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Applying a cancer model to the generation of writing for performance: Finding (creative) life in death

Abstract:

This paper outlines the creative experiment that led to the composition of *Self Portrait / In Cross-Sections / With Bird*, writing designed for theatrical performance. The paper sets this experiment within a critical framework that theorises a textual system. The textual system utilises the organismic dynamics of systems biology to delineate the dwelling within and shaping of imaginative spaces that results from the act of writing. Using practice-based research, the experiment seeks to investigate how biological processes might be used to generate innovations in dramatic form by analysing the implementation of one distinct biological process – the generation and proliferation of cancer. Specifically, by applying a model of composition derived from cancer biology to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is theorised that a dramaturgy essentially cancerous in nature might emerge. A cancerous mode of composition is realised through the transcription or copying of a foundational *Hamlet* text, a process which models DNA replication and which allows for a proliferation of mutation errors. The rapid and unchecked accumulation of transcription errors simulates the destructive energy of cancer, embodying the tension between chaos and order by which cancer is characterised. What emerges from the experiment are insights into the relationship between (creative) life and death within a cancerous mode of creative composition. By extrapolating from cancer to biological processes more broadly, the paper argues that a biological mode of composition – one which is alert to the inherent energy of the textual system – can enhance our understanding of the mutual emergence of character, author and text.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

In this paper I survey one of a series of creative experiments in which biological science was used as a tool for generating new writing for performance. The experiment described here utilises practice-based research to investigate biological dramaturgies, research which is focused on the questions: What might happen if you gave an existing literary text cancer? How might cancer manifest itself structurally and compositionally? And, finally, what might this deployment of cancer biology suggest about the creative possibilities of the biological sciences more broadly?

The text corrupted with cancer in the course of these experiments was Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. While there is not the space here to fully delineate the reasons why cancer and *Hamlet* became the focal points of this investigation, it is sufficient to say that both *Hamlet* (which I had worked with creatively prior to these experiments) and the biology of cancer (which was ever-present in my awareness due to my partner's work) together generated what Damasio refers to as "a complicated stew of current thoughts and old thoughts, of new images and old recalled images" (2019, p. 97) which fostered fertile ground for creative discovery.

Through an application of "cancerous" thinking to the writing of a performance text, the paper reveals a process by which the emergent properties of a creative text might be examined. Further, the paper interrogates how "life" might be found in a textual system that is, by definition, hurtling towards death, an analysis which stresses the mutual coming-into-being of author, character and text.

The textual system

Before turning to the dynamics involved in applying a model of cancer biology to the generation of a creative text, it is first necessary to briefly explore the nature of the textual system which underpins this model of composition – a system modelled on that of the genesis, development and evolution of biological organisms.

In delineating the lived experience of creative practice it is often necessary to reach for metaphors to express what is, in and of itself, largely inexplicable (States, 1992). Although mindful of Davidson's assertion that "no single metaphor either captures the [creative] process as a whole or adequately explains the process" (2020, p. 30), systems biology nevertheless provides a model of inception, development and emergence – for example, the adaptive self-organisation that allows an individual organism to emerge from a single living cell that has

itself emerged from “non-living molecules” (Davies, 2015, p. 5) – by which the compositional processes with which I engage in this paper might be effectively investigated.

Systems biology reminds us that the integral relationships between the individual components of an organism – for example, its DNA or its genes – are embedded within a system of co-dependency between the developing organism and its environment, each shaping the other in the process of growth and evolution. Patterns of growth and development are determined neither wholly by an upward flow of instructions from the organism’s genes (structural forces), nor wholly by a downward flow from the organism as a whole (organisational forces). Rather, there is a two-way channel: the individual components of the organism “alter the behaviour of the system, and then the system in turn alters the behaviour of the components” (Noble, 2006, p. 62). This “interplay of two opposite tendencies, an integrative tendency ... and a self-assertive tendency” (Capra & Luisi, 2016, p. 65) drives all living systems.

Crucially, biological research has drawn a convincing link between creativity and our embodied experience of, and affective responses to, the world, one which can be traced back to the sensory reactions of single-celled organisms (Damasio, 2019; Godfrey-Smith, 2020). In this scenario, subjectivity is a “relentlessly constructed narrative” (Damasio, 2019, p. 159) that manifests through an organism’s interactions with their external world – “the world of their past memories, and the world of their interior” (p. 159) – and this is where we can see a clear correspondence between the biological characterisation of an organism’s coming-into-being and non-linear models of creativity such as those espoused within critical literary geography (CLG). Specifically, CLG stresses the knowledge, memories, discourse, emotions and texts – the intertextualities and “cultural negotiation[s]” (Brace & Johns-Putra, 2010, p. 410) – which feed the creative act.

By melding a systems biology model with the phenomenologically derived concept of emergence prevalent in CLG, there ensues an articulation of creative practice that represents the dwelling within, and shaping of, imaginative spaces not as a textual landscape (as CLG espouses) but as a textual *system*. Further, given its correlation with biological systems, this notion of a textual system allows for an analysis of creative practice that is alert to the dynamics generated by concurrent environmental, structural and organisational forces: that is, from the materials the system assimilates from outside itself; the internal interactions which “[trigger] structural changes in the system” (Capra & Luisi, 2016, p. 135); and, the imposition of order within the system through the management of those interactions (Nurse, 2020).

Cancer and *Hamlet*

A significant element of my practice as a playwright has involved engagements with science through the writing of several “science plays”. The practice-based research described in this paper developed out of my efforts to move my writing beyond biographical and thematic engagements with science and instead find a ways of rendering science dramaturgically. It was

possible, I believed, to interweave the form and content of the plays I was writing more effectively – to imbue my “compositional practices”, as Meyer notes regarding Gertrude Stein, with a “complex interweaving of writing and science” (2001, p. xvi) – and, in doing so, to push towards more innovative dramatic forms than I had yet been able to discover.

My initial creative engagements with cancer biology had sought to corrupt *Hamlet* through a series of transcriptions (typing and retyping) that facilitated, over a number of iterations, the mutation of Shakespeare’s original text. Here, it is necessary to acknowledge that I am far from the first playwright to draw inspiration from *Hamlet*, or to manipulate Shakespeare’s text for their own purposes – examples include Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmachine* (1979), Takeshi Kawamura’s *Hamletclone* (2000), Annie Dorsen’s *A Piece of Work* (2013) and Dickie Beau’s *Re-member Me* (2018). Nor are fusions of *Hamlet* with the metaphors of cancer new. For example, Müller references cancer in *Hamletmachine* – the image “the breast cancer radiates like a sun” (1979/1984, p. 55) both evoking images of the Virgin Mary and contributing to Müller’s (misogynistic) representation of women as agents of putrefaction. Similarly, Kawamura (whose work was inspired by Müller’s) refers to “Cancer, cancer, cancer. Breast cancer and cancer of the womb are the symbols of battle” (2000, as cited in Eckersall, 2006, p. 208). Even biology has its own cancer-*Hamlet* melding – a protein-lipid complex that facilitates apoptosis (cell death) in tumour cells is known by the acronym HAMLET (Svanborg et al., 2003).

My earliest cancer-*Hamlet* experiments were mired by my abandonment of the cancerous process towards the end of composition, allowing myself as an author-God to shape the resulting material, for example, by manipulating the network of images within the text and deliberately inserting a mutated nursery rhyme – what I deemed a “ball of noise” (Journal entry, June 23, 2019) [1] – in order to ensure there was, in the final play, some theatrical manifestation of a tumour. In this, my understanding of cancer had been very much influenced by metaphors I encountered during my early research, particularly the notion of cancer as an invasive force.

Further research into cancer biology refined my understanding of the underlying forces which contribute to the origins and spread of cancer. Specifically, as occurs in biological development more broadly, cancer develops through particular interactions of environmental, structural and organisational forces; however, in cancer these forces are out of kilter, the cancer genome becoming “pathologically obsessed with replicating itself” (Mukherjee, 2016, p. 9) to the point where the organisational forces of the system can no longer keep pace. In aspiring, therefore, to imbue the writing with (borrowing from Roesner [2014]) the *condition* of cancer, what I aimed to capture within the composition of the writing in this experiment was this sense of competing forces, where one combatant (cell proliferation) completely overwhelms the other (that of cell differentiation which marks one cell as, for example, a skin cell and another as a nerve cell).

The outcome of such a process, as I demonstrate below, is a textual system that is constantly on the verge of collapse, the structural and organisational forces that facilitate the emergence

of creative life operating in such a way that the prospect of imminent “death” looms over the system. That is, what the experiment generates is a system where tensions between life and death are exacerbated, which provokes questions regarding how, within such a system, any creative life might be salvaged. In seeking answers to these questions, I examine the emergence of patterns within the noise of the system and discuss the ways in which these patterns might reveal the performance text whose emergence is waxing and waning within the cancerous textual system. In probing this tension between life and death within a cancerous dramaturgy, I go on to consider what the drive towards life – a drive that is fundamental to a biological mode of composition – might tell us about the relationship between such compositional modes and the postmodern.

The nature of the experiment

Crucially, the characterisation of cancer treatment as having historically been a case of cutting, burning and hoping (Hesketh, 2012) – what I came to call the “cut, burn, hope” protocol – offered both the start and end points of this new creative experiment with cancer and *Hamlet*. That is, I treated the text which had emerged from the initial flawed experiment [2] as a medical practitioner might treat a patient, aiming to cut the cancer out of the patient (the corrupted *Hamlet*) such that only *Hamlet* remained, recognising that any such surgery must be radical – “uprooting [the] cancer from its very source” (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 65) – and with no guarantee that the patient would survive intact. This “recovered” *Hamlet* served as the seed text for my second cancer-*Hamlet* experiment. The following passage demonstrates the “surgery” that took place in order to find whatever remained within the cancerous *Hamlet* of the original text (as least as I recollected it).

HAM	Peace, woman. Let me sit you down and wring your heart. The deed thou hast in silence acquiesced ... Look you here. The counterfeit presentiment of two brothers. This was your husband. Look you what follows – this now your husband, a thing that sits like mildew on the trunk of his wholesome sturdy brother, gnawing at his realm, his virtue, his wife, consuming all my own want – until there is nothing of the better left and all remaining a dank and eager canker.
—————	You have stolen again my father from me. By lying with him, you have stolen again my father, forced / him
HOR —————	My father. My son.
HAM (cont.) —————	to walk unshriven through the back alleys and shadows of this kingdom, until there is not a corner of this place, not a cell, that is not haunted by his anguish.

GERT

Speak no more. (Working draft, December 1-4, 2020)

While there is not the opportunity here to go into the full details of the experimental protocol I followed, it was guided by a handful of critical principles:

- The suppression not only of an author-God imposing a plan or design on the emerging text but also an integrative-author; that is, that aspect of the author within a textual system that orchestrates or oversees, without unduly controlling, the emergence of the text's "overall identity or pattern of organisation" (Capra & Luisi, 2016, p. 255);
- the recreation, if possible, of the fractal nature of cancer, in particular the principles of recursion and self-similarity that are evident in cancer's underlying architecture (Baish & Jain, 2000);
- the accumulation of error that characterises cancer, as well as the fact that cancer does not invade (a misinterpretation that permeated my first cancer-*Hamlet* experiment), but rather reproduces from within.

Using the "recovered" *Hamlet*, I proceeded with the same process of transcribing the text that I had used in the initial failed experiment; that is, typing the text over and over through a number of iterations, thereby modelling DNA replication. However, the transcription was done at speed; I typed as fast as I could physically manage and exponentially faster than during the first experiment. Typographical errors generated random substitution mutations within the text. As in a normal cell, some of these errors could be automatically repaired (through Microsoft Word's autocorrect function) while others prevailed. Insert mutations were generated using randomly sourced fragments of other texts or through random thoughts that would surface as I typed. The protocol might best be characterised as "don't think, don't correct" (Journal entry, December 5, 2020), just type as fast as your fingers will go. When I finished copying the text I would follow the same procedure of transcription, using one iteration as the seed text for the next iteration.

Over the course of the experiment as a whole (a period of just over five months), close to one hundred different iterations were completed. Some iterations resulted from the protocol described above, while others emanated from variations of this protocol. For example, in later phases of the experiment, mutation errors were introduced through the use of Word's dictation function, using different soliloquies from *Hamlet* as the seed texts. The dictation was further muddled through the concurrent playing (on the same computer into which I was dictating the text) of either filmed versions of *Hamlet* or lectures on cancer biology.

The repetition (over the months of daily transcriptions) of the mutation and reiteration protocol resulted in five streams of text. In the final phase of the experiment, I returned to the "cut, burn, hope" protocol, endeavouring to excise some living performance text from within the textual chaos generated through the cancerous processes I had applied. That is, I determined that in

order to find life within the accretion of textual material, it was necessary to invoke the integrative-author who would approach the system as a surgeon approaches a cancerous mass. The principal guide as I worked was to find within these clumps some emergent meaning, even if that meaning was only evident to the “speaker” of the texts: “where the speaker knows their own mind absolutely, even if the expression of that mind/being is baffling to anyone else” (Journal entry, April 4, 2021). In this case, the sensibility of the emergent speaker – a Beckettian figure sitting in a dark room watching his mother die – fed into the work, becoming a muted top-down effect on the transcription process, interpreting meaning and discerning which elements to cut and which to allow to stand.

As a process, the “cut, burn, hope” protocol runs counter to the idea of cutting the tumour from the body. Rather, it is an attempt to disclose the body, the life, upon which the tumour has grown; to “offer a little creative differentiation without damaging the effect of the proliferation [and without imposing] anything that isn’t already there” (Journal entry, April 11, 2021).

The example below indicates something of this “cut, burn, hope” protocol. The example begins with the third iteration of the recovered *Hamlet* text (discussed above), and demonstrates the two stages of “cut, burn, hope” that were applied to the text after it had been through a further two iterations, each iteration arising from the transcription process through which cancer was modelled within the textual system.

Iteration #3

Who’s there the rhythmy things that move with you nay answer me stand and infold
two cloks together discovered long lie the dreamsnad flitting monster the irish
remember he you come most carefull ypon your hour it’s just struck twelve taking them
seriously its consequences extraordinary deams you come most careufooll ypon your
hour it’s just struck twlve gor you from bed

First stage of “cut, burn, hope”

Silence
Just struck twelve
Turn the other way, I tell myself, and it would all be different – whatever one thinks.
All of time sitting there like drops in a bucket.
My God, he would say, will it never end.
It grows within for a finish. Grows and grows. A ghost in the blood.
Standing there one moment, gone the next. And the papers the next day.
Who’s there?

Final stage of “cut, burn, hope”

Unfold.

Just twelve.

Bitter cold. Sick at heart. At gut. At lung. At throat.

But a piece of me yet. Fluttering still. Ghost-bird of a thing.

Are you there?

[*Silence.*]

No longer watch the hours. The minutes now. Dull thud of them as they pass. Holding fast to the silence between.

There's a light on the edge of time there. You need to squint hard to see it. Neither morning nor night. You could slice a knife along its margin. Let all the ghost-birds free. Listen.

The experiment culminated in the emergence of a performance text *Self Portrait / In Cross Sections / With Bird* (hereafter *Self Portrait* [Stubbings, 2021b]). Crucially, the embodiment of cancer I experienced during the experiment was not what it might feel like to *have* cancer, but rather what it might feel like to *be* cancer (a point I develop below).

Cancer as (embodied) energy

There is no single mutation, no single event, which causes cancer. It has, rather, a cumulative pathology (Bertolaso, 2016) and the same might be said of the composition of *Self Portrait*. It was not a play that emerged out of a single moment of inspiration, a single linear creative process; it emerged from a succession of moments, of errors, catching and reiterating until there was a cluster, a system of sufficient energy and momentum to drive the writing towards its culmination. Vitally, this process depended on an understanding of cancer biology that hinged on the imbalance within cancer of cell proliferation and cell differentiation, an imbalance which demanded that the integrative-author and the author-God be as far removed from the emergence of the text as possible. As such, it was essentially the errors that occurred through the textual transcription – the frenetic speed of the typing and the deficiencies of the Word dictation function – which propelled the development of the work, even when there was no knowing “what sort of mess [might] emerge on the other side” (Journal entry, December 10, 2020).

The creative system by which the writing was being generated (a system characterised by rapid typing and/or a faulty dictation function, both of which allowed for the accumulation of error) was able to replicate the effect of cancer – to become cancerous in such a way that it “excavat[ed] and ‘liberat[ed]’” cancer’s “intrinsic quality” (Roesner, 2014, p. 9) – through my embodiment of (what felt to me to be) the energy of cancer; through my *becoming* (as I noted above) cancer. In my experience, this embodiment was defined by metaphors and images that emphasise cancer’s momentum, acceleration and relentlessness – and it was this same energy that I endeavoured to capture within the transcription process:

What I feel ... is not a cancer that is corrupting an individual [as I felt in my initial flawed experiment] ... rather as I work I am the cancer [and]... the writing that rushes out is the cancer ... It is a thing in and of itself – not a thing attached to, or existing within ... the flesh ... of something besides itself. (Journal entry, December 14, 2020)

However, during the final stage of *Self Portrait*'s transition from addled text to something performable, I noted the difficulty of “embodying the cancer – of feeling that sense of cancer within me” (Journal entry, April 13, 2021) as I cut through the cancer looking for any sort of meaning or pattern, and this perhaps accounts for an increase in the word count of the text between my two applications of the final “cut, burn, hope” protocol. I was, as author, creating a layer of comprehensibility around the words, almost as though I was ensuring a good periphery of healthy flesh around the emergent life represented in the text before it could be cut back to its absolute essence (a distorted echo of the cancer surgeon's efforts to ensure that nothing of the cancer is left in the flesh surrounding the tumour). What it is vital to note here is that when I speak of comprehensibility, I am speaking of things that are comprehensible to the speaker of the text, if not to his audience. This became a way for me to navigate the straits between the integrity of the system and its collapse; between meaning and incomprehensibility. That is, it became the speaker who needed to be able to recognise within the text – within the cancer – a life intact and whole. What the audience – or even the nominal author of the text – understood of that life became, within this system, a secondary concern. Nonetheless, as author of the text I needed to manipulate the cancerous formations of text such that the speaker might somehow reveal themselves. How to facilitate that transition within the text from something that was moving towards death to something that was moving towards life was my principal concern during the final phases of the experiment.

Finding life within death

Throughout my work on this cancer-Hamlet experiment, there was an ever-present tension: How long do I let this cancerous process drive the creativity before I assert some manner of authorial control? Does a biologically driven mode of composition demand complete abdication of the author-God's prerogative to determine the final form of the work, or is there a moment in the evolution of the work where the author might step in and mould the clump of developing cells “in their own image”? In essence: “Can a cancer dramaturgy, pushed through to its endpoint, really be compatible with a living piece of theatre – when by definition *a cancerous dramaturgy must always be on the verge of dying*” (Journal entry, April 1, 2021).

Turner writes of the “difficulty of holding meanings open ... in the face of audience expectations of narrative” (2009, p. 113) and this was a constant weight as I wrote: How far can I push this text such that it will still connect with an audience? And who might that audience be? The second half of that question I am yet to resolve, but it seemed to me imperative that, in order to be true to a cancerous dramaturgy, it is necessary that the living organism of the text be “constructed so as to maintain the coherence of its structure and functions for as long as

possible against the odds that threaten it” (Damasio, 2019, p. 36). I wanted to find within the clumps of text something that existed just at that pivot point where life threatens to break down entirely: where the writing may be on the verge of death – of complete semantic collapse – but, like the biological body, “fights to stay alive long after its arbitrary sentence has been passed” (Thomson, 2019, p. 35).

To discover the life within the text I needed first to discover its purpose: its reason for being (Nurse, 2020). And as part of that discovery of purpose it seemed necessary to discern whatever patterns or motifs might be concealed within the textual chaos (example below). This was the impetus for returning to the “cut, burn, hope” protocol that I had used at the beginning of the experiment. I reasoned that such an approach might enable the removal of enough of the cancer that the system would teeter more towards life than death.

The following example shows the progress of the text through two iterations, as well as the effect of the application of the surgical “cut, burn, hope” protocol.

Self Portrait, *iteration #15*

16 squared party you are the inflation matrix said more than he Mr developer skeleton lawyer as cells but so it is normal

Self Portrait, *iteration #16*

who would die time inflation may trigger something after death said more than he Mr developer who's born skeleton lawyer as cells but so it is normal

Self Portrait, *first “cut, burn, hope”*

My thinking is that if you die in time the inflation of hours triggers something after death that says more of the developments you’ve gone through since birth. And if some skeleton lawyer can’t argue your case with whoever you happen upon on the other side of it all then what’s the point anyway.

Self Portrait, *second “cut, burn, hope”*

My thinking, you see – this is what I says to her – my thinking is that if you die in time, the inflation of hours triggers something after death that reflects in a kinder light all you’ve gone through since birth. And if some skeleton lawyer can’t argue your case with whoever you happen upon on the other side of it all then what was the point of it all anyway.

My use of the “cut, burn, hope” protocol in this final stage of *Self Portrait*’s composition (as noted above) represented a significant shift from processes by which cancer is generated to processes by which cancer is eradicated, one that was reflected in an experiential shift from the embodied energy of cancer to the embodied energy of the surgeon; from rampant growth forces to a (partial) revival of those forces which sought to coordinate that growth. Nevertheless, I attempted through these final revisions to maintain something of cancer’s pathological energy by employing quick and time-limited “cutting” to discourage any tendency towards conscious design. Vitally, I was no longer looking to find *Hamlet* within the clumps of text, but rather the inherent meaning – or purpose – of the tumours erupting out of the remnant traces of the cancerous disease which had sullied *Hamlet* in my initial experiment. The effect was something that, in hindsight, might be likened to the frottage technique adopted by artists such as Max Ernst, whose artworks – derived from rubbings made over blocks of wood – I had seen in the period prior to beginning work on the experiments at an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria [3]. Relevant here is the way Ernst’s process allowed him to find natural forms within the shapes and textures suggested by the rubbings [4]. Also relevant is pareidolia or “patternicity”: the human tendency to perceive patterns or meaning within meaningless noise – the patterns we discover in such noise tending to be the patterns we have evolved to discern (Shermer, 2008). In my own application of “cut, burn, hope” the patterns of life discerned within the noise corresponded – at least in the first instance – with the voice that manifested through the phases of the experiment.

Throughout the transcription process I experienced a voice emerging from within the writing, a “character” who was staging their life story within my imagination, endeavouring to make sense of all the textual noise that was being generated by the cancerous process; the textual tumult that comes of gathering a life’s experience into a limited parcel of time; of finding within that experience its essential purpose:

I can hear him more and more as I write – can hear him falling over words and memories, can hear his disdain for elements of his past, his confusion about the worth of his own life, that he is speaking for what he knows will be the last time. (Journal entry, January 6, 2021)

However, very little of what I “heard” in my imagination was replicated in the transcribed text – it existed only as subtext, as an echo within the textual system. Fragments of this subtext punched their way through, but most subtextual material was bypassed because of the sheer speed of transcription. There was, therefore, a constant tension between the text playing out in my imagination as I typed and the text appearing on the screen. There was also the tension of hearing satisfying lines of dialogue playing out in my imagination while all the time knowing “so many of them are getting lost in translation, my fingers not accurately catching at the words moving through my head” (Journal entry, December 29, 2020).

Despite its refusal to fully reveal itself in the physical text, this voice became a significant integrative factor, intermittently pushing back against the noise of the cancerous text. For example, it was my sense of the speaker behind the voice, of who he must be, that began to influence which fragments of mutant text caught my eye as I glanced down at the pages open on my desk (Journal entry, January 6, 2021), as well as how illegible words within the text might be transcribed. That is, the rhythms of the man's speech began to work their way into the transcription, in "the way words and sentences form and float and break" (Journal entry, January 21, 2021). Further, it was this old man's private inner narrative, his version of history, which made sense of the errors in the text as though he was the mechanism "inside the cells doing the best they can to repair the damaged DNA" (Journal entry, March 9, 2021).

The example below demonstrates the proliferation of "cancer" through the text as it went through the iterative process of aural transcription as well as the "cut, burn, hope" surgery that gave rise to the final version of the text.

Dictated iteration #2

sweet Flowers how came he did ocean over peering the list how all occasions do inform
against me tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day divided himself in his fair judgement
follow him clothes

Dictated iteration #4

sweet Flowers became heated ocean pier over the best whole occasions do perform
against him tomorrow Saint Valentine's Day divided himself in his her judgement
follow him clothes

First "cut, burn, hope"

Sweet flowers.
The heated ocean peels back from the earth, readies to strike hard against us.
Tomorrow is St Valentine's day.
Divided himself in judgement.
Follow him.

Second "cut, burn, hope"

There is no room left now for being.
Tomorrow is St Valentine's Day.
Five stars are not a constellation.
When we fall through time we only believe we are falling forward. (Stubbings, 2021a)

The turning off – or at least dimming down – of the organisational function of the author, which was elemental to the cancerous process adopted in this experiment, meant that for much of the process I felt like this man was the only thing resisting the inexorable march of the cancer towards death and anchoring the transcription in life. Therefore, whenever I was not physically writing I clung to him, listening to him and watching him move within the textual system in the hope that he would somehow take charge when I was actually transcribing; that he would intervene in order to give the work some sense of order and structure, to pull it back from the chaos, even when I was prohibited from doing so (Journal entry, March 9, 2021). By spending imaginative time with him, I hoped to:

catch that post-dream feeling ... that is a little like stepping off a boat after a long time at sea, where you can still feel the movement of the waves in your body, and your movements are responding to the physical sense of something that is not actually there. (Journal entry, March 9, 2021)

This man's presence in my imagination during the compositional process leading to *Self Portrait* provokes several questions. From where does the integrative force – at least as much of an integrative force as exists within a cancerous dramaturgy – come? Does it reside in me or in the speaker/s of the text? And what is our relationship? Are we, in the end, one and the same person? My instinct is to resist any theorisation of practice which suggests that we might be one and the same, but at the same time I recognise that this man is an entity which is somehow present in the bloodlines – *my* bloodlines as well as those faint traces remaining of *Hamlet* – that the creative writing has inevitably betrayed. In this, he might be read as a disposition impressed within the textual system by my genealogy: my cultural, emotional and family histories (as well as my own relationship with *Hamlet*) underscoring the particularities – the shapes and motifs – of the dramaturgy I discerned within the clumps of text.

While there is not the space here to examine the relevant cognitive factors behind this effect, my experience of this reaching for meaning within the cancer was of searching for the “blood supply ... that might speak to what is feeding this thing” (Journal entry, April 11, 2021). What I was instinctively looking for within the clumps of text as I applied the “cut, burn, hope” protocol was what Alison refers to as a “network of meaning” (2019, p. 23) or “vectors of association” (p. 190), where the momentum of the text is not so much driving towards an Aristotelian resolution as towards “illumination” (p. 200). In this, the connection between the cancerous text and the audience might be revealed *via* an “intermediality of phenomenology” (Vanden Heuval, 2013, p. 366) that has its nucleus in the speaker of the text. I was looking for “something that holds it all together – that forms the formlessness and undifferentiated-ness of the cancer – that defines it – that gives it some pattern that has, if not a semantic effect, then at least an affective effect” (Journal entry, March 9, 2021).

It may be that an answer to the question of my relationship with the speaker lies in the writing itself: “Once [he] was submerged in my cells. Now I am submerged in [his]” (Stubbings,

2021b, p. 2), an image which returns us to the biological notion of the nested levels of the organism working cooperatively to achieve their joint purpose (Damasio, 2019; Jaeger, 2017), the author slipping between modes of being in order to facilitate creative life. We are, this “character” and I, integral parts of the same system, both of us needing to work together in order to exist – what Virginia Woolf refers to as a “synthesis of my being ... [which] only writing composes” (as cited in Lee, 1997, p. 5). Concomitantly, the speaker can never be whole unless he is being written: “character” and “author”, as well as text, engage in a mutual coming into being. And there is (if I am honest) something in the final features of *Self Portrait* suggestive of a malformed version of my own experience – a distortion of self that is a little like looking in a recurved mirror – that supports this notion of mutual emergence and the foundational presence of my own experience within the textual system.

Beyond a cancerous model of composition

There is within the text of *Self Portrait*, I suggest, the same disintegration of both representation (the physical manifestation of the disease) and the writing self (its emotional and psychological manifestation) that I imagine is felt by the cancer patient. Lobel (2019) argues that engaging performatively with cancer is often a quest to discover a new language by which the performer might represent their diagnosis and what it means for their understanding of self, a quest often accompanied by the pressure to transform the cancer “journey” into a neat, redemptive narrative. Similarly, Stacey demonstrates how these coherent narratives act as counterweights to the “uncertainties” generated by a cancer diagnosis (1997, p. 9). Even so, these narratives cannot completely conceal the “chaos ... disorder ... [and] pain” (pp. 14–15) that cancer represents.

Here it needs to be acknowledged that my own engagement with cancer biology does not – and cannot – encapsulate the literal embodiment of cancer that such narratives tend to represent. Working with cancer dramaturgically rather than thematically, imaginatively rather than physically, allows for a defiance of this (psychological and social) pressure to construct a self-affirming, ordered narrative. It is the cancer itself which determines the narrative and by its very nature that narrative will seem disordered, even at times incomprehensible. However, it is a disintegration of representation, of the writing self, that comes, I suggest, with its own reconfiguration. What I experienced in the text that emerged through its various iterations was not an irredeemable fragmentation but rather something that was becoming whole and integrated in and of itself. Significantly, in order to “see” this emergent form, I needed to let go of what I hoped the text might become – the vision of an old man standing alone on a beach recollecting his own attempts to play *Hamlet* who I had envisioned speaking the text through its initial iterations – and find instead the life, the purpose, in what was coming into being, even in the face of (or perhaps because of) a cancer-driven textual death. As it came into being that life spoke not of a man recollecting *Hamlet* but, as I indicate above, a man sitting at his mother’s death bed.

What has come into focus for me through the course of this experiment is a tendency within biologically driven modes of composition to move beyond the fragmentary meta-narratives and theatricalities that mark the postmodern and postdramatic and towards a reclamation – even revitalisation – of literary form that re-entwines text, narrative, meaning and theatre as a “series of parallel skeins” (Gibbons, 2017). What this entails is a shift away from a focus on the “essential incongruity of human experience and its representation” (Funk, 2015, p. 4) and a circling back to a narrative or dramatic coherence which “is founded on an attitude of confidence in the power of sign systems to actually convey experience” (p. 5), a process Campos gestures towards when she notes that “science ... allows contemporary practitioners to move beyond postmodern and postdramatic fragmentation” (2013, p. 304) without offering specific pathways by which this might occur. My own sense of this process of reclamation is perhaps best captured in Virginia Woolf’s *A Letter to a Young Poet* in which she advises:

your task [is] to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity. To absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly, and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole and not a fragment. (Woolf, as cited in Winterson, 1996, p. 85)

Despite the occasional urge to let my own cancer-*Hamlet* experiment die – “Let it be done with and wait to see if any of its little corpses re-emerge in some later work” (Journal entry, April 13, 2021) – I reminded myself that what I was trying to capture through the experiment was “something that exists in the interstices between life and death – that is both living and dying – and the judgement call will be whether [it has] tipped too far in one or other direction” (Journal entry, April 13, 2021). It is within these same interstices between life and death that emergence might be said to be situated and it is within the phenomenon of emergence, I suggest, that biologically driven modes of composition are able to push beyond the postdramatic and postmodern and reinvigorate the “withered material” (Lehmann, 2014, p. 313) of literary form.

Biological life emerges through the optimal interaction of environmental, structural and organisational forces, the emergent property that is life arising from “specific patterns of organisation” (Capra & Luisi, 2016, p. 35) within the developing organism. Crucially, “[l]ife ... is not present in the [constituent] parts” (p. 133) of the organism. Rather, it arises only from the “configurations of ordered relationships among [those] parts” (p. 35). In cancer biology, the imbalance between chaos and order pushes the organismic system towards either total collapse and the “submergence of [emergent] properties” (Sigston & Williams, 2017, p. 4), or there occurs a “transformation [which] results in the emergence of a new ‘system’” (p. 4). This resistance of textual and semantic collapse and the “qualitative leap” (p. 4) towards a “new” system might be likened to Winterson’s account of modernism: “[rebuilding] new possibilities” out of chaos (1996, p. 50), or Serres’s reference to the “new cycle” that emanates from the “old [and] mortal” (1982, p. 117). It manifests in the transformation of *Self Portrait* from several clumps of largely undifferentiated, fragmentary, dying texts to a meaningful, emergent, living

whole; that process of transformation driven by the coherent experiences of the speaker who emerged – concurrently with the text and the author of *Self Portrait* – out of and through the transcription process and their own “confidence in the power [of their words] to actually convey” their own internally coherent “experience” (Funk, 2015, p. 5), recognising that with respect to “the energy of being, the refusal of finality ... is not the same ... as the refusal of completeness” (Winterson, 1996, p. 19).

“To the speaker,” I noted in my journal, “this is not fragmentary – to the speaker this is complete and whole” (Journal entry, April 3, 2021). Finding that speaker and realising his emergent voice depended, I argue, on a dramaturgical process modelled on organismic biological systems, one that allowed for the reconstitution of the text’s elemental and apparently disjointed parts into a “network of meaning” (Alison, 2019, p. 23) and a complex and coherent whole.

Conclusion

The compositional practice which underpinned the emergence of the performance text *Self Portrait / In Cross-Sections / With Bird* was modelled on the fundamental imbalance in cancer biology between cell proliferation and cell differentiation. Further, the text’s composition was actuated by the removal of myself – as integrative-author and, thereby, the facilitator of cell differentiation – as far as it was possible to do so, from the composition of the writing. To this end, I pursued generative writing techniques which favoured an accumulation of error and a subsequent intensification of disorder within the text.

The result of this writing process was a series of tumours, each of them a clump of chaotic and apparently meaningless text. The resolution of these tumours into a living performance text was facilitated through a “cut, burn, hope” protocol which sought to emulate surgical responses to cancer. In applying this protocol, a number of questions ensued regarding the balance between (creative) life and death within a cancerous mode of creative composition, and whether it is ever possible for a piece of writing that embodies cancer through its duplication of the destructive energy of cancer – one that seeks to replicate the chaos and inevitable collapse inherent within cancer biology – to “live” as a (performance) text.

Drawing on an understanding of the emergent nature of cancer biology, I theorised that what emerged from my own experiment with cancerous compositional modes – and from the imminent textual collapse demonstrated by the cluster of tumours generated through the experiment – was a coherence that revealed itself within the patterns or networks of meaning inherent within the tumours. Further, those networks of meaning emerged in concert with a voice or “character” who synthesised the disparate elements of the text into an internally integrated experience which the “cut, burn, hope” protocol initiated in order to set him free and let him live. Crucially, this “character” participated in the same mutual coming-into-being as that which incorporates the author and the text. In looking beyond cancerous models of

composition, I suggest that biologically driven compositional techniques may potentially facilitate a reconfiguration that pushes literary and dramatic form beyond the postmodern/postdramatic.

Notes

[1] References given as dates refer to my journal notes recorded during the period of work on the experiment.

[2] This flawed experiment resulted in a performance text called *Blood & Shadow* (Stubbings, 2021a, pp. 327–403).

[3] *MoMA: 130 Years of Modern and Contemporary Art from the Museum of Modern Art*, New York [Exhibition]. (2018). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

[4] Surrealist and Dadaist discourse concerning the agency of the author and the role of chance in creative practice (for example, Susik, 2016) are relevant to some of the ideas around chance that I touch on here; however, any exploration of these connections is beyond the scope of this thesis.

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