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Imagination is the queen of truth: The realist text as a sensory narrative image

Abstract:

This article focuses the realist text as a sensory narrative image. I propose that realist fiction, or abstracted realism, is an attempt to capture the incompleteness of human experience through carefully crafted narrative detail – interwoven narrative images. The central premise of this article is that productive engagement with our own writing and the work of fellow writers involves paying close attention to the relationship between sensory narrative detail and a focalising consciousness, as a representation of the ideas that lurk beneath the surface of the text. This analysis occurs within the more specific context of dark subject matter in realist writing. Ideasthesia (from neuroscience) and the unthought known (from psychoanalysis) provide a theoretical frame for a broader examination of the relationship between a focalising consciousness and the transposition of narrative detail. Through this frame, and in relation to examples from long- and short-form fiction, including my own practice, and with reference to William Maxwell, Marcel Proust, Luke Davies, Arnold Zable, Flannery O’Connor, Edith Wharton, Toni Morrison, as well as Francis Bacon, Charles Baudelaire and Victoria Walsh, this article contemplates the realist text as a sensory narrative image. I track the relationship between form and feeling, both within the narrative world as well as with reference to authorial intention, more broadly.

Biographical note:

Julia Prendergast’s novel, *The earth does not get fat* was published in 2018 (Australia: UWA Publishing). Recent short stories feature in *Australian short stories 66* (Australia: Pascoe Publishing 2018). Other stories have been recognised and published: *Lightship anthology 2* (UK), *Glimmer train* (US), *TEXT* (AU), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition (IE), *Review of Australian fiction*, *Australian book review* Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize (AU). Julia’s research has appeared in various publications including: *New writing* (UK), *TEXT* (AU), *Testimony witness authority: the politics and poetics of experience* (UK). Julia is a senior lecturer in Writing and Literature at Swinburne University, Melbourne. She is the current Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia. Julia is an enthusiastic support of interdisciplinary, open and collaborative research practices.

Keywords: narrative, abstracted realism, authorial intention, imagination, focalisation, detail

Introduction

This article reflects upon my understanding of the realist text as a sensory narrative image and is informed by my ongoing practice-led research as well as my engagement with other writers and their stories. The discussion takes place within the parameters of my preferred writing and reading habits, which largely focus on realist fiction, and is perhaps bent, in particular, towards Dirty Realism: a form that traditionally emphasises the darker aspects of ordinary life in unadorned prose. My tendency, in writing longer-form fiction, is to focalise the story material from multiple points of view – a process I refer to as ‘writing back’. This is a means of building from short- to long-form fiction – it constitutes an ongoing, although not necessarily consciously determined, pattern of practice. This methodology encourages me to be hyper-aware of the relationship between the focalising consciousness and concrete and specific narrative detail. It is this relationship that informs the following discussion and leads me to an assessment of the realist text as a sensory narrative image.

Engagement with other writers, with both their work and their thinking, is a fascinating, looped interplay that can be understood as a form of temporising. Drusilla Modjeska suggests that temporising ‘can become a form of consciousness’ (Modjeska 2002: 76). She writes:

Temporising ... is an attitude of mind which develops in certain people who find themselves engulfed, even tipped off balance, by the sadness of the present. *The incurable imperfection in the very presence of the present*, Proust says. As a consequence, they protect themselves with psychological manoeuvres that slip them into other timeframes; in other words they play with time. (Modjeska 2002: 75)

In conversation with other writers, and in reading, I often feel I am in the company of fellow temporisers. Collectively we seem to be examining the mystery of human interaction: the imperfection of the present. Fiction is an apt vessel for capturing the haunting incompleteness of human experience – the best stories are concertina-like, expanding and contracting as we read them, and thereafter, endlessly. In reading, we remember details and we understand that they represent ideas. But how, this magic?

To engage with authors and their work is to bear witness to the attempt to capture the mystery of lived experience – its not-enough-ness. The poet Luke Davies speaks of writing and reading as an act of translating the inexpressible. He speaks of the “‘spine-tingling experience of poetry working in that way ... it’s that moment where it’s like I grasp that this poet is approaching translating the unsayable’” (Davies qtd in Carter 2016). This is the great joy of reading and the lure of writing – encountering the ineffable through concrete and sensory narrative detail – bearing witness to the creative use of language as an act of deep homage to an otherwise irresolvable idea.

The sadness and imperfection of the present, the irresolvable and the unsayable, puts me in mind of Helen Garner and, in particular, Garner's reverence for the journalist Janet Malcolm. In 'The rapture of firsthand encounters', Garner reflects upon Malcolm's incomparable influence on her work, noting that 'Malcolm's way of perceiving the world is deeply dyed by the psychoanalytical view of reality' (Garner 2016: 167) and drawing attention to Malcolm's claim that 'life is lived on two levels of thought and act: one in our awareness and the other only inferable, from dreams, slips of the tongue, and inexplicable behaviour' (Malcolm qtd in Garner 2016: 167).

The concept of inferable meaning is at the heart of the activity of reading and writing as it is focused in this article. I examine contemporary realist writing, springboarding from a short story within the dirty realist tradition: Raymond Carver's 'Tell the Women We're Going' (2003; 2009). I move to an examination of the relationship between narrative detail and a focalising consciousness, with reference to my own writing and the work of other authors, taking a continued interest in dark subject matter as a representation of the mystery of lived experience – its not-enough-ness – the conundrum and contradiction of human experience as it is expressed through concrete and sensory narrative detail.

My research addresses this subject matter from the perspective of authorial intention – investigating meta-level creative writing processes by examining the evolution of concrete and specific detail, at a primal moment of narrative composition and beyond. Two theories in particular guide my theoretical exploration: ideasthesia or sensing concepts (from neuroscience) and the unthought known or the primary repressed unconscious (from psychoanalysis) [1]. Together these theories assist me in articulating my understanding of the phenomenon whereby detail is transposed – the process whereby story detail becomes capable of meaning something other than what it is. Through the concept of what I describe as ideasthetic imagining – a process of deep sensory imagining through which writers plot concepts in the form of narrative detail – I have come to a deeper appreciation of meta-level processes in creative writing. In related articles, I go to some length to unpack these processes: within the context of one of my short stories, in relation to the evolution of my novel, as well as my ongoing writing practice – explicating my understanding of how meta-level processes of imagining are informed by experiential knowledge [2].

This article expands my prior work on the concept of ideasthetic imagining by emphasising the way it informs my reading practice, encouraging me to interrogate the relationship between sensory data, in the form of concrete and specific narrative detail, and an underlying concept or idea – scrutinising narrative detail as a representation of the author's conscious and unconscious drives. This occurs via an analysis of the relationship between narrative detail and a focalising consciousness – both within the narrative world as well as with reference to authorial intention more broadly. In the discussion that follows I illustrate these ideas with reference to short- and long-form realist fiction, laying bare the 'thinking positions' that inform my understanding of the realist text as a sensory narrative image.

Sensory narrative detail and the focalising consciousness

The concept of inferable meaning is at the heart of Helen Garner's prose. In this her deep homage to Malcolm is abundantly clear. The complex juxtaposition of action and intentionality underpins Garner's book *This House of Grief* (2014). In an interview with Jennifer Byrne, Garner notes her deep-rooted fascination with the entangled nature of human behavior: "people act out in symbolic ways" (Garner qtd in Byrne 2014). In *This House of Grief*, Garner addresses the complexity of love – familial and romantic – and the context in which an 'ostensibly' loving father, Robert Farquharson, might intentionally drive his car into a river, killing his three boys (Byrne 2014). Garner notes her deep-rooted fascination with the entangled nature of human behaviour: "people ... act out in symbolic ways" (Garner qtd in Byrne 2014).

Writers of realist fiction also capture the payoff between action and intentionality through an apprehended fictional world – an abstracted reality that is played out at the surface level of the text through concrete narrative details. Stories resonate because they are intensely focused upon a very particular ontological and epistemological inquiry: Why do the characters in these stories see what they see? How do they know what they know? Perhaps it is precisely *this* – the focus upon a very particular form of sensory apprehension – that lies at the heart of stories that resonate beyond the final lines of text. Edith Wharton captures this sentiment superbly:

"The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the [writer], be an event in the history of a soul, and the use of the 'descriptive passage', and its style, should be determined by the fact that it must depict *only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of an intelligence*". (Wharton qtd in Hodgins 2001: 79, emphasis added)

Fiction writers create an apprehended reality by focalising the consciousness of a very particular register of intelligence. Certainly, without this degree of focalised specificity, story detail might be nothing more than a shopping list of ideas and observations. As Flannery O'Connor notes:

The fiction writer has to realise that [they] can't create compassion with compassion, or emotion with emotion, or thought with thought. [They have] to provide all these things with a body; [they have] to create a world with weight and intention... A story always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality ... showing you how some folks *will* do, *will* do in spite of everything. (O'Connor 2006: 524, original emphasis)

Memorable stories in the realist mode resonate because they are attentive to specificities and particularities: to detail as it relates to a unique consciousness. This relationship explains how telling detail, richly textured, metamorphoses – a process of transposition underpins the link between concrete narrative detail and metaphorical meaning. This explains how we might read *compassion*, *emotion* and *thought* in interwoven narrative images – sensory narrative detail is capable of translating that which seems inarticulable, making it tangible through the imaginative use of concrete detail.

The stories we remember capture our imagination through carefully crafted detail – tiny, telling detail. In this way, they exemplify O’Connor’s deceptively simple claim – fiction must convince through the senses:

Fiction operates through the senses... No reader who doesn’t actually experience, who isn’t made to *feel*, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells [them]. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted and touched. (O’Connor 2006: 524, emphasis added)

Collectively, these observations from Wharton and O’Connor capture my deep interest in the realist text as a sensory narrative image. This resonates with my understanding of my methodology: where the production of narrative detail is underpinned by a meaningful inner relationship. Creative writing involves flips and turns of mind, cognitive transitions that allow for the metamorphosis of ideas, using the language of narrative to capture ideas as sensory data. An analysis of the deft use of concrete and sensory detail, aligned with an astutely rendered focalising consciousness, is a means of tracking the ways in which authors engage in processes of ideasthetic imagining in acts of narrative making. This approach extends my continuing interest in the work the mind undertakes at a primal moment of narrative composition, in a resting state, and the effect of that work on more conscious creative acts. Together, the concepts of ideasthesia, or sensing concepts, and the unthought known, as a representation of experiential knowledge, provide a means of articulating the relationship between authorial imagination and narrative detail – together, these concepts inform my practice: reading as a writer, writing as a reader.

An example from Raymond Carver – poster boy for the Dirty Realist tradition

In discussion with a writing friend – as we unpacked the complexity of writing and responding to dark subject matter, probing the highs and lows of exploring shady narrative themes – I recalled Raymond Carver’s story ‘Tell the Women We’re Going’. I said: ‘Have you read the Carver story about the rape and murder of the young woman?’ He looked at me quizzically and I said: ‘Unless I’m mis-remembering, making up a different version of that

story'. In this story, Carver – like Garner and Malcolm – enters into a conversation about the haunting, entangled complexity of human behaviour.

Carver's 'Tell the Women We're Going' first appeared in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Carver 2003: 48-56). Edited by Gordon Lish, the story ends like this:

He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill's. (Carver 2003: 56)

As I revisited this story, after the conversation with my friend, I was reeling. It was not the story I remembered.

I reached for an alternative version of the story, published in a collection put together by Carver's widow Tess Gallagher, who gathered the stories in their original form after Carver died (Carver 2009: 81-94). In this version of 'Tell the Women We're Going' – published almost three decades later than the first edition – Jerry rapes one of the young women. He prepares to leave her at the site of the rape, in the semi-wilderness. Instead, he apologises. Then he punches the young woman and slams a rock against her face: 'He actually heard her teeth and bones crack, and blood came out between her lips' (92). Jerry proceeds to choke the girl but, finding he cannot commit, takes a larger rock and drops it on her face, repeatedly. In this version, the story ends when Bill (a friend of Jerry's) finds him standing over the girl with the rock. The ending reads as follows:

But Jerry was standing now in front of him, slung loosely in his clothes as though his bones had gone out of him. Bill felt the awful closeness of their two bodies, less than an arm's length between. Then the head came down on Bill's shoulder. He raised his hand, and as if the distance now separating them deserved at least this, he began to pat, to stroke the other, while his own tears broke. (Carver 2009: 94)

How to read this story without weeping along with Bill? I don't know – I sobbed outright – but that is hardly the point. What do the two versions, side by side, suggest about the perils and possibilities of handling someone else's story material? What do they tell us about the work of the imagination as it relates to concrete detail and, more broadly, to the realist text as a sensory narrative image? What do they tell us about the writer's relationship with subject matter?

Upon reading the version edited by Lish (2003) my writing friend suggested it was, by comparison, a more 'unhinged – psychotic world' (Anonymous 2018). In this, he highlights the crude manner in which the edited version groups the men together as a plural unit – a combined sinister-ship.

In the aforementioned interview about *This House of Grief*, Garner discusses Farquharson's trial, as well as her writing process and her interaction with others as she progressed with the book. She suggests that the trial included discussion about how much Farquharson loved his children. While Garner accepts that this seems accurate, she adds: "used as an argument [in support of his innocence] that [...] doesn't stack up, in human terms" (qtd in Byrne 2014). In this way, Garner takes an interest in the riddled relationship between action and intentionality. To my mind this is the premise, or at least one of the central premises, of Garner's book: that to love someone does not preclude the possibility that we might commit harmful and destructive, *ostensibly unloving*, acts towards them. In Garner's words: "love goes along with all sorts of wild, destructive urges" (qtd in Byrne 2014). She draws attention to the judge's 'beautiful' words as he delivered the verdict, in the first trial: the judge suggested that Farquharson "formed a dark contemplation" (qtd in Byrne 2014). In *This House of Grief*, Garner enters into an assessment about what this "looks like". It is here that I draw a connection between Garner and Carver, who is also wrestling with a character's *wild destructive urges*, within the context of a fictional exploration of criminal acts representing dark contemplation.

I am interested in Carver's engagement with the complex intimacy between Bill and Jerry, in the final scene of the story: a scene that is eliminated in the version of the story edited by Lish. To my mind, Lish's version of 'Tell the Women We're Going' lacks Carver's deeply probing questions about the complex relationship between action and intentionality – questions Carver poses in the context of rape, violence and tenderness. In an interview about the art of editing, in the *Paris Review*, Lish suggests that he was "not really interested in anybody else's heart or mind, or even in [his] own" (Lish qtd in Lorenzen 2015: 208). Yet Carver was undoubtedly deeply interested in questions of the heart and mind and the riddled intersection between these domains. To my mind, the significance of working with other writers is implicitly tied to the act of acute listening. What sadness of the present is the author contemplating?

Some readers would support the decision to cut the heart-wrenching and haunting details of the rape and murder from the final scenes of 'Tell the Women We're Going'. They might ask: Are the details *necessary*? The answer, to the extent that there is an answer, seems to depend upon what the story is *about* – what sadness of the present, what incurable incompleteness, is Carver grappling with? Did Lish ask? Did Carver quibble? Did Carver agree to cut but later prevaricate?

In an interview in the *Paris Review* focusing on the art of fiction, William Maxwell discusses his work as both a writer and an editor. In 1936, Maxwell was employed at *The New Yorker* and he continued to work there as an editor until 1975, staying on as a contributor until 1999, when he was aged ninety-one and in the last year of his life (Updike 2008: 2). Maxwell, whose editorial style stands in stark contrast to that of Lish, suggests that:

“...real editing means changing as little as possible... What you hope is that if a writer reads the story ten years after it is published [they] will not be aware that anyone has ever touched it. But it takes many years of experience – and love – to be able to do that.” (Maxwell qtd in Seabrook 1982: 127)

Did Lish love Carver’s stories? Did he love them *enough*? In the original version, Carver opens a world for us – pathways to deep and deeply troubling forms of imagining – questions of violence and tenderness – moments of loving tenderness amid violent atrocity. The edited version of the story limits the reader’s ability to enter a conversation about these things, as disturbing as that conversation may be.

Maxwell notes that his writing was necessarily slow due to his uncertainty about the unfolding story. Like many writers and literary editors, Maxwell had a day job outside of writing but, more pertinently, he suggests:

“Undoubtedly, if I knew exactly what I was doing, things would go faster, but if I saw the whole unwritten novel stretching out before me, chapter by chapter, like a landscape, I know I would put it aside in favour of something more uncertain – material that had a natural form that was up to me to discover.” (Maxwell qtd in Seabrook 1982: 110)

Maxwell (qtd in Seabrook 1982: 110, 113) embraces ‘uncertainty’ as the momentum that drives the writing mind. In doing so, he inadvertently explains why he was celebrated for being such an assiduous editor. As we engage with the work of other authors, particularly as editors and teachers (in which case we are often engaging with work that is in a state of becoming), we bear witness to the writers’ attempts to capture uncertainty, to plot that which seems beyond description. Uncertainty, as it relates to evolving form, is precisely what Flannery O’Connor means when she suggests that ‘the more you write, the more you will realise the form is organic ... it is something that grows out of the material ... the form of each story is unique’ (O’Connor 2006: 528). O’Connor draws attention to the entangled nature of the relationship between form and subject matter – a relationship I engage with through Christopher Bollas’ concept of ‘the immaterial intelligence of form’ (Bollas 2014: 19).

This concept is at the heart of my connection to Bollas’ theory of the unthought known, or the primary repressed unconscious. In the article ‘Creativity and Psychoanalysis’ Bollas suggests: ‘In the struggle to engage the invisible, the analyst (like the artist) breaks the figure; not to find out what is inside but to realise the immaterial intelligence of form’ (Bollas 2014: 19). I have argued that, in some respects, my relationship with the evolving text as author mimics the psychoanalytic relationship. This proposal is informed by my awareness of the crucial relationship between authorial intention, broadly conceived, and narrative detail. To engage with the work of other writers is also a process of bearing witness to the relationship

between sensory detail and the underlying idea – it is to be alert to the materiality of form and the immaterial intelligence of form. This focus has also drawn me to the thinking of Irish-born British artist, Francis Bacon, and in particular to Bacon’s obsession with the relationship between form and feeling. In an interview first published in *Time* magazine in 1952, Bacon suggests: “[Art is a] method of opening up areas of feeling rather than merely an illustration of an object” (Bacon qtd in Carnduff 1955: 60). In Bacon’s thinking, I hear reminiscences of Danko Nikolić, Bollas, O’Connor and Wharton who collectively take an interest in the sensory representation of concepts – each of these practitioners shows heightened attention to the relationship between feeling, idea and form.

Imagination, conveyance and realism – my writing and ‘thinking positions’

The ways in which writers utilise sensory data is part of a broader conversation about truth and imagination – at the heart of so much discourse around realist writing. With a particular interest in Francis Bacon, Professor of art history Victoria Walsh tackles the subject of conveyance. Focusing the relationship between art and life, Walsh suggests that Bacon ‘remained consistently in sympathy’ (Walsh 2009: 236) with Baudelaire, among others, with the belief that ‘the purpose of art was not to “illustrate” life but to bring it closer to the imaginative and the sensory’ (236). Walsh suggests that, for Bacon:

the prerequisite to realising the full potential of the painted image was its synthesis with the idea which it was seeking to bring into form, ensuring that, as Bacon explained in 1953, “idea and technique” were inseparable. (Walsh 2009: 237)

Literary realism merges idea and technique so that they are barely, if at all, distinguishable – technique is masked by writing that seems ‘at one’ with reality. I refer to writing of this kind as ‘abstracted realism’ – my use of the term derives from comments made by Michael Meehan: novelist and Professor of writing and literature. Meehan suggests writing that ‘feels real’ is often:

beautifully abstracted ... conveyed through deep subjectivities, with the style shifting as it dramatises the consciousness, the subjectivity of each narrator – “Realism” is of course, always a confidence trick – making the reader feel that these blank marks on the page somehow give us a “real world”. (Meehan 2018)

How do we navigate the realist text as a sensory narrative image? In my own writing practice, I have agreed to *cut*, sometimes radically, because in doing so I could more clearly see the architecture that was left standing. In this way, I am indebted to fellow writers and editors, to creative thinkers who have helped me see my own story ‘scaffolding’ in a more acute light. Terri-ann White, former director of UWA publishing and publisher of my debut novel *The earth does not get fat* (2018), a fractured narrative in multiple first-person voices, had

reservations about the narrators in the mid-section of the novel. White expressed concern that the male voices in this section were taking ownership of a story that belonged to the characters of the mother and the daughter, at the heart of the text. I agreed and I subsequently cut, keeping only one male voice: the voice of a character who exists in the temporal present of the novel and who has an intimate relationship with the traumatised mother and her daughter. I used this one male voice to absorb material from the other male voices, but only material that was entirely necessary to the plot. This radical cut provided a clearer dramatic catalyst for the broken mother to tell her own story and underscored the limitations of the collective male voices.

This is the tightrope we walk as we toil with our stories and engage with the work of other writers. When is less *more*? When is less *less*? As I prepared the novel for publication, the relationship between a focalising consciousness and narrative detail materialised for me in an unprecedented way – I was prompted to ask myself again and again which focalising consciousness provided the best chance for the transposition of narrative detail. Beyond the question of fictionalised focaliser, the concept of a register of intelligence, more broadly conceived, also captures authorial intention: the ‘meta’ work of association and metaphor at a primal moment of narrative composition, and beyond. This sparked my engagement with the concepts of ideasthesia and the unthought known.

In practice my writing work is rarely consciously determined or logical. I write towards knowing and can generally only make sense of the relationship between authorial intention and detail retrospectively. Certainly I fought the fractured structure of the novel until I came to an understanding of the relationship between form and theme. Ideasthesia, or sensing concepts, provides a means for deconstructing the ways in which writers sense concepts or ideas in metaphorical and associative ways. I contemplate ideasthetic imagining, in acts of narrative making, as a means for investigating the process of transposition that underpins the relationship between the focalising consciousness and narrative detail.

At the end of a mesmerising lecture at Swinburne University, internationally acclaimed writer Arnold Zable asked students: ‘Do you ever think what you’re writing is just weird?’ (2018). ‘Go there’, he said, with great conviction, encouraging writing students to push forward, to trust the writing mind even if the conscious, logical mind is second-guessing – What am I writing? What does it *mean*? To my mind, Zable was describing what I refer to as affective immersion in processes of ideasthetic imagining: deep, sensory imagining informed by webs of experiential knowledge that are not necessarily readily available to conscious awareness.

Imagination, conveyance and realism – reading as a writer

To write creatively is to pay homage to the incurable imperfection of the present, capturing the unsayable at the level of the sentence through tiny, telling details. The writer toils towards

a focalising consciousness that is thoughtfully rendered: memorable for the use of idiosyncratic voice as well as concrete and specific narrative detail. To engage with the work of other writers is also a process of bearing witness to the relationship between sensory detail and the underlying idea – it, too, involves being alert to the materiality of form and the immaterial intelligence of form. In this way these ideas inform both my writing and reading practice, leading me to take a particular interest in realist stories that are rich in sensory detail, as well as fractured narrative forms, that stylistically foreground the relationship between focalising consciousness and detail.

I found Josephine Rowe's *A Loving, Faithful Animal* (2016), shortlisted for the 2017 Miles Franklin Award, to be an unforgettable novel, because of the way it illustrates the author's profound awareness of the relationship between a focalising consciousness and narrative detail. Rowe employs multiple focalisers to tell the story of a family ravaged by violence: the father (Frank) is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his involvement in the Vietnam War. The novel not only foregrounds multiple registers but also employs several styles of narration. The text is bookended by the perspective of Ru, the youngest daughter, and utilises second-person narration. The mid-section of the novel focalises via Evelyn (the mother), Lani (the eldest daughter), and Les (Uncle Tetch) – all narrated in close-third person. Rowe employs stream-of-consciousness narration to focalise Frank, the father: the trauma is apparent in fractured associations and the absence of a clear first-person or third-person point-of-view. So skilfully does Rowe employ a number of styles of narration that, to some extent, I remember the varied approaches as intimately as if they were all narrated in first-person. Such is Rowe's acuity for the relationship between perspective and detail that she deftly handles multiple focalisers and multiple styles of narration, in order to render a composite picture of a family riddled by inter-generational trauma.

When I read the work of realist writers, I sometimes feel that I am privy to aspects of the authors' unthought known or, at the very least, to the ways in which the authors have ideasthetically imagined their unthought known, through concrete narrative detail. The stories I tend to remember are those in which narrative detail triggers sensation, detail that *feels like* compassion, emotion or thought, detail that *feels like* lived experience. The stories I cannot forget are those that manage to do this *and* capture subject matter that seems to belie description, plotting that which seemed unutterable in the form of the realist text as a sensory narrative image.

A short-form example is Lisa Merrifield's 'One Lovely Thing' (2002). This story was the winner of the My Brother Jack Short Story Award for 2001 and was subsequently published in *Meanjin*. I use this story in a lecture for undergraduate students in a unit called 'Working with words', to explicate the operation of metaphor. This unit focuses on micro-analysis of prose and, therefore, a preoccupation with the relationship between register and detail. The opening line of Merrifield's story is: 'There should be a hardness test for truths, I think, the way there is for minerals' (Merrifield 2002: 77). The story is told in first person and, in short,

focuses the narrator's retrospective lens on her relationship with her father, on the one hand, and her mother and her siblings, on the other.

From the outset, through the skillful handling of the relationship between the central focalising consciousness and the narrative detail, we encounter a kind of metaphorical mapping. The hardness test for rocks acts as scaffolding within the broader narrative structure; a frame through which the hardness and softness of minerals is used to examine the hardness and softness of truths, the hardness and softness of people. The hardness test is described as follows:

I was very young when [my father] showed me the rock samples he kept in ... his bedroom... [H]e explained Mohr's hardness scale to me. He had a sample of ... ten minerals and I can still recite them now, one to ten, like a poem or mantra. *Talc, gypsum, calcite, fluorite, apatite, orthoclase, quartz, topaz, corundum, diamond*. I do this when I'm worried and the names sound beautiful, like another language. "Look", my father said, "the softest is one and the hardest is ten". (Merrifield 2002: 78)

The story is anchored in the adult narrator's focalising consciousness and begins one year after her father commits suicide. The details of the narrator's engagement with the rules of the hardness test are portrayed through richly textured narrative detail, dramatising the narrator's memories of her family history across time. The measuring of detail within the context of the hardness test is perhaps most clearly and literally illustrated by the following extracts:

I hadn't discovered the hard truth about myself then, that I am like my father... I must have been a lot older when I realised that my father was possibly chalk and my mother was somewhere off the scale, a type of super-hard granite... My brothers and sisters are like her, they ... range on the scale between seven and nine. (Merrifield 2002: 77-79)

The title of the story, 'One Lovely Thing', relates to the scene in which the father implores the narrator:

"If you are ever worried, or afraid, or sad, you must look around and find something lovely. Look at it hard". ...He must have read my mind because he said that there was always something, there was always one lovely thing... "You must learn to see it," he told me. (Merrifield 2002: 79)

This scene encourages the reader to navigate the flips and turns of mind of the focalising lens, to contemplate one lovely thing within the context of a procession of otherwise dark subject matter: themes of brokenness, aloneness, failure, suicide. As I re-read the story, I weigh and measure the detail in narrative time. I examine the focalising consciousness as a facilitator for

the transposition of narrative detail – considering the ways in which the focalising lens provides opportunities for the detail to become something other than what it is, contemplating the process of transposition that allows me to read *compassion*, *emotion* and *thought* in Mohr’s hardness scale for minerals. In this way, I am interrogating the relationship between concrete narrative detail, feeling and idea – plotting the capacity of language to act as a scaffold for the otherwise irresolvable and indescribable, exploring the relationship between form and theme as a means of probing the preoccupations that drive the writer ...

Word-work – a linguistic bridge between the brain, the heart, and the mind

Maxwell addresses the preoccupations that drive the writer in response to the following question: ‘What exactly is the force that makes you a writer?’ (Seabrook 1982: 113). He suggests: “‘Why, what makes anyone a writer – deprivation, of course’” (Maxwell qtd in Seabrook 1982: 133). Some time ago, after completing a hasty draft of this article – the ideas plotted here still swimming in my thoughts, I arrived home, present and not present – I opened the laptop, briefly, and in a note to self wrote: *Put in the bit about longing – link to the incurable imperfection of the present and the unsayable*. I remembered *longing* in Maxwell’s *deprivation*. To my mind, we are saying the same thing.

What Maxwell calls deprivation, Proust refers to as the imperfection of the present moment – Modjeska recognises herself as a temporiser while Davies reels in the face of authors capturing the unsayable – Zable implores writers to ‘go there’ and O’Connor champions sensory detail as a means of ‘getting there’ – Wharton brings this discussion together within the exquisite terms of a register of intelligence. In this way, these thinkers take an interest in creative writing as a linguistic bridge between the brain, the heart and the mind.

This bridge is underpinned by the work of the imagination in creative texts. In his seminal essay ‘The Queen of the faculties: the salon of 1859’ Baudelaire declared:

Imagination is synthesis, imagination is analysis... It decomposes all creation ... *it produces the sensation of something new... Imagination is the queen of truth.*
(Baudelaire 1859: 200-201, emphasis added)

In this quote, in particular, I am reminded of Walsh’s (2009: 236) highly astute observation regarding the synchronicity between the ‘thinking positions’ held by Bacon and Baudelaire. In their ideas I return to the capacity of ideasthetic imagining to facilitate the transposition of narrative detail – the power of narrative to create the sensation of something new.

In the context of realist fiction Maxwell also heralds the work of the imagination, suggesting that it is not about “‘getting the facts down’” but rather “‘the degree of imagination you bring to it’” (Maxwell qtd in Seabrook 1982: 113). Maxwell’s sentiments are also reminiscent of

Bacon who proposes that ““real imagination is technical imagination [constituted by] the constant struggle to come near the sensory side of objects”” (Bacon qtd in Carnduff 1955: 60). It is the sensory object as a representation of the artist’s imagination that resonates with my understanding of the realist text as sensory narrative image. To create sensory objects within the context of realist fiction is to capture meaning metaphorically – in abstracted realism.

The connection between concrete narrative detail and symbolic meaning, between idea and experience in art, puts me in mind of Toni Morrison who, in her Nobel acceptance speech, untangled the myth of an old woman – blind, renowned for her wisdom. A group of children approach the woman and one of the children asks: ‘Is the bird I am holding living or dead?’ (Morrison 1993). Reflecting on her writing practice, Morrison suggested that ‘speculation on what (other than its own frail body) that bird-in-the-hand might signify has always been attractive to me’ (Morrison 1993).

When I first began to write this article, Morrison was alive. As I reflect upon it a final time, Morrison has been dead for one year. A recent article in *The Guardian* acknowledges Morrison’s death and applauds her contribution to what the author herself calls ‘[w]ord-work’ (Morrison 1993). The article quotes from Morrison’s Nobel acceptance speech: ‘oppressive language ... does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge’ (Morrison 1993). I think of the payoff between lens and subject matter in Morrison’s work, particularly in the novel *Beloved* (1987) – the text I know best – a work I feel I know intimately and not at all. I remember reading *Beloved* as an undergraduate Arts student, some twenty-five years ago. My recollection of that time is of reading in some kind of fugue state: so swallowed by the narrative that I felt disconnected from my own life – childbirth on the run, the recurring concrete and specific detail of the maze of scars on Sethe’s back – a chokecherry tree of entangled scars. I remember blood and mother-love, killing and gnarled scarring. I remember the tree bleeding, healed scars bleeding, loving hands on bleeding scars. Am I mis-remembering? Does this remembering, falsely or otherwise, re-enact the very act of reading? I take the book up again as I prepare to send this article. I note the folded pages – the scrawled underlinings of my twenty-year-old self:

For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love ... the thing that makes it all right to kill her children ... the best thing she was, was her children ... if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?... You your best thing Sethe. You are. (Morrison 1987: 45, 206, 251, 272, 273)

I think of the author, Morrison herself, who undertook this word-work, the woman who suggested:

“[T]wo things I want to see in life. One is a white kid shot in the back by a cop. Never happened. The second thing I want to see: a record of any white man in the entire history of the world who has been convicted of raping a black woman. Just one.”
(Morrison qtd in Lea & Cain 2019)

Morrison’s analysis of the relationship between authorial lens and word-work, together with the themes in Morrison’s work: the refusal to shy away from the abysmal acts of which human beings are capable, brings me back to Carver and despicable acts of brutality, to the conundrum and contradiction of love, to Garner and Malcolm, and to the concepts of ideasthetic imagining and the unthought known, in writing and reading – to my faith in the power of word-work to translate what seems beyond saying.

To take an interest in the symbolic qualities of narrative detail is to ask how the writer has drawn the veil away in order to capture living sensation – it is to contemplate how the realist text, as a sensory narrative image, gives materiality to the immaterial – to otherwise irresolvable ideas. As writers develop sensory responses to the pivotal concepts that underpin the story, they translate sensations into detail. In this way, fiction writers capture sadness and imperfection through an apprehended fictional world – an abstracted reality. In turn, narrative detail triggers sensation – detail that *feels like* compassion, emotion or thought. When we listen acutely, we are attuned to the payoff between sensory data and idea as a representation of the author’s unthought known.

In this way the frail bird-in-the-hand is capable of meaning more than its own wasted body – the lifeless bird takes flight as ‘unmolested language surges toward knowledge’ (Morrison 1993). The realist text, too, as a sensory narrative image, stands for an otherwise irresolvable idea. As the writer captures tactile events through a concrete and specific lens, in minutiae, the text is transformed – it becomes a tangible assemblage of the otherwise unsayable.

Notes

[1] I focus on neuroscientist Professor Danko Nikolić’s concept of ideasthesia, coupled with the concept of the unthought known, originating with Christopher Bollas, Professor in Literature and a psychoanalyst. Ideasthesia is drawn from Nikolić’s definition, which arises from the ‘Ancient Greek words *idea* (for concept) and *aesthesis* (for sensation). Hence ... the term ideasthesia [or] *sensing concepts*’ (Nikolić 2016: 2, original emphasis). Ideasthesia provides a means for understanding the way writers sense ideas in metaphorical and associative ways. Nikolić is concerned with ‘what is happening within the minds of people when they experience art’ (2016: 4): arguing for ‘a particular relationship between the depth of meaning and the intensity of sensation’ (5). I’m interested in the concept of ideasthesia as it applies to producing art – in order to bring narrative to life in an experiential way, in order, that is, to show rather than tell, I argue that writers sense concepts, plotting ideas *as* sensory data. This ‘thinking position’ draws me to Bollas’ concept of the unthought known. I come up with the term ideasthetic imagining, suggesting that this process is an act of forgetting (I the

author) and remembering (the I of experience). Bollas argues that ‘aspects of the unthought known – the primary repressed unconscious – will emerge during a psychoanalysis, as a mood, the aesthetic of a dream, or in our relation to the self as other’ (Bollas 2017: preface). In a similar way, ideasthetic imagining leads to the emergence of aspects of the unthought known that are consonant with a mood, a dream aesthetic, an *othered* sense of self.

[2] Prendergast, J 2020 ‘Ideasthetic imagining – Patterns and deviations in affective immersion’, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (2020): 1-19.
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