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Strange loops: Creative practice and philosophies of selfhood

Abstract
In A Creative Writing Research Methodology: New Directions, Strange Loops and Tornados *(2009), Nicola Boyd takes the conceptual movement of Douglas Hofstadter's Strange Loop as a model for creative research, and a plausible creative methodology. She describes the movement of a Strange Loop as a self-repeating spiral and, as a familiar sensation in creative writing, one useful as an effective metaphor for the emergence of focus in the writing process. But Boyd's model overlooks Hofstadter's original use of the Strange Loop as a neurological explanation for consciousness that is linked to narrative theories of selfhood. Arguably, taking an interdisciplinary focus in reading creative writing through Hofstadter could potentially serve to augment discussions of selfhood in the Creative Writing discipline. I contend that Boyd has inadvertently opened the way for a potentially rich discourse examining the involvement of self within the creative process. I question the manner in which a Strange Loop constructs self, and just how this might relate to the act of writing.*
Keywords: creative writing methodology, Strange Loop, selfhood

> But the need for self-understanding goes much further than that. We are powerfully driven to create a term that summarizes the presumed unity, internal coherence, and temporal stability of all the hopes and beliefs and desires that are found inside our own cranium – and that term, as we all learn very early on, is 'I'. (Hofstadter 2007: 179)

> A poem is not only a verbal reality; it is also an act. The poet speaks, and as he speaks, he *makes*. This making is above all a making of himself: poetry is not only self-knowledge but self-creation. The reader repeats the poet's experience of self-creation… (Paz 1974: 60)

These two quotations, coming from vastly different areas of study, both point towards language as constituting an act of self-construction. The difference is one of perspective. Octavio Paz writes as a writer, focusing on the impact and consequences of the poetic act. His assertion that writing creates selfhood is not unfamiliar. Martin Heidegger similarly suggests that 'the work is the origin of the artist' (Heidegger 1993: 143). He points to a co-dependant existence, in that 'neither is without the other' (143). From a slightly different perspective, in *i: Six Nonlectures*, e.e. cummings suggests that 'the question "who am I?" is answered by what I write – in other words, I become my writing' (cummings 1953: 4). He describes this realisation as a 'wholly mysterious moment which signifies selfdiscovery' (1953: 4). 'Selfdiscovery' subsequently becomes the subject for his third lecture. In each of these cases, selfhood as a writer is

implicated in the act of writing. Douglas Hofstadter, in comparison, writes from within the philosophy of consciousness, as a practitioner of Mind/Brain Theory (see Kim 2011: 91-3). His approach to language is in response to the conceptualisation of self that he puts forward: a 'high abstraction' on which consciousness centres (2007: 179). Language symbolises this abstraction in the pronoun 'I'. Hofstadter's work is supported by others: Jerome Bruner and Daniel Dennett both base their theories of consciousness in the notion that selfhood is abstract, albeit in slightly different ways. These theorists make only tenuous links with Creative Writing. Hofstadter, even while using creative work within his texts, does not discuss it directly in reference to the construction of self. So what might be gained in taking an interdisciplinary focus here? Intersections between scientific philosophy and the creative arts would on the face of it seem minimal. But they might also be productive. David Herman, in his study of intentionalism in reading narrative, seeks to highlight 'the advantages of fostering a dialogue between scholarship of storytelling and the sciences of the mind' (Herman 2013: 25). He suggests that their interrelation encourages innovation in scholarship, even 'underscores the need to re-think … perspectives on stories' (2013: 55). How could Hofstadter's work contribute to a discussion of creative writing? Philosophical theory surrounding the conceptualisation of self has the potential to provide a critical framework for discussions of 'self-creation' in writing. Hofstadter puts forward a version of selfhood which might contribute to understanding how, as Paz describes, writing holds the capacity to 'make' us.

Hofstadter's work has already gained some attention within the Creative Writing discipline. In 'A Creative Writing Research Methodology: New Directions, Strange Loops and Tornados' (2009), Nicola Boyd employs the notion of the 'Strange Loop' as a metaphor central to a methodology for creative writing. She labels this methodology 'CSLR', or 'Converging Strange Loop Research methodology' (Boyd 2009: 8). Originally a concept put forward by Hofstadter to describe the emergence of selfhood in consciousness, for Boyd:

> Strange Loops use a system to move from one place to another to arrive in a similar but not identical place. With CSLR the researcher starts with an area or broad idea and through a spiralling process of experience, reading, writing and critical thought moves towards a single idea or set of ideas to create both scholarly and creative works. (Boyd 2009: 9)

Boyd understands the Strange Loop as descriptive of creative practice and constructs from it a methodology which she argues is capable of incorporating a variety of pre-existing methods, creating for the discipline a comprehensive and cohesive language with which to express our academic practice (2009: 10-11) [1]. While Boyd's application of the Strange Loop does give rise to an interesting discussion of methodology and its limitations when faced with diverse research practices, it does not question Hofstadter's construction of the concept nor examine the implications his work might have for creative writing as a field. Instead, Boyd utilises the Strange Loop as a metaphor for the experience of writing.

In CSLR, Boyd focuses on building a model which is capable of representing movement between multiple research strategies and efforts within a single process. Citing Escher's drawings and Bach's fugues as Hofstadter also does, Boyd describes the Strange Loop as 'a spiral … [or] a tornado' (Boyd 2009: 7). She cites Hofstadter's description of the Strange Loop as a phenomenon which 'occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we

started…' (Hofstadter 1999: 10). Her use of the Strange Loop is as a model, one she suggests is capable of best describing 'the state in which writers research' (2009: 6). Boyd acknowledges the sensation of creative writing research as one of constant reflection, as occurring through 'reading and response to that reading, whether creative, public or scholarly' (Boyd 2010: 136). The process grows from this sensation: 'the tornado is a compelling image as the sharp end of the spiral jumps from one point to another… As research occurs in the wider spiral, the creative or scholarly output may jump from one form to another, changing focus and direction' (Boyd 2009: 8). Her outline of the 'steps' present within the process also reflect this, offering the potential within clearly outlined methodological practice to 'add or subtract items in the research', 'restate the area of interest', and 'reiterate and refine until the output is complete' (2009: 8). The appeal of a model with this flexibility is understandable when taken in context with the difficulty of 'identifying or evaluating the theories underlying and shaping our practice' (Stewart 2003) within creative writing as an academic field. It emphasises wider research processes as essential to production, leaning on Hofstadter's representation of Strange Loops as infinite to insinuate the manner in which a text, too, is never 'finished', but simply moves out into the world, disseminates to 'spawn new research spirals and modes of research engaged in quantum entanglement as the creative writer researches' (Boyd 2009: 10). As a methodology, it also moves deliberately away from Practice Led Research (PLR), which Boyd sees as limited in suggesting that 'creative arts research comes predominantly out of practice' (2009: 5), excluding research not directly related to the practice or output. She states:

> What I am looking to do in this paper goes beyond PLR, in search of a unifying language, model or framework which clearly states how we conduct research and brings together the multitude of research processes into something which is specific, explanatory and usable as a platform to refine these processes. (2009: 4)

Boyd's attempt to create a model from Hofstadter's Strange Loops is driven by the desire to encapsulate contrasting and contradictory research practices within a single process. Ultimately, however, her methodology functions as a metaphor for process rather than providing a 'language' to express an approach. Her adaptation of Hofstadter's Strange Loop pays very little attention to the original construction of the meme, and instead adopts it in a reduced form as representative of writing as a specific act. Her use of the tornado in comparison reflects this: while it emphasises the element of spiralling movement Boyd focuses on in adopting Hofstadter's Loop, it is far removed from Hofstadter's descriptions, and introduces an element of turbulence and destruction that differs significantly from Hofstadter's emphasis on balance in self-support.

In introducing his theory of Strange Loops, Hofstadter focuses on the structure as self-supporting. It is 'a majestic, wraparound self-referential structure' (2007: xiii). His usage of Bach and Escher is not to demonstrate the singular focus of each repeated event or its capacity for movement, but the manner in which each repetition supports (and is reliant on) the existence of the next. Bach's musical fugues and Escher's drawings are descriptive here in that both utilise circular and repetitive movement to create the illusion of an almost impossible integrity in structure: stairs which continue upwards forever in a loop, music which turns in on itself. They do not represent true Strange Loops in that they require a creator to function (1999: 689-691); and in this sense, Boyd's appropriation of the Strange Loop as a metaphor is similarly problematic. As a self-supporting entity, the Strange Loop represents a self-

referential existence, it creates itself. Hofstadter utilises the Strange Loop as a meme to explain the emergence of a conscious 'I' within the psyche. Hofstadter suggests that consciousness and mental states are all products of neural activity (1999: 337, 369). He upholds the notion of 'symbols' within the brain, neural states keyed to external referents allowing for signification as a process in interpretation; but he maintains that such symbolism is at base neurological (1999: 349). The self is one such symbol: 'a term that summarises the presumed unity, internal coherence, and temporal stability' (2007: 179). The emergence of the symbol is dependent on a high-level loop of representation, the self-referential perception of the experience of qualia as situated within the body. The self exists because we perceive it as a centre to our existence – and as we centre on it, we support the perception of its existence. This is the action of the Strange Loop. Self-reference supports self-consciousness which supports self-reference. He describes the self as a 'kind of mirage … a mirage that perceived itself' (2007: xii). Selfhood thus is based within a constant cycle of self-representation and recognition, reliant on the perception of being within the world. The Strange Loop is not a metaphor for the manner in which a self comes in to being, but the reality of its existence (2007: 180). The meme functions to describe the structure of the self as inherently looped inwards, constantly reinforcing itself through self-reference. This is the point at which Hofstadter's work comes into relevance for Creative Writing as a discipline. The self, according to this theory, is supported by its own actions; through self-representation and the self-reference of perceived effect within the world.

Writing as an act can be understood to offer such perceptible representation and effect. The psychoanalytical approach of Jaques Lacan similarly upholds the notion of development through self-reference, according to a moment of visual recognition in a mirror. Lacan argues that seeing and recognising an image of one's self is an important step in the development of the ego: 'the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego … in an exteriority' (Lacan 1977: 2). Like Hofstadter, Lacan's thought suggests the neurological function of symbols, in referring to the potency of images forming cohesive, set structures as a 'complex' within the psyche (Lacan 1977: 2; see also Safi-Eddine 1994: 49). The 'complex' which supports self, however, requires the cohesion of reflection to function, an image which 'serves as the form that in-forms the subject … It is this reflected image of self that Lacan understands by the 'I'' (Safi-Eddine 1994: 49). While Lacan focuses on exploring infantile development in the 'mirror stage', he puts forward an understanding of self predicated on self-reference (1977: 2-6). The Strange Loop structure still holds in this relationship. This is not to say that Hofstadter's work continues that of Lacan, but that the structure Hofstadter points to functions within Lacan's description of self-formation. Hofstadter similarly highlights 'self-image' as central to the conception of self, suggesting that this confirmation of selfhood become 'integrated in some enormously complex way inside the entire mental structure [of the Strange Loop]' (1999: 696). The physical self-reference of writing could potentially be seen to take the place of the mirror; reconfirming the self-symbol through the physical manifestation of its signifier, 'I', rather than in the image of corporality.

There are various examples in philosophy wherein language use, both oral and written, has been recognised as constructive of self. Studies in linguistics recognise the pronoun as a site of subjectivity; specifically, Emile Benveniste describes the role of pronouns as to 'provide the instrument of a conversion that one could call the conversion of language into discourse' (Benveniste 1971: 220). He suggests that the specificity of the pronoun implicates a specific subject: 'it is by identifying himself as a unique person pronouncing *I* that each speaker sets himself up in turn as the 'subject' (1971: 220). The 'fall

into language' thus is a determination of subjective selfhood (Young 2009: 82). As Benveniste makes clear, 'it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being' (1971: 224). Paz' proclamation of authorly self-creation, as I opened with, suggests that this idea could hold within the act of creative writing as well, despite the lack of high-level self-reference (inherent to the 'I' pronoun). The entry into 'self-knowledge' which Paz sees as implicated in the act of creation provides a looped representation of self which allows for the sensation of self-creation to arise. Heidegger's maxim could similarly be constructed in a loop – the artist is the origin of the work which is the origin of the artist and so on. His insistence that 'neither is without the other' and yet that simultaneously 'neither of them alone bears the other' approaches once more a structural self-reference in the reliance of the mutual relationship (Heidegger 1993: 143). This is expanded as Heidegger 'speaks of art as creating a 'people'' (Young 2001: 53): both in the manner in which a text offers an authentic *Dasein*, 'does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work' (Heidegger 1993: 193); and a specific being, 'it is the work that makes the creators possible in their essence' (Heidegger 1993: 196). As an 'origin', '*Art then is a becoming*' (Heidegger 1993: 196). Social and individual existence is conceptualised through the 'essence' (1993: 196) of the work as an existence. But each is reciprocal, each existence encapsulates the other. Heidegger suggests that to see this, 'only the right concept of language is needed … language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time' (1993: 198). In all of these examples, the entry into language can be understood to construct the subject through the self-reference and/or self-representation it provides.

Writing can in this sense be understood as an external referent of self. When writing 'I', the subject enters into a loop of representation and perception which contributes to the power of the symbol as representing self. Similarly, the author or artist reconfirms his/her own existence in contributing to the existence of the work. The difference between this construction and Hofstadter's neurological selfhood is that the experience which indicates self – the writing – is no longer internal to the body (as quale). Self-reference is shifted to encapsulate the experience of effect within the world. In recognising this, Hofstadter's work is indebted to narrative theories of selfhood which pick up on similar ideas (2007: 271-2, 275-6). Narrative selfhood represents a wide field of study, originating principally in the work of Paul Ricoeur (1992), Jerome Bruner (1990, 1991, 1994), and that of Daniel Dennett (1991, 1992). Such works incorporate narrative in a variety of ways as key to the development of a conscious self; but the main tenet of such study is the conceptualisation of the self as abstract. This is something both Bruner and Dennett emphasise heavily, even while they differ significantly in outlook. While Bruner enters the field from a sociological position, Dennett like Hofstadter tends towards Mind/Brain theory. Dennett's 'Multiple Drafts' theory suggests that the multiple instances of sensory perception function as narrative 'drafts' which in their totality constitute the experience of consciousness. The self is 'an abstract object, a theorist's fiction' (Dennett 1992: 104) born of sensory response, but it is not consolidated. Narrative is a metaphor for understanding how this abstractum might be developed over time, rather than suggesting a cohesive stream-of-consciousness (Dennett 1991: 113). Dennett's self has no 'final' or 'published' draft: 'The natural but naïve question to ask is: Where does it all come together? The answer is: Nowhere' (1991: 135). Bruner, conversely, considers the narrative properties of autobiography. He approaches narrative as a cultural form which influences our conceptualisation both of self and of reality: 'cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of

reality' (Bruner 1991: 3). Narrative is no longer a metaphor but an active force in the development of self, the form in which we comprehend and contain our experiential relation with the world. Bruner lists ten properties taken from narratology that can be applied within narrative theories of selfhood (1991: 6-20). His version of the narrative self takes up these narratological properties in order to represent both the flexibility of self within the world and the potential for complex movements. The version of selfhood which emerges knits cohesively across a narrative construction. Narrative selfhood as an area of study thus supports Hofstadter's premise. It builds on the notion of self-reference to illustrate how this cohesively develops over a long period of time in the ongoing construction of self.

From this field, two comparatively minor works particularly appeal to me: Owen Flanagan's *Self Expressions* and an article from Lisa Och and Eleanor Capps. They take up an understanding of narrative as fluid in reference to a construction of self. They also move outside a purely subjective viewpoint – narrative involves a process of 'feedback', taking on the characteristics of the Strange Loop in the implied movement. These works thus incorporate a reduplicated narrative, one which is constructed of contrasting acts – writing and reading, telling and retelling – rather than leaning on the concept of a single 'story-line' as an overreaching metaphor for the consciousness which emerges. Flanagan's theory of 'Multiplex Identity' highlights the different 'social selves' every person gives out as united by a 'self-represented identity' (Flanagan 1996: 70) which, like Dennett (albeit in a different context), he suggests forms 'the centre of narrative gravity' (1996: 70; see also: Dennett 1992: 104) for a conscious being. For Flanagan, the narrative does not depend on the resolution of these selves, but functions in integration. 'Multiplex selves in complex environments display different parts of their narrative to different audiences … to me, in the first person, my different selves are part of an integrated and unified narrative that contains, as proper part, the different selves that I sometimes display in isolation' (1996: 70-1). In highlighting the multiplicity of narrative positions taken up by a single self, Flanagan challenges the notion of narrative as dependent on a singular trajectory. In this sense, self emerges from a Strange Loop supported by a multitude of contrasting and cohering points of external self-reference. Ochs and Capps pick up on similar ideas in their article 'Narrating the Self' (1996). They turn more specifically to writing as an external referent for self, in referring to 'personal narrative' as a socio-cultural structure, suggesting its empirical power in that it is 'born out of experience and gives shape to experience' (Ochs & Capps 1996: 20). They are 'partial representations and evocations of the world' (1996: 21). Listing various examples of personal narrative across 'a range of genres from story to novel, diaries and letters to memoirs, gossip to legal testimony, boast to eulogy … etching to palimpsest, and mime to dance' (1996: 19), they suggest such narrative emerges through communication and thus exists within the social domain. Each act of personal narrative 'provides narrators and listener/readers with an opportunity for fragmented self-understanding' (1996: 22). But each act is simultaneously located within time and space, and limited thus to the apprehension of specific or fragmented experiences. Personal narrative has the potential to 'generate a *multiplicity* of partial selves' (1996: 22) which have the capacity to function in relation, and which 'may construe new narrative readings, which in turn alter one's sense of being-in-the-world' (1996: 23). The concept of self to emerge from both these applications of narrative is one which is cohesive as a position to be taken up sociologically, but which incorporates a sense of fluidity in its capacity to construct reality. Each language act in this context can be understood to function vertically in reconfirming the abstraction of self. But simultaneously, these separate acts combine horizontally to create a narrative self, as Dennett and Bruner describe.

In each case, creative writing as an act offers a complex site of self-construction for the writer.

While none of the theorists exploring selfhood in this wider context make explicit reference to Hofstadter's construction of the Strange Loop (originally published in *Escher, Gödel, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* in 1979), the structure of the loop reappears consistently through the emphasis on self as emerging through self-representation. These theories combined imply that the act of creative writing is also an exploration of selfhood. Writing physically doubles over the representations of self, reconfirming the self-symbol; while narrative provides a structure for the conceptualisation and development of a cohesive self. The theories interrelate quite strongly on this point; Dennett and Hofstadter have even worked together in the field to produce *The Mind's I* (1982), exploring neurological processes of consciousness. Writing offers self-reference, both in the act and in the solidification of the 'I' symbol as a physical manifestation. It brings into being a specificity as well, in that the 'I' which is manifested through each writing act is unique, takes up the integrity of the writer's existence. It is, for example, gendered: as Luce Irigaray says, 'I am a woman, I write with who I am' (Irigaray 2007: 47). As a context, thus, within the discipline of Creative Writing, such scientific and philosophical studies have the potential to illuminate the involvement of the author in the writing act. Hofstadter's work, beyond Boyd's metaphoric application, might be taken to provide a framework for the discussion of selfhood in writing.

There is a long history of scientific thought inspiring or lending insight to creative work – Shakespeare's apparent awareness of the theory of the four humours, a medical and philosophical concept, is one example. The emergence of naturalism as a literary movement in the late 19th century engaged with scientific perspectives to the extent that, in the preface to its second edition, Émile Zola could declare that his objective in writing *Thérèse Raquin* 'was first and foremost a scientific one' (Zola 1992: 2). William Carlos Williams, practicing as a paediatrician and obstetrician for the larger part of his writing career, suggests in his autobiography that interest in medicine and writing 'amount for me to nearly the same thing' (Williams 1951: 286). The similarity he describes is the fascination of insight into life – 'this immediacy, the thing' (1951: 288), the 'perfections' (1951: 288) of his patients as living beings. In writing, he claims, he was driven to capture this. But 'my 'medicine' was the thing that gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self' (1951: 288). On one reading, his experience of medicine simply provided Williams with material for creative study. But on a different level, there is the suggestion that the creative impulse, the experience of connection with life, is for him comparable across both forms of engagement with the world. The lives he encountered drew him to recognise 'the thing, the thing, of which I am in chase' (1951: 288). This inexpressible perfection is framed as an intellectual and emotional impetus: 'my writing, the necessity for a continued assertion, the need for me to go on will not let me stop' (1951: 288). It is not so strange then to put forward a discussion of creative writing which moves through a framework of the scientific and philosophical elements of Hofstadter's thought. The wider context from which he emerges – Mind/Brain theory and discussions of the development of consciousness – could possibly be used within works of creative writing in the same way that Williams finds an 'entrance' to writing through medicine. Indeed, David Herman's study of intentionalism in narrative is based on this premise, seeing philosophies of consciousness as relevant across disciplines and applying them in critical readings of fictional texts (Herman 2013). Hofstadter's work specifically, taken within this wider body of philosophy, gives insight to creative practice in ways Boyd overlooked. His notion of the self as emerging through the Strange Loop serves to elucidate, for

example, the self-creation that Paz represents as inherent to the writing process (1974: 60).

Discussing writing through such a framework provides a philosophical language for interpreting the discourse of self-creation through writing that Paz, cummings and Heidegger all participate in [2]. When Hofstadter refers to 'the need for self-understanding' (2007: 179), he is pointing to the inherent patterning of the Strange Loop in self-formation, indicating the neurological drive to stability in self-reference. To return to writing as an act in this context is to understand it as informing a neurological loop. For practitioners within the discipline, then, the appreciation self-understanding in writing is reduplicated; reaching out to meet with an appreciation of subjective selfhood. It allows us to read into Paz' assertion that the poet's making is 'above all a making of himself: poetry is not only self-knowledge but self-creation' (1974: 60). Coming from within a discussion of Romanticism, this statement suggests the capacity to inscribe self through language into cultural and social meaning. This is not to diminish the sense of the individual which emerges – Paz points to an experience of self-affirmation which is necessarily unique to the subject. But within his discussion, self-creation relies on 'the old belief in the power of words: poetry thought and lived as a magical operation to transmute reality' (1974: 60). Read through Hofstadter, a second layer emerges within this self-creation, in that the conception of self is predicated on the self-referential act Paz describes. The Strange Loop which is indicated in the structure of his sentences – 'The poet …*makes*. This making is above all a making of himself' (1974: 60) – doubles over his assertion of the power of words to indicate a deeper power of self-reference within the writing act; implicating language as reconfirming subjective agency, and hence subjectivity, within the world. Paz' recognition that the 'conception of poetry as magic implies an aesthetics of action' (1974: 60) feeds into these ideas, implicating the practitioner in the self-creation involved. The reduplicated self-creation implied in this reading suggests that creative writing as an act consistently involves on a subtextual level the effort to reconfirm subjective selfhood. Any overt or concerted effort to self-knowledge is reinforced by the manifestation of the subject within the act.

As a context for understanding our own practice, this is illuminating. The impetus writers feel to write might be configured in these terms as a drive to confirm selfhood and subjective integrity. Such a concept of writing might feed into the tendency to perform a variety of narrative acts that Och and Capps illustrate (1996: 19); and reach towards the desire for narrative which Bruner highlights (1991: 3). But conversely, the implication of selfhood within writing as an act might also point towards anxieties of subjectivity. This is specific to the formation of self through an external locus. Understanding writing as providing self-reference and thus supporting the development of selfhood through a Strange Loop stipulates that the self is influenced by that which is external from the body. Selfhood moves beyond a strictly neurological conception in this sense to envelop broader psychological influences – as suggested narrative theories of selfhood. This opens the development of self to potentially dangerous territory. In discussing the mirror stage and its function in ego-formation, Lacan acknowledges a danger of subjective fragmentation implicit to the situation of the mirror-image outside the body. He suggests a distress in manner in which recognition also gives rise to a splitting of subjectivity in representation: 'This form situates the agency of the ego … in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically … he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality' (1977: 2). The reconfirmation of self through the writing act similarly functions externally to the body. For Lacan, it is the 'self's radical ex-centricity

to itself with which man is confronted' (1977: 171) in this process. He continues to take up a discussion of language and speech as a site of realisation for the subject, further elucidating this conflict (1977: 40-1). Alike Lacan, in alluding to self-recognition and self-image, Hofstadter suggests that 'a large number of unresolved, possible unresolvable inconsistencies' (1999: 696) inevitably arise. These, he suggests, 'undoubtedly provide much of the dynamic tensions which is so much a part of being human' (1999:696) The Strange Loop is not, therefore, for Hofstadter, proof against subjective conflict.

The development of selfhood through language is thus not without its dangers. This notion applies directly to the writing act. e.e. cummings almost instinctively suggests a subjective 'splitting' in creative writing, given that the premise for his lectures is to ask: 'But who am I? Or rather … who is my other self, the self of the prose and of the poetry?' (1953: 3) A subjectivity specific to the act is implied, one made separate or external in writing. In discussing postcolonial writing, Robert Young approaches the pronoun in relation to its function as a 'third space' within language, a site of both creative potentiality and the 'production of anxiety' (2009: 82). In doing so, he responds to the work of Benveniste, who differentiates the pronoun 'I' from other linguistic markers of subjectivity:

> These pronouns [the personal, 'I'] are distinguished from all other designations a language articulates in that *they do not refer to a concept or to an individual*. There is no concept 'I' that incorporates all the *I*'s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers …It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. (Benveniste 1971: 226)

Linguistically, then, the 'I' symbol which emerges in writing is implicated in time through the specificity of discourse. While it gives rise to a subject, its inherently temporal existence also splits that subject away from the speaker's self. Taking this up, Young in turn suggests that 'until the moment of speech, the pronoun remains empty: a void (*vide*), into which the speaker or addressee find themselves dropping into but an emptiness which at the same times [sic] enables the articulation and assertion of their own subjectivity' (2009: 82-3). Young traces the effects of this articulation, highlighting both the anxiety occasioned in the splitting off of each subjective construction in language, and conversely the creative potential of the space offered in the void. As anxious as the space might be, Young concludes, there is a power which emerges from it, partly in the actualisation it offers: 'turning wound and fracture into the emergence of being, anxieties of enunciatory ambivalence into inventive productivity' (2009: 94). In emphasising both anxiety and empowerment as implicated in the personal pronoun, Young follows a trajectory similar to Lacan's acknowledgement of the fragmentation implied in external processes of self-confirmation. Selfhood is both supported by and placed under pressure in the act of writing.

The danger implicit to the configuration of selfhood through language suggests that whenever we write – and more specifically, when we write with the overt intention of challenging concepts of self – we are paradoxically both constructing and undermining self-creation. Hofstadter's work would suggest that the formation of self through the Strange Loop functions on a neurological level, is unconscious and automatic. Writing as an act feeds into the loop of self-reference and thus supports this selfhood. But it also has the potential to subvert and challenge self-creation in providing a site of subjective

fragmentation. The difference between self and subject here is important – writing can be understood to implicate both. That these functions can co-exist might seem paradoxical. But the Strange Loop as a meme suggests inherently in its structure an element of paradox. The loops Hofstadter points to in demonstrating his concept, those of Escher and Bach, both involve paradox of form. Following Hofstadter's conception of self we can differentiate between the conflicts and anxieties of subjectivity which arise through the act of writing and the positive confirmation of agential selfhood it simultaneously provides. Indeed, it could be suggested that these anxieties pertaining to the subject might come to function as feedback in the loop and thus inform the continued formation of self, offer a specific self-knowledge within the self-creation. This is how Hofstadter can suggest that the Strange Loop 'contains' (1999: 696) inconsistencies of self-image. Tension and conflict of subjectivity is not reconciled so much as absorbed by the self structure. The self we gain access to in writing takes on a certain complexity when read through this context.

While Boyd's application of Hofstadter's thought is directed solely towards the description of methodological practices in writing, his work potentially opens up multifaceted notions of selfhood as implicated in the writing act. It provides a framework of philosophic thought which might be used within the Creative Writing discipline. He illustrates too the manner in which writing can be taken as an inherently reflexive act, giving insight into the involvement of the author in his or her own practice. Discussions concerning the drive to write and the effects of writing on the writer, here only touched upon, might be developed further. As a framework, this might be particularly useful for applications in exegetical writing. More immediate to his thought, however, is his conception of the self in general. Exploring and challenging these notions through writing, or conversely exploring writing through these notions, offers a range of perspectives which might be of significance within Creative Writing discourse.

Notes

[1] This discussion is continued and expanded within her PhD thesis, 'Strange Loops and Confessions: In Search of a Creative Writing Methodology, and AI PI: A Novel' (2010) return to text

[2] In one sense, my application of Hofstadter's theory thus meets with Boyd's, in that she too sought from Hofstadter's work a 'unifying language, model or framework with [sic] clearly states how we conduct research …' (2009: 4) return to text

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