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The strange and the familiar: seeing beyond when we know

Abstract:

My novel is a collection of interrelated stories. Each story is framed by the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

As I draft and re-draft the stories, I am forced to assess the interaction between the voices. I am aware of the disjuncture, and I ask myself: Why not tell the story through the eyes of one narrator? Why not choose a third-person perspective, an omniscient narrator who might collect all of the voices together, in a coherent way?

As I second-guess my approach, I realise that the splintering of voices feels like the right way to tell the story and, in this way, I approach the question of methodology. I am aware that a sense of disjuncture arises out of the medley of voices, but I also realise that the disjuncture is carefully constructed; it is not accidental. This is an intuitive judgement.

If I edit my novel ethically, I ask what the discontinuity achieves, rather than how it fails in the context of logic. This means that I recognise that the narrative begins from a place that does not worry about logic, and I realise that second-guessing the surface content of the narrative, from a rational perspective, may be counterproductive.

The conscious mind, fettered as it is with inhibitions, may fail to see that the logical track is not necessarily the most productive route. The conscious mind may not recognise that going off-track is the way forward and, perhaps, the only way that the story can become something other than what I, in my rational mind, believe that it should be.

Ethical editing means that I am attentive to my intuitive response to the narrative; it means that I tolerate incongruous elements of the narrative, even if they do not fit the criteria of logic.

Ethical editing is a meeting of minds (both mine); the fully conscious mind meets the work of the subconscious mind with surprise and approval, at best, skepticism and derision, at worst. The work of the subconscious mind is elusive but it need not be subjugated to logical, rational considerations, for this means that I delimit the work of the subconscious; it means I assess the discontinuity on the basis of an external operating system; it means that I impose certain criteria upon the surface narrative,

criteria that has nothing to do with understanding why the discontinuity exists in the first instance.

Alternatively, when I pay heed to a primal moment of narrative composition, a moment that is not necessarily consciously determined or logical, I apprise the surface of the narrative as a metaphorical map, I attempt to engage with the possibilities for meaning that the map encompasses; this constitutes a quest for the unstable *how* of meaning attribution.

Biographical Note:

Julia Prendergast is a PhD candidate in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne. Her thesis consists of a novel and exegesis.

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Introduction: discontinuity in my novel

My novel (Prendergast 2012) is a collection of interrelated stories. Each story is framed by the idiosyncrasies and prejudices of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

As I draft and re-draft the stories, I am forced to assess the interaction between the voices. I am aware of the disjuncture, and I ask myself: Why not tell the story through the eyes of one narrator? Why not choose a third-person perspective, an omniscient narrator who might collect all of the voices together, in a coherent way?

As I second-guess my approach, I realise that the splintering of voices feels like the right way to tell the story and, in this way, I approach the question of methodology. I am aware that a sense of disjuncture arises out of the medley of voices, but I also realise that the disjuncture is carefully constructed; it is not accidental. This is an intuitive judgement.

If I edit my novel ethically, I ask what the discontinuity achieves, rather than how it fails in the context of logic. This means that I recognise that the narrative begins from a place that does not worry about logic, and I realise that second-guessing the surface content of the narrative, from a rational perspective, may be counterproductive. Ethical editing means that I am attentive to my intuitive response to the narrative; it means that I tolerate the discontinuous structure, even if it does not fit the criteria of logic.

Gertrude Stein says:

> let [the writing] take you and if it seems to take you off the track, don't hold back, because that is perhaps instinctively where you want to be and if you hold back and try to be always where you have been before, you will go dry (Preston 1955: 160).

What I refer to as intuition, Stein calls instinct. The point, in both instances, is that the conscious mind, fettered as it is with inhibitions, may fail to see that the logical track is not necessarily the most productive route. The conscious mind may not recognise that going off-track is the way forward and, perhaps, the only way that the story can become something other than what I, in my rational mind, believe that it should be.

Editing my discontinuous narrative is a meeting of minds (both mine); the fully conscious mind meets the work of the subconscious mind with surprise and approval, at best, skepticism and derision, at worst. The work of the subconscious mind is elusive but it need not be subjugated to logical, rational considerations, for this means that I assess the discontinuity on the basis of an external operating system; this means that I impose certain criteria upon the surface narrative, criteria that has nothing to do with understanding why the discontinuity exists in the first instance.

Ultimately, subjugating the work of the subconscious to external, rational considerations means that I delimit this work. Alternatively, when I pay heed to a primal moment of narrative composition, a moment that is not necessarily consciously

determined or logical, I am able to tolerate incongruous elements of the narrative, like discontinuity. Ethical editing means that I choose not to impose rational, logical strictures upon the narrative without question.

My novel is a daughter's quest for the memory-stories that her mother (Annie) is incapable of telling. At the beginning of the novel, Annie is withdrawn and dysfunctional; she relies on pills and alcohol to numb her existence; she barely gets out of bed for days at a time.

I would like to begin with an extract from one of the stories in my novel. This story is an example of the peripheral stories in the narrative; it is an example of the stories that seem to wander aimlessly away from the novel's central inquiry: why is Annie withdrawn and dysfunctional, what happened to her? I wonder why these peripheral stories are part of the narrative; I wonder how they contribute to the narrative as a whole.

The narrators of these stories are minor players, characters on the fringe of the central inquiry about Annie's demise. I struggle with these stories because they represent a diversion, and I am already grappling with a text that is riddled with diversions and potholes.

The story 'Getting away with murder' is narrated from the perspective of Peter. Peter worked at the morgue when Annie's son was brought there. Peter remembers Annie, talking about her at the beginning and the end of his story. He says:

> I didn't trust that mother as far as I could throw her. She was hiding something. Who takes their dead boy away in a bag? That's what I wanted to know.
>
> [And later]
>
> I hid in the Ti tree all night long, watching the mother and the boy in the dead bag.
>
> […] I stepped out in the shadowy light of dawn, in my tinted glasses and my khaki army-pants with the thermal over-jacket; that's when the mother knew that I had been there for the whole night, for the long haul, watching […]
>
> *I am not blind,* I said to her, and then I ran towards her, stopping a few steps short of the grave, taking my glasses off and yelling: *You think you can get away with murder. NOT ON MY WATCH* (Prendergast 2012).

Despite these brief references to Annie, the story is about Peter. I struggle with this story because the overarching narrative is about Annie; the novel is propelled by a daughter's quest for Annie's memory-stories, and I ask myself: what has Peter's story got to do with Annie?

As I ask myself how this story relates to the overarching narrative, as I investigate how it contributes to the narrative as a whole, I interrogate the surface content of the story. I ask myself what the story *is;* I ask myself what the story *does*. The story asks: why does Peter see what he sees? How does he know what he knows? I realise that this ontological and epistemological inquiry underlies all of the first-person voices in the text; I realise that this inquiry connects the stories and that, in each instance, this inquiry is postulated in the context of the narrator's remembering.

Discontinuity and remembering: structure and content

The narrators of the stories are called on to remember Annie, and their remembering is riddled with idiosyncratic truth. In each instance, the narrator's memory is a perception about self and present, in the context of yesterday and tomorrow. The narrative thereby plays out Daniel Schacter's (1996: 308) observations about memory: '[o]ur memories are the fragile but powerful products of what we recall from the past, believe about the present, and imagine about the future'. And so, when I ask myself: what do these peripheral stories have to do with Annie's demise, I realise that the answer is: everything. Annie has withdrawn from society; she is completely dysfunctional; she is so plagued by her past that she cannot live in the present or envisage any sense of future.

When we remember, meaning is produced as the result of successive additions. Proust suggests that: 'remembering emerges from the comparison of two images: one in the present and one in the past' (Schacter 1996: 28). In the stories, we see the interaction between the cue for remembering and the remembered material. This is an example of Schacter's (1996: 70) proposal that: 'a retrieval cue combines with the engram [memory trace] in order to yield a subjective experience that we call a memory'. The memory is, therefore, more than the replica of an original event, it is a story about an original event and this story relies, as Proust suggests, upon the interaction between past, present and future in the mind of the rememberer. I realise that the narrators of these peripheral stories are able to do what Annie cannot do and, that is, combine a perceived sense of self with a remembered image, thereby creating a memory-story.

When I assess the multiple voices in my novel, I revisit Bhaktin's notion of 'heteroglossia'; translated from 'speech types [*raznorecie*]', Bakhtin suggests that the languages of heteroglossia 'live a real life' and represent 'the refracted (indirect) expression of [the author's] intentions and values' (Bakhtin 1934-5: 674, 674, 676, 676). In this way, Bakhtin argues that intentions are the determining factor in the artistic organisation of the novel.

As I edit my discontinuous narrative, the stories strike me as both strange and familiar. As I try to account for the elusive elements in the narrative, I become crucially aware that Bakhtin does not attend to the possibility that authorial intentions may not be fully consciously determined. On the contrary, I move towards an assessment of the operation of my subconscious, and an awareness of the shared ground between the stories, when I ask myself how the stories are connected. This means that I think about the narrative in terms of Freud's 'interweaving of […] reciprocal relations' between 'manifest' and 'latent' content (Freud 1900: 404, 400, 400).

When I think about Freud's (1900: 400) appraisal of a dream (narrative) as 'a picture puzzle, a rebus', I am able to articulate a methodology that includes the operation of subconscious authorial intentions. I realise that elements of my discontinuous narrative are strange to me because I am estranged from them, and I am estranged from them because they are not consciously determined or logical, but at the same time they are familiar, strangely familiar, because they come from one and the same mind.

If the process of narrative composition were fully consciously determined and logical, it would be altogether familiar to me, and yet the opposite is true in the context of my discontinuous narrative, especially in the case of these peripheral stories, my experience is that they are quite strange. I have to work out what to make of these stories and it is surreal, like waking from a dream, and yet I become conversant with the surreal, and the strange becomes familiar, when I recognise that the picture puzzle is strung together by a common ontological and epistemological inquiry, the why and the how of idiosyncratic truth, in the context of memory.

Seeing beyond when we know

Hemingway describes the connection between the manifest and the latent content in narrative, the sense in which the former is ghosted by the latter. He claims that the subject matter of the story is-what-it-is:

> The sea is the sea. The old man is the old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are all sharks no better and no worse. All the symbolism that people say is shit. What goes beyond is what you see beyond when you know (Baker 1981: 780).

The notion of seeing beyond when you know is the work of the imaginative subconscious and Hemingway cuts to the core of my fascination with the nature of authorial intention.

In the primal moment of narrative composition, seeing and logical-knowing separate. In this moment seeing and knowing are alogical. This is because narrative representation is a process of seeing beyond, outside the constraints of logic. This is what David Whish-Wilson (2009: 85) means when he speaks of 'the "splitting" of normal consciousness whilst in the creative state'. When the mind is split, voice is pluralised, and I propose that this aspect is attributable to the work of the imagination in creative texts. I argue that conscious intention does not necessarily exist at the point of inception, so that the discontinuous structure of my narrative is intended, but not consciously so; it is intended beyond when I know, doubly intended when it is endorsed at the conscious, manifest level.

In this way the operation of my subconscious ghosts the surface of the text. This is Derrida's concept of 'alterity' operating within the realm of narrative; alterity is the 'trace' of 'otherness' as it corresponds to presence, and discontinuous narrative foregrounds the shadowing effect of alterity (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 278). This ghostly playoff between otherwise empty signs highlights the sense in which signs are an absent presence in the narrative. It is because signs are otherwise empty that a latent rhythm gives the surface its shape.

I account for hybridity in the context of the push and pull of the strange and the familiar, the subconscious and the conscious mind, as opposed to Bakhtin, who accounts for hybridity in the context of 'intertextual[ity]'; I account for heteroglossia in the realm of seeing beyond knowing, in the context of the work of the subconscious, as opposed to Bakhtin, who accounts for 'heteroglossia' in the context of conscious authorial 'intention' (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 674, Bakhtin 1934-5: 676). My analysis differs from Bakhtin's because it allows for the possibility that authorial intentions are not fully, consciously determined.

As I edit the manifest content of the narrative I compare the stories and, in doing so, I recognise similarity in difference or, as Aristotle says (defining metaphor): 'the similarity […] in dissimilars' (Ricoeur 1977: 23). Through the editing process, I realise that there are underlying similarities between the stories although, on the surface, they are quite different. Aristotle's definition is particularly useful because I realise that the stories are connected metaphorically, through latent content. Comparing the stories in this way is a process of equating the 'equal with the unequal'; Nietzsche suggests that:

> every idea originates by equating the equal with the unequal […] every word becomes at once an idea not by having […] to serve as a reminder for the original experience […] but by having simultaneously to fit innumerable, more or less similar (which really means never equal, therefore altogether unequal) cases (Nietzsche 1873: 263).

Aristotle's theory of the dissimilar-similar and Nietzsche's theory of the unequal-equal intersect; they explain how I can reason, in a rational, conscious way, about the work of the subconscious in narrative; they explain how latent content ghosts the surface of the narrative; they explain how latent and manifest content are strangely diametrically opposed, and yet familiar and compatible, and they do all of these things, because they explicate the operation of metaphor in the context of alterity.

Susan Sontag suggests that, for Freud:

> manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning – the *latent content* – beneath [she says that] to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it (Sontag 1972: 655).

As I edit my discontinuous narrative, the surface content is the starting point of inquiry. I am not suggesting that we read back and dismantle the sign; I agree with Hemingway: the sign is-what-it-is (albeit an otherwise empty *is*). I also believe that the spirit of Hemingway's definition is in keeping with Sontag's notion of 'transparence'; when Hemingway speaks of the is-what-it-is of the sign, he is referring to what Sontag calls 'the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are' (Sontag 1972: 659).

We can see through that which is luminous and transparent, and it is this condition of being see-through that is consistent with the otherwise empty sign. The sign is empty but for 'the trace of other things'; Derrida proposes that to bear the trace of other things is to be 'constituted as a fabric of differences', thereby giving 'presence' to the is-what-it-is of the sign (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 278, Derrida 1968: 286). Trace explains how presence is simulated; trace explains how the otherwise empty sign becomes full.

In the context of trace, and in response to Sontag, I propose that there are no equivalents for manifest content; there are only unequal equals, dissimilar similars; this is so because the manifest content is a metaphorical map, a surface rebus of otherwise empty signs. Latent content is not a means to dismantling the is-what-it-is of the sign, because latent content is itself an interpretation. Sontag (1972: 654) suggests that interpretation has merit 'only in the broadest sense, the sense in which

Nietzsche (rightly) says, ["]There are no facts, only interpretations["] '. Latent content is an interpretation, rather than a fact, because latent content is not prescriptive; it attaches itself to the surface content in a non-prescriptive way, as shadow, as trace.

The relationship between latent and manifest content takes an interest in the way that signs become full. In this way, my methodology fits Sontag's (1972: 660) description of the 'function of criticism': a process that 'should […] show *how* [the narrative] *is what it is,* even *that it is what it is,* rather than to show *what it means*'. My appraisal of the surface of the narrative, as a metaphorical map, is not an attempt to *make it mean*, but an attempt to engage with the possibilities for meaning that the map encompasses; this constitutes a quest for the unstable *how* of a meaning attribution.

Conclusion – ethics and editing: assigning value

The concepts of alterity, the dissimilar, and the unequal, underlie J. Hillis Miller's theory of displacement; Hillis Miller (1992: 235) claims that narrative meaning arrives out of 'displacement from one sign to another sign that in its turn draws its meaning from another figurative sign'. In this way, Hillis Miller explains how latent content is an absent-presence in the text; he explains how the relationship between latent and manifest content is metaphorical. It is this metaphorical manoeuvre that renders strangeness, strangely familiar. This manoeuvre configures content as absent presence. It is within this context, of absent presence, that I understand Sudesh Mishra's (2006: 110) discussion of 'aporetic manoeuvre[s]' in language: the 'extreme reorientation of consciousness that permits language to stand in a radical relationship to itself'. This manoeuvre is the means by which I familiarise myself with the strange, in the context of the dissimilar-similar, unequal-equal, of latent content.

In 'The Uncanny', Freud (1919: 420) refers to this reorientation of consciousness; he speaks of 'shades of meaning', an intriguing anomaly whereby one thing is pushed to the point that it becomes 'identical with its opposite'. As shades of meaning intersect, contradiction merges into compatibility; one thing becomes the other because shades of meaning ghost the sign, intersecting at every turn, investing and reinvesting the sign with meaning. This occurs in a neverending chain of inversion and supplementation, allowing the strange to become, strangely familiar.

And so I might agree with Hemingway, that the manifest content of the narrative is a world of boys and fish and sharks, or, in the case of my narrative, a world of discontinuity, diversion and 'Getting away with murder'; these things are what they are, no more, no less, tangible, hard-core, manifest content, but this content is otherwise empty; this content has presence precisely because we see beyond when we know, because this content is informed by the reverberations that simulate presence.

When we encounter a story without knowing what in the world it could possibly mean, it is like waking from a dream. In the world of dreams, like narrative, what we see is determined beyond the point of knowing, because in this context seeing is not constrained by logic.

As I edit the text as a hybrid construction, I negotiate between manifest and latent narrative content. This is an ethical negotiation because I assign value to elements of the representation as I rewrite and rearrange the narrative material. I recognise that the

manifest content of the stories is a patchwork of signs, a picture puzzle of dissimilar-similars, unequal-equals. The stories are not necessarily coherent; they may be elusive and ambiguous. I have to work out what to make of the stories, and working out what to make of them does not mean that I reconstruct the narrative in order to make it coherent, or that I rewrite the narrative to fit the criteria of logic.

Discontinuous narrative is a representation that foregrounds heteroglossia in the context of the absent presence of the unstable sign. As I grapple with the strange and the familiar, in the context of my discontinuous narrative, I attend to the possibility that narrative representation is not fully, consciously intended; I realise that my role, as editor of my narrative, is an ethical negotiation; I accept that my discontinuous narrative is multiple-voiced, not only literally, in the context of multiple first person narrators, but metaphorically multiple-voiced, in the context of the unequal-equal, dissimilar-similar, of latent content.

I am aware that my ethical engagement with my writing is a process of negotiating between the somewhat-strange workings of the subconscious, and the more familiar workings of logic. When I am attentive to latent narrative content, as trace, I have faith in a vision that I intend beyond when I know.

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