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Re-visioning recovery: Experiencing Nachträglichkeit in poetic autoethnography

Abstract:

Nachträglichkeit, most commonly translated as “afterwardsness”, began as a psychoanalytic concept developed by Sigmund Freud whereby an event is retrospectively re-inscribed as traumatic following the experience of a new trigger. In this article, it is adopted as a creative writing and poetry therapy methodology and applied to a short series of autoethnographic poems that explore the lived experience of recovery from sexual trauma. At the heart of Nachträglichkeit is a profound re-visioning. Nachträglichkeit renders the poem or piece anew in the eyes of the author, weeks, months or years after the writing, which allows new discoveries about the self-reflexive self to be made. As a methodology, Nachträglichkeit promotes the inhabitation of richer, slower and more considerate perspectives and modes of being towards writing, the self and the wider world.

Note/Content Warning: This article explores the lived experience of trauma and mentions instances of sexual assault.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Nachträglichkeit, creative writing, autoethnography, free-verse poetry, trauma

Trauma ... is an attempt to return that instead departs.
– Cathy Caruth, 2014

Introduction

Nachträglichkeit is a psychoanalytic concept originally developed by Sigmund Freud; a term that has been loosely translated into English as “deferred action or afterwardsness” (Goldin, 2016, p. 408). It refers to the “after-blow” of an experience not initially recognized as traumatic, as new insight “generates an experience of retrospective disorganization”. When it comes to creative writing, Nachträglichkeit can be experienced as a feeling of discovery or revelation about a piece of writing during (or after) the process of revision. The term was first co-opted by Dominique Hecq in *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing*, where she claims that “most of the discoveries we make occur after the fact, that is, after the writing is done” (2015, p. 8). Applying the concept of Nachträglichkeit in writing allows the writer the belated opportunity to recognise the breadth and depth of the images they have included within their original poetry, leading to new revelations about the self-reflexive self – that is, “self as subject and object at once” (Lebra, 2004, p. 177). Using examples from my own autoethnographic poetic practice, I will examine the usefulness of applying the notion of Nachträglichkeit as a tool for the re-visioning of my own recovery. Due to the retrospective nature of Nachträglichkeit, applying it as a creative writing methodology can bring about greater awareness of the symbols and images that proliferate within one’s own writing, as the moment of insight both recreates the past and also projects itself into the future.

Nachträglichkeit is made up of the German words *nach* (after) and *tragen* (carry), therefore the meaning of the word is to “carry towards an after” (Chervet, 2023, p. 14). Some other common interpretations of the term are “deferred action”, “belatedness”, or “après-coup”, which means “after-blow” (Weller, 2012, p. 21). Freud’s case study of Emma is most often described as the inspiration for Nachträglichkeit. Emma Eckstein was a 27-year-old Viennese woman who sought out Freud’s help, as she was suffering from a seemingly irrational fear of going into shops alone (Mezzalana, 2022, p. 34, Bistoien et al., 2014, p. 672). She reported feeling intense anxiety upon witnessing two shopkeepers laughing at her on one of these occasions, which brought up a repressed memory of a shopkeeper molesting her when she was eight years old (Goldin, 2016, p. 408). This example emphasises the psychic latency that occurs in the re-configuration or re-emergence of a memory as traumatic: two moments that are separated by a distinct amount of time come to affect one another, as the second moment transforms the first – which up until then, had seemed innocuous or unremarkable – and renders it traumatic (Bistoien et al., 2014, p. 674). Jean Laplanche describes the first moment/memory as being not unlike a time bomb –one which goes off only after being triggered by a specific event and subsequently leads to the retroactive re-conception of the first memory (1999, p. 265). In this way, Nachträglichkeit accounts for the convergence of “multiple temporal vectors” as the past

is re-configured in the present, becoming what it will be from now on (Mezzalira, 2022, p. 34). Cathy Caruth describes it as “a future action that undoes its own future” (2014, p. 28).

The word trauma, which originates from the Greek “to wound”, originally referred to a physical wounding – an injury inflicted on the body (Pederson, 2019, p. 26). Hacking describes traumatic experiences as “wounds to the spirit” (1995, p. 183). Apart from the real or perceived threat of death or injury that characterises traumatic experience, an accompanying sense of “intense fear, helplessness or horror” may be present during the instigating event, which is then not assimilated correctly by the subject’s consciousness (Bisson, 2007, p. 789). This is described by Bond and Craps:

The specificity of trauma resides ... in the fact that it is not assimilated by consciousness, not fully experienced as it occurs, which is why it returns to haunt the survivor later on, possessing them instead of being possessed by them. (2020, p. 57)

Caruth refers to this haunting of the subject as “the second wounding”, whereby the instigating event is experienced “too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (1995, p. 4). Herman argues that the characteristics that defined the instigating traumatic moment can continue to “pursue” the subject for a considerable period, months or years after the danger has passed (1997, p. 50). This quality of experience is described as “grappl[ing] retrospectively, *nachträglich*, with the supposed original experiences” (Goldin, 2016, p. 408).

Freud understood the unconscious mind as being unlimited by temporal restrictions, which elucidates the natural tension between the lived experience of time and the atemporal machinations of the unconscious (Mezzalira, 2022, pp. 46–50). The bidirectional mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* was therefore a pivotal gear in Freud’s wider conceptual machine. According to Hecq (2015, p. 183), despite never offering an official definition of the term, he reinforced its significance within his own writings by using and underlining the term frequently. Hecq further argues that writing can act “as a way of piecing the self together” after periods of loss, instability and crisis, with the mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* acting as a tool, for better or worse, to facilitate the re-discovery of a former self (p. 182). As a creative writing methodology applied to therapeutic poetry, *Nachträglichkeit* can describe the re-inscription of an older poem in a new – but not necessarily traumatic – light, as fresh undercurrents of meaning emerge through the processes of re-vision, or seeing again/anew.

In my own experience, the process of revising creative writing and poetry can allow for novel impressions, sensations and connotations to emerge, particularly if the re-visitation of a piece is occurring weeks, months or even years after the writing. Poet Karen Craig speaks about moments such as these when “the poem speaks back”:

You scan the piece and, improbably, you discover something – some insight you didn’t plant there (at least not intentionally). I’ve even found dense layers of imagery in a poem I didn’t calculate; they just sort of showed themselves upon later inspection. My

own poems kind of floor me sometimes, not because they're amazing poems (although there are some I'm very proud of), but because they seem to operate independently of my consciousness. (As cited in Faulkner, 2019, p. 44)

This sentiment simply and admirably captures the mechanism of discovery at work within *Nachträglichkeit*, whereby the writer re-witnesses their poem and its metaphors and revises both past and future. As a creative research methodology, applying *Nachträglichkeit* challenges the concept of a linear research trajectory by re-configuring the landscape of the research retrospectively. It allows the writer the opportunity to recognise the depth and breadth of the imagery used, after the fact of creation. This also highlights the naturally self-reflexive nature of autoethnography, which unites critical modes of thinking with the fluctuating modes of the writer, who uses the variable self as a lens through which to examine society. For the purposes of this article, I will share poetry about the experience of trauma and recovery that I wrote in 2022 and have chosen to revisit in 2024, to observe and demonstrate how *Nachträglichkeit* comes into play.

Freewrite – Re-write – *Nachträglichkeit*

The methodology at work within this paper involves a combination of autoethnography and applying *Nachträglichkeit*. The two concepts work in temporal tandem with one another to reflect on both the individual's past and present, as well as the contextual social ripples of their experience. It is important to briefly distinguish between an autoethnographic approach and one that embraces an autobiographical or confessional poetics, as there is often confusion between these methods of writing about the self. Autoethnography deliberately uses the lens of the self as a window through which to view the social and cultural. It is set apart from standard autobiography based on its engagement with cultural analysis and "the deconstruction of the researcher's behaviour, thoughts and experiences in relation to others in society" (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016, p. 436). When writing about trauma and recovery, this involves understanding the actions, thoughts and responses of the individual to be symptomatic of the social environment they are enmeshed within, as well as exploring the wider cultural trends (such as #MeToo) and hierarchical systems of power that come to both express and define these environments. In my own autoethnographic writing, the experience of rape serves as an allegory for the violent oppression suffered by the world at the hands of a dominant class of white elites. Meanwhile, descriptions of recovery entwined with nature imagery, are emblematic of a possible spiritual counterweight that considers the experiences of the marginalised and privileges a somatic tactic for collaborative being/worlding.

This kind of insight into one's own work is almost never evident at the initial time of writing, and the writing is never perfected the first time around. Indeed, revision is described by some writers as a form of "re-seeing", a state that is entered only via the phenomenon of distance (Ward, 2023, p. 149). The Latin root of the word revision is *revisere*, which literally means "to visit again". Even though revision might not be thought of as a natural part of the autoethnographic poet's process, it's true that the bulk of the poet's time is actually spent in the tedium of revising. T.S. Eliot stated in his essay *The Function of Criticism* that "the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting,

combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as it is creative” (as cited in Freiman, 2005, p. 1). Yet there is also a deeper process at work: philosopher Andy Clark examines the plasticity of body image and how technological resources including pen, paper and word processors can act as extensions of the sensing form which is constantly re-defining its relationship to the world (2004, p. 6). This means that from the formation of the first draft, the poet enters into a form of externalised cognition, whereby the pen becomes “a machine to think with” (Oatley & Djikic, 2008, p. 9). The process of creating multiple drafts or iterations of the piece is the concrete manifestation of this phenomenon, with “the writing generating more of itself” (Freiman, 2015, p. 63).

In my own practice, the poem begins as a freewrite. I might record my sensory impressions of my current environment, the lived experience of my emotions, or perhaps bring up a memory or a piece of research to work with, but the imperative of the freewriting process means not stopping or censoring one’s initial draft, instead letting the words unfold into whatever they become. It is described by Bracegirdle as a “dialectical process ... where the imagination or thought is freed from logical thinking, and depending on felt experience, images and a dreaming mind give voice to the inexpressible” (2011, p. 82). This results in a piece of writing that naturally flows on from itself, with the conscious and unconscious allowed to play freely on the site of the page, itself an artefact of externalised cognition. Sagi describes this as “private writing that often begins as a journey inwards, facing the sheet of paper, with no need for a reader or publicity, in an attempt to ease the pain and to deal with abuse and its consequences” (2021, p. 153). It is an interactive method of creation that naturally produces “an ongoing string of language ... words call up words, ideas call up more ideas” (Elbow, 1983, p. 39).

This kind of dance with the unconscious reminds me vividly of Clark’s description of the “mangrove effect” (1998, pp. 208–209). A mangrove begins as a floating seed which eventually perpetuates itself into a forest of trees and matter connected via aerial roots and spongy tissue. Each mangrove fruit produces an embryonic root that can attach itself into the mud once it has fallen, generating new shoots. Most importantly, it does not become a mangrove without its initial seed growing aerial roots to trap matter and debris in its orbit. The island does not bring forth the seed, but rather the seed produces the island. In this way, my poem becomes a kind of unfolding being, its words and images birthed from the ones that preceded them:

It is natural to suppose that words are always rooted in the fertile soil of pre-existing thoughts. But sometimes, at least, the influence seems to run in the other direction. A simple example is poetry. In constructing a poem, we do not simply use words to express thoughts. Rather, it is often the properties of the words (their structure and cadence) that determine the thoughts the poem comes to express. (Clark, 1998, p. 209)

Sitting down to freewrite therefore generates the data in its first expansive iteration, after which the piece can be left alone to gain the distance which is so valuable in this process. When it is taken up again, the processes of re-vision are used to improve the poem and the methodology of applying *Nachträglichkeit* can be engaged, which can retrospectively re-configure its content and/or meaning. Writing about our trauma therefore becomes part of an unconscious “learning

process” that can be fully appreciated over time, as *Nachträglichkeit* allows the poem to be experienced by the writer anew, as both “reader and witness” (Bracegirdle, 2011, p. 82).

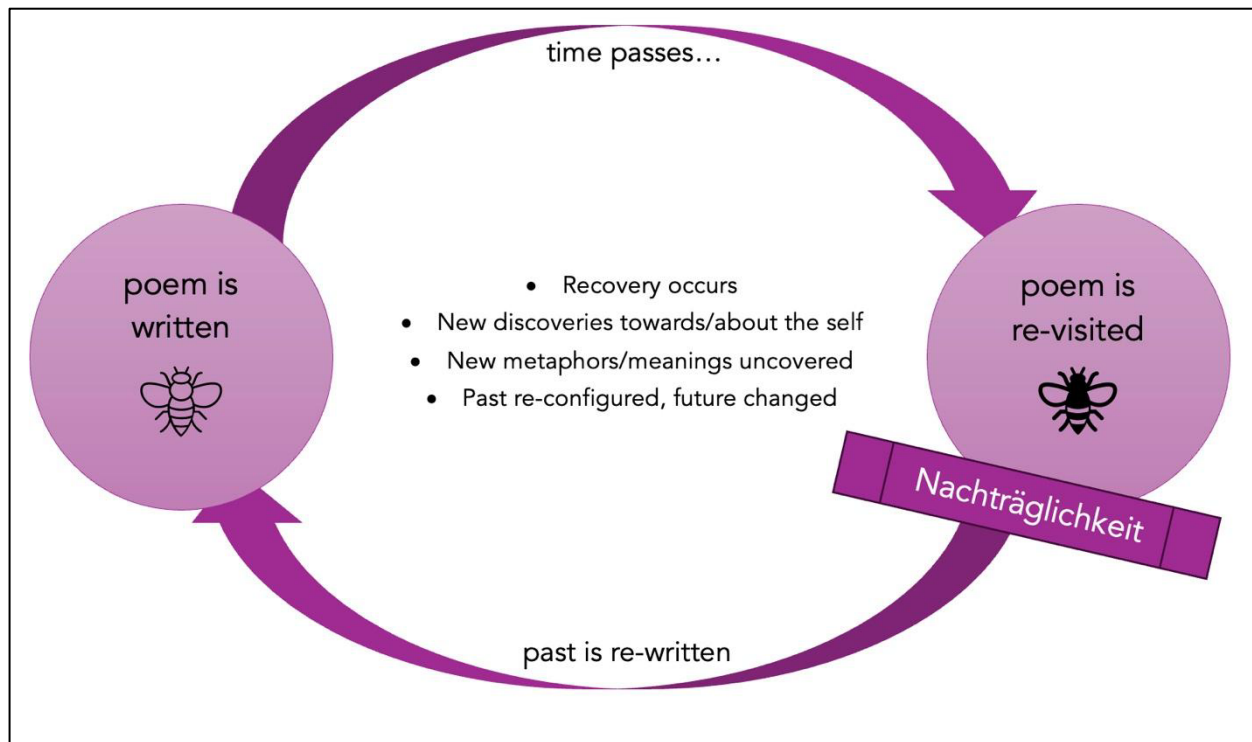


Figure 1: A visual depiction of the *Nachträglichkeit* cycle for poetry.

The poems speak back

Traumatic memories are characterised as being distinct from regular memories in three ways: 1) they are retrieved as sensory and affective elements rather than alongside sensory and affective elements; 2) they are invariably distressing or characterised by anguish; and 3) they are intrusive (McDonald, 2019, p. 21). The core of any traumatic event is essentially barricaded from the subject’s conscious awareness (LaLonde, 2018, p. 198). The reason that poetry is such an effective vessel for the transformation of embedded distressing experiences is that it touches both the sensory and cognitive aspects of the writer and reader’s worlds, allowing for a connection to form between the explicit and the unconscious (Shinebourne, 2012, p. 175). Bracegirdle describes how writing poetry enabled her “observing self” to communicate with her “experiencing self” as she experienced traumatic embodied flashbacks following the murder of her sister (2012, p. 205). The phrase “poetry of witness” was coined by Carolyn Forché to describe works that are both acts of resistance and testimonies of lived experience; in some cases where no physical evidence is preserved, they exist as “the sole trace of an occurrence” (1993, p. 9). This sentiment is echoed by Blumenfeld:

Poetry of witness speaks across an abyss of language. The poems mark that the unspeakable happened. Testimony calls to our individual and communal willingness to

hear and bear witness in the face of the realms of speechlessness, the realms that belie language. (2011, p. 73)

Hecq, the first to acknowledge the mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* within a reflexive creative writing methodology, additionally acknowledges the need for “a safe space to write from”, one which sees her “breaking into poetry at moments of crisis ... interchanging narrating personas, breaking up the syntax and making full use of metaphors, fragments and blank spaces” (2015, p. 189). The role that *Nachträglichkeit* plays is to invite an acknowledgement of these aspects of one’s own writing after the fact, uncovering the resulting changes that have occurred to the self and the self’s context over time. I will now explore how this process has unfolded around some of my own poems.

The poem ‘Demeter’ is one I wrote as a means of exploring the experience of sexual assault in an attempt to alchemise its effects. It depicts the story of Demeter’s attempt to escape rape by the god Poseidon by turning herself into a horse. As recounted by Robin Hard in *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology*:

While Demeter was wandering through the world in search of her lost daughter, Poseidon followed her in the hope of having intercourse with her; and when she tried to hide from him by turning herself into a mare and grazing among the other horses outside Thelpousa, he turned himself into a stallion and subjected her to his will ... It was claimed that Demeter had acquired her local title of Erinys (Fury) because she ‘had been enraged’ at Poseidon’s treatment of her. (2020, p. 127)

When I first wrote the poem below, I wanted to tell this story with Demeter as the central figure, and to draw personal parallels between her story and my own, as well as reflect on the role of rape in a patriarchal culture that understands both women and nature as background characters to male exploits.

Demeter

Demeter of the golden double-axe, of the harvest
changed into a mare to escape a god in disguise
his silver trident split her horse-hair skin
through to the red river of the past where she’s torn
and blood red blooming across the landscape

sacred circle a broken poppy crown: *papaver somniferum*
ballooning out from furry slips like lazy jellyfish
gauzy, vague, narcotic
blood clots forming in thin air
to the sound of the raging brother sea

it was Poseidon who made her Demeter Erinys
Demeter of the cave and of the famine
Demeter of the unshod hooves, the smooth long flank

the black mane and tail, the sunlight and grass
plunged deep into the grief of unreached-for places

where the blood and claw hammer thuds into
soft withers, wrenches nimble legs apart
unearths deep roots of the goddess as the
digger rakes the ground as the talons grip
the scalp as the farmer's machine guts her insides

I froze and became a statue in the cold water of the sea
snakes grew from my hair and I held onto the ropes
the way a fish holds onto the line of its captor
slapping against a rotting jetty, drowning in air
while the moon drowns in the black sky echo chamber
while the statue burns red at the mouth of the cave

Re-visiting and re-visioning the poem two years after I originally wrote it, I discovered much more within its lines than I can recall intentionally including at the initial time of writing. Demeter's "golden double-axe" is a reference to the labrys, or double-headed axe that is favoured by female goddesses in Crete, never by a male god (Unwin, 2017, p. 18). I can see that I have unconsciously contrasted this symmetrical, butterfly-shaped weapon associated with the goddess, with the trident of Poseidon, which is a penetrating instrument. The introduction of the colour red and the alliteration of the words "blood" and "blooming" seems to have naturally led me into the image of the poppies, which opens the second stanza. The use of the word "ballooning" goes on to conjure the image of the "lazy jellyfish" who are "gauzy, vague, narcotic". This simultaneously acts as a reference to the opiate qualities of the poppy, which is one of Demeter's key symbols; she was often depicted in antiquity as wearing a crown of wheat stalks and poppy capsules (Spaeth, 1994, p. 69). I see now that my decision to use the image of "blood clots" evokes the blocking-up of pathways and the corruption of bodily systems, while the lines that depict Demeter as a horse – "the unshod hooves, the smooth long flank" – are representative of her innocence and incorruptibility, despite her subjection to rape by her "raging brother sea", Poseidon. I wonder now why I chose black for the colour of her mane and tail. Considering the workings of *Nachträglichkeit*, I can speculate that, at the time, the image of Black Demeter was lurking around the fringes of my unconscious mind; Black Demeter was the local name for her at Phigaleia, where a wooden statue of the goddess stood, with the head of a horse and serpents for hair (Hard, 2020, p. 127).

In the penultimate stanza of the poem, I speak to rape as an industry, using the image of the "farmer's machine" gutting the insides of the goddess of the harvest. The "digger rak[ing] the ground" also touches on the capitalist patriarchy's tendency to view the earth as a submissive background for human activity, one which supposedly invites rapacious plunder. With this much distance between myself and the poem, I can experience the gut-wrenching feeling provoked by the sheer and violent physicality of the writing, but from a safe distance. I can also speculate that the "deep roots" I speak about being unearthed represent the way that trauma

unmoors the subject from her sense of connection and self – what Yochai Ataria calls “the collapse of the knowing-how structure” (2015, p. 148). The final stanza of the poem introduces the pronoun “I”, as I begin to compare myself to Demeter’s statue, using the image of “snakes gr[owing] from my hair”. It has now occurred to me that the image of serpent hair could evoke the figure of Medusa, who was also raped by Poseidon and, in her Gorgon-shape, represents “a manifestation of patriarchal anxiety in the cultural imagination” (Hedgecock, 2019, pp. 50–51). Rosemary Reilly argues that autoethnography is a significant site from which to reclaim the identity and power of mythical women such as Medusa (2021, p. 83), who was depicted by the classical poet Ovid as receiving a “just and well-earned punishment” for boasting of her own beauty.

Finally, the lines “while the moon drowns in the black sky echo chamber / while the statue burns red at the mouth of the cave” contrasts the actions of drowning and burning, symbolising the feminine and Demeter/me respectively. The words “echo chamber” are serendipitously symbolic of the recurring nature of trauma, in which the same patterns and messages repeat themselves as they fruitlessly search for resolution. In the words of Stacy Holman-Jones:

That’s the thing about returning to the site of trauma, searching for a way to restore or re-story the fiction of what should have been ours ... it happens over and over again. (2018, p. 121)

Experiencing ‘Demeter’ anew, after an extended period away from its stanzas, allows for the emergence of new meanings behind old images. In this sense, *Nachträglichkeit* is arguably in play, working as a kind of re-witnessing of the initial traumatic event, one that reinscribes our understanding of it as truly existing in the past.

My search for the right metaphors to describe (and therefore re-story) my experience also led to the creation of the poem ‘Wolf’, which was written about the same sexual assault, around the same time.

Wolf (excerpt)

after midnight I was unfolded and pinned to the sheet
the way a butterfly is spread by museum hands
under glass, thorax speared and tied to the rotting masts of the bedhead
living ornament undressed skinning flower, fresh for the harvester
next wolf of the new moon with a head full of teeth:
irradiated poison moonstones
dripping rubies of my sacred blood

lullaby-led into a low-slung place where the heart usually goes in a chest
 then I am undone: human package of skin unwrapped
 from itself into another self, separate and unmoving
 un-fluttering limbs stall in the heartbreak-shattering-burst
 that frozen elucidating moment where I am stretched out
 in slow motion and a rock is placed over my heart
 for long minutes but really years

This poem variously describes the perpetrator as a lepidopterist, a harvester and a predatory animal, while the victim is portrayed as a frozen specimen, or “ornament”. I can see that I have contrasted the image of the butterfly – signifying beauty, innocence, ephemerality – with the clinical, colonial “museum hands” of the collector/rapist. The predator is simultaneously portrayed as a contaminated entity, with teeth of “irradiated poison”, and the use of the words “moon” and “moonstones” could even evoke the concept of a werewolf for the reader, although this was not intentional at the time of writing. I am aware, looking back, that my overwhelming urge in this first stanza was to convey the trapped and frozen nature of the victim via the image of the immobilised butterfly “under glass, thorax speared”. I’ve carried on with this concept in the second stanza, using the compound adjective “un-fluttering” to describe the unnerving stillness of the freeze response. The objectifying imagery of the victim is also continued, as I describe myself as a “human package of skin unwrapped / from itself into another self, separate and unmoving”. I can speculate that this was an effort to convey the feeling of dissociation that emerges during traumatic events, as the consciousness tries to protect itself. This is at odds with my choice of the word “elucidating”, which was an attempt to convey the alarming clarity that can infuse a terror-filled moment. The metaphor of the “rock... placed over my heart / for long minutes but really years” is symbolic of the heavy weight carried by the survivor; the initial moments of trauma might not last long, but their impact can echo for decades.

Nachträglichkeit, as a notion, accounts for how the symbols and images of the writing are subject to new connections and links in the mind of the writer/reader/witness. These insights are retroactive and, in this case, re-inscribe both ‘Demeter’ and ‘Wolf’ as sites of deeper and more profound meaning for me today. I am especially struck now by the ferocity, pain and darkness of each poem, as these feelings have transformed greatly in the intervening time. I feel lucky to have had my perspective, which was wracked with pain and angst at the time of writing, alchemise into a more distanced and softened viewpoint. It could be said that in these intervening years, I have managed to relocate to a place of safety from which I can calmly re-visit the writing. However, the potential for the Nachträglichkeit methodology to cause a writer to re-experience their trauma, or suffer anxiety at the prospect of engaging with old pieces of work, should not be overlooked. Creative writing about the self is often used to “work through” difficult periods; what Hecq refers to as “moments of crisis” (2015, pp. 188–9). However, the act of re-visioning – literally re-seeing – our darkest moments can stimulate great anxiety as we re-experience loaded instances that, until now, may have been “put on hold”. This possibility represents the hidden, darker face of Nachträglichkeit as a research methodology. While the re-experiencing of a piece of work may be positive and productive, it just as equally may not be. To delve any further into this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of this article,

which aims to recount my experience of using the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* as essentially beneficial to my recovery journey, but another article might explore these more loaded aspects of the creative process.

To further convey how an understanding of *Nachträglichkeit* has allowed me to access a new perspective on my own recovery, I will explore the insights gained from a retrospective look at my poem ‘Blossom Moon’, which was written about my engagement with cognitive behavioural therapy to cope with trauma.

Blossom Moon

went back to bed
pulled the covers up
to my chin like the sea
pulls the tide
back to herself

the heat of the day
pushes its way in
to the crevasses
drippingsweatsmell
of my folding body

the bleed of the radio
crashes into the air
like trampled flowers
whitenoisereckoning
the flicker and the float

plough ground at night, she says
turn up blossom moons
big as dinner plates
breathe in that smell that
happens after rain

Looking back at this poem via the methodology of *Nachträglichkeit*, I can see unconscious images of recovery and renewal emerging through the language choices. I liken myself to the sea while personifying the ocean as “herself”. The first stanza creates the image of the bed or the quilt as a place of restful restoration, as opposed to the dangerous location of the initial assault. “the heat of the day” pushing its way into “the crevasses” of my body could be read as a metaphor for the psychological changes I was experiencing, as I realised that the instigating traumatic event was not my own fault, and could be integrated into my reality through cognitive therapy and practicing radical acceptance. The line “drippingsweatsmell” emphasises the primal physicality of the poem, and the erasure of spaces between the words signifies the dissipation of boundaries between the subject and her surroundings. My experience of post-

traumatic stress disorder was that I was closed off from my environment, and this poem seems to mark a turning point, representing self-care, the re-awakening of the senses and personal discovery. I can see and experience this with greater clarity now, more than two years after the writing. The phrase “plough ground at night” describes the process of excavating my own damaging self-beliefs and stuck points through therapy, and the “blossom moons” uncovered through the process represent my changed understanding/s.

The final stanza is evocative of the fable of Mara, a demon who attacked Siddhartha as he was meditating under the fig tree in the pursuit of enlightenment. Mara is a Buddhist demon of chaos, the agent of death, rebirth and desire. Mara brought an army to challenge Siddhartha, and rained arrows down upon him where he sat, but before the arrows could touch him, they were transformed into flowers and then fell to the ground harmlessly (Kozak, 2021, pp. 12–13). The re-writing of my internal patterns was something like this. Each problematic thought I held about my own experience was a barbed arrow I had to turn into a flower and place down upon the ground to gently decay as it needed to. Then I could let it go. In the current political climate, which has seen Trump re-elected in late 2024 and the complicity of Western governments in the ongoing genocide in Palestine, this approach to alchemising evil is one with implications at the individual level; on any given day, we might turn a singular arrow into a flower within our own sphere of influence as a means of enacting change. Eventually, the flowers may proliferate into a community garden. The closing lines of the poem, “breathe in that smell that / happens after rain”, imply the incoming of a new era following the darkness of a storm.

I will engage the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* for one more poem from my recovery period and then move onto the other results I gleaned from this experience, looking back to re-vision my future understanding.

Sea

the smell of salt
 tang as I round the corner
 blue
 horizon touched with the silver
 feathers of dawn
 and a clean wind
 blows through me:
 sun kiss the concrete, light up
 my ribcage like a church fire
 un-folding hymn

This short poem is full of hope and light, in stark contrast to the poems ‘Demeter’ and ‘Wolf’. This is symptomatic of the subject’s lifeworld opening through the re-awakening of the senses throughout recovery. The poem opens by evoking the smell of the sea, and the following images work to capture its colour and energy with the word “blue” occupying its own line and the “horizon touched with silver” describing the way the sun reflects off water. “feathers of dawn”

is a soft and textural line, conjuring a feeling of hope and the promise of a new day. The concept of “a clean wind” blowing through the subject is representative of a fresh start and highlights the undeniable impact of the more-than-human world on awakening. Similarly, the “sun kiss[ing] the concrete” and lighting up “my ribcage like a church fire” is symbolic of emotional and spiritual re-engagement with the environment. The final line of the poem, “un-folding hymn”, further emphasises the spiritual nature of meaningful human transformation and closes the poem with an opening.

By looking back on these poems, I can see that this process of recovery (despite being neatly encapsulated here in just a few pages) took a number of years. The event that precipitated my trauma took almost two years to render itself as such in my memory. This was my own real-life experience of *Nachträglichkeit* as Freud conceived of it. I was also unable to begin writing about my experiences until long after I had entered therapy to grapple with them. Now, looking back on this process, I can see the progression of time and the unravelling of my trauma bonds within each poem. This is one of the potential (and often profound) gifts of using the methodology of *Nachträglichkeit*. Re-visiting/re-visioning the poem brings the writer back into a new relationship of contact and contention with its images and ideas. This helps the poet unearth new meanings and context for their experiences, allowing them to “reorganize previously formulated views”. In this sense, *Nachträglichkeit* recalls, to borrow from Jeffrey, an “exploration of the multiform potentialities of a thing” (1992, p. 71).

The piece is always in progress

Nachträglichkeit as a methodology plays with reflexivity and the flow of time. The word reflexivity comes from *reflexivus*, which means “capable of bending back” (Webb, 2012, p. 12). This bending of the linear concept of time allows for a multi-directional relationship to be created between the writer and their written self, as she re-reads what she wrote of herself and re-visions it once more. In this case, performing an application of *Nachträglichkeit* on my own poems has led to the discovery that my recovery from sexual trauma is much fuller, more complete and more profound than I anticipated. The visceral shock I felt at re-reading poems about my post-traumatic experience signals to me how much has changed since I first wrote them. In this way, *Nachträglichkeit* as a notion and applied as methodology offers us a chance to “appreciate the past from which we emerged” (Harris & Bass, 2011, p. 240). In this regard, I have made significant progress. However, significant, measurable progress need not always be the goal of *Nachträglichkeit*, and goals themselves (or the notion of subjecting the self to goals per se) may be capsized in the future, based on *Nachträglichkeit*’s temporal, tempestuous undulations.

Much of the literature about the revision of creative writing pieces speaks to the practical need to re-work and refine a piece until it resembles a standard that is publishable. But I would argue that even after publication (if that is indeed an intention or hope), the piece always remains ‘in progress’. It never settles, but remains restless until its next re-visioning, even if this occurs years after the writer last directed their attention towards it. I have even experienced this with poems I wrote as a teenager and thought I had completed; upon re-discovering them in my

thirties, I have seen the words and their configurations anew and experienced that unmistakable sense of vitality and presence, that uncanny feeling of knowing: “there’s something here.” In this way, the meaning/s of a piece for the writer is/are mutable and never-quite-realised. They are diffracted across time through what Karen Barad refers to as the “thick-now of the present moment” (2017, p. 21).

Anyone currently working in an academic setting understands the pressure of being seen to have an output. In this type of atmosphere, writing risks being conceived as a bracketed tick-the-box process, a means of contributing to the “assembly line of moments” (Barad, 2017, p. 29) that neoliberalism considers constitutive and evidence of progress. As Deborah Bird Rose states:

our work is broken down into measurable units, the units are aggregated into arbitrary categories, and the categories compared. We are urged with both carrot and stick to set higher targets, engage in more fragmentation in order to produce more and more units. (2013, p. 5)

This proves difficult for writers who understand the written self, in the words of poet Lynn Emmanuel, as “provisional, shifting, molten” (as cited in Faulkner, 2019, p. 178). Poet and scholar Pamela Richardson describes how “academic life and poetic life feel often like parallel paths” or “opposing banks of the same river” (2018, p. 241). It feels difficult to successfully navigate a path through the trauma of a neoliberal system that prioritises linear productivity over immersing oneself in the natural chaos of the world. Yet I remain an advocate for methodologies that celebrate non-linearity and are instead filled with moments of revelation and sacred stillness. Just like the practices of poetry, therapy allows us to re-story our experiences and emotions. When employed as part of a creative writing methodology, *Nachträglichkeit* helps to show us that our writing remains alive, even after being confined to the ‘final’ copy of any document.

Conclusion

Using *Nachträglichkeit* as a methodology for creative writing allows for the retrospective contemplation of work created weeks, months or years before the re-reading/re-vision. It symbolises a re-animation of the writer’s images and ideas, potentially leading to a renewed sense of novelty, and a feeling of discovery about old work and past experiences. In this particular case, *Nachträglichkeit* allowed me explore another dimension of my own recovery from trauma, offering insight into the processes of reparation that I accessed through my own writing without even fully realising it at the time. This is only one of the possible gifts of *Nachträglichkeit*, which itself is an instrument of revelation. By engaging meaningfully with past pieces of writing, we both re-inscribe the present moment and re-implicate its future. Combining autoethnography and *Nachträglichkeit* in a temporal methodological relationship allows us to reflect on both the writer’s past and present, as well their social context/s. My argument for the use of contemplative and non-linear methodologies like *Nachträglichkeit* is based on a desire to contribute to the slowing down of the frenetic pace of contemporary life, accompanied by an appeal to embrace the natural messiness of creative research and the ever-

changing self. The notion that any one piece of writing is static or self-contained is challenged through activating the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* within writing practice, as is the academic's accepted role as a content creator on the assembly line of scholarly production.

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