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Inside the house of fiction: The creative-critical possibility of Gerald Murnane's A Million Windows

Abstract:

To grapple with the meaning of creative-critical writing today, it is necessary to begin from within literature. Too often, literary critics take up a disinterested position outside the text, which foregoes the ways in which the critic is always entangled with the text's meanings. Through a reading of Gerald Murnane's *A Million Windows* (2014), I propose a model for how a critic might read from *within* a literary text. I demonstrate how Murnane's fiction – through the use of estrangement – entangles the reader-critic into performing acts of extension, rather than explication. With Murnane's fiction, a critic must embrace – extend themselves into – a fictional landscape where “it [is] impossible to accept that the last page of a book of fiction was any sort of boundary or limit” (Murnane, 2014, p. 20). Such extended reading opens new possibilities for criticism's form.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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Introduction

Thinking about the meaning of creative-critical writing now, we are immediately confronted by challenges of definition and terminology. Under the banner of the creative-critical, we find such interrelated and ever-proliferating terms as fictocriticism, para-criticism, creative criticism, auto-theory, meta-criticism, auto-ethnography and the list goes on [1]. Although these terms may denote slightly different styles of writing and approach, they can all be understood within the general motivation toward academic writing that deviates from what is considered orthodox about scholarship. When it comes to literary criticism, creative-critical writing challenges vital disciplinary questions: What does it mean to write about literature? What is the relation between literature and the writing about literature? In the work that follows, I show how the creative-critical mode can emerge from within literature itself, rather than as a question or method to which we subject literature. To demonstrate this, I read Gerald Murnane's *A Million Windows* (2014) as a novel that uncannily estranges readers into producing generative responses through its use of imagery and allusion.

This reading of Murnane is situated within established notions of the creative-critical, while demonstrating how Murnane's fiction can extend such approaches. Amanda Nettelbeck, in her introduction to the collection *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* (1998), argues that fictocriticism "might most usefully be defined as hybridized writing that moves between the poles of fiction ('invention'/'speculation') and criticism ('deduction'/'explication'), of subjectivity ('interiority') and objectivity ('exteriority')" (pp. 4–5). In this way, fictocriticism asks the critic to inhabit the uncanny space *between*, refusing to allow the domination of either term in a binary. Although Nettelbeck's gestural definition directly invokes fictocriticism's relationship to literary studies, it is now more common to understand fictocriticism as a hybridised genre in the broadest sense of hybridised, where it intersects with potentially any academic discipline that seeks to resist the orthodoxies of scholarship via stronger attention to creative practices (Brook, 2002). What this broadening potentially elides, however, is the potency that fictocritical writing has for literary criticism. My reading of Murnane, therefore, is closely aligned with Stephen Benson and Clare Connors's (2014) definition of "creative criticism". For Benson and Connors, the conventions of traditional literary scholarship miss something essential about what draws readers to literature in the first place. As they write, "Indeed [the principles of traditional literary scholarship] are on the side of much one might want to celebrate: lucidity, close attention, rigour, wide reading. But oh, how achingly distant they seem, in their language and their assumptions, from the very 'texts you have read' and about which you are being asked to 'write'" (Benson & Connors, 2014, p. 2). Traditional scholarship, because of its scholarly detachment from the text, fails to capture the vibrant encounter that takes place between reader and text. Instead, it creates distance between the texts we read and the texts we produce about that reading. In this sense, Benson and Connors write, "in being asked to give an account of what you have read, you are required to pretend that nothing *happened* in the course of your reading" (2014, p. 2). Creative criticism – or creative-critical writing, whichever term you prefer – provides literary criticism that attends to that *happening* and to what Nicholas Royle (2011) sees as "the possibilities of a

critical writing that veers into the literary” (p. 68). What emerges, in the spirit of Nettelbeck’s definition of fictocriticism, is literary criticism that abides *between* literature and criticism.

For most of you reading this, what I’ve just outlined will be overly familiar. *TEXT Journal* has been a vibrant space for this style of writing and (most of) its readers won’t require convincing about the need for scholarship in the space between fiction and criticism. The arguments have already been hashed out. I want to argue from this very position of belatedness, to suggest that creative criticism positions itself, whether self-consciously or not, *after* literature and *after* criticism. Although we persist with the trope of creative criticism being the “space between”, we should never forget the reality of its *afterness*. For example, creative criticism, as the quotations above from Benson and Connors show, relies on recognition of the traditional scholarly conventions from which it deviates. The rules must be established before they can be played with; a space must be made before we can find the in-between. Rather than rhetorically trying to escape this lateness, I argue we should embrace it by tethering ourselves to the spaces *within* literature, allowing them to be generative.

Although any literary text could be read from this space of betweenness, the work of Gerald Murnane is especially useful as a demonstration of this style of criticism, because Murnane’s work is self-consciously structured to generate creative-critical readings. In what follows, I demonstrate how this works as a direct and indirect consequence of his style, which is founded on allusion as a mode of estrangement. This style can be seen across Murnane’s oeuvre, but begins in earnest from *Inland* (first published in 1988) onwards, culminating in the self-reflexive zenith of *A Million Windows* (2014). The effect of Murnane’s style is the creation of uncanny readerly engagement whereby the neat boundaries of inside and outside – the boundaries between text and reader – are dissolved. Murnane’s appropriately uncanny central image for this process is the House of Fiction, which is also the novel’s “setting”. It is the space where the narrator and his various personages live, surrounded by the vast landscape of all existing and potential fiction. The work of criticism is, as it were, always-already housed within the novel – and yet simultaneously the fiction becomes unhoused – or estranged – by the criticism. The work of criticism, in this way, extends and prolongs the meaning of the text, beyond the boundaries of traditional scholarly discourse that merely seeks to explicate a fictional object.

For many readers, Murnane’s style isn’t just estranging but deeply alienating, to the extent that they might become ambivalent or antagonistic. A common insult, as Emmett Stinson writes, is “Gerald Mundane” (2023, p. 90). Those who love Murnane, on the other hand, seem to be like followers of a secret cult. To use the metaphor of the House of Fiction, those readers who love Murnane have taken up lodgings in the house, whereas those who hate him are relegated to roam the grounds in perpetuity. Estrangement in Murnane functions as a protective gesture, warding off those who are not welcomed into the text’s secret meanings. This secrecy is key, not only because it furthers an element of the uncanny that is central to Murnane’s fiction, but because it corresponds to what his fiction offers potential readers. Similarly, Murnane describes the images that most speak to him as “winking” at him, a word he associates with a secret communion since “a wink from one person to another often signals that the two persons share

a secret knowledge” (2005, p. 174). Teju Cole (2013), in a letter to Murnane, summarises this tendency when he writes that Murnane’s “work feels personal, feels, in fact, like a letter, written by one person, singular, intended for another, singular” (p. 1). Cole indicates two reasons for this, one social and one aesthetic. The social reason is because, Cole being an American, Murnane’s work was rare, located in second-hand bookshops or libraries, requiring special ordering, which gives Cole a sense of being in a special “minority” (2013, p. 1). Aesthetically, Murnane’s fiction is about conveying privileged sensations to the reader. “The narrator is always concerned,” Cole writes, “with the process of narrative, specifically the aspect of narrative that concerns the transfer of sensations from the mind of the narrator into the mind of the reader” (2013, p. 1). The power of Murnane’s fiction is such that we have the sense that “you [Murnane] have for many years now been writing directly to me” (Cole, 2013, p. 1).

The most recurrent image of Murnane’s – the one he continually revises and writes toward – is the “ideal reader”. This image – which is also a many-layered allusion, as is always the case with Murnane – functions both as the structuring trope of Murnane’s fiction, as well as a Muse-like figure who helps to get the work written, even if she – it’s always a “she”, for Murnane – is never to be directly encountered. As Samantha Trayhurn (2020) argues, “Murnane’s ideal reader gives validation to a lifetime of writing. She provides the connections between what seems to be and what is, and in doing so generates a process that is meaningful” (p. 40). When Cole writes that he believes Murnane’s work is written for him alone, he does what every immersed Murnane reader does: he (or she) substitutes himself (or herself) with the ideal reader. Cole calls this “the reader’s solipsism” (2013, p. 1) but it is solipsism only two could share. By this process of substitution with the ideal reader, one becomes not only a part of the text itself, but a *necessary* part. It is from this position, I believe, that literary critics can generatively engage with Murnane. This necessitating of the reader within the text also, I hope, provides a general model for how we might write about literary texts.

Existing examples of this style of Murnane criticism serve as both a model and a warning. This style can be categorised into two modes: the autobiographical and the imitative. The autobiographical mode, as seen in work by Sarah Gerard (2012) and Scott Esposito (2013), reads Murnane’s work within the context of the critic’s own life: in Gerard’s case, the death of a father; in Esposito’s, an encounter with the landscape of Death Valley, shadowed by what he only calls “a great calamity in my life” (p. 92). The imitative mode also shares in this choice to read Murnane into the contexts of one’s life but differs at the level of form and style. Instead, the imitative critic exhibits a profound desire to imitate the way Murnane writes when they write *about* Murnane’s fiction. The three best examples of this come from Emmett Stinson (2013), Luke Carman (2018), and Merve Emre (2022) [3]. Imitative in slightly different ways, they share in at least the following characteristics of Murnane: hyper-formal sentence structures, which tend to be both very long and repetitive of key words and phrases; reliance on indeterminate words and phrases (seeming, perhaps, suppose, probably, presume) and indirect allusions to writers who are never named, such as “I cannot recall either her name or the name of her award-winning collection” (Carman, 2018, section 2, para. 5). Jarrod Hedel (2019), writing about Carman’s essay, summarises this urge from Murnane’s imitative readers-cum-critics:

To read [Murnane's books] is perhaps to feel a powerful inducement to write about the experience, an experience that just has to be accounted for and cannot be let to pass, as if to read Murnane is, for some, to be roused not only into more words but also into new words, and that these just have to be set down in writing. (Hedel, 2019, para. 2)

Extending Murnane's style in the form of criticism becomes a way of honouring and accounting for the experience of reading Murnane. It allows the reader to become an extension of the text, rather than a mere explicator. This impulse to write about Murnane via extension of his style enacts his conception of meaning as connection. As he writes in *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*, "A thing exists for me if I can see it in my mind, and a thing has meaning for me if I can see it in my mind as being connected to some other thing or things in my mind" (2005, p. 177). A connection, for Murnane, can only be made by and through sentences – "the existence of the sentence bears witness to our need to make connections between things" (2005, p. 182) – because the sentence is the primary form in which an image can be shared, or connected, with someone else. More forcefully than this, Murnane writes in *Last Letter to a Reader* (2021), the sentence alone is the fundamental "unit of meaning" (p. 34). By writing about their reading and thereby connecting with it, Murnane's readers – whether they perform this writing as criticism or in private – help to extend the meaning of the text. Murnane's texts, I would go as far to say, are meaningless if they are only read and not written about.

I wrote, at the start of the last paragraph, that these critical approaches not only provide a model but a warning as well. The danger is in criticism that is overly imitative, as if extension could only emerge by reproducing Murnane's voice. As I demonstrate below, the critic isn't just estranged by the text but also needs to estrange the text to keep open its potentiality, allowing it to be prolonged as an uncanny ghost into the future. To just imitate the text creates a nonreciprocal relationship: the text shares its voice with you, but you do not share yours with it. The voice of my piece as it continues below, in the spirit of the creative-critical, abides in-between Murnane's and my own, even as I read other voices into the image-pattern of Murnane's House of Fiction. Murnane's fiction, in this way, provides the generative model for a creative-critical criticism that starts *within* literature, rather than outside it. It is from within that space that I wrote what follows.

Approaching the House of Fiction

The ideal for a book would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority of this kind, on a single page, the same sheet.

– *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004, p. 10)

We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse, a tight passage, a siphon. We will be trying to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point. Only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of the enemy, the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually open to experimentation.

– *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004, p. 3)

If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men. The metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles, and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world, another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop.

– “The Poet”, *Essays and Lectures*, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1983, p. 461)

It may seem strange to begin a work of critical writing on Gerald Murnane’s *A Million Windows* with quotes from, on the one hand, Emerson, and on the other, Deleuze and Guattari, but what seems strange on the surface, I hope, will emerge as the only way that I, the implied author of this piece of criticism, could ever hope to begin to write about a piece of fiction as strange as *A Million Windows* would appear to me. The start of any piece of “so-called” criticism emerges “from [the] feeling that [I, the critic] knows too little about a certain subject and ought to know much more” (Murnane, 2014, p. 180). When I began to write about *A Million Windows* I was “aware of no more than a few clustered images” or quotations of images – those quoted above – that seemed to “emanate” a “certain feeling”, which at times was “persistent, intense, and sometimes troubling, and yet, at the same time, promising” (Murnane, 2014, p. 181). What the images seemed to be saying – reaching out in disparate connections – was a “wordless” message: “*Write about me in order to discover my secret and to learn what a throng of images, as yet invisible, lie around me*” (Murnane, 2014, p. 181; emphasis original).

“We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 3). Although even now it is impossible for me to say when I entered this house, let alone from which point I entered. The beginning of any novel, Nicholas Royle argues, is an experience of veering: “You come to realize that you have veered into it and you go on veering” (2011, p. 13). I tried to orient myself; grasp onto anything familiar, anything that would’ve made me feel at home, even if I found pleasure in the defamiliarisation. However, the opening paragraph of this novel (quoted below) reminds us that any opening in Murnane is only ever what seems to be the opening. Images that might on the surface be familiar are deeply estranging. The narrator could have started anywhere and in many ways creates an image in which he does start just about anywhere:

The single holland blind in his room was still drawn down in late afternoon, although he would have got out of his bed and would have washed and dressed at first light. At the moment when he became a personage in this work of fiction, I supposed him to be seated at his small desk with his back to the glowing blind and to be reading, by the light of a desk-lamp, a sentence that he had written, perhaps only a few minutes earlier, at the head of a blank page. The sentence was his remembered version of a quotation, so to call it, that he had read long before. He recalls, or so I suppose, that the author of the sentence was a male person from an earlier century but he cannot recall the name of the author. The sentence is as follows: *All our troubles arise from our being unwilling to keep to our room*. (Murnane, 2014, p. 1; emphasis original)

Before these opening words – hanging over the entrance to the house – there is the image of the novel’s epigraph from Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady*: “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million” (James, 2008, p. 7). The person behind the blind exists as a “personage in this work of fiction”; one of the many personages, so Murnane calls them, within the House of Fiction. If I were a “bad” reader, one trained on what the narrator calls “faulty fiction” (Murnane, 2014, p. 1), I might expect to learn his actual name and real history, “even [his] motives and deepest feelings” (p. 2). In short, I might come to know the “truth” behind the fiction. In this work of fiction, however, his existence is as an image of a character who we can only suppose acts like the character described in the quoted paragraph. He has no existence in what narrator calls the real world.

Despite the narrator’s protestations that I will learn nothing about this personage, I feel he possesses a secret, something I need to know. Standing on the precipice of the House’s entrance, I must speculate and describe from the outside, as someone not yet permitted entry. I have to “devise [my] own outcome rather than merely report the actual” (Murnane, 2014, p. 3). I see him, perhaps, as one of the many personages in this House of Fiction that are designated only by the pronoun “he”. Not being an actual person – with thoughts, feelings, desires – is he only an image of a secret that I long to make visible? Is he the narrator’s secret self, his double? Talk of doubles, secrets, houses: these are uncanny speculations. *Unheimliche*: un-housed. “There has to be a sense of home and homeliness within and beyond which to think the unhomely” (Royle, 2003, p. 25). Whose voice is that? [4] It echoes: the uncanny is “everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and [that has] come into the open” (Freud 2003, p. 132). What if the secret is never revealed? What if, I the critic, do not uncover but conceal further? The door remains shut.

The House of Fiction, within this novel, emerges from a constellation of interconnected images [5]. The first comes from the epigraph and the second from learning of an unnamed Swedish filmmaker who “had directed, if that is the correct word, a film set in a castle many a room of which was occupied by one or another chief character from one or another of the many films directed by the Swede in earlier years” (Murnane, 2014, p. 3). The image generates meaning for the narrator due to its connections with other images – other images that have no “seeming connections with the place that many call the real world and I call the visible world” (Murnane, 2014, p. 4). One such image is a recollection of an image from one of the Swede’s films “of a white-haired man looking out over a small lake; behind the man is a house of two or, perhaps, three storeys” (Murnane, 2014, p. 4). In the invisible world – the liminal space “between the fictional and the actual” (p. 149) – where these images have their existence, the narrator tells us, “figuratively”, “the site would be at the centre of some mental landscape of mostly level grassy countryside and would comprise a house of two or, perhaps, three storeys and who knows how many windows” (p. 5). What exists in this house is not just a collection of fictional personages or characters, but the images of fictional personages from throughout Murnane’s oeuvre. Within this image is nested – or housed – another image, and another, until we arrive at the image that expands the surroundings of this house of two or, perhaps, three storeys:

The previous four paragraphs may be thought of as having been written behind some or another upper window in a house of two or, perhaps, three storeys and in some or another room opening off a corridor frequented by, among others, those wayward few who look for their subject-matter not in visible places on the far side of the mostly level grassy countryside surrounding this building but in the mental space surrounding fictional texts, which space is to be thought of as reaching endlessly backwards, so to speak, from the first paragraph of each text, endlessly forward, so to speak, from the final paragraph, and endlessly sideways, so to speak, from every intervening paragraph. The wayward few, as I call them, take for their subject-matter scenes and events never reported in any fictional text but likely to have taken place in the vast zone of possibility surrounding not just every page but the merest sentence on that page. And the mental space that I mentioned just now extends so far in every direction from every fictional text that the wayward ones, as I call them, are able to write as though the content of many a seemingly disparate fictional text adjoins, or is entangled with, the content of many another such. (Murnane, 2014, pp. 22–23)

Imagine. I hear a disparate echo. All of literature “on a single page, the same sheet” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 10). A dream, maybe, but isn’t that what the space of literature offers? A home for the wayward few? Nested within every endless landscape is a house; within every house an endless landscape. An endless echo: “No thing was one thing” (Murnane, 2012, p. 48).

The novel’s images for interconnectedness are themselves examples *of* interconnectedness: the “house of fiction” with “not one window, but a million” from James and the “house of two or, perhaps, three storeys and who knows how many windows” from the Swedish filmmaker. They house and simultaneously unhouse the reader, because these images partake in a dialectic between direct and indirect allusion [6]. The allusion to James is explicit in the naming of James and the use of direct quotation; the allusion to the Swedish filmmaker, I assume, indirectly alludes to Ingmar Bergman. What makes this indirect allusion estranging is that it isn’t a stable allusion. If you go searching for the “film set in a castle many a room of which was occupied by one or another chief character from one or another of the many films directed by the Swede in earlier years” (Murnane, 2014, p. 3), you will never find an exact match. It could be *Cries and Whispers* (1972) with its large manor house setting or it could be *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) with its castle and artist who is haunted by real and imaginary figures. This indirect allusion can be understood as the narrator revelling in the spirit of those few whom he writes “take for their subject-matter scenes and events never reported in any fictional text but likely to have taken place” (Murnane, 2014, p. 22). Allusion becomes a way of opening possibility. “The devices of art,” Viktor Shklovsky writes,

ostranenie, or the ‘estrangement’ of objects, and the impeded form—magnify the difficulty and duration of perception, because the process of perception in art is an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a means of experiencing the making of an object; the finished object is not important in art. (2021, p. 12; emphasis original)

The finished object isn’t important precisely because it can never be finished, only prolonged. Rather than creating alienation, literary estrangement works here as a way of deepening and

prolonging, but also of warding off uninvited visitors, creating a space for secret communion. The narrator of *A Million Windows*, after all, desires to never “accept that the last page of a book of fiction was any sort of boundary or limit” (Murnane, 2014, p. 20).

Both direct and indirect allusions can be estranging since they allow the reader to proliferate outward connections. This interplay between direct and indirect allusion – the seen and unseen – is an uncanny effect created, as Harriet McInerney (2017) writes, “through the simultaneous occurrence of ... two oppositional elements” (p. 141). It undoes traditional conceptions of allusion as a binary mode. As Stinson argues, “What appears to be external reference is actually a complex mode of internal reference” (2023, p. 60). *A Million Windows*’s epigraph, for example, also functions as an indirect allusion to Murnane’s short story, “Stone Quarry” (*Stream System*, 2018). The narrator of that story is also writing about a house populated with fictive fiction writers. He writes, “They could consider themselves for the time being dwellers in the House of Fiction, but they ought to acknowledge that the house had considerably fewer windows than Henry James asserted” (Murnane, 2018, p. 77). The writers in this house are participants in what the narrator calls a “Waldo workshop”, where the only rule is that “writers ... are not allowed to communicate by any means other than the writing of prose fiction” (Murnane, 2018, p. 69). Any breach of the rule results in being expelled from the house. To communicate his feelings to a woman in the workshop, the narrator must rely on the indirect techniques of prose fiction, the most prominent of which is the “inserting of an allusion into a passage of fiction” (p. 82). The writer must trust that the “woman read my pages and understood more clearly than I understand why I am writing them” (p. 85). Allusion in Murnane works in this estranging way: the tracing of allusions invites readers into a communion of trust with the implied author. An essential part of that tracing is in the location of allusions that might not even be in the text, but due to these sentences that I’m writing here, become a part of its potential intricate patterning.

The name “Waldo workshop”, Stinson argues, is “a punning allusion both to the famous artists’ retreat Yaddo and to Ralph Waldo Emerson” (2014, para. 7). Nested within the reference to Waldo is my own epigraph, finally coming to the fore: “Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world, another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop” (Emerson, 1983, p. 461). At no point could it stop, in this limitless, boundless space. Follow Murnane *Inland*: “I trust the words to this extent: that if it were not by definition impossible for me to tell my reader where I am at this moment, I would write on this page that I am at this moment in another world but that the world where I am is in this one” (Murnane, 2012, p. 104). This allusion, if traced, can find no definitive source, even though the narrator gives, on the surface, a direct allusion. The narrator of *Inland* tells us that the quote is from Paul Éluard – “*There is another world but it is in this one*” (Murnane, 2012, p. 100; emphasis original) – but that he encountered it in “the preliminary pages of an unlikely book” by Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala*, although the reader is never told the title. The narrator confesses to trying and failing to find where the quote has come from, meaning that the reality of the words for him are as “some pages in a dream-book that I can only dream of” (Murnane, 2012, p. 101).

Inside the House of Fiction

To enter these pages – to exist on this single sheet – is to remember Gaston Bachelard’s idea that “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of the home” (1994, p. 5). (But when did I enter?) In a Murnanian way, these inhabited spaces are also “the real beginnings of images” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 5) and form the basis of our orientation to the world. From this basis, the house provides its “chief benefit” for Bachelard: “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (p. 6). The narrator gestures toward this possibility of the image of the house, speculating that the reader, “after having read my report, would see in mind just such a house as he or she had for long hoped or expected to see while reading some or another passage of fiction” (Murnane, 2014, p. 6). This gesture opens the novel’s landscape – its House of Fiction – as a space of shared dreaming in which we seek to understand “the vast zone of possibility surrounding not just every page but the merest sentence on that page” (Murnane, 2014, p. 23). All those years ago, back when the future was a mere possibility, this was the first of Murnane’s fictions that I read, the first house that I encountered: an image still hazy with longing, always shaded by the setting sun. One day, in my homeland of Tasmania, somewhere along that vast strip of road between Hobart and Launceston known as the Midlands Highway – on one of those drives that seems to go on forever – sometime in those twilight hours – gazing out of the window at the landscapes flitting by, a house of two, or perhaps, three storeys passed in a moment, but a moment that has gone on forever. It is a haunted house containing the past of everything I longed once to learn and of everything that calls to me from the future. It is only today, sitting at my desk as I write these sentences, that I have noticed the full import – “He claims that the word *coincidence* was far from occurring to him ... after his first visit to the island-state” (Murnane, 2014, p. 146) – of these details. This personage, travelling in this island-state across “the district known as the Midlands”, visits a “building of two, or it may have been three, storeys”, in what he “consider[s] the very centre of the mostly level district” (p. 147). Sitting at my desk, I look out from one of the million windows in this House of Fiction and see an image of a figure in the distance who seems to resemble an image of the reader that I wish I was, the reader who is implied by this novel and who I can only ever long to be. Can you see me? “Several times, it seemed to him as though some or another person was looking out at him from one or another of the upper windows” (Murnane, 2014, p. 147). Am I really at home in this place? Or am I just “another reflection in the glass of some or another part of the sky” (p. 147)?

How do these “seemingly disparate fictional text[s] adjoin” (Murnane, 2014, p. 23)? The process of adjoining – or entangling or connecting – occurs through what the narrator calls “considered narration” (p. 15) by which one image becomes connected to another in the “narrative dimension” (p. 18). It is the same process by which I, the narrator of this piece of criticism, connect what might seem to be disparate images together. The time of this space – the narrative dimension – does not conform to a notion of temporal progression by which time is measured, but “extends infinitely backwards and forwards, as we might say of our own *time*, as we call it, but has what I perceive to be a breadth or depth, likewise immeasurable” (Murnane, 2014, p. 18). The narrative dimension, however, shouldn’t be confused with a “timeless realm” or a space “outside or beyond what we know as time” (p. 17). Neither is it

ontologically distinct from actual time. In *A Million Windows*, we have three conceptions of time: actual time, timelessness, and narrative time. Actual time is measured (*it was, it was, it was*), marked by the linear progression of facts or events distinct – or unconnected – from the human mind; timelessness is pure presence or absence, a singular moment that in its singularity cannot be connected to anything else, let alone the human mind; narrative time connects the experience of moments in actual time or, in other words, narrative time turns actual time into a figurative space of potentially disparate connections. An experience or memory, through its narration, becomes an image connected to others that eventually make a pattern that extended out long enough make what the narrator calls “true fiction” (p. 30). That place – the narrative dimension – extends to “the mind of the reader” and conveys an experience “richer and more memorable by far than anything seen through the lens of a camera or overheard by an author in a bar or a trailer park” (Murnane, 2014, pp. 30–31). After all, as the narrator tells us later, “What others might have called *meaning* he called *connectedness*” (p. 37).

What is the effect of true fiction in the narrative dimension? How would we as readers begin to understand the meaning of that effect, let alone identify it? Should it be identified with the intention of the author who places these images within this narrative that we are reading, the person Murnane has called, “the breathing author”? (2005, p. 157). Is that figure the same as the narrator of *A Million Windows*? That narrator, perhaps, gives us an answer: “The reader should think of me as a *personage* as being in some respects less than an actual person and in other respects rather more so” (Murnane, 2014, p. 31). Is he then no different to the other personages mentioned so far? He is, also potentially, “another sort of personage”: “the author or, rather, the *implied* author, by which I mean the personage of whom nothing is known except what can be inferred from this text” (p. 31). Is this implied author the same as a figure he seems to resemble a lot, Gerald Murnane? The notion of an implied author within the novel is found in Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), which the narrator references without naming, making Booth another personage within this fiction (Murnane, 2014, pp. 48–52). The implied author, in Booth, is another way of articulating the implied meaning of a work. “Our sense of the implied author”, Booth writes, “includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole” (p. 74). As Stinson argues, this concept in Murnane is used to exploit the complications that arise from Booth’s own application of the term. In Murnane, Stinson writes, the concept “is rather a means to create nested fictional ontologies that are then elided in paradoxical formations” (2023, p. 66). After all, Murnane’s narrator identifies himself *with* the implied author, a personage who is one of many such within the work, so which are we supposed to identify as *the* implied author? These paradoxes are generative for fiction that both desires autonomous unity and its own fragmentation. Booth notes a few different categories of implied readers, but the one most appropriate to Murnane’s work – the one desired by Murnane’s implied author – is the implied reader “who accepts all [the text’s] norms as permanent, unqualified by ‘aesthetic distance’ or by any sense of a possible return to a realer life: this is real life” (1983, p. 430). This is “true fiction”.

The notion of aesthetic distance is key to understanding the desires of the narrator of *A Million Windows*. Just as the implied author is derived from the immanent connections of a text, so the implied reader is doubly created by the result of those effects. The implied reader, in Murnane, serves the same function that Stinson attributes to the implied author: to generate and deepen the ambiguity of meaning within the narrative dimension. There are, though, (at least) two implied readers. The first one is described by the narrator in terms that are common throughout Murnane's fiction: "each of us develops while he writes an image of a personage deserving to be called the implied reader ... The personage, so to call her – and we, being males, make her out almost always to be female – is someone scarcely known to us" (2014, p. 185). This implied reader is defined by two characteristics only: "she is by definition unknowable except for the one fact that she will one day read our words with discernment" (p. 185) and that, despite this unknowability, the "implied readers are utterly to be trusted" (p. 186). The second implied reader is the personage writing these words, who in a doubled sense acts as the implied author of this work of criticism. Like the implied reader that the narrator refers to, I too, am a personage in the narrative dimension – and in a reversal of fortunes, I know that the implied reader of this piece I am writing is unknowable except for the one fact that they will one day read these words with discernment. I know that "the narrator of this present work of fiction is to be trusted" (Murnane, 2014, p. 29). Whereas in the actual world, the implied author is someone whom I could never meet – a distance that is irreparable, even if the breathing author and I were standing next to each other, speaking or shaking hands or even just staring out at immeasurable landscapes that surrounded us – in the invisible world of the narrative dimension, I come to a connectedness that abolishes all distance, finding as I do, with the narrator, "it impossible to accept that the last page of a book of fiction was any sort of boundary or limit" (Murnane, 2014, p. 20) and that I "would dread to feel that we were separated even by these sentences" (p. 33).

Louis Klee supposes that this last quotation "serve[s] as a permanent reminder of an imperfect medium – writing – which is premised on deathlike silence and separation" (2023, p. 157). Such an idea seems an outlandish nightmare. And yet, at times, this House does seem marked by separation, haunted by so many ghosts, absences and silences. There is a perpetual feeling of death. The voice of the narrator of *Inland* echoes throughout these corridors:

When I wrote the letter which was the first of all my pages, I was thinking of a young woman [his ideal reader] who was, I thought, dead while I was still alive. I thought the young woman was dead while I remained alive in order to go on writing what she could never read.

Today while I write on this last page, I am still thinking of the young woman. Today, however, I am sure the young woman is still alive. I am sure the young woman is still alive while I am dead. Today I am dead but the young woman remains alive in order to go on reading what I could never write. (Murnane, 2012, pp. 162-163)

Always another echo, one I'm not sure the text hears: "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth [of the Author]: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). Every death, though, always creates a ghost.

I'm so crowded by voices I can barely hear... "What of the future? The future can only be for ghosts" (Derrida, 1994, p. 37). If the writer dies when he writes, allowing the reader to live on, then am I not also dying as I write these words? A fiction without "boundary or limit" could only be ghostly since the ghost, as another voice writes, "erases the limit which exists between two states, neither alive nor dead" (Cixous, 1976, p. 543). The reader might be alive – and separated from the writer – while they are simply readers. I, as a breathing reader, might go on living a separate existence, but when I write I am sentenced to death, allowing us both – writer and critic – to live on as ghosts within this House of Fiction without separation.

The lack of separation between these sentences makes the question of voice pertinent. I've wandered so far into this House that I've long since forgotten what my voice sounded like. It is doubled, always. That double, the narrator, refers to the technique of double voicing which he describes as the "technique by which the narrator of a work of fiction is able to seem to report a series of events while at the same time seeming to report the thoughts and feelings of some or another character involved in the events" (Murnane, 2014, pp. 65–66). For Anthony Uhlmann, double voicing works as a way for the narrator to express the otherness and multiplicity of the self, especially as it gives voice to the various writers who walk the corridors and converse in the House of Fiction (2015, p. 4). The effect of double voicing is another way of thinking about allusion – and concurrently how I manage the various "voices" in this work of criticism. This effect also works in the novel, as Uhlmann writes, by "double voicing ... both saying and not saying something, both sound and silence" (2015, p. 7). I am also writing in this way, voicing both the novel and its various echoes, whether or not they were sounds ever intended to be heard within this House.

What else is left to say? "The *true* secret of fiction rests somewhere else", always (Cixous, 1976, p. 547; emphasis original). Maybe the truest criticism of this novel would be a speculation on those images and allusions that are utterly silent, flitting like the many butterflies that appear within its pages. Those butterflies are themselves images of silence, intertextual echoes that emerge from the cocoon of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, passing through Machado de Assis's *Epitaph of a Small Winter*. Follow the silence:

The butterflies reported earlier as passing through Casterbridge might not even perceive any change in their surroundings if they were to flit over our few streets, where the silence is so profound that the sound of a single motor vehicle can be heard from far away, even by a drunken person. (Murnane, 2014, pp. 179–180)

What I hear is an echo of a dream from earlier – was it a dream? – where I am reminded of a "frequently repeated anecdote [that] tells of a Chinese sage who dreamed of being a butterfly and who, on waking, questioned whether he was, in fact, a man who had dreamed of a butterfly-existence or quite the reverse" (Murnane, 2014, p. 122). I speculate, sometimes, whether or not it is my fate to be a personage within the work of Gerald Murnane, some part of my voice always doubled by the sound of his sentences, the connectedness of his images. Each sentence I write here seems my only chance at extending the life of that voice, even if I've silenced others. Those silences stretch out in every direction and judge me for what I have only been

indirect about. No matter. “In short, I learned nothing” (Murnane, 2014, p. 192). I can only speculate. There is still everything to be written. One can never truly be spread out on the same page. Maybe I need to begin again at a different entry point. Prolong the meaning in some other way. Only then – sometime in the future – may I come to a sense of this “extensive fictional space” without “any sort of boundary or limit” (Murnane, 2014, p. 20).

Notes

- [1] As Scott Brook (2002) points out, part of the genealogy of Australian fictocriticism is contestation over its descriptive terminology. “The central concern of fc [fictocriticism],” Brook writes, “would then appear to be with how one can write as, in, through, or between shifting and compound identificatory positions” (p. 115). That a professedly hybrid genre continuously hybridises around new compound terms suggests a degree of definitional anxiety, as though it were necessary to continuously re-define the stakes of the creative-critical approach.
- [2] Murnane – and his narrators – also talks about this desire as a rationale for his fiction. In an interview with Emmett Stinson, he says that *Inland* emerged from “reading a book and becoming so greatly affected by the book that he decides ... that he is going to get inside that book” (2023, p. 116).
- [3] There are also many fiction writers who are imitative of Murnane. Some of these writers, such as Tom Cho and Maria Takolander, are former students. Louise Davenport would be another, especially relevant because her work is directly named in *A Million Windows*, which is telling because so many other allusions are indirect (Murnane, 2014, p. 100). There is also Shaun Prescott, whose novels seem the most directly influenced by Murnane. Teju Cole and Ben Lerner are prominent American exemplars. Nevertheless, that fiction writers are imitative of Murnane is less interesting to me than the fact that his critics are imitative. After all, writers have been imitative of writers forever; but is there another writer who has caused his critics to write in his style, at least to the extent that Murnane has done?
- [4] I know it would go against scholarly standards, but the truer version of this piece would remove (most) of the citational information, although I would still want to use quotation marks.
- [5] Murnane’s use of the “constellational form” is unpacked in great detail by Louis Klee (2023). This is an excellent article, although Klee falls short of articulating how Murnane’s perception of “constellational form” is both actual and projected.
- [6] For a detailed discussion of Murnane’s use of indirect allusions, see Stinson’s chapter on Murnane’s *A History of Books* (2010) in *Murnane* (2023).

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