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Kevin and I ride to St Albans

Abstract:

What if writing turns out to be an unconscious rewriting of other writing, and what's more, in the domain of nonfiction, what if the autobiographical lived experiences of the writer, upon which he or she reports, also turn out to be re-versions of the autobiographical lived experiences of other writers? This essay explores questions of mimesis, memory and metaphor, through a retracing of textual paths staged in dialogue with diverse writerly influences including Nicholson Baker, Nick Flynn, Jorge Luis Borges, W.G. Sebald and Sigmund Freud. It attempts — or essays — to excavate the implications and trajectories of an unconscious act of writerly repetition. A writer sets out upon a bicycle through the suburbs, towards a class of writing students who await him. He later recounts aspects of this journey, transforming it into metaphor through writing. A second writer reads the subsequent published work. The writing soaks into his being, and he forgets all about it. Some years later, he happens to set out on almost exactly the same journey by bicycle as that travelled by the first writer. He too writes about it; he too mines the experience for its metaphorical significance. Then he discovers what he's done and where he's actually been.

Biographical Note:

David Carlin is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at RMIT University and co-director of RMIT's nonfictionLab research group. He is also co-chair of the international NonfictionNOW Conference. His widely acclaimed memoir *Our father who wasn't there* (Scribe) was published in 2010. His creative nonfiction, essays and articles have appeared in *Griffith Review*, *Overland*, *Text*, *Newswrite*, *Victorian Writer*, *Continuum* and other journals. He currently leads the *Circus Oz Living Archive* project and has previously written and directed for theatre, film and circus.

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Nonfiction – Mimesis – Identification – Creativity – Memoir – Forgetting – Memory – Imitation – Reenactment

Write blindly. I note: *he writes blindly*. No, in the beginning he *wrote* blindly; that's what he told the creative writing class in St Albans the day he rode there on his bicycle.

Issue one, number one. In the beginning, it turns out (this beginning), there was Kevin.

Nicholson Baker's book *U & I* (1991) enacts Baker's obsession with the famed fellow-American writer John Updike, in a dizzying feat of controlled hysteria. Baker picks apart everything he as a (then) up-and-coming writer shares with the older Updike, including precocious publication in the *New Yorker* and the affliction of psoriasis, as well as those things that separate them, such as Baker's premature hair loss and lack of proficiency at golf. Moreover he harnesses all this jokiness and triviality in a wild jalopy driving across the loftier topic of literary influence. These things run in chains, he says: his own bonnet-bee about Updike chimes (more or less modestly) with Updike's own preoccupation with Nabokov and before that Nabokov's with Proust, and Proust's with Henry James — or is that Henry James's with Proust? (I parade my ignorance on this latter point in happy if skewed imitation of Baker himself, who, for instance, admits that although any capital-C critic of his Updike project would necessarily cast it in the grand shadow of Harold Bloom's weighty volume *The anxiety of influence*, he has never read his required Bloom and has no intention of doing so now *for fear that the book would take me over*.) One thing is clear with Baker's particular chain of influence: it appears to be a boy thing. Like metaphorical literary father, like Oedipal son.

Nicholson Baker is hyper-conscious of Updike's literary influence upon him. But what about those influences we forget?

I will try to explain: I had been working on a book about my friend S and her remarkable life as an Ethiopian/Australian circus performer. S lives in St Albans. For the book we'd had many face-to-face conversations over several years and some of these at her house, and on this occasion *I had the idea* that it would be a pleasant and fun, not to mention healthy, adventure to ride my bicycle to visit her, alongside the Maribyrnong River.

So far, so good, but as it transpired the Maribyrnong River has rather more twists and turns than I had anticipated and about halfway to St Albans the riverside bike path I had been relying on to deliver me to a park near S's house abruptly stopped and I had no alternative, other than to retreat or to carry the bike on my shoulders, but to divert into what became a confounding labyrinth of backstreets, dead ends and walled-off freeways. Eventually I arrived safely but the experience had been both exhausting and existentially ludicrous enough to be firmly lodged in my memory, and some weeks or months later *I had another idea*, as I was wondering where to go next with my manuscript. I would write about my crazy bike-riding journey. I wasn't quite sure why this was a good idea, but as the story unfolded in prose it began to link with reading I had been doing for the book about the European colonialist "scramble for

Africa” of the late 19th-century and the misadventuresome blundering journeys into foreign territory of those such as the English opportunist Henry Morton Stanley. Riding along the Maribyrnong and into a suburban jungle, with who-knew-what projections of S’s ‘African soul’ bumping around in my bike-helmeted post-European head, wasn’t I a teensy bit like those guys, who could have been my great-great-grandfathers?

Well, this all worked out swimmingly, at least by my standards (if not by Nicholson Baker’s, let alone John Updike’s, etc.), so much so that I published the chapterette as a stand-alone essay in a magazine and people praised it (the essay) for its craft and expression, and possibly (I’d like to think so anyway) for its witty, ironic and *original* conceit.

So far, even better.

A couple of years later, following a train of thought now (appropriately) lost to me, I came across by chance an essay written by the poet, novelist and essayist Kevin Brophy, published in the journal *TEXT (Vol 1 No 1)* more than a decade before my own. That essay is entitled, eerily, as it transpired: *Endings: reproducing originality*. Glancing at the essay I experienced the vertiginous shock of familiarity with what I had once known but since evidently forgotten. In his essay, Brophy (if we can retain this surnamely distance for a moment), tells the story of *his own* bicycle ride up the Maribyrnong River towards none other than St Albans (although, N.B.: not to S’s house, that would be toooo weird; instead to a University that was hosting the aforementioned creative writing class) and *his own* crisis when the bike path ceased, and crafts *his own* writerly co-option of the experience for its metaphorical significance. The only distinction between Kevin’s trip and mine a decade later is that (a) he departed from the river on its left-hand bank and found himself on the Ballarat Road whereas I exited to the right and struggled to the Western Ring Road; and (b) his journey became a metaphor for one of his favourite concerns, the nature of creativity, demonstrating that even though one consults maps (as he says, ‘in the forms of assumptions, rules, craft or techniques’) and starts with a rough plan when setting out on a creative task, one never knows what one will come across along the zigzag path of the work itself — whereas I was pursuing my postcolonial *Heart of Darkness* riff, as described above.

I had read Kevin’s essay, on some occasion years before. I had loved it precisely for the deft way he had entwined the micro-momentous personal anecdote with his larger theme. I might even have thought: that’s the type of essay I’d like to write one day.

But then, conveniently, I forgot about the whole thing. So that, at every point in what now can be viewed as my *re-enactment* of Kevin’s ride and subsequent essayist reflections upon it, I remained unencumbered by Kevin’s literary shadow, blissfully innocent and convinced that I was first having and then reporting upon an authentic and, dare I say, original life experience.

Now I look again at Kevin’s essay: *Creativity*, he writes at one point, *is an act already*

mapped out, already begun in imitation. In fact, can I quote some more? It is all surprisingly pertinent:

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'.

This is a touch strange, is it not? The very essay from which I have unconsciously purloined and restaged a personal life experience to subsequently transform into artistic fodder is an explicit discussion of the role of copying in creativity. Kevin is arguing that creativity is more complex and paradoxical than we might think: for a work of art to be recognized as 'original' or 'creative' it needs to fit to a greater or lesser extent within a pre-established generic mould. If you set out on a path that is nowhere near those of any of your predecessors you are more likely to be considered mad or eccentric than a creative talent. This is somehow reassuring; perhaps my unconscious 'copying' is not so strange. I can't help but feel that this essay is talking to me directly, that it has been written for me twice over.

But what strikes me, over and over, is the nonfictional status of my imitation. Riding to St Albans, although it felt at the time like a spontaneous choice I had made as an autonomous individual, was an act *already mapped out*. Even getting lost, which was certainly not part of any ingenious plan I might have had to add spice to an ordinary nonfictional day, turned out to be an act *already mapped out*. This leads me to wonder what other vivid life events I might have experienced or am about to experience, only to discover that Kevin, or — who knows, perhaps Nicholson Baker — has been there first?

Needless to say, my reaction at my involuntary reacquaintance with Kevin's fine originating text (which, as I've alluded to, was, quasi-Biblically, the very first article published in the first issue of the now distinguished journal *TEXT* and is thus in some sense the ur-text of *TEXT* itself, the text of texts...) was one of equally involuntary deep dismay. I was not overjoyed to find myself doubly colonialist with my implicit claims to the literary *terra nullius* of the greater Maribyrnong basin exposed as an entry into territory already inhabited and storied. My apparently authentic experience, even the twists and turns in its psycho-geographic narrative, were, as it turned (and twisted) out, an embodied inking-in of a path I had already traced years earlier in my mind as a reader of Kevin's essay, a path which had in the interim become eroded and finally vanished, apparently just in time for me to stumble upon it as if anew.

Nick Flynn has recently published a memoir, *The reenactments*, which describes what it was like to witness his own life re-enacted by movie stars; to watch his alcoholic father stumbling in the snowy streets of New York as played by the actor Robert De Niro, working from the script of a memoir (*Another bullshit night in suck city*) Flynn had written previously. He reflects upon the uncanny doubling, or trebling effect of seeing his memories of traumatic childhood events acted back at him from inside out.

This again, through antithesis, helps to define the Maribyrnong Case, because far from setting out consciously to re-enact Kevin's bicycling experience so as to bring it to life moment by moment (every naturalistic actor's goal) and perhaps afterwards even to reproduce word for word Kevin's essay itself, not by copying but through the precision and depth of my reenactment, as Borges's character Pierre Menard managed with the Cervantes classic Don Quixote (in the story, *Pierre Menard...*); far from this I set out blindly, oblivious to Kevin's beetling slipstream.

But ironies pile upon Oedipal ironies, because Kevin, during a time after the writing of his essay but before the writing of mine, was my Ph.D. supervisor on a (separate) creative writing project about memory and narrative that led to the publication of a memoir. It was called *Our father who wasn't there* and it was about my absent father and the long repressed memory of him.

Paul Connerton has written a scholarly article with the seductive title: *Seven types of forgetting*. My own lifelong fascination with memory stems not only from the (ur-) fact that I have always felt like I began life having forgotten something important (that something being my father who died when I was six months old — the nitpicking reality that six months is too young to retain memories of anything is neither here nor there, especially for those whose worldview is more or less psychoanalytically inflected, as is mine and, as a matter of fact, Kevin's) but also because the strangeness of what I am able to forget, or find incapable of remembering, only increases the older I get. I hem my way down Connerton's Types. Some of them apply to forgetting at the more programmatic level of the nation state or the corporation. Like: forgetting 'we' (the Allies) carpet bombed Dresden or, on the more positive side of the ledger, forgetting centuries of enmity and agreeing to buddy up (viz post-war France and Germany). Connerton's Type 3 might be closest to home: *Forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity*. Forgetting need not involve simply a loss, Connerton reminds us. The forgetting of details about a former stage of life (a former relationship or religious adherence, for instance) might be prudent and healthy, he argues, during a subsequent stage of life. As a writer of personal essays and various forms of memoir, my apparently direct experience of the world and all its objects and my reflections upon that experience are my raw material. I need as much as I can get. And perhaps experience is all the richer when it retraces paths of significance already laid out in the culture, just as, as Kevin argues in his essay, creative work retraces and overlays established tracks. If I need to forget a story so that I can live it as if for the first time, if I need to forget what I am inspired by so that I can discover, even if deluded, something new, this is surely an aspect of what Kevin calls *the shadow side of creativity*.

Q: Is it the forgetting or the imitation that is shameful? *Imitatio* was the ancient Roman term for the Greek concept mimesis. *Imitatio*, as Matthew Potolsky explains in his book *Mimesis*, refers to the crucial role imitation plays in the creative process; the artist, the Romans believed, should study closely the work of his (sic) artistic role models so that his own work could be more culturally legible and resonant, refracting

rather than ignoring the antecedents of its tradition. Whether this refraction was to be put to conservative or radical effect, *imitatio* was considered a skill to be cultivated. Freud's concept of the unconscious, which persists in our culture like the elephant under the floorboards despite the popular ridiculing of his kinky Viennese theories, leads us away from the flow of conscious imitation across generations out into the confusing and badly signposted, the misleadingly blank bitumen surfaces of what we do despite ourselves. This is mimesis recast as involuntary and unwitting. Freud's term for this was identification. If I can take license here to vastly oversimplify (refer to Laplanche and Pontalis for an entry to the finer points), Freud said that identification with role models is a normal and inevitable part of life but one over which we have no choice and about which we remain clueless. Acts or choices we make apparently independently and of our own volition turn out to be in unconscious imitation of those who come to stand in for our primal role models, our parents. Hmm. Where's Kevin? Is that him pedaling off around a corner?

Riding, riding, writing blindly. Only blindly is it possible to write. The writer must forget and forget and forget again, to stumble upon the illusion of invention. I often look idly at the work of another writer and marvel that there are so many ways to put words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs that here once again a recognisably new formation has been etched. This might sound ridiculous since for the opposite to be true would return us to the Borgesian parable of sublime and perfect imitation (viz. Pierre Menard), or at the other extreme to the uncanny spectre of purely unconscious mimesis: what if you were to write a sentence only to discover afterwards that the very same sentence had been pre-scribed by another? Does this happen all the time?

Thinking of sentences and imitation leads me back to the writing of W. G. Sebald, who is never far away from my path. How many times have I marveled at the engineering of his sentences, their looping suspension, their rigorously anchored capacity to bend and flow and shimmer between here and there, and now and then. He also wrote about the ruinous echoes of the colonial encounter, in *Rings of Saturn*; he also wrote about the tricks the mind plays as the past continually intrudes upon the present. Sometimes I wonder: can I approach the poetry of a Sebaldian sentence without falling into the try-hard trap of mimicry?

Kevin, I remember now, loves sentences and has written about this love. He even keeps a collection of those sentences he finds particularly barbed, one way or another, with a Barthesian *punctum*, although whether this way of putting it (à la Barthes) is my gloss on Kevin's discussion or Kevin's own allusion I can't recall without digging out his article and, pace Nicholson Baker, I steadfastly refuse to do that because it's really not the point. It's certainly the type of thing Kevin *might* have written, or at least considered in a thoughtful way while for example munching on a sandwich by the banks of the Maribyrnong if he hadn't been under such pressure to get to class on time to deliver the secrets of creative invention. I mention this phantasmic morning tea of Kevin's because, just as in his essay he imagined his Maribyrnong path-riding

self split, projecting another version of it peacefully canoeing in the stream, for me in all new potential versions of my attempt at this suburban North-West Passage, I am not alone. Kevin is there, as I realize now he always was, and I am chasing after him like Alice the white rabbit and/or fleeing desperately his shadow.

Back then we were both lost, both in a hurry. His ending was to teach those eager for maps of storytelling, mine to listen to the foreign stories of my friend. I needed to allow myself to travel into unknown territory, to recognise the baggage I was carrying, to document as best I could all of my encounters. His students wanted answers for the problems of endings and beginnings. He could give them only stories. He gave me this story, or I took it, and buried it like a faithful dog in my mind's backyard. From there grew another story, which like a child woke blind as to its provenance.

Perhaps there might be other writers out there considering a bicycle ride from Melbourne's inner suburbs northwest toward St Albans. There could be any number of original attractions or obligations to draw you there. By all means, take the bike path following the river: nobody can say exactly what you'll find out there on any given day. And rest assured, you will make a path somehow, somewhere to St Albans. Only afterwards will the significance of your journey become apparent. Only afterwards will you recall the shadows and the truths that add up slant. I will be there. So will Kevin. And Emily Dickinson. You might come across a hot and sweaty Henry Morton Stanley crashing through wild fennel the council wants to spray. I will be there again, this time playing the role of Kevin. A further Kevin will be operating a further me with some kind of remote control. All of us will crowd into a peloton and disappear, like the White Rabbit, midsentence —

Now forget I ever mentioned this.

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Research Statement

Research background

Kevin rides to St Albans draws upon the tradition of the self-reflexive personal essay since Montaigne to ask: how do operations of artistic influence and forgetting play out together in the context of contemporary nonfiction writing? Questions of mimesis, imitation and artistic influence have been discussed, with regard to Western literature, since Plato and Aristotle. More recently these have been addressed through psychoanalytic and poststructuralist readings and concepts such as intertextuality. At the same time, in the developing field of memory studies, we find an array of analyses of the cultural and psychic constructs of memory and forgetting.

Research contribution

This essay addresses these concerns from a writerly perspective, and moreover within the particular issues of explicitly subjective nonfiction writing: issues such as the relation between narrative apprehension, witnessing, control and perspective. Notions of ‘authentic’ and ‘original’ experience are placed in question.

The essay attempts to formally, playfully stage the intertextual drama it discusses, within the metaphor of the labyrinthine journey, and with reference to the mythic figure of the blinded Oedipus.

Research significance

The essay discusses the connection between two previously published essays, the first by a well-known Australian writer/scholar in a leading international literary journal and the latter (by the author) in a widely circulated Australian literary magazine.