

Deakin University

Kevin Brophy***Endings: Reproducing Originality***

In March 1995 I was asked to talk to a group of Creative Writing students at Victoria University of Technology at St Albans, an outer suburb of Melbourne. I decided to travel there by bicycle from Brunswick because the weather was fine. Before leaving I checked a street directory and planned my route. As a precaution, knowing that my memory for details on a map is unreliable, I tore out the page with the last part of my journey on it and put this in my shirt pocket. Probably I would not need to use it, but having it there in my pocket would give me the feeling that I couldn't really get lost.

When I was less than halfway there, riding along Maribyrnong Road, I began to think that perhaps I hadn't planned out the most direct route. Not yet in the area mapped on the page in my pocket, I stopped at a service station and asked the attendant if I could look in one of their unsold directories. The directory I looked at was new, with more detail than my thirteen-year-old one at home. It showed a footbridge across the Maribyrnong River and a bicycle track just beyond the turn-off I had been planning to take. From the map it looked as if I could ride down onto the footbridge, cross the river and take the bicycle track along the other bank until it met with a road running almost directly onto the St Albans railway line close to the university. I had plenty of time and the prospect of a ride beside a river was more attractive than my planned route along the Ballarat highway with its semi-trailers and peak-hour traffic.

I took in as much of the detail on the map as possible, noting the name of the street running down to the bridge, the place where I should leave the bicycle track, the name of the street I should find when I rejoined the world of traffic. It looked simple enough and it was the sort of route I am fond of taking on my bicycle when I travel the parks and bicycle paths of the inner suburbs. The first problem I encountered was that at the end of A'Hern Street, where I should have been able to go onto the footbridge, there was a cliff-like fall covered in low scrub, grass, weeds and paddock fencing. I turned around and went back to the next side street but it ended in a neat cul-de-sac and a children's playground. The playground had a large sign installed at the front, detailing the names of local organisations which had contributed to the cost of building its equipment. The play equipment was purchased with donations amounting to fifteen thousand dollars. While I read the sign a dog barked from one of the back yards next to the park. The street seemed to be one where strangers would be noticed and reported to police. I went down to the back of the playground to see if there was a track or steps to the river and bridge. But my way was blocked by the same scrub and paddock fencing. The dog was barking loudly now. I returned along Maribyrnong Road to the main bridge over the river and found that I could get onto a dirt track under that bridge by lifting my bike over a fence. This track was wide and smooth, gliding along beside the grassy banks of the river. One of my fantasies is to take a canoe along this river and explore it, leisurely, back up towards its source and then down as far as the ships docked on the edge of Port Phillip Bay. As I rode beside the river part of me was there on the river in a boat, watching the cyclist push past, enjoying not having any particular destination. The part of me still on the bicycle began to resent having a destination, and a time by which I had to be there.

The footbridge, I discovered, was blocked to all but pedestrians by a series of complicated steel poles. I considered abandoning the new route then, but I still had enough time to go this way, and besides, once across the river I could relax along the scenic bike track on the other side. I lifted my bike across the barriers at both ends.

On the other side the track which had been marked with the simple symbol of a bicycle in the street directory ran straight up a steep hillside and was scoured by gutters of erosion. I pushed the bike up the rise and then followed the track as it cut back towards the river, riding my bike in a braking wobble, dangerously slipping on the edges of washed-away sections of the track. By now I knew that if I went back I would almost certainly be late. But if I went on this way there was some danger of becoming lost, for if the map had been misleading in indicating that this was a bicycle track it might have been mistaken in even suggesting that the track did continue for the distance marked on the map. To me the track looked like petering out or coming to a halt where it might be washed away completely. When I saw up ahead a hillside of closely mown grass which seemed to rise to a suburban street, I decided to leave the track. The hillside was steep but I could push the bike up onto the street above me. When I reached the street I rode in what I hoped was the right direction, but knowing from experience that this inner conviction of a right direction can be hopelessly wrong. After passing some street signs which didn't fit with anything I had seen on either of the directories I turned into a road with heavier traffic. The next intersection looked vaguely familiar. It was the Ballarat highway. I was back at the very road I had intended to avoid by taking my alternative bike path. With some confusion and relief I pedalled as hard as I could to get to the university on time to talk to the class of Creative Writing students.

There were about twenty five students in a small mauve room inside a large mauve building. After reading aloud some poems and part of a story I asked what aspects of creative writing they would like to discuss. They were silent. I asked if any of them were writing poems. None of them admitted to this. They agreed that all of them were tackling short stories. I picked up a whiteboard marker and asked them again if there was anything about creative writing that they would like to discuss. 'Endings', one student said. She told me I had once rejected a story of hers that she sent to a magazine I was editing. In my rejection note I had asked her why she had ended the story at the point she had chosen. She seemed to have some continuing resentment, or perhaps it was puzzlement over my reason for rejecting her story. I wrote 'Endings' on the whiteboard and asked if there were any other issues they wanted to address in the next two hours. The next issue that was important to them was 'Beginnings'.

What they wanted, it occurred to me, was a map. They wanted to be able to set out on a route clearly marked all the way to its destination. All I could tell them, truthfully, was that the map in my pocket had been no more than a comforting but useless presence on my way to their classroom, and the maps I had consulted had been misleading approximations of the territory I had cycled and climbed through. But all the same it was the map of the bridge and the neat little track indicated by a dotted blue line that had encouraged me to head out into the weedy back blocks of Keilor where I had longed for a day's travelling without destination, and where I had almost got myself lost. In fact, when I arrived at the edge of the Ballarat highway I had realised that I had been lost for a time in the streets above the river and the track. Were they asking for beginnings and endings because this is what concerns new writers when they tackle their first short stories? Or were they asking for this because inside that mauve building they are students at a university who must learn something—something that can be set down and recognised as knowledge? What kinds of anxiety, and what kinds of understandings of creativity lay behind their requests for beginnings and endings? Were their requests dictated by an understanding that this particular creative activity constitutes a course they must pass by producing a certain number of 'completed' words?

For me it is still startling and strange to stand in a room with a class of students who have declared they want to be creative writers and can even name particular problems of their craft such as the problems of beginnings and endings. When I began to write I knew no one who thought of themselves as a writer. After ten years of writing I had met only one other person who called himself a writer. It did not occur to me to ask questions about how to begin or how to end a piece of writing. I wrote, blindly, from within the current of enthusiasm created in me by the books I had been reading. The writing itself seemed to be the point of it and the great pleasure of it—I had no place to get to by a certain time or within a certain number of words. The river took me. I suppose my map, if I had a map, was whatever book I had most recently been reading; but imagine trying to find your way along a bicycle path at the back of Keilor with a map of Dickens's London or Dostoevsky's Russian minds in your back-pack.

In reflecting on this I am not wanting to pit my experience against these students' experiences in order to claim that my way of learning was more truly creative. It is to see that the activity we call creative, that kind of writing we call creative, can be experienced and used very differently in different contexts, and that it carries with it certain contradictions.

The notion of creativity throws up a number of oppositions which highlight the way its presence shifts under our gaze or slips through our fingers or the way it takes us by surprise despite and because of our maps. Spontaneity/planning, original/copy, art/craft, new/old, uncanny/familiar, play/work, self-expression/chance, Dionysian/Platonic, personal/impersonal, are only some of the hierarchies and oppositions that immediately come into play when we approach a creative task (or approach a task creatively).

The students desired to write something which would be acknowledged as creative. What they write must then be new and original, but at the same time it must be a copy, that is a repetition of some formula of beginnings and endings—it must be *recognisably* creative. In 1920 at the Festival Dada in Paris, Breton wore a sandwich board which advertised Francis Picabia's Far-Sighted Manifesto: 'In order for you to like something it is necessary for you to have seen and understood it a long time ago, you bunch of idiots' (Altshuler 119). Are we idiots because we mistake our recognition of something creative for an 'original', or have we excluded the possibility of recognising anything truly original as long as we insist (idiotically) on admiring only copies of aesthetic formulae already established? Whether one or both meanings resonate in Picabia's manifesto it points to elements suppressed by the social, cultural and institutional value given to originality and creativity: the original, the creative, is fundamentally based upon the copy, the already-mapped-out grid.¹ In S/Z Roland Barthes made the point that realist writers do not even copy from an original nature. Their work is a copy of a copy. He wrote, '... realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy ... through secondary mimesis [realism] copies what is already a copy' (55). In seeking guidance on beginnings and endings creative writing students do not look to nature or 'life' for clues, but to other short stories, and other writers who have managed the trick of starting then stopping passages of writing. During the week that I spoke to the students they were required to read Peter Høeg's novel, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*. It is a mystery crime thriller, a novel modelled on a genre which has certain conventions. Briefly the elements of the genre might be summed up as follows: the story begins with a violent episode, the hero/heroine becomes involved against her will, and proves through the course of the book that she has remarkable powers of deduction, extreme bravery and resilience in the face of thuggery; and finally there is an ending which unravels the book's mysteries. For most of its passage the novel does satisfy the reader on these scores, then towards the end when some of the mystery has been dispelled, but only by raising further mysteries and questions, the book finishes abruptly:

Tell us, they'll come and say to me. So we may understand and close the case. They're wrong. It's only what you do not understand that you can come to a conclusion about. There will be no conclusion. (410)

At the end, the conventions (those agreements with the reader) are broken teasingly. Taking Barthes' analogy of the narrative in such novels as corporeal striptease, our hope of a final uncovering has been denied (*Pleasure* 10). In Freud's terms the Oedipal desire to uncover (to shame) the father has been both thwarted and protected. The narrative is exposed as a game which must always mimic something that is beside the point. What was it I wanted to know at the end of this book anyway? It was something I would have forgotten (repressed) again almost immediately. Høeg's ending, like Picabia's manifesto, directs us back to our desires and the repressions so necessary to them. What Rosalind Krauss calls the 'originality-effect' is dependent on a repression of the knowledge of the role of the copy in producing any 'original' work (177).

To take another of the oppositions—spontaneity/planning—is to see again how one of these terms has been suppressed in the promotion of a certain image and value connected with creativity. Originality was confirmed as an ultimate value in art with the rise of the modern *avant-garde*, and its earliest art movement, Impressionism, is named for the quality of spontaneous 'impressions' in the paintings of this period.² Monet became perhaps the most famous Impressionist. It would be a mistake, however, to consider his work was accomplished simply with spontaneity. It was in fact accomplished in a slow, painstaking manner which resulted in a painted surface that gave the *impression* of spontaneous brushstrokes. Famous as the painter of light and natural effects Monet boasted to journalists and critics about the extremes of weather he endured, obscuring the fact that he worked obsessively on his canvases in the warmth of his studio, sometimes unable to finish a painting for several years (House 9-26). He named his technique 'instantaneity', and its far from instant production is described by Rosalind Krauss in the following manner:

The sketchlike mark, which functioned as the sign of spontaneity, had to be prepared for through the utmost calculation, and in this sense spontaneity was the most fakable of signifieds. Through layers of underpainting by which Monet developed the thick corrugations of what Robert Herbert calls his texture-strokes, Monet patiently laid the mesh of rough encrustation and directional swathes that would signify speed of execution, and from this speed, mark both the singularity of the perceptual moment and uniqueness of the empirical array. On top of this constructed 'instant', thin, careful washes of pigment establish the actual relations of color. Needless to say, these operations took—with the necessary drying time—many days to perform but the illusion of spontaneity—the burst of an instantaneous and originary act—is the unshakable result. (167)

To see how calculation was crucial to Monet's achievement of a spontaneous effect is not to expose him as a fraud, but to see again that creativity is never simple, that it operates with and through signs that have social, cultural and historical values.³ It operates as a code which is compromised and contradictory. It operates as a strategy, subtle or crude, in manoeuvres over influence, significance and ownership. Signs of spontaneity give Jack Kerouac's quintessential beat novel, *On The Road*, its particular sheen and its particular place as a work of modern prose. Kerouac took three weeks to write the novel in 1950, but then it was seven years in the rewriting (Gifford and Lee, also Kerouac 187, 326, 593-4).

To seek the codes of beginnings and endings as if they are natural or necessary to living or to writing is to bring certain tastes, certain preferred rhythms, certain assumptions to creativity. In 1759 Edward Young commented elegantly and mournfully on how thoroughly enmeshed we become in our own cultural time: 'Born originals', he wrote, 'how comes it to pass that we die copies?' (42). In 1818 Jane Austen recognised manifestations of this process in enthusiasm among the cognoscenti for Gothic or Romantic effects. In *Northanger Abbey*, she has Catherine and the Tilneys take a walk around Beechen Cliff above Bath:

They [the Tilneys] were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost ... It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer proof of a fine day ... She confessed and lamented her want of knowledge ... and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his [Henry Tilney's] instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every thing admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades;—and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make a part of a landscape. (125-6)

The first assumption is of course that the creative or aesthetic act finds its origins and inspirations in life or nature, and the second, as Austen makes clear, is to have a pre-existing set of aesthetic rules confirmed by what is 'discovered' in nature. The Tilneys might be more ridiculous than Catherine, but not because they are less natural

than her. The difference between them is that Catherine's code of understanding the picturesque is a simple one while theirs is elaborate and modern. Both imagine they learned their codes by looking at nature.

While writing creatively might seem to promise an open-ended and unpredictable experience, the anxiety over beginnings and endings alerts us to the presence of maps (in the forms of assumptions, rules, craft or techniques). Creativity is always an act already mapped-out, already begun in imitation.

The modernist art of ready-mades and found objects, and the postmodern art of quotation do not constitute sacrilege or even revolutions against art, but rather they make explicit the shadow-side of creativity—its artificiality, we might say, or its presence as a repetition of copies even before it is 'created'.

Yet creativity can still be approached as a moment of anxiety and excitement because it holds out the possibility of throwing up the unknown and the unexpected. Both the writer and the reader want to be surprised by an unpredicted (though not, in hindsight, unpredictable) outcome. This activity must always find itself in some danger—for a degree of control must be relinquished if surprises are to come. Not only does creative writing produce novels, but the history of the novel risks upheavals and unexpected developments under the influence of creative writing. When creative writing is established in university humanities courses, these institutions of education must then accommodate an activity which, while it wants to be assessed, still insists on a freedom to set its own criteria for success.

The introduction of Creative Writing courses to Australian universities in the past fifteen years might seem to be a fundamental challenge to their nature as institutions of strictly framed scholarship and research. What meaning will a doctorate have if it can be earned by writing a crime novel or a stream-of-consciousness manuscript? How might the discourse of research and academia be altered by this? At the same time the universities' absorption of creative writing might seem to be a form of control and distortion over acts of creativity. How creative can a student-writer or artist be who must achieve a certain score out of one hundred? There is no doubt that tensions and contradictions are present in this process, but whether they are new tensions and contradictions or an exposure to processes which have been repressed or ignored as long as creativity avoided these institutions is not clear. The students at Victoria University were correct—writers must face the question of finding an ending each time they write. But is this any different for the writer of an exploratory essay? The creative writing students seemed to experience this problem as a mysterious one, as a daunting and personally challenging task—as something particular to creative writing. I wanted to see it as something typical in an experience of a journey.

On the way home from talking with the Creative Writing students I kept to the main roads I knew well. Large trucks came dangerously close to the bicycle and one car with a trailer seemed to swerve deliberately towards me so that I had to move into the gutter to avoid it. At all times I knew where I was, and I knew what route was ahead, but I felt I was living too dangerously. I kept in my mind the certainty that I would return to that bicycle track by the river one day when I have nowhere in particular to go.

LETTERS AND DEBATE

Letter from Hugh Martin

Letter from Terry O'Connor

Hugh Martin. *Into the Millennium: The Never Ending Novel* NOTES

1. I am indebted to Rosalind Krauss's essay, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' for raising this issue of the relations between originals and copies in art (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde* 151-170) Return to article
2. Public debate over originality as a key to recognising artistic achievement can be traced back to Edward Young's iconoclastic work of 1759, *Conjectures on Original Composition*. Harold Forster has called it a 'manifesto of Romanticism' (*Edward Young* 325) Return to article
3. Monet also played interestingly with the notion of the original and the copy by working on up to one hundred canvases of the same landscape subject at once (House 25) Return to article

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au
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