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“You mean it’s OK?”

Creating an online environment for supportive creative writing peer review

Mandy Haggith



Introduction

Managing feedback on drafts is a fundamental skill for creative writers and peer review can be one of the most helpful ways for students to improve their work. The discipline of giving helpful feedback to others enables more critical

self-reading, and the trust that builds through a constructive feedback process can be good both for individual writers’ confidence and in building a community of writers. This paper describes experience in encouraging peer feedback among students at the University of the Highlands and Islands, using video conferencing and a virtual learning environment discussion board. It explores the challenges of getting students over the hurdle of posting drafts online and identifying signals that the process is working, not least that delighted response to a first reading: “You mean it’s OK?”

Context

I teach a module called “Exploring Creative Writing”, which runs annually as an option in several Master of Literature (MLitt) courses at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), including Highlands and Islands Literature, Viking Studies, British Studies and Island Studies. The students are mostly mature, with a female to male ratio of around 60%/40%. They are

geographically very dispersed, with a majority in the Highlands and Islands and a minority elsewhere in the UK. The class size is normally small, with less than 10 students. The module takes place in the second semester of the MLitt course and provides students with an opportunity, having studied relevant literature, to explore and develop their own literary work.

The intended learning outcomes for students taking the module are as follows:

- Students will have experimented in a variety of styles and voices across a range of disciplines.
- They will have studied and be familiar with a number of texts related to their chosen discipline.
- They will have been introduced to some of the most prominent Scottish prose writers and poets.
- They will have been encouraged to explore their own literary interests.
- They will have been motivated to work across a number of literary disciplines.
- They will be near completion of a major piece of work.

The learning activities include a series of 12 seminars carried out by video conference, which all the students and the tutor access from either their own homes or offices or from a room in one of UHI’s colleges, institutes, learning centres or other access hubs. Students can be anywhere in the UK but most are on Scottish islands or in the Highlands. I teach from a remote croft in northwest Sutherland. Extensive use is also made of a virtual learning environment (Blackboard) for providing texts, writing tasks and a discussion board. The module assessment

is via a portfolio of the students' own creative writing work, the development of which is therefore a major focus of their learning. The students are encouraged to use peer feedback to develop their drafts, so we need an online process to support the students in producing and improving pieces of writing destined for their portfolios. After two years of trials I have a method that seems to be working.

The theory behind the method

The task of teaching creative writing students to give useful feedback to each other (also referred to as "peer review" or "collaborative formative assessment") has been widely studied, particularly by some of the more mature graduate writing programmes in North America, where it is described as a "signature pedagogy" (Heinert 2017; Stukenberg 2017). The influence of the methodologies developed by these programmes has been critiqued, for example, as a form of "cultural imperialism" in light of whether it involves cultural assumptions specific to some societies and alien to others (Whitehead 2016). Nonetheless the use of peer review for creative writing is widespread, even reaching schools (Philippakos 2017). Research shows that peer review of written work can be as effective or even more effective than feedback from a teacher (Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000), and that the giving of feedback is possibly even more helpful for learners than receiving it, since it requires the metacognitive work of reflecting on and articulating what constitutes effective writing and how to tackle problems (Lurdstrom and Baker 2009).

Recent research has enabled understanding of some of the factors that make peer review more or less successful, for example, the dynamics of feedback group size (Pozzi, Ceregini, Ferlino and Persico 2016). There is also increasing evidence of what constitutes the most helpful kind of feedback (Patchan and Schunn 2015) and the usefulness of roles (Falchikov 2002). Some researchers (Bedore and O'Sullivan 2011) have looked into why tutors find peer review challenging, revealing issues of its inherent power dynamics. From an elearning perspective, research is revealing the particular advantages and disadvantages of different platforms, such as discussion boards or blogs (Novakovich 2016), video (Jordon 2012), e-portfolios and wikis (Kear 2014) and the impacts of synchronous systems such as instant messaging or chat versus asynchronous feedback by

email (Honeycutt 2001). However, the challenges of managing peer review online go beyond such technical choices.

From a pedagogical perspective, I want my student group to operate as a community of practising writers. I am inspired by Wenger's Communities of Practice methodology (Wenger 1998), which makes explicit the social nature of learning and the way that knowledge develops through participation and reification, and the Community of Inquiry theory (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2000), which articulates that social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence are necessary for effective learning in an online context. These theories underpin my design of a collaborative feedback, or peer review, process.

To support peer review, the social presence of students is critical, so this aspect of the Community of Inquiry theory is particularly relevant. A substantial body of theoretical approaches to social presence is surveyed by Cui, Lockee and Meng (2013), who define social presence as a spectrum from a superficial "perception of a person's being real or being there" to a deeper, affective sense of "positive interpersonal and emotional connection" between co-learners (*ibid.*: 663). They place the concept within psychological theory of interpersonal communication, relating it to ideas of immediacy and intimacy. In recent developments of Community of Inquiry theory, social presence is afforded increasing prominence and centrality (Garrison 2009), with both teaching and cognitive presence seen as having a social dimension (Armellini and Stefani 2016). Social presence plays a key role in developing "higher-order" thinking and metacognition (Kanuka, Liam and Laflamme 2007).

Social presence can be considered to have several dimensions, for example Biocca and Harms (2002) divide the experience of social presence as follows: firstly, the perception of the presence of co-learners; secondly, the subjective sense of their accessibility via features such as their attention, emotional engagement, comprehension and interdependent behaviour; and thirdly an intersubjective sense of "mutual and dynamic interaction" or, more simply, working together on what Wenger describes as "joint enterprise" (1998). That second dimension, often called "emotional presence" (Cleveland-Innes and Campbell 2012), is crucial because emotions are "key to the interaction process", either distracting from or enabling cognitive and teaching presence (Gregory and Bannister-Tyrell 2017), affecting students to "identify formation" in the "digital social ecosystem" (Bozkurt

and Tu 2016) and influencing their sense of cognitive presence (Yang, Quadir, Chen and Miao 2016).

The peer review process

A robust e-learning process for developing students' peer review skills is a key strand in the success of the online creative writing module. The learning outcomes for this strand of the module are as follows. Students will:

- understand good practice in asking for, giving and receiving feedback on creative writing;
- develop confidence in sharing work in progress for peer review and gain experience of asking for, receiving and responding to feedback on their own creative writing, as input to a process of revision and improvement of their work;
- experience expressing a reader's view of a draft and offering constructive comment to its author;
- develop relationships and a sense of community with other writers.

The first two of these outcomes require students to have a strong cognitive presence. They also have a social element, particularly the second outcome which recognizes the importance of emotional presence (in the form of confidence). The third outcome places the students in the role of advisers to each other, thus requiring them to provide an element of teaching presence to the group. The fourth outcome is heavily dependent on rich social presence being fostered within the student group.

The approach to peer review that I take is based on Wenger's communities of practice (Wenger 1998), and therefore involves three stages: participation, design/creation and implementation. The students are set three tasks following these distinct phases.

The first task ("participation") facilitates students' use of the e-learning tool to do very simple tasks such as introducing something they enjoy reading, in order to

overcome technical challenges and familiarize themselves with the tool.

The main task ("design/creation") is to post a draft piece of their own writing and give constructive feedback to other author-students by replying to their posts, responding to their writing and asking questions. Roles are used for this process.

The final task ("implementation") is to use feedback received to revise their written work.

Given the crucial role of social presence for the learning outcomes, a key issue is how to facilitate the process to ensure a strong level of social presence throughout. The work of Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) makes clear that social presence can be facilitated by a teacher and that clear roles and rules can help to ensure the intimacy among students that nurtures it.

Sharing drafts can be daunting, particularly at first, and many beginner writers find it excruciating to face the "exposure" of making their drafts available for comment, particularly to strangers. There are risks that students can be hurt by peers who give insensitive or overly critical feedback, resulting in loss of confidence (Bedore and O'Sullivan 2011). It is therefore important that emotional presence is managed in the learning process. Research by Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) into emotional presence shows that some positive emotions such as enjoyment and contentment are positively helpful for learning, while negative emotions such as fear, anger and embarrassment are more likely to lead to negative outcomes. Some negative emotions, if managed, however, can "connect the affective to the cognitive", making issues feel important, stimulating memory and motivating learning decisions. For example, feeling envious of another student's performance can help to trigger the metacognitive activity that is essential for learning. Gregory and Bannister-Tyrell (2017) have found that "feelings affect motivation, self-regulation and academic achievement", and in a variety of e-learning contexts, student learning outcomes are stronger when they have a richer emotional online presence. Students need to be given guidelines to help them give feedback in a kindly manner likely to provoke positive emotions.

Creative writing students are, usually, hoping to communicate, so learning about how their words are received by readers and audiences is crucial. The discipline of giving

helpful feedback to other writers enables more critical self-reading, and the trust that builds through a constructive feedback process can be good both for individual writers' confidence and the community of writers as a whole.

Research by Patchan and Schunn (2015) has pointed to further factors that influence effective peer review. They conclude that there is a correlation between writing quality and feedback quality and that the best writers give feedback that is more critical than weaker writers, with the most useful feedback involving not just the identification of problems but also the offering of solutions. They confirm the results of other research that weaker writers are more likely to simply offer praise to others, or focus on minor issues, and one of the solutions for this is for a teacher to guide students to focus on higher-level, structural aspects (Falchikov 2002). Pozzi, Ceregini, Ferlino and Persico (2016) show that when students do peer review in twos they are more active cognitively than when they are in bigger groups, being able to focus more directly on the peer review process. Bigger groups devote more effort to negotiating how to organize their discourse, turn-taking, roles and so on. If the roles in a group reflect key concepts in the review process, then these group negotiations can support more of the metacognitive activity needed for successful learning.

A corollary of the above is that a peer review process can benefit from students being assigned clear roles, with each addressing a different high-level aspect of the writing, such as structure or plot, theme, main character development or secondary characters. Discussion about and performance of these roles can help with what Wenger (1998) calls "reification" of key issues. It can also give students practice in the metacognitive work that they need to do to address the problems in their own writing.

In the process I use, the group of students take turns to adopt critical roles focusing on a particular aspect of the text. For fiction these are: theme, setting and atmosphere; plot or structure; main character; other characters; and detail, such as grammar, punctuation and vocabulary. For poetry they are: form; theme, setting and atmosphere; imagery and detail. Student feedback on the use of these roles suggests that they find this helpful as they know what they are looking for

when reading a text. For example, if their role is "main character", they can focus attention and comments on the descriptions, speech and arc of that character. This ensures that across the group a useful range of feedback is given. Moreover, it helps the students to ask more clearly for specific feedback, (e.g. "are there too many secondary characters?" or "Does the atmosphere come across as spooky enough?"), and to interrogate their own writing more critically.

The roles are rehearsed in video conferences and detailed guidelines are provided. Initially students often need help or encouragement to upload drafts and I take part in the first round of feedback, modelling the kind of comments that are useful. After that, I pull back, focusing on monitoring (and ultimately assessment).

Technological issues

The iconic writing workshop model involves an inperson circle considering photocopied texts of participants' writing. The design of an online peer review process must seek to retain many of the benefits of this workshop process whilst also tapping into other opportunities offered by e-technology. The technological benefits need to outweigh the loss of all the subtle signals that help create social presence and supportive emotional presence in face-to-face feedback, including facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and the immediacy of live conversational question-and-response.

There are some pragmatic benefits of an online feedback process, which include the fact that there is no need for physical proximity, thus broadening the geographical scope of the group of co-writers and access for people with disabilities or caring duties. There are also significant temporal benefits, both in terms of flexibility in when to post and respond and time to give considered input and to think before replying. This is particularly important in my context where the students are geographically distant from each other and from me, and face-to-face time (in video-conferences, for example) is limited.

Temporal factors are deeply important to social presence and the feeling of being together, (as Cui, Lockee and Meng (2013) make clear). A key question about technology is whether and to what extent it supports "co-presence" and "responsiveness" (ibid.: 665), which require simultaneous engagement or at least reasonably rapid exchange between participants, such as can be achieved with instant messaging

and online chat. The linear threading and lack of notifications of the discussion board on Blackboard does not support this kind of simultaneity. However my experience has been that the slower, asynchronous interaction that results brings benefits of more measured and more detailed responses, with thoughtfulness and lengthier attention helping to support the intimacy and emotional presence that is needed to support learning. This is supported by research by Honeycutt (2001), who compared email peer review with online chat and found email to be more helpful as it allowed time for reflection and greater detail. Abha Dawesar (2013) suggests that one of the pernicious effects of the “digital now” is that it erodes attention (and therefore care), and that synchronous echnology therefore carries risks of potentially negative emotional presence.

An additional benefit of posting texts online (compared to a paper-based workshop process) was identified by Novakovich (2016) who studied blog-mediated peer feedback and found that “students were better able to make the connection to real-world work” and that the online review process led to more critical and directive comments and fewer “naïve” (simple praise) comments, which, as we have seen above, is indicative of the most useful kind of peer review. A problem with using a blogging platform for creative writing review, however, is the difficulty for reviewers to give detailed in-text comments, rather than general remarks. The quality of feedback can be enhanced by the ability to give very specific and precise textual suggestions directly on an eversion of a text (for example, using track changes in a Word document), without the ambiguity or risk of transcription errors from a spoken commentary.

Further Work

I assess students’ participation in peer review as an element of their portfolio grade but why should I be the one to evaluate the value of their feedback? As Bedore and O’Sullivan (2011) make clear, peer review raises important issues of power and requires a teacher to relinquish control to students, who effectively create some of the teaching presence in a more “democratic classroom”. Furthermore, in order genuinely to

empower students, not all of the power of grading and assessment should be retained by the teacher. Therefore, as well as inviting students to give comments to help with formative evaluation through the peer review process, it would be good to build in an element of summative peer assessment by students, allowing them to rate the helpfulness of each other’s feedback. The risks and benefits of assessment of a peer review process need to be carefully balanced (Kear 2011); for example, the benefit of ensuring participation in the process (149) versus the risks that “student postings will be more a performance than a genuine contribution to the debate” (ibid.: 156), and also the risk that students will seek to please their peers by “being nice” or over-generous (Falchikov 2002) rather than giving the more critical comments that we have already seen are actually more helpful for learning. Another option would be a selfassessment process, to ensure that students reflect on the peer-review comments they have given and received.

There are technological alternatives too. Other options to explore as peer review platforms are e-portfolio systems and wikis. The benefits of wikis are mostly in supporting collaborative writing (Williams and Donelan 2011), but there is clearly potential for e-portfolio systems such as that used by Wang (2011), or Mahara, particularly worth exploring for a process involving selfassessment and reflection. UHI is about to shift to a new virtual learning environment (Brightspace) so it will be interesting to discover how to use its more sophisticated discussion board facility for the peer review process.

Conclusions

Taking care to foster the social and emotional presence of students, with clear guidelines addressing their anxieties and promoting positive responses to each other’s feedback, has paid dividends, not least in the sheer increased volume of comments that they receive on their work. Assigning students roles that reflect key issues that they should address, such as plot, theme and character arcs, has facilitated cognitive presence by reifying the most useful kinds of feedback for learning, while helping to manage the social and teaching presence that the students bring.

While the group size has been too small for quantitative analysis, anecdotal evidence points to this being a worthwhile

approach to develop. One dyslexic student was initially too frightened to share their writing with others but after engaging in the carefully structured feedback process, they reached the point of posting their own work for the first time. The delight they expressed with the single comment, “You mean it’s OK?!” vindicates the way strict rules of etiquette and a slow, if perhaps “clunky” e-discussion tool combine to provide a safe zone for even the least confident students.

Several different technologies have been considered here, including blogs, wikis, e-portfolios and instant messaging. For the purposes of simplicity of management of the peer review process, a basic discussion board seems to be sufficient to support students’ learning and an asynchronous approach to the process may well have distinct benefits in the quality of comments.

Some questions remain about how best to assess the peer review process, with a mix of benefits and risks in teacher-, self- and peer- assessment. As Hienert (2017) states, “cultivating the buzz of peer review requires pulling back”, but the reward is that students more fully develop the habits they need for successfully learning to become writers, whether or not they are ever in the same room as each other.

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Ghosts in an Italian city

A poetry of place and wider observations regarding *Sottoripa*

Julian Stannard



present day. Sottoripa is a quite distinct and well-known area of Genoa, right on the edge of the port. In the medieval period, and in the earlier Roman and Greek periods too, the Mediterranean would have pushed up against the very land which is now marked by the prominent vaulted porticos, acting once as a kind of barrier, and which still exist today, notwithstanding various architectural interventions over the centuries and the damage from bombs dropped by allied planes or launched from British ships in WW2.

Even today the Sottoripa creates the idea of a boundary (this is the end of the sea, the beginning of the ancient city, the *centro storico*, the largest extant medieval settlement in Europe) and this also creates a liminal space full of opportunity and danger which historically has been the territory of sailors, soldiers, merchants, noblemen, explorers, smugglers, fishmongers, prostitutes, slave traders with their cargo, human and otherwise, emigrants, refugees and all the toing and froing of any great Mediterranean port. Readers might wish to look at Nicholas Walton's *Genoa La Superba: The Rise and Fall of a Merchant Pirate Super Power* (2015) for a brief and readable account of the city's history.

Sottoripa is still a pretty rough and ready area and certainly back in the 1980s (when I had by chance found an apartment there with an Iranian who had fled the

Sottoripa: Poesie Genovesi (Genoese Poems) is a publication in English and Italian (Canneto Editore, 2018). <http://www.cannetoeditore.it/libri/arte-grafica/sottoripa-poesie-genovesi-di-julian-stannard/> The aim of this paper is to give an account of a project which has been in the making for several decades.

Sottoripa – the name of the bilingual book published by the Italian press Canneto (2018) – takes its title from the title-poem which refers to my first contact with Genoa in the 1980s and the subsequent forging of a relationship with this mysterious Italian city which continues to the



regime of Ayatollah Khomeini) it had an unmistakably seedy atmosphere. That feeling was compounded by faded military instructions plastered on crumbling walls which had been put there at the end of the war – Off Limits to Foreign Troops.

I was 22 in 1984, an English graduate, and Sottoripa seemed to offer everything I needed: cafés, bars, alcohol, cheap restaurants, street food, the local *friggitorie* (fish frying shops), dives, cheap cigarettes, a variety of quickly acquired friends, Moroccan hash dealers, street musicians, gypsies mostly. I found it pleasingly congruous that one of the narrow streets at the heart of the red light area was called Vico Dell' Amor Perfetto (The Street of Perfect Love), which dutifully neighboured the Street of Angels, the Street of Piety and the Street of Consolation. And I would learn soon

enough that the old city – the city within the city – was full of Neapolitan gangsters, pickpockets, alcoholics,



heroin addicts and “the small fry of the criminal class”. At night, especially during the winter months, the darkness of the port area was lit up by makeshift fires spluttering out of oil drums and around these infernal gobs of light the homeless, the shift workers, road sweepers, the pathologically nocturnal – *fantasme* even – contraband cigarette sellers and their friends gathered to enjoy some warmth and there were packs of snarling dogs which disappeared in the hours of day. I would learn that street walkers (and there were many in the port) were sometimes known as *luciole*, or fireflies.

What I didn't know in 1984 added up to a great deal. I didn't know that the singer songwriter (poet, anarchist) Fabrizio De André (1940-1999) had immortalized those narrow streets

running off the Sottoripa. I didn't know that Dino Campana (1885-1932) had written the greatest verses of his *Canti Orefeci* in Genoa's unforgiving labyrinth, the poet consumed by psychotic visions. I didn't know that Chaucer the businessman and diplomat had been a visitor (might he have compared notes with Boccaccio?) or that Richard the Lion Heart had processed through the Porta de Vacca – Cow Gate – before embarking on the Third Crusade. Or that Byron had for a lengthy period made Genoa his home. It was his last Italian address before he left for Greece and such an inglorious death! I didn't know that Dickens had walked the streets of Genoa in the 1840s. His heady account in *Pictures from Italy* (1846) reverberates today:

[Genoa] is a place that 'grows upon you' every day. There seems to be always something to find out in it. There are the most extraordinary alleys and by-ways to walk about in. You can lose your way (what a comfort that is, when you are idle!) twenty times a day, if you like; and turn up again, under the most unexpected and surprising difficulties. It abounds in the strangest contrasts; things that are picturesque, ugly, mean, magnificent, delightful, and offensive, break upon the view at every turn. (Dickens 1998: 38)

I didn't know that Paul Valéry had composed his great storm poem "La Nuit di Génes" in 1892, or that Constance Wilde was buried in Staglieno, the city of the dead; or that Thomas Hardy had described Via Garibaldi as the most beautiful street in Europe. And there down on the quay, in front of the apartment where I now lived, how could I have known that Basil Bunting in 1930 would have found a copy of Firdosi's *Shahnameh* which led to the English poet learning Persian, which in turn would lead to his working for British Intelligence in the Middle East during WW2, all of which feeds into his masterpiece *Briggflatts* (1966). I knew hardly anything about the "Ezruversity", lodged comfortably about the coastal town of Rapallo, some thirty kilometres south of Genoa where between the wars Ezra Pound was the leading light in that modernist community of writers, artists and musicians; where the American poet laboured with the *Cantos*, the most lyrical sections of which drew inspiration from the Ligurian landscape. At the end of the war Pound was arrested by partisans and handed over to the American authorities in Genoa.

In fact I knew little about the partisans or the Red Brigades and Genoa's left wing traditions or that Giorgio Caproni (1912-1990), himself a partisan as well as one of Italy's greatest twentieth century poets, had written about Genoa with such yearning. His emblematic "Litania" ("Litany", 1956), in its very insistence, is a great love poem to the city. Here in this stanza, in fact, he mentions the Sottoripa:

Genova di Sottoripa.
Emporio. Sesso. Stipa. Genova di
Porta Soprana, d'angelo e di
puttana.¹

(Caproni 1998: 176)

And nor did I know that a hundred metres or so from my apartment there remained the dilapidated shell of The Hotel of the Cross of Malta which, in various periods, had opened its doors to Smollett, Flaubert, Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry James, Mary Shelley, Stendhal, Mark Twain, Giuseppe Verdi and Friedrich Nietzsche. It was much later I learnt that Adolf Eichmann and Josef Mengele had stayed in nondescript hotels in these same backstreets after the war, waiting for a safe passage to South America, in all likelihood helped by the Catholic Church.

Yet there was something in the lay of the streets – the *caruggi* or *vicoli* – and something in the roof tops; there was something in the cupolas, the funiculars and the fish stalls whose fresh catch writhed across the cobbles in some final desperate spasm; and there was something in the dialect (Zeneise) which sounded like a mix of French and Portuguese, and the light breaking into some piazza that woke me to the fact that the city was redolent with poetry. The city itself *was* the poem, or at least some inchoate endless draft. Its thimble-wide streets were poetic lines of varying lengths breaking and re-gathering in some evanescent, tantalizing fugue. In 1984 I wasn't overly familiar with terms such as cultural geography, psycho-geography, spiritual geography, and it was unlikely that I understood the meaning of metempsychosis, but as an English graduate I was hooked on poetry and the city must have taken me by the nose like some rag-and-bone man version of Virgil. I got hold of a typewriter and I wrote. I bundled poems into envelopes and sent them off to Alan Ross, editor of the *London Magazine*. Months later I would get a reply on some recycled post card, which had already, it seemed, been half way round the world: Not quite there, it would say, yet moving in the right direction...

ARTICLES

By 2005 I had left my job at the University of Genoa and was teaching at the University of Winchester. I still visited Genoa regularly, for it was there my children were growing up, and I had many friends in the city. I was given a Bogliasco Foundation Fellowship in 2008. (Bogliasco is a village along the coast from Genoa where Constance Wilde lived out her life in anonymity after the imprisonment of her husband.) Genoa had long got under my skin; it was now part of my skin.

In 2012 I received an email from Guglielmo Trupia, a film maker based in Milan who wanted to make a film about Genoa. I read the email with interest. He had visited the *centro storico* – the old quarter – to carry out some research and had come across a second-hand bookshop near the port which had some poetry magazines and literary anthologies. One of them was called *Genova per Noi* (Genoa For Us) – the title of a wellknown song by Paolo Conte. The anthology had been commissioned by the city authorities to celebrate Genoa’s 2004 European

City of Culture status. Trupia opened the tattered book and a poem fell to the floor. It happened to be “Sottoripa”, the poem I’d written in the 1980s. He decided there and then that “Sottoripa” was going to be the film, a film-poem in effect. It was a moment of serendipity, the poem taking on a talismanic quality and I gave my blessing to the project and then forgot about it.

A year later he sent me a draft version of the film. It was better than anything I had imagined and because he is the *auteur* of *Sottoripa* the film – my role was to have written a poem some twenty years earlier – I feel I might be allowed to say something on its behalf. I gave a viewing of *Sottoripa* at the NAWE Conference in York (2018). Each time I watch it I get a surcharge of emotion. It’s a short film, circa 7 minutes, and Trupia has worked with black and white archives, mostly from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, to create a vivid conversation with the poem: <https://vimeo.com/82730928>.

Antonio Carletti reads the poem in Italian, and the



English appears in subtitles. This is no Merchant and Ivory concoction; these are shots of an industrial working port, and the back streets of the city create a brooding atmosphere and a claustrophobic effect punctuated by a mother's voice calling after a child from a high window (*Sara! Sara!*). We get a sense of the height of the buildings, and we see people standing and staring as well as smokers, shopkeepers, skipping children and a woman flapping a cloth out of the windows. We cut to the port and hear an elegiac soundtrack, and we see the faces of a ship's crew close up – of varying ethnicities – and the famous lighthouse, or *lanterna*.

A pair of shirts hanging from a clothesline under a dark sky makes me think of condemned men on a gibbet. In fact, throughout the piece, clothes hanging from lines, Italian style, become unlikely prayer flags, and towards the end the film cuts back to street level: fruit vendors, that unexpected bicycle moving at speed through a narrow street, and the otherworldly sound of waves as the film ends with a lone figure walking along a stretch of beach.

What I like about the film is its unflinching melancholy and the growing awareness that the faces of these men, women, children are ghosts – ghosts on the screen, ghosts in the city, ghosts behind the text, real people long gone reminding us that poetry is habitually an act of breaking bread with the dead, not only in that Eliotic notion of acknowledging what has gone before – the past in the present – but also in a quite visceral, uncanny, metaphysical sense, which makes the hairs on the back of the neck stand up.

What delighted me about Trupia's film is that he had "read" my poem with an uncanny precision. Apart from a brief email exchange we had not met or spoken; that would happen later, after the film had been released, and that also by chance, in New York as it turned out. He had raised up my youthful poem with cinematographic generosity, capturing the atmosphere of a moody post-war industrial city excellently well.

Trupia's work was nominated at the Raindance Film Festival in 2013 in the documentary short category. Canneto Publishers suggested I worked with a translator to produce a bilingual text which gathered together my "Genoese" poems.

I turned to Massimo Bacigalupo. I had worked with him in the 1980s and 1990s at the University of Genoa. He had translated "Sottoripa" for the *Genoa Per Noi* anthology. He knew that my collections of poetry – published in the UK and Ireland – had engaged with Genoa in a number of ways. The titles of four of the volumes contain Genoese references. *Rina's War* (2001), for example, provides a title-poem which refers to my mother-in-law's war time experiences in northern Italy; *The Red Zone* (2007) offers up a title-poem which alludes to the notorious G8 summit in 2001 when the old quarter was cordoned off by the police and referred to as the Red Zone; *The Parrots of Villa Gruber Discover Lapis Lazuli* (2011) refers to a broken down villa in Castelletto, an area of Genoa above the old quarter; *The Street of Perfect Love* (2014), as mentioned earlier, is a narrow street that cuts through the red light area. Bacigalupo, as translator and curator of the project, selected poems from these respective volumes and we added a handful of unpublished pieces.

I have been resident in England since 2005, yet I go back to Genoa regularly. Sometimes I go back to give readings. This year I am visiting an exhibition curated by students from the Accademia di Belle Arti who have been working with *Sottoripa* as a way of exploring the labyrinthine nature of the *centro storico*, the city within the city. Sometimes I return to Genoa by way of memory, creating, at moments, what might be described as a parallel existence: geographical dislocation, longing, dreams. Modernist poets, like Bunting for example – typically emigrés themselves – worked between languages; they enthusiastically mined moments of linguistic slippage; they embraced the macaronic with delight and this was shored up by a serious commitment to the reading of "foreign" poets.²

The *Sottoripa* project inevitably raises the complex matter regarding the translation of poetry *per se*. In short there are divergent views, which range from Robert Frost's laconic observation "Poetry is what gets lost in translation" to Robert Lowell's loose translations as revealed in *Imitations* (1961), which celebrate the way in which the movement from one language to another might be allowed to create something fresh and new, *sui generis*. Make it New! Ultimately a translator of poetry is a navigator relying on instinct and technique and in Bacigalupo I had the advantage of having an academic and accomplished translator who had read my work over many years and who also knew something of my personal circumstances.

Some of my poems are autobiographical, even perhaps

“confessional”, although that term, which Michael Hofmann has referred to as the “C-Word”, always requires further interrogation (Saffis-Nahely and Stannard 2013: 102) - Some of my poems might be seen as creative “readings” in that I have “written to” or “written out of” various Italian, English and American poets. These include Giorgio Caproni, Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) and Camillo Sbarbaro (1888-1967) – all Ligurian poets – as well as Charles Tomlinson (who lived in Liguria in the 1950s and wrote about this experience in *Some Americans*), Basil Bunting, a onetime “student” at the Ezruversity, and D.H. Lawrence, who made Liguria his home before the First World War.

I would argue that writing a poem – any poem – is an act of translation, just as much as it might be an attempt to preserve a memory (*pace* Larkin.) A strong poem enacts some kind of kinetic jolt, that journey or *movement* of the poem across the page and down the page, and beyond the page. It is in some ways an act of intellectual and emotional “migration”, a dynamic if subtle shift, the *translating* of an experience, personal or otherwise. Poetry *travels* in effect, far and wide. Bacigalupo’s Italian translations are further examples of cultural intervention, trans-culturalism, transmogrification, even, perhaps, a type of metempsychosis. The English poems, which came out of the bricks and bones and alleyways of an ancient city, out of the poetic voices of the living and the dead, are passed on through the Italian language into the 21st century. The past in the present. The ghosts can stretch their limbs again.

The act of translating is also pragmatic and aleatory, like the writing of a poem. The work began in 2014 – a painstaking, intriguing process during which I was sometimes asked to clarify the meaning of an English word or explain a reference, or look over the Italian. A doctoral student at the University of Genoa carried out some wood clearing in order to prepare the ground. He took on the role of poetic sleuth, tracking down graffiti (sometimes it was still there!) or checking the accuracy of any urban or geographical references I had made in a poetry of streets, piazzas, cafés and bars; poems such as, for example, “Vico Casana” (p.24), “Via Mascherona” (p.48), “Piazza della Posta Vecchia” (p.54), “Vico San

Marcellino” (p.58), “Vico Angeli” (p.58), and “Bar Degli Specchi” (p.96).

We corresponded about register and tone and minutiae of varying kinds. In effect the project inscribed the collusion and collision of two different languages and two different poetic traditions. The doctoral student was no doubt raised with a reverential attitude towards poetry which can still pressurize, it seems to me, a fair amount of Italian poetry today. He wanted to elevate my rather more colloquial Anglo-Saxon into what he must have considered a more philosophical or overtly lyrical type of poetry; he wanted – with the best of intentions – to bleach any traces of the demotic and render my version of Genoa into a more “literary” project. Poetry with a capital P, perhaps.

He appreciated the lapidary engagement with the city – his city – but he wasn’t always comfortable with my poetic strategies – the throwaway line, the switching from the hieratic to the bathetic. Bacigalupo on the other hand, from many years of reading American poetry – William Carlos Williams, Frank O’Hara et al. – and a Poundian scholar, was less concerned. He understood that the poetry of anecdote, fragment, the quotidian, half rhyme, jazz – *stuff*, in effect – can create its own chiaroscuro, allowing sunlight and humour into the tenebrous heart of the city.

I’ve set out to demonstrate how *Sottoripa* has been enriched by a variety of sources, not least the somatic presence of the city itself. I want to acknowledge that, although my poetic decisions have clearly played a significant role, the work, as it now stands, has been shaped by the collaborative contribution of others, not only Trupia and Bacigalupo, and not only the writing of poets alive and dead, but also by those daily transactions and conversations with friends, family, partners, my ex-wife, colleagues, students, shopkeepers, strangers, as well as bus, boat and train journeys, by what Donald Davie has called “the reek of the human” (and there’s no shortage of humanity on a crowded Genoese bus!). And it was shaped by my wanderings across the *centro storico* over the course of 30 years. This most secretive of Italian cities opened itself, grudgingly and lyrically. In my poetry I have tried to keep a record of this.

Baciagalupo handed a proof copy to his niece, a photographer who works in Africa and who uses her work to promote

human rights. In 2010 Martina Bacigalupo was given the Canon Female Photo Journalist Award. She was visiting Genoa, putting on an exhibition in the old quarter. She made it clear she wasn't into doing any "tourist" pictures (good!) and eventually supplied 10 black and white photographs which bring an elegiac grace to the writing: interior spaces, courtyards, the vaulted ceilings of the Sottoripa, a chaise longue, stairwells in crumbling palazzi, showing Genoese marble and slate; lone figures in the miasma of the backstreets, broken palaces inhabited by immigrants from Africa and South America, the lighthouse towering over the port. These photographs create another layer of atmosphere and underscore what has been on my part over many years a passionate poetry of place, ever conscious of the footsteps of those who have come before.

Notes

1. Genoa of the Sottoripa. / Shops. Sex. / Genoa of PortaSoprana, / angels and street walkers.
2. All of this was challenged by Philip Larkin who claimed (provocatively) he had never read any French poetry and who had a programmatic dislike of intertextuality which he considers in his 1950s "Statement": "As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people."

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Below is a link to a RAI Radio 3 programme in which the journalist Oreste Bossini speaks with Massimo Bacigalupo about the poetry of *Sottoripa*:

<https://www.raiplayradio.it/audio/2018/12/Magazine-Julian-Stannard-cd-novit195160-91479e72-25bf-45098443-81c95596e98e.html> [Accessed 24 June 2019]

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Six poems from *Sottoripa* by Julian Stannard

Sottoripa 1984

I wanted the meanest zone in the city, so I took a room in the Sottoripa and lived with a Persian for six heady months. He fed me on pistachio nuts the only thing mamma knew how to send and boasted about his muscles.

Breakfast was a trip downstairs coffee followed by grappa followed by coffee a room full of lined stomachs, the small fry of the criminal class.

There was much talk about nothing And life was full of throat-cutting gestures.

If you wanted sex you had to pay for it or wait until the smallest hours. The Tunisians were always ready to oblige. Meanwhile the ships drifted into port to unload their human cargo and the dogs in the Sottoripa multiplied.

Saint Anna's Funicular

When I go down to hell I will take Saint Anna's funicular. It will be waiting for me in the nearly dark of a velvet-skied Genoese evening.

I will be the only passenger and the doors will slide shut with a sublime finality. It will be an extraordinary occasion, this journey into eternity.

And in that narrow steep descent I will be given my last vision of the city against the sea and I will pass lighted windows full of comfort and chandeliers.

Piazza della Posta Vecchia

Darling, they've dripped gold lights over our piazza, the knocking shop of our glorious epoch where the Borgia Prince Bettino Craxi once hovered in the courtyard buoyed up by a hit squad of squeaking puppets. We peeped out naked, so sexually wired. Come back to bed, you said.

that sudden dragging of you into the world.

Your mother was led away to recover and I was left holding the baby. We walked, startled father, startled son, along the hospital's marble corridors edging away from Rosalba's one good eye.

That's when I noticed we didn't actually *have* a bed.

The Red Zone

I need to get back into the Red Zone because I left something in the apartment ten, twenty, thirty years ago. And this little row of pants lining the alleyway, hand washed, sparkling... I need to climb these slate stairs. Has anyone bothered with the locks? And I thought the city so quiet until helicopters drifted over my shoulder. I need to get into that apartment with its high ceilings, its whorey curtains, the bat still flapping in the wardrobe, a baby on the table. Did someone leave a baby on the table?

Sampierdarena, 1990

For Jack

Do you remember the night you were born? Rosalba was our gynaecologist of choice. She smoked incessantly, that little flickering of ash transforming her consulting room into a not unreasonable display of *pointillismo*. Her babies were born in a fix of nicotine. A gynaecologist who smoked was bound to do well in those heady days when smoking was almost a necessity. But a gynaecologist who smoked and who was blessed with an eye that twitched...

You were born in the hospital of Sampierdarena in the early hours of March the sixth, 1990. You were crowned in the sweetness of placenta and several little daubs of excrement. Rosalba worked nimbly, her cigarette, her twitching eye

And of course I knew there would be a bar across the road so I put you into my coat pocket like a kilo of *trofie* and we slipped into the world of senses. Everywhere there were *bancarelle* of mimosa and I drank coffees laced with grappa and little flakes of brioche landed on your head.

Jack, how many hours did we sit there in Bar Franco?

Do you recognise the child, Rosalba asked a little strangely. Do you know, Rosalba, I have seen him somewhere. I have seen him in the breaking dawn of Castelletto I have seen him in the labyrinth of the city I have seen him in the Bar of Mirrors I have seen him in the waters of Sori.

Blue Towel

I hang a blue towel on the line beneath the window then I walk around the flat in a melancholic daze.

When I go for the towel a little later

I see that it's fallen and snagged on the line below.

Next day I'm staring out of the window watching a girl taking her pants from the clothes line.

I don't suppose you've come across a blue towel?

Sure, she says, pop down sometime *carissimo*.

Early evening and I'm pushing at her bell: she opens the door and there's a blue towel wrapped around her head.

I'm asked if I'd like a little grappa and soon there's a clink of glasses behind a curtain and I'm looking at the room which consists almost entirely of a bed which is not unreasonable given her line of work and a sprinkling of books including a copy of *Chameleon Tunes*.

She brings a tray with three glasses, one of which is full of ice. Do you like Billie Holiday? I must have nodded because we sat there listening to some strange fruit hanging from the trees sipping chilled grappa her head wrapped so beautifully in my blue towel.

Impossible fictions

Writing/reading Magic Realism and the uncanny

Alan Bilton



Magic Realism, the Fantastic, the Marvellous, the Uncanny: while literary critics adore squabbling over taxonomies and definitions, creative writers tend to prefer more lyrical language. John Banville talks of the “invasion of the dreamlike”, André Breton of a “convulsive shudder”, “a crack” opening up within “the carapace of normality” (Brandon 1999: 218), Salman Rushdie of “the commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (Warnes 2009: 32), Umberto Eco of a “universe of hallucination” (Brandon 1999: 218). What links all of these ideas is the notion of two contradictory and mutually exclusive worlds – the ordinary and the impossible – somehow crossing a philosophical border to exist in the same fictional space.

In some models, these two states of being, one subject to scientific rules, the other in some sense supernatural, remain like oil and water, refusing to mix, but instead existing in opposition; this is the *modus operandi* of Surrealism, where the eruption of the irrational is registered as a kind of jolt or shock, a disorientation of the mind. Other commentators speak (perhaps less attractively) of a *seepage* of the magical or miraculous, a kind of contamination or infiltration, whereby the so-called real world becomes progressively more extraordinary or ridiculous or bizarre. And still others, following the Latin American model of Magic Realism, explore a mode of writing where the real and the fantastic are so intermingled that it is impossible to tell where the frontier might lie, or whether ancient folklore or modern science is the most incredible.

Whether one sees the Fantastic as a genre, an aesthetic, or a philosophical statement of intent, the purpose of this essay is not to argue over definitions or manifestos, but rather to suggest ways in which creative writing teachers might encourage their students to explore the narrative possibilities of the marvellous, that shot-gun wedding between the mundane and the hallucinatory whose very illegality (or hybridity) is ultimately its greatest strength. To this end, this essay will sketch out a kind of continuum or

bridge between realism and fantasy, inviting students and authors to situate themselves somewhere along the span. A warning, though: this horizontal model is also prone to sudden shifts and disruptions, a dizzying and delirious verticality, and the traffic between the plausible and the dreamlike is strictly two-way.

The two banks of the river

Although we’re chiefly interested in the construction spanning the two sides, it’s also important to take a moment to size up the two opposite ends of the channel. On one shore lies realism. Here the irrational or outlandish can be explained by relatively straightforward narrative means: the narrator might be crazy or deranged, drunk or ill, high as a kite on drugs or simply dreaming. In all of these cases, the apparently magical or numinous is ultimately a mistake, a *misreading*. The impossible is subjective rather than objective, a sign that the narrator has it wrong: that isn’t really a ghost, but rather a curtain billowing in the wind, not an angel but a trick of the light. In short, the impossible (by definition) could not really have happened.

On the other bank lies the enchanted realm of fantasy, fable and fairy tale. In this world, magic is both real and an integral and accepted part of the genre. Wizards can cast spells, animals can talk, elves fix shoes, and none of this contradicts any of the laws of the land; in short, this is a magical realm – Middle Earth, Narnia, Oz – that the reader knows is profoundly separate from their own. Close to this lies The Boringly Literal Lands of Allegory: here, the meaning of any supernatural occurrences can be quickly grasped as a means of instruction, education or other didactic intent. Everything here has a clean meaning and purpose, generally with the purpose of enlightening impressionable young minds.

There’s nothing wrong with either the rational solution or life in Toyland, of course: nevertheless these are the two shores that we’re intent on leaving. Or rather, it is the means of getting from one world to another, the scaffolding that will transport us from the known to the unknown, which we’re interested in. In my novel, *The Known and Unknown Sea*, the inhabitants of a small Welsh town receive mysterious tickets promising them free passage to the mysterious other-side of the Bay. When they arrive there they find themselves on a *papiermâché* moon which resembles nothing so much as a child’s model or drawing of their world back home: wonky lines, badly drawn houses, the art-room smell of glue and paint. Likewise, in my first book, *The Sleepwalkers’ Ball*, a

mundane Scottish town turns inexplicably silent, insubstantial and black and white. The “other” thus turns out to be a crazy mirror version of the ordinary, or rather, the line between the two becomes increasingly erased.

Exercise 1

From the mysterious opening at the back of a wardrobe, to the train waiting at platform nine and three quarters, many of the most popular fictions are based around a portal or passageway between the ordinary and the extraordinary, this world and the other side. The Surrealists too were fascinated with the idea of trap doors, secret passages, mysterious pathways hidden among the familiar. Think about a geographic space that you know very well – this might be your home, workplace, college or school – and describe something there that might serve as an opening to another realm. How does it work? Who finds it? What lies on the other side?

Uncanny valleys, mysterious shapes

The term “Magic Realism” was first used by German Art Historian Franz Roh in an article on Central European Art in 1925. Roh was interested in paintings by artists as diverse as Otto Dix, Georg Schrimpf, Christian Schad, and Alexander Kanoldt, which he saw as breaking with the central tenets of Expressionism. Unlike Expressionism – where vivid colours, savage, irregular brush strokes and deliberately crude compositions seek to capture extreme states of mind in pictorial form – the so-called Magic Realists, at least on first glance, seemed to be much more conventionally realistic or mimetic, aiming for the flat objectivity of photography. However, on closer inspection, Roh argued that something much stranger and more mysterious was going on, an indefinable otherness haunting these apparently straightforward landscapes, still lifes or studio portraits, “a mystery that does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (Bowers 2004: 3). For Roh, beneath the surface of these apparently commonplace paintings lurked something strange, bewildering and disturbing, as if the curtain of reality had been pulled back just a quarter of an inch. Viewers felt as if there was something wrong with this picture, an eeriness or alien quality glimpsed from the corner of one’s eye. Either the angles did not quite match, or the light sources were wrong, or the scale and perspective were subtly *out*; in each case, the ordinary seemed estranged from itself, defamiliarized, in that ugly but highly charged phrase, *othered*. Unlike the

exaggerated and heightened “savagery” of Expressionism, Magic Realist paintings, Roh argued, were painted in a deliberately flat and sober manner: the strangeness lay in how something estranged could be glimpsed within the very fabric and texture of the humdrum everyday.

Italian critic Massimo Bontempelli subsequently applied this idea to literature, exploring the idea that miracles might appear in the midst of the banal or boring (indeed, both writers can be linked back to a long tradition of Romantic Idealism, the existence of spiritual elements discernable beneath the thick crust of matter (Warnes 2009: 20)). Both Roh and Bontempelli were interested in works of art or literature that seem inexplicably transparent, allowing another, magical world to peek through. The silent partner in all of this thinking is, of course, Sigmund Freud, whose 1919 essay “The Uncanny” argues that that which is most truly ‘other’ or aberrant is to be found in the home rather than in some exotic, or far flung location (Freud 2003: 123). Thus, while the Gothic sought out sites of otherness in ruined castles, haunted moors or sublime mountain peaks, Freud argues that the truly strange hides among the familiar, when an everyday thing is suddenly seen in a new light. For Freud – and Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst which followed him – the face glimpsed among the wallpaper, the bulge in the curtain, or the shadowy shape hiding under the bed are ultimately far weirder (in the true sense of the word) and terrifying than any vampire’s tomb; the horror of the everyday turned radically, ontologically, unknown (ibid.: 130).

For Freud, this bewildering phenomenon could be explained by the functioning of the unconscious mind. In psychoanalytic theory, the pleasure principle (as opposed to the reality principle) fails to differentiate between what is really happening, what *might* happen, and what one fears or wishes at any given moment (young children are particularly bad at discriminating here). Thus in the unconscious mind, the real and the imagined or fantasized are placed on the same plane of reality; the logical part of the brain is switched off, allowing the inexplicable free rein (Gay 1989: 80). Of course the scientist Freud sees this as a misapprehension, whereas both Roh and Bontempelli discern hidden yet real spiritual forces. Nevertheless all of this school of thought grows out of a Germanic tradition rooted in a denial of Kant’s separation of existence into the phenomenal (physical things, matter) and the numinous (the realm of the divine, the spirit, the Ideal) (Warnes 2009: 23). Suddenly the

distinctions between subject/object, spirit/matter and reality/vision all seem to collapse. But what should be our response?

Exercise 2

Describe either a character gazing out of their upstairs window (they might be at home, at work, or in some other intimately familiar place) or idly watching TV, when they suddenly catch sight of something impossible, something that does not fit with this everyday world. Describe this impossibility in as realistic yet unemotional a manner as possible. Flatten your prose so that the alien feels as if it is made of the same material as everything else in your world.

Your character does not register any surprise and seems unperturbed by what they see; nevertheless, what do they do?

Seasick on the sea of dreams

Bontempelli's essay proved extremely influential, blending with a parallel interest in psychoanalysis and surrealism, and reaching an audience as far afield as Alejo Carpentier in Cuba and Miguel Ángel Asturias in Guatemala. And yet at this point we reach a parting of the ways, along with the suggestion that there may be more than one way to reach the other shore.

For Andre Breton's Surrealists – following from Freud – the penetration of the impossible within the real is felt as “convulsive”, “the marvellous”, as “the eruption of contradiction within the real” (Breton 2011: 453). Central to this idea is an assumption that we are naturally conservative, conformist creatures, ruled by habit, repetition and convention. We do the same things, talk to the same people, and go to the same places, without ever so much as looking up from the ground. For

Breton, this is the tyranny of the habitual, the inability to escape one's mundane groove. However, the Surrealists believed that if we stepped off the well-worn path, turned left instead of right, caught the train before ours, or followed a stranger down the street, then we might find ourselves somewhere very different, turning the corner into a very different realm.

Moreover, Surrealism preached that there were signs and maps indicating this other world – X marks the spot. Incongruous street signs, objects in store windows, shadows

on the wall, stains on the floor: all these were omens, symbols, either arrows pointing the way, or tools to dig ourselves out of our bourgeois hole. The key to Surrealist art is that you don't make it, but *find* it; hence the search for magical objects in junk shops, weird fetish objects in flea markets, secret doors in funfairs or at the back of the circus. This magical exit door was to be found in precisely those places where the mechanized rule of law and order was at its weakest: cinemas, toyshops, junk yards, seedy run-down arcades. Here, amongst the erotic postcards and broken toys, one might find a picture of some imaginary city, a peculiarly suggestive item of clothing, a torn book in a foreign language. For Breton, the “marvellous” is always to be found among that which society discards, the trash and the litter, rummaging in the debris of the worthless. The “marvellous” must be sought out therefore, as our rational, positivist society had consigned it to the rubbish pail. It was always hidden, camouflaged, disguised, just like the spiritual energies Roh detected in Magic Realist Art.

Not that the marvellous is always positive or sacred in Breton's eyes; on the contrary, its presence is always upsetting, confusing and inescapably alarming. It might be likened to wandering away from the beaten path into an endless, awful labyrinth, or digging up a doll or statue whose shape or visage both fascinates and appals. The marvellous *intrudes* on our world – it does not belong here. Its pimple-like eruption manifests itself as a threat to the established order, to reason or logic or morality. It cannot be assimilated into our everyday lives; it is scandalously, shockingly, irredeemably *other*. In the title story of my 2016 collection, *Anywhere Out of the World*, the postman Urbino searches for a Parisian address which does not, cannot exist. When he eventually finds the way in (via a strangely three dimensional painting), there is no way back.

Exercise 3

Think of the places you have been to where you have felt the farthest from home, either in a positive or negative sense. It may be an exotic escape from the everyday or an environment where you felt you really did not belong. It may be the language or the customs that seemed so bewildering, or a sense of being lost, alienated, or unable to make sense of the sights, activities or people around you. Try to list the key elements that accounted for this profound sense of otherness, what Kafka called “sea-sickness on dry land”. Now try to apply this sense of estrangement to a place you know very well – your workplace, old school, local pub. Write a

short piece of prose in which the commonplace or domestic takes on something of the texture and nature of the utterly strange.

On farther shores

As much as Latin American writers such as Carpentier were drawn toward the possibilities of Surrealism, ultimately Breton's ideas seemed at once too abstract, too limited, too (paradoxically) middle class (Schroeder 2004: 6). The Surrealists needed to have the leisure and means for their games of metaphysical hide and seek, searching for that four-leaved clover among the boulevards and cafés of Paris. Moreover, the assumption that the rational and mechanical was the norm from which the marvellous was implicitly an escape simply didn't square with the Latin American experience. Rather than something to be sniffed out by sophisticated European noses, for Carpentier *lo real maravilloso* was a constituent part of the Post-Colonial experience, as real – and as local – as the climate or the soil (ibid.: 6).

Indeed, for Carpentier, Magic Realism is best understood as a uniquely Latin American phenomenon, the product of “a juxtaposition of circumstances unimaginable in other places on the planet” (ibid.: 3). The fiction most closely associated with the Magic Realist “boom” all draws upon the region's rich and heterogeneous culture: indigenous Mayan or Aztec culture, Afro-Caribbean folk magic, Catholicism and the European Baroque. This ethnic mixture of indigenous people, slaves and settlers inter-mingles Shamanism, voodoo and Catholic superstition to create a mythic folk culture defined by a belief in the permeability of the barrier between this world and the next, a world where an acknowledgement of the existence of angels, ghosts and evil spirits appears as part of the very nature of the real. Here the magical is less an intruder than a taxpaying citizen; indeed, in the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, it is the scientific and the modern which is seen as the “other” and whose presence is most keenly felt as a disturbance in the fabric of life. Thus, rather than an antagonistic element (as we have seen with the Surrealists), in the South American tradition magic is normalized and integrated, the supernatural recorded in deliberately flat, non-judgemental prose. Carpentier believed that the Surrealists “turned their back on reality”, looking for some kind of escape tunnel from an over bureaucratic and mechanized world (ibid.: 6). By way of contrast, the Latin American writers embrace reality, the reality that, in Garcia-Marquez's words, “is also the myths of the common people

... their beliefs, their legends; these are their everyday lives and they affect their triumphs and failings” (Schroeder 2004: 6). Surrealism is the avant-garde cocking a snoot at the everyday; Magic Realism is folk art, the art of the people, not hidden in the dusty corner of a library, but right here, directly to hand.

Exercise 4

Think about what vestiges of folk culture or magical thinking still exist in our world today. This can range from urban legends – of ghosts, serial killers, haunted buildings – to ancient folklore, or different forms of non-scientific belief. Where do we find these patterns of other, non-empirical ways of looking at the world? We might think of the Internet and conspiracy theories or playground tales or religious belief or astrology columns or New age mysticism or the kind of superstitious thinking we're all prone to: the belief that stepping on a crack or saying a forbidden name three times will have mysterious consequences. Write a first person piece of work from the perspective of a character for whom these beliefs are an integral part of daily life. How do they reconcile the mythic and the mundane? How does this alter how they see, and how you write about, the world?

Dreams for sale

While all of this may sound attractive and convincing, it also sets up a whole series of literary problems. One is the question of how *portable* a Magic Realist aesthetic might be. If the form is rooted in a specific and highly complex culture, can the recipe then be duplicated elsewhere, except in a bland, or watered down form? Moreover, this model also sets up a number of quandaries concerning the implied reader. A visitor from outside this culture will interpret the various fantastical events – the levitations, ghosts, visions and so on – as literally impossible (which is to say, outside of the realm of scientific possibility) and therefore read the book as an example of the exotically primitive, a colourful fairy tale of poor folk from a country far, far away. Although the prose might work hard to normalize the impossible, the reader will continue to register key events as outside of realism, even if they have tangible effects in the text (or in other words, they actually happen). Hence Jean Franco's dismissal of the term Magic Realism as no more than a “brand name for exoticism”, an out-sourcing of poor-people's fantasy (Warnes 2009: 1). The brand's patronizing view of the poor and marginalized as irrational children thus

continues the colonial project under another name: gap year literature for the globalized literati.

The margins and the centre

In all of this, we should remember that Carpentier and Marquez were self-consciously setting out to differentiate their work from the dominant European model (associated with colonialism) and to define a movement that both legitimizes and lionizes the Latin American experience. Central to both writers' thinking is the assumption that Magic Realism blooms on the margins of the known world, on the periphery, or the border. Hence, Marquez's seminal *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is set in the fictional town of Macondo on the isolated Caribbean coast of Columbia, far from a European centre, Europeans seen as the foci of power, authority and meaning, those who determine what is and is not real. The idea that "realism" is the norm is itself ideologically loaded, of course, assuming that there is some kind of consensus as to what reality is. The greater the distance from the centre, the more reality becomes subject to local pressure; hence as a genre or movement, Magic Realism always exists far from the centres of administrative control, on the edge of (so-called) civilization.

As a model, at first sight this doesn't seem to fit in with European examples very well at all. After all, the Surrealists were chiefly busy in Paris – the epicentre of modernity – while the most famous European practitioner of the weird, Franz Kafka, worked as an insurance agent in a major city at the geographic heart of the continent. If one digs a little deeper, however, then similar patterns emerge. As a German-speaking Jew, Kafka felt himself as estranged from the newly formed Czechoslovakia as from the Austro-Hungarian empire, while the repetitive and somnambulant nature of his work allowed time and space for his imagination to ferment. Likewise, and as we have already seen, the Surrealists were drawn to precisely those things that the modern managerial, pragmatic, ends-orientated sensibility most disdains: the broken, the useless and the discarded. In this sense, a feeling of occupying the margins can be experienced almost anywhere. Again, we might think that, while the Gothic privileges lost or wild places, the Uncanny exists within the local.

This marginal status, however, gives room to escape the constrictions and commandments in force elsewhere, and thereby to question exactly what constitutes reality anyway.

As Maggie Ann Bowers argues, Magic Realism is a disruptive form, blurring the distinctions between fantasy and reality, indeed questioning the very distinction in the first place, "a description of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious" (Bowers 2004: 82). For the critic Christopher Warnes, Magic Realism either expands existing categories of the real (the path of faith: we believe in the unseen) or ruptures them altogether (the path of irreverence: all systems of order are prone to collapse (Warnes 2009: 48). Whichever model an individual author is drawn to, it is a narrow, functional, capitalist notion of meaning being linked to purpose which is being challenged here; the margins writing back.

Exercise 5

Think of a successful, accomplished, well-connected character, who is very much at home in the contemporary world. Then think of a scenario in which they are displaced into a place or situation far removed from this. This "fish out of water" scenario is a much beloved staple of Hollywood script-writers, but think about its deeper implications. What beliefs, assumptions or expectations will this jump in time or space serve to challenge? What happens when we find ourselves in a place where very different rules or ways of seeing the world apply?

The real, the fantastic, and the cordon sanitaire

While in literary theory the wall between fantasy and reality might seem very well policed, 'twas not ever so. Indeed, if one goes back in literary history far enough, the idea of an antinomy between the realistic and the spiritual appears virtually incomprehensible, the chivalrous knight existing in the same world as ogres and dragons because the categories of the real and the fantastic simply did not exist (Warnes 2009: 32). For Fredric Jameson, the "disenchantment of the world" is linked to the creation and growth of capitalism, a mercantile, secular world in which the real is defined by use or productivity – the very world the Surrealists sought to flee (ibid.: 34). This is the world of middle management, quantifiable, empirical, and rationalized for maximum efficiency. Any tradition which can't be fed into this commercial algorithm, from myth to idle daydreams, is re-classified as worthless or unreal, the whole tradition of "romance" becoming hopelessly archaic. The work that captures this moment best is, of course, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615); our befuddled hero might *think* that he's jousting with giants, but, like Sancho Panzo, we know that

he's *really* just tilting at windmills. Thus does Romance disappear from the world; with the invention of modern spectacles we now all see the world for what it truly is.

In his famous essay on the book though, Carpentier stresses that he, for one, is on the Don's side. He has faith that the giants *are* real, arguing that the purpose of literature is to challenge this very hierarchy of what is real and what is not (he also adds that Cervantes isn't so sure either). In his fiction, Carpentier uses the romanticized accounts of the first European explorers – the idea of Latin America as an exotic, enchanted land – as a weapon *against* European rationality and empiricism, reclaiming these tropes to attack the notion that only the productive is true, his critique of realism simultaneously a rebuttal of colonial authority (ibid.: 37).

Attractive as this idea might be, we might also at this point take issue with Jameson's assertion that we live in a disenchanted, profane world. Rather than manufacturing a ruthlessly mechanistic and stable world, capitalism is awash with enchanted objects (just think of the role of advertising in consumer culture), mythical creatures (or celebrities, as we call them), mysterious cults (via the internet) and pre-fabricated fantasies of escapism. Indeed the ways in which the formal provocations of Surrealism have been co-opted by Hollywood and Fifth Avenue suggest that late capitalism actively encourages the deconstruction of any distinction between who we really are and our fantasies of who we might be. The invention of CGI, virtual reality and our almost constant immersion in technology and social media all suggest that unreality is now our natural environment – or rather that our definitions of reality are as old fashioned as *The Matrix* (1999).

In this online environment, our bridge between reality and the fantastical threatens to collapse, the two banks becoming hopelessly confused. Magical thinking – and the saddling of political unicorns – now seems commonplace in our post-truth world, Umberto Eco's characterization of the Middle Ages as a "universe of hallucination" eerily similar to our hyper-real, simulacra-infested world. As such, Magic Realism, which explores the multi-dimensional nature of the real without flattening or diluting it, may well be seen as the form best placed to explore this. After all, its creation of a third space between reason and the irrational, the material and immaterial, the known and the unknown now feels like our home – and as such the natural habitat of the uncanny.

But perhaps I exaggerate – and certainly, we're not there yet, whatever some postmodernists might tell you. Rather, I agree with Wendy Faris that the aura of the miraculous never fades away entirely, even in the most culturally rooted of Latin American texts (Faris 2004: 8). Disruption and instability follow the uncanny wherever it goes, whether in terms of our bridge across the waters, or our very understanding of the two countries involved. Indeed, as I argued at the start, this may well be its greatest strength. Encouraging students to write in a Magic Realist mode also encourages them to rethink categories of realism, fantasy, the imagined and the everyday, to find their arching bridge transformed into a perilous tight rope, or a narrow line of prose. As the tour guide in my novel, *The Sleepwalkers' Ball* says, "hold on tight, ladies and gentlemen, hold on tight..."

Exercise 6

How might the fantastical or uncanny be manifested in our technology-obsessed, online, computer-generated world? Write a piece in which the inexplicable or supernatural exists not in a dusty mansion or haunted castle, but in the devices and systems all around us – the ghost in the machine.

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Putting multimodal writing on the page

Sarah Gibson Yates



With a background in filmmaking, university lecturer and PhD researcher Sarah Gibson Yates shares some of the challenges and opportunities she's experienced expanding her creative practice into prose fiction for young adults.

The challenges of representing multimodal and digital languages within fiction are multiple, varied, and, I would say, unavoidable if you're writing contemporary realist novels aimed at young readers. Young adult literature readers are more likely to be immersed in social technologies than other demographic groups.¹ With this in mind it would seem that learning how to better represent the stories and languages of digital culture in our fiction should be a real concern for writers wishing to connect with those readers. In what follows I consider some of the ways I've approached this challenge in my PhD novel, drawing on ideas presented at the NAWE Conference in 2018. I also share some of the lessons that I've taken forward to writing classes with undergraduate film and media students, as well as the public. These are formulated as guiding principles, and illustrated with writing practice examples from the classroom, which may hopefully be of interest to other writers looking for ways to incorporate the impact of digital culture into their writing practice, and/or teaching.

Towards a multi-disciplined writing practice

Nine years ago, I received a small award from The National Lottery through Arts Council England to develop a novel exploring the behaviours and consequences of digital culture centred around a group of networked young people. Their real lives happen in a thinly fictionalized Cambridge, where I still live, and the plot takes the shape of a crime investigation; my protagonist, 18-year-old Taylor, the self-appointed detective piecing together the parts of the victim's life left behind while trying to make sense of the virtual and real connections with her own story. I used most of the award to buy in expertise to develop the manuscript –

then a novel aimed for adult readers – in the form of a writing mentor, through Jill Dawson's Gold Dust Scheme.² I learned a great deal about writing prose fiction in that time and I am hugely grateful for the experience of being able to develop my writing practice in this guided space. Although I had a background in fiction, drama and filmmaking, including an MA in Creative Writing: Scriptwriting (UEA, 2015), I quickly realized that while some of the tools required for fiction were similar – characterization, plotting, genre, pace – others were not, in particular narrative perspective and narrative voice. The challenge of achieving the right voice for this novel has taken me through many drafts. Finding a writing style that conjured the voice that matched my intentions for the work was in part troubled by my insistence on including a range of digital elements of form such as instant messaging, videos, podcasts, photo sharing, blog posts, geo-location maps, etc. alongside conventional prose passages. In retrospect, I see that this project was a difficult starting proposition for a writer still learning her craft but I have since understood that the problems that beset me around finding the right voice and right mode of stylistic expression are central to the problems many writers might encounter when faced with the challenges of putting multimodal writing on the page.

Multimodal writing

Digital culture is multimodal by default and the implications of this for my practice found extension through two publically engaged creative-practice-as-research workshops held in the Cambridge Festival of Ideas (2014). The remainder of the grant was spent on providing a range of artists and tools set up to explore identity construction in online contexts via multidisciplinary practice including video, photography, writing and performance. *Digitize Me* was my first attempt to actively think about and practice multimodal writing and the workshop succeeded in engaging a lively creative session where selfies were taken and questioned, profile indicators visualized and investigated, status updates documented, fictionalized and framed. The ideas and practices explored there have formed my research questions and the formulation of a particular kind of aesthetic for the work – *a digital aesthetic in book form*. It is an aesthetic that draws on the multimodal, intertextual, multi-narrational world of digital technology, including, specifically, social technologies, through which significant portions of the novel

are narrated, and which seeks to unify these fragmentary elements into a coherent novel.

As of 2014 I have been developing this novel, alongside a maternity leave, lecturing and mothering, as part of a part time PhD. As I discussed my book with colleagues near the beginning of the journey I was often asked if I was writing an interactive book, as I spoke about including texts, videos, photographs, blog posts, podcasts, comment threads, Tweets, etc. to build an authentic contemporary story world for the post millennial protagonists of my young adult story. But this was, and still is, very much *a novel-book*, one intended to be printed in hard copy, on paper page, turned by real fingers, and become tatty and discoloured over time. This material fixing of the ephemeral, digital world is a central part of the *initium*³ for the project and inseparable from the narrative's core questions: What are the long-term impact of digital technology on the lives on young people? How does digital technology affect behaviour? And how does it shape a young person's sense of self and others?

Multimodal transitions

The process of working out this question has afforded a deep engagement with the problem of how to effectively put multimodal writing on the page in a readable and engaging way. Should I represent an instant message by using a different font? Should I indent on a separate line? Keep it within the paragraph? Should the content or experience of watching a video be represented as a prose description, italicized or standard? Could it more effectively be represented as a screenplay? How *should* I move from one representational style to another? And what are the implications for the reader in terms of experience and meaning making?

The transitions in perspective that occur when a character moves from reading something to watching something or listening to something to saying something are the spaces in which we now live. Within fiction these moments can be explored to define character, to provide insight into a way of viewing the world and reveal much not only about the inner workings of a character but the author's mind too. How do you represent the daily acts of our multi-sensory online experiences within fiction?

The specific creative challenges of writing this novel, as well as its potential for opening new ways of thinking about prose fiction for young adults, lies here in figuring out how you

write the transitions from one representational style to another, and it is central to multimodal writing practice. There are two main choices. To use language from film editing, you can straight cut or dissolve. You either crash two different media objects together or cross dissolve them smoothly, softening the change, removing the jolt. But then jolts are sometimes what you want as a writer. Dissonance reveals much about how we experience not just digital culture but contemporary life more broadly.

The way the story of my novel came to me, via a news article, was itself a form of *transitioned narrative*, one part strange new digital reality, and one part traditional news reportage. In 2006 I came across the story of American teenager Anna Svidersky in an article entitled *Death on My Space* (*The Guardian*, 2006). I had just begun to engage with social media and was struck by this story that described how a 14-year-old girl's popularity peaked after being stabbed at the diner where she worked. Anna's Myspace page had been memorialized by a friend and stories of the girl's life and death in small town America spread widely online. The intriguing juxtaposition of the futuristic ghost story and human interest news story stayed with me; a curious and uniquely 21st century phenomenon that someone could have more "friends" dead than alive. I began thinking: What were these people doing friending a dead girl? What motivated them? Then: What if she (Anna) wasn't the person she appeared to be on social media, but that her murder was an end-point to a bigger narrative, which, once unpicked, would reveal who she truly was?

The story that flowed from those questions became my novel, a story born of a combination of other narratives from a variety of sources (text, image, video, sound), spliced together in the imagination, and which gave rise to the questions of multimodal representation that became central to my PhD research.

Digital culture on the pages of young adult literature

From Trollope's urge to depict *The Way We Live Now* (1875) novelists have sought to capture contemporary life in the stories and languages of contemporary culture and young adult authors are no exception. Contemporary realist young adult literature (YAL) thrives at an exciting nexus of possibilities, including story-telling, identity-forming and culture shaping. These possibilities have only just begun to be explored, yet as far back as 1996 the tendency for formal

invention in YAL was being detected by scholars, with eminent Swedish critic MN describing children's literature as

evolving towards complexity and sophistication ... reflected in such phenomena as the disintegration of traditional narrative structure and the extensive use of different experimental forms, in the intricate use of time and space, in a growing intertextuality, in a questioning of conventional approaches to the relationship between text and reality. (Nikolajeva 1996: 207)

In the noughties, this questioning of conventional approaches to the relationship between text and reality took place through the cultural paradigmatic shift in use of digital technology, especially by the young. Since YAL is written precisely about and for the demographic most effected by digital technologies, it is unsurprising that a body of work has emerged that addresses the personal, social and moral issues that arise from living so close to technology. It is possible to see the qualities to which Nikolajeva refers emerging and developing in a range of books, a first wave of YAL addressing the impact of technology, identified in a 2010 paper by Jill Olthouse, 'Blended Books: An Emerging Genre Blends

Online and Traditional Formats'. This offers an analysis of YAL texts exploring the interface between traditional and new forms of (digitally enabled) storytelling which she calls blended books. Nine years on this definition is ready for an update. I suggest a useful refinement might be to distinguish between books that *adapt* online formatting *wholesale* for the presentation of their stories, "adapted books", and call those that truly *blend* traditional prose with other digital and multimodal forms "blended books". Under this new definition, "adapted books" would include Lauren Myracle's hugely popular *Internet Girls Series* (2004-2014), *Entrapment* (Michael Spooner 2010), and *Serafina67 *urgently requires life** (Susie Day 2008). All use either instant message boards or blog formats throughout the whole book. Examples of "blended books" might include: YA superstar John Green's more recent *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017), in which prose is combined with other digital formatting styles such as blogs, instant messaging technology and photographs to tell the story; blogger Zoella's commercial debut hit, *Girl Online* (2014), a mix of prose with instant messages, blog posts and photographs; *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013) with its prose and fanfiction; *Radio Silence* by Alice Oseman (2017), containing prose, podcasts and instant messages, and her debut novel, *Solitaire* (2014). It is clear that it is this latter category that has prevailed, at least within mainstream

publishing, with few books of the "adapted" formatting kind currently on publishers' lists. And it is these truly blended books that interest me most, reflecting, as they do, my artistic concern – to *create a digital aesthetic in book form* – while also creating complex postmodern discourses around identity and narrative-making.

Putting multimodal narratives on the page

My novel, *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, now complete and with an agent at the time of writing, is fundamentally a response to a real-life murder and an exploration of what digital technologies can teach us about narrative today: how it constructed and how it is used. There are many instances of digital technology structuring the narrative of my novel. For instance, the Anna Svidersky story inspired the launching off point.

The first page:

The day after she died, I find a message in my inbox.

Dear valued friend,

krr^c Seee^o aemm^m dpee^p lmm^l ymbbⁱ yee^c rr^a mm^t yeIm^e m^e d^d toa. irm^e
P^pmy P^le wl^a aieⁿ wlta^e iih^t tv^e hes^h .tv^a yⁱⁱ oPls^u elic^a t^o ocy^m neom^e
uy ta^t hnmf^o idoe s^a rm^l oⁿ boar^e evsi^e ae^a n^u.ll^d toⁱ inp^f ga^b u^g lae^t s^s
aynodu

Kash x a friend in need [Gone but not forgotten]

Taylor's decision to accept the friend request is, to use screenwriting terminology, a midpoint, or *point of no return*. It is also the title of that chapter. As a filmmaker and film student Taylor is immersed in the ideas of this form of narrative structure but she struggles to apply its clean logic to her own life. Accepting the friend request from the girl she found dead the night before marks her commitment to finding out more about Kasha and becoming more deeply involved in her story. It is an example of technology not only structuring the fiction of my novel but inspiring it; a narrative starting point that is unique to a specific technology – a Facebook-authored algorithm. Without this "digital object" –

the friend request from a dead girl – my novel would not have its first page.

Lessons in multimodal writing

There are three guiding principles that have come to define my current research and that I have explored in my teaching of undergraduate film and media students:

1 *Deepen an understanding of the different ways we receive and process narrative information provided multimodally.*

Classroom: In both my screenwriting and online writing classes I give students a range of film or online writing texts [short films, blogs, posts, vlogs, journalism] to analyze and discuss in terms of what information is being provided visually (through image), aurally (through sound), or textually (through words). We reflect on why the producer has decided to communicate that idea or information in that particular way, and what impact it might have on the meaning of the work. For example, words are most effective for providing information, or history of a subject, video excels at conveying action, and audio is hugely effective at communicating a sense of place (ambient or location sound) and emotions (particularly through voice).

Writing Exercise, Social Media Share: Using a social media object⁴ students have selected as a prompt, students must respond in a timed free-writing session (5 minutes). This instant response might be a flash fiction, a post, a message, a letter, anything. They can use the “object” as a launching off point or build their piece about it. They can choose to share their “object” or keep it for themselves. Everyone is then given 10 minutes to edit their work following peer feedback in pairs. They then upload their work to our online discussion group board, where it might be developed into a larger project.

2 *Explore tools for writing multimodal story using screenwriting techniques.*

Classroom: Drawing on my experience of screenwriting where idea generation and developmental processes foreground visualization and structural planning techniques, I work with students to map their ideas using these tools to develop and construct their story ideas.

Writing Exercise, Rule of 3s – Idea generation for the short fiction screenplay: Using three photographs they have taken, one each of a place (location), a person (character) and a thing (prop), students must write three things about each image. After 10 minutes they swap photographs in pairs and repeat the exercise with these different images. Then we discuss how to build a scene from each response (six in all per pair).

3 *Develop an informed, practice-based awareness of the interplay between showing and telling (including mimetic and diegetic forms of narrative making, as well as montage).*

Classroom: Students are asked to create a multimedia news project using words, video and audio.

Exercise, Multi-media News Story: Students decide on a topic in pairs, research the content for the piece and using a range of visualization tools decide which elements of the content will communicate their messages most effectively using written word, images (moving or still) or audio. As a group, we then consider the relationship between information giving (telling) and communicating experience/perspective (showing), before committing to a production plan for all related media, using scripts for podcasts, radio and screenbased work where appropriate.

Conclusion

There is a long history of technology being explored by literature and of literature exploring technology⁵, but it is only in recent times that this has come into our everyday stories and the texts that carry them. As technology impresses itself ever deeper into every aspect of all our lives, so we see it structuring our fiction.

Technology provides new structures and new forms for story-telling, and as writers we need to better understand the narrative strategies offered by technology to see how it demands new behaviours and new stories to be told. Or, at the very least, how old stories demand to be *rewritten*; seen through a new lens; de-familiarized and made anew for new generations.

I began with a claim of wanting to write a traditional novel that would address some of the impacts of digital languages for identity construction and authenticity. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the process has taken me to an exploration of story itself – and writing too. How do we cognitively and creatively piece a narrative together? Today? Immersed in multimedia?

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We do it all the time. It is what we *do* daily on social media, as we construct our own identities – and those of others – in the space between the information provided; it is what my protagonist *does*, her main action throughout the novel as amateur detective and young adult finding her way in the world; it is the reader's action as they read; and it is of course mine, as an author, constructing a narrative built from multimodal sources.

Notes

1. The most commonly cited age attribution to YAReaders is 12-18, although it is well documented that many adults (in the 18-30 year-old bracket) make up a large proportion of the market sales (Mushens 2015). A 2018 study conducted by the American nonpartisan fact tank the Pew Research Centre found that 95% of all teens have access to a smart phone and 45% say they are online constantly. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teenssocial-media-technology-2018/> [Accessed 2 May 2019].
2. This successful writer mentoring programme has been running for many years. www.gold-dust.org
3. In *The Fiction Editor* (1988), Thomas McCormack describes the initiation of a work as “what the author had in mind when he began his novel.” p190.
4. A social media object is an item that can be found on a social media platform, for example a video, blog post or podcast. The comments, shares history or any other interaction with that object can also be considered as part of that object and a meaningful indicator of its cultural discourse.
5. For further reading on the experimental end of the relationship between literature and technology see the many works of literary critic N. Katherine Hayles, or for more recent work on the topic, *Electronic Literature* (Scott Rettberg, 2018).

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Julia Deakin, *Sleepless*, Valley Press, ISBN 978-1912436-10-1, paperback, £10.99.

Do you sleep well? If so, be warned: Julia Deakin's new collection *Sleepless* could change that – or leastways make you question why your nights are so peaceful. Casting a wise, searching eye across 21st century life, she beguiles with a powerful mix of wit and wistfulness, gradually, inexorably building to her final twist – when, as in life, we ask, too late: how did it come to this? The first section (oddly also called *Sleepless*) gazes with wonder and lament at today's world. Deakin is innovative with ideas and form. Here she offers: truths seen by goldfish ("Only a goldfish"); an Escher-inspired concrete poem about identity ("Ascending and descending"); and a translation of Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" ("The Swan"). In "Red kite over Harehills Lane" nature triumphs in an urban landscape, where "Ten seconds at the lights present a sight / unseen in Leeds since Shakespeare's day": a red kite above the neon signs, soaring "off kilter like a toy kite in the diesel fret".

And with this comes tentative optimism for our future: "From this fraught junction of the disparate, / pluck hope: that the improbable is possible." But where she gives hope, Deakin also takes it away. The facing poem, *Armley Clock School*, delivers a sense of dis-ease that lingers for the rest of the collection. Here, the clock of a long-gone school ticks, bomb-like, for those children who "played out the best years of their lives" among "the feathers / of pale blue candy-floss that floated over Aviary's estate / from Roberts' asbestos works".

That sense of "we shall reap as we sow" pervades the second section, "It has rained", which looks aslant at "normal" things (like the title poem's rain on blackberries). There's a playfulness, experiment with form, and humour. Deakin conjures 1970s teenage life in a deft concrete poem shaped like a shower head, and encounters the Grim Reaper in Wilkinsons. There are wistful family memories, too, brimming with what is lost, a sentiment pertinent in the exquisitely disquieting sonnet "Syzygy". I had to look up the word (in astronomy "syzygy" is a conjunction/opposition, especially of the moon and sun) and lamented the lack of notes, wondering if Deakin deliberately wants to make us work. But I loved the view of the earth from the moon, where "Even the clouds cling like wisps of packaging / around some infinitely precious thing / plucked from a ruin

another warning stab, switching viewpoints to one from earth to the moon, which "looks whacked", "pulling strings / to keep the whole goddam show on the road."

In the third section, "Cloze procedure", the show and road are clearly parting company. Political and edgy, here are poems about the worst of it – child abuse, refugees, rape, crimes in the name of religion. In that first category, "I would like to FORGET" is a powerful list poem, where things to forget include "the gagging shut up", "the smell of you / on every man", "the fear / of being touched". It ends "Please can you fix this for me" – with no full stop.

Amid all this comes the (thankfully) hilarious "Turning Sixty", with the epigraph "'Off out tonight, gonna get mortal'. Facebook." In effect another list (and a sonnet to make Shakespeare's eyes pop), it catalogues what the speaker, at 60, has not done: "trolled the streets of central anywhere / at 2am in search of another WKD", for starters.

But where is all this going? Deakin's penultimate poem, "In deep", explores a post-apocalyptic world, where the final blow came softly – snow which fell (echoing that earlier asbestos) as "angel feathers". Just snow – but "How could we have known / it wouldn't stop?", "That what they'd warned us of was happening?". Observing with a cinematic eye, Deakin tots up realities: "The old, the sick collectively forgotten", a "new / economy / of grit and drudgery", which makes "machines a joke, the wheel history". Finally, in "After Rothko", she echoes the visual essence of the artist's *Black on grey*, listing what, perhaps, her work is not: "This is not the edge... Not ruined Manhattan" leading, bluntly, to a definite truth, and beyond: "It is paint on paper. It is just" – and leaves it there.

Sleepless offers ideas you'll wish you'd had, poems you'll wish you'd written. Deakin, humorous and chilling by turns, skewers modern life with a sharp mind, lamenting the route to our demise with a wistful heart. Read it and weep.

Dawn Gorman

Michael Thomas, *The Portswick Imp*, Black Pear Press, ISBN 9781910322574, paperback, £7

Sometimes a piece of writing resonates more than its author

REVIEWS

and unwrapped intact." The volta, at line 11, delivers

could have imagined. "Catching the Light", the second story

in this collection by Michael Thomas, is given added weight by our febrile political times. Set in a Britain where flat-footed diplomacy has caused a “global deportation of British nationals” and the collapse of civil society, the story opens in a former convenience store turned “commodity hub”. The narrator, Martin, has swapped two packets of cigarettes for a diamond brooch. Martin is an accomplished scavenger, a “careful slipper-and-slider”, the head of a household of women, left behind in the badlands of North Worcestershire after his son-in-law took a chance on the “freedom-boats”. It’s powerful to turn the refugee narrative, and the callousness of deportation, on its head, and Thomas makes the most of it; some of the repatriated Brits, without medical care, are casually described as having “died *en route*”. Only two radio stations still exist, one of which plays archived material “for British forces dispatched across a still-pinkish map”. But being British offers no protection. The only hope is to “vanish”, which Martin’s son, working in Australia, has managed to do. Thomas shows the toll taken by political instability on the family unit. Martin, who may never see his son again, hopes the young man is safe and free. He imagines him “on a veranda in the Blackwater country... doing a fine Aussie accent, laughing, hopeful...”

passenger who bitterly regrets their passage”, she learns that the spirit is “the Almighty’s candle, illuminating Father and Son”. She then takes matters into her own hands, with disastrous consequences.

A sense of yearning for a simpler time, long gone, permeates some of the tales. The title story, told in the voices of a husband and wife, traces his boyhood passion for push-bikes, which he has put aside. Seeing cyclists on the road, “throwing air over either shoulder”, brings his true love back “like an old song”. At first, despite hating the “dank shops, each with its mumbly little man in a brown coat stuffed with pens”, his wife helps him search for the perfect bike. But no single machine is the answer. The end result, “five bikes’ worth”, he names the Portswick Imp, after a childhood memory. Out in the countryside she watches him ride, until his bike lights are “just a bit of the Welsh moon broken up”. He has ridden away, back into the safety of his childhood imagination.

If a longing for the past can make some pieces feel dated, they conjure a genuine and affecting atmosphere. Some images, while obviously meaningful to the writer, need a little more clarity to work for the reader. But at his best, in

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The ties of family and friendship, sometimes stretched to breaking point, are examined in many of the stories. “Strawberries and Frightened Water” shows us a hellish end-of-term school prizegiving, from the viewpoints of three put-upon teachers. With a humorous touch, Thomas dives in and out of the three women’s secret lives, involving personal and professional rivalries, sex, and alcohol. Yet at the end of the ceremony, when the teachers stare at “the blank mass of summer” waiting for them, they step forward together, “as if with hands joined on a dare”. In “Misshapes from Cadbury’s” a parcel returned from a distant nursing home rekindles memories of a deep and lasting friendship between two women. The parcel, once “belongings”, is now “effects”: “Death ... with sober tidiness, had exchanged one word for the other.”

Throughout the collection the author shows a keen feel for language. In “Come, Holy Ghost”, a woman with a vivid imagination is tormented by being able to picture the spirit only as “a tunnel of November mist”. Seeking advice from a priest, who sees her hanging over the altar rail “like a boat

this collection Thomas succeeds in portraying human relationships, in all their messiness and mystery.

Sarah Hegarty

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