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Iterations: Days, walks, episodes, chapters, scenes

Abstract

*Both writing and reading occur inside everyday routines. Both lives and texts can be considered as iterations of constituent units, whether these are days, chores, walks or events on the one hand or chapters, scenes or episodes on the other. By making a number of excursions over the same ground, the article analyses how the two forms of iteration accumulate into larger narratives in tandem and in tension with one another. Diaristic writing is one approach but perhaps performs the mapping too neatly. The novel chapter constitutes a formal unit, and the scene a narrative unit, against which both texts and lives may be measured. Readings of WG Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and Alice Munro's story 'Family Furnishings' indicate how iteration figures in these two very different texts.*

Keywords: walking, chapter, picaresque

1 Walking the line

In volume 6 of *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator pauses to describe the 'line of [his] story... These were the four lines I moved in through my first, second, third, and fourth volumes. – In the fifth volume I have been very good, – the precise line I have described in it being this' (Sterne 1967: 453-4):

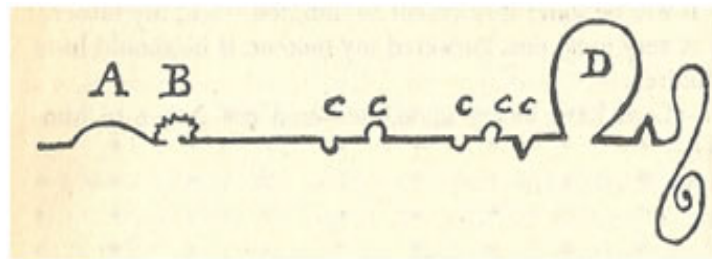


Figure 1: The line of Shandy's fifth volume (Sterne 1967: 454)

The figure of movement ('I moved through') is carried through in Shandy's glossing of the line's variation from the straight. 'At the curve, marked A, ... I took a trip to Navarre' (454). We are being asked to see the lines as cartographical. Sterne's diagrams emphasise the similarity of movement and journeying with the progression of narrative, and the inadequacy of such diagrammatic means for fully representing either sort of journey.

Compare that with the following diagram, which records my daily dog walk over seven days:



Figure 2: Seven daily dog walks

Here the basis is cartographical: the line shows my progress through a landscape, even if it doesn't represent the landscape itself. In fact, it doesn't show much, except perhaps the slight variation as I pursue almost but not quite the same route each day, and the way that these reiterations of the same route accumulate into something other than, and more than, a single circuit of the route.

As a record of experience the diagram is wholly inadequate, showing neither the sensory nor the imaginative experience of the walker. It does suggest the thickening of experience as a walk or other experience is repeated day after day. What happens when a writer rehearses a writing routine? How are texts built up through iterations, either of everyday experience or of formal literary units?

2 Dog-walking, writing and the everyday

Every day I take the dogs for a walk, interrupting my writing some time before or after lunch for about an hour. We walk in the countryside on the edge of a provincial town in Northumberland, UK.

My daily dog-walk reiterates the same route over a long period. I have used dog-walking as a space in which to imagine and reflect on various creative texts I've been writing, sometimes over many months, often revisiting the same creative problems while walking the same routes. Scenes of the novel I've worked on have been through umpteen imaginative drafts (some of them realised on the computer screen, some considered mentally and discarded), and now when I walk the routes they are all brought to mind as a series of slightly different stories, evolving into the finished version. It's rather like the walk itself changing through the seasons, and it's as if the novel itself is the sum of all those walks, just as it's the sum of its chapters.

I've become aware of the formal qualities of the dog-walk, and I'm interested in how an iteration like a dog-walk can provide a means for thinking about

creative iterations. What analogies can we draw between the iterative walk and the iterative literary unit, such as the chapter, section or stanza? And, just as our knowledge of a landscape deepens and increases when we move through it repeatedly, how can literary texts manage the reader's experience by providing iterations of theme and event, rather than simply a single chronological series of events?

3 Methodology

In an interview with Joe Cuomo, the writer WG Sebald talks about his preference for doing things

in a random, haphazard fashion ... in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplottable manner. And he invariably finds what he is looking for. I think that, as I've always had dogs, I've learned from them how to do this. (Sebald in Cuomo 2008: 96)

He describes walking along, finding things (meant both literally and figuratively), as 'a form of unsystematic searching' (96).

That's the spirit I'm undertaking this paper in: an unsystematic, probably incoherent, accumulation of materials, going back over the same ground. I provide a number of iterations of the topic which I hope will suggest connections, rather than steering a single central argument. As artistic practitioners, we know that work sometimes has to proceed in this open and provisional way. Jeanette Winterson wrote that 'you can read in spirals ... I really don't see the point of reading in straight lines. We don't think like that and we don't live like that. Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway' (Winterson 2001: xiii).

4 Daily writing

A direct translation of the writer's everyday life into the writing they produce occurs in the diary and journal forms: the writer writes each day, and the boundary of the text is determined by the temporal boundaries of the day. Two recent poetry sequences use the journal approach, paying attention to the iterative nature of days – as the arena of both living and writing. Peter Riley's *Greek Passages* is 'a set of 105 prose-poems derived from four sojourns in Greece... The structure is entirely diurnal, building each poem from the day's events' (Riley 2009: back cover) Peter Hughes' *The Summer of Agios Dimitrios* is described as a 'poetical journal' (Hughes 2009: back cover) with each entry titled by a specific date. In both cases immediate sense-impressions and images sit alongside material from other sources-at-hand. There is some lyric meditation, but it is oblique rather than conclusive. The diurnal constraint presents a limit to the discursive and the argumentative; but it also allows its development in serial form on subsequent days.

Riley allows a rather portentous meditation to range widely, but tethers this in the details of everyday experience:

No one at home. / *The knowledge that knows nothing, the empty room where brightness is born* / creeping through the narrow white corridors and cells, thick with grey dust, fallen

plaster, at the centre a dark casket, a muscle that reflects the small lights, grips the world's fear and keeps silence / Lunch by the harbour at Vivari, watching kingfishers. (Riley 2009: 66)

Hughes' poems are more like Frank O'Hara-ish lists of the details encountered:

this road passes more sacred spaces than you think
 some holding their own remains in their arms
 some disguised as shelters for pigs & goats
 & this one where exhausted saints
 point down to a child's plastic tractor
 parked against the wall with candles
 incense & a lighter
 held in its half-raised bucket
 (Hughes 2009: 23)

Both sets of poems have a provisional quality, like sketches, refusing closure and other grand rhetorical effects; they are odd, sometimes slight, but generally engaging. Like their meditative concerns, these qualities accumulate through iteration, so that the reader's ear becomes attuned to the approach – its tone and its reticence – and how such effects arise through the method of writing. The practical conditions of the writing help to determine both content and the formal unit; that unit, and its iteration, in turn influences the effects and meaning produced.

However, the precise mapping of days on to textual units performed by the journal approach is a special case. With most texts, and especially longer texts like novels, the days of writing (and of reading), the scenes of the narrative and the formal units of the text will tend to overlap each other.

5 Units of text and life

Are there not little chapters in everybody's life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of the history? (Thackeray 2001: 60)

A short story can be read or even written in a single day (Stevick 1970: 15). But longer texts like novels have to be read and written over more than one day. We talk of reading 'a chapter before bed'. Reading, writing and experience are all divided into units.

Chapters of a novel are analogous to chapters or episodes of experience (Stevick 1970: 28-29), and it isn't clear whether the chaptering of novels follows our tendency to think of our lives in narrative units, or whether our thinking about our lives is influenced by the literary form. Nicholas Dames points out that the chapter

is the most prevalent way in which the technology of the novel has entered everyday speech and everyday thinking about our selves, our lives, our pasts. To "close that chapter of my life" with regret; ... to excitedly "start a new chapter": these are at once experiences of reading and experiences of living. They are ways in which our lives, in fact, take on the shape of a novel. (Dames 2010: 856)

Dames also argues that the chaptered novel 'license[s] discontinuous reading' – we read a chapter, then stop and go and do other things and come back to the

novel later – and that this ‘permits the infiltration of everyday life by the text’ (857). (Compare Aleksandr Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2003), a feature film shot in a single unbroken take, which achieves a mesmerising quality through its withholding of the permission to look away from the screen which a cut between scenes would grant.)

It seems that iterations of formal units, such as the chapter, mirror and even reproduce the iterative units of experience, such as days, walks, and episodes, into which the lives of reader, writer and character are divided. Our daily life is not a continuous stream of experience divided arbitrarily into twenty-four hour-sections. The division into days is usually enacted formally through patterns and routines: of sleeping, eating, bathing, working and so on. In my case dog-walking is just one such activity whose repetition helps produce a formal similarity between days, whose iteration builds into a larger life narrative.

In what way might the formal units of a literary text reproduce this phenomenon, repeating, with variation, the same structure in order to produce a larger whole? In what follows I discuss the chapter in relation to prose fiction, but other kinds of formal unit might behave similarly: an obvious example is the use of stanza forms like *terza rima* and *ottava rima* in the construction of long poems.

6 The chapter as iterative formal unit

The writer of extended narrative is obliged to make his work out of subordinate, distinguishable parts, each of which can be seen in its relation to the whole work and each of which can be seen as a form in itself. (Stevick 1970: 15)

The most obvious way a chapter may function as (re)iterative is through the reiteration of content. Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style* (1981) famously retells the same incident in 99 different ways. I’m not so much interested in retelling of the same material, though, as in reiterated form: the way repeated iterations of the same form come to shape narratives and allow themes and events to re-echo; and in the way the requirements of the formal unit exist in tension with those of the larger series. One of my contentions here is that the chapter has been relatively invisible in criticism (Dames 2010: 855; Brown 1987: 103), and that both critics and writers should pay more attention to it as a formal unit, in order to discover how both local effects and larger narratives are produced through formal iteration.

Studies of mainly Victorian novels have identified repeated forms and effects in novel chapters, and related the chapter as a formal unit to the conditions of its production and reception. Joseph P Jordan argues that ‘rhyme-like’ relationships between final paragraphs of chapters in *Great Expectations* make important contributions ‘to readers’ experience that is extra to the sort generated by the narrative’ (Jordan 2012: 278). Jordan notes that the weekly instalments of the novel ‘feel like stand-alone units’ (278), suggesting some sort of relationship between the chaptered form of the novel and its serialisation. Similarly Mary Hamer’s study of *Framley Parsonage* considers how the new context of writing for serialisation affected Trollope’s novel-writing technique.

There is no doubt that the serial novelist worked under severe formal constraints. He had to conduct his narrative and develop his characters within a set number of pages. Among the problems set by the form, the difficulty of reconciling the

claims of the individual instalment, which must present itself as a well-paced and coherent entity, with the claims of overall design is paramount. (Hamer 1975: 156) (See also Dames 2010: 858)

On the other hand, Trollope's previous novels had also been chaptered. Serialisation may have intensified the formal constraints, but it did not create them. The more or less parallel development of the chaptered novel alongside the serial novel is highly complex and out of my remit here; but the phenomenon of serialisation is significant because it insists on reading as an iterative activity spread over a succession of days. Clearly the original readers of serials were not expected to read a novel through in one sitting, and the modern reader and novelist continue to use the chapter both as a formal tool to shape the text and as an extratextual tool to shape reading and writing practices inside their daily lives.

7 Types of iteration: formal structure and narrative structure

Dames argues that for Trollope,

the chapter was an essential unit, with a structural integrity and regularity all its own... The form of the chapter, in all its inescapability... and seeming banality, is for Trollope a truly *expressive* form: it contains not only a technique but an ontology. (Dames 2010: 855)

We should distinguish between formal units (e.g. chapters) and narrative units (e.g. scenes or episodes). *Moll Flanders* is not divided into chapters but it is episodic. We might say it is iterative in narrative terms (one episode happens after another), but non-iterative in formal terms (the novel is one continuous, unchaptered narrative). On the other hand, Smollett's *Roderick Random* is both chaptered and episodic; whereas *Tristram Shandy* is ostentatiously chaptered, and highly digressive, but hardly episodic as it contains so few distinct episodes of action; inasmuch as it is concerned with events at all, it foregrounds their complexity and interrelation rather than their succession in time. The genre of picaresque is particularly pertinent here because the episodic narrative, in which a succession of scenes is little bound by a larger narrative structure, displays a kind of iteration similar to the chapter's formal iteration. Notice how Moll repeats the same mistakes and kinds of encounter through her life. We're conditioned to think of life as developmental on the model of the *Bildungsroman*, but very often it feels more like a process of repetition; and it always take place iteratively via a succession of days, weeks and months.

Note that, in any novel, formal and narrative units may not coincide: in the cliffhanger, a discontinuity between the two is used to create tension and interest, analogously to the way line-breaks and sentences are made to work against each other in poems. Stevick argues that chapter transitions allow changes of scene and the passage of time, as well as changes in tone, to be handled easily (1970: 27-28). They allow the creation of contrasts, multiple narratives and elisions (28). Some chapters may display formal unity and use devices like cadence to seem to end or resolve, even as the larger narrative continues (37ff); others may not end properly, subverting reader expectations (57ff). Probably a mixture of both types is needed in order to manage narrative pace and momentum. The chapter always expresses a tension of "'coherence" versus memorable fragment' (Dames 2010: 856).

It is important to notice that shaping a narrative into formal units which use image, cadence and rhythm to suggest closure and unity also implies a shaping of meaning. The narrative is not a pre-existing whole cut into convenient slices by chaptering: it is realised through its particular formal qualities, including chapters: an unchaptered text tells a different story from a chaptered one. The novelist's use of chapters to move between plot strands and characters is one example of this. More generally, although chapters (formal units) and scenes (narrative units) are often not co-terminous, the length and treatment of chapters will clearly influence the length and conception of scenes. Chapter-making is thus not a transparent tool for realising an underlying narrative, but a significant factor in shaping narrative. This I take it is what Dames means by talking of the chapter form as 'contain[ing] an ontology' (2010: 855): the life and core of the narrative is to some extent conjured by the chaptering, not just represented through it. The chapter provides a means not just for recording events but also for conceiving them.

In this regard I'm interested in what Garrett Stewart calls 'narratography', the study of how narrative exists and can only exist in 'the immanent workings of a given medium', in contrast to narratology which 'abstracts from a given plot, in verbal or cinematic print, to its generalizable modalities' (Stewart 2008: 509). It's the difference between formal structure, as a local and specific response engagement with medium and genre, and narrative structure as something which is independent of and prior to the choice of medium. The two conceptions may sometimes be in tension. But narratology's idea of the 'underlying' narrative, however useful, should not lead us to trivialise the formal and local means of its realisation as mere adornment.

8 Mapping text against life

Representations [of landscape] are inevitably selective, framed ... and ideological. We encounter the landscape through its always partial representation, and such an encounter encourages us to build new texts and representations on the basis of old ones in an endless series of repetitions of the same. (Tilley 2012: 15)

We're a long way from my daily dog-walk, which isn't evident in much of the above, just as it isn't really evident in the fiction I've produced alongside and partly through my walking. Yet the critical and imaginative thinking that takes place on the walks is as much a part of them as the routes I take and the sensory experiences I have on them. For me the content of this article and the substance of my fiction are vividly associated with the sight of the hay meadows, full of buttercups just before their early summer cut and beautifully clean and bare just after; the dog's first tick of the season and the satisfaction of removing it cleanly; the sight of a hunting stoat; and of a cow chewing on the hawthorn hedge instead of the succulent grass at its feet. Yet the article recording the critical thought, the fiction recording the imaginative work, and the map recording geographical position, all fail to account either for those lived experiences, or for each other. They are each inadequate representations which focus only on one aspect of the complex business of living. Whether or not we are writers, we are all authors of our lives, in what we select and what we suppress, constructing intelligible narratives out of unintelligible noise.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no simple correlation between the units of living and the units of text. We might force a correspondence by writing according to a diurnal programme, as Riley and Hughes both do, or limiting

our writing to what is seen and imagined in the course of a single activity like a walk. This is likely to produce certain kinds of effects, and while it is a viable compositional method, it is no less artificial than any other constraint. The relations which arise more naturally between our lived and textual iterations are likely to be more haphazard. My own experience is that the unit of the dog-walk rarely coincides with the formal unit of the chapter: I don't imagine in a sufficiently sustained or indeed verbal way to come back with a whole chapter formed, even in plan, in my mind. I am more likely to return with the idea for a scene or episode, a narrative turn, which then finds expression in writing which may or may not constitute a chapter. Most likely of all is that days, walks, episodes, chapters, digressions, scenes overlap each other, so that the iterations of days and walks and of chapters and scenes advance alongside each other, but out of step.

Nevertheless the recognition that writing and living both take place inside iterative or atomic structures is an important one: it encourages us both to attend to the formal units of our texts, and to address how our writing is associated with, and dependent on, a system of routines, and how we might write more effectively within and against those routines.

I'd like to close this article by putting theory into practice via readings of two texts to which the notion of iteration is particularly relevant, in terms of both form and content: WG Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and Alice Munro's short story 'Family Furnishings'. I then turn briefly to how iteration has figured in my own recent creative work.

9 Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*

Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* famously takes a long walk though Suffolk as its structuring principle (Zisselsburger 2010: 18). Inasmuch as the book gives us a single narrative, it's the narrative of that walk from start to finish.

The central walking-tour narrative serves as a reorienting mechanism for the text and a reminder that in spite of its global reach, this is ultimately an English pilgrimage ... this is the narrative node around which the rest of the sprawling story is structured. (Hui 2010: 280)

Each chapter covers roughly a day, although the divisions are not exact. For example, the narrator's first day's journey begins chapter 2, but the beginning of the second day's journey is tagged on and fills the last five pages of chapter 2, continuing and completing the narrator's meditations on Lowestoft. Chapter 3 begins, 'Three or four miles south of Lowestoft ...' (Sebald 2002: 51) and introduces a new train of thought. Similarly the narrator's arrival in Southwold that evening is elided between chapters 3 and 4, and chapter 4 merges the rest of the second day with most of the third. Days of the walk provide the underlying rhythm of the narrative, but do not determine precisely the limits of the chapters.

Like Tristram Shandy, Sebald's narrator continually leaves the straight and narrow in order to pursue digressions (Gray 2009: 27): the book is really a compendium of little narratives, and the long walk provides the underlying narrative structure which knits them together. Barbara Hui has shown the global range of these narratives (2010: 280); Massimo Leone observes that

the narrative structure of the travelogue provides Sebald with an extremely flexible and nevertheless coherent device for the

organization of extremely multifarious material. The extraordinary melange of genres (autobiography, biography, apologue, fiction, essay), which characterizes Sebald's text, would probably appear chaotic without the thread of travel (Leone in Zisselsburger 2010: 18).

This thread, the underlying narrative structure, is the more important because the book's formal structure is compromised. Although the chapter functions as a formal unit, Sebald's famous use of long paragraphs means that this smaller formal unit plays little role in managing the narrative. In the interview I quoted above Sebald notes that,

as [the materials] have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between the two things. If you look for things that are like the things that you have looked for before, then, obviously, they'll connect up. But they'll only connect up in an obvious sort of way, which actually isn't, in terms of writing something new, very productive. You have to take heterogeneous materials in order to get your mind to do something that it hasn't done before. (Cuomo 2008: 96)

Given the non-obvious connections he seeks to make, the need to create 'transitions that superimpose a sequential logic on the otherwise random order of episodes' (Gray 2009: 42), Sebald's tendency is to hide the joins inside long paragraphs rather than to introduce each new topic more conventionally with a new paragraph. For example, a paragraph in chapter 1 (Sebald 2002: 5-17) covers: the death of Michael Parkinson; a portrait of Parkinson; the shock to their mutual colleague Kanine Dakyns; a portrait of Dakyns; Dakyns' interest in Flaubert; Dakyns' desk; the surgeon Anthony Batty Shaw and the hunt for Thomas Browne's skull; Batty Shaw's article on Browne; Browne's biography; the dissection of a corpse in Amsterdam; and Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Conventionally a writer might give each of these topics a separate paragraph in order to clarify the progression of the argument, and would probably use more paragraph breaks to manage the rhetorical movement of the argument. Since his argument is typically tenuous, Sebald runs the topics together, smoothing over the joins to produce the effect of a single train of thought and/or of a chaotic torrent of material. As in *Russian Ark* (Sokurov 2003), the reader finds it difficult to 'look away' from the text without the permission bestowed by a formal break. But making minimal use of the paragraph as a formal means of dividing the narrative puts increased pressure on the chapter and on the narrative structure provided by the daily segments of walk. We look to the days of the walk to provide a means of managing the torrent.

The iterative narrative structure helps to determine the effects and meaning the book produces. In the absence of a developmental narrative the strung-together events and materials are themselves rendered 'flat and [iterative]', and this creates 'a difficulty in registering narrative progress as a series of events in time' (Summers-Bremner 2004: 306). In this sense, as well as in the matter of literary influences (Gray 2009: 31), *The Rings of Saturn* is a picaresque. 'Historical time collapses as past and present merge' (Gray 2009: 30), making all of history present and available as a set of iterations, a context whose members inform each other and in which individual narratives and histories are heavily subordinated.

Reading *The Rings of Saturn* is itself an experience rather like Sebald's figure of the dog looking for clues, and like the experience of a dog walker covering

and re-covering familiar terrain. Geoff Dyer points out that the reader doesn't know what she is looking for, and so has to proceed with 'a patience-straining diligence that proceeds in tandem with the narrator's weary tramping through the Suffolk countryside' (quoted in Summers-Bremner 2004: 305-6), looking for significance.

Significance in fact accrues not through an item's role in the narrative, but through its resonance in a constellation of similar items, images, motifs and narratives throughout the book. For example, in chapter 3 (Sebald 2002: 49-71) the billions of dead herring recall the breaded fish which the narrator eats towards the end of chapter 2 (43), suggest and are succeeded by the dead of the Holocaust (Summers-Bremner 2004: 312), and the herd of swine driven into the sea in the Gospel of Mark (Sebald 2002: 66-7). Sebald accumulates disparate materials and though the narrative links he makes between them can be tortuous, he nevertheless resists explaining those links explicitly. The iteration of similar items and the narrator's wandering both serve to emphasise the aimlessness of living and the texture of life as an experience to be undergone and repeated.

10 Alice Munro: the short story as novel

Alice Munro's 'Family Furnishings' (Munro 2001: 86-119) is not a chaptered novel but a short story in chapter-like sections. It is a virtuoso piece of prose fiction, and it's of particular interest because the story is itself concerned with (re)iteration, the way characteristics, stories, events and images occur and recur in changed forms, how momentous events occur in the context of everyday iterations. Its form reflects that concern.

'Family Furnishings' is a story about stories resurfacing and mutating when they do resurface (Bigot 2008: 28-31). There are two stories: how the narrator's father and his cousin Alfrida were walking in the fields when they heard the bells ring to mark the end of the First World War; and how Alfrida's mother was killed when an oil lamp exploded. These stories are retold, and the retelling is not simply repetition, but reiteration, because meaning accumulates and changes with each retelling.

The story is divided into twelve sections separated by white spaces which function more or less as chapters. (Since Munro has been described as writing 'mini-novels', we could think of them as 'mini-chapters'.) The sections proceed loosely chronologically: the first tells the story of the end of the war, and the early sections generally cover the narrator's childhood, while the later ones cover her adulthood. But within that loose structure the narrative moves back and forth. (For example, the penultimate section covers the narrator's father's funeral, but the final section jumps back to an incident years earlier.) And although the story depicts the narrator's development, it is not really a developmental narrative but one in which significant events are shown to resonate within their habitual and everyday contexts.

Following the story of the end of the war, the second section provides not a series of specific events but a generalised portrait of Alfrida and her relations to the narrator's family. Note the reliance on modal verbs, and the explicit ranging over time:

Three times a week, we could read Alfrida's name in the paper (Munro 2001: 86);
...the city to the south, where Alfrida lived, and which my family visited perhaps once every two or three years (87);

Dear Morning Star, Alfrida or Horse Henry would write (87);
Alfrida was always referred to as a career girl (89);
She always called her cigarettes ciggie-boos (88).

There's even an opening out into geographical generality:

In all the small towns of that part of Ontario, housewives who belonged to the Flora Simpson Club would hold an annual summer picnic. (88)

A portrait of permanence is achieved: the narrator's rural childhood is one of unchanging habit, into which Alfrida enters as the agent of change and transience. She is identified as a 'city person', and though this means the literal city, it also means 'something more abstract that could be repeated over and over, something like a hive of bees, stormy but organized, not useless or deluded exactly, but disturbing and sometimes dangerous' (89). The story traces the narrator's movement from childhood permanence, the iteration of comfortingly similar days and experiences, to the transient and grown-up city, a paradoxical iteration of ceaseless change and succession.

The significant event which is allowed to resonate in this generalised context, where Alfrida cajoles the narrator into crossing the threshold between childhood and adulthood, occurs in the third section:

When I was fifteen or sixteen she leaned across the table and asked me, 'How would you like a ciggie-boo, too?' The meal was finished, and my younger brother and sister had left the table. My father was shaking his head. He had started to roll his own.

I said thank you and let Alfrida light it and smoked for the first time in front of my parents. (88)

The narrator comments that 'this moment was amazing' (88), and it really does function as a moment in the mechanical sense of being a pivot which the story turns around. In the next section (89-97) we return to the generalities and modal verbs, describing Alfrida's relationships with the rest of the extended family. Owing to the ordering of the material the reader might assume that we are seeing life continue afterwards; but after nearly seven pages of narrative we realise that all this has preceded, not followed, the offering of the cigarette:

On the day when I smoked the cigarette Alfrida decided to take this a bit further (96);
... perhaps that was the last time, the very last time, that Alfrida sat at our table (97).

Although the incident marks the close of a phase in the narrator's life, its placing in the middle of the material asks the reader to consider how events are embedded in, and draw their meaning from, their historical accumulations of context, and not just from chronological sequence.

The second half of the story is largely taken up with a visit from the narrator to Alfrida's house in the city, in which their relationship is resumed and complicated by the passage of time (101-112). We see the shifting of sympathies, the retelling of stories, and the repetition of history through family inheritances: literally Alfrida has inherited her parents' furniture (104), and figuratively the narrator has inherited the snobbishness she had previously scorned in her mother (88-89; 100-101). During this visit Alfrida retells the story of her mother's death. The narrator, who by now aspires to be a writer, is

struck by it, and years later uses it in her writing. Alfrida is offended, but the narrator refuses to accept blame:

‘It wasn’t Alfrida at all,’ I said to my father. ‘I changed it, I wasn’t even thinking about her. It was a character. Anybody could see that.’ (113)

On the one hand this is flimsy defensiveness, but on the other it expresses a truth about the way stories change in their different iterations. Just as Sterne’s diagram of his argument and our accounts of walking and landscape are only ever partial narratives, so all representation is also misrepresentation.

‘Family Furnishings’ isn’t a story about walking, but it does open and close with scenes of walking. In the beginning, Alfrida and the narrator’s father walk as children in a permanent countryside. At the end, after leaving Alfrida’s house the young-adult narrator walks the unfamiliar streets of the city, thinking about the life ahead of her and her ambition to write. She stops at a drugstore and buys a cup of coffee and thinks about ‘the work I wanted to do, which seemed more like grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories’ (119). The man in the drugstore is listening to ‘the ball game’ on the radio:

The cries of the crowd came to me like big heartbeats, full of sorrows. Lovely formal-sounding waves, with their distant, almost inhuman assent and lamentation. (119)

The narrator comments that ‘this is what I thought I had to pay attention to’ (119), and we understand that she isn’t yet attuned to the family materials that will furnish her true work, this story itself. But what she is attuned to, a dehumanised humanity, speaks eloquently of what happens when we write, the drawing of a particular line which however accurate distorts by what it excludes.

11 Walking and writing *The Footsteps*

My recent writing project has been a novel, *The Footsteps*, written during my research into writing and walking and partly through a daily programme of dog-walking. How have the iterations of days, walks and chapters played out in this case?

The Footsteps concerns the users of a particular public footpath on the edge of a provincial UK town. In that sense the novel’s subject matter and setting reflect my own home landscape and my walking activities; but it is not intended to record my walking in any direct or thinly-fictionalised way. This is not to say that my daily walks have not contributed to the work. The landscape provides details of the setting: elements such as a river path, a sewage works, a country lane and a wooden footbridge appear in both my daily walk and my novel. More importantly, the novel is concerned to depict the texture of daily life as an iteration of days, walks and chores. It is focalised through five protagonists, and each has his/her own narrative expressible in terms of their goals and character; and a larger narrative (the threat of the footpath’s closure through a housing development) provides a unifying structure. But as I wrote and revised the novel over a period of months and a programme of daily writing and walking, I came to see that my interest was not simply in telling and resolving these narratives, but in showing how they develop inside the context of the characters’ daily routines:

‘Can you help me find the hairdryer, Daddy?’ asked Kate.
 ‘These Cheerios aren’t very crunchy,’ said Shelley.
 ‘Ask your mother,’ said Mike, pulling on his coat. ‘I’ve got to take Bushy or he’ll poo everywhere.’ They giggled.
 When he got back they were leaving for school, trotting off laden with bags and PE kits and coats.
 ‘You’ll never guess,’ he said.
 ‘It’ll have to wait,’ said Moira. ‘We’re late. I’ve got the hairdresser at ten, so after I’ve dropped off the girls I’ll go to the library and see about the clothing appeal.’
 They were out of proper coffee so he made himself a decaf and scrambled an egg in the microwave. Then he logged on and did some digging.
 ‘There’s a notice up on a telegraph pole down in the fields,’ he said, as Moira walked in the door. ‘They want to approve it for a change of use – housing land. They want to build on it.’
 ‘Uh-huh.’
 ‘Your hair looks nice.’ (Williams 2013)

This focus on the lived daily experience of the characters as the arena in which meaningful narratives develop is reflected in my approach to chaptering. Originally each protagonist was given four long chapters of around 4,000 words. These were distributed according to a three-act structure: the first chapter dealt with events prior to the threat to the footpath; the two middle chapters dealt with the character’s response to that threat; and the fourth chapter covered their life afterwards. Each chapter was then split into a number of sections divided by white space, following Munro’s practice. The effect of this structure was twofold: it emphasised each character’s own goal-based narrative, and it isolated the narratives from each other; with such long chapters, it might be 16,000 words, a significant proportion of the novel, before the reader heard from a character again. In other words, it created an impression of five interlinked short stories, and emphasised the narrative element in each story, at the expense of the wider community of the novel in which these narratives occurred.

Applying the lessons of the research into iteration meant thinking about how the text’s division into formal units might better serve the novel as a whole and my intentions for it. In particular, having consciously noted my own interest in showing the texture of everyday life, I want to find a way in which the novel’s form might serve that interest. By reducing the size of the chapters to between 1,000 and 2,000 words, I was able, on the one hand, to increase the frequency with which the reader hears from each character and to create the impression not of five isolated individuals but of five members of a community whose meetings, near misses and oblique relationships depict of vision of provincial life in the UK; and, on the other, to break up and de-emphasise each character’s own narrative. By moving quickly from one strand to another, and delaying the resolution of narrative moments, I hope I manage to foreground instead the daily life in which such narratives develop. After all, our own meaningful experiences develop slowly, day by day, inside and alongside the mundane realities of life.

This was the fruit of my walking research. Iterative practices and formal iteration in texts will rarely correspond neatly. Daily routines such as dog-walking provide a space in which we can imagine, write, rewrite and revise creative work, but this does not mean that each walk, or day, will birth a new chapter. Often iteration means *re*-iteration, going back over familiar ground. Sometimes we come back with nothing, or seem to; but our routines of working

and living should provide us with spaces in which we can work without worry; for me they also provided both subject matter and technical solutions.

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