to create, as well as an event, in that by opening ourselves and encountering otherness, we are changed—one’s idioculture is transformed. In describing the process of creation, Attridge writes: “the act of breaking down the familiar is also the act of welcoming the other; the event of the familiar breaking down is also the event of the irruption of the other”³⁸. An original work, Attridge argues, is one wherein which otherness effects a change in the same.

It is in this light that the reading process may be viewed as both an act and event. Attridge asserts that a work may be defined as a literary work if it can evoke in the reader, during the event of reading, a sense of otherness that alters their idioculture. He writes:

³⁶ García Márquez, Gabriel. Nobel lecture: ‘The Solitude of Latin America’. www.nobelprize.org. 26 September 2011. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982.marquez-lecture.html.

³⁷ Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004. 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 26.

The predilections and conventions by means of which most events of comprehension occur are challenged and recast, not merely as automatic extensions but as invitations to alterity, and thus to modes of mental processing, ideas and emotions, or conceptual possibilities that had hitherto been impossible...This process of initiation, this movement into the unknown, is experienced as something that *happens to* the reader in the course of a committed and attentive reading³⁹.

In returning to Márquez's responses, we can begin to see the relationship between Márquez and Kafka as less of an influence offered to the younger writer, and more as an event, singular to Márquez's reading, which proved transformative. That is, Márquez found in Kafka's story an otherness, which he was receptive to, and which demanded changes to his familiar mode of perception. Márquez's subsequent summation of Kafka's story into an incipit attempts to both denote the means of irruption and capture the irruptive moment.

II

In 'A Life Story Briefly Told' (1925), Hermann Hesse offers a succinct survey of his life. Unlike most biographies, Hesse does not restrict himself solely to those events that he has experienced. After detailing the years from 1877 to 1925, Hesse breaks with the tenets of reality and begins to dictate a conjectural narrative that depicts the concluding years of his life. Hesse writes, "Now since so-called reality plays no very important role for me...I need not end my biography with the present day but can let it go quietly on"⁴⁰. He then adds, "I shall give a brief account of how my life completes its curve"⁴¹.

Hesse recounts the years that precede 1925 in a factual manner that is admirable for its honesty and level of self-scrutiny. Hesse's non-conformist tendencies are evident from a young age. He does not fare well at school; firstly he attends a local school, then a Latin school in another city and for a short while he is enrolled in a theological seminary. Hesse also demonstrates little success in the practical field; he

³⁹ *Ibid.* 59.

⁴⁰ Hesse, Herman. Autobiographical Writings. Edited by Theodore Ziolkowski. Translated by Denver Lindley. London Jonathan Cape, 1973. 64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 64.

spends time as an employee in a mechanical factory, tower-clock factory, as a bookseller and lastly, as an antique salesman. Hesse writes, “Every attempt to make a useful human being out of me ended in failure”⁴².

At the heart of Hesse’s waywardness was an early realisation that he wanted to be “a poet or nothing at all”⁴³. This conviction stood in opposition to both traditional practicality and usefulness. Hesse understood that without a clear course of instruction, his path towards his artistic goal would be fraught with hardship. It was a path he accepted: “I saw between me and my distant goal nothing but abysses yawning...only one thing remained constant: that I intended to become a poet, whether that turned out to be easy or hard, ridiculous or credible”⁴⁴. Hesse refers to this realisation and commitment as his first transformation.

Hesse’s second transformation comes with the advent of the First World War. Hesse’s pacifist views, which he made public in 1915⁴⁵, ostracised him from his peers. He writes, “Once more, between reality and what seemed to me good, desirable, and sensible, I saw a hopeless abyss yawning”⁴⁶. At odds with the world, Hesse turned inwards; his introspection was not a form of escapism, but rather a desire to regain ‘his innocence’ by acknowledging his responsibility (or sense of wretchedness) and pursuing the cause of his sufferance to an internal source. In 1946, he wrote:

the thought of the hell smouldering beneath our feet, the sense of impending catastrophe and war never left me...I strive to guide the reader not into the world theatre with its political problems but into his innermost being, before the judgment seat of his very personal conscience⁴⁷.

As the survey moves beyond 1925, Hesse loses joy in writing and chooses instead to paint. He continues to hold little respect for reality, asserting: “I consider

⁴² *Ibid.* 57.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 56.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, ‘O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!’ published on September 1914. Hesse writes: “Precisely this wretched World War must make us more keenly aware that love is higher than hate, understanding than anger, peace than war. Or what would be the good of it?” Hesse, Hermann. If the War Goes On. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 60.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

reality to be the last thing one need concern oneself about, for it is, tediously enough, always present, while more beautiful and necessary things demand our attention and care”⁴⁸. He devotes himself to practical magic. In his seventies, he is brought to trial for the ‘seduction by magic of a young girl’ and is imprisoned.

It is the concluding part of Hesse’s essay that is of greatest originality. Throughout his imprisonment, Hesse is given painting material and is allowed to paint a picture of a landscape on his cell wall. Enthralled in his art, Hesse gives scant attention to his confinement—indeed one can sense happiness in his extrication from the world. However, the demands of reality soon impede on his environment, in the form of endless questioning and bureaucracy by guards, and Hesse is forced to make a decision: “If I was not allowed to play my innocent artist’s game undisturbed, then I must have recourse to those sterner arts to which I had devoted so many years of my life. Without magic this world was unbearable”⁴⁹. He then recites a Chinese spell and steps into the picture, much to the amazement of the guards.

III

I have read and re-read ‘Life Story Briefly Told’ on many different occasions since my early twenties and it has never lost its profound imaginative impact. I don’t believe that I could have written *Erasure* without first having been affected, or altered, by this particular work of Hesse’s. Not only does the essay demonstrate an admirable devotion to art and a rigorous examination of the self, but it also embodies a bold imaginative scope. I believe that it is an original piece of work—in Attridge’s full sense of the term—that does more than simply recast familiar autobiographic conventions, but rather invites otherness, through conjecture, and embodies an inventive quality that is sustained and reinvented, for me, in each reading.

The essay continues to affect me at each reading because I sense in it a dynamic mixture of innocence and defiance. One cannot read the essay without considering the events that would soon unfold in Europe and the effects that this would have on

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 63.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 67.

Hesse. By 1926 Hesse had already spoken publically against the rise of the National Socialist movement. In 1922 he wrote against prevailing anti-Semitic views: “to make of a single group of people a scapegoat for all the evil in the world and for the thousand awful sins and the sloth of the German people itself is an act of degeneracy”⁵⁰. In this regard, ‘Life Story Briefly Told’, stands as a testament to the vitality of the imagination, in opposition to the futility of reality. Hesse’s conjectural narrative stands bravely beyond the reach of perversion; its sense of innocence is felt as a direct result of his attempt—as he would describe it in 1939—to create “islands of humanity and love in the midst of devilry and slaughter”⁵¹.

Hesse’s essay impelled me to explore the role of the imagination as a stance of defiance. In *Erasure*, ‘Patricio Muñoz’ quickly reveals the real reason behind his employment. He understands that he has taken residence in a restrictive regime. He is aware of the full implication of his task—that in creating an anthology of authors, he is not highlighting the literature of Maragos, but delivering perceived dissidents to the respective authorities. Faced with a decision, ‘Patricio Muñoz’ decides to invent all of the characters and all of the stories in the anthology. In essence, if ‘Patricio Muñoz’ is forced to denounce anyone, he will offer characters that reside in his imagination; he will offer a false ‘Testimony’. When he is interrogated by the censor, who asks him to reveal the whereabouts of each author, ‘Patricio Muñoz’ states: “I have brought them to you...They are all here in front of you today. Each of them is staring you in the face. I invented all of them. They were forged from that place of resilience, that womb of hope, inside of me. They are beyond your stranglehold” (p.272)⁵².

This revelation, I hope, revitalises the text. The anthology is now seen as a creative act. The photographs that purportedly depict Maragonian authors are revealed as false; the reader can begin to see the disparateness that exists between the era depicted in each photograph and the autobiographical note that underpins it—for instance, the photograph of ‘Diane Salazar’ (p.13) is dated “Sep. 1947 Studer S.A. Tex.”. Ignoring the difference in location, if we were to assume that the age of

⁵⁰ Herman Hesse, as cited in: Cornils, Ingo., ed. *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*. Rochester: Camden House, 2009. 310.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 315.

⁵² References to my creative work, *Erasure*, are given in-text with their appropriate page number.

the lady depicted is 40 years, then by the time she encounters ‘Patricio Muñoz’ in 2008, she would be 101 years old. This revelation also serves to explain the unity of tone throughout the anthology; it also demonstrates that the censor will blindly overlook obvious narrative similarities in his paranoiac and obsessional quest to take offence and punish.

The works of Márquez, Kafka and Hesse have all helped me better understand the craft of writing. In particular, I have always been impressed by the way in which they utilise fantastical elements to such different ends. In Márquez’s work the fantastic tends towards hyperbole; it is José Arcadio’s trickle of blood that runs under the door, across the living room, onto the street, down steps, climbs curbs, makes right angles, hugs walls so as not to stain the rugs, and ends at Úrsula’s feet⁵³. In Kafka’s work the fantastic serves to delineate and emphasise a sense of alienation; it is Kafka’s matter-of-fact declaration that an apple in Gregor’s back served to remind his father that “Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience”⁵⁴.

However, in Hesse’s essay, the fantastical elements serve to create a positive end. That is, Hesse puts ‘practical magic’ to practical use. He offers an alternate way that allows us to realise that a world without magic *is* unbearable and that, importantly, this world stems from within us. It is this high regard for the imagination that I seek to explore in *Erasure*. In part, I hope to capture the manifold possibilities of the imagination and the responsibilities this imparts to people. This is best exemplified in the second part of *Erasure*, ‘Supposition’, when Professor Huffman writes:

I have used my imagination...Does it not amaze you that we are all equally capable of doing such things? That apart from our physical existence, there is within us the capability to conceive of things that have not existed, or did

⁵³ See, García Márquez, Gabriel. One Hundred Years of Solitude. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. 131.

⁵⁴ Kafka, Franz. ‘The Metamorphosis’. The Complete Stories. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books, 1983. 122.

not occur, and to further, imbue these imaginings with such minute details that they can summon real emotion from us? (p.192).

3. The Short-Short Story/or, *A Thousand Angry Hands*.

“He who hath eyes to see, let him see!”

- Heinrich Böll⁵⁵.

I

Central to the development of social networking tools has been a cultural shift towards a heightened sense of immediacy, a turn which necessitates brevity⁵⁶. Twitter is the prime example of this trend; users are offered the freedom of communicating their every thought and movement from mobile devices or personal computers; in turn, their postings (‘tweets’) are limited to 140 characters. Jack Dorsey, the co-founder and CEO of Twitter, has commented on the success of the company:

It’s the immediacy. Twitter is a very light mechanism to push out information. And it doesn’t require a lot of thought. It’s very clean, simple and accessible. It gives you the capability to kind of report what’s going on from anywhere right away. That’s pretty powerful⁵⁷.

The 140 character restriction could be seen as an impediment—a restriction imposed on expression. However, users have been creative in their manipulation of language (e.g. ‘You are great’, becomes ‘U R GR8’), and willing to adapt to the technological model. Dorsey adds, “I’m a big believer in constraint inspiring creativity...Limiting yourself to 140 characters tends to make you focus in on a more off-the-cuff manner that naturally allows for directness”⁵⁸.

The June 2009 postelection protests in Iran demonstrated the popularity, potential and limitations of social media technologies. The ‘Green Movement’, as it

⁵⁵ Heinrich Böll. ‘In Defense of “Rubble Literature”’. *Missing Persons and Other Essays*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1977. 130.

⁵⁶ On the characteristics of this trend see: Cowen, Tyler. ‘Three Tweets for the Web’. *The Wilson Quarterly*. Vol. 33, No. 4 (Autumn 2009), pp. 54-58. Cowen writes, “The new brevity has many virtues. One appeal of following blogs is the expectation of receiving a new reward (and finishing off that reward) every day” (p.54).

⁵⁷ Jack Dorsey, as cited from: ‘Media Interviews: in their own words’. www.iwantmedia.com. 1 October 2011. <http://www.iwantmedia.com/people/people75.html>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 1 October 2011.

was called, gained worldwide attention, in part, because of tools such as Twitter and YouTube. At first, it seemed as if protestors in Iran were using Twitter to effectively bypass government opposition, to inform the broader community of events occurring, and to organise demonstrations. To those distant from the physical protests (those watching media outlets or following ‘tweets’ on their mobile phones or PC’s), there was a palpable sense of impending change: was it possible that a ‘tweet’, something of only 140 characters, could overthrow an authoritarian regime? The American State Department believed so; on June 15 they requested that Twitter postpone a scheduled maintenance of its global network that would have impeded the efforts of Iranians. The *New York Times* also reflected this possibility; on June 16, an article titled, ‘Social Networks Spread Defiance Online’, read: “New kinds of social media are challenging those traditional levers of state media control and allowing Iranians to find novel ways around the restrictions”⁵⁹. This was followed on June 17 by an article titled, ‘Washington Taps Into a Potent New Force in Diplomacy’, which highlighted the Obama administration’s intervention and the role of social media as a “new arrow in its diplomatic quiver”⁶⁰.

By June 21, 2009, the mood had changed. Articles that appeared in the *New York Times* no longer informed of possible change, but rather now stated the lessons we *had* to learn. An article appearing on June 21, titled, ‘Twitter on the Barricades: Six Lessons Learned’, read:

But does the label Twitter Revolution...oversell the technology? Skeptics note that only a small number of people used Twitter to organise protests in Iran and that other means—individual text messaging, old-fashioned word of mouth and Farsi-language Web sites—were more influential⁶¹.

Twitter was criticised for being an unreliable gauge of events; a series of 140 character tweets (even thousands of them) could capture the ‘emotion’ of an event, but this did not equate to the ‘hard-facts’ that constituted good journalism. On September 10, 2009, *The New York Times* took the reflective stance a step further.

⁵⁹ Stone, Brad & Noam Cohen. ‘Social Networks Spread Defiance Online’. June 16, 2009. www.nytimes.com. Accessed on 2 October 2011.

⁶⁰ Landler, Mark & Brian Stelter. ‘Washington Taps Into a Potent New Force in Diplomacy’. June 17, 2009. www.nytimes.com.

⁶¹ Cohen, Noam. ‘Twitter on the Barricades: Six Lessons Learned’. June 21, 2009. www.nytimes.com. Accessed on 2 October 2011.

In an Op-Ed piece titled, 'New Tweets, Old Needs', Roger Cohen stated that Twitter certainly wasn't journalism. He wrote: "Journalism in many ways is the antithesis of the 'Here Comes Everybody'...deluge of raw material that new social media deliver. For journalism is distillation...It comes into being only through an organizing intelligence, an organising sensibility"⁶².

Twitter was not intended to mimic or rival journalism. Dorsey refers to the nature of Twitter as a "new behaviour", or a "new way to communicate"⁶³. That is, both Twitter and traditional journalism communicate the same message, but with different intentions. The latter, in Cohen's opinion, favours organised intelligence, organised sensibility and the first-hand experience of a 'seasoned' journalist; Twitter, on the other hand, prides itself on its accessibility, 140 character limit and the absence of ruminating qualities—as mentioned, Dorsey has stated: '(Twitter is) a very light mechanism to push out information. And it doesn't require a lot of thought'. This dynamic development in modes of communication—a new and quickly developing reality—spurs us to ask certain questions: what effect does the desire for immediacy, encouraged by a word limit, have on our need to bear witness to injustice? Is it possible that the desire for immediacy (the impulse to 'tweet' as part of a 'twitter' culture) works in opposition to the real need for immediacy in a situation (i.e. the potential for harm)? If this is so, should we then not question the behaviours we adopt (or create) that in turn allow us to express our right of seeing?

In the end, it was the restriction of all forms of communication and the violence of a regime, not simply the *mode* of expression, which stopped political change in Iran. Furthermore, the accessibility of social networking tools aided in the identification of dissidents. In his essay, 'Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution"', Morozov writes: "Both Twitter and Facebook give Iran's secret services superb platforms for gathering open source intelligence about the future revolutionaries, revealing how they are connected to each other. These details are now being shared voluntarily, without any external pressures"⁶⁴. Kevin Cross also

⁶² Cohen, Roger. 'New Tweets, Old Needs'. September 10, 2009. www.nytimes.com. Accessed on 2 October 2011.

⁶³ Jack Dorsey, as cited from: 'Jack Dorsey on the Twitter ecosystem, journalism and how to reduce reply spam. Part II'. Technology. February 19, 2009. www.latimes.com. Accessed on October 2, 2011.

⁶⁴ Morozov, Evgeny. 'Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution"'. *Dissent*. Vol. 56, No. 4 (Fall 2009). pp. 10-14. 12.

notes economic factors for the Green Movements failure. He astutely argues that Iran's largely undiversified market, based on oil revenue, was indeed aided by the political unrest, which served to bolster the price of crude oil. He concludes, somewhat alarmingly, "Why bother determining the will of the people if on the balance sheet the people are a liability rather than an asset?"⁶⁵

The June 2009 postelection protests in Iran resulted in 70 deaths. The death of 26 year old Neda Soltan is perhaps the most readily commented on. Neda was shot and killed on June 20 while demonstrating on the streets of Tehran. Her final moments of life were captured by a mobile phone camera; the footage was subsequently uploaded onto the video-sharing website YouTube. The video is 41 seconds in duration. Although I acknowledge the nature of authoritarian states, what does this trend towards technological immediacy and brevity highlight other than our voyeuristic sensibility and banal commitment to the world?

II

For much of 2009, I worked on the first part of *Erasure*. My focus was squarely upon the creation of short stories. I knew that the book would consist of three parts ('Testimony', 'Supposition' and 'Erasure'). The naming, structure and order of the work was both deliberate and essential; the censor that narrates part three views the anthology of work not as fiction, but rather as a 'testimony' given by Maragonian dissidents. He finds and uses the work of Eric Plumly as 'suppositional' evidence. In part three, he seeks to 'erase' the perceived cause of his distress. In this regard, I knew that the anthology I created would have to resemble a 'real' anthology, consisting of a convincing selection of Maragonian authors. The fact that I was working with a final word limit necessitated that I keep the stories within the anthology short; in essence, they would be marked by their brevity; they would resemble, what is now commonly termed 'flash fiction', 'sudden fiction' or the 'short-short story'.

The postelection protests in Iran encouraged me to position my writing within a broader cultural context. Specifically, I began to examine the way in which brevity

⁶⁵ Cross, Kevin. 'Why Iran's Green Movement Faltered: The Limits of Information Technology in a Rentier State'. *SAIS Review*. Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer-Fall 2010). pp. 169-187. 185.

might affect the representational possibilities of a short story. That is, did my necessity for brevity hamper the potential for a short story to effectively engage with social concerns? Further, if a story consisted of only 261 words (such as, ‘The Meeting Place of Hands’), could it evoke sufficient tone to warrant a censor’s suspicion? By consequence, was the short story, in this epigrammatic format, a sufficient and effective narrative of dissidence?

The characteristics of a short-short story are defined by brevity and tone. A short-short story is brief—suggestions range between 360 and 1,500 words⁶⁶. In regards to the short story, Poe has said, “the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance...this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting”⁶⁷. The brevity of the short-short story means that the reader may certainly benefit from the full impact of a story’s unobstructed ‘totality’. However, this ‘totality’ is rendered ineffectual if the author is unable to create “a single *effect*” by balancing “undue brevity” with the formalities of the genre. That is, each word is important and what is most needed is a tone that creates a lasting resonance. To this end, Irving Howe writes, “Everything depends on intensity, one sweeping blow of perception. In the short short the writer gets no second chance. Either he strikes through at once or he’s lost”⁶⁸.

In his essay, ‘Chekhov and the Modern Short Story’, Charles E. May comments on the minimalistic and evocative nature of modern short stories. May states that Chekhov’s short stories are defined by

character as mood rather than as either symbolic projection or realistic depiction; story as minimal lyricized sketch rather than as elaborately plotted tale; atmosphere as an ambiguous mixture of both external details and psychic projections; and a basic impressionistic apprehension of reality itself as a function of perspectival point of view⁶⁹.

⁶⁶ *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine* published by the University of Chester (UK) limits its entries to 360 words. In the introduction to *Short Shorts*, an anthology of short-short stories, Irving Howe suggests a limit of 1,500 words. For Howe’s comments see: Howe, Irving & Ilana Wiener Howe., ed. *Short Shorts*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983. x.

⁶⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, as cited from: May, Charles E., ed. *The New Short Stories Theories*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. 60.

⁶⁸ Howe, Irving & Ilana Wiener Howe., ed. *Short Shorts*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983. xi.

⁶⁹ May, Charles E., ed. *The New Short Stories Theories*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. 199.

These characteristics are also applicable to the short-short story. There is little opportunity within the short-short story to narrate complex themes, elaborate locations or intricate characters. In this regard, the short-short story favours the evocation of a mood, or the impressionistic record of a moment. The writer of a short-short story competes with and within the framework posed by brevity. It is this distinct challenge that often results in short-short stories being characterised by poetic enthusiasm, or lyricism.

‘The Meeting Place of Hands’ (p.13) attempts to demonstrate how the short-short story can embody both brevity and social relevance. As mentioned, the story consists of 261 words. The first line reads: “Hands are the hardest thing to capture. To capture hands one needs a steady eye, and another set of hands” (p.14). The success of this story is dependent upon the ambiguity of this first line; this introductory comment sets the tone of the entire piece. The sense of ambiguity lies in the word ‘capture’. Hands are difficult to draw. When a skilful artist renders a pair of hands accurately, we often say that they have ‘*captured* the likeness of a subject’. The term ‘capture’ can also mean to take prisoner. This dual meaning allows the reader to imagine that hands are not only difficult to artistically recreate, but that they are also somehow rogue entities, separate from our bodies, which we are required to seize.

This ambiguity provided me essentially with a fork in the narrative path. If I were simply writing a factual piece, I might have then made reference to a set of hands drawn in an exemplary way (e.g. see ‘Drawing Hands’ by M. C. Escher). However, I was after—as Poe states—a single creative effect and I therefore chose to pursue the idea of hands as defiant limbs. Brevity necessitated that I move from ambiguity to specificity quickly. I knew that in order for the reader to make the imaginative leap needed, I would have to make them feel repulsed by the very existence of hands; I would have to make them want to disassociate themselves from these dissident limbs. By the end of the first paragraph the move towards a split is almost complete; the reader is forced to imagine themselves conversing with their hands as if they were separate entities: “You are attached to my arms, you say, you even have the nerve to duplicate yourself, and now you are broken, weak and useless to me” (p.14).

In the second paragraph I continue to give hands distinct qualities, aiming to push the boundaries of accepted reality. In her book, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson views fantasy in literature not as the invention of another non-human world, but rather about “inverting elements of this world, recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different”⁷⁰. Imbuing the hands with characteristics and emotions leads the reader to overlook obvious rational objections: hands are not capable of realising when the body is asleep; hands cannot detach themselves from arms; they cannot commute on buses or go walking to remote areas; they may be able to clench themselves into fists, but what good does applauding do for them, if they do not have ears to hear the applause? Pursuing this imaginative narrative—one of *otherness* and *newness*—to its end allows me to credibly pose the final separation of hands from limbs in the third paragraph:

I often think that while we sleep, hands leave the body...They commute to a place where all hands gather: a hall, a chapel, an office someplace. There they practice assertion...Happy with their defiance, they spend the rest of the night wildly applauding each other (p.14).

‘The Meeting Place of Hands’ concludes with the line, “Nothing will end a life quicker, than a thousand angry hands around a human throat” (p.14). It is my hope that after reading *Erasure* the reader will be able to recognise the social commentary that underpins this short-short story. They might notice that ‘Dianne Salazar’ has been recognised for her contribution to critical thought, and that, elements of the authoritarian regime she lives in, have forced her to seek work as a dental assistant. They might also note the names of her publications—*The Luckiest Stone*, *The Weight of Water* and *A Certain Line*—and wonder what type of work this politically engaged fictional writer has written and might have gone on to write had her freedom not been interrupted. What I have offered is a brief segment of a life; and although, in the end, ‘Dianne Salazar’ proves to be a fictional character, I hope that I have given her existence sufficient worthiness, intellect and resources that, in turn, resounds with the reality of the reader.

⁷⁰ Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen, 1981. 8.

The writing of fiction does not exist in a vacuum independent of reality. To this end, it draws upon broader cultural and social concerns. It is by no means a far stretch to think that ‘a thousand angry hands around a human throat’ could easily serve to represent, ‘a thousand angry people’. The postelection protests in Iran demonstrated that an educated populace can, with enough repulsion, imagine themselves as divided from the body-politic that encapsulates them. But it remains to see whether or not the capitalism that spurs ingenuity in the field of social media technology will also allow people the means with which to enact true change. What now seems to be needed is an imagination and intelligence that focuses the opportunities offered by social networking to a committed cause. For in the end, what good is the sound of applause, if there are no ears to hear it?

4. Space and Place/or, *Writing (in) the Library*.

“The universe (which others call the Library)...”

- Jorge Luis Borges⁷¹.

I

NOTE:

This figure/table/image has been removed to comply with copyright regulations. It is included in the print copy of the thesis held by the University of Adelaide Library.

72

A standard sized folio does not do adequate justice to the photographs of Candida Höfer. Her inquisitive study of architectural spaces, often devoid of people, is undertaken with a large-format camera. The resulting prints, which in some exhibitions have been over six feet wide, are resplendent with detail. Höfer is interested in the way in which places *work*. Her aim, as she states, is not to “expose strangeness, or, so to speak, to catch the space at an odd moment, but to investigate the details, their contribution to the overall space, which seeks to organize them, and the shades of light that altogether make up the character of a space”⁷³.

The photographs in her monograph *Libraries* serve well to exemplify her artistic motive; there are pictures of historic reading rooms (‘Real Gabinete Português de

⁷¹ Borges, Jorge Luis. ‘The Library of Babel’. *Fictions*. 1956. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. London: A Jupiter Book, 1965. 72.

⁷² Höfer, Candida. ‘New York Public Library IV 1992’. *Libraries*. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2005. 19. The actual size of the reproduction within this folio is 14.5cm x 21.5cm.

⁷³ Interview with Candida Höfer and Carolyn Yerkes. ‘Candida Höfer’. <http://www.museomagazine.com/802470/CANDIDA-H-FER>. Accessed on 11 October 2011.

Leitura Rio de Janeiro 2005'), functional stacks ('Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden IV 2002'), relaxed public areas ('Otis College of Art and Design Los Angeles I 2000') and intimate alcoves ('Allgemeine Lesegesellschaft Basel I 1999'). All of the photographs curiously record the interplay of design, fit-out, occupation/usage (or lack of it) and the natural elements. A few of the photographs—both sparse and intricate—seem to suffer from the limitations of the folio; for instance, her photograph 'New York Public Library IV 1992' (see previous page) effectively captures the way in which light is allowed into the reading hall via the large arch windows, but fails, in my opinion, to demonstrate the character of the lit chandeliers overhead and renders the spines of books into blots of colour. This is a critique of publication, as opposed to skill, but nonetheless detracts from the viewers' ability to fully grasp Höfer's intention of rendering the characteristics of a particular space.

Höfer's photographs are characterised by an absence of people. Although Höfer does not aim to 'expose strangeness', her unpopulated images create a sense of uneasiness, or alienation. In his essay, 'The Atmosphere of Absence', Léith writes, "Yet, while Höfer's interiors may on occasion exude a sense of melancholy or disquiet, there is no sense in them of desolation or definitive abandonment...for now these spaces are empty"⁷⁴. This sense of disquietude arises as a result of the relationship between space and place. While space is an abstract term, place is what we make of space when we invest meaning to it; that is, space may be an office, but becomes a place if it is *my* office, with *my* computer in it, where *I* go to work each day. Place serves not only to denote a possession, but also an *experience*—the feeling of going to and working in *my* office. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has noted a relationship between space, place and movement. He writes:

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...the ideas 'space' and 'place; require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each

⁷⁴ Léith, Caoimhín Mac Giolla. 'The Atmosphere of Absence'. <http://www.modernart.ie/en/downloads/imma-hofer-macgiolla.rtf>. Accessed on 08/10/2011.

pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place⁷⁵.

Libraries as place have a specific purpose. Buschman writes, “Libraries and librarianship preserve and promote rational discourse through the organization of collections coupled with the principle of unfettered information access”⁷⁶. Höfer’s photographs of libraries devoid of people exude a sense of alienation because they deliberately depict a physical place without including the subjects that give that place its fixed purpose; that is, Höfer’s photographs do not depict the investment of meaning in action (e.g. a student reading), but rather the architectural expression of our necessity for meaning (e.g. an empty reading hall). In turn, the viewer is forced to invest meaning into the photographs; they are led to ask, how would I use this room/library? Where would I sit? Inevitably, they would be forced to ask, would I feel comfortable alone, without peers or without librarians? Höfer’s photographs offer no incentive for the viewer to ‘pause’, because they are not places which we would like to experience or linger in; they are devoid of ‘security’ and ‘stability’; they serve to remind us that the demarcation between place and space is tenuous, ‘threatening’, and easily erased.

The library is an institution with a demarcated and fixed location, in which collections are both organised and easily accessible. This fact encourages usability and fosters a sense of security and stability; it creates a hospitable place. But what if one conceived of a library that existed in opposition to these characteristics, that was infinite and lacked organisation? In ‘The Library of Babel’, Jorge Luis Borges envisions a library that includes every conceivable book. The narrator of the short story writes: “I repeat: it is enough that a book be possible for it to exist. Only the impossible is excluded”⁷⁷. In order to accommodate this fact, the Library is described as vast, composed of “an indefinite, perhaps an infinite, number of hexagonal galleries”⁷⁸. This total Library exists as a place without exit and rational discourse; its inhabitants are forced to pursue meaning in its incoherent books and

⁷⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan, as cited from: Creswell, Tim. Place: A Short Introduction. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 8.

⁷⁶ Buschman, John E. & Gloria J. Leckie., ed. The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture. Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2007. 18.

⁷⁷ Borges, Jorge Luis. ‘The Library of Babel’. Fictions. 1956. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. London: A Jupiter Book, 1965. 78.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 72.

unfathomable form; without order and significance, they increasingly turn to suicide. The hope of the narrator (and other ‘official searchers’ and ‘inquisitors’) is to find a ‘total book’ that gives justification to the library and to his consuming quest for meaning: “To me, it does not seem unlikely that on some shelf of the universe there lies a total book. I pray the unknown gods that some man—even if only one man, and though it have been thousands of years ago!—may have examined and read it”⁷⁹.

The possibility of a total library was first examined by Kurd Lasswitz in his short story, ‘The Universal Library’ (1901). Unlike Borges who posited a hexagonal institution, Lasswitz envisioned the library as occupying a single, horizontal line. He writes: “To go from one end of the library to the other with the speed of light will take twice as many years as there are trillions of volumes in the library...All space to the farthest known spiral galaxies would not hold the Universal Library...No matter how we try to visualize it, we are bound to fail”⁸⁰. Although both Lasswitz and Borges understand that such a library, though mathematically conceivable, is otherwise ungraspable, it is Borges alone who explores the extent of such an actualised thought. Essentially, Borges not only envisions the space such a library would require, but invests in this space a creative and intellectual sensibility which transforms it into a conceivable, yet inhospitable, place.

Borges’ imaginary library is an inhospitable place because its occupants are unable to endow the environment with value, significance or meaningful experience. In referring to the role of structure and agency in place, Creswell writes:

Places are never finished but always the result of processes and practices. As such places need to be studied in terms of the ‘dominant institutional projects’, the individual biographies of people negotiating a place and the way in which a sense of place is developed through the interaction of structure and agency⁸¹.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 78.

⁸⁰ Lasswitz, Kurd. ‘The Universal Library’. Fadiman, Clifton., ed. *Fantasia Mathematica*. 1958. New York: Copernicus, 1997. 242.

⁸¹ Creswell, Tim. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2004. 37.

Borges provides no information as to how and when the Library came into existence (the library exists ‘*ab aeterno*’⁸²). Nor does he provide any reason as to why such a vast Library was created. The inhabitants are born and die within one of the many hexagons; they spend their lives searching in vain for the book that will explain these missing points of existential significance. Essentially, the unfathomable ‘structure’ of the Library governs the ‘processes and practices’ of the inhabitants; the ‘individual biographies of the people’, the inhabitants, reflect the incomprehensibility of the architecture. The narrator of the short story writes: “I suspect that the human species—the unique human species—is on the road to extinction, while the Library will last forever: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly immovable, filled with precious volumes, useless incorruptible, secret”⁸³.

Borges’ story evokes a different sense of alienation than that of Höfer’s photographs. In Höfer’s work, one understands that at some point in the near future, the absent spaces will once again be occupied by people who will invest the location with purpose. In this sense, Höfer’s work not only reveals the tenuous territory between space and place, but also highlights the importance of community and collective reasoning in defining public spaces. However, in Borges’ work, the inhabitants of the Library are offered no reprieve from their angst; their sense of alienation is permanent. Unlike Höfer’s photographs, Borges’ Library is not characterised by an absence of people, but rather by architecture devoid of clear functional reason. ‘The Library of Babel’ is a place that inspires dread; it is a space that defies appropriation, offering us no ‘pause’, significance or hope.

II

On most mornings of my candidature, I would make my way to the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide where I would write. My decision to work in the library was pragmatic—I had a young family and a small stipend and required somewhere quiet to work. The Barr Smith Reading Room proved to be a perfect place; designed by Walter H. Bagot and opened in 1932, it has the capacity to sit 200 students. The classical nature of the reading room—with its ornate high

⁸² Borges, Jorge Luis. ‘The Library of Babel’. *Fictions*. 1956. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. London: A Jupiter Book, 1965. 73.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 79.

ceilings, natural lighting and open plan—proved a welcome change to the compact and often stifling design of academic libraries.

The central design concern of any academic library is how to best store resources in a limited physical space. To this end, academic libraries are still inevitably characterised by parallel rows of shelves compactly fitted into a limited floor space. Natural lighting is kept to a minimum so as to preserve books. Work spaces are typified by individual or grouped carrels that are both practical in their space usage and sufficient for privacy and study concerns:

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This figure/table/image has been removed
to comply with copyright regulations.
It is included in the print copy of the thesis
held by the University of Adelaide Library.

84

Academic libraries are increasingly beginning to factor in design principles that meet rapidly evolving technological developments. The rise of social networking facilities—and the presence of libraries on these sites—has no doubt influenced the design of libraries, encouraging casual communal spaces connected by freely available Wi-Fi access. However, these changes are offered as refurbishments to older sites and the purpose of disseminating information to the broader university population remains unchanged.

I enjoyed working in the Barr Smith Reading Room because it did not impede my physical movement or line of vision. My experience within my physical surroundings translated into clear and undisturbed thought. In regards to space and place, Yi-Fu Tuan has written:

Space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. On the negative side, space and freedom are a threat...to be open and free is to be exposed and

⁸⁴ Leighton, Phillip D. and David C. Weber. Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings. Chicago: American Library Association, 1999. 164 and 227 respectively.

vulnerable. Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning⁸⁵.

If library reading rooms seem anachronistic, it is because they do not seek to exploit the limited space available. They are expressions of opulence or grandeur, and embody the characteristics of place, coupled by a sense of freedom that derives from the notion of space. That is, while working in the reading room, I felt both a sense of stability, afforded to me by the consistency of the environment, and a sense of freedom, suggested by the ‘openness’ of the room, which invoked in me a feeling of movement that invited me to action, creativity and thought. My reaction to this particular place is due to the appropriate and classical architectural proportions of the reading room and my ability to invest meaning into its design. If the Barr Smith Reading Room had only one table and chair and yet remained capable of accommodating 200 people, the space would seem inappropriate and unwelcoming. Likewise, if the ceiling were three times its height—mirroring the architecture of a stadium—it might also seem inappropriate, far too extravagant, even threatening. The Barr Smith Reading Room became my writing studio—it was a pleasant space; it encouraged me to read other material within the library; it was open on a consistent basis; it was free of charge to use.

Coming to the library on such a frequent basis made me examine the way in which resources were ordered and the effect this organisation might have on creative writers. Both public and academic libraries may be seen as ‘non-places’. The anthropologist Marc Augé defines ‘non-places’ as “spaces where people coexist or cohabit without living together”⁸⁶. Such places are characterised by spaces of circulation, consumption or communication by mobile or transient users. Within the academic library it is not only the users, but also the resources, which are in circulation. An increased interaction with resources on an electronic level—via an online catalogue, and increasingly from social media platforms—helps define the modern library as a dynamic ‘non-place’.

⁸⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan, as cited from: Shin, Un-chol. ‘A Journey from Place to Space in the Humanities’. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), pp. 84-88. 84.

⁸⁶ Marc Augé, as cited from: Creswell, Tim. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 45.

Academic libraries may be fluid environments, but they are not neutral places; the arrangement of resources and the manner in which they are used dictates behaviours and subsequently influences learning. The Barr Smith Library is organised in accordance to the Dewey Decimal Classification scheme. The Dewey system divides knowledge into 10 main classes, which are then divided into sub-classes. Melvil Dewey, who invented the scheme, saw this form of organisation as most efficient. He writes that within the library “the most rigid economy must rule...our free libraries will all need to exercise their strait economy & any sistem that does not allow such saving must be defeated for users”⁸⁷. Reflecting Dewey’s principles of efficiency, the Barr Smith Library advises its users to turn firstly to the catalogue: “It is generally better strategy to use the catalogue to identify particular items of interest and then go to the shelves knowing the exact call numbers of the items”⁸⁸.

The library cultivates an environment in which the user is directed, in the most efficient way, to the appropriate book. Under the Dewey scheme, books are then grouped according to their similarities (e.g. 800’s for literature; 860’s for Spanish and Portuguese literature). Users are encouraged to quickly find a solution to their concerns within a specific classification framework; this form of fact-finding does not in itself constitute, nor foster, creative thinking. Undoubtedly, libraries have to be organised; one need only think of Borges’ Library to realise that chaos results in an inhospitable environment. However, the pursuance of organisation and efficiency can relegate the labour and rewards of serendipitous browsing to an unproductive pass time.

Creative writers must work in opposition to the structure of the library. As Derek Attridge has mentioned, creative acts require one to seek and allow otherness to affect one’s mode of cognition. This otherness, in my opinion, is to be found through broad and thorough reading. Creative writers must read more than just similar works; they must seek all forms of fiction and non-fiction work—the more disparate, the better. They cannot be guided by call numbers and classification

⁸⁷ Wiegand, Wayne A. *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey*. United States of America: American Library Association, 1996. 21.

⁸⁸ The University of Adelaide Library. ‘Locating Material in the Barr Smith Library’. <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/library/help/locating.html>. Accessed on 13 October 2011.

systems. They must linger in libraries and be willing to appear hopelessly inefficient; that is to say that they must be avid readers. True creation—*creative* writing—is spawned by the melding of vastly disparate ends. This fact is echoed by Italo Calvino in his essay, ‘Whom Do We Write For?’. He writes:

A writer’s work is important to the extent that the ideal bookshelf on which he would like to be placed is still an improbable shelf, containing books that we do not usually put side by side, the juxtaposition of which can produce electric shocks, short circuits⁸⁹.

Academic and public libraries are dynamic and fascinating places. In the second part of *Erasure*, I include a postcard of the Public Library building on 4th and Main Street in Quincy, Illinois (p.188). The postcard is postmarked October 6, 1905. The photograph is devoid of people. Below the picture is a cursive script: ‘Why dont you write are you all sick or why do we not hear from you. ma’’. The juxtaposition of stark photograph and emotive sentiment strikes a curious, and ultimately sad note within me. In *Erasure*, Felix Plumply writes: “But why did she choose this particular card? How can one correlate the significance of the public library with the nature of her sentiments?...I don’t know. It’s a mystery” (p.189). What did this library as a place mean for this caring mother? What prompted her to write in such an open and expressive manner?

A quick look on an online search engine tells me that the Quincy Public Library was founded in 1888. This means that the postcard used by this lady showed a library already 17 years old. In 1974, the public library relocated two blocks away. The building pictured is now the Gardner Museum of Architecture and Design. The new Quincy Public Library has a website, an online catalogue, several YouTube entries and a Facebook page; the daily events of its librarians and local users are easily followed. However, all of this information draws me no closer to knowing what impelled this mother to write to her children in 1905. There is a void that I cannot fill; something has been lost; death rids us of our place, leaves only space.

⁸⁹ Calvino, Italo. ‘Whom Do We Write For?’ *The Literature Machine: Essays*. Translated by Patrick Creagh. London: Secker and Warburg, 1986. 82.

Borges wrote: “I suspect that the human species—the unique human species—is on the road to extinction, while the Library will last on forever”⁹⁰.

What did we lose on the way from Maine Street to Jersey Street?

⁹⁰ Borges, Jorge Luis. ‘The Library of Babel’. Fictions. 1956. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. London: A Jupiter Book, 1965. 79.

5. A Close Reading/or, *The God Question*.

“Why do you ask me my name? It is beyond understanding”.

- Judges 13:18⁹¹.

I

In his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), I. A. Richards notes six ways in which the concept of ‘imagination’ is thought of and discussed. Of these qualities, Richards places importance on the ability to order varied experiences to new effect. To this end, he reinterprets the ideas raised firstly by Coleridge, whom he quotes: “(Imagination) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities...the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order”⁹². In Richards’ opinion, it is the poet who has the heightened sensibility to wrangle experiences and contrary emotions into a single poised response; in his view, the poet possesses a heightened self-awareness, coupled by both an uninhibited (Richards uses the word ‘disinterested’) approach and a skill for selective inclusion and exclusion. He writes:

The poet makes unconsciously a selection which outwits the force of habit; the impulses he awakens are freed...from the inhibitions that ordinary circumstances encourage; the irrelevant and the extraneous is excluded; and upon the resulting simplified but widened field of impulses he imposes an order⁹³.

A quality that is deemed of near equal importance is the use of figurative language. He perceives metaphors as the “supreme agent by which disparate and hitherto unconnected things are brought together in poetry for the sake of the effects upon attitude and impulse which spring from their collocation and from the

⁹¹ ‘Judges 13:18’. Zondervan The New International Version Study Bible. 1985. Fully Revised Edition. General Editor Kenneth L. Barker. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002. 351.

⁹² Coleridge, as cited from: Richards, I. A. ‘The Imagination’. Principles of Literary Criticism. 1924. Twelfth impression. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950. 242.

⁹³ Richards, I. A. ‘The Imagination’. Principles of Literary Criticism. 1924. Twelfth impression. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950. 244.

combinations which the mind then establishes between them”⁹⁴. In this regard, the metaphor is seen as an integral part of communication; a linguistic or verbal expression—an ‘agent’—that facilitates and constitutes the central aspect of the creative process.

In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) Richards expands upon the interactive role of the metaphor. He argues that metaphor is central to the way in which ordinary (not just poetic) language functions; that is, language, which is characterised by a necessary ambiguity, is the way in which we attribute a malleable reality to our experiences; as such, there is no literal-figurative dichotomy, but an inherent metaphoric structure. Richards explains the nature of metaphors as “two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is resultant of their interaction”⁹⁵. He introduces two distinct elements to this linguistic process: ‘vehicle’ and ‘tenor’. The former term refers to the metaphoric concept or idea used; while the latter term refers to the subject to which the idea is applied. The interaction of these two disparate qualities engenders a unique meaning that cannot be achieved otherwise; Richards refers to the resultant ‘meaning’ as the ‘ground’. In this light, the effect of metaphor, as Terrance Hawkes asserts, is to

extend language and, since language is reality, to expand reality. By the juxtaposition of elements whose interaction brings about a new dimension for them both, metaphor can reasonably be said to create *new* reality, and to secure that reality within language, where it is accessible to the people who speak it⁹⁶.

Central to the aim of all fiction writing is the desire to create work characterised by originality. To this end, metaphor serves as an important tool to capture a sense of newness—this fact has been realised as far back as Aristotle in both his *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. Of interest to my own work, is the way in which metaphor can ‘extend language’, create ‘new realities’ and secure such new meanings within the realm of articulation. In my short story, ‘A Preface to God’, I explore the possibilities of

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 240.

⁹⁵ I. A. Richards, as cited from: Hawkes, Terence. *Metaphor*. London: Methuen & Co., 1972. 63.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 63.

conceiving an otherwise ineffable figure through the metaphor, ‘God is a book’. This short story—consisting of 333 words—is built around this single metaphor and examines its possibilities and limitations.

In ‘A Preface to God’ the metaphor is not directly expressed. I write, “what if I were to then reveal to you that the letters A and Ω were references to God (*Revelations 21:6*) and that in this instance, they were not simply an appellation of God, but God itself. That is, that God was the very book you held in your hands and perused” (p.95). The narrative requirements of a short story naturally differ to that of poetry; therefore, it seemed appropriate that, in order to gain a creative effect, I should reveal the metaphor in a more descriptive way, with awareness of the story’s narrative path. Another important reason for doing so is that the metaphor, when expressed literally, is problematic. The term ‘God’ lacks fixed, discernable qualities. As such, ‘God’ as the ‘tenor’ of a metaphor, works best when the ‘vehicle’ connotes an emotive meaning (e.g. God is a sunrise). The metaphor encounters trouble when the ‘vehicle’ suggests a transformation wherein the ‘tenor’ gains fixed characteristics; this is owing to the fact that ‘God’ is itself an abstract term; as such, the metaphor may serve not to ‘expand language’, but rather to hinder or restrict it.

In order to make the metaphor work successfully, I had to provide a great deal of literary scaffolding—preemptive description that encouraged the reader to follow the possibilities of this somewhat problematic metaphor. The author of this story is called Rose Ekert; her surname deliberately alludes to the German theologian Meister Eckhart. Ms. Ekert is the author of several books based on theological or spiritual topics—*Say it Loud: A Dialogue on Belief* and *The Home of Questions*. The latter book receives glowing praise as “embodying an intangible, golden persistence” (p.94); these comments serve to reflect the ‘intangible’ qualities of the story and its central concern. Her comment on writing, based on John 18:38, examines the notion of ‘truth’ and asks, “Can truth be captured in a book?” (p.94). The quotation is intended to mirror the theme of the subsequent story: ‘Can God be captured in a book?’ Ms. Ekert’s photograph shows a lady of elderly age, dressed reservedly, standing happily in a garden, holding her reading glasses. My aim in choosing this photograph was to depict a lady who demonstrated a calm and studious nature, thus giving credibility to the philosophical exercise that followed.

The title of the short story is taken from Lao-Tzu's work, *Tao Te Ching*. My endeavor to attribute qualities to an ineffable God reflects Lao-Tzu's philosophical writings on the nature of Tao. Lao-Tzu writes, "Continually the Unnamable moves on, until it returns beyond the realm of things. We call it the formless form, the imageless Image. We call it the indefinable and unimaginable"⁹⁷. There are many translations of this central Chinese text. I take the title of my story from R. B. Blackney's translation (1955) of the *Tao Te Ching*. In section IV, the Tao—or the Way—is described as having no fixed origin of place or time; it is described as limitless: "A deep pool it is, never to run dry! Whose offspring it may be I do not know: It is like the preface to God"⁹⁸. Depending on what edition one reads, the final sentence is offered in varying interpretations: "it is older than God", "It images the forefather of God", "It might appear to have been before God" and "It comes before nature"⁹⁹. Blackney's use of the word 'preface' can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, in regards to the Christian Church, as a celebratory introduction to the main part of the Eucharist; and secondly, in a literary sense, as the introduction to a published work. In my short story, I use the sentence to help establish the metaphor; I also hope to evoke further questions in the reader's mind—for instance: if God is a book, who will write the preface? By consequence, can anything or anyone precede God? Both an Aristotelian response (God as the first mover) and a biblical response (John 1:1) would reflect an answer in the negative.

In writing this story, I viewed the use of metaphor as more than an embellishment of language. That is, the central metaphor that I chose sought to go further than simply adding, in some aesthetic way, to an existent meaning. The interaction of 'tenor' and 'vehicle' was integral in creating something communicable—a new 'ground'—which could not have been expressed otherwise. Metaphor was not so much an aesthetic tool, as a means (perhaps the only means) to attempt to express the ineffable. Placing the revelation of the metaphor towards the end of the story allowed me to let the reader enact the 'ground', or new meaning,

⁹⁷ Tzu, Lao. [Tao Teh Ching](#). 1961. Translated by Dr. John C. H. Wu. New York: St. John's University Press, 1974. 19.

⁹⁸ Tzu, Lao. [Tao Te Ching](#). 1955. Translated by R. B. Blackney. New York: Signet Classics, 2007. IV.

⁹⁹ These are four interpretations. There are many other translations of this work. These respective translations have been undertaken by: Stephen Mitchell (Harper & Row, 1988), D. C. Lau (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), James Legge (Digireads book, 1891), and Peter Merel (www.vl-site.org/taoism/ttcmereel.html, 1995). For full details refer to Bibliography.

that the metaphor would reveal. It gave me the opportunity to write: “In your hands you hold a book. Go on, browse through it; this may be your last chance” (p.95). If the story is successful, it is because the territory opened by the metaphor engages with the space opened by the reader’s imagination in a new and effective way.

II

My interest in discerning the qualities of a spiritual God is an endeavor with a rich discursive history. Many writers of varying spiritual, philosophical or religious inclination have examined the ineffable nature of God. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine writes: “You, my God, are supreme...You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us...yet we cannot comprehend you...even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find the words to describe you”¹⁰⁰. These sentiments can also be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas. He writes: “Our definitions and conclusions are outranged, for he is incalculable, comprehended only by himself...exceeding all speech, he is ineffable, and nobody can sufficiently sound his praises”¹⁰¹.

The use of metaphors to describe both the nature of God and the process towards spiritual enlightenment is prevalent throughout *The Bible*. The characteristics of these metaphors vary not only in differing scriptures, but also in alternate translations of identical verses. In the King James Version (KJV, 1611) of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (13:12), one finds the passage: “*For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*”¹⁰². In the New International Version (NIV, 1973) of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the same passage reads: “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*”¹⁰³. The identical passage in The Message (TM, 1993) translation reads: “*We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather*

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. *Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961. 23.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas, Thomas. *Theological Texts*. Edited and Translated by Thomas Gilby. New York: Oxford UP, 1955. 36-37.

¹⁰² My italics. ‘1 Corinthians 13:12’. King James Version. Biblica. International Bible Society and Send The Light (IBS-STL). <http://www.biblica.com>. Accessed on 17 October 2011.

¹⁰³ My italics. ‘1 Corinthians 13:12’. New International Version. *Ibid*.

clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!"¹⁰⁴

The varying interpretations of the passage cited result in different metaphoric meanings. In the KJV and the TM translation, the reader is encouraged to persist with their faith for an essentially hidden God (Isaiah 45:15), who will then reveal Himself either face to face (KJV), or as a light source that clears the dimming fog (TM). In both instances the revelation of God will occur to the reader from an outside source, even though the eventual knowledge of God will be internal, direct, unifying and self-revelatory. However, the NIV translation suggests an act of faith that begins and concludes entirely within the reader. That is, the extract implies that as mankind was made in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26), the subsequent pursuance of God should therefore not be an external journey to a separate unifying God, but rather, a wholly internal experience. The metaphoric mirror may offer a poor reflection, but when cleaned it shows the enlightened self, while the glass (clean or unclean) does not reflect or reveal the self, but shows an 'other' being through the glass, apart from the self. The linguistic difference may seem slight, but the visual concepts raised in each translation demonstrate markedly different points of spiritual relation. There are certainly epistemological differences between knowing and comprehending God if He is external from the self (KJV and TM), as compared to if He originates from within the self (NIV).

Literary authors have also taken an interest in examining the nature of God. In 'The Nine Billion Names of God' (1953), Arthur C. Clarke tells the story of a Tibetan high lama named Sam Jaffe who acquires an Automatic Sequence Computer (a Mark V) from an unnamed western company. In acquiring the computing machine, the monks intend to deduce the 'real' names of God:

It is really quite simple. We have been compiling a list which shall contain all the possible names of God...All the many names of the Supreme Being—God, Jehovah, Allah, and so on—they are all man-made labels. There is a philosophical problem of some difficulty here...but somewhere among all

¹⁰⁴ My italics. '1 Corinthians 13:12'. The Message. *Ibid.*

the possible combinations of letters that can occur are what one may call the *real* names of God¹⁰⁵.

With the aid of the Mark V—functioning continuously for 20 hours each day—the monk asserts that they will be able to do what would have taken “fifteen thousand years” in “a hundred days”¹⁰⁶. Once paid, the western company provides two personnel members who help relocate the Mark V to the remote monastery. The project is dubbed ‘Project Shangri-La’ and is looked upon by the westerners with bemusement.

It is later revealed that the monks believe that by deriving the ‘real’ names of God, the governing purpose of the earth will be completed, or exhausted, and the world will be subsequently brought to a close by God: “they believe that when they have listed all of his names...God’s purpose will be achieved. The human race will have finished what it was created to do, and there won’t be any point in carrying on...God steps in and simply winds things up”¹⁰⁷. The two western employees believe the scheme will fail. They fear the subsequent reaction of the monks and decide to flee, only to notice that “overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out”¹⁰⁸.

From the last sentence, the reader is led to believe that the monks have revealed the ‘real names’ of God and that He has subsequently intervened and brought the world to an end. At no point are the actual characteristics of God depicted; nor are the exact ‘real names’ of God ever revealed. Despite these important omissions, the story remains imaginative and effective. Its success owes in part to the use of metaphoric language which allows the reader to envision God as something that is existent and capable of having an effect on the functioning of the world. That is, Clarke tells the reader that God is a ‘Supreme Being’ with humanistic qualities; he is depicted as having a ‘purpose’, as the creator through which humans gain their meaning; he can, if he sees fit, ‘step in’ and bring the world to an end, as if he were the chief machinist. It is this imagery that allows the task carried out by the monks

¹⁰⁵ Clarke, Arthur C. ‘The Nine Billion Names of God’. The Other Side of the Sky. London: Victor Gollancz, 1972. 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 12.

to hold both significance and gravity; it is also this which allows the doubtful behaviour of the westerners to stand in opposition to that of the monks, adding resonance to the final revelation.

Clarke's short story also shares similarities with the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, namely *the Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*. In his work, Pseudo Dionysius records the many names and characteristics attributed to God in the scriptures. He also acknowledges ones fundamental incomprehensibility of God. He writes:

How then can we speak of the divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding?¹⁰⁹

In his work, *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius asserts that the process of understanding the 'Transcendent' is through an exercise of denial. He writes:

as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings¹¹⁰.

Clarke's imaginary Mark V Automatic Sequence Computer can then be seen as not computing the 'real names' through investigation, but deducing such names through the negation of the many 'man-made' impossibilities. Seen in this light, Clarke's destructive answer remains unspoken because, as Pseudo-Dionysius asserts, God is "beyond every denial"¹¹¹ and present not in "wise or persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4)¹¹².

¹⁰⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aereopagite. 'The Divine Names'. Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works. Translated by Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1987. 53.

¹¹⁰ 'The Mystical Theology'. *Ibid.* 138.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 141.

¹¹² '1 Corinthians 2:4'. Zondervan The New International Version Study Bible. 1985. Fully Revised Edition. General Editor Kenneth L. Barker. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002. 1777.

In ‘The Preface to God’ I have sought to engage with this long-standing spiritual or philosophical discourse. I have attempted to place my short story within this broader literary context. The narrator in the story asks, “What size was the book? How was it bound? What did the typeset look like? What language was it written in?...Are its pages few or do they tend towards the infinite?” (p.95). The reader is encouraged to examine both how they conceive of God, and how they would then mediate this image with the idea of God as a book. The reader is led to attribute their own feelings towards books and reading to a spiritual end. In a creative manner, the reader may then go on to build upon the metaphor, to transcribe this imaginary book, to add further linguistic reality to this single imaginative exercise.

III

The purpose of a metaphor is to create and secure a new reality within language. What if we were to examine the full scope of the metaphor and the ‘ground’ that it opens, pursue the boundaries of the linguistic reality that it creates? That is, what if we were to creatively imagine whether the metaphor, God is a book, could be actualized? This sort of exercise seems, at least to me, fundamental to the creative writing process; I offer it at the end of this particular close reading because it reflects my own method of reading, writing and creating. Texts serve not only as forms of entertainment, but platforms from which to spring from; as a writer, my inclination is to ask: how can I learn from this text? What can I take from it? What ideas can I make new or push to new creative ends? In this regard, the metaphor, God is a book, is a new ‘ground’, which I examine thoroughly for creative material. In the paragraphs that follow, I draw primarily from Saint Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*.

Let us reassert the aim: God is a book. Firstly, is there a difference between conceiving God as a book and questioning whether God is capable of writing a book that records His own existence and knowledge (in the form of an autobiography or testament)? If God is a book then it should follow that someone prior to, or aside to God authored or co-authored ‘God as a book’. Leaving aside the possibility—immense in itself—that if authored, or co-authored, God may be a creation of either fiction or non-fiction (at the worst, an act of plagiarism), let us assume that God is of

the first instance¹¹³ and immutable¹¹⁴. God is therefore, at once, the author and book in itself.

God is eternal¹¹⁵ and at once (and always) writing and existing, for if God paused to write what He had experienced so far, then it would entail a multiplication of eternal time. Even though God is not a body¹¹⁶ and therefore does not have any limbs to physically write with, let us allow for the existence of a writing mechanism that does not entail the use of a hand—a voice or thought generated contraption.

If God is eternal, does this mean that the book would be of infinite pages? This largely depends on the nature of God's form of written communication; as Λ to Ω signified the beginning and the end, so too God might use a single symbol that may demonstrate the eternity He has so far endured and comprehended. However, if the symbol (let us say it is ∞) is singular, could a reader understand it with the speed and comprehension with which they comprehend any regular singular symbol or word (i.e., *c*, *a* or *t*, or *cat*)? The letter although singular, may be of infinite size, unknown form, or multi-dimensional and therefore largely inconceivable in appearance, meaning or available (and finite) reading time.

Even though God is incomprehensible to created intellects¹¹⁷, let us allow that the work is conceivable. It may serve to ask what might be God's impetus for creating a book that records His experiences and knowledge. If God is perfect¹¹⁸ and if He is the sole entity that comprehends Himself¹¹⁹ then what enjoyment would He derive from reading His own work? Indeed, is it possible for Him to allocate time to reading His created work? However, if readers were able to comprehend God would they derive any enjoyment from the unsurpassed perfection? Does the reader need an error (at the least, a typographical one) or a subjective opinion to sustain interest and formulate an argument?

¹¹³ Aquinas, Thomas. 'Q. 2 Art. 3'. *Summa Theologica*. Vol. 1. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns & Oates, 1947. 13.

¹¹⁴ 'Q. 9 Art. 1'. *Ibid.* 38.

¹¹⁵ 'Q. 10 Art. 2'. *Ibid.* 41.

¹¹⁶ 'Q. 3 Art. 1'. *Ibid.* 14.

¹¹⁷ 'Q. 12 Art. 7'. *Ibid.* 54.

¹¹⁸ 'Q. 4 Art. 1'. *Ibid.* 20.

¹¹⁹ 'Q. 14 Art. 3'. *Ibid.* 74.

If God is conceived as a book—large or small—and is everywhere¹²⁰, does this suggest that there needs to be multiple copies of the same book (‘God as a book’) within different libraries and book stores? How may this concept be reconciled if God is One¹²¹ and therefore indivisible? Further, if God is everywhere and spiritually available to all, then does this not suggest that ‘God as a book’ must also be produced in different formats (i.e., Braille, large print, audio books, and children picture books)? Is it then possible to develop an adequate translation language or translation process that encompasses God’s word?

If God is a book then it is likely that the book would be called ‘He who is’¹²². For academic purposes, how then would one catalogue a book that is all, yet beyond all categories owing to the fact that it is the instigator of all such things and definitions? If it were categorized, how long would the loaning period be for? Is a general loan of two weeks too short for a (possibly) infinite book, or does its prized nature mean that it is stored in a ‘reserved’ area and only allowed for short loans or internal use? Would the regulations of late fees still apply in this case?

Finally, if we are made in God’s likeness, and derive purpose in our life from His existence, would we then not also appear as characters in this book? If we were to find the chapter, page, paragraph or sentence that depicted us, would it not tell the story of each day from our birth till the moment we found the extract? Could it go any further, somehow foretell our death, or would it be caught transcribing the moment? God writes: “he continues to read. He continues to read. He continues to read. He does not leave my side”. It is at precisely this moment when the metaphor is surpassed by a new, ‘novel and fresh’ idea; when we come full-circle—returning to I. A. Richards—and begin to think in an imaginative way. This turning point, characterised by a move towards creation, reveals that metaphor is intrinsic to language and that the interaction between disparate ideas—tenor and vehicle—can result, or generate, insightful and creative spaces of meaning.

¹²⁰ ‘Q. 8 Art. 2’. *Ibid.* 35.

¹²¹ ‘Q. 11 Art. 3’. *Ibid.* 47.

¹²² ‘Q. 13 Art. 11’. *Ibid.* 70.

6. Ethics/or, *An Unaffected Style*.

“From murals and statues/
we get a glimpse of what/
the Old Ones bowed down to”
- W. H. Auden¹²³.

I

Joseph Brodsky’s essay ‘Homage to Marcus Aurelius’ is a meditation on antiquity (its inaccessibility), commemoration (bronze statues), the city of Rome (its seven hills), and the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius. The essay can be encountered in two ways: it originally appeared in *Campidoglio* (1994), accompanying the photographs of Alexander Liberman, and was subsequently included in Brodsky’s essay collection, *On Grief and Reason* (1995). Brodsky’s work is formidable in any light; his homage to Aurelius loses none of its skill in either context. However, it is in the former publication where one appreciates the unique character of Brodsky’s tribute.

Both Liberman and Brodsky share a long-standing interest in the Piazza del Campidoglio. Liberman’s photographic project spans twenty years. He writes, “And when I plunged into the Campidoglio, I came on it in total ignorance, so that the eye was my guide. This is not a scholarly project. I have tried to achieve a kind of visual poem”¹²⁴. The series of photographs that follow depict the Piazza from different angles, proximities and in different light; they show details of Aurelius—his bearded face, his outstretched hand, his curled hair—in different profiles, and the horse he saddles—its muzzle, crest, hock and hooves. Liberman’s interest is resoundingly physical: sculpture, architecture and site; it is bound by the workings of both aperture and shutter.

¹²³ Auden, W. H. ‘Archaeology’. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Edward Mendelson. London: Faber & Faber, 1976. 662.

¹²⁴ Liberman, Alexander. *Campidoglio*. New York: Random House, 1994. 16.

In contrast, Brodsky's essay begins with the physical (the city and its ruins), and extends to encompass the metaphysical (antiquity, and in a more abstract sense, time). Brodsky asserts that the former is the expression of the latter; he writes, "Take white, ocher, and blue; add to that a bit of green and a lot of geometry. You'll get the formula time has picked for its backdrop in these parts"¹²⁵. Brodsky engages with Aurelius directly. His regard for Aurelius rests on the fact that the emperor was not born to the role, but appointed; he bore the responsibility with moral insight, self control and regard for the common good. Consequently, the pursuance of personal ethics, in light of power and its ability to eschew the ethical, made Aurelius' stance unique, lonely and admirable. Brodsky writes of the emperor, "You were just one of the best men that ever lived, and you were obsessed with your duty because you were obsessed with virtue"¹²⁶. Although Brodsky does not regard Aurelius' *Mediations* as a flawless book (it is, in his opinion, a melancholic, repetitive and patchy book with flashes of genius), he states, "If that book hasn't civilized us, what will?"¹²⁷

How then does Brodsky's essay pair with Liberman's photographs? Unfortunately, in my opinion, next to Brodsky's essay, Liberman's photographs appear somewhat static and insubstantial. This is in part due to the limitations of photography and to the individual relationship shared by each artist towards the Piazza del Campidoglio and its bronze subjects. As a poet, Brodsky believed there existed a link between Russian aesthetics and Italian culture. In 1995, he proposed an academy in Rome where Russian scholars and artists could reside. In a letter to the *New York Review of Books*, he stated his aim:

Italian culture is indeed the mother of Russian aesthetics...for seventy of this century's years this connection between the mother and her child was artificially severed...the idea of establishing a Russian Academy in Rome has to do with a desire to restore that child to its natural, healthy condition¹²⁸.

¹²⁵ Brodsky, Joseph. 'Homage to Marcus Aurelius'. *Ibid.* 50.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 52.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 51.

¹²⁸ Brodsky, Joseph. 'The Russian Academy: Preliminary Notes'. *The New York Review of Books, Letters*. April 10, 1997.

Brodsky's relationship with the Roman Empire began at high school. It is well informed and personal: "Marco Aurelio, I repeated to myself, and felt as if two thousand years were collapsing, dissolving in my mouth...The Roman! Emperor! Marcus! Aurelius! This is how I knew him in high school, where the majordomo was our own stumpy Sarah Isaakovna...who taught us history"¹²⁹.

In 1972, following his detainment in a psychiatric hospital on the Pryazhka and subsequent internal exile to the Arkhangelsk province of northern Russia, Brodsky quit his home country. He visited Rome soon after. One cannot help but associate his recent émigré status at that time with the history of the Roman site. As Diane Kelder notes, "The Piazza del Campidoglio, was once called the *Asylum*, perpetuating the legend that the city's founder, Romulus, welcomed refugees and exiles from surrounding communities there"¹³⁰. Brodsky encourages us to see these similarities; he does not simply engage with the site, but fuses his own story with the heritage. Therefore, it is not a big stretch to suggest that the manner in which Brodsky met his unforeseen circumstances matched in quality the stoic courage and disposition of the Roman emperor he admired.

II

In his essay, 'Marcus Aurelius', Matthew Arnold writes: "The sentences of Seneca are stimulating to the intellect; the sentences of Epictetus are fortifying to the character; the sentences of Marcus Aurelius find their way to the soul"¹³¹. Seneca and Epictetus had to contend with an audience; Aurelius only with himself. The Roman emperor's words do not reach us through a secondary author, such as Arrian, but directly, in a tone that is both intimate and immediate: "No, you do not have thousands of years to live. Urgency is on you. While you live, while you can, become good"¹³². Aurelius's sole aim was to keep his 'directing mind' focused on the exercise of virtue: "Your mind will take on the character of your most frequent thoughts: souls are dyed by thoughts"¹³³. The dispassionate or austere qualities that

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

¹³⁰ Diane Kelder. 'The Campidoglio: A Historical Perspective'. Liberman, Alexander. *Campidoglio*. New York: Random House, 1994. 199.

¹³¹ Arnold, Matthew. 'Marcus Aurelius'. *Essays: Literary and Critical*. 1906. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1950. 201.

¹³² Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. Translated by Martin Hammond. London: Penguin, 2006. 26.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 41.

are sometimes associated with stoicism are not overtly present in Aurelius's work; there is instead a deliberate attempt by Aurelius to control and guide his emotions towards appropriate ends: "never to give the impression of anger or any other passion, but to combine complete freedom from passion with the greatest human affection"¹³⁴. Aurelius's *Meditations* appeals to the soul because its frankness, intimacy and aphoristic nature, reflect the personal and succinct qualities of poetry.

In Aurelius's *Meditations*, one reflection serves to adequately capture the disposition of Joseph Brodsky. In Book IV, Aurelius writes:

'It is my bad luck that this has happened to me.' No, you should rather say: 'It is my good luck that, although this has happened to me, I can bear it without pain, neither crushed by the present nor fearful of the future.' Because such a thing could have happened to any man, but not every man could have borne it without pain¹³⁵.

Brodsky concludes his homage to Aurelius with 18 short excerpts from the emperor's work. That the above quotation was not included perhaps reflects Brodsky's decision not to imbue his past experiences with false sentiments or unnecessary significance. Yet, this lesson of moral insight is clearly important to him. In a commencement speech delivered at the University of Michigan in 1984, Brodsky advises the future students accordingly: "At all costs try to avoid granting yourself the status of victim...No matter how abominable your condition may be, try not to blame anything or anybody...try to respect life not only for its amenities but for its hardships too"¹³⁶.

There are few, if any, examples in Brodsky's interviews, essays or poetry in which he laments or labours upon his experiences or exile status. In his interviews with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky is quick to state that his public trial in 1964 was beyond his control, a natural demonstration of authority, and therefore not extraordinary. When plied for an emotive response, Brodsky answers: "No, I'm not making anything up! I'm saying exactly what I really think about this! I thought the

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 4.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 33.

¹³⁶ Brodsky, Joseph. 'Speech at the Stadium'. *On Grief and Reason*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995. 144.

same then as well. And I refuse to dramatize all this!”¹³⁷ His subsequent exile to the Arkhangelsk province of northern Russia, which must have certainly had both its physical and mental repercussions, is surmised by Brodsky as such: “All in all, as I now think back, that was one of the best periods in my life. There have been no worse, but I don’t think there have been better”¹³⁸.

Brodsky’s comments regarding his exile to the United States in 1972 have been similarly pragmatic. It is possible to trace a development in Brodsky’s views towards his exile status. In his poem, ‘In the Lake District’ (November, 1972), the feeling of estrangement is clear: “I...a spy, a spearhead/ for some fifth column of a rotting culture (my cover was a lit. professorship)”. This satirical approach is then counterpointed by the solemn second stanza that records the reality of his day-to-day challenges: “Whatever I wrote then was incomplete:/ my lines expired in strings of dots. Collapsing,/ I dropped, still fully dressed, upon my bed”¹³⁹. His poem ‘1972’ (December 18, 1972) is a meditation on aging, exile and language. Brodsky sums up his experience: “What I’ve done, I’ve done not for fame or memories/...but for the sake of my native tongue and letters”¹⁴⁰. Even though he expresses sadness at first having to leave his country and then having to acquire proficiency in a new, foreign language, the poem is optimistic and resolute. After exile, once the split has been made and the consequences become apparent, all that remains is language; not Brodsky’s native tongue, but an abstract sense of language, something other—in place of—to pay service to. The poem continues: “This isn’t the desperate howl of deep distress./ It’s the species’ trip back to wilderness./ It’s, more aptly, the first cry of speechlessness,/...Change for the better. Or that’s my view of it”¹⁴¹.

In ‘Lullaby of Cape Cod’ (1975) Brodsky is able to reflect upon his exile with some distance. He writes, “It’s strange to think of surviving, but that’s what happened”¹⁴². He describes his exile as a switching of empires and goes on to express the importance he places on language: “The change of Empires is intimately

¹³⁷ Volkov, Solomon., ed. Conversations with Joseph Brodsky. Translated by Marion Schwartz. New York: The Free Press, 1998. 71.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 82.

¹³⁹ Brodsky, Joseph. ‘In the Lake District’. Collected Poems in English. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. 71.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* ‘1972’. 69.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* ‘1972’. 69.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* ‘Lullaby of Cape Cod’. 116.

... tied/ to the hum of words, the soft, fricative spray/ of spittle in the act of speech”¹⁴³. Language, as Brodsky asserts, will outlast history; and poetry, as the highest form of locution must be practiced and preserved as a bulwark against an absence in morality. Brodsky writes: “Preserve these words against a time of cold,/ a day of fear”¹⁴⁴. By June 4, 1977, when Brodsky wrote ‘The Fifth Anniversary’, he is able to conclude with hindsight and acceptance: “I don’t know anymore what earth will nurse my carcass./ Scratch on, my pen: let’s mark the white the way it marks us”¹⁴⁵.

In his essay, ‘Reflections on Exile’, Edward Said writes that exile is “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted”¹⁴⁶. The subsequent life of the exiled individual, according to Said, is “nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal”¹⁴⁷. If Brodsky can be said to share in any of these characteristics, the repercussions of his exile were certainly not insurmountable. Brodsky’s demands of language and poetry made him a formidable anomaly; a fact that also served to centre his wandering existence. In ‘The Condition We Call Exile’ (1987), Brodsky writes, “The truth of the matter is that from tyranny one can be exiled only to a democracy”¹⁴⁸. 15 years after his departure from the Soviet Union, Brodsky’s views on exile are now clear and defined. Exile, in his opinion, is the ultimate lesson in humility because it forces a person—in this case, a writer—to measure themselves not against a specific community of people, but humanity in total. Being freed however, does not equate to freedom. Success, or happiness, comes in deriving significance amid the masses. Brodsky concludes: “If we want to play a bigger role, the role of a free man, then we should be capable of accepting—or at least imitating—the manner in which a free man fails. A free man, when he fails, blames nobody”¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* ‘Lullaby of Cape Cod’. 119.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* ‘Lullaby of Cape Cod’. 124.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* ‘The Fifth Anniversary’. 244.

¹⁴⁶ Said, Edward. ‘Reflections on Exile’. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Brodsky, Joseph. ‘The Condition We Call Exile’. *On Grief and Reason*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995. 24.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* ‘The Condition We Call Exile’. 34.

Joseph Brodsky died on January 28, 1996 in New York City. He was buried in Venice, Italy. In his poem, 'May 24, 1980', he wrote: "What shall I say about life? That it's long and abhors transparency/...Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,/ only gratitude will be gushing from it"¹⁵⁰. Death is the final exile; it is an abstraction from life. Each day carries over into the next in an act of daily enjambment. Death is the cessation of language, the dropping of the pen, with or without final punctuation. Turning again to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, we can fittingly conclude:

You embarked, you set sail, you made port. Go ashore now. If it is to another life, nothing is empty of the gods, even on that shore: and if to insensibility, you will cease to suffer pains and pleasures, no longer in thrall to a bodily vessel which is a master as far inferior as its servant is superior. One is mind and divinity: the other a clay of dust and blood¹⁵¹.

III

At times, it seems imprudent to interrupt a discourse with personal interjections. This is especially so when the experiences and virtues of the subject under discussion vary so widely in character and in quality to one's own.

A few lines will suffice: *Erasure* is a work of fiction. The central theme of the work is censorship. The second and third parts of my work examine the paranoiac and pervasive elements of state censorship. In Part Two, Professor Huffman hosts a noted writer who reveals his experiences with censorship:

'The worst thing about censorship,' he said, before correcting himself. 'Do you know what's fucked up? I can describe a tree, a fucking tree that I have seen every day for twenty-plus fucking years. I can give that description to the fucking agency and it returns in some mutated form.

'The tree is no longer the tree that I see; the thing I took shade in...Do you fucking understand that? Of course you don't' (p.203).

¹⁵⁰ Brodsky, Joseph. 'May 24, 1980'. *Collected Poems in English*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. 211.

¹⁵¹ Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. Translated by Martin Hammond. London: Penguin, 2006. 17.

A sensibility for emotion and imagination can only feign the experience of reality. I can throw a fictive story into a wastebasket, but those who have bridged the gap between writing and experience—documented oppression first hand—cannot as easily disregard lived moments.

In the epilogue of her poem, ‘Requiem’, Anna Akhmatova (whom Brodsky called the Keening Muse) writes:

And if ever in this country they should want/
To build me a monument/ I
consent to that honour,/ But only on the condition that they/
Erect it not on
the sea-shore where I was born/...But here, where I stood for three hundred
hours/ And where they never, never opened the doors for me¹⁵².

The statue has not been erected. It only exists in the poetry of Akhmatova. Like its bronze or marble counterpart, the written page is monochromatic and appeals to our imagination, our sentiments; it, as Brodsky suggests, engages us in an act of complicity. To write of ethics, of the moral principles that govern a person’s life, is to catch the ‘melting snow’ that ‘drop like tears from the motionless bronze eyelids’ of Akhmatova’s statue.

Anything more, in my opinion, would be an incurrence on the dead and on the literature through which they yet live.

¹⁵² Akhmatova, Anna. ‘Requiem’. Selected Poems. Translated by D. M. Thomas. London: Vintage, 2009. 96.

7. Conclusion/or, *Why Write?*

“Though on a journey I have fallen ill,

My dreams on withered moorland wander still.”

- Bashô. ‘Last Poem’¹⁵³.

I

On 17 September 2001, Shoshana Felman and Professor Sara Suleri-Goodyear gave a lecture on Plato’s *Phaedo* at Yale University. A transcript of this session is provided in *Claims of Literature: A Shoshana Felman Reader*. The transcript includes the comments of both professors and the response of their students. Plato’s work, as Felman notes, deals with the issue of death. Early in the lecture, she reminds her students that the second charge brought against Socrates was that of corrupting the youth. To this end, she adds,

That means he (Socrates) was a teacher: an *influential* teacher who *transformed* people. In *Phaedo*, you are seeing him precisely as a teacher...It is a performative text that powerfully draws us into its performance...Its acute drama of death and life is at the same time a profound philosophical reflection on the significance of pedagogy—on the very process of teaching and learning¹⁵⁴.

The performative nature of *Phaedo* might be said to begin with the words of Socrates’ wife, Xanthippe. On seeing Socrates’ friends, she laments: “This is the last time your friends will talk to you and you to them”¹⁵⁵. Socrates subsequently asks Crito to take her home. This action underlines one of the central tenets of the text: that to partake in philosophy correctly is to practice for death and dying. Socrates restrains his grief. He chooses instead to engage in dialogue; to better his immortal soul for the journey that awaits him.

¹⁵³ Stewart, Harold., ed. *A Net of Fireflies*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1960. 97.

¹⁵⁴ Shoshana, Felman. *The Claims of Literature*. Edited by Emily Sun. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 428.

¹⁵⁵ Plato. ‘Phaedo’. *Five Dialogues*. Second Edition. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002. 97.

It is clear from the transcript that Felman shares a passion both for Plato's work and her duties as a teacher. Her methods are admirable both for their level of insight and for her insistence on simplicity; she is quick to discourage her students from using 'bombastic philosophical words' in their arguments. In both the primary text and the secondary transcript, Socrates stands as an exemplary philosopher and teacher; his belief that the virtues of learning should be characterised by "moderation, righteousness, courage, freedom, and truth"¹⁵⁶ is coupled by patient and practical instruction.

In the opening parts of *Phaedo*, Crito warns Socrates that excessive talking, or animation, will impede the effect of the poison he is to take. Socrates refuses to stop talking. He responds by saying that the guard should be "prepared to administer it twice or, if necessary, three times"¹⁵⁷. Felman notes the importance of this dramatic moment which, in her opinion, "encapsulates the passion, the poignancy, of teaching"¹⁵⁸. In this regard, Felman's transcript—its nature, the way it deviates from a traditional essay, book chapter or set of lecture notes—can be seen as a deliberate homage to teaching, to the transformative potential of pedagogy, to the philosopher-teacher Socrates. It is a performative text that mirrors a primary performative work; in reading it, we too are drawn into the class discussions. Felman effectively transposes the Socratic teacher-student dynamic into a thoroughly modern setting; a university, a classroom, far from a jail cell.

Of interest in Felman and Suleri-Goodyear's lecture is the idea that philosophy proves insufficient at the moment of death. Felman states: "At the moment of death there is another mode: there is the literary mode that has to come in and be included in order for this death to have significance, to create its significance"¹⁵⁹. In *Phaedo*, Socrates responds to the demands of his dreams—to "practice and cultivate the arts"¹⁶⁰—by beginning to write poetry. Although, he initially believes that the dreams are calling him to practice philosophy, Socrates soon realises that he "must

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 151.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 100.

¹⁵⁸ Shoshana, Felman. *The Claims of Literature*. Edited by Emily Sun. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 428.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 433.

¹⁶⁰ Plato. 'Phaedo'. *Five Dialogues*. Second Edition. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002. 98.

compose fables, not arguments”¹⁶¹. To this end, he versifies the work of Aesop. Felman expands upon the difference between ‘fables’ (the literary) and ‘arguments’ (the philosophical), stating that the latter deals with defining concepts (in *Phaedo* it is exemplified by the discussion of Forms), while the former evades definition and remains in “excess of the concept”¹⁶².

The limitations of philosophy are exemplified by Socrates’ discussion on the deathless nature of the soul. Initially, Simmias and Cebes are concerned that the soul will disintegrate or perish once it has departed from the deceased. Cebes states: “Assuming that we are afraid, Socrates, try to change our minds, or rather do not assume that we are afraid, but perhaps there is a child in us who has these fears; try to persuade him not to fear death”. To which Socrates responds: “You should...sing a *charm* over him every day until you have *charmed* away his fears”¹⁶³.

Even though Socrates subsequently argues that the soul is both deathless and indestructible, he is faced with the uncertain path of the afterlife. He does not describe the journey to the underworld as a fact, or argument, but rather as a legend or fable: “We are told that when each person dies, the guardian spirit who was allotted to him in life proceeds to lead him to a certain place”¹⁶⁴. After concluding his story, Socrates acknowledges his uncertainty: “No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief...since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an *incantation*, which is why I have been prolonging my tale”¹⁶⁵. Here, the words ‘incantation’ and ‘charm’ share a similar meaning. Philosophy offers comfort when the concepts are intelligible; but in matters of death, the use of myth and fiction—incantation and charm—serve best to bring relief, significance and meaning to the noble causes undertaken (not without their grief) throughout life.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 98.

¹⁶² Shoshana, Felman. *The Claims of Literature*. Edited by Emily Sun. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 433.

¹⁶³ My italics. Plato. ‘Phaedo’. *Five Dialogues*. Second Edition. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002. 116.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 145.

¹⁶⁵ My italics. *Ibid.* 150.

Socrates faces death calmly. The guard that brings him the poison to drink says, “Fare you well, and try to endure what you must as easily as possible”¹⁶⁶. His friends weep, not for Socrates, but for the teacher they will lose; Felman states that they had now become orphans, philosopher-orphans. Socrates says to Crito: “we owe a cock to Asclepius”¹⁶⁷. Crito replies that he will repay the debt and then asks if there is anything else. There is no response. Socrates’ life has ended. There remains an unanswered question; an unfinished dialogue.

II

In November 2004 my father fell ill while travelling through Japan. News of his ailment reached me in Tasmania, where I was staying on a property by the D’Entrecasteaux channel. I immediately flew to Sydney and then progressed onto Japan. Within a day, I was at his bedside.

My father died in December of that year. He passed away in a hospital in Yokohama. He was cremated in Japan. As we drove to the crematorium, I remember looking out of the window in disbelief. My father’s coffin was less than a foot away from me. We rode in the hearse together.

My father loved telling stories. He had a particular fascination with the cinema. He would often tell me movie ideas that I should write—invariably, they involved mistaken identities, intricate plots and above all else, humour. In his stories, people would often lose their briefcases or mobile phones; the contents would reveal secret information, or important contacts, which all served to instigate the most absurd calamities.

My father died of melanoma cancer. Not only was he a medical anomaly in Japan, he was also the only foreigner in the hospital. He had tumours in his brain. He could not speak easily. There was a mural in the hospital depicting a seaside with seagulls. Often, I would wheel him to this spot and throw hot chips at the imaginary gulls.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 152.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 153.

When it became obvious that my father would die, the doctors suggested he be taken home. The Japanese hold importance to dying in a natural setting, surrounded by family. It was not possible to do so. My mother told the chief doctor that my father had admired Mt. Fuji. The next morning he was moved across the hospital to a window from where the mountain could be seen.

When my father died, the chief doctor approached me and said, “Please overcome your sadness”. Bashô has written a beautiful haiku about Mt. Fuji. It is called ‘The Absent Mountain’. It reads, “Though veiled amid these misty showers of grey, Fuji is lovelier still—unseen today”¹⁶⁸.

The hours spent at the hospital were often boring. To pass time, I suggested to my father that I tell him a story. He agreed. I readied myself. I could not begin. I knew that this would be the last story we would share. I realised that every story that is begun necessitates a conclusion, and that on this occasion, the end would be final. It struck me then that literature offered no way for one to evade death or extend life.

My father waited. I did not begin. Instead, I asked him a series of questions, pretending that I was trying to cater the story to his exact desires. What types of stories did he like? Did he want one central character or a multitude of players? A love story or a detective story? I prepared to begin. I never began. My questions suggested something great to come; something that we both knew would soon be snuffed. It was not a victory of any sort. It was the only thing I could do to stop myself from thinking of death.

III

In order to give her students a broad perspective on the relationship between death and discourse, Felman introduces comments by three intellectuals: Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin. Arendt asserts that story’s reveal “the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings”¹⁶⁹; that is, narrative gives the incomprehensibility of an event perspective and significance. Foucault suggests that “the most fateful decisions are

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 96.

¹⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, as cited from: Shoshana, Felman. The Claims of Literature. Edited by Emily Sun. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 430.

inevitably suspended during the course of a story”¹⁷⁰; that language can be seen to emanate from tragedy and serves to ameliorate the effect. Benjamin, who is given the most thorough discussion, states, “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller has to tell. He has borrowed his authority from death”¹⁷¹. At the moment of death, according to Benjamin, the real events of a person’s life become transmissible, or communicable, to others in a significant way.

It is Arendt’s suggestion that is of most interest to me. If an experience can be characterised as a series of ‘sheer happenings’—events largely unintelligible to the self as they occur—then the literary must be characterised by distance from the event, perspective, and organisation. The literary cannot exist at the point of an event; it exists, so to speak, after the event. *Phaedo* is notable for Plato’s absence; Phaedo states, “Plato, I believe was ill”¹⁷². One may argue that Plato required distance from the traumatic event in order to bring significance—historical truth—to Socrates’ execution. Although it is Phaedo who writes of his sadness, one cannot but think it is also an expression of Plato’s, albeit removed, lamentations: “Most of us had been able to hold back our tears reasonably well up till then, but when we saw him drinking it and after he drank it, we could hold them back no longer; my own tears came in floods against my will”¹⁷³. Distance from the event—away from pain and the death of the body—allowed Plato to craft an exemplary literary work.

I often think of my father and of my attempt at storytelling. It always seems to me as some sort of failure; but, perhaps, there was no place for literature there. Or, perhaps, I did the best that was possible—invested the event with the possibility of literature. But this strikes me as somewhat academic; untrue. Years later, I wrote ‘The Anaemic Sages’ (p.61) which, in part, fictionalises this experience. In the short story, the narrator says: “At the age of sixteen his father died of melanoma cancer...He found it difficult to feel sorrow over his father’s death. Yet somehow he is capable of crying at the fate of a complete stranger” (p.62). It is a matter of distance, of perspective; the son becomes the orphan, becomes the orphan-storyteller.

¹⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, as cited from: *Ibid.* 430.

¹⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, as cited from: *Ibid.* 430.

¹⁷² Plato. ‘Phaedo’. *Five Dialogues*. Second Edition. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002. 96.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* 153.

The story concludes with a reinterpretation of Quinn's paradox: "The possibility of happiness, of love, even of an easing in the pain, always outweighs the knowledge that the final day will be the most severe. Having entered life, he can't leave. His only choice is to live, or to sit idly among the living" (p.65). If this short story is successful, it is because the distance from the foot of the bed where I sat with my father and this desk today is far enough. If it is unsuccessful, it is because that distance will never be far enough. My only choice is to write and to test, each day, how far I am from the pain.

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