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The Double Life

> Once a woman taught the arts of war on a bird-shaped island.
>
> After Serena heard the words that changed the family past, she came to believe that nobody needed to be taught to kill.

I have opened with a doppelganger, for those first sentences are also the first sentences of *Water's Edge*, the novel that I have just finished writing. *Water's Edge* already has at least a double life, as I intend to submit it to commercial publishers following its academic assessment. The double life of this piece of writing has always existed: I have written the novel and the thesis simultaneously, inseparably.

Discussions at the annual AAWP conferences and in *TEXT* remind us that research in the creative arts is under a tumult of interrogation and growth. In part, the tumult involves anxiety over what we do as writers who are also researchers, and this has resulted in much talk about possibilities of identification and nomenclature relating to our research. (1) I do not suggest that we should be prescriptive or restrictive in our discussions of what we do. Rather, we can openly discuss our activities and take inspiration from one another. If we do not succeed or do not wish to succeed in producing specific names and models, then we at least have the privilege of knowing what other writers and researchers do. We can be privy to the ideas and methods of our colleagues as they write within the current higher research structures, stirring up a humming, buzzing noise of names and definitions and points of interest that surrounds and penetrates our work and working environments.

Eva Sallis (1999) writes:

> Seeking authenticity and authority for imaginative work is destructive and leads to writers lying about their names and antecedents and generates an even more authenticity-conscious readership. Taken to a conclusion this trend is the death of fiction: we would only have life experiences, based on true stories and the illusion that people knew what they were talking about. Discomfort with lack of authenticity and lack of authority could easily dominate a readership which searches too rigidly for the right to write.

Sallis' point needs to be kept in mind as we develop writing programs in higher research, or else a very sterile and cautious type of writing could end up being the only type that we are brave enough to produce within such environments. But as writers who are also professional academics, or vice versa, we do need to continue to seek authority for our activities, for the purposes of procuring funding and employment conditions, for example. But the fight for the right to write need not infringe on the nature of the writing being done.

Likewise, Kevin Brophy (1999) writes:

> I am not so comfortable with the arguments for creative work being recognised as research. Seems more like arguments for creative work being recognised as health products endorsed by the State. I want room for mean, unhealthy, ambitious, unsettling art too!

The discourses of higher research can also be 'mean, unhealthy, ambitious, unsettling'. The processes of identifying and naming, of writing towards the subject of research in the creative arts need not be sterile or rigid or conservative, and in fact, in the context of the writing that already exists on the topic, it is the opposite of those descriptions.

Models for writing programs in higher research need not be tightened or clarified, but rather elaborated upon: scribbled and doodled on, cut and pasted, coloured in, erased and rewritten again and again, until each of us has an image in mind of our own version, our own customised marked-up manuscript. With such an artefact in mind, I make my final analysis of my experiences of writing within the creative work-plus-exegesis model.

My interest in doubles and doubling was inherent in the writing of *Water's Edge*. One of the novel's kernels was the idea of two sisters who had lived apart, oblivious of one another's existence, until the moment in this narrative when they meet as women in their twenties. The themes and range of my exegesis revealed themselves more slowly, surreptitiously.

If students and supervisors find themselves initially bamboozled with beginning an exegesis, then I suggest that they read the exegeses of others and talk to candidates who are further advanced in the processes. At the least, this can reveal the richness of the range of material being produced in recent times, and show that an exegesis can be many things and certainly need not be less creative than the other component of the thesis.

> She skimmed through her scribbled notes, then paused at the last entry, the legend.
>
> > *Scatha* (*or* Scath *or* Scathach), *pronounced* sky-a *by some, was a dark goddess, Mother Death one of her aspects. Another of her names,* Scotia, *was used to name Scotland itself. Some say Skye was named for Scatha and that the isle was her mythical realm. On the island, Scatha taught the arts of war to the famous warriors of Celtic legends.*
> >
> > *Scatha*. Serena whispered the name.

When we write novels, we range and rove about, finding the directions the novel will take us, researching sometimes eclectically, sometimes in quite an organised fashion. How do we research the exegesis? Obviously the process differs from writer to writer. The novel and exegesis form a whole for the purpose of the thesis, and some writers have reported ways of researching both pieces at once, drawing from the same bodies of research to produce different kinds of writing.

Eva Sallis, for example, writes of how she produced her novel *Hiam* and her nonfiction work, *Sheherazade*, from the one body of research, stating:

> *Hiam* and *Sheherazade* grew side by side. To look at them now perhaps you could not tell. They are utterly different. *Hiam* is lyrical storytelling, set in Australia. *Sheherazade* is socio-literary criticism. Writing them side by side kept each free of the material and the style which belonged to the other. (Sallis 1999)

Tess Brady (2000) writes of a related yet different experience:

> I was writing a novel and I was writing a PhD. The academic became the creative; the creative became the academic. My desk was covered with the trappings of the academy, with filing cards, photocopies, Manila folders marked "bibliography", "Vinland references", "maps, other" and so on. My desk was also covered with the trappings of the novelist… But I could not maintain the division as one slid into the other and the academic and the creative processes blurred.

In comparison to the experiences of Sallis and Brady, I think that the double life of my thesis had a somewhat ragged birth. I fought the development of my exegesis for some time. I wanted to write fiction and was uninterested in writing a second body of material with a nonfiction structure that treated similar themes, for example, to my novel. I believed - and still believe to some extent - that to write fiction as one hundred percent of a thesis in the discipline of Professional Writing is acceptable. Yet with that fight came an immersion in the myriad discourses of creativity and writing theory and creative arts research, and I was intoxicated by those, caught up in the excitement of developing research that is difficult and sometimes dirty and never dull. That is when my exegesis came to life.

In the early days of researching my thesis, I read *Camera Lucida*, by Roland Barthes (1993). I was browsing works of literary and cultural theory, seeking a thread to lead me into critical work that interested me. The lyrical title of Barthes' book drew me in. *Camera Lucida* is in one instance a theoretical work on photographs, but is often referred to as part of Barthes' autobiography, grouped together with *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) and *A Lover's Discourse* (1977). These three were the last books Barthes wrote before his accidental death in 1980. *Camera Lucida* was the final.

My reading of *Camera Lucida* is that it addresses far more than photographs. It is a meditation on the death of Barthes' mother and his ensuing grief. That singular expression of a death is what *wounds* me in this book, as Barthes writes about the certain something in a particular photograph that wounds a particular spectator (Barthes 1993: 27).

Barthes (1993: 63) writes of how he sifted through photographs of his late mother, planning to write a book about her. So *Camera Lucida* too is a work with at least a double life. For it is a book that emerges from the efforts to write another book, yet in itself it is a book about Barthes' mother: perhaps a book that was never to be written?

As Barthes reads references on Photography he is frustrated that they fail to include the photographs he loves (Barthes 7). This sense of the singular and personal is picked up again and again throughout the work and culminates in a statement about how he grieves not for a generic figure of the Mother but for his own mother (75). For me, that segment is the moment when *Camera Lucida* becomes a conscious part of my research, of my work. This is the moment when my reading shows me that I know what to look for when I research a piece of writing, even if I cannot identify it until a certain significant moment. Or, in the language of *Water's Edge*, I know how to kill.

> Scatha taught to kill: Mother Death of the bird-shaped island.

Serena knew how to kill. The right moment was all it took for the knowledge to reveal itself, like a sword drawn from a sheath that she found was strapped to her waist all of the time.

Barthes' thoughts on grief remind me of my own family tragedy, the drowning of my father and my brother. Following the tragedy, I tried to read personal help books about grief, but I discarded them all, unfinished. I had no desire to read of the psychological stages of grief or even about the grieving experiences of other individuals. The book that I sought was about a butcher and his son who drowned in an irrigation channel.

Barthes (1993: 7) writes:

> What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? Each time I would read something about Photography, I would think of some photograph I loved, and this made me furious. Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body: but an importunate voice (the voice of knowledge, of scientia) then adjured me, in a severe tone: "Get back to Photography. What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer belongs to the category 'Amateur Photographs', dealt with by a team of sociologists; nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc." Yet I persisted; another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture. So I went on, not daring to reduce the world's countless photographs, any more than to extend several of mine to Photography: in short, I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, "scientifically" alone and disarmed.

Is it a sense of disarmament that we writers feel when we set upon the mandatory exegesis: an awareness of the pressing in of troupes of university requirements and rules? In *Camera Lucida*, I found the weapons that I needed to proceed, or rather, like my character, Serena, I found the weapon that was always sheathed at my side, and knew that I never was disarmed. If this sounds aggressive or negative, I think of it rather in the sense of good, clean battle: sport, perhaps, much as we participate in when we write whatever we choose in defiance of fear or dread.

Barthes discusses what he calls the *studium* and the *punctum* of photographs. The *studium* is that in a photograph that is enjoyable in a generic sense: the cultural or historical points of interest in a photograph, for instance (Barthes 1993: 26). Of the *punctum* Barthes (27) writes: 'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.

Of course *Camera Lucida* is not a photograph. Yet I find a *punctum* in its pages: a moment when I am pricked and bruised by the singular sense of grief, the desire to own one's grief, that Barthes expresses. At that instant, the book transforms into a singular experience of my own, becoming not the book Barthes has written but a book about my father the butcher and his son.

The emotion driving the writing of *Water's Edge* was *murderous anger*. I kept in mind the legend of Scatha who taught warriors to kill. Taught people to kill. Taught to kill. In fact she taught the arts of war, the use of weaponry, for example. Yet it was the killing that stayed like a barb in my mind as I wrote. Who needs to be *taught* to kill? Surely we all know how. And does whatever we want to write - whatever has the power to prick, bruise, maim a particular writer - already exist and is waiting to be recognised? In my case, the knowledge of where my research was leading me was tapped by the recognition of a moment in *Camera Lucida*, a *punctum* found in its pages.

Since 1993 I have found myself writing on one topic and when this topic is submerged in any piece, I know that still I write around its edges. The deaths of my father and brother, who drowned on a January day in 1993, have engulfed my writing. In that year, what I now call the *water's edge writing* began. (2)

The first story of that writing, 'Night Swimming' (Perry 1993-4) was eked out, a fragment at a time, in the weeks following the drownings. The story was about my brother. At that time I could not think of the double tragedy. My mind seemed to protect me by letting me focus only on the death of my father or my brother at any one time. I grieved for them separately, but the sense of doubling would trouble me later.

I named the story after a REM song. Night swimming was a metaphor for my grief. One line of the lyrics chills me. Referring to the moon, the line goes 'and what if there were two, side by side in orbit' (REM 1992). I think of two deaths, two drownings, two bodies in the water at night, two people I loved side by side in a cemetery.

I wonder if the day when the two of them drowned marked the beginning of my interest in doubles and doubling.

As I began writing my novel, I found two characters developing, the adult sisters who were meeting for the first time. I looked to Krzysztof Kieslowski's film, *La Double Vie de Veronique* (1991), about two women who look identical and have the same name but have never met and live in separate countries. With my exegesis in mind, I extended my research to doppelgangers in literature, finding that most of the material related to psychoanalytic theory and German romantic literature. But I found myself unmoved by such reading. Like Barthes thinking of the photographs that wounded him, I kept returning to that one work, *Veronique*, and by connection to other films by Kieslowski that were not about doppelgangers but that wounded me in other ways. I returned even more impatiently to the writing of my own novel.

Just as Barthes did not wish to research photographs in terms of family rite or history, I did not want to research doppelgangers in terms of psychology or in terms of German romantic literature. I found nothing to wound me in that research, nothing that discomforted me.

The second part of *Camera Lucida* directly addresses the photographs Barthes has of his mother. He writes: 'And no more than I would reduce my family to the Family would I reduce my mother to the Mother' (Barthes 1993: 74). He speaks of reading Freud and other theorists, and considers how easily their theories could be applied to his situation. He concludes: 'Thus I could understand my generality, but having understood it, invincibly I escaped from it. In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother.' (Barthes 75). Barthes continues: 'For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable (75). I see Barthes' discussion as being applicable to the research methodology and output of the creative artist within an HDR. The researcher looks for something akin to a *punctum* in the material being read. She or he seeks that which is personally significant, that which bites, has teeth: *wounds*. Researchers need to have the confidence to research whatever it is that wounds.

In the first year of my PhD candidature, I wrote the research paper, 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis' (published in *TEXT*), that was to become the first chapter of this exegesis. I continued to write papers on research in the creative arts. I knew that these would form my exegesis, yet still I lacked framing. I lacked naming. Also, although the progress of my novel was constant, the work lacked a title. The exegesis had never had a title. All the while, I often thought or spoke about my *water's edge writing*, of how every story, review, article, paper, chapter that I wrote had the submerged image of a double drowning lurking within. In the final month of working on the thesis, I wrote the words *water's edge* in my writing journal, and there saw the title that my novel must have. Immediately afterwards the title of the exegesis was obvious: *The Water's Edge Writing*. At this time, I understood that the shape of the exegesis had existed for some time, perhaps as long as the history of my novel. In the novel, I wrote of sisters living parallel lives, and in the exegesis, I found myself writing of components of a thesis living parallel lives. I wrote of doubles, and I wrote of the instinct to kill in both works.

Emerging from my experience and my research, I have a suggestion for those writers and their supervisors who encounter difficulties in wading through the fluid qualities of the HDR requirements. I suggest that they move on with *writing*, using the methods and approaches that work for them whenever they take up their pens. I advise them to trust their instincts: to know that the research material with the power to stop them, as individual writers, in their tracks, to *wound*, is likely to be the material that can guide the writers through the thesis phase of their works.

I re-present the opening passage of 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis':

> When required to couple a creative piece with a critical exegesis, a postgraduate researcher may be tempted to subvert the notion of the exegesis, to rupture it by slipping in subjective writings. **Sometimes I write in the dark, by moon- or street-light**. This reminds me of writing myself into a new work, into darkness. I think - **is it** - of Julia Kristeva's 1983 essay, 'Stabat Mater', which attempts to subvert scholarly writing with a personal text written around, into and through the theoretical material **necessary for me**. An exegesis may appear to frame or direct the reading of the creative piece, **to switch on the overhead light**. The student may feel trapped in a space between the impulse to create, **when I come**, and the institution. This paper considers the misgivings surrounding the exegetical requirement, seeking positive approaches **to writing my exegesis**? (Perry 1998)

Finally now I open up my *writing in the dark* to let in the writing of my exegesis: or is it to let *out* the writing?

Endnotes

1. See Strand (1998); Brady (2000); Kroll (1999); Sallis (1999); Dawson (1999) for discussions regarding various aspects of identification and nomenclature of creative arts higher research activities. return to text.
2. At this point, I am not discussing the beginning of the exegesis but am referring to the beginning of a phase of my writing that, as mentioned, I call the *water's edge writing.* Later, the exegesis was named *after* this named phrase of writing. return to text

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Gaylene Perry has just submitted her exegesis and novel for the award of doctorate in Deakin University.

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