Griffith University, Gold Coast

Nigel Krauth

'The body in coupled action': writers as becoming-animals

Abstract
This paper investigates the fiction writer's ecosystem comprising spaces of mind, body and world. With reference to ideas put forward by Merleau-Ponty, Varela and Deleuze and Guattari, concepts of embodied cognition and becoming-animal are linked to the well-known association between writing and walking. Experiences of Virginia Woolf, William Wordsworth and Walter Benjamin are woven into the author's own experience to demonstrate how mind, body and world can combine when walking becomes part of the writing process.

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world …
(William Butler Yeats, *The Cutting of an Agate* [1912]
Yeats 1985: 107)

I set out, with the notion of the writer's body in its environment

Ecologies are studies of organisms in their environment, and the organisms I'm interested in are writers - mainly the fiction-writer species. Their environment ranges widely: their ecosystem is potentially the whole world as presented by the culture, but it also includes the world's replication in the writer's mind. The writing process can be described in terms of moving about - of mobility, portability and itinerancy - among a series of spaces, from external to internal, that constitute the writer's creative territory. These spaces include:

- the public space, or investigable real world where most things derive from in terms of material and issues to write about;
- the private space of the desk where the physical aspects of the writing process are undertaken;
- the intimate space in the novelist's head where the project is managed; and
- the imagined space which is the fictional world where the characters and events reside (see Krauth 2006).

The behaviour of writers in their ecosystem is not well understood. Here is an example: most people seem to believe that fiction writers sit in high, narrow garrets with doors and windows shut, making it all up. This is not even half the truth. Writers are hunters and gatherers in the real world; what they garner they store in their heads. Continually they pass between the real world and their stored world. This process of passing between - this weaving / merging of inner and outer environments - creates fiction. The fiction writer exists in an ecosystem of mind, body and world.

Writers' practices vary, and perhaps the two poles of practice are represented by the following. *Writer A* (whose process occurs significantly in the mind's domain) has an ambition to produce 'the perfect work of the imagination'. Each morning he starts out from his kitchen, armed with the cut lunch and thermos prepared by his partner, and walks down the hallway of his house to his study. There he shuts the door behind him and sets about his day's writing, engrossed in a world of recollections. He does not emerge until dusk.

Writer B, at the other extreme, sees writing as an excuse to get out of the study into the real world - to investigate, to explore, to observe, to indulge, to go feral - not to sit rooted to a chair and desk. In *B*'s view, readers stay in their chairs; writers rove. Because fiction is actually and always about how humans act and experience, how they do and think (even when humans are disguised as animals, as in *Watership Down* or *Animal Farm*), *B* conceives of writing as searching, discovering, seeing the sights, using the senses. To do that, she launches her body as investigatory vehicle out the study door and into the wide, wild world.

For both *A* and *B*, writing is a body thing, focused either more or less internally or externally. Writing fiction is writing the body's actions, observations and memories. What the body does or observes, the mind can reconstruct; what the mind can reconstruct, the hand can write. When I write my body's experience, I aim to converge upon, collide with, and cross into others' experiences.

I believe that as a writer I spend much more time (compared with non-writers and non-artists) focused on my reactions to experience: the awareness of being and responding; the alertness to recording details; the attentiveness to storing for later reference and use; the attraction to recognizing minutiae of my body's responses. And therefore, even if my experience is somewhat different from others', I make up for the difference with the kind of microscopic attention for which the normal reader / experiencer has not had time or inclination. By this means, I - and my reactions - become interesting to others; as a writer I am expected in my work to have focused powerfully on my experience in my ecosystem.

I confess I am more like my above *Writer B* than *Writer A*. Unlike my non-adventuring colleague who spends his time safely in his study down the hallway, I have subjected my body to a less safe cause of writing. I risked AIDS to find out what sexual experiences were like. I compromised relationships to discover how people reacted to emotional situations. I sat talking too long in pubs and walked unhatted in a desert and argued too fiercely with friends and got lost in mountains and stayed out too late and drove too fast and read too long and got too bitten in rainforests and was stressed too often and drank too much and put my body forward as if it were a crash-test dummy in a head-on collision experiment studying what happens to humans when they think / act / imagine / regret / win / lose / hope / endure … at crisis point. Yes, this author's body is the major recording device.

But also I did all this because I simply wanted *to know*. I had an insatiable appetite to be human - and being a writer offers one of the best ways to be comprehensively human. As a writer, I was a kind of scientist: I observed, hypothesized, and experimented. Not unlike the Nobel Prize winner for medicine in 2005, Barry J Marshall - who injected *himself* with a virus so he could document its effects and better understand its progress in the body (Sweet 1997) - I took passionate trajectories in what I saw to be grand causes. I set up romantic ideas about the nature of human experience derived from my favorite writers and my individual impressions, and molded them into an hypothesis of bodily experience. And I tested them on myself. I set off and moved through the

world, as my environment's denizen, and also as its ecologist, studying my steps along the way, seeking to see what the world was all about, and at the same time, what the writing process could say about it.

I continue, with an excursion into theory

In a letter to the Cosmos Forum titled 'Why the mind is not in the head' (Varela n.d.), Francesco Varela focuses on the current call for 'a re-enchantment of the unity of humans and their environment'. He explains:

> The tradition of western science and technology introduced [unity's] opposite: the sharp distinction between mind and physical matter, required by the distance between observer and observation (the core of science) and of control (the core of technology). This dualistic paradigm has become dominant worldwide, and a key component of our modern ecological crisis. (Varela n.d.)

Varela's restorative philosophy brings the body and the physical world back together. By doing so, it returns emphasis to the 'animal' in the human - that part which rationalist thinking sought to eradicate - and also, I would say, to the writer's ecology.

> [Lately we] have witnessed the ascent of an alternative view, that of embodied or enactive cognition. This new wave arose because the computationalist doctrine failed to account even for the most elementary coping with the world: walking, perceiving objects in a natural setting, imagination. Slowly the cards turned into considering that the basis of mind is the body in coupled action, that is, the sensory-motor circuits establish the organism as viable in situated contexts. From this perspective the brain appears as a dynamical process (and not a syntactic one) of real time variables with a rich self-organizing capacity (and not a representational machinery). So in this sense the mind is not in the head since it is roots in the body as a whole and also in the extended environment where the organism finds itself. (Varela n.d.)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings in the 1940s underlie Varela's emphasis on the body's comprehending extension into the environment. Merleau-Ponty stated:

> My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my "comprehension". (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 273)

> … my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover … this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world … they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping - This also means: my body is not only one perceived / among others, it is the measurant (*measurant*) ... of all the dimensions of the world. (Merleau-Ponty, cited Berleant 2006)

These ideas thrill me - as a writer and as an animal. But Merleau-Ponty goes on:

> It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects like words. If a word is shown to a subject for too short a time for him to be able to read it, the word "warm", for example, induces a kind of experience of warmth which surrounds him with something in the nature of a meaningful halo. The word "hard" produces a sort of stiffening of the back and neck, and only in a secondary way does it project itself into the visual or auditory field and assume the appearance of a sign or a word. Before becoming the indication of a concept it is first of all an event which grips my body, and this grip circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference. One subject states that on presentation of the word "damp" … he experiences, in addition to a feeling of dampness and coldness, a whole rearrangement of the bodily schema, as if the inside of the body came to the periphery, and as if the reality of the body, until then concentrated into his arms and legs, were in search of a new balance of its parts. The word is then indistinguishable from the attitude which it induces, and it is only when its presence is prolonged that it appears in the guise of an external image. (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 273-74)

Merleau-Ponty analyses the reaction of the body to symbols (including words) in the world as part of our being 'at home in' the world, understanding it and finding its significance (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 275). Animals react similarly to symbols in the world for their survival (as experimental psychology has shown). Writers, like animals, cannot afford not to do so.

In *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History* (1997), Tom Conley discusses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *devenir-animal*, or 'becoming-animal' (1987). For Deleuze and Guattari, he writes:

> Becoming is a molecular process, and the subject who becomes an animal … diffuses masses of particles so as to create new spaces and relations that confuse organic and inorganic realms. Whoever becomes-animal does not necessarily resemble the molar or aggregated traits of the animal in question, although imitation or metaphor may be catalysts for the operation. … Through molecular action there takes place an intensification of the experience of space and corporal extensions … *zones* of variously perceived relations of identity are summoned when the event of an encounter takes place. (Conley 1997: 51-2)

If the animal is the quintessential instinctive responder to the world's symbols, then as a writer I wish to become-animal. In assessing the landscape, in reading the nature of relationships, in perceiving the nuances of body language and emotion displays, as a writer I want that animal-perception which puts me directly in touch with my reality. I don't want my brain's conceptual interventions or my linguistic vagaries to get in the way. I want the animal response … the one where 'my body is the fabric' into which my world is woven. As the Nicaraguan poet, Gioconda Belli, describes it, I want embodied comprehension of my environment:

> "Rivers run through me, mountains bore into my body and the geography of this country begins forming in me turning me into lakes, chasms, ravines, earth …" (Belli cited Berleant 2006)

I keep on, taking a turn into women's literature

Deleuze and Guattari note that becoming-animal is a strand of the process of becoming-other, and that the most significant aspect of that process is, for the male writer, *devinir-femme* - becoming-woman. There is currently, in fiction writing, a reticence about entering the viewpoint of the opposite gender. As a male writer I find this to be a serious constriction to my ranging in my environment.

Without going into how my novels have appropriated female viewpoints in the past (and on occasions been praised by females for my efforts), I would like to trace here my absorption in, and identification with - as reader, and as writer - Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf's work was courageous and groundbreaking, but especially for me it teases out the notion of building and nuancing an argument in terms of being in, and walking in, spaces / environments. As Woolf develops her argument about women and their relationship to fiction, she follows her own steps on campus in Cambridge, in streets in London, into coffee shops, amongst bookshop shelves, and in libraries. *A Room of One's Own* is an engaging account of how a writerly thesis (by 'writerly' I mean: taken from the viewpoint of the writer, and being about writing) is elaborated in terms of Varela's 'the body in coupled action' with the environment.

At one point in her argument - Woolf is grappling with an explanation of war's effects on romance and literature and trying fervently to get to the truth - she writes three dots:

> For truth … those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham. (Woolf 1989: 15)

We realise here that her thinking about her writing, and her producing the marks on the page, are entirely wound up with her movement in her environment. There are abundant instances in *A Room of One's Own* of a writer making her way - in argument, and in corresponding physical space - towards an environment and attitude best suited for writing.

I make a detour, into memoir

My own development as a writer received its most important impetus when I was at university. At the same time that I rejected my parents' strong Christianity and tried to get into bed with young women, I was reading William Blake, William Wordsworth, WB Yeats and DH Lawrence. I was learning how the Romantic revolution of the early nineteenth century had thrown off various shackles related to the idea of being 'pure' - as the Christian church had it. I learnt how religion was 'Binding with briars my joys and desires' (Blake 2003) and how 'sensuality' (a dirty word in Christian terms) was in fact to do with the life of the senses, was about touching and tasting and hearing and seeing the world, and was also about - as Yeats pointed out - what art bids us do:

> Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. (Yeats 1985)

Well, this was freedom indeed! Art gave me licence to explore my joys and desires - the 'impure', the animal - in me. DH Lawrence told me that the true

way to spirituality was not through denial of the physical, but through celebration of it - through sexuality and serious sensual adventuring; a far more attractive proposition than the way the Anglican church offered. And the English Romantic revolution, which gave us the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example, suggested that God was visible in Nature and that we should more intimately observe and participate in the natural world for our spiritual development. All of this was so much better than the literature my mother had given me when I was 11, warning me that young boys who had sensual thoughts needed to grow up.

So I developed my own project for 'growing up'. In my twenties one of the first things I did, in my new era of emancipation, was to count the moles on my body. At the time, I was embarrassed by these moles and I decided - as a literary project - to count them, and write about them. I not only counted them, I celebrated them by treating them as stars on the firmament of my body: with a pen I joined them together as constellations to see what stories they told, what myths they engendered.

That was particularly liberating. It was a coming to terms with myself as a physical being, as an animal, as a skin surrounding myself, as a skin related to the cosmos. But the acceptance of myself as an animal in the universe opened me up to a universe of investigations and potential understandings. And subsequently, the project of studying myself as a spiritual animal - an animal capable of finding the God inside myself, and therefore capable of knowing the world - has consumed all of my writing career (as it did for far more famous other writers). But I don't regret a single feral-hunting, limb-pumping, sweat-wreathed moment of it. By investigating the animal I am, I believe I discover who I am.

I return, by talking about walking

We walk now as animals. We have the choices of driving, riding and walking, and mainly we don't walk. We drive and ride because we don't wish to lower ourselves back down the evolutionary ladder to the level of the walker / animal.

Referring to the upright human condition, i.e. the bipedalism by which we think we take the higher ground over animals, Rebecca Solnit in her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), says:

> The animal kingdom has nothing else like this column of flesh and bone always in danger of toppling, this proud unsteady tower. The few other truly two-legged species - birds, kangaroos - have tails and other features for balance, and most of these bipeds hop rather than walk. The alternating long stride that propels us is unique, perhaps because it is such a precarious arrangement. Four-legged animals are stable as a table when all four feet are on the ground, but humans are already precariously balanced on two before they begin to move. Even standing still is a feat of balance, as anyone who has watched or been a drunk knows. (Solnit 2000: 32-33)

Drunkenness is perhaps a feature of the writerly pursuit, but I don't wish to go that way. I prefer to engage with Solnit's idea of the human as the 'column of flesh … always in danger of toppling, this proud unsteady tower'.

One of the ways the Romantic poets pursued their sensuality / spirituality project was by walking - by getting in touch with the wild places of the natural

world inhabited otherwise only by the low-life: insects and animals (but also God, it seemed). Wordsworth famously walked in the European Alps and the Lake District of England - moving with intent, like an animal in search of sustenance - in order to come upon aspects of the environment inspiring for his writing and his interpretation of the human condition:

> I wandered lonely as a cloud
> That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
> When all at once I saw a crowd,
> A host, of golden daffodils … (Wordsworth 2002)

In this poem about experience of his environment, Wordsworth has several insights into the relationship of humans to nature, particularly an insight into the role and processes of the writer:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude … (Wordsworth 2002)

The interaction between the minutely-perceived and closely-felt experiencing of the environment, the recording and storing of that experience, and the coming back in thought to analyse it, constitutes the writer's ecology. To make this happen, the writer has to forage over and over - to get to know and understand. Wordsworth's world-famous poem about daffodils was not an accident of walking and observing. The writer walked as a professional activity, with an aim to producing culturally significant writing (see Solnit 2000: chapters 6 and 7).

There have been various other great walker-writers in literature (from Japan's Basho to America's Gary Snyder) but notably there is Walter Benjamin. This German Marxist documented 13 years of walking in Paris from 1927 to 1940. In *The Arcades Project* (a massive manuscript unfinished at his death and subsequently published in a variety of forms: see Benjamin 1999) he consolidated for posterity the experience of the *flaneur* - the thoughtful, detached, walking observer who saw through the hype of a city's hero-statuses to focus on the real environment, its rubbish and failure.

Benjamin showed that the freedom of the writer to rove anonymously, to observe and comment without hindrance from authorities, to fashion descriptions without prescriptions, was a key concept for cultural critique. In some ways, Benjamin's viewpoint was that of the stray dog in the streets - the animal perspective not attached to pre-ordained values. For example, Benjamin includes a description of the Tuileries Garden, near the Louvre, as an 'immense savannah planted with lampposts instead of banana trees' where the 'gas lamp illuminating it looks like a coconut palm in the middle of the savannah' (Benjamin 2002: 422). While walking in the city the writer is, on this occasion, taken to other landscapes and external critiques, because the walking body is able to see this way, able to sense the primitive underlying the modern, the natural beneath the built.

I'd like to pick up on Benjamin's noting of the transformation of the city into savannah as a portal to entering my own understanding of the writer-walker, human-animal intersection. In my life beside the Gold Coast Broadwater, I walk as a way of getting in touch with the sensual parts of me. I am lucky enough to be able to walk regularly at the seaside, but I have also walked on a regular basis in rainforests and on mountains (such as we have in Australia) and in Europe. As I walk I feel such things as the thrusting of my legs and the pumping

of my buttocks and the blood happy in me (clearly animal in their nature) and also a sense of the land moving by at a rate able to be analysed for its writer-exploitative possibility. I'm an animal cruising in the culture and the landscape, venturing observantly. I'm on the lookout for potentials. I'm on the hunt for ideas in the environment. I'm cruising too in the *paysage intérieur*, my mind's landscape. At three miles an hour (or five kph, the speed at which thoughts keep pace with the body, as Rebecca Solnit has it) I'm free to contemplate, to un-fix my thinking, while being on purpose

> … unsettled, between places, drawn forth into action by desire and lack, having the detachment of the traveler rather than the ties of … the dweller…. (Solnit 2000: 26).

Walking allows the mind to be coupled to the body, the body to be coupled to the environment - the 'coupled action' that Varela speaks of 'where the organism finds itself … viable in situated contexts' (Varela n.d.). Animals know themselves and their viability via interaction with their environments, and so do writers.

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Associate Professor Nigel Krauth teaches writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast. With Jen Webb he is co-editor of TEXT www.textjournal.com.au *and with Tess Brady is co-editor of* Creative Writing: Theory beyond Practice *(Post Pressed 2006).*

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb
Text@griffith.edu.au