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Dehiscence: Reading, Breath and Step

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Kent

School of English

June 2017

57 912 words

Abstract

The dissertation offers its readers a model of how to bring together complex conceptual ideas with personal experience by exploring how reading, breath-orientated meditation and walking in nature may be transformative for self and writing. It is composed in two parts: first, a creative-writing piece—a novella titled *Dehiscence*—and second, a critical, theoretical piece titled *Metaphors and Practices of Self-Becoming*. The creative-writing component of the thesis enabled the writer to develop a model of self-becoming based on the metaphor of dehiscence. The critical approach explores how this model was developed and the theoretical ideas underpinning it. The model was in part conceived by the creative writer/researcher’s engagement with the writings of Hélène Cixous, Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michele Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy and certain Buddhist scholars, particularly twelfth-century Zen monk, Kuoan Shiyuan. These writers have described through a variety of forms processes of self-becoming and intellectual discovery. This thesis is particularly concerned with how they developed writing styles that accommodate original, personal and spiritual content. In a similar way to Nicholas Royle’s employment of the metaphor of veering in his book *Veering: A Theory of Literature* to ‘think afresh’ and ‘as a productive critical concept’, I have chosen the botanical metaphor of dehiscence.¹ Dehiscence is a movement whereby the seeds inside a plant grow towards and beyond the outer and encapsulating skin. In the context of this thesis, dehiscence becomes a critically productive metaphor that enables the researcher to slowly trace certain reading and growth journeys. These journeys are towards the edges of knowledge and experience in the hope of discovering something new.

Royle writes that, by his sustained and rigorous application of veering as a metaphor in a wide variety of literary texts and genres, he disturbs presuppositions about the literal and the figurative, the physical and the psychological, the external and the internal, the

¹ Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 7.

literary and the real. An application of dehiscence as a reading metaphor does not so much seek to disturb, although disturbance may be an effect, but rather to attentively notice that which points beyond dualistic constructions.

Twelfth-century Zen poem *Ten Bulls* depicts a story of spiritual dehiscence via the practice of solitary meditation. The poem and commentary are a model of poetic narration, as well as a source of insight and inspiration. Each poem sets the scene for reflections and analysis of how the practices of breath-orientated meditation, reading and walking in nature assist in the dehiscence of self. The overall arc of self-becoming that this thesis stretches towards in the critical component aims towards love, making it companionable with the narrative trajectory of the creative work.

The thesis was developed through an experimental dialogue between creative and critical modes of inquiry. It invites its reader to adjust the lenses of creative and critical modes and to share in a process of unfolding evolution and in the development of a growing sense of awareness, literary embodiment and union.

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PART 1: THE CREATIVE COMPONENT OF THE THESIS

Dehiscence
A Novella

Opening

At 11am at her place, the mists lift but not totally. One can begin to see the green and the translucent spider webs on barbed wire fences. Aoife lives on the edge in a place full of sky. She has never lived in a place so full of sky. She lives here with him from moment to moment, feeling the granular detail of things like a strand of hair blowing in the breeze against her cheek. She will tell you more about him later. He will weave in and out of all the stories that she will tell about the books, the writers, the breath and the sky.

Aoife begins to trace, sketch and outline a passage of time and transformation by books and breath. The book and the breath have been travelling together for many years now like a front hand and a back hand, with no seam, just a continuity of difference.

Outside her window, the summer fades and the breeze has become cold and sharp; she feels it in her shoulder joints and across her kidneys. The grasses have turned white and the sky is full of white with grey streaks. Autumn arrives with its absence of smells. Sweet, blood-filled insects, now dead, no longer buzz around hot evening sunburnt grasses. The earth is closing and has been laid stark. Aoife smells the rain coming. Only the rippled skin of the baby fig tree swelling shows signs of new life. It sways like a Christmas tree bauble in a wind, textured with silence.

She has just returned from travelling along the ocean where a stingray as wide as her arm span—black and leathery, hard yet rippling, graceful like a jellyfish—floated past her. In fact, it swam alongside her—and him—for many steps, until disappearing under the sea. They were walking along the edge of a thin space that separated land and sea.

From then onwards, it has come to her repeatedly, often unexpectedly, its enormous angles floating across her mind, taking up the whole space, carrying her back to dreams, story and imagination. Sometimes, in the market place, among the green of Asian bok choy, orange laminated coffee tables, over ripe mangos and the calls of the vendors—‘two dollars a bunch!’—it would come, like a giant hang-glider over her—except it wasn’t overhead: it

was inside her. It filled her with the sense of an eruption of great beauty. It enabled her to open, look and receive more without effort: it just was.

During their travels, Aoife sat down by the banks of the sea with him and watched an amber light flicker on the glassy, thick green. He told her about how he dreams in music that is precise and complete; he doesn't know how he does this; he can barely hum a tune in real life. Yet in his dreams, there is an unknown song that he can sing from beginning to end without falter. She listened to him and was not surprised; there is a musicality about him, a singsong, sea-shanty groove.

She thinks back to the beginnings of meeting him and to all the interweaving things that enabled this meeting and recognition, this mutuality—the stingray consciousness combined with the unknown sea-shanty song. She tries to remember the first whiff, scent or utterance that announced this.

Reading

In the beginning, she was reading; she had begun meditation and was studying eastern philosophy. She lived in a small country town at the foot of a mountain. There, she was close to chooks, vegetable gardens, fruit trees and children.

Tiny seeds swelling. Wind stirring. Her domestic world was quite small. Almond-shaped stones lined her bed. A table of books produced prickly junctions between reality and life. Aoife read like a plant in dehiscence at a slow pace. It was strange that reading should become her path. Her mother was illiterate and her father did not speak.

She was attracted to writers and poets who wrote about silence and nature, who, through experiences of solitude, discovered vitality and a way of experiencing the relatedness of all things. She was trying to come to know what type of person could apprehend and communicate such experiences. In Hindu scriptures, she read that ‘the Breath of Life was called wind and breeze and in the Breath of Life is what is past and what is yet to be. On the Breath of Life all things were based’.² The feel of her own breath in her nostrils was warm, gentle and close. Perhaps if she stayed close to her breath, she would discover something.

Book covers of blue swirls, entwined bodies, painted eyes, cross-legged *bodhisattvas* and golden lotus petals lay strewn on her bedside table. Moving from Hinduism to Christianity, from Christianity to Zen, she made bridges and arches, musical slurs between sutra and prayers, parables and poetry. In hazy yellow mornings, the gentle breeze kept light her thoughts and footsteps. Sitting outside reading, jasmine scent curled up her nostrils, her batik earrings swayed and a red-breasted robin pecked at her toenail.

² R.C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. by Zaehner (London: Everyman’s University Library, 1966), p. 29.

The House

Aoife must have moved 15 times or more as a child, from country to country. A series of losses and new iterations created a strong desire for stability and solidness. She hated cities, smells, hustle and bustle, constant consumerism, screens and the screams of shopping mall menageries. Progressively, she moved more towards nature—to beach, bush and, finally, the mountains. There was an ideal in her heart for her own children, an antithesis to her upbringing—routine, predictability, stability, beauty, gentleness, colour and creativity. She had two daughters who were like hazelnuts of pearly skins with splashes of olive, one with long straight hair and the other a curly mop top. Their hairstyles reflected something of their natures: the eldest—careful, neat and ordered—the youngest—playful, loose and embracing. She had always liked children and had virtually raised her youngest brother. As a young mother, Aoife had long dark hair, bushy eyebrows and a never-ending supply of breast milk. Her days were spent suckling, carrying, rocking, shushing, cradling, caressing, cooing, kissing, playing and singing. Her daughters took turns to climb onto her knee and she would make an imaginary saddle as she bounced them up and down and recited,

This is the way the farmer rides: trot, trot, trot.

This is the way the gentleman rides: trot-ter, trot-ter, trot-ter trot.

But this is the way the girls ride: a gallop, a gallop, a gallop.³

The eldest always clung so tight and the youngest bumped and loosened her grip to increase the thrill of danger.

They moved into a triangle house when the grasshoppers were jumping like popping corn in the heat. The house was made from solid wood and steel. Its shape enabled the snow to slide off its eaves. It seemed to reach to the heights of the sky, the tip of its spine touching the clouds. It even looked like a mountain: majestic and tall, yet rooted on the ground with a wide veranda base. It was surrounded by enough land to run a few sheep and chickens and

³ Blanche Fisher Wright, *The Real Mother Goose* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co, 1916) Available at: <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10607/10607-h/10607-h.htm>> [accessed 7 February 2017].

it had a dam for ducks. There was no garden, just paddocks, so Aoife began digging, planting and nurturing the soil. In time, there grew a lemon tree, baby eucalypts, verbenas, daffodils and cherry, apple, plum and almond trees. She dug, planted, weeded and watered. The soil was tough clay, non-porous, compacted rock. It was hard to make dark and fertile. She worked and worked and, in time, established a fruitful summer vegetable garden with black zucchini, rosy tomatoes, lettuces of every shade, from bitter maroon and milk-white radicchio to nutty rocket and sweet succulent butter leaves. There were aromas of basil, oregano, rosemary and thyme. In winter, afternoon teas were made of poppy-seed cakes, coffee and cardamom, honey oil and marigolds; a wood fire was burning and a kettle was whistling.

Ducks quacked, sheep were shorn—round and round she spun their wool—grey, black, brown and white. ‘Can you knit me a hat out of Scampy’s wool?’ the eldest child asked.

It was a short bicycle ride to the school with the baby in the bike seat and a six year old powering alongside. The deciduous trees shimmered red, gold and amber during the autumn rides back and forth. She liked to listen to the children recite their morning verse:

Yellow the bracken,
Golden the sheaves,
Rosy the apples,
Mist on the hillside,
Clouds grey and white.
Autumn, good morning!
Summer, goodnight!⁴

The mothers at the school described Aoife as strange, aloof and too ‘herbal’. This label signified a whole list of things: a lentil-eating, lefty, no-TV, grow-your-own-

⁴ Melisa Nielsen and Amber Hellewell, *Waldorf Essentials: Ultimate Planner*, 1st edn (2015). Available at: <<http://waldorfessentials.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Ultimate-Planner.pdf>> [accessed 4 July 2015].

vegetables, scrub-cloth-nappies type of mother whose children could get muddy, dirty, climb trees, touch animals and poke about in nature a little too much. Riding her bicycle home, criticisms rocked back and forth in her mind like hens peaking at wheat. The turn of the wheels quickened and soon enough her thoughts softened as her house and land came into sight.

Aoife first experienced silence and stillness at this house. Sometimes all that you could hear was your own breath—whispering, filling, opening, leaving. The house, with its huge spacious underground belly, gave out a cool, expansive, clear and delicate silence. Before the sun came up and the children's feet hit the wooden floors there was a solitary stillness. Outside the window a moist droplet clung to a thin twig. Inside, a warm fire burned; on the floor lay a basket of shells from Elcho Island—shaped like ears with a fringe of pink skin. Wooden logs stood erect, arranged like a castle; horses carved out of rosewood circled; finger-knitted rainbow beanies and yellow gum boots were strewn by the door. On the kitchen table was a red jug and a small vase of wild flowers. A doll's cradle kept warm by the fire. Everything lay dormant, yet alive, waiting for those soft little hands to hold and create. The children would wake and come and find her. She sang them a good morning song as she washed their faces with a warm flannel cloth, gently waking up each eye, cheek, mouth and nose.

While all this was very good—more than good—at night, Aoife was dreaming of difference. In the darkness, in the velvety womb of sleep, something was awakening in her and she did not know what it was; it was an unstoried story that lay in the world of senses and symbol. Sometimes she would wake in the heat of the night and ask herself, 'where did this dream come from; how did it come to be? It makes no sense, like a Shakespeare comedy of loss and confused identity'. Nevertheless, these were her dreams, her prophecies and currents that would bring her to the place full of sky.

Dreams

Aoife's dreams were like green pears hanging on a vine: unripe and not quite in the right place. She paid attention to dreams. Once, she'd read that all dreams were gold, even the horrible ones, for they sought the wholeness of the dreamer. In dreams, one met all sorts of stories and energies, imaginings and feelings that spilled out of deep hollows and recesses. Sometimes, Aoife felt that they were a more accurate guide to what was going on for her in life, for they kept track of things across huge expanses of time: time that was before memory or consciousness and prophetic time that was still to come. She wrote them down in her notebook. Sometimes they evoked a sense of self and place that she rarely experienced in everydayness but that she knew was always there behind the surface of things. Dreams were elliptic, economical, yet jam-packed.

A woman is riding on a tall, elegant horse by the ocean. She is strong and upright, riding fast in a determined way. She is relaxed; her body is wet and her breasts exposed. She is full; there is a strength that is sexual and beyond sexualising ...

A woman is lying at a beach on the hillside of a sand dune where exposed rock overlooks the ocean. A man comes charging towards her on a horse. The man on the horse races up the hill and almost tramples her. It is a deliberate scare tactic and he has sinister motives ...

It is a cold morning; she gets out of bed and goes down to the ocean. She dives into the water. She hasn't taken off all her clothes, but most of them. The swim is deep, deep under water. She immerses herself fully and then emerges, totally rejuvenated ...

At work, an architect comes to show her a new structure, a work space he is creating for her. He brings slides of sculpted earth domes. The roofs are transparent so that she can see the sky. The building is embossed with angels blowing trumpets ...

It took ten years for these dreams to ripen and ripple and many more would come and usher in the unnamed but infinitely possible. Things would get pretty messed up the deeper in she went and the more complexity she tried to hold. This sense of life and living at this time she named as living in communion with the very depths of being and as meeting the depths of that which was before her. It required spaciousness, a practice that would make room for the other. Aoife's dream life reflected the very limited ways she made room for herself back then. How could she enact a position of wideness, a wideness that would embrace all the divergences of self and make spacious room for the other? She would need to stop following the loudness of this and that, the common currency and well-trodden paths. She would need to open and take notice, to step into other places; she would have to pay attention to a different order of things. There was a hole in the sky that her heart slipped through.

Childhood

Aoife notices the wind that she drinks in. In through her nostrils and down her neck into the deep-purple, cauliflower alveoli, expanding them, creating a meeting point between air and blood—a crossing. ‘Broken boundaries and scattered grasses’: this was what a friend wished for her long ago. Before this beginning, before the edge, before the sky and him, she forgot to breathe. She looked but she did not see much. There is a photograph of her as a child with muddy-brown billabong eyes that look down and slightly to the left.

Aoife’s mother had long ginger hair and her father had jet black. He had won a twisting competition and secured the heart of her mother not long before Aoife was conceived. They lived in a two-bedroom, semi-detached house in a place full of troubles. He drank too much and her mother was too young.

Each morning Aoife walked with her mother to the local bakery. She wore a brown and red chequered wool duffle coat, saggy, pale-pink nylon tights and black painted shoes. Jingle, tingle went the entrance bell, as they moved from the frost into the warm perfumes of flaky pastries and jam buns. She liked to stand at the glass door and puff her warm breath onto the window pane, creating a fog cloud to draw shapes in. Sometimes, on their way home, her mother would move quickly, sensing danger in the air. At night, her father would insist, ‘We must leave this place’.

In the street where Aoife lived, a banner with the slogan ‘No Surrender’ hung across a bomb-blasted wall. Aoife’s feet, half the size of a broken brick, stepped nervously over the piles of rubble and rubbish. The air was choked with thick tobacco smoke that was rising and yet pushed down by the grey, drizzly sky. It was like everything was trying to escape. Men with guns, black berets and balaclavas crept through the streets of skinny stray dogs. The streets smelled of burning metal and blood. At night in bed, she could hear smashing windows, ricocheting bullets and drunk men singing. Their neighbour, Mrs Rogers, was her Granny’s best friend. She sprinkled Aoife’s bedroom with Holy Water and said, ‘There now, little Aoife, you will be safe. Our Lady will protect you’.

Her Granny walked to church every morning in a powder-blue skirt, a tailored jacket and a fur Cossack pill-box hat. She had a fierce face and stepped regimentally in time with the striking hammer of the church bell. The sound of the church bell in the distance was comforting to Aoife. Aoife's father cursed the church, this place full of fury and violence. 'We must leave this place', he pleaded with her mother.

Aoife lived in a man-made box with a backyard of bricks; everything was broken, just like the song: 'broken leaves on broken trees, broken spoons, broken knives, broken vows, broken lives'.⁵ She lived in a broken box; like a broken record, it went around and around. Backyards, bombs and smells, black tarmac, no trees, hard cold steel and static noise—incessant, man-made noise.

⁵ Bob Dylan, *Everything Is Broken* (New York: Columbia Records, 1989).

Dai

His childhood was so different. Dai's mother and father met on a boat to Africa where both were heading to work as missionaries. His father was a young priest and his mother a midwife. He grew up in the bush running bare foot between the flame lilies, climbing kopjes and eating mangos. Across empty plains, he watched lions, elephants, zebras and rhinoceros. Evenings were sundowners on long, shady verandas, beneath swaying purple jacarandas with iced tea. Family picnics took place in the mountains, all equipment strapped onto the back of a beige Opel. Days were spent making fires and sling shots, hunting and fishing. In the swish of long grasses, surrounded by little dirt tracks, there were the sounds of African men whistling, babies crying and dogs barking. His father called him 'Dai bach', meaning 'Dai, little love'. He was very happy.

When they first met, he asked Aoife to tell him about her childhood.

'There is nothing really to tell', she said.

'Why don't you answer things directly?' Dai asked.

'If you want to come to know me it is not through the Freudian door of childhood. Ask me about today, about what I noticed, about the shape of moon and what I dreamed about last night,' replied Aoife.

She did not want to participate in the 'life-narrative summary/get-to-know-you game': one that glorifies childhood and worships the back then.

One evening, they were talking about the unconscious. Aoife was explaining how Freud's 'mystic writing pad' was a metaphor for how perception and memory were caught in tensions between unlimited receptivity and leaving a permanent trace, which in turn limited the surface area for new perceptions.⁶

'I don't really get what you are talking about, Aoife', said Dai.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'A Note Upon The "Mystic Writing Pad"', in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. by Phillip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 2008), pp. 211–16.

Aoife explained how unlimited receptivity operated like a Magna Doodle. A Magna Doodle was a drawing machine from her childhood. As a child, she would spend ages drawing and writing secret notes on the television-like screen's surface with a plastic, yellow pencil. Once the screen was filled and she had gone too far with her secrets, she would quickly pull the yellow knob at the bottom across and the picture and words would disappear, like magic! She could only keep filling the surface if she was prepared to wipe away and lose what was there. As a child, she spent ages wondering, where did the erased lines go? Even as an adult, Aoife thought, 'They must be still there, in the box, underneath, behind the surface'.

Australia

Aoife arrived in Australia in December. The door of the plane opened like a lid taken off a boiling stew. A steamy heat hit her in the face. The glare of sun was painfully blinding. She smelled the sizzle of the tarmac and blindly held tight her father's hand. Her mother struggled with a screaming baby. It was 43 degrees Celsius. Uncle Jim was there to pick them up; her father's sister married a protestant and migrated to Australia in the 1960s. No need for coats or wool tights now. Her skin burned in the heat. They drove for hours to the southernmost suburbs, windows rolled down; the speed of the heat hit her face even faster. Where did the cold wind and snow go? Aoife squinted her eyes into shuttered chinks. Uncle Jim told them all to look out of the right side of the window. A thick, green-navy line in the distance lay below the jarring sun, the white, pale-blue sky. 'The beach!' he exclaimed.

The Way of the Cucumber

When Aoife moved to the country with small children she did not work outside of the home. She was receiving and giving with open eyes. Yet, something was catching her unawares and opening things out; she noticed it and let it be; for once, she was not resisting or repressing, picking and choosing. It was a space she was growing because she was interested in freedom and coming to experience things. She was getting to know things by letting herself be known by them and letting them unaccountably reveal their own *beingness* in closer proximity to her. She found a picture once of a cucumber with a caption that read ‘A cucumber unaccountably cucumbering’. She could only proceed by way of the cucumber now.

Technê tês zoas: the art of living. The Greeks trained in it: making one’s own life a work of art. In the beginning, she read a lot about seeing. It seemed like everything she picked up was asking her to look again. Liquid shapes and swollen landscapes. She liked pictures that could be hung vertically or horizontally. Georgia O’Keeffe said, ‘Art was about sensation, that it is created from a living thing, from an adventure into the unknown. To make the unknown known is the desire to create.’⁷

Feeling something that had not been understood and finding a place, a language, a relationship to it, this was how she moved, how she breathed from one breath to the next, in and out. Sensing and seeing, cellular and ocular, external and internal, visible and invisible, in and out, she breathed; round and round went the cycle. There was motion, momentum, a turning of the wheel. She was going to ride her bicycle into the darkness without a light and without a helmet. She would begin this journey in the night when the sickle-slithered moon was lying on its back, gazing up at one small star. In fact, there are many beginnings like this ...

⁷ Hunter Drohojowska-Philip, *The Art and Life of Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 155.

A Young Woman

Before she had children and moved to the country, Aoife worked. Her job was to listen to people and ask questions. She was a long way from the southernmost suburbs and those predatory young men, their panel vans plastered with images of scantily clad women, breasts spilling out into their greasy, greedy hands. Life was busy, colleagues plentiful; lists of people came and went.

‘Your 9.30 client is waiting for you Aoife’, stated the receptionist.

‘Thank you’, Aoife nodded.

A young woman sat opposite Aoife and told her story. Aoife listened carefully, noticed and thought: she comes to see me in her snow cap, cheap, cherry-painted lips and straggly, streaky blond hair. She cries. Her mind operates like random particles colliding, thought Aoife. She cries. She loves him, the 20-year boy with the baby-face whose fists and threats appear and disappear like the night. She cries, ‘Maybe I did see the warning signs in the beginning. I just like him. I want him’. She sobs.

Aoife offered tissues, allowing the paradox to be, to unfold, to be voiced. This was always the first stage of how to be with the other as they are and to see them as they are, without force, without extinguishing all that they pour forth. It required something of the therapist that can’t be named, a way of being a safe and warm, silence, so that the smallest and most vulnerable aspects of being have somewhere to go, a place to be put while the shape and order of things can be remade.

Coffee, conversation and analysis in abundance: the work was rewarding.

Aoife attended a course and was introduced to a therapist named Michael. Michael had a patch of strawberry-blond hair, blown wildly to the side. He wore a black T-shirt and jacket, neatly tailored trousers, brown sandals with black socks poking out of the holes. He was a masculine inconsistency—muscular, soft, stylish and unusual. His voice was deep and strong like a long black coffee with enough warm milk on the side. He spoke with a measured

thoughtfulness that was open to new discoveries. He scaffolded theories with great precision, bracketed by humble hesitation.

‘People give meaning to their lives through story lines and, sometimes, these story lines are thin and have people drawing conclusions about themselves and their lives that are problematic and limited or biased in perspective. It is the therapist’s work to engage people in conversations that reflect the multiplicity of stories available, through attending to the marginalised experiences, thoughts and values’, he proclaimed.

His theories were developed through the practices of attentive listening and reading philosophy. She had not seen such skilful practice anywhere else. He was unique and he was attractive. She watched video tapes of his therapeutic sessions and saw his great tenderness with people. She can still picture him, counselling a woman with a severe mental illness who had lost her husband and was despairing. He kept asking questions to evoke the loving presence of her husband so that he was almost palpably in the room with her.

‘What would John say if he was here and was seeing your distress? Is there a story you could tell me about how John comforted you at other times in life? What is it like to remember the power of John’s comforting presence? If you were to evoke this more often and felt you had access to it, would it help you manage this pain better?’

Slowly, gently and patiently he would help people find a better space to stand in, one that was already within them, but had been blocked by pain, trauma or prejudice. He was like a master excavator, chipping away at hard lines, careful so as not to break anything; warm-breathed, blowing dust off precious hidden objects, polishing until they shone with light.

As Aoife listened and looked at him, a tight desire to ride, to be altered, to be opened, to cycle, rose within her. She noticed how Michael asked good questions: ‘good’ being those that exposed dominant ideas and made room for the marginal and the peripheral. She could breathe out in these questioning spaces; they were not so restrictive. She saw the links between his questions and his readings of Foucault. She noted some questions and thought

about them in relation to her own life, her sexuality, her madness, her class, her spirituality and her power relations. Initially, she adopted a leftist, feminist–Marxist understanding of power. She saw that she had been too captured by ideologies and ‘isms’. She began to understand how one gets locked into certain understandings through language, power and social relations. Her relationships became more difficult now; people were always asking what side was she on. Her ethics were about questioning and freedoms to engage with many positions; she did not want to foreclose on anything too quickly. The tensions created a jerky beat in her body—drumming heat, sweat, speed, her heart was pumping and her breath was pressed right up to its limits.

Before Working

Aoife's early adult life ran on a list of survival plans: get away from childhood home, get a job, go to university, pay the rent and learn to cook. At university, she was always behind the eight-ball—trying so hard, stressed and anxious, never feeling good enough or confident. The work load was enormous.

‘Read this, research that, reference this, write this essay, 5000 words due Friday; only the top 10% of all students will get through this course’, the lecturers stressed.

Her mother's harshness pierced and perforated at every opportunity:

‘I am sure we took the wrong child home from the hospital’, her mother laughed.

‘Look at you, head in a book’, her mother sneered.

‘How now brown cow’, her mother said, putting on an upper-class accent.

‘Who do you think you are?’ her mother said.

Aoife was not sure who she was. She didn't fit back there and it looked like she wouldn't fit at university either. There was only forward. Along the river, she rode her bicycle past paddle boats, native ducks and shell-shaped art galleries. Faster and faster; time would pass, she would get through bit by bit, subject after subject, semester after semester, year after year, decade after decade, degree after degree: there is always an end. Outside the standard curriculum, there were her own reading desires, calling with a persistent quietness, a trickling gentleness, delicate, barely audible.

Philosophical Beginnings

It was only at the triangle house that she finally began to read. Aoife started to read about how people who had experiences of madness lived their lives before the birth of the asylum, about the practices the Greeks used to form themselves, about how Christianity introduced self-forming practices related to purity and interior conscience and about what sort of ‘I’ was created from them. She read like a hungry wolf quickly tearing the taste of the words in her mouth and ear. What will we call reading, she pondered, when a text overflows all books and comes to meet us, giving itself to be lived? The rural town was sparse for intellectual conversation, so Aoife read more books than she had ever before, mainly by Foucault and Derrida.

Aoife contemplated how reading was shaping her life, opening out new horizons, assisting her to transgress the spit and hiss of working-class chaos; but were these texts also being changed somewhat by her readings? Were texts like her children’s play things; did they come alive in new ways when she turned and tilled them in her empty-cup shaped hands? She read somewhere that reading doesn’t take place at all unless the reader transgresses the boundary of the text, touching it, adding something to it and committing something of herself to it. Reading was a relationship between text and reader and, like every relationship, each reading was unique.

These ideas were so different to what she was told reading was in her childhood. Reading was spoken of in her family of origin as a waste of time, laziness, something that people who didn’t know how to have fun did. Aoife’s mother had often told her ‘she was a dime a dozen, a jinx, a klutz, a boring, good-for-nothing child’. She ridiculed reading as she painted her eyes with green shadows and her lashes with thick, brown, gluggy mascara. Splat, splat went her mother’s words; venom blew them with merciless force, pelts of putdowns expanded in Aoife’s heart like pancakes dolloped into a black pan. It’s funny how reading took her to these places that she had long forgotten. It was an experience of thinking

alongside an unconscious counterpoint of jumbled, unpredictable and painful memory fragments. Yet, reading filled her with a new sense of freedom.

Aoife became suspicious and more alert to the ways in which the practices of everyday life promoted unquestioning conformity. She also felt the snap of the snare when she stepped too far out of line. She thought she needed to be careful with these ideas; but they continued to produce desires; they did get under her skin. Outside her window the rough tufts of golden grass stuck up to the sky unashamedly now that nothing was covering them.

Foucault

Aoife wanted to read Foucault for herself. She wanted to read him from the beginning. How did he start, she wondered? She googled him and discovered that he was from an upper-middle-class family, born in Poitiers, a major city in West Central France; his father was a surgeon and his mother the daughter of a famous surgeon. A life of privilege surrounded by power, Aoife thought. At this time, Aoife lived nowhere near a bookshop or a town. She had very little money. She had always used libraries. She had never bought a book for herself, let alone a book she did not feel entitled to read. When *The Order of Things* arrived, she met him for herself, eye to text, and he showed her how to look and see multiple gazes, orientations and positions. In the Preface, Foucault wrote that *The Order of Things* arose out of [his] own reading of a fictitious passage about a taxonomy in a Chinese encyclopaedia by Jorge Luis Borges, ‘out of the laughter that shattered, as [he] read the passage, [because] all the familiar landmarks of [his] thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of age and geography’ were disturbed.⁸ The passage he referred to stated:

[...] animals are divided into: (a) belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broke the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.⁹

Foucault taught that, by means of a fable, ‘the passage demonstrated the exotic charm of another system of thought and the limitations of our own’.¹⁰ Aoife began to see how arbitrary ordering systems were, that people created absurd categories, like her own mother’s classification system of what type of people read books: (a) girls who were boring, (b) girls who did not know how to have fun, (c) snobby girls, (d) girls who were ugly and (e) girls

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 1st edn (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. xvi.

⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvi.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvi.

who could not get a boyfriend. Aoife began to see that her mother was not totally malicious; she just had a different way of categorising the activity of reading: this was all she knew; these were her limits, the ‘stamp of her age and geography’.¹¹ What other ideas about reading could a woman born into extreme poverty with ten brothers and one sister to a widowed, superstitious, Catholic mother, who was pulled out of school at ten years old to work, who was illiterate and who lived in a brick-brown housing estate in the slums of bomb shaken West Belfast in the 1960s have?

Through reading Foucault, Aoife learned about breaking up all the ordered surfaces, especially the ones in her own mind, with which she was accustomed to taming the wild profusion of things. Her heart softened inwardly and her mind expanded outwardly—in and out like the bellows of an accordion—as she read *The Order of Things*. Aoife learned how things were ‘laid’, ‘placed’ and ‘arranged’ in sites very different from one another and how, through techniques of arrangement, things are grouped and controlled, how relationships are created and how laws dictating the relation of things to each other are established. As Aoife was reading Foucault’s theories, she sensed a certain influence on or propinquity to her own life. Aoife wanted to lay, arrange and place bits of her life on a page to find groupings, patterns and identities. Moreover, she wanted to dissolve them, to re-form and explore potential other ways of coming to know self, the other and love.

Foucault explained how science and philosophy dictated the primary order of things, telling us why this ordering system was superior over that one. He wrote assertively and boldly of another region of knowledge-making that was more difficult to analyse; he named it culture. He inspired her towards freedoms by stating:

it is here that culture imperceptibly deviating from the empirical orders prescribed for it by its primary codes, instituting an initial separation from them, causes them to lose their original transparency, relinquishes its immediate and invisible powers,

¹¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvi.

frees itself sufficiently to discover these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones.¹²

Yes, she could see how certain overt orders governed the way she lived life; however, others were so internalised, unquestioned, unnoticed and invisible, like breath. Aoife came to know that no gaze was stable or neutral through his descriptions of the painting *Las Meninas*.¹³ Foucault wrote, ‘It may be that, in this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing—despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations and portraits’.¹⁴ She was beginning to see how, in her own life, she was at once looking and not seeing—blinded by her own limits, being looked at and yet not seen. She could understand how she was creator, spectator and subject all at once. She came to understand that ways of seeing (and not seeing) were not created by the individual but by culture over time.

Foucault wrote:

order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.¹⁵

¹² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xxii.

¹³ Diego Velasquez, *Las Meninas* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Del Prado, 1656).

¹⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xxi.

The Grid

The father of her children made an art installation, a three-dimensional cube divided into 100 grid-formed cells. It was made from Perspex plastic and hung suspended from a gallery ceiling in a dark room, spotlighted from every angle. Inside each little square compartment were objects—a tooth, a coin, a tiny feather, a ring, a rusty nail, a lock of hair, a shell, a button, a fragment of broken china, amber glass, emerald stone, a piece of jaw bone ... Each random thing was placed in a tightly ordered, transparent system, as though the system alone could create a whole, could create relationships within a master system that contained and constrained possibilities, but nevertheless produced unity. Aoife admired the art work and was fascinated by it long before she knew what a taxonomy was. It was not unlike how she experienced the artist, the father of her children, whose chaos allowed for creativity, but boxed her into orders and systems, roles and ways of being that were assigned, unquestioned and constraining. He was the artist genius, the intellectual: special, not of this world and set apart, she believed. He created such beautiful things. Aoife always liked to watch him work in his studio, where he was focused and quiet. There was a structure that contained them but seemed to stunt her. Her roots couldn't deepen and her growth tips barely caught the sun. Someone had to earn a living, keep the routines, mow the lawns, be dependable and be attentive to the children, to the family, to his projects. Aoife couldn't help but feel that beneath the surface of this ordering system there was another order. She looked carefully at the cube and thought that each little object did have its own history, its own place, before it was plucked and placed in this one. Maybe there were other ways.

And so, she started breaking up the surface realities of her existence and re-looking, re-creating unprecedented taxonomies. She wanted to see more and wondered how to keep extending into the invisible regions—what sort of mind or intellect could do this? She experimented by living out of alternative thinking planes, like a cubist painting with subdued colours and not enough playfulness. She questioned categories and thought about culture.

Words such as woman, mother, wife and God all started to feel a little stiff and claustrophobic. At some point during these intellectual explorations, Dai entered her life.

Dai Appears

There was only one café in the small country town. From its rafters hung a yellow bicycle and some ocean-blue beaded umbrellas from India. Aoife was there reading when she first saw him. He was walking down the street. Her eyes, needing a rest from the world of words, momentarily looked up—and he was there, like a ball travelling across space, which you don't take your eyes off because it is coming towards you. He walked in long, even strides, hands in his pockets. He held himself with a sort of old-fashioned, gentlemanly pride. Through his stride, she could see a type of Huckleberry Finn boyishness. She imagined him with trousers rolled up to the knee, casting a fishing line on some muddy river flat—an expectant glint in his eyes.

Aoife was taking her children to school some weeks later when she walked passed a group of giggling women who asked her whether she had met the new man in town.

'No,' she replied, but then remembered the man she had noticed and wondered if, indeed, they were speaking of him. She did not like to loiter in spaces of gossip and so she walked on but, in the distance, she could hear their flirtatious laughter and exhilaration.

Many months passed—summer, autumn and then winter came. She was invited to join a group studying eastern philosophy. It was a challenge to complete all the chores, tuck children into bed and ride a bicycle to the meeting in the bitter cold and blackness. Aoife spent most of her time alone and people thought it would be good for her to get out. She found it exhilarating to dodge the pot holes in the dark and had more than a few near misses as she rode speedily, late for the first meeting.

When she entered the room, cold to the bone from riding her bicycle, a warm fire was blazing. She took off her coat, scarf and gloves and sat down to open her bag and take out her notebook. When finally settled, she looked around to greet the members of the group

and, to her surprise, he was there. They exchanged a polite glance as a greeting. She immediately felt an inexplicable oneness with him, even though they did not directly speak.

On her way home, the mists made it so difficult to see ahead that she had to slow right down. Her cheeks were freezing, her legs pumping and her mind wondered: who was he and why was he there? Overall, the group disappointed her and she did not plan to return, for their type of study was too disconnected from life, too caught up in esoteric elitism. She needed another type philosophy, a more embodied practice. She yearned for a teacher, a guide. She would find in time that she would need many teachers, many guides.

Buddhism

As luck would have it, unexpectedly in the kitchen at work, Aoife met an older woman who was thin and smiley. The woman moved like a bird, she spoke clearly, economically and always affirmed whoever was in her presence. Aoife was struck by her ways of moving, talking and being: such gentleness and precision. The older woman came and went and sometimes they met in the kitchen. One day, the word meditation was uttered. Aoife mentioned that she was going on a meditation retreat. The older woman looked up and took more notice; she stopped making her cup of tea and looked deeply into the young woman's face.

‘I am interested in meditation,’ she said.

The young woman felt like she had landed somewhere. Circling, circling, round and round, Aoife could hear something in the distance, something faint, something very close and intimate. In the older woman's eyes, she landed on a branch and, while breathing slowly, a softness entered her. Aoife wanted to ask many questions, such as, ‘what sort of meditation are you interested in? What do you practice? How did you find that path?’ But this encounter was full—full of recognition, of presence, of landing; best not to clutter it, she thought; best to stay present and wait.

Later that week, the older woman left a book on her desk. It was called *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* by Śāntideva. It had belonged to her beloved husband, a Buddhist scholar. This was her first meeting. This was her gift.

Unexpectedly in the kitchen, through the babble and the banter of the work place, she met a precision, a gentleness, a gateless gate and was opened.

The Seed

That jewel, the Mind, which is the seed of pure happiness in the world and the remedy for the suffering of the world, how at all can its merit be measured?¹⁶

Aoife was struck by how Buddhism viewed the mind as the source and remedy for suffering. She wondered how to explore this, how to examine her own mind. Up until now she had dabbled around the edges of reading about these things, but had never seriously developed a practice. She had been too busy considering what was wrong in the outside world—the world of politics and power, corruption and greed. Things were always happening out there: important things, serious things. She was taught that it was wrong to think about the self, that the self must be got rid of, crucified, so that you could genuinely serve others. Serving others was the way to alleviate suffering, not dwelling on yourself; but what was going on inside her own mind? She was spooked to think that perhaps she had not practised getting rid of the self, but that she was just rather negligently ignoring it and not noticing what was really going on. It felt like everything inside lay dormant, looking for light, looking for an escape. Yes, she had periods of stillness and silence, but they came and went as children woke, jobs needed to be done and days proceeded with their own demands. She needed to do something to create a space, a balance, a full-stop, a blank page. She opened a drawer and took out a small wooden box. Inside, wrapped in a remnant of yellow silk was a pair of silver bells. A Spanish woman had given her a pair of silver meditation bells for her eighteenth birthday; she didn't even know what they were, yet she had carried them faithfully from house to house, through all of her moves and relocations. Now, Aoife took them into her hands and felt their weight. Studying the bells, she saw that the top was embellished with two dragons and the underside a script; they were held together by a leather cord. Years later, she discovered that the inscription was the 'Order of the Double Dragon' given to foreign

¹⁶ Śāntideva, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 7.

rulers and high-ranking officials in the Manchu Dynasty; the dragons represented strength and power. The script on the underside was '*Om mani pade hum*', which meant 'hail to the jewel in the lotus': Buddha.

She began to meditate each morning and evening. These bells became the sound gate that ushered her from one reality into another. For many years, she focused on how to hold them—steady, parallel—and then on how to strike them against one another with just the right amount of force, three times, each one even and steady, always waiting for the very last ripple of sound to silence, before striking again.

Guarded, Open: Stop, Start

The Way of the Bodhisattva

Verse 47

When one wishes to move or to speak, first one should examine one's own mind, and then act appropriately and with self-possession.¹⁷

Aoife, by chance, bumped into Dai regularly in the early days. At the café, the fruit shop, an art opening, a play reading, a working bee ... She joined a meditation group and he was there. He had recently moved to the town.

The Way of the Bodhisattva

Verse 48

When one notices that one's own mind is attracted, or repelled, one should neither act nor speak, but remain like a block of wood.¹⁸

He asked her why she carried such a big, heavy bag full of books all over town and joked that he would write her a song called 'The Handbag Song'.

The Way of the Bodhisattva

Verse 51

When my mind seeks acquisitions, reverence, or renown, or again wants an audience or attention, I remain like a block of wood.¹⁹

He drove a van that he had hand painted like an Indian tuk tuk, with swirling mandalas—olive green and foxwood orange.

'Mind attracted: remain like a block of wood.'

He told her he had travelled mostly overland from England to Australia.

'Mind attracted: remain like a block of wood.'

¹⁷ Śāntideva, p. 38.

¹⁸ Śāntideva, p. 38.

¹⁹ Śāntideva, p. 38.

His favourite song was a hymn about breath.

‘Mind attracted: remain like a block of wood.’

He went to agricultural college and then studied religions.

‘Mind attracted: remain like a block of wood.’

He loved robots, sex, nature, colour and curries.

‘Mind attracted: remain like a block of wood.’

He could rebuild engines and read the mystics.

‘Mind attracted: remain like a block of wood.’

She smiled at him. She enjoyed his playfulness. Dai was well read, but not bookish.

Sometimes, in his presence, her baby toe tingled and her arm pits swelled with liquid.

Meditation

Your eyes should be

cast down,

looking at a point about three feet ahead of you.

If your eyes are closed, you may become too dreamy;

if your eyes are wide open, you will be too easily distracted.²⁰

In and out, slowly and steadily, she practised between the closed and the open—not too dreamy, not distracted—looking ahead, just a single point with everything else dark: there is only one.

It was Monday: an autumn morning, cool and white. She meditated on the front veranda. She was very still. The bird sounds fell like snowflakes, bouncing between the mountains, landing on her chest.

Whenever Dai went anywhere, he explored. He always found the most off-the-beaten-track place of beauty. He showed Aoife a walk up a mountain in the Blue Range. It was the closest, most secluded place within easy reach of the town. At the top of the Blue Range was an escarpment and from this plateau you could see all the mountains surrounding the valley: a 360-degree view. Once Aoife learned to follow the trail and the tracks, she routinely climbed to the top of the escarpment early every Saturday morning. Along the ridge, conglomerate rocks protruded like gnarly faces. From spring to late summer, yellow and ruby everlasting daisies—starchy and starry—covered the ground.

Aoife made a meditation seat at the edge of a precipice. She carried to the top her bells, her books and an orange. She chimed herself in and out. In complete solitude and

²⁰ Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen* (New York: North Point Press, 1982), p.23.

quietness, she would sit. When she opened her eyes, she saw shades of green—olive, apple, lime, fern, juniper, sage, moss, pistachio, parakeet and mint. In a moment of wind, a wedge-tailed eagle circled above and the scent of the orange peel rose like incense.

She read about the four stages of Hindu life: the *brahmacarya*, the period of training; the *gārhastya*, the period as a householder; the *vānaprasthya*, the period of retreating and of the loosening of social bonds; and the *samnyāsa*, the period of renunciation. ‘Every state of life is necessary; the blossom does not deny the leaf and the leaf does not deny the stalk nor the stalk the root.’²¹ Aoife felt deeply moved by another way of viewing the stages of life. Her heart quickened as she read, ‘when the wick is ablaze at its tip, the whole lamp is burning’.²²

During this time of getting to know Dai, Aoife met an old friend from whom she had not seen nor heard from for a long time. She rode on the overland train to the city where he lived. It was called the City of the Arts. She had not planned to see him, but they bumped into each other. Aoife was pushing her bicycle through the market place and bargaining for bread when he saw her. With her bicycle basket full of olives, cheese, bread and pears, she strolled through the marketplace unaware of him. As she was leaving, about to hop on her bicycle, he approached her. He looked older and more conservative, she noted. He looked worn. He said that she looked older, more beautiful and perhaps like she was in love or something. She blushed and felt clumsy and girlish, like she did ten years ago when they first met. Aoife told him she was married, had two children and lived in the country. She was just visiting the city to attend a course on narrative and therapy. They exchanged bits and pieces about their lives. Aoife was surprised that, after so many years, their paths had evolved with some sort of parallel synchronicity. What enabled that to happen she did not know but, nevertheless, it had occurred. He told her he was studying Zen meditation and she told him that she was studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

²¹ Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 16th edn (London: Unwin Books, 1971), p. 65.

²² Radhakrishnan, p. 66.

‘How long have you been meditating?’ he asked.

‘About four years now’, Aoife replied. ‘And you?’

‘Every morning and every evening for about the same.’

‘Do you meditate with others?’

‘Yes, a Zen group meets weekly at my house. We meet tomorrow night. Would you like to join us?’

‘Yes, I would, very much—thank you’, Aoife said.

She arrived at his basement to find a room covered with black mats and cushions, an altar with incense, orange blossoms and a comical green frog. They drank tea and they sat, they walked and they sat and then they recited sūtras. Aoife thought the sūtras were very beautiful, particularly lines from *The Bodhisattva’s Vow*: ‘At the peak of each thought a lotus flower opens, and on each flower is revealed a Buddha. Everywhere is the pure land in its beauty’.²³

There was an ease in the quiet, the discipline and the focus. At the end of the group, they asked about her practice and she explained that, while she did not belong to a group, she meditated morning and evening and that every Saturday she climbed a mountain and sat. An older woman smiled and said that it sounded like she had a rich practice. The Zen group gave her a cushion and a book of sūtras as a gift. She was very grateful. As she was leaving, her friend ran to her and slipped into her hand another book. He said she might find it helpful. Under an amber street light, she looked at the title: *Taking the Path of Zen*. She opened the first page and read:

This is the stone,

drenched with rain,

that marks the way

23 Robert Aitken and Tori Enji, *Encouraging Words* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p.77.

As the train rattled home in the night, Aoife wondered about the way, the path and the openings that were arising. She thought of Dai and how she couldn't wait to return home to tell him about these things. She yearned for him greatly in this moment and couldn't understand why these openings, these stories desired to be taken to him. She hardly knew him at this point but, whenever she thought deeply about all that was occurring within her, she wanted to share it with him. Her heart was beating fast; she wanted to say it was this way because she loved him. The words fell out of her heart and as soon as she heard them, she was shocked, scared and anxious, so she pushed them away.

She stopped thinking and she read a bit more and felt glad of this train, this liminal space, this carriage that moved across the barren Australian countryside, for, right in this moment, she was free.

24 Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, p. 1.

Budding

Aoife and Dai became solid friends and companions, much to the dismay of others. She was riding her bicycle with him, up and down little dirt tracks, surrounded by the smell of the long summer grasses. The river was slow, wide and green. He was broad chested, squiggly haired, strong, steady and long legged. His neck pulsed from childhood; his eyes were blue, round and clear—full of seeing. He saw in colours: layers of colour. He knew the spectrum from dark to light. His smell was sweet, airy, milk-white, delicate cinnamon.

On the morning they arrived they planted fresh herbs and lettuce in the sandy banks of the running water, a makeshift garden for summer salads. They ate and swam. He painted and she meditated. The sounds of the cicadas drummed louder and louder as the evening heat drew inwards. She wiped the corner of her lips free of drizzling mango with the tips of her fingers. She noticed how the sweet, fragrant smell of the apricot-coloured juice overpowered the traces of fresh coriander leaves and river currents.

Place and body, seasons and cycles—and time—were important to her, particularly what was felt in a moment and how much could be attended to in a moment. She stilled herself more, so that she could traverse more of him—more than the thousand eyes twinkling, more than the broken glass that she cut her feet upon. She breathed him in and laughter fell out of her mouth like flowers.

Aoife read by the banks of the Murray River, ‘In the pasture of this world, I endlessly push aside the tall grasses [...] following unnamed rivers, lost upon the inter-penetrating paths of distant mountains’.²⁵ There, evening cockatoos clamoured, screeched and squawked. It was there that she swam naked and was almost bitten when a tiger snake slithered over her thigh. She was beginning to see the almost. It was summer then. If stories do in fact have a beginning, a middle and an end, Aoife and Dai were somewhere midstream.

²⁵ Kuoan Shiyuan, ‘Ten Bulls’, in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (England: Arkana, 1991), p.138.

The Bodhicaryāvatāra gave Aoife a framework to understand the Buddhist journey. She progressed through each verse and section with great focus: (1) ‘Praise of the Awakening Mind’, (2) ‘The Guarding of Awareness’, (3) ‘The Perfection of Forbearance’, (4) ‘The Perfection of Vigour’, (5) ‘The Perfection of Meditative Absorption’ and (6) ‘The Perfection of Understanding’. Each chapter and verse pulled her away from him and towards him at the same time. While her dualistic mind worked in dualistic ways, her heart was gradually opening.

The Guarding of Awareness

Verse 10

The perfection of generosity is said to result from the mental attitude of relinquishing all that one has to people, together with the fruit of that act. Therefore, perfection is a mental attitude itself.²⁶

To Aoife this idea didn’t seem so strange after the religious teaching of her upbringing, except that the foundation was so different, for the Buddhist path wasn’t asking her to follow a law or a commandment, but rather to cultivate a mind or a heart space, the consequence of which would produce a relinquishing generosity to all. Aoife felt that this path would help her to make real the teachings and ideals that she loved but struggled to live up to and out of. She would get so inspired with such noble ideals and then feel a dark, black frond of darkness when she thought about herself and Dai. Dai and relinquishment in the same sentence made her throat tighten and her breath strain. Her heart opened, softened and expanded with him, but what was the good of this if it caused suffering to the whole. She and all were separate in this dualistic construction and it was difficult to see how generosity to all could fruit.

²⁶ Śāntideva, p. 34.

Aoife thought in one breath that she must not see him and in the next breath that she would die without him—what crazy thinking, she thought! Perhaps if she read and meditated more, a clear mind would teach her to proceed.

The Present

Today, 20 years later, riding her bicycle along the corrugated corn and apricot roads, she returns to thinking about the past and about other beginnings. How much of the past needs to be brought forward to understand how she came to be in this place, to be this woman, straw sun hat flapping in the speed of the downhill ride?

The Past

One night she had a dream of streaming, pounding rain that hit black tarmac and bounced off it, as high as her knees. Once he wrote about loving her, all of her, even her knobby knees and he drew a picture of them just to prove it! They were resting by the banks of a river and she was reading a story by H el ene Cixous called ‘What is it O’Clock? or The Door (We Never Enter).’²⁷ She was intrigued by this story and how time was linked to the body and the love of the other: ‘As soon as we enter a “love story”, what is imperceptible, colourless and odourless in ordinary life becomes extraordinarily insistent [...]. Time is the Other’s odor’.²⁸

For sure, this was what happened to her—every sense heightened, every sense led back to him. This story seemed to give her a way of understanding these moments and especially ways of living out of multiple senses of time. Back then, before they could be, she was measuring her days by where he was. When she woke, she wondered if he was awake. She carried him around in her doubled consciousness, the *me–him* consciousness, which was like a speckled sparrow egg, fragile and warm.

Fingers splayed, hands slightly rounded, she held *Stigmata*, with its flower-ankle-tattoo cover and read Cixous’s story a little further:

we are always interiorly our secret age, our preferred age, we are five years old, ten years old, the age when we were for the first time the historians or the authors of our own lives, when we left a trace, when we were for the first time marked, struck, imprinted, we bled and signed, memory started [...] when we took up our own power [...] or else we are twenty five years old or thirty five, and on the point of surprising the universe.²⁹

27 H el ene Cixous, *Stigmata* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1998), p. 78.

28 Cixous, *Stigmata*, pp.78–79.

29 Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 83.

Back then, on the banks of the river, she wondered how her life was being shaped and contained and what it would mean to ‘take up one’s own power’. Was she on a point of surprising and being surprised? Aoife breathed deeply, slowly, as if to catch her breath, to feel her breath, to move back to her body. Brow wrinkled, breathing deeply, she watched Dai scribbling on a piece of paper:

Question: If you were just a knee what would time look like? Answer: ask H  l  ne Cixous.

Dai was loving her then in a way that gathered and made visible all that was important to her. The seeds of her inner life were nourished and noticed by him—and she was seeing how she loved him across all time: as a child, as a young woman, as an older woman, towards death and beyond death. The odour of him would be the clock set, the chime in the night, the sunrise of the morning.

Yes, in her dream, the black rain was hitting the ground hard, pounding it and bouncing back up to her knees. She was being taken back to memories by the rain and they were hitting the present now, alerting her to the fact that she did not want to go back, to retrace—to attempt to stitch together a whole account that had her dwelling in each stepping stone. It would be too painful, too unbearable and too tragic. It would be like watching a child playing on a road of near misses. Back then, she did not know that the forces of sex, marriage, church and motherhood would be like that black, dark tarmac that caused a bouncing back for the rain that wanted to gush, pour and flow. She was seeing and not seeing at the same time. She closed her eyes and made space interiorly.

When she opened her eyes, things looked different; he looked different. She experienced a way of seeing that was like something she had read about by a mystic writer, a long time ago: ‘This way of looking is first attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as (s)he is, in all truth. Only the person who is capable of attention can do this’.³⁰

30 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), p. 61.

To balance her Buddhist reading path, Aoife returned to some Christian mystics for she felt that, somehow, these two complimented and extended one another. Sometimes she felt so overwhelmed and lost in the Buddhist ‘non-duality’, ‘all-is-mind’, ‘everything-is-delusion’, ‘attachments-are-wrong’ philosophies, that she returned to her Christian roots where the key idea she retained was that a person was created from love for the purposes of love. Was to give and receive love an experience of the highest order or was it emptiness?

Delicate and thread-like, she stilled her mind and quietened her being so that she could apprehend further this heart seeing; in the silence, it was there. In the end, it was all she had to follow when Dai was gone, when she walked aching through an art gallery of love stories and drank in the snippets of love’s memorabilia—a glass casement of torn love letters, kept handkerchiefs and coffee-stained sketches of hips and lips. She liked to feel close to great, passionate love stories, even if they had gone wrong. She hoped by chance that hers would be fulfilled, that perhaps it could find a place somewhere; but that wasn’t to happen for a long time, so she read and rode, meditated and hurt and learned how to carry the hurt with forbearance in an old-fashioned, tea-cosy style, which allowed the orange pekoe to brew and kept something warm.

Life as Story

Not long after they first met, Aoife saw Dai at a dance in an old church hall full of colour and children. He was standing in the corner alone, looking lost and awkward. She felt sorry for him and asked him to dance to the beat of a drum and the humming of a gum leaf. Aoife felt his body soften into hers, yet hold the steady beat of the music at the same time. Whenever they let go of one another they always found a way back to ‘their body’ with ease. ‘Their body’ together was slender and agile, full of rhythm and life, full of passion and magnetism—it could roll and romp, twirl and stamp with an uncanny unity and timeliness.

As their love story progressed and especially in the darkness of midstream, the steps only produced disorganised fragments. Aoife had to remind herself not to draw conclusions, despite the multiple invitations to do so. It took generations for some meaningful shape to occur and, ultimately, it would take death for the last step, or breath, to reveal the shape that her life with him would become.

Old Woman

The old woman was sitting by her wood fire, in her simple little house in the hills and, at her feet, were her seven great granddaughters who had come to hear their bedtime story.

‘Tell us about all the men who fell in love with you when you were young and beautiful’, they asked with bright little eager eyes.

‘Well’, she said, looking up, squinting as if she were trying to count how many there might have been, ‘well ... let’s see ... I could tell you about the man who fell deeply in love with me.’

‘Oooh, yes please’, they said, ‘and tell us what happens when someone falls in love with you?’

‘Well, this one just used to look at me. He would just sit there and look and stare. He would spend hours just looking. He said it was like drinking me in. He said it was a mystery that gave him life. He loved to stare.’

‘Is that all he did?’ they asked, sounding a little disappointed.

‘Well, yes, he would hold my hand and gaze and gaze and gaze. He said he wanted to be gazed out and then, one day, he must have been gazed out because he just fell over.’ Captivated by the thought, their mouths dropped wide open.

‘Then what happened?’ they asked, full of curiosity and interest.

‘Tell us more about the man who fell deeply in love with you, the one who used to gaze’, asked the eldest great granddaughter. ‘I want to know what you thought about all this gazing. Did you like it? Did you fall deeply in love with the gazing man?’

‘Well’, said the old woman, ‘when this man gazed at me, everything else stopped and I plunged into those eyes, much the same way that a deep-sea diver travels deeper and deeper into the depths of the ocean. In his gaze, I would become lost in an oceanic swim—weightless, free, in a timeless, silent space. I would reach a point where I could no longer tell what was the water, what was me, what was him. An extreme feeling of oneness would overcome me. Sometimes, this was shattered by a birdcall, or by my own nervousness or by

a movement in the trees. Then, I had to return to the surface for air. This man, you know, had the softest, clearest blue eyes, eyes that could speak, eyes that would invite me to journey into the depths with him. Sometimes his eyes would rotate around my face, exploring and mapping every little bit: every bit bothered with. I use to wonder what he was thinking. Sometimes, I would worry that he would find a bit that he did not like and, with that thought, came a nervousness, for I did want this man to love every bit of me as I loved every bit of him. We gazed and gazed and drank each other in more and more deeply and, over great expanses of time and tiny little moments of time, we fell as far as any two people can into the depths of love.'

The younger children were fidgeting and giggling by this time, but the eldest great granddaughter looked solemn, expectant and delighted.

The in Between

The boards of the triangle house are weathered, the cream green paint flaking. Looking upwards at the rain, she sees the drops from underneath. A shadow bird flaps its wing against a white linen bed; Aoife's consciousness is dispersed, not quite all together. She is in between this story and the next: an interval. In her writing, she is looking, like Rembrandt, for the light and the shade that evoke mystery, like Vermeer, for the everyday scenes of life, told with colourful, strong pigments of cornflower blue and sunny yellow. She is looking for where to place her pied pen, for what contiguous impressions will sparkle with pearly highlights. She wants to write in relation to the whole text with a self that is present in this moment.

Grace and Ivy

Grace played a mournful tune on her violin. She was tall and lean like the bow. She was wearing a black skirt and white shirt, practising for her end of year concert; she was the lead violinist in an orchestra. Her violin was crying, as if the sadness of what was to come had seeped into her, crept into her soul. She screeched in harsh, angry tones and stamped her feet when she made the slightest mistake. She was mad with herself, with the world and she did not know what was going on. Everything was changing; she did not like change; she loved being a little girl wearing a crown and pegs in her dress to make the shape of a ball gown. She loved pottering with her mother in the garden, picking berries and tomatoes. She loved having Winnie the Pooh stories read—she was fond of Piglet—and laughed at the puns and plays of language. She snuggled into Aoife at night, twinkly, eager, mind shiny and sharp for a story. Aoife read,

‘Pooh’, he said at last, and a little timidly, because he didn’t want Pooh to think he was giving in, ‘I was just wondering. How would it be if we went home now and *practised* your song, and then sang it to Eeyore tomorrow—or—or the next day, when we happen to see him?’

‘That’s a very good idea, Piglet’, said Pooh. ‘We’ll practice it now as we go along. But it’s no good going home to practise it, because it’s a special Outdoor Song which Has To Be Sung In The Snow.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Piglet anxiously.

‘Well, you’ll see, Piglet, when you listen. Because this is how it begins.

‘The more it snows, tiddely pom—’

‘Tiddely what?’ said Piglet.

‘Pom,’ said Pooh. ‘I put that in to make it more hummy. *The more it goes, tiddely pom, the more—*’

‘Didn’t you say snows?’

‘Yes, but that was before.’

‘Before the tiddely pom?’

‘It was a *different* tiddely pom’, said Pooh, feeling rather muddled now. ‘I’ll sing it to you properly and then you’ll see.’ So he sang it again.

The more it

SNOWS—tiddely pom

The more it

GOES—tiddely pom

The more it

GOES—tiddely pom

On

Snowing.

And nobody

KNOWS—tiddely pom

How cold my

TOES—tiddely pom

How cold me

TOES—tiddely pom

Are growing.

He sang it like that, which is much the best way of singing it, and when he had finished, he waited for Piglet to say that, of all the Outdoor Hums for Snowy Weather he had ever heard, this was the best.

And, after thinking the matter out carefully, Piglet said:

‘Pooh’, he said solemnly, ‘it isn’t the toes so much as the ears’.³¹

Little Grace would laugh at the idea of making a song more ‘hummy’ and Pooh waiting for a compliment. She loved these stories and could be found under a tree devising humorous absurd rhymes or playing Pooh stick races in the river with Ivy. As adolescence loomed, darkness and shadows came into her world of pixies and ponies, picnics by the river, magic shows and puppet plays. All were slowly evaporating; she was growing up. Anxieties hardened her. She became angry easily, clenched her teeth, especially if her mother went away for the day.

‘Why do you have to go away again? Why can’t I come? I don’t want to stay here without you’, she sulked.

Ivy was now at school and ever so happy. She loved to collect eggs in her gum boots. She had a way of settling into Aoife’s lap with the whole of her body like a dog that makes its seat just right. She loved to kiss Aoife’s face in butterfly kisses. She had a permanent sense of connection with Aoife, even if she was not in her direct presence. She was loud and messy, muddy and buttery. Long curly locks like a lion’s mane surrounded her round face. Her huge deep eyes were framed by lashes like daddy long legs.

³¹ A. A. Milne and Ernest H. Shepard, *The House at Pooh Corner* (London: Egmont, 1974), pp. 4–6.

The Visit

A long time after the dance, she travelled some distant way to see him. She bought with her a sky-blue ukulele, a bottle of berried wine and a second-hand book that she'd picked up at the train station. It had a cream front cover with sea-green splashes and frothy, white foam creases ran along its back cover like creek tributaries. Pages with burnt, brown edges revealed too much time in a sunny car dashboard. It was a well-loved, thumbed and travelled book called *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. She chose it because he was living in a coastal town by a lighthouse.

Aoife wore a purple frock, a huge straw sun hat and her green leather shoes, which he said made her look like Olive Oyl. Dai wore a grey and apricot scarf and was very dashing.

She was walking into a life he had created for himself a long way away from her, a beautiful life close to colour, reverence and ever-changing sea. He picked her up at the train station where she was clutching all her things, terribly nervous but wanting to appear composed at the same time.

The night before she left to see him, she had a dream. She was climbing a mountain and the mountain became wider and wider, taller and taller and, as its enormity rose before her, she became smaller and smaller, until she was a mere speck. It was terrifying but beautiful at the same time.

That night had been black when she had opened her eyes. She longed for the first warmth of sun so that she could leave this bed, this house, this town and go to him. The children were asleep and all was silent when she left. She closed the front door with a quietness that was afraid to draw attention to itself.

When she saw him at the station, she thought he looked very well, but also nervous. Dai had made his home comfortable for her—simple, but beautiful: some flowers and books, a desk and a lamp, guitars and Indian cloths. He was learning to cook vegetarian food. He had chosen a book to read to her. They joined two lounge chairs together and called them

the ‘one–two chair’. Sitting in this boat-like structure, legs outstretched, looking at one another, they would gaze and sit and read and drink wine and play music together and laugh. At night, they would swim in the cold, ocean-black, deep sea and return home to a warm shower and bed.

She loved him best when he read aloud to her a story from his childhood, when his voice quivered with emotion and his eyes swelled with tears. At these moments, her heart kept opening, opening and opening as if it was limitless. Dai’s favourite story was about a lighthouse keeper named Phillip, a snow goose and child who grows into a woman named Fritha. He first read it in the Vumba mountains on the Zimbabwe–Mozambique border when he was 13. His first love story.

‘Why did you choose this story to read to me?’ Aoife asked.

‘Because I love the images of the wind-swept marshes,’ he replied and read:

Tidal creeks and estuaries and the crooked, meandering arms of many rivers whose mouths lap at the edge of the ocean cut through the sodden land that seems to rise and fall and breathe with the recurrence of the daily tides. It was desolate, utterly lonely, and made lonelier by the calls and cries of the wildfowl that make their homes in the marshland and saltings—the wild geese and the gulls, the teal and widgeon, the redshanks and curlews that pick their way through the tidal pools.³²

Dai told her he loved it because of the strong emotions. He identified with the lighthouse keeper’s loneliness, he believed, because he was wrenched from home to attend boarding school at age seven. He read on, ‘He lived and worked there alone all year round. He was a painter of birds and of nature, who, for reasons, had withdrawn from all human society’.³³ He spoke fondly of the lighthouse keeper’s great heart for animals and of his love of painting.

Dai read in soft tones:

³² Paul Gallico, ‘The Snow Goose’, in *The Best of Paul Gallico* (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), p. 3.

³³ Gallico, p. 5.

a child approached the lighthouse studio by means of the sea wall. In her arms she carried a burden [...] It's a snow goose from Canada. [...] there were scissors and bandages and splints on the shelf, and he was marvellously deft, even with the crooked claw.³⁴

And he puffed out his chest when he spoke of the heroic ending, whereby the lighthouse keeper responded to Winston Churchill's call to collect stranded English soldiers from Dunkirk:

'Philip! Must 'ee go? You'll not come back. Why must it be 'ee?'

He said: 'Men are huddled on the beaches like hunted birds. [...] They need help'.³⁵

Dai welled with tears when he retold of the child who grew into a woman, who called to him: 'Phillip, I love 'ee':

Fritha remained alone at the little lighthouse on the Great Marsh, taking care of pinioned birds, waiting for she knew not what.³⁶

Dai said that the snow goose was the force that connected them like the spirit; it was the soul of the story that appeared in the end to her to tell her that he loved her and that he had died:

Wild spirit called to wild spirit, and she seemed to be flying with the great bird. [...] Sky and earth were trembling with it and filled her beyond bearing of it. 'Fritha! Fritha! Frith, my love. Goodbye, my love.'³⁷

Aoife loved Dai. She wanted to receive everything from him throughout all time—from the little child that was held tenderly by his mother, to this man who was so solid and strong in conviction but who approached life with openness and play. She had never experienced such intimacy with a man and so much pleasure from reading.

³⁴ Gallico, p. 11.

³⁵ Gallico, p. 20.

³⁶ Gallico, p. 28.

³⁷ Gallico, p. 29.

From One Lighthouse to Another

Aoife read aloud to him the story *To the Lighthouse*. Dai liked the character of Mr Carmichael the best, shuffling along in his yellow slippers: ‘Mr Augustus Carmichael, who was basking with yellow cat’s eyes ajar, so like a cat’s they seemed to reflect the branches moving or the clouds passing’.³⁸ Aoife loved the poetry, the type of consciousness that Woolf could reflect in her writing and her ‘scene-making’. It seemed to her that Woolf could poetically and emotionally do through language what the dry world of male academia and religiosity could not—capture the moment by being in the moment, bouncing around the character’s inner consciousness, in their multiplicity of moments, in relational ways.

Aoife read aloud into the dark of night:

Now eight candles were stood down the table, and after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit. What had she done with it, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, for Rose’s arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus [...], among the leopard skins and torches lolloping red and gold [...] Thus brought up suddenly into the light it seemed possessed of great size and depth, was like a world in which one could take one’s staff and climb hills, she thought, and go down into valleys, and to her pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking united them.³⁹

Aoife liked how imaginary and metaphoric meanings were written into the viewing, like a fruit bowl becoming hills and valleys to walk among. It provoked Aoife to think about

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 9.

³⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 90

how Dai saw things and how she saw them; did they occupy the same world in the unspoken silences that lay between them. Aoife marvelled at how Woolf created this scene. She thought about how Woolf used ubiquitous things, like the candle light, the sea, the light from the lighthouse, even Mrs Ramsey the great matriarch herself, to unify things that would not easily be gathered together.

They all sat separate. And the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her [...].⁴⁰

Aoife looked at Dai. Looking and reading united them. He watched the shape of her mouth and her plum lips as she read. He enjoyed her animation and love for poetic beauty. He loved her attention to literary detail, her drawing attention to the way words sounded and how she could catch him up on the plot when he had drifted.

Dai was full of desire for her but always employed restraint because he did not want to hurt her. She was full to the brim of desire for him but she did not know what to do with her desires. Aoife continued to read aloud in a tense and confused tone as if the sexual metaphors in the text were jarringly reflecting her own divisions:

No, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realising it) jealously, hoping that nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.78.

⁴¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 100–1.

Mind Minefield

During this time, this phase, this cycle, her mind minefield was full of secret explosions. She spent most of her time in trepidation, stepping this way and that to avoid a bomb blast. Just like in her childhood, when she had stood silently in the middle of a bomb field and her parents had yelled to her from the house to lie down, she was paralysed with fear and uncertainty and would not move an inch; she had become safe when her father had run out and covered her with his body from the shells and debris. She would need to learn to walk the mind minefield herself now, for no father could cover her. It was hard, but at least she had found her sex, her desire, her love. His body would become her path. She lay on his chest, her hair across his abdomen; she felt his breath rise and fall, soft and full and she relaxed into him and fell deeply asleep. The sea wind shook and rattled the doors like ribs, everything breathed in unison.

Literature

Aoife moved away from reading copious religious texts. She needed stories, not theories or teachings. Stories revealed how people navigated the complex worlds of interiority and social expectations. Stories were emotional and relational. Stories showed rather than told. Stories helped one understand a range of perspectives or how, despite the impossible circumstances, a heroine kept going. Her favourite heroine was Tess in Hardy's novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Aoife thought this the most heart-wrenching story ever told, particularly the scene where Tess's baby was dying: a baby who was conceived by rape, whose child-mother revealed a tenacious heart of pristine goodness:

Tess had been one of the last to suspend her labours in the fields. [...] with curiously stealthy yet courageous movement, and with still rising colour, [she] unfastened her frock and began suckling the child [...]. Later that day, when she reached home it was to learn to her grief that the baby had been suddenly taken ill. [...] it soon grew clear that the hour of emancipation for the little prisoner of the flesh was to arrive earlier than her worst misgivings [...]. Her baby had not been baptised. [...] she rushed downstairs to ask if she might send for the parson. But her father would not allow it and bolted the door [...]. Like all village girls she was well grounded in Holy Scriptures [...]. In misery she rocked [...] she thought of her child consigned to the nethermost corner of hell [...] the infants breathing grew more difficult [...].

Oh merciful God, have pity; have pity on my poor baby!' she cried. Heap as much anger upon me, and welcome; but pity the child [...] she suddenly started up. Ah! Perhaps baby can be saved! Perhaps it will be just the same! [...] she lit a candle [...] pulling out the washstand [...] she poured water from the jug, awoke her brothers and sisters [...] made them all kneel [...] she took the baby from her bed [...] stood with infant on her arm beside the basin [...] the next sister held the Prayer-Book [...] her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon her face which had been her

undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with an impress of dignity almost regal. [...] ‘Sorrow, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’. She sprinkled the water, and there was silence.⁴²

The heroine ultimately took the religious acts into her own hands for the sake of her dear baby. Aoife wept so hard reading this scene that her breath heaved like it would never stop. It seemed to be a story so full of the pain of being a woman, a mother, the power of men and the very worst of religion. At this time, in Aoife’s eyes, it seemed to her that no Buddhist or Christian moral tale could match this one. Tess was a woman, a mother and no man could experience the pain evoked in this story. It intrigued Aoife to think that Thomas Hardy, a man, could write with such tenderness about a woman’s predicament.

Aoife felt scared for herself and her own children. She did not want them to live in sorrow.

⁴² Thomas Hardy, *Tess Of the D'urbervilles* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 90–95.

Breaking

She was on the verge of a doorway, a threshold. It was a difficult position to be in. Everything was unknown and none of her usual ways to navigate things worked.

The father of her children did not think that sex was as important as art, literature and religion. It was carnal and therefore of a lower order. ‘To achieve great things one must sublimate the sexual into pure artistic and idealist pursuits!’ he would proclaim. He was a scholar, an expert in Kant, St Augustine and Dante. He loved Renaissance paintings, opera and Gregorian chanting.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*

Once, he made a sculpture for her out of a tree with a poem carved into the trunk: ‘I want to do to you what spring does to the cherry trees’⁴³ However, it was all words, lofty talk, romantic speech and imagination. The real nitty, gritty of the body—flesh, fluids, passions and sweat—did not interest him.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*

He spoke disparagingly of people who based their lives on lust—lust that would all too soon fade. He spoke of women foolishly led on by fanciful men who wanted only ‘one thing’.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*

He was a civilised man, a man of principal, order and restraint. He was a caring man who sought to help anyone in need. He was a man of charity and propriety, heavenly not earthy. In his world, good and bad were easy to divide.

⁴³ Pablo Neruda, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, trans. by W. S. Merwin (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 37.

Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

His intellectual acuity was extraordinary.

Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

She found in him the answers to all her childhood fears. He had certainty, surety and superiority.

Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

She wondered if it was so easy for him to claim all these things because he did not burn in the body like her.

Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

He asked her to be careful: 'Men like that just want sex', he said. She took heed of his caution but could not stop the love thoughts from coming and going like uninvited guests.

Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

Love and Sex

Did Dai love her or does he just want sex? What did people mean when they used the words love and sex? How did she come to ask that question—did he love her or did he just want sex? When did the binary between love and sex appear and who ushered it in? How did language operate to circulate particular relations between concepts such as love and sex? What were the power fields and plays, the multiplicity of power relations and operations that led to particular performances of love and sex? To whom could she take these questions? To whom could she bring all her experience and innocence? To whom could she tremble out her uncertainty and vulnerability like a clumsy clarinet? More intimately, she wondered, who was this idea of ‘me’ that he might want? And how on earth did this idea of ‘his wants’, as though she was a product to be consumed, enter the questioning field? And who made ‘him’ the decider, the orderer, the leader of the field of play? The more she looked at this one question, the more she realised the gravity of history, ideas and power that sat behind each word, the more she realised that she did not want to play in the patriarchal love or sex game. She tilted it over in her mind trying to see it more clearly, trying to use language in a way that would illuminate how it was being used in the first place.

Back to Foucault

She returned to reading philosophy and decided to take her sex questions to Foucault. Foucault had written a three-volume study on the history of sexuality in the West. Aoife thought it would be best to go straight to Volume Two, *The Use of Pleasure*, as she was sure that this was where she experienced the most confusion. She picked up the bold orange and black book cover with an image of a young couple, head touching head and eyes gazing upon each other, the man seated on a chair and the young woman about to climb on top of him. The woman looked strong, focused and like she was taking the lead. Both were naked and he had an erect phallus. It was the moment just before they made love or had sex or both. On the back book cover, it said that the painting was on a wine jug from the fifth century BC. She thought about all women throughout time who were passionate and bold enough to take the sex they desired and felt back at the amoeba stage of development. Aoife wondered how she was going to untangle herself from the sexual oppressiveness that she carried. She thought that perhaps she should start with Volume One and the chapter on ‘The Repressive Hypothesis’; she despaired—but she didn’t want to go back; she wanted to go forward, to understand pleasure, to feel in touch with and supported by all those women who, across time, had deviated and challenged normative regimes. Aoife questioned what she was up against. She turned the pages and read:

the meaning of the sexual act itself: it will be said that Christianity associated it with evil, sin, the fall and death, whereas antiquity invested it with positive symbolic values.⁴⁴

Yes, Aoife thought. She remembered long ago she went to an art exhibition and viewed a small contemporary lithograph of a Renaissance-type Eve being dismissed from the Garden of Eden with a modern, gutsy spin. The picture portrayed a naked Eve who, instead of

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 14.

cowering in shame, was holding her head high and the caption underneath, from a Kate Llewellyn poem, read ‘she wasn’t kicked out, she walked out’.⁴⁵

Aoife, felt she needed to reinscribe sex with positive symbolic values; she needed to walk out of fear-based and puritanical discourses. She read further and listened as Foucault asked, ‘How did sexual behaviour come to be conceived as a domain of moral experience?’⁴⁶ ‘How does one enjoy pleasure “as one ought”? To what principles does one refer to in order to moderate, limit, regulate that activity?’⁴⁷ It seemed strange and revelatory for Aoife to think that there was a time when sexual behaviour was not so hitched to moral experience.

Dai and Aoife were walking in autumn mountains with sharp, grey winds, and eating tart orange persimmons when Aoife said, ‘Dai, did you know that in the ancient world and early Christian monasteries there were more regulations about the intake of food and gluttony than there were about sexual thoughts and behaviours?’

Dai looked ahead into the distance.

‘And it didn’t matter how many people you had sex with just as long as you had sex within the right social order. A married man could have sex with slaves or boys, just not another man’s wife,’ Aoife reported.

They walked on in an uncomfortable silence.

Through reading, Aoife discovered that there had always been ways of regulating sex. For the Greeks, moderation and control were important as they aspired to a type of self-mastery and a correct social order as an aesthetic way of being. For both the Greeks and Judeo-Christians, sexual austerity was important, but for the Greeks, unlike the Judeo-Christians, it did not spill over into notions of permanent, timeless laws that would create historically diverse forms of repression.⁴⁸ Aoife thought about women in contemporary Western culture and about how they were both liberated and repressed at the same time. She

⁴⁵ Kate Llewellyn, ‘Eve’, *Australian Poetry Library* (2017). Available at: <<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/llewellyn-kate/eve>> [accessed 9 December 2016].

⁴⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 253–54.

thought about the spectrum of women she knew and how each woman held her own different relations to sex, pleasure, body and self. Repression was not dead, it had just become more hidden and interior, even in the most liberal, thought Aoife. Aoife tried to understand how people had explored sexual relations over time. What did reading about it make possible for her? At one level, she felt that, by applying her intellect to sex, it would somehow safeguard her from being hurt or misled and from exploitation. She would 'know all about it' and be able to tame the wild discourses of sex; but, after a while, she realised that, just like reading religious texts, reading about sex was not the way. The type of sex she was interested in could not be an object of knowledge. She needed to get her head out of a book and trust her own erotic instincts.

Deepening

In the wake of autumn lambing, she walked unfettered. The carnage of a little lamb lay open before her, pink, pecked flesh ribs of the recently killed. The pinks and reds looked stronger against the wing of a black crow. The millipedes were all dead now; curled shells like toenail clippings: once they had streamed down the moss-filled rocks, like lines of rain. There was a bee and his hum was tired. In this cold place, one golden flower rose out of the dead summer grasses. She looked at the textured bark of the aged trunk and wanted to touch it, but it was out of reach. She was looking for a porous space, for a Jacobs's ladder. She desired her sex to be like honey that dissolved into tea, leaving abstract and prophetic fortunes at the bottom of a cup to couple and copulate.

The breath can be so even, like finely placed red stitches on a white linen cloth. She was noticing the rise and the fall of the in and the out breath: puffed out, it billowed, filling and releasing. Her tongue sat fully in her mouth: relaxed, it was taking up the hollowed space. When she first realised the feel of her own tongue, its shape in her mouth and its firm attachment to the back of her throat, she wondered how she had lived and spoken and eaten for so long without any real awareness of it.

Her lips touched each other lightly and, if she stilled herself a little more, she could feel them expanding out, releasing: each cell finally having enough room. She had been taught to observe the breath, the physicality of it, the relationship between the length of the in and the out breath, the balance and evenness. She noticed her breath and then let it be:

just one,

just two,

just three,

just four,

just five.

It was the ‘justness’ that mattered. In and out, she cycled, attentive and rhythmic. Within this stillness, the only movement was that of air moving in and out of her body. It became the wallpaper, the feel and tone of her body–mind. She noticed what clouds of consciousness floated by; she observed them come and go as she persisted faithfully in following the breath.

She remembered a little child who sat down next to her, who reached over and picked a grass seed from her black stocking, an act of spontaneity and familiarity, like finding your own tongue. She could smell the bounces of the kangaroo through the mists.

She was hearing two frogs continuously call and respond to each other. Their deep-throated croaks got louder and louder—her eardrums were being filled with this sound, like over-blown balloons they felt like they could burst at any minute. She loved the intensity of opening and receiving. In the evening, she meditated by a brown billabong. When her meditation was completed, she read:

Unaware of illusion or enlightenment,
from this stone I watch the mountains, hear the stream.
A three-day rain has cleansed the earth,
a roar of thunder spilt the sky.
Ever serene are linked phenomena,
And though the mind is alert, it’s but an ash heap.
Chilly, bleak as dusk I move through,
I return, a basket brimmed with peaches on my own arm.⁴⁹

She thought about the consciousness that is not dividing things between this and that, a consciousness that is watchful and accepting of things.

49 Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto, *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 74.

Consequences

‘If you fall in love with him, you will ruin all our lives,’ the father said. However, she was already falling. It was a fast descent, but there was no end in sight. She wondered when her feet would hit the ground. She braced herself and stretched out her arms, but there was nothing to hold onto, nothing could stop her now, so she stilled herself interiorly and opened her eyes to take in the view.

Little children were riding horses, bouncing on a trampoline and eating porridge: ‘Mummy, Mummy look, I can do a somersault’. Little children were laughing and running through the long, summer grasses after swimming in the dam, clay stuck to their skin. Sometimes the children sat on her knee and she told them a story of two friends who set sail on a wonky boat. Ivy had curly pigtails and a disposition to enter everything. Grace stood tall, erect, composed and thoughtful. How she loved these two children! She held onto them tightly one on each knee. She remembers the morning she told them about the change, about the little cottage by the lake; she remembers their looks of fear and devastation. She remembers how she wanted to weep, it was painful this sense of rupture and hurt. She held them closer and told them it would be good. They did not know what to do; they did not want this change.

‘Why can’t you just love him and stay with us?’ the eldest asked.

The mother had been trying for years now to make this work. He had left everything and was waiting for her. He never put any pressure on her. However, she knew that the only way that everything could re-find a place of belonging was for her to step forward into the reality that was. It would take courage and faith. It seemed impossible.

The School Car Park

‘Have you heard about her?’ asked the school yard mother.

‘How could she leave her children?’

‘I don’t like my husband, but you just put up with it, for the children’s sake!’

‘Her husband is so good, such a good father, always doing something with the kids.’

‘Yeah, she’s got nothing to complain about. Poor kids ...’

Grace

When Grace was born, Aoife could hold her in two hands. She carried her in her womb and spoke to her lovingly from the beginning. Aoife rode with her on a bicycle through chilly winter starry skies, floral spring breezes and into the hot Australian summer. It was 40 degrees Celsius on the day she was born. Aoife was spraying her huge belly with a water bottle of icy mist just to keep cool. In the night, Aoife lit a candle by a Marc Chagall painting of a mother and child; it was full of blues, yellows and floating reds. When Grace was born, every dog in the neighbourhood barked and sang. They could smell the blood, the livingness of her. It was a full moon. The neighbours decorated the fence with flowers, shells and welcome notes.

Grace was beautiful, dainty, with big rosy lips.

When it came time for Aoife to leave the triangle house, Grace was so devastated that she decided to change her name. Perhaps she thought that by changing her name she could change the story. She called herself Pip. She would come and stay with Aoife in the little house by the lake. They would put on their coats and make warm tea and milk and walk down to the lake. Pip called it ‘the spooky lake’, with all its dead trees; she told Aoife that she was going to write a story about it. Pip was very scared. Aoife stayed close. She hoped in time it would get better. They walked out to a big log and sat and watched the fish jumping and the birds fly home. They played a game of naming how many colours could be seen in the water. They had a lot of fun, Pip and Aoife. Pip had a beauty, quietness and containment about her being. Aoife loved to be with her. It was very hard not to live with her fully. Aoife’s heart felt like a lime-green banksia, twisted and tortured. They walked back to the cottage just before dark. Aoife cooked soup—Pip’s favourite—while Pip worked on her calligraphy. Aoife set the table and they said grace. Aoife gave thanks for the colours and reflections, for family and food. Aoife read and did a bit of sewing while Pip showered. They played chess and ate chocolate. Pip beat Aoife in two moves. She had a great strategic mind.

Pip would be hurt and angry for a very long time, but it would pass.

Aoife would watch her grow into the most extraordinary young woman, full of musical notes, bravery and intelligence. Pip would learn that her mother's love was immovable, unchangeable, eternal, ever-present and reliable, no matter what the circumstances. She would change her name back to Grace. Grace would become as tall as Aoife. She would have long, nut-brown hair and a boyfriend. Aoife would take her to a dance on Saturday night and she would watch her from a distance, laughing and twirling with her friends. She would look radiant, full of joy and happiness. Dai would sit next to Aoife, supporting her love for her daughter. Grace would greet him with friendliness. It would take so long.

Ivy

When Aoife moved into the little cottage by the lake, Ivy was so excited to sleep in the top bunk. They spent many hours together walking around the lake. Around the shoreline, Aoife would build stories for her out of sand—sand pictures. Ivy would check if they were still there the next day.

Ivy was the littlest, but the most centred and the most uncluttered. She did not have any big ideas about this and that. She stayed close to happiness; she knew how to make others laugh. She was practical and earthy. When she was very little, Aoife pinned a bell to her purple overalls. One could hear her jingling and jangling throughout the whole house. Even when Aoife couldn't see her, she had a presence, a happy playful presence. She was Aoife's 'roly, poly, pudding girl'. She liked to laugh from the belly. She was born in the darkness of winter in front of a raging fire. She was born to a loving older sister who counted down to her birth with a wish every day:

'I hope you have an orange dress.'

'I hope you are born safely.'

'Come out so that I can play with you.'

'I would like to give you a bath.'

'I have made a warm blanket for you,' wished Grace.

They baked crescent moon biscuits to celebrate her coming. She was born in her sack, which means that she will never drown at sea. She was born strong, huge, like a Renaissance cherub: so healthy, so abundant. In no time at all, she grew a mass of curly, wild hair. She had a feisty, loving spirit, was sensible and willing to try anything. She walked earlier than most. Through all the mess and changes, she stayed close to whoever needed her, close in a way that was mutual, making sure her needs were met as well as giving to the other. She had big round eyes, still and deep.

It was her birthday this week. She turned 13 years old. The first acacias were flowering bright yellow. Aoife made her a cake and drew her a card of the older girl she now

was, playing a French guitar. Yes, her birthday: so much to give thanks for—they made a winter fire, a vegetable lasagne and an apple cake.

Friendship

There was a time when she needed some way to protect her love story from her children and the feelings of self and cultural condemnation: to find a path that could hold the irreconcilable. She needed a friend. Before all this began, a woman had entered her life named Evelyn. Evelyn was a woman of great beauty and intelligence, a woman who could 'lay', 'arrange', and 'place' words in new orders. She was pregnant when they met and had recently returned from India. Evelyn seemed to carry love for her children and passion for life with a broad-hipped, gentle ease. She was slight in physical stature but her mind moved with great agility and humour. Evelyn walked alongside Aoife, faithfully, all the way to the end.

Letter One

To Aoife,

I think the ethics you have raised about relationships and about being a woman, a mother and heightened susceptibilities to mental vulnerabilities are interesting. What do you need to do to stay clear and not be sucked into the whirlpool of mother-blaming, woman-hating discourses? These discourses create binaries between your sexuality and motherhood; you know they were once called purity and sin discourses.

Letter Two

To Evelyn,

I need to keep remembering and connecting with other histories, and other decisions that I have made that were not approved by normative regimes, like when I chose midwives who would come to know me and hold what was precious to me in the birthing of my daughters: women who would stand up for my dignity and choices if I were unable to. I surrounded my birthing places with symbols and knowledges, quotes plastered on the walls about surrender

and ecstasy, life and trust. Now, I hang onto your letters in these times of such uncertainty

...

Letter Three

To Evelyn,

Your letter comes at such a good time and was very nourishing to read—thank you. It was his last day here yesterday. I was driving to work in a messy, fragile state, so you can imagine what consolation I felt receiving it. When I read your letter, I felt like someone had walked into the room of my mind and drawn the curtains, opened the windows to let in fresh air and light. Do you really think I am on a path of radiance that will discover the centre, the very depths of life? When I was seven, I lay under a majestic gum tree, looking up higher and higher, searching for the edges. I could never find the end, the meeting points between tree and sky. It was a type of looking that gave me a thrill and a sense of despair at the same time. I can see how the spiritual and the sensual have always laid close to one another, even from these childhood memories. Now I have a bigger landscape or reflective surface to contemplate them.

Letter Four

To Aoife,

Every year of my life since I was 14 there has been something that has come along that has considerably aided my understandings and experiences of different levels of consciousness. The list includes books, creative visualisation, automatic writing, lots of different meditation techniques, drugs, writing, travel, relationships with men, Foucault, anthropology, studying dreams, dream analysis, the spiritual lives of other cultures, the bush, the sea, yoga, Buddhism, quantum physics, ... then motherhood. Motherhood was so sustaining and expanding and yet culturally withering at the same time. I grew tiny, socially acceptable addictions and life got duller.

I seek life. I adore the way that when thinking has stopped and the body dissolves, life takes on such a sweet, translucent quality, a sense that every moment is a flowing adventure offering deeper depths ...

Letter Five

To Evelyn,

I am reading a book on Buddhism and reflecting upon notions of trust. It states:

Trust is that which arises from applying oneself to thoroughly investigated inclinations towards what really matters. Trust is holding the ‘not-knowing’ carefully to allow for the possibility of deepening. The kind of trust that arises from moving slowly is one that cares about truth and from this position of care; experience can be examined with awareness.⁵⁰

I want to keep my life orientated towards this type of clear seeing, careful awareness and trust in what is beyond the apparent. I ache so badly from missing him. At times, I am so afraid.

He has now been away for three weeks. He writes to me about painting his new house, working and going on holidays with his wife. I sit at my computer and cry. I can't really cope with such a connection. I can't be at peace. I have written him a letter to cease all contact. I feel like the character out of Munch's *The Scream*.

Letter Six

To Aoife,

I found your descriptions of ‘trust’ in holding the not knowing carefully to allow for possible deepening very orientating. I know what it is like to be in your state when you find your present reality so at odds with soulful love, passion and ideals.

50 Ajahn Munindo, *The Gift of Well-Being: Joy, Sorrow and Renunciation on The Buddha's Way* (Northumberland: River Publications, 1997), p. 44.

To sit in this time, in the wake of his leaving, with all the other relationships that are in pain and hurting because of this love is difficult. Moreover, your own pain having no ‘cultural visibility’ because the pains of others seem more legitimate means that there is little care extended to you. It is not surprising you feel like the character in ‘The Scream’. You have been under an extraordinary stress for years. I have marvelled at how you have managed this in a claustrophobic small town. I have walked the dark places you are walking. Is there any part of you watching, witnessing and slightly removed from the pain, sadness and anger of it all? If there is such a person, what aspects of your life is she rooted in? I wish I could come over; virtual communities are hard at such times.

Letter Seven

To Evelyn,

Thank you for your kind words ... I am slowly finding a way to keep going. I have begun playing guitar again. I am learning a new song:

Oh, little red bird,

Come to my window sill

Been so lonely

Chasing that autumn chill [...].⁵¹

⁵¹ Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings, *Winter's Come and Gone* (Nashville, TN: Acony, 1998).

Grief

This is a story that tries to listen to itself, to retrace its own steps and reinscribe upon itself, like a tattoo upon a body. It was winter at this juncture—cold and icy. Aoife shuddered and trembled as she rode her bicycle in darkness. There was no street lamp, nor moonlight, just a series of potholes that almost toppled her. She had to clench the handles tight to stop from falling off.

Aoife didn't see much of him at this time. She yearned for him terribly but he was away, far away, in another land, in another place, in another story. Despair grew and moved across her, like the mist descending on chilly mornings. She could only make out what was a few feet ahead. Aoife heard about him in whispers and corridors, through the laughing cackles of other women. Around her, things were slowly falling apart, fine hair cracks got larger; holes and schisms were now becoming visible. She lived from fragment to tear, from rip to hole, from wound to crack. She lived a patching, mending, suturing, gluing-together, paper-mâché existence and it was exhausting. Nobody seemed to notice and she became thinner and thinner, working all day and all night just to hold things together; but, at some point, there were just too many holes and not enough energy to keep pulling things together. Things began to seep out. Meditation had taught her to breathe and watch things happen, so she watched and felt the edges of things in her mind and in her body.

As things progressed, she got sick—sick in her head—and she got thin: thin in her body. She held onto to three things, the only three things she could see: her love for Dai, her children and the breath. In and out, slowly but surely, evenness might come again. She would wait and feel all of this. She would run her fingertips along the jagged glass trying not to cut them as she went around and around.

It was in the darkest time of winter that she planned to go away. She was very vulnerable at this time, very weak. It was not the best time to travel to a foreign country.

You Must Walk

Aoife was offered a scholarship to see Michael, the therapist, give a lecture at Kowloon University. She had never been away from her children and was reluctant to accept. Her manager at work would not hear of her refusal; he had won a gold medal in the Olympics as a young man and had decorated the office spaces with affirmation posters about success. He had his personal assistant, Helen, immediately cost flights, accommodation and draft an itinerary.

‘Aoife, I can get you some great deals here, why don’t stay a bit longer and do something more fun after the conference. I have been to Hong Kong so many times—the markets, the shopping are amazing; it’s such a vibrant place; you are going to love it!’ Helen said. Aoife smiled, wrinkled her brow and cast her eyes downwards, noticing the worn castor marks of Helen’s quick moving chair on the navy office carpet square. Aoife did not think markets and shopping were her thing. She tentatively thought, perhaps I could do something.

Aoife researched and discovered that on Lantau Island there was a giant bronze Buddha at a Zen (Chan) monastery called Po Lin. She looked at pictures of the bronze statue of the Buddha—112 feet in height, majestically arising like mountain peak—and an enthusiasm to go rose within her. Soft and flowing sculptural lines created such a serene Buddha, sitting on golden lotus petals: tiny snail curls of bronze hair covered the head, elongated ears touched the shoulders; the eyes were at peace; there was a gentle smile, a hand softly outstretched to save all.

Aoife was put off by the hordes of tourists that climbed the 240 steps to see the statue and visit the monastery. This did not seem like the place of deep silence and depth that she was looking for.

A few weeks later, when the tickets were booked and a date of departure set, Aoife found the story of an Australian Buddhist nun in an old Buddhist journal. The story was called ‘Learning Discipline in a Hong Kong Monastery’. Aoife felt this was a sign, a movement and a path to follow. She read with resonant delight, ‘you must walk to get to Po

Lam; starting at the famous big Buddha statue, one first passes through an arch with a Chinese inscription that reminds people of the value of letting go the dust of samsaric life. The way to Po Lam follows a tree-lined mountain path on an Island in the South China sea'.⁵² Aoife could feel the noiseless, soundless, secret silence, the dampened hush, shush, soft-footsteps silence as she read about the worn-out, grey patched robes, about the water drawn from a bubble out of a rock, the absent walls and fences, the beautifully tended organic vegetable plots, the bathing and washing from a bucket and the hot water heated by wood fire; ancient Chinese practices: no talking, no westerners, no English. 'Yes', breathed Aoife.

As time drew near to travel, Aoife became increasingly anxious. Anxieties came continuously like lemonade bubbles forming and rising, breaking on the surface of her consciousness continually: 'Why did I agree to this? I can't leave my children. I am going to miss Ivy's birthday. I hate flying. What if I get lost climbing the mountain? What if I can't cope in the monastery with the routine? What if I go mad? What if I get punished by God for straying into Buddhism? What if I get punished for having lustful thoughts? I am impure and wretched—what if I contaminate the monastery ... ?' Aoife's thoughts kept rising one after another and, while she tried to let them go, she began to dread this whole idea.

The night before she left she had a dream. Her body was dissolving, disseminating, dispersing. She was frightened. The force was great. She was being reformed as a whale—a huge whale—pounding through the ocean. Aoife felt like her body was being stretched further and further, until every bit of her occupied every cell of the whale. The ocean was limitless: too big, too dark and too cold. She was pounding along at great velocity. She felt her huge body, blubbery and wet. She wanted to go back and be a human, but she knew that she had to accept this new configuration. Her spirit was still against it; she would have to learn to settle, to be, to let go.

⁵² Jampa Chodron, 'Learning Discipline in A Hong Kong Monastery', *Sakyadhita Newsletter*, 12.2 (2002), 2–7, p. 3.

Aoife was a real mess when they dropped her at the airport. She walked down the passage to where the doors closed and there was no return. With each few steps, she turned around and could see her little family getting further and further away—children waved frantically and blew dozens of kisses. Aoife’s stomach swayed in an unparalleled sickness. She must get through this. The doors closed behind her. She took a deep breath down through the sea sickness in her stomach; the breath, like a pin, gently pierced through it and brought some relief. ‘Focus’, she thought to herself as she entered the piercing. The breathing and entering pushed her forward; the momentum quietened her mind. A lady at the counter greeted her with a warm smile, ‘Can I help you?’ she said. In no time at all, papers were stamped, bags checked and Aoife was sitting in a departure lounge watching the giant metal birds lift and rise with the wind.

Descent

The plane wings angled like a tipping scale on the descent into Hong Kong and, outside the window, Aoife could see the mountains of green forest, the pools of sea-green water and the giant Buddha. As the plane lowered, she saw a sky-scraper building with a banner hung across it saying 'Jesus Loves You' in pink writing, like a pop song. Tensions rose within her as seemingly competing signs both welcomed and cautioned at the same time. Aoife sank into her chair, her breath, closed her eyes and placed her left hand onto her lower abdomen and her right hand on top; she felt her shoulders rise and fall with each deep inhalation.

Outside the airport, her first whiff of Hong Kong was steamy, loud, humid heat. Aoife started to wilt. Sweat ran down her forehead as she struggled with a hiking pack, a bag and her Zen meditation cushion. She shared a taxi with a Western woman who was also travelling to the university; her husband was a lecturer and she had returned from visiting family in Perth. Kowloon was all squares—square windows, square on top of square, on top of square—high-squares that filled every space. Aoife had never seen so many people crammed into such small confines. Yellow, blue and white neon signs with red writing and emerald borders stuck out of every building like menacing tongues; everything competed to grab your attention ceaselessly.

Nancy

The conference was somewhat tedious and she was glad when it was finished. She met a Canadian woman named Nancy who was staying on a few extra days after the conference. Nancy was like a cream puff: round and soft, oozing a sweet warmth. She had a beautiful voice that spoke with a mellow and precise spaciousness. She had small, round, silver, wire rim eye glasses, which made her face look more puckered. Her face was framed by loose, gentle, brown and silver curls. She moved in slow and steady paces, unhurried, yet not lacking in determination. When Aoife told Nancy what she was doing after the conference, Nancy asked if she could come. This unexpected request was such a relief to Aoife. ‘Yes, I would love you to come with me’, Aoife smiled. They rang the monastery and obtained permission. Aoife could see how having a companion, a friend to journey with, was so much better than doing it alone. Nancy’s presence was like a gift: someone to travel with who had a quiet and deep quality of being that would still allow the solitary nature of such an expedition to swell.

The Mountain Path

Aoife and Nancy caught the bus from Kowloon University to the markets near the giant Buddha. They walked in the pelting rain and could see only an outline of the Buddha statue through the strokes of rain. Past the tea house, there was a track and a wood carved sign—The Wisdom Path. They began the climb, up and up the mountain. There, the rain fell like diamonds. The smell of decay was all around them. The water gushed down the flanks of the mountain. It poured onto their sodden feet. Aoife slid on the mud-stained track.

Up and up the steep and winding mountain they walked in silence. Near the top, they passed through an arch that had inscribed on it: ‘What is time?’ and ‘There is no memory’. Aoife shuddered as though she was going into another perpetuity; she was so far away from anything familiar—from the smells and skins of her little children, the yellow sun and the blue sky, the dry heat and crackling eucalyptus trees, the magpie and kookaburra songs. Everything felt mouldy, a set-in type of mouldy that could never dry or be removed. Monsoon rains poured on and on: sheets of silver splashing, slushing. Past the arch on the left, the green roof top of Po Lam became visible. Aoife looked nervously at Nancy, who smiled gently as they walked on. Following the driveway down past neat vegetable plots on the right, they could hear in the distance voices chanting, like waters flowing. They followed the chanting and came to the study room. Lines of monks and nuns stood straight as pins. Nobody noticed them; hot, wet and tired, they waited. Aoife felt frightened by the rigour and dedication. She felt as though she had turned up to run in the Olympics when she should have gone to Little Athletics. She saw a nun walking down a path and asked for help. The nun did not speak English, quickly averted her eyes and walked away. Master *Leung Si* approached them moments later and summoned Aoife and Nancy to follow him. He took them to his office and gave clear and impersonal instructions. He asked questions—‘How did you find this monastery? Why did you want to come?’ He listened carefully to the answers. He told Aoife that he had searched for a long time before settling in Po Lam, that he had seen things between monks that were not good; he was disturbed and returned home.

Aoife wondered whether he was talking about extreme punishment and abuse. Master *Leung Si* told them that when he was older, when he set out again and found Po Lam, it was a good place—and that he had been there for 20 years. Master *Leung Si* told them he was an artist before he became a monk and that he now made and mended robes for the monastery. He spoke with an even eagerness, as though they were potential novices.

Master *Leung Si* took them to the temple. In the centre of the temple, there was a glass casement and inside it was a statue of the Buddha with many hands. He explained that inside the casement there were relics of the Buddha *Shakyamuni*. To see these, one had to climb a ladder. He invited Nancy and Aoife to do this one at a time. Nancy went first. Aoife watched her climb higher and higher. She paid her respects and came down. Aoife climbed each rung carefully, step by step. When she arrived at the top, she looked in the casement and it filled her with golden light: a radiant light of delicate silk penetrated her whole body. She had never experienced such a mysterious thing before. She lingered in the presence, overcome with reverence. When she climbed down the ladder, Master *Leung Si* asked her to prostrate three times before the Buddha.

Aoife joined her hands together, brought her mind into complete focus and, feeling at one, bowed three times. She had arrived. Foreignness was shaken off like a shaggy dog's wet fur. This was the present moment. There was nothing else.

Life at the Monastery

Aoife and Nancy were taken to meet the nuns. Aoife's legs trembled with both awe and fear. She cautiously took each step so as not harm any living creature. There were lots of snails, slimy and slippery: brown scrolls of Buddha becoming. At the nun's quarters, there was a busyness and the sounds of scrubbing, sweeping and washing. *Lan Si*, the house keeper, was keen for them to wash their bodies, clothes and shoes; they must strip. She gave them each a clean black robe. They must not expose any flesh of their bodies. She did not speak English and directed Aoife and Nancy in silence by signs. She was firm and direct, keen for them to understand and adhere to all protocols on cleanliness and water usage.

Lan Si was kind and took them to a tree hut. The little wooden hut shyly poked out of the side of the mountain. *Lan Si* taught them how to roll out their straw mats and make their beds. The hut was surrounded by rare trees and unusual flowers that survived on steep slopes. Aoife felt at home in the simplicity and sparseness.

Aoife and Nancy waited in the tree hut quietly. At 6pm, *Lan Si* returned and accompanied them to the temple for evening meditation. Aoife thought the monastery was like a ghost town; everything so quiet; people walked across little mountain paths towards the temple; nobody looked at one another; nobody spoke; it was a place where there was no self in each being.

The Daily Schedule

3.30 am: Morning call.

4.00 am: Morning Service.

5.15 am: Breakfast.

7.10 am: First Sutra Recitation.

9.50 am: Second Sutra Recitation.

11.15 am: Lunch.

1.15 pm: Third Sutra Recitation.

3.10 pm: Evening Session.

6.20 pm: Walking Meditation.

6.40 pm: Sitting Meditation.

8.00 pm: Walking Meditation.

8.15 pm: Sitting Mediation.

9.00 pm: Bed.

Walking Meditation

Aoife and Nancy removed their shoes, entered the temple and began to walk around the perimeter. Aoife walked slowly, step by step, feeling each little bone of her toes and feet lifting and planting, rising and falling like her breath. The monks passed her like formula-one racing cars at a slick speed that surprised her. She was not familiar with the track or etiquette, so she continued slowly, close to the wall, trying not to get in the way, like a country-town driver on a highway. Nancy followed, walking faithfully behind Aoife. The bell rang and they sat. *Leung Si* told Aoife off gruffly for not covering her feet properly. Aoife corrected. She tried to settle her mind. Master *Leung Si* walked around the room with a flat, wooden *kyōsaku*, striking monks whose attention lapsed. Aoife heard the whacks and sat bolt upright. Scared and anxious, Aoife focused on her breath. It flowed in constipated, tight chunks.

The Night

After meditation, Aoife and Nancy returned to the tree hut. The door was locked and *Lan Si* told them she would unlock it at 3.00 am. They lay down on their mats—hot, dizzy and tired. There was nothing to say. In the darkness, the monks began to chant to the beat of a gong. The silver line of sound rang out into the starry night. Aoife listened to the gong, the chants, the rain and the wind in the trees, exhausted but alert. At 3.00 am she turned on her torch and dressed. She sat upright and woke Nancy. Nancy dressed quickly. The door was unlocked and they walked quietly down the stairs.

Before Dawn

Everyone moved like internal organs with no obvious, overt signs. A silence of pure existence united them like a skin. The air was still with silence. Aoife stood in the blackness looking towards the lit temple in an alone, nobody-there, type of silence. She breathed nothing-coming-in, nothing-going-out breaths. She could feel her ribs arched like a church: curved, brown-blooded, pearly-white candle tusks. Her eyes held the mysteries of being awake and asleep.

The Walk

The nuns began to walk and Aoife followed like a drip of water pulled along by sheer adhesion. She watched the ground carefully, so as not to harm any living creature. Stepping along the stony path, she felt small, fragile, like a snail shell—thin, delicate, empty, hollow, easily crushed underfoot.

The Temple

The temple was filled with pungent incense of sandalwood, agarwood and spices. Invisible like the silence, it stretched across space, becoming the air breathed. The gong was struck and the chanting started. A nun gave Aoife and Nancy a book with Chinese verses. The thick smoke, the striking gong, the crammed-in monks and nuns and the dizzying heat were too much for Nancy, who went outside.

Aoife felt taken in, absorbed osmotically into the whole smell–sound scape. The walking meditation began. Aoife didn't even feel her footsteps, only that she was part of one ancient stepping. She pictured herself from a distance, like a little ant that was part of a long line of ants from the beginning of time—ants that, seen from a distance, could only be one line. Something expansive and beautiful occurred for Aoife in those moments, where she touched the shape of the oneness, the form that all things were made from, the flow of life itself.

Dawn

Outside the temple, morning was breaking in pallid hues of yellow. The distinctive outlines of sharp, cone-shaped mountains were becoming visible. Nancy sat in a heap of sweat, limp curls and tiredness. She greeted Aoife with a welcoming smile. Aoife loved her in that moment and saw that, even though her outward being had crumbled under these strains and conditions, her inner being was as still and wide as a moonlit lake.

‘Don’t leave without me Nancy’, Aoife whispered. ‘It would be too hard to remain here without you.’

Nancy gave a small nod.

Leaving

Aoife told *Lan Si* that it was time for them to leave. They rolled their straw mats and swept the floor. A nun turned to Aoife and spoke:

‘You should stay longer’, the nun said softly.

Aoife was taken by surprised that this nun spoke and knew English.

‘I am such a small seed; I need to go somewhere where I can take smaller steps’, Aoife replied.

‘You are a small seed from a big tree’, the nun replied, bowed and left.

Aoife and Nancy went to the thin stream that plunged down the rocky walls near the kitchen and washed their robes and shoes.

Lan Si escorted them to Master *Leung Si*’s office. Master *Leung Si* asked about the leaving. He turned to Aoife:

‘You should stay!’ Master *Leung Si* said in a stern tone.

‘I do not feel I could manage’, Aoife replied.

He looked at Aoife both sternly and softly and told this story:

‘There was once a monk who, as a child, went fishing all the time. As he progressed on his spiritual journey he became overwhelmed and terrified, thinking of each little fish he had killed. He was at the brink of destroying himself, so filled with anguish was he. Once he faced it, all of it, there was no more fear. There is no fear.’

Aoife looked at him straight, feeling the weight of the story, holding it with great care before him, in reverence, in silence, in openness.

‘Good luck with your journey’, he said kindly. ‘Please wait here. I have asked a Polish nun who has lived here a long time to come and see you before you leave; she has been looking after a dying monk in a remote forest hut; she speaks very good English.’ With those last words, he bowed and left.

Aoife and Nancy looked at each other. They were keen to get going and sensed the pressure to stay. 'We leave together', Nancy said solidly and pressed her hand into Aoife's hand.

The Polish nun entered, her face glowing translucent like a thin skin about to split. Her spirit was spilling out, splashing the forest walls with light.

Aoife looked at her and with courage asked, 'After a lifetime of meditating what have you learned?'

And the nun replied, 'That every moment is different'.

Leaving was unusually sad and scary for Aoife. She felt like her soul had been blown out like a gigantic bubble and was about to hit the surface of life again and break. Holding onto each other, Aoife and Nancy began the long walk down the tree-lined mountain path. Temple dogs led the way. Each time Aoife tried to overtake, they snarled and sneered, showing their pointy white teeth. For a moment, Aoife thought that they would not let them leave, that they would be stuck in this timeless place, that no one would find them. However, as per usual, that was the fear talking and, when they got nearer the bottom of the mountain where the loose sounds of vehicles could be heard in the distance, the dogs stopped and let them pass. Aoife turned every few metres and could see the dogs watching them, waiting to see that they reached the bottom safely, like protective guards.

The End of Existence

When Aoife and Nancy finally arrived at the International airport, Aoife was covered in mud from top to toe. Having not slept or eaten much for days, she looked bedraggled, mad, quite out of place in the slick land of duty-free business suits, silk scarves and boutique chocolates.

They arrived with not a moment to spare for Nancy to catch her flight. Aoife had not even booked hers. At the departure lounge they looked at each other, shook their heads and smiled. Nothing could be said; how could one find words for all that had transpired between them. They hugged tightly and Aoife watched Nancy disappear into the crowds. Aoife stood alone, baggy black pants sopping, covered in mud and lichen—a skeleton, barely holding up a backpack, meditation cushion in hand. Aoife became overwhelmed with the noise, the light, the people and the glare; like a tsunami, they came rushing into all her senses at once. She wanted to fall on her knees and scream with utter defeat. She became aware of how her own apparent solidness was rooted in Nancy, how, without Nancy, she was lost. She was alone, broken and bruised. How could she make a meal out of these bony bits? She remembered *Leung Si's* story: the hook was in her own mouth, she had reached the edge, the end of her own existence. Dai, the children, the artist, the triangle house, Christianity, Buddhism, sex, marriage, passion, duty, ethics, discipline, knowledge, love ... it was all too much.

Beginning Again

When she returned home, she buckled under for a long, long time. She stayed within the confines of what is and not what could be. She ached and ached so terribly that she felt she could no longer go on. Her body was in one story and her heart was in another.

She went about her business. The busyness and routines of the children and family kept her physically working and preoccupied; there was always something to do, someone who needed something. She completed things, but she was dry. Small, whip-like emotional spikes with no sap grew inside of her woody and stinky being. She was listless, ghost like, mechanical. She attended to her children, but there was no joy inside her; she became a beige bland creature that the children began to avoid. Aoife's chest hurt just below her left breast. Sadness came and went at its own leisure, as regular as the breath. It was necessary to learn to live with it. 'I must not affect the lives of others with this', she recited to herself; but it leached out of every pore. 'You can't paint over errors', she once read.

Chip, chop, cut, splice, grate, portion, sift, bake: life went on. A grey-white invisible finger covered her mouth. She cried silently, cinnamon tears, hot and heady; they rolled down her face, ironing the wrinkles that gathered like fans across her side temples. At night, she dreamed of men who would cut her body into pieces, starting with her ring finger.

Ivy sometimes found her sitting in the dark on the veranda and stroked her head, the way one soothes a dying animal.

Aoife tried her best to contain and carry this predicament. However, questions continued to rise like vaporous mists, sneaking out. Quietly and repetitively they spoke: 'Is this, really right? Have you missed your chance for love? What if he gives up and finds another? Must your own happiness be forsaken for everyone else? Is there another way?'

She had heard that he and his wife had separated. He now lived alone. She thought she could wait until her children grew up, but this type of waiting was dying. Her mind was so agitated: thoughts slapped, flapped and slammed like screen doors guarding flies from weaving in and out.

She had reached a shattering point in this old paradigm.

She could not stand this contradiction and misery any longer. She drove to work and stopped by a lake that was still and cold, stark and barren, silent; no birds or leaves, just rotten stumps and grey, cold, spiky, bushfire-blackened branches reaching out, like brittle bones. They seemed to stretch upwards towards the heavens, towards life, calling out like the prophet Ezekiel: 'Can these bones live?'

She arrived at work, switched on her computer and knew that it was now or never. She wrote without thinking:

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin.

Dance me through the panic 'til I'm gathered safely in.

Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove.

Dance me to the end of love, dance me to the end of love.⁵³

Her hand moved the mouse decisively to the send button; one click and it was done. One click like one breath can mean the difference between life and death.

Swiftly, he replied. He drove for hours and hours uphill in a beat-up old kombi to see her. He picked her up and they travelled to Gypsy Point where the spring river was picking up speed from the melting mountain snow.

He traced her arm with a blade of grass, weaved that blade into a ring, circular and round with no beginning and no end. He touched her breasts and her nipples grew solid. He kissed her lightly and smelled her skin. He made a smell map of her whole body: rosemary, musty horse and apricots. His slipped his tongue, his fingers, his member into every opening and every opening widened, received him, held him. Around him, all of him, her body clothed their nakedness. Kookaburras shrieked with laughter. Scattered throughout her body,

⁵³ Leonard Cohen, *Dance Me to The End of Love* (New York: Columbia, 1984).

in the grasslands, hills and plains were clustered, everlasting, with yellow heads ushering in early spring and aromatic traces that never fade.

In the dark, there was just him, his skin, his breath and the moonlight.

The Way of Little-meditation Breaths

The more they made love, the deeper and more silent Aoife's meditation became. The opening and receiving she experienced in sex was extended to everything in life. She allowed herself to open and more easily receive others in all their complexities.

Each day and night was marked by breaths—7.00 am, morning meditation; 7.00 pm, evening meditation. Aoife sometimes meditated by the billabong with the wild ducks. Sitting on the dirt in a half-lotus position, back straight, Aoife felt her hip joints rotate and open like a fan, making room for the abdomen, the guts and internal organs. She felt the substance of her bones, her flesh and her blood filled with breath. There was now something solid and common in her approach to meditation. Aoife managed to weed out the specialist religiosity surrounding it. It was an ordinary thing to do: an essential thing, like breathing.

Before evening meditation, a line of white llama crossed the hillside—one brown one at the back. 'Whoop, Whoop', called a bird. Warm sunlight ran down her spine. A long, thin strand of grey hair waved like a flag in the corner of her eye. The grass rippled and ran up and down the hill like spring lambs full of joy and exuberance. A welling place of peace and pristine awareness took root in her. Sometimes, she was so in concordance with her surroundings that she felt as though she were inside a kookaburra's laugh, rising to ecstatic heights with inhalation and tapering off as she exhaled. Her attention stretched further, like a yawn, right to the tight edge of all that could be experienced in each moment. The pluck and croak of a water frog beat in time with her heart.

At the end of each period of silence, she would read something that dialogued with the mystery of these experiences, like a prayer:

Now, Lord, through the consecration of the world the luminosity and fragrance which suffuse the universe take on for me the lineaments of a body and a face—in you. What my mind glimpsed through hesitant explorations, what my heart craved with so little expectation of fulfilment, you magnificently unfold for me: the fact that your creatures are not merely so linked together in solidarity that none can exist unless the

rest surround it, but that all are so dependent on a single central reality that a true life, borne in common by them all, gives them ultimately their consistence and unity.⁵⁴

Now, Aoife focused on how to meet all experiences with light and love. She had slowly untangled herself from purity discourses. Meditation was a training ground, an altar into a wider, more relational consciousness. She read philosophies on the limitlessness of love—secular, Buddhist, Christian—holy trinities without borders, Aoife concluded. Reading and breathing were a couplet. She read not just for ideas but for companionship. She read, ‘To think love would demand a boundless generosity towards all possibilities and its generosity would command reticence: the generosity not to choose between loves, not to privilege, not to hierarchize, not to exclude’.⁵⁵ The world was changing; people could choose for love—women, people of colour, people of different faiths and cultural traditions and people in love with the same-sex. It was becoming easier for love to win, but many powerful people and institutions continued to violently oppose love. However, momentum was building; there would be no turning back.

Love, like air, infused everything.

There was a time when Aoife thought that she could deny love, that there was a more moral choice, but now she understood that this would be like trying to deny breathing, for love and life lay closely bound to each other and have always done so from the beginning of time.

Dai had given to her something very solid by loving her, through his faithfulness. It was a giving beyond what he had to give. She learned vulnerability and generosity from him. She learned how to give from a liminal space, a space of excess, a space of emptiness, a space of unknowingness and a space that was beyond all that she knew. Aoife felt, for the first time in her life, that she was strolling strapless—the sun on her back, linking ice creams—to gentle flip-flop steps that barely marked the earth.

⁵⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of The Universe*, 3rd edn (Suffolk: Collins Fontana Books, 1973), p. 24.

⁵⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 83.

Dai asked her to marry him against the half moon rising, while he buttered honey rolls. Silhouetted pelicans swam starry beaked on the lake. Sheoke-branch shadows danced across her straw hat.

They

There is a photograph of the back of a woman, wearing a long, black-lace dress. There are large, white flowers embroidered on it and lace around the collar of her long, slender neck. Her hair is rolled up and clasped with a silver clip.

Next to her is a man much taller: strong and erect. He is wearing a waistcoat—1930s style—and neatly tailored pants. He has polished his boots and the light that is pouring in from all the arched windows forms a glint, a speckle on his boots.

Yes, they are in black and white, but there is light pouring in, flooding in.

They are standing before a small, wooden table and he is holding her hand. Or is she holding his? Hand in hand, with their backs to us, him with his shiny boots and her with her silver hair-clasp.

They are looking upwards, onwards, beyond, looking into something mysterious.

They hold each other's hands. Their hands have always fitted so well together, so perfectly, right from the beginning. They are proclaiming something, something very intimate about blood, wine, tears, love, sacrifice, faithfulness and death. The light is blinding now as they proceed. Their bodies and their voices are doing something—something deep, something that is about entering into the heart of the very mystery of life, something that marks the edges of joy and ecstasy.

They have marked this space of intimacy in their own hearts for such a long time now, but they are finally here; and all around them is light—deep, purple light with golden threads, lime-green shades, burning orange and crimsons, softened by sky blues.

It took a very long time to be in this place. On this day, their love was celebrated, made visible, incarnated into the lives of others. Yes, what is significant is that, on this day, their love was storied in the bodies of other people. Some people were strangers and some were their own flesh and blood. All their children gathered in this place to witness their union. This union would be the boat to carry each of them forward into the new, into the future.

Evelyn was there standing at the back of this gathering. She taught Aoife how to love ethically in impossible situations. She helped Aoife to carry her love story to this place by her example of trusting one's own desires. She imparted to Aoife how to look desire squarely in the eye without fear or self-condemnation.

On this morning, before the day began, they baked a small loaf of bread together. They would bake many loaves, over many years, but this was the first. There was always something about the firsts—the first kiss, the first bicycle ride, the first time they made love, their first home together, their first meal—and, the lasts. When they came, the lasts— they were sometimes painful and unexpected, sometimes gave time to relish and relinquish, sometimes were taken for granted and their measure only felt in lament. One never really knew when they would come: the last kiss, the last bicycle ride, the last night of love-making, the last meal, the last breath. This very love story was caught up in many lasts and many hurts.

She still waited for a time when the hurt that she caused the Dutch woman and the Italian man would not be so painful to carry. She still grieved that she was not his first, not the mother of his children, not the woman he travelled with through adulthood. Sometimes, she saw photographs of him in another story; he was smiling; he had built a house in the bush with a Dutch woman; there were children on his knee and he had a long bushman's beard. They were celebrating a birthday or maybe it is Christmas. He looked happy; he looked foreign. Sometimes, she felt this other woman's body in their bed, in their love making; it happened in the early days; every now and then, the Dutch woman's presence would appear. It would frighten her when that happened. She would become so out of sorts, lost and sad. Languages of intimacies, like smells, are distinctive, present, yet invisible. She learnt that the past cannot, nor should not, be wiped away. If she loved him, she must make space for all that he had loved and not see it as a threat. It would take time for her to learn to deal with fears and to trust. However, she applied herself to this task of ensuring that all in this story could re-find places of dignity and have their heritages honoured. His heritage was

now interwoven with hers. The mother of his children must be honoured and, likewise, the father of her own children.

She carried this woman's presence probably more than anyone would think or know. She often felt shame, sadness and the awfulness of hurting another. She worried about her and prayed for her wellbeing and happiness. Sometimes, she felt jealous and sad that another woman had known him in ways that she would never understand, in the darkness and the underbelly of adult play and themes. Sometimes, she saw his pain from the leaving and the breaking and that too filled her with deep sadness.

As for her, she married a man when she was 17. She had never been with another man. She did not really know her own body. She was simple and fresh, like a jasmine vine. He was very good to her and he loved her. It is hard to know why, how and when things began to draw her away from this, but it happened such a long time ago. It happened long before she was even conscious or questioning of it. When she fell in love with Dai, the distances between this man and her became visible. It was hard to see this, to look at it properly; it was not what she had expected. Breaking faithfulness to this man went against everything she had believed, but something bigger than what she understood was drawing her forward. It could go by many names: reality, love, enlightenment, desire, lust, union, sex, meeting the other, being met, destiny, God. Whatever the name for it, it happened and, with courage, she walked and bicycled and read and meditated and made love to him—devoted and besotted, she proceeded, unaccountably loving him with flow and ease, just like water pouring over the edge of a waterfall. This was the natural course, this was the way.

Grace and Ivy loved their mother Aoife deeply and, while this whole story was painful for them, on this day they wished her well. They had come to see that their mother's flow of love was enhanced by this union, that there was not less, just more. This union was the deep well that their mother could draw from to feed them, indeed to feed all whom she worked with and served, all the people who came and went from her life, especially those with stories of deep violence and abuse. Their mother always had to reach deep and give

plentifully. This was the way she was, the way she had always been. Grace and Ivy loved their mother and they knew that Dai would protect that love, that he would be a conduit, not an obstacle. Something threaded through all of them now like blood and united them.

When Aoife and Dai drove away on that day, the day of their wedding, the five children stood together in the sunny grass under a wide blue sky: three girls and two boys. Dai's eldest son gathered them all in together. He would be a good older brother for Aoife's girls, a protector. He would take the lead to create new stories of family. He would always honour the old. He would be the first to say publicly, 'Meet my step-sisters Grace and Ivy and this is my step-mother, Aoife'.

Dai and Aoife finally made a home together. At their house, everything was fecund. The little house grew as grown-up children, partners and grandchildren came and went. They painted its walls sunny yellow. It was like a gypsy caravan on the move. 'Monet painted his kitchen yellow', Dai said, while his brush dipped and dripped, splashing gold upon the stark, white walls. The sky-blue ukulele sat happily next to his honey guitar. A swing chair hung on their front veranda, which looked out towards the endless mountain ranges called the Great Divide in this place full of sky. They ate porridge on the swing in the morning and drank wine and talked in the evening. Harvested garlic bunches tied with string swung loosely across the front veranda where remnants of last year's Spanish onions remained. Sometimes, the smell got up her nose and she complained that they blocked her view; Dai only laughed and exclaimed, 'But they are part of the view!' Aoife smiled at him and watched the frayed Buddhist peace flags blow lightly in the spring breeze.

This day would end by a river, a long, wide and old river; a river green like her eyes. It would end with the two of them, skin to skin. Once he asked her, 'If any part of our bodies could be joined together, what would you choose?' 'Skin' she replied. It was not the erotic answer he had hoped for. Yes, he would travel a long mile to understand her, her passions and her erotic sensibilities. For Aoife, the sounds of the river lapping gently and slowly, the songs of the evening birds, the smells of the buds bursting in spring, the warm sun and gentle

breeze and his skin would all pulsate next to her, building and layering desire upon beauty, passions upon heat, wet upon breath, until she would erupt with ecstasy.

Yes, there was light all around them this day and now it was closing, night was coming and everything was becoming quiet and settling down. They lay face to face. Their breath mingled. Everything was still and silent. They were here now; they had arrived.

THE END

PART 2: CRITICAL COMPONENT OF THE THESIS

Metaphors and Practices of Self-Becoming

Only when guided by inspiration do we choose right, when we are receptive, in a state of grace. But that is rare, very rare. And those who are (in a state of grace) do not know it [...]. The more so, since being in a state of grace often means losing your way, your usual way, in order to follow another: more secret, more mysterious.⁵⁶

Introduction

This thesis aims to bring together complex conceptual ideas and personal experience by exploring how reading, breath-orientated meditation and walking in nature are transformative of self. The creative-writing component of the thesis enabled the writer to develop a model of self-becoming based upon the metaphor of dehiscence—a metaphor drawn from botany. The critical approach explores how this model was developed and the theoretical ideas underpinning it. The model was in part conceived by the creative writer/researcher's engagement with the writings of Hélène Cixous, Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michele Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy and Buddhist scholars, particularly twelfth-century Zen monk, Kuoan Shiyuan. These writers have described, in a variety of writing forms, processes of self-becoming and intellectual discoveries. This thesis is particularly concerned with how they developed writing styles to explore original and personal content. In a similar way to Nicholas Royle's employment of the metaphor of veering in his book *Veering: A Theory of Literature*—to 'think afresh' and 'as a productive critical concept'—I have chosen the metaphor of dehiscence.⁵⁷ Dehiscence is a movement whereby the seeds inside a plant grow towards and beyond the outer and encapsulating skin. In the context of this thesis, dehiscence becomes a critically productive metaphor that enables the researcher to slowly trace certain reading and growth journeys. These journeys are towards the edges of knowledge and experience in the hope of discovering something new. If Royle, as he proposed, wished to consider the idea of reading

⁵⁶ Edmond Jabes, *The Book of Questions*, trans. by Rosemary Waldrop. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), p. 54.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 7.

a novel as an experience of veering, this thesis, by contrast, examines how reading could be an experience of dehiscence. Royle writes ‘veering is something that happens between the novel and the reader: as such, it is unstable, unpredictable, silent and secret’.⁵⁸ He uses the metaphor of veering to raise the following questions: What will this novel bring? What might it do to you? How might it change what you think or feel? When you start reading’, he continues, ‘you never know what might happen, and you are on the verge’.⁵⁹ Veering has a motion quality and pace that is quite different to dehiscence. Dehiscence is a slow ripening way of reading that produces small changes over time, whereas veering is quick and skittish. Dehiscence and veering as reading metaphors produce readings of texts that go beyond traditional literary criticism borders and boundaries. Royle highlights ‘twisting, spinning, sidestepping, swerving’ as factors in veering, ‘all of which contribute to what is shifting, uncertain and risky in the moment and experience of reading’.⁶⁰ He writes ‘my concern is to elaborate an understanding of veering that goes beyond any traditional enclosure of “literature” and that cannot be confined or reduced to any kind of “mere theory”, “linguisticism” or “wordplay”’.⁶¹ Royle proposes that reading via employing the metaphor of veering challenges ‘borders or oppositions between interior/exterior or inner/outer’.⁶² Likewise, reading as a practice of dehiscence seeks to extend or go beyond dichotomies of ‘interior/exterior or inner/outer’. Royle’s veering metaphor has echoes of Barthes’s ‘drifting’ metaphor for describing readerly readiness: ‘simply drift, or veer into the other lane, [...] or skid or leak’.⁶³ Royle describes ‘a sort of creative and critical, literary and theoretical figure in motion, a dream shifter’.⁶⁴

To explore reading and writing under the metaphor of dehiscence implies a slower and steadier pace. It is a reading approach that values a step-by-step peregrination with the

⁵⁸ Royle, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Royle, p. 28.

⁶⁰ Royle, p. 29.

⁶¹ Royle, p. 5.

⁶² Royle, p. 8.

⁶³ Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse* trans.by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. xii.

⁶⁴ Royle, p. 69.

intent of noticing inner, hidden and organic movements between text and reader. It differs from Royle's research as he seeks to challenge 'ways of construing the movement of writing in a smooth and seemingly assured anthropomorphism of walking'.⁶⁵ However, this research, following in the steps of Cixous, seeks to see how the pace of walking as a reading–writing metaphor could still be fruitful. Cixous, in *White Ink*, speaks of writing as a search, a journey; she states:

the word 'wandering' conveys the slowness, the step-by-step element, which is really important [...] it's the only approach that allows one to move towards truth—not to reach it, because it is a long way off, but to go towards it, where step-by-step is the only way to move forward.⁶⁶

The thematic explorations of breath, step and dehiscence as metaphors in this thesis reflect an approach to reading–writing research that have roots in a type of exploratory process articulated by Cixous, whose work has been described as 'resisting method'.⁶⁷ Instead of imposing frames, questions or structures upon the construction of the research, themes themselves become the vehicle for poetic and philosophic writing discoveries. Cixous states, 'when I start writing, I am feeling my way in the dark. It's a kind of darkness that's not altogether black—there are a few indicators, lights to guide me, black stars'.⁶⁸ This is not unlike the expression from the creative work *Dehiscence*: 'She was going to ride her bicycle into the darkness without a light and without a helmet. She would begin this journey in the night when the sickle-slithered moon was lying on its back, gazing up at one small star'.⁶⁹ Cixous speaks of 'heading into the territories that elude us' and 'not sticking to conceptual reasoning, even if there is a certain capacity for abstraction there' and she describes her own texts as being 'uprooted from the traditional mode'.⁷⁰ She combines

⁶⁵ Royle, p. 80.

⁶⁶ Cixous, *White Ink*, ed. by Susan Sellers, (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Marta Segarra, *The Portable Cixous* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 1.

⁶⁸ Cixous, *White Ink*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Michelle Wood, 'Dehiscence: Spiritual Paths of Reading, Writing, Meditation and Love' (unpublished PhD, University of Kent), p. 15.

⁷⁰ Cixous, *White Ink*, pp 6–9.

writing–thinking journeys with embodied studies on everyday life. She states, ‘the material for any text of mine is the raw stuff of everyday life. There are cars and very specific makes of cars, saucepans, jam jars, plane tickets—all the accessories of life, both as common objects and metaphor’.⁷¹ This approach to writing is exemplified in the beautiful descriptions of her mother in a bathing suit in her memoir *So Close*:

[...] I had just been admiring her, she was in a bathing suit, I was sitting across from her, I admired the steadiness of her life instinct, I was not myself in a bathing suit, I hadn’t thought of it, whereas my mother, as soon as she sensed the appalling heat rising through the windows, had responded to the danger, my mother never loses sight of a life whereas I am always losing them one after another, the bathing suit had not moved, you see thought my mother, saw I, one must never throw anything away, I have had this bathing suit for thirty years, she no longer goes swimming ever since her skin is no longer skin, we hadn’t seen it in ten years, it is a one-piece, with wide diagonal strips, I was moved by the bathing suit, by the return of the bathing suit, by the reunion of the shimmering bathing suit with the henceforth two-toned body of my mother, whose pale skin is now painted with large ochre patches of various sizes and shapes and ‘it’s beautiful’ I was saying to myself [...].⁷²

Step by step, word by word, Cixous takes us towards an intimacy of self-revelation in the act of gazing upon her mother. Within this scene, a rich reflective surface is developed for explorations of time, memory, age and body through an object—the bathing suit. A metaphoric and philosophic sensibility is taking its first breaths in the ‘raw material’ of life. My approach to writing has been inspired by the meeting and exchange between literature and life. Following dehiscent growth points, I have sought to extend my capacities for reading and writing. To do this, this thesis takes research paths that Cixous describes as responding to notions of calling and to how ‘certain texts have a certain music that we are

⁷¹ Cixous, *White Ink*, p. 9.

⁷² Hélène Cixous, *So Close* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 1.

attuned to'.⁷³ A key attraction for me, as for Cixous, is responding to a text in which 'someone has managed to keep within the narrative the spontaneous, frothy quality of notebooks and diaries'.⁷⁴ This type of text has a quality that is metaphorically breath like. It is one in which the raw material of life is present, living and breathing. It is a text that, as Cixous explains, 'hasn't yet been brought to heel, tamed and tidied up, or a text where the reader gets to a point of sensing the enormity of the story and thinks, "Damn where has the narrative gone?"', and all of three words get the narrative back'.⁷⁵ Cixous is not the only model for this breath-type writing style and this thesis will also illustrate it using examples from texts by Clarice Lispector and Virginia Woolf. In her last novel, *A Breath of Life*, Lispector wrote, 'Each new book is a journey. But a journey with eyes covered thro' seas never before discovered—the muzzle on the eyes, the terror of the dark is total'.⁷⁶ She goes on to write:

this book will be made apparently out of shards of a book. But in fact, it is portraying quick flashes of mine and quick flashes of my character Angela [...]. Each entry in my diary and the diary I made Angela, scares me a little. Each entry is written in the present. The instant is already made of fragments.⁷⁷

Similarly, Woolf described the process of apprehending and expressing her experiences in writing:

The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, they shape themselves into the life [...] Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance which sight or

⁷³ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁷⁴ Cixous, *White Ink*, p. 9.

⁷⁵ Cixous, *White Ink*, p. 9.

⁷⁶ Clarice Lispector, *A Breath of Life*, trans. by Pedro Almodóvar, (Barcelona: New Directions, 2012), p. 7.

⁷⁷ Lispector, *A Breath of Life*, pp 10–11.

incident scores upon consciousness [...] flickerings of the innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain [...] to come so close to the quick of the mind.⁷⁸

Both Lispector and Woolf share an understanding that the instant or the moment is comprised of fragments. As writers, both see their task as the authentic recording of the moment, though it may be disconnected or incoherent in appearance. Woolf's writerly quest is 'to come so close to the quick of the mind' and Lispector describes hers as 'to write pure movement'.⁷⁹ The skill of astute observation is necessary for both writers and the ways in which they cultivated this will be explored later in the thesis.

When I read the descriptions of how Cixous, Lispector and Woolf approach writing, I sense an affinity with my own writing desires. I note that their texts 'call' me on to certain reading paths. Their texts move me and produce movement within me. Their writings inspire me to develop my own metaphors of reading–writing methods or transportation. This thesis seeks to achieve this by examining reading as dehiscence.

An introduction to the metaphor of reading as dehiscence is elaborated on by contrasting it with Cixous's metaphor of reading as 'by the light of the axe', which illuminates the purpose of reading as awakening to journeys of discovery.⁸⁰ The thesis explores in detail breath and step as metaphors of processes (meditation and walking) that assist self-dehiscence. These metaphors are introduced early in the thesis and revisited throughout the writing in the creative–critical, reflective narratives on reading and writing. The creative writer/researcher performs an investigative journey by drawing links between personal experiences, literary texts, writers' diaries and essays. Attention is given to the twelfth-century Zen poem, *Ten Bulls*, as it depicts a story of spiritual dehiscence via the practice of solitary meditation. The poem and commentary are a model of poetic narration,

⁷⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1986-1994), IV (1994), pp. 157–164 (p. 160).

⁷⁹ Woolf, p. 160; Lispector, p.1.

⁸⁰ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 63.

as well as a source of insight and an inspiration. The overall arc of self-becoming that this thesis stretches towards in its critical component aims towards love, making it companionable with the narrative trajectory of the creative work. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy wrote that ‘love is the extreme moment, beyond self, of a being reaching completion’.⁸¹ Nancy, in ‘Shattered Love’, draws upon philosophy, theology, the arts and psychoanalysis to describe the life and structure of love. He describes it as occurring in oppositional couples (necessary and impossible; sweet and bitter; free and chained; spiritual and sensual, lucid and blind, altruistic and egotistic). Nancy claims that, ‘from all these oppositions, love carries out resolutions or surpasses them’.⁸² He heralds an idea that is important to the novella *Dehiscence*, *The Bull Poems* and this thesis: ‘Love is at the heart of being. [...] it is necessary that being have a heart, or still more rigorously, that being *be* a heart’.⁸³

Metaphor 1: Dehiscence

Dehiscence is a movement whereby the seeds inside a plant grow towards and beyond the outer and encapsulating skin. It ‘involves the differentiation of specialised cell types and co-ordination of molecular and bio-chemical events that eventually lead to a cell separation process that frees the seeds once they have matured’.⁸⁴ The plant’s eventual opening can also be assisted by being touched by an animal or wind or the warmth of the sun. The purpose of the opening is so that the contents from inside the plant can be released, dispersed and disseminated and so that the plant can blossom and bloom. Other structures that do not open in this way are said to be ‘indehiscent: they rely on other mechanisms such as decay and predators to release their contents’.⁸⁵ Dehiscence comes from the ‘Latin word *hiscere*, the

⁸¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 86.

⁸² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 87.

⁸³ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 88.

⁸⁴ Cristina Ferrandiz, ‘Regulation of Fruit Dehiscence in Arabidopsis’, *Journal of Experimental Botany* (2002), 2031–2038. Available at: <<http://jxb.oxfordjournals.org/content/53/377/2031.abstract>> [accessed 8 April 2013], p. 2031.

⁸⁵ ‘Dehiscence (botany)’, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (24 November 2016) Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dehiscence_\(botany\)&oldid=751312718](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dehiscence_(botany)&oldid=751312718)> [accessed 24

inchoative of *hiare*, to yawn'.⁸⁶ Yawning has both physical and metaphorical qualities and is defined as 'to be wide open, as a chasm, abyss, or the like; to have or form a wide opening, gap, or chasm'; or 'to make involuntarily a prolonged inspiration with the mouth wide open and the lower jaw much depressed'.⁸⁷ It must be noted that dehiscence usually occurs along a line of weakness. Weakness in the context of this thesis is understood as an edge between what we know and have experienced and what we have the potential to know or experience—or, between what we are in this moment and what we have the potential to become.

To read at the edges of knowing in the hope of discovering something new is the impetus for the reading journey of self-becoming. It requires that one is attentive to 'the call' of certain texts. The quest for love, transcendence and communion are metaphoric seeds within the reader–researcher that find warmth, light and air in certain texts and so begin to stretch towards them. How this mysterious process of reading resonance occurs remains unknown unless observed, studied and documented. The value in documenting these processes is that they demonstrate how one develops living, embodied, relational knowledges as well as theoretical knowledge. It is hoped that this research will be an example for other creative writer/researchers interested in exploring intersections between critical theory, creative writing and personal memoir.

In *Dehiscence*, the creative writer/researcher wanted to tell the story of self-becoming through a love story that was enabled by intellectual and spiritual dehiscence. To tell this story, the creative writer/researcher gathered source material in the forms of personal diary entries, notated philosophical and literary texts and letters of correspondence. The creative work required a style of writing that could delicately incorporate small and large passages of time and move between narrative sequences in non-linear ways, attuned to

November 2016].

⁸⁶ Lewis Ramshorn and Franz Lieber, *Dictionary of Latin Synonyms* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1839), p. 236.

⁸⁷ 'Yawn', *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) Available at:

<<http://www.oed.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/view/Entry/231303?result=2&rskey=6VJn5d&>> [accessed 20 February 2017].

burgeoning developments in unconscious spheres. The creative writer/researcher needed to find a language for such a journey, one that enabled the memoir account to reflect the real, raw material of life and thereby reveal how the step-by-step practices of breath-orientated meditation and reading affect being. The memoir also explored psychological shifts in the main character, Aoife, from childhood to middle age. These were revealed by unpacking notions of class and normative constraints through small memory narratives that were subsequently contrasted with her adult life. Importance was placed on physical locations, on nature and on the cycles of seasons. These are the key measures of time in the *Dehiscence* journey narrative, allowing for both the inner world and external changes to be seen and linked to the botanical metaphors of growth that this thesis employs. The balance between poetic prose and the integration of theoretical ideas proved continuously challenging while writing the novella. This was partially overcome by trying to situate and contextualise the act of reading: ‘In the beginning, she was reading; she had begun meditation and was studying eastern philosophy. She lived in a small country town at the foot of a mountain. There, she was close to chooks, vegetable gardens, fruit trees and children’.⁸⁸

Yet this contextualisation of the act of reading also considered the materiality of the book—the cover image, the creased or weathered pages, the feel and weight of the book itself:

Foucault had written a three-volume study on the history of sexuality in the West. Aoife thought it would be best to go straight to Volume Two, *The Use of Pleasure*, as she was sure that this was where she experienced the most confusion. She picked up the bold orange and black book cover with an image of a young couple, head touching head and eyes gazing upon each other, the man seated on a chair and the young woman about to climb on top of him. The woman looked strong, focused and like she was taking the lead. Both were naked and he had an erect phallus.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Wood, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Wood, p. 62.

Further, it involved making clear how texts were chosen and embedding that story into the narrative:

It had a cream front cover with sea-green splashes and frothy, white foam creases ran along its back cover like creek tributaries. Pages with burnt, brown edges revealed too much time in a sunny car dashboard. It was a well-loved, thumbed and travelled book called *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. She chose it because he was living in a coastal town by a lighthouse.⁹⁰

It proved most effective to embed the theory within the character Aoife's own inner grappling's, moving between theory, thoughts and questions:

Aoife wondered how she was going to untangle herself from the sexual oppressiveness that she carried. She thought that perhaps she should start with Volume One and the chapter on 'The Repressive Hypothesis'; she despaired—but she didn't want to go back; she wanted to go forward, to understand pleasure, to feel in touch with and supported by all those women who, across time, had deviated and challenged normative regimes. Aoife questioned what she was up against. She turned the pages and read:

the meaning of the sexual act itself: it will be said that Christianity associated it with evil, sin, the fall and death, whereas antiquity invested it with positive symbolic values.⁹¹

Yes, Aoife thought. She remembered long ago she went to an art exhibition and viewed a small contemporary lithograph of a Renaissance-type Eve being dismissed from the Garden of Eden with a modern, gutsy spin. The picture portrayed a naked Eve who, instead of cowering in shame, was holding her head high and the caption

⁹⁰ Wood, p. 51.

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 14.

underneath, from a Kate Llewellyn poem, read ‘she wasn’t kicked out, she walked out’.⁹²

Aoife, felt she needed to reinscribe sex with positive symbolic values; she needed to walk out of fear-based and puritanical discourses. She read further and listened as Foucault asked, ‘How did sexual behaviour come to be conceived as a domain of moral experience?’⁹³ ‘How does one enjoy pleasure “as one ought”? To what principles does one refer to in order to moderate, limit, regulate that activity?’⁹⁴ It seemed strange and revelatory for Aoife to think that there was a time when sexual behaviour was not so hitched to moral experience.⁹⁵

The focal point of the memoir was the self-encounter with inner life and how awakenings of desire—spiritual, sexual and intellectual—produced transformation. For this type of personal content to be explored the creative writer/researcher had to step back and ask: How did these stirrings come to be; and what was it about the external context that enabled their expansion, growth, ripening, blossoming and eventual bloom? These questions promoted reflections on the reading of texts, such as Heidegger’s ‘The Call to Conscience’ and Zen monk Kuon’s *Ten Bulls*, that will be explored later in this thesis. In the writing of the creative piece, themes emerged that shaped the researcher’s critical reading, thereby enabling the creative work to lead the research, in contrast to a more traditional course of critical research, whereby research questions and methodology are set prior to commencement. Creative writing and narrative making are also used in the critical work to explore the *Ten Bulls Poem* and paintings. I created reflective narratives to clarify the themes that resonated with my readings of the poems. In this way, I could more attentively engage with the *Ten Bulls* and refine the conceptually critical content that arose to be explored. Through this process, I was also able to compare all eight English translations of the poems

⁹² Kate Llewellyn, ‘Eve’.

⁹³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 24.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 53.

⁹⁵ Wood, p. 63.

and to search for resonances between the themes of thesis and the poems. It is hoped that the occasional returns to the creative-writing piece in the critical work have maintained an embodied, personal style of writing while enabling meeting points of dehiscence between the creative and critical research processes. The writing–living process allowed the researcher to follow what was being awakened, to stay close to the scent of life and to follow her own nose, rather than to rely upon authorised and constructed pathways.

A Model of Self-Becoming Based Upon the Metaphor of Dehiscence

She has just returned from travelling along the ocean where a stingray as wide as her arm span—black and leathery, hard yet rippling, graceful like a jellyfish—floated past her. In fact, it swam alongside her—and him—for many steps, until disappearing under the sea. They were walking along the edge of a thin space that separated land and sea.

From then onwards, it has come to her repeatedly, often unexpectedly, its enormous angles floating across her mind, taking up the whole space, carrying her back to dreams, story and imagination.⁹⁶

Things that come out of left field, unexpectedly, such as a giant stingray, stir something inside that is initially unutterable. They awaken a secret that is invisible, but ripening—a force that stretches beyond what we know or imagine. This could be viewed as a type of call to conscience. Heidegger described the call to conscience as ‘a call that dispenses with any kind of utterance. It does not put itself into words at all; yet it remains nothing less than obscure and indefinite’.⁹⁷ He wrote, “‘Nothing’ gets called to this Self, but it has been *summoned* to itself—that is, to its ownmost *potentiality-for-Being*’.⁹⁸ Heidegger believed that ‘this call moves a being “forth” (and “forward”) into its own most possibilities, as a

⁹⁶ Wood, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper One, 1962), p. 318.

⁹⁸ Heidegger, p. 318.

summons to its ownmost *potentiality-for-Being-its-Self*'.⁹⁹ Heidegger defines Being as something in each one of us that is in a process of inquiring into our own possibilities for becoming. Simon Critchley describes it follows:

Conscience is a call. It is something that calls one away from one's inauthentic immersion in the homely familiarity of everyday life. It is, Heidegger writes, that uncanny experience of something like an external voice in one's head that pulls one out of the hubbub and chatter of life in the world and arrests our ceaseless busyness.¹⁰⁰

He qualifies this statement by noting that, for Heidegger, an inauthentic life is characterised by chatter of the world and reminds us that the call is silent. It is through this silent return to self that we can encounter ourselves. Heidegger writes, 'The call comes *from* me and yet *from beyond me and over me*'.¹⁰¹

Dehiscence, the creative work of the thesis, explored how one can be called beyond the immersion in domesticity and the busyness and chatter of life by an uncanny encounter, such as love. This encounter produced an unpredicted extension of being, prompted an uncomfortable but unavoidable questioning of being and initiated possibilities of new ways of being. A dehiscent ripening of being or self is an encounter of self, an encounter marked by the possibilities of becoming. It is beyond one, yet within one at the same time. An example of trying to tell this narrative occurs in *Dehiscence* at the Buddhist monastery:

Aoife told *Lan Si* that it was time for them to leave. They rolled their straw mats and swept the floor. A nun turned to Aoife and spoke:

'You should stay longer', the nun said softly.

Aoife was taken by surprised that this nun spoke and knew English.

⁹⁹ Heidegger, p.318.

¹⁰⁰ Simon Critchley, 'Being and Time: Part 7 Conscience', *The Guardian*, July 20 2009. Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/20/heidegger-being-time-critchley>> [accessed 18 December 2014].

¹⁰¹ Heidegger, p.320.

‘I am such a small seed; I need to go somewhere where I can take smaller steps’, Aoife replied.

‘You are a small seed from a big tree’, the nun replied, bowed and left.¹⁰²

How these encounters with self via meditation, reading and immersion in nature occur are described in different ways by different writers, reflecting the unique and irreducible ways that we are each called to our own potentiality of becoming.

Dehiscence and Reading

Hélène Cixous’s writing explores a type of interruption as an approach towards increased self-awareness. Some self-narrations in her earlier works, *Coming to Writing* and *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, use metaphors of breaking open, escape, killing and death to express a facilitation of the transformation of self. They are metaphors that depict a force coming from outside the self to hastily break open self-maintained barriers, hampering the life of the self. In contrast, *Dehiscence* narrates a more graduated transformation that comes from inside and yet beyond the self at the same time. I am curious about the different ways in which self-transformation or becoming is depicted in texts and how these may reflect, challenge and illuminate notions of non-violence, time and relational ethics. By relational ethics, I mean ethics that value our ‘interdependency as well as freedom, emotions as well as reason, and our unique situation as well as our human commonalities’.¹⁰³

In her book, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, Cixous contemplates writers that she loves to read and speculates about how they wrote:

I realise in time that the writers I love above all are of the dying-clairvoyant kind.

What also reunites these authors is that they wrote, as I like to say, by the light of the

¹⁰² Wood, p. 93.

¹⁰³ Wendy J. Austin, ‘Relational Ethics’, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. by Lisa Given (Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE Publications, 2008) Available at: <<http://methods.sagepub.com/reference/sage-encyc-qualitative-research-methods/n378.xml>> [Accessed 8 April 2013]

axe: they all dared to ‘shatter the frozen sea’, as Kafka puts it, break eggshells, the hulls of boats; they all dared to crack their own skulls, and return to the forest.¹⁰⁴

Cixous asks herself what ‘her’ writers have in common and answers that they have all written by the axe’s light: ‘They have sought bliss in savage conflict and have found it’.¹⁰⁵ The ‘light of the axe’ sounds a potentially violent metaphor to describe what can be discovered through reading and writing. Is this the only way towards quenching the desire to know: to stand naked before ‘the face of God’ or ‘the face of the soul’, as Cixous phrases it? Are there other ways of ‘seeing through’ our thought habits without resorting to metaphors that link awakening with violence? For Cixous, it seems that interiority must be broken open to discover the deep mysteries of life. Cixous, with some ferocity takes up her axe-like pen and writes: ‘with blows of the axe—we will get to the other side’.¹⁰⁶ Cixous returns to the metaphor ‘by the light of the axe’ throughout *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*; it is a key note that links her own ideals for reading and writing to Franz Kafka (1883–1924). What does the axe represent for Kafka and how does Cixous use it? For Cixous, the letter ‘H’, which is the initial of her first name, looks like a ladder and sounds in French like *hache* (axe) and, through combining these two poetic connections, she begins her hermeneutic analysis of the science of writing:

H: you see the stylized outline of a ladder. This is the ladder writing climbs. Perhaps you were going to tell me this **H** is an *H*. I mean the letter *H*. After all, in French *H* is a letter rich in significance. Indeed I write *H*, and I hear *hache* (axe) [...] This is already transporting for whoever desires to write. In addition to this *hache*—a cutting instrument, an axe to clear new paths [...] in French, *H* is a letter out of breath.¹⁰⁷

Through this small excerpt, we can see how Cixous draws attention to intricate and detailed aspects of reading. She notices the shape of the letter, its sound, its pronunciation, its

¹⁰⁴ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁵ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁶ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁷ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 4.

relationship to history; then she works this reflection on a single letter into an introduction on the purpose of writing: ‘to clear new paths’. She explains that, in French, the H is a letter ‘out of breath’ and claims that ‘before it was silenced during the French Empire it was breathed out, aspirated’.¹⁰⁸ She continues by contrasting this pronunciation of the letter in French with its sound in English and notices that in ‘English there is breath; let’s keep it’.¹⁰⁹ In all this, she is performing an exemplary reading, even at the level of breath—from the grandest historical analysis to the humblest sound of exhalation.

It is not until later in the book that she links this name play to the Kafka quotation and identifies an impulse to write by the ‘light of the axe’.¹¹⁰ The original expression by Kafka is about the purpose of reading—about what a book should do to one, if it is worth reading. The book for Kafka is an ‘instrument’, a metaphoric axe:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we’re reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? [...] we need books that affect us like a disaster, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished to the forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.¹¹¹

Cixous takes this expression of Kafka—that ‘a book must be the axe for the frozen sea’—and claims that the authors that she loves to read write by ‘the light of the axe’; she marks in parenthesis that they dare to ‘shatter the frozen sea’.¹¹² Cixous then further proceeds to inscribe the axe as an instrument that she will use to travel the unconscious, that inner, foreign land:

¹⁰⁸Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 4.

¹¹⁰Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 63.

¹¹¹ Franz Kafka, *Franz Kafka Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1977), pp. 15–16.

¹¹² Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 63.

we must descend by the ladder hidden under the legal bed and breaking all ties and rules, with blows of the axe, pass through to other side [...] in the beginning, it has to do with leaving ‘home’ by passing through ‘the door’ in the depths of oneself.¹¹³

For Cixous the ‘light of the axe’ enables a cutting, a breaking with all ties and rules to forge new writing paths. To shatter the frozen sea allows Kafka to experience reading as a psychological breakthrough—marking a way of going into the wild unknown, into areas of fluid possibility. For both writers, these metaphors show how they discover something beyond conventions and existing structures.

Kafka wrote, ‘We need books that affect us like a disaster [...] like being banished into the forests far from everyone’; his use of the metaphor of the forest seems to conjure a place of punishment and alienation.¹¹⁴ It is perhaps important to return to the full quotation and its context to understand Kafka’s vision for both reading and writing. When Kafka writes about what makes a book worthwhile, according to Wagenbach, he is responding to a growth point within himself, where, at 20 years old, he begins to engage with the question: what is important literature?¹¹⁵ At this time Kafka had subscribed to the literary-cultural journal *Kunstwart*, meaning ‘art guard’, founded some 16 years before in 1887.¹¹⁶ This journal was interested in ‘promoting the German classical tradition and was considered traditionalist and conservative’.¹¹⁷ Part of Kafka’s growth as a reader–writer was to question opinions offered by others from the outside and to cultivate his own in-depth explorations.¹¹⁸ He began following his own reading inspirations, responding to a call: Hebbel, Aemil, Byron, Grillpazzer, Eckermann’s *Conversations with Goethe*, Grabbe and Madame Du Barry, the

¹¹³ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 63.

¹¹⁴ Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, p.16.

¹¹⁵ Dawn McKenna, ‘Life or Literature? Klaus Wagenbach’s Kafka Biography’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Online* (2005). Available at: <<https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=10436>> [accessed 7 April 2013].

¹¹⁶ Richard T. Gray, *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard T. Gray (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), p. 173.

¹¹⁷ Gray, p. 173.

¹¹⁸ Wagenbach, Klaus, *Kafka*, trans. by Ewald Osers (London: Haus Publishing, 2003), p. 42.

biographies of Schopenhauer and Dostoevsky. He explained his interest to his friend Pollak in a 1904 Letter, which Cixous takes up in her own iteration on reading. Kafka wrote:

If you are surveying a life like that, which towers higher and higher without a gap, so high you can barely reach it with your field glasses, your conscience cannot settle down. But it is good when your conscience receives big wounds because that makes you sensitive to every twinge. I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we would write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished to the forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.¹¹⁹

In the above passage, Kafka is responding to his reading of Friedrich Hebbel's *Diaries*.¹²⁰ To complete the momentous act of reading all four volumes of the *Diaries*, Kafka explained to Pollak that he worked like a caveman rolling a stone in front of the entrance of his cave.¹²¹ When he speaks of 'surveying a life which towers higher and higher without a gap, so high you can barely reach it with your field glasses', he is referring to the extraordinary life of Friedrich Hebbel (1818–63) who while 'born in impoverished circumstances proceeded to become the founder of modern German dramatic literature'.¹²² It is through reading Hebbel that Kafka experiences a type of dehiscent opening, a gap in and a wound of conscience, a metaphorical wound akin to the medical definition of dehiscence which refers to 'a wound bursting open, splitting, or gaping along natural or sutured lines'.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, pp. 15–16.

¹²⁰ A critical edition of Hebbel's *Tagebücher* (1825–63) was published in four volumes in 1903. The set was in Kafka's library; see Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, p. 427.

¹²¹ Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, p. 15.

¹²² Thomas Moody Campbell, *The Life and Works of Friedrich Hebbel* (Boston: Richard Badger, 1919), p. 3.

¹²³ Wolters Kluwer Health, 'Dehiscence', *Stedman's Medical Dictionary* (MediLexicon, 2017). Available at: <<http://www.medilexicon.com/dictionary/23363>> [accessed 17 December 2016].

Apparently, at the heart of Hebbel's success was the intensity with which he undertook to understand his own nature. Campbell writes: 'Few writers of such pronounced genius have been equally concerned as Hebbel with understanding themselves. He began a new diary on March 23, 1885, and we see him gradually formulating his own theories of poetry'.¹²⁴ Kafka too was a disciplined diarist. His 13 quarto notebooks edited and published by his lifelong friend Max Brod depict, according to Brod, 'literary ideas, the beginnings of stories or reflections that pass through his head, and dreams'.¹²⁵ Brod describes Kafka's diaries as 'a kind of springboard for literary creation'.¹²⁶ Through diary entries and letters, Kafka expresses how reading, life and writing interweave. Kafka's writing in the letters to Pollak (his old school friend and early university companion) is where he begins to develop his theories and tastes for reading and writing. Kafka's ten letters to Pollak from 1902 to 1904 capture a period of his life when he was developing his own path and inspiration for reading and writing. Kafka was 20 when he articulated the belief that 'a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us'.¹²⁷ Kafka was expressing a desire to read at his limits, not within the bounds of convention. Wagenbach suggests that Kafka wished for more 'sensitivity of conscience and an independence of judgement'.¹²⁸

Dehiscence as Stretch, Wound and Destination

New philosophical ideas and literary encounters stretch the imagination and our familiar sense of truths. Derrida defines deconstruction as a 'remarking, in the reading and interpretation of texts, that what has made it possible for philosophers to effect a system is nothing other than a certain dysfunction or "disadjustment", a certain incapacity to close the system'.¹²⁹ There is always a weakness, a line of thinking that can be ruptured because texts

¹²⁴ Campbell, *The Life and Works of Friedrich Hebbel*, p. 25.

¹²⁵ Kafka, *Diaries*, ed. by Max Brod (New York: Schocken, 1976), p. 471.

¹²⁶ Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 491.

¹²⁷ Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, pp. 15–16.

¹²⁸ Wagenbach, p. 42.

¹²⁹ Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for The Secret*, trans. by Giacomo Donis, ed. by David Webb (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), p. 4.

are irreducible, as are readers and their capacities for reading. Derrida further described deconstruction as a way of thinking and reading as a type of ‘bending rules with respect for the rules themselves in order to allow the other to come or to announce its coming in the opening of this dehiscence’.¹³⁰ Derrida gives an example of this when he reflects on his own reading of poetry; he says, ‘I try therefore to make myself listen for something that I cannot hear or understand, attentive to marking the limits of my reading in reading [...] my reading is modest and does not exclude other readings of this poem’.¹³¹ Derrida creates an image of the reader in relation to the poem. The reader is cast as ‘he or she who creates a wound—a hole or a mouth for the poem to speak’.¹³² This approach to reading by Derrida towards openings and openness, along the weak lines that seek to close a system, reinforces an approach to reading that is important to this thesis, one that values reading as a journey beyond existing conventions to new destinations and understandings or ways of being.

Kafka and Cixous use sea and forest as destination metaphors for a type of reading that they consider worthy of the name. To be at sea is defined as ‘in a state of mind resembling the condition of a ship which is out of sight of land and has lost her bearings; in a state of uncertainty or perplexity, at a loss’.¹³³ The sea is depicted as an unknown origin, outside all connections that can be mapped and the metaphor speaks of a place that is beyond, wild, unpredictable and expansive. The sea metaphor reflects both the infinite horizon and the mystery of invisible depths. The frozen sea inside implies that a cold layer has solidified within the self, preventing new experiences and movements into expansive unknowns.

Similarly, the forest is a place outside the domestic, manicured garden and outside the walls of the castle—a place beyond what has been fenced in and secured. ‘Forest comes from the Old French forest (French forêt), Medieval Latin forestem (silvam) the “outside” wood (i.e., that lying outside the walls of the park, not fenced in), forīs “out of doors”’.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) I (2007), p. 44.

¹³¹ Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, p. 166.

¹³² Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, p. 166.

¹³³ OED Online

¹³⁴ OED Online

There is wildness in the forest, as there is in the sea. It is outside the secure, known and protected. A journey into a forest travels into the dark, hidden and unpredictable. There is also excitement and danger. The forest is where the wild beasts are, where you go hunting, where you might be eaten—if you are not careful. Sea and forest paths involve travelling outside the familiar and the known. A book, in a metaphoric sense, is a means of transportation, whether it be as an axe, a ladder or a dehiscence. Sea and forest as destination metaphors show how something can be discovered that is beyond conventions and existing structures.

For Cixous the ‘light of the axe’ enables a cutting, a breaking with all ties and rules to forge new writing paths. Cixous tells us that ‘all great texts begin in the manner that *breaks*: they break with our thought habits, with the world around us’.¹³⁵ A break with our thought habits and the world around us resonates with the separation from thoughts and world that is necessary to practice meditation and that seems a gentler motion than an axe shattering the frozen sea inside. When I read the Kafka passage, I recoil from the words ‘wound’, ‘stab’, ‘disaster’, ‘grieve’, ‘death’, ‘banished’, ‘suicide’ and ‘axe’. For me they resonate with a broody darkness and an urgency of transformation. I question the need for excessive force and want to delineate a way that follows a path of graduated steps. Following a dehiscent pace involves wandering into new terrain without the infliction of injury from the outside.

Metaphor 2: Step

In his essay, ‘Conversation about Dante’, Osip Mandelstam (1934–35) takes up different writing metaphors from those of the axe and ladder. His metaphors are highly compatible with the terms of this thesis. Mandelstam writes: ‘In Dante philosophy and poetry are forever on the move, forever on their feet [...] the metrical foot of his poetry is the inhalation; the

¹³⁵ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 59.

exhalation is the step'.¹³⁶ Writing happens step by step, breath by breath. Mandelstam claims that the evenness of pace in Dante's writing-walking allows for the most rapid associations—for catching things on the wing, as Dante described it: 'The step linked to the breathing and saturated by thought: this Dante understands as the beginning of prosody'.¹³⁷ The creative part of this thesis was conceived in just such a way, through rhythmic patterns of walking and breath-orientated meditation. Consequently, the writing produced has a feeling, which I want to emphasise, of catching things on the wing, on the edges of consciousness and in the moment. For example:

In the wake of autumn lambing, she walked unfettered. The carnage of a little lamb lay open before her, pink, pecked flesh ribs of the recently killed. The pinks and reds looked stronger against the wing of a black crow. The millipedes were all dead now; curled shells like toenail clippings: once they had streamed down the moss-filled rocks, like lines of rain.¹³⁸

Mandelstam asks 'how many sandals did Alighieri wear out in the course of his poetic work, wandering about on the goat paths of Italy?'¹³⁹ Some of the nature scenes in *Dehiscence* were created by walking the same mountain track for over six years in different seasons, noting what caught the creative writer's attention and attempting always to see afresh:

Aoife made a meditation seat at the edge of a precipice. She carried to the top her bells, her books and an orange. She chimed herself in and out. In complete solitude and quietness, she would sit. When she opened her eyes, she saw shades of green—olive, apple, lime, fern, juniper, sage, moss, pistachio, parakeet and mint. In a moment of wind, a wedge-tailed eagle circled above and the scent of the orange peel rose like incense.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Osip Mandelstam, *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. by Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin. (New York: New York Review Book, 1973), p. 107.

¹³⁷ Mandelstam, p. 107.

¹³⁸ Wood, p. 65.

¹³⁹ Mandelstam, p. 107.

¹⁴⁰ Wood, p. 35.

In writing the novella, creative notebooks containing nature-walking writings were retrospectively reflected upon and interwoven into the self-becoming narrative to fit with certain moods, dilemmas and life decisions at particular times.

Mandelstam tell us that ‘to indicate walking Dante uses a multitude of varied and charming turns of phrase’.¹⁴¹ Words are steps that take the reader towards a particular expression of something. For example, Mandelstam states that when Dante uses the word ‘sun’ he is ‘not throwing out an already prepared meaning [...] but living through a peculiar cycle. Every word is a bundle and the meaning sticks out in various directions’, a ‘forever road’ as Mandelstam puts it.¹⁴² He gives a simple example from *Inferno*, where the eyelids are not just called eyelids but ‘the lips of the eyes’.¹⁴³ Mandelstam, through his reading of Dante, suggests that walking and breathing influenced Dante’s writing style. He speaks of these as producing an ability to create ‘rapid associations’, ‘to catch things on the wing’ and to enable ‘a sensitivity to allusions’.¹⁴⁴ Mandelstam reflected that to read Dante for the first time is to begin a labour that is endless, that ‘results in only shortness of breath and wholesome fatigue’.¹⁴⁵ He urges the reader ‘to equip themselves with a pair of indestructible Swiss boots with hobnails’.¹⁴⁶

Virginia Woolf had a pair of ‘thick rubber boots and a walking stick and, in the winter, wore a wool helmet’.¹⁴⁷ This was the necessary equipment to walk the South Downs in Sussex. She walked this terrain from 1911 until her death in 1941. Woolf biographer Alexandra Harris states that ‘for Woolf writing and walking were inseparable; she made up her books as she walked’.¹⁴⁸ Woolf and her husband Leonard lived at Monks House in South Downs from 1919 and walked for two hours across the Downs every day—over bare slopes

¹⁴¹ Mandelstam, p. 107.

¹⁴² Mandelstam, p. 115

¹⁴³ Mandelstam, p. 115.

¹⁴⁴ Mandelstam, p. 107.

¹⁴⁵ Mandelstam, p. 107.

¹⁴⁶ Mandelstam, p. 107.

¹⁴⁷ Alexandra Harris, ‘Sussex’, *A Walk of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf on Foot* (2015). Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b067wnnd>> [accessed 26 January 2017].

¹⁴⁸ BBC, ‘Sussex’.

and water meadows. In her four-part radio documentary, Harris describes the importance of walking for Woolf, both as a way of expanding her mind and of discovering metaphors. She claims that, for Woolf, walking was metaphorically akin to writing: ‘the rhythms that she was trying to get into her writing were akin to the rhythm of walking—you put one foot in front of the other’.¹⁴⁹ As she walked, Harris tells us, Woolf was ‘mentally writing, she understood the book as a path, a half-hidden track pausing and petering and then suddenly coming upon a view’.¹⁵⁰

Walking had always been part of Woolf’s life. Woolf scholar Hermione Lee reveals that ‘Woolf in her early life would walk with her father Leslie twice a day to Kensington Gardens, morning and evening’.¹⁵¹ Harris adds that ‘trespassing, walking out of bounds and trampling on daisies were Woolf’s metaphors for bold reading and writing’.¹⁵² Harris quotes Woolf stating ‘when you get home from a walk, you have a certain conception of the world and one’s mind moves like a dragon fly’.¹⁵³ An idea is proposed here that, when the body moves through large vistas, suddenly development happens in the mind. Importantly, Lee states that ‘for Woolf walking was a way of capturing her inner life’.¹⁵⁴

Metaphor 3: Breath

Aoife begins to trace, sketch and outline a passage of time and transformation by books and breath. The book and the breath have been travelling together for many years now like a front hand and a back hand, with no seam, just a continuity of difference.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ BBC, ‘Sussex’.

¹⁵⁰ BBC, ‘Sussex’.

¹⁵¹ BBC, ‘Sussex’.

¹⁵² Alexandra Harris, ‘Kensington Gardens’, *A Walk of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf on Foot* (2015). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b067wnnd> [accessed 26 January 2017].

¹⁵³ Alexandra Harris, ‘Cornwall’, *A Walk of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf on Foot* (2015). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b067wnnd> [accessed 26 January 2017].

¹⁵⁴ BBC, ‘Sussex’.

¹⁵⁵ Wood, p. 2.

In the novella, *Dehiscence*, breath is the source metaphor by which the plot moves. It is through stories and descriptions of breath that the reader can see and feel how inner changes occur in Aoife. The relationship to breath is the constant factor that ungirds the whole story as it ungirds life itself. The spiritual dehiscence that occurs throughout the novella is based on the creative writer's engagement with the practice of breath meditation. Breath is the force that propels the journey and widens Aoife's capacity to grow and hold more of life. It is through the regular practice of breath meditation that Aoife learns to experience her particularity of being in relation to the whole.

Early in the novella, breath is named as the force that will be followed, as that which is linked to discovering the new:

In Hindu scriptures, she read that 'the Breath of Life was called wind and breeze and in the Breath of Life is what is past and what is yet to be. On the Breath of Life all things were based'.¹⁵⁶ The feel of her own breath in her nostrils was warm, gentle and close. Perhaps if she stayed close to her breath, she would discover something.¹⁵⁷

Breath in the novella plays a crucial role as a metaphor of teacher, teaching Aoife to apprehend her own experience. Breath is the force that allows for gentle expansion and for the capacity to accommodate more, including the new and the contradictory:

Feeling something that had not been understood and finding a place, a language, a relationship to it, this was how she moved, how she breathed from one breath to the next, in and out. Sensing and seeing, cellular and ocular, external and internal, visible and invisible, in and out, she breathed; round and round went the cycle.¹⁵⁸

The catch cry of the novella is that one cannot come to know things about spirituality and sexuality through books alone; one must find embodied ways of experiencing life. The

¹⁵⁶ R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. by Zaehner (London: Everyman's University Library, 1966), p. 29.

¹⁵⁷ Wood, p. 4.

¹⁵⁸ Wood, p. 15.

spiritual dehiscence narrative reaches its climax during the visit to the Zen monastery. It is in this narrative that the mystical–religious ideas are reflected in an embodied experience:

Aoife walked slowly, step by step, feeling each little bone of her toes and feet lifting and planting, rising and falling like her breath. [...] Scared and anxious, Aoife focused on her breath. It flowed in constipated, tight chunks.

[...]

She breathed nothing-coming-in, nothing-going-out breaths. She could feel her ribs arched like a church: curved, brown-blooded, pearly-white candle tusks. Her eyes held the mysteries of being awake and asleep.

[...]

The temple was filled with pungent incense of sandalwood, agarwood and spices. Invisible like the silence, it stretched across space, becoming the air breathed. The gong was struck and the chanting started. [...]. The walking meditation began. Aoife didn't even feel her footsteps, only that she was part of one ancient stepping. She pictured herself from a distance, like a little ant that was part of a long line of ants from the beginning of time—ants that, seen from a distance, could only be one line. Something expansive and beautiful occurred for Aoife in those moments, where she touched the shape of the oneness, the form that all things were made from, the flow of life itself.¹⁵⁹

Introduction to *Ten Bulls*

Ten Bulls is a Zen poem with commentary that brings to life the metaphors of dehiscence, breath and step in a profound way. The monk walks in solitude and nature as a self-forming practice on a journey towards enlightenment. The parable teaches how, through the practice of meditation, he develops attentiveness to his inner life and ultimately transcends dualistic

¹⁵⁹ Wood, pp. 87–91.

thinking to serve all creatures in the world. To trace an inner dehiscence over time and to write about it is to make graphic a journey of becoming. *Ten Bulls* is an illustration of such a journey and, as such, has informed the creative element of this thesis. The complete title of the *Poems on the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures* is *The Venerable Kuoan of Mount Dingzhou's Poems on the Ten Ox-herding Pictures*: 'They were originally written and illustrated by Venerable Shiyuan of the Linji School's Yanqi sect during the Song Dynasty (1127–1279)'.¹⁶⁰ Shiyuan's ten-poem version and the Preface written by his disciple, Chi-Yuan, became 'widely known in Japanese Zen circles, their popularity was ensured by the copying and re-printing of the Chinese text'.¹⁶¹ The *Ten Bull* paintings expound the teaching that all beings are endowed with Buddha's nature. For, as D. T. Suzuki writes in *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 'If you want to seek the Buddha, you ought to see into your own Nature, which is the Buddha himself'.¹⁶² There are eight different English translations of the Chinese *Bull or Ox-Herding Poems*: Suzuki (1923 and 1934), Sensaki and Reys (1957), Myokyo-ni (1996), Kapleau (2000), Sakamoto (2002), Sogen Hori (2004) and Balcom (2011). The translators vary considerably in their vocations: some are Buddhist scholars, some poets, some Zen Roshis and one a professional translator.¹⁶³

The twelfth-century Zen poem can be read as the story of a monk walking a path of self-dehiscence that culminates in the flowering of an enlightened being. This poetic parable and commentary take the reader step by step through the journey of graduated enlightenment. The original intent of the poems, paintings and commentaries was to teach meditation by providing a simple, yet deep illustration of the path of meditation towards enlightenment. Having such an example when one begins the practice of learning meditation is useful because it can symbolically alert one to the challenges likely to be encountered and the skills required and can produce an awareness without being overly prescriptive. The bull

¹⁶⁰ Kuoan Shiyuan, in *The Poems on The Ten-Oxherding Pictures*, ed. by Venerable Yi Chao and Louvenia Ortega, trans. by John Balcom (Hacienda Heights, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2009), p. 2.

¹⁶¹ Stephanie Wada, *The Oxherder: A Zen Parable Illustrated*. Trans. by Gen P. Sakamoto (New York: George Braziller, 2002), p. 16.

¹⁶² D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1949), p. 234.

¹⁶³ A Rōshi is a Zen teacher.

is a symbol of separation in the Buddhist tradition, of a force that separates one from one's true nature, of an unruly mind. It is initially mistaken for some 'thing' that is to be found, tamed and ridden but as the narration progresses the relation with the bull itself emerges as a symbol. It comes to reflect a type of divided consciousness to which awareness can bring ultimate unity. In his Preface to the original *Ten Bulls* poems, *Tz'u-üan* (Ja. *Jion*) illustrates this point with a marvellously strange and vivid metaphor of animal symbiosis:

Just as the eyeless jellyfish uses the shrimp as its eyes in the search for food, so also I have used these pictures as my eyes. Yet from the first 'Searching for the Ox' to the final 'Re-entry into the Marketplace', I have wilfully stirred up waves and attached horns sideways onto the ox's head. Furthermore, since fundamentally there is no heart-mind to be sought after, why should there be any need to search for an ox? ¹⁶⁴

Mumon Rōshi, Zen Master of *Shōfukuji* Monastery (1953), puts it more simply and humorously: '[...] if we have never lost our Buddha-nature, does it make sense to say that we now have to go in search of it? It is like looking for your glasses with your glasses on'.¹⁶⁵ In Mumon's translation of the commentary for *The Search for the Bull* he explains that the precondition for the search is a certain distancing: 'Turning away from your own awakening, you become estranged from it'.¹⁶⁶ To turn towards one's own awakening means to enter a spiritual journey, to follow a call that cultivates attention and awareness. In Zen, 'the artist's visions were held to be revelatory; painting and poem were meant to put men in touch with the absolute', hence the importance of these poems and paintings in the Zen Canon.¹⁶⁷ This has something in common with Walter Pater's vision of aesthetic criticism where he writes: 'the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly'.¹⁶⁸ The *Bull Poems* and paintings attempt

¹⁶⁴ Yamada Mumon, *Lectures on The Ten Oxherding Pictures*, trans. by Victor Sogen Hori (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁶⁵ Mumon, p. 20.

¹⁶⁶ Mumon, p. 18.

¹⁶⁷ Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto, *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 11.

¹⁶⁸ Walter Horatio Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: The Library of London, 1910), p. 4.

through narrative, poetry, commentary and picture to realise distinctly the monk's own experience of meditation. They are a unique and creative account of the monk's own transformation and of how he realised Buddhist teachings.

The spiritual journey as personal narrative attempts to join the teller's own autobiographical experience to what could be called a grand narrative, one that is informed by religious traditions; sacred, poetic and philosophic texts; rituals and ethics. In Zen, the stories and poems told by the great masters emphasise the importance of the person's unique story of enlightenment. One must be able to trace and give an account of one's own spiritual transformation, as happens in the *Ten Bulls*. The *Ten Bulls* is, therefore, a model for one aspect of this thesis, as well as a source of insight and an inspiration. One begins by 'being aware of the possibility of a spiritual force that can be directive in life'.¹⁶⁹ A 'call' provides the initial impulses or stirrings towards the unknown, something that is unrecognisable at first. A translated commentary on poem one, *The Search for the Bull*, by Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki, speaks of this first picture as reflecting 'a lostness and fatigue caused by a delusional mind, a mind captured by desire for gain and fear of loss'.¹⁷⁰ Confusions and dissatisfactions are the precursors, the necessary conditions that lead to an interest in the search. In this next section, the *Ten Bull Poems* and paintings are presented alongside the creative-critical reflective narratives that trace the researcher's experiences of becoming a reader, a meditator and a creative writer.

¹⁶⁹ John Daido Looi, *Riding the Ox Home* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 371

Ten Bulls

First Bull Poem: 'The Search for the Bull'



Figure 1 Shūbun, *Ten Bulls*—'The Search for the Bull'¹⁷¹

In the pasture of this world, I endlessly push aside the tall
grasses in search of the bull.

Following unnamed rivers, lost upon interpenetrating
Paths of distant mountains,

My strength failing and my vitality exhausted, I cannot find the bull.

I only hear the locusts chirring through the forest at night.

Comment: The bull has been lost. What need is there to search? Only because of separation from my true nature, I fail to find him. In the confusion of the senses I lose even his tracks. Far from home, I see many crossroads, but which way is the right one I know not. Greed and fear, good and bad, entangle me.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

¹⁷² Poem and Commentary, Kuoan Shiyuan, 'Ten Bulls', in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, ed. by Paul Reps (England: Arkana, 1991).

Reflective Narrative One

The young monk is neatly attired and barefooted. He looks around. There is tension in his body—a type of strained stiffness. His feet point one way, and his head the other. Feet forward and head looking back. His right hand, raised, seems to gesture a signal to wait.

Surrounding the monk is water. Is this the unnamed river? To follow the unnamed river could mean to follow a flow of life, or something that you are not sure of, when you do not know where it is going—but where this is a place that you might end up, like falling in love.

It is difficult to follow the currents and energies of the unknown; it takes a kind of bravery. One proceeds with trepidation and persistence.

The monk is searching for a bull in this world. Is there another world?

The commentary speaks of being lost and of the monk's separation from his true nature. What type of landscape and experiences will assist the monk to rediscover this true nature? After all, he is only separated from it; therefore, he was once in touch with it.

For now, mountains, water, trees, roots, grass, rocks, outcrops of land and the sounds of insects surround the monk. There are many possibilities and a choice has to be made.

The monk is searching for what is named in the poem's seven different translations as 'true nature', 'innermost nature', 'original nature', 'inmost nature', 'awakening', 'becoming acquainted with oneself' and 'finding what one has lost sight of'.¹⁷³ The monk, therefore, begins a metaphoric journey to find his *ownmost* potentiality for Being—in a Heideggerian sense. Being in a Heideggerian sense differs from the ordinary sense of being in that 'Dasein is a Being who understands that it exists, and what is more the Being of Dasein is, in part, shaped by that understanding'.¹⁷⁴ Roderick Munday explains that 'the only

¹⁷³ Shiyuan, *Zen Flesh, Zone Bones*, p. 138; Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 371; Shiyuan, *The Poems on the Ten Ox-herding Pictures*, p. 5.; Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1935), p. 133; Mumon, p. 18; Myokyo-ni. *Gentling the Bull* (London: The Zen Centre, 1988), p. 26; Wada, *The Oxherder* (note, no page numbers are given because the book is written in Japanese style reading from back to front with no page numbers given).

¹⁷⁴ Roderick Munday, 'Glossary of Terms in Heidegger's *Being And Time*', *Visual-Memory.Co.Uk* (2008). Available at: <http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/b_resources/b_and_t_glossary.html> [accessed 8 March

way to understand Being is as “my Being” and the implications of this are that ‘how I regard “my Being”, creates the conditions that make authenticity and inauthenticity possible’.¹⁷⁵ It is the reflective awareness of Being and the quest for authenticity that distinguish Heidegger’s concepts from an ordinary notion of being. Similarly, this reading–writing thesis is a metaphoric inquiry into my own Being’s potentiality for being, each word a step forming a path in authenticity. The *Ten Bulls* are, among other things, a compass for my reading and writing, orientating explorations in which fresh reflections on literature, philosophy and memoir—perhaps even enlightenment—become possible:

Enlightenment was explained by the Buddha as the *Dharma* which was to be directly perceived (*sandiṭṭhika*), beyond limits of time (*akalika*), to be personally experienced (*ehi-passika*), altogether persuasive (*opanayika*), and to be understood each for him (her) self by the wise (*paccattam veditabbonviññhi*).¹⁷⁶

In this thesis, I have attempted to trace ‘my Being’ as experienced and understood through the transformative acts of reading and meditation. The writing quest is a site of revelation.

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¹⁷⁵ Munday.

¹⁷⁶ Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 61.

Second Bull Poem: ‘Discovering the Footprints’



Figure 2 Shūbun, *Ten Bulls*—‘Discovering the Footprints’¹⁷⁷

Along the riverbank under the trees,
I discover footprints!
Even under the fragrant grass I see his prints.
Deep in the remote mountains they are found.
These traces no more can be hidden than one’s nose,
looking heavenward.

Comment: Understanding the teaching, I see the footprints of the bull. Then I learn that, just as many utensils are made from one metal, so too are the myriad of entities made of the fabric of self. Unless I discriminate how will I perceive the true form from the untrue? Not yet having entered the gate, nevertheless I have discerned the path. ¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

¹⁷⁸ Poem and Commentary: Shiyuan *Ten Bulls*, p. 139.

Reflective Narrative Two

The monk creeps, his steps barely audible, surrounded by distant, spiky mountains and forests, far above the cloud line exposed to the limitless sky. In his left hand, he clutches a rope tightly, ready to catch something. He walks quietly, so as not to startle anything. He is stealthy looking, body ready to lunge.

However, it is not in the lofty mountains or heavenly sky that he finds something. On the contrary, it is on the ground, right in front of him, very close. It is a footprint, an impression of something real, made by a body that was once there. The monk now has a trail to follow, reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs in the forest. It is important to have a trail or a map in the forest or else you are lost. He looks ahead, eyes alert, body on standby, just in case.

He has found these footprints along the riverbank. In *The First Bull Poem* 'The Search for the Bull', he began by following an unnamed river. Some things cannot be named, or defy the limits of naming. They are things in motion or in flow, things of excess, like love. They cannot be frozen like Kafka's sea inside. The monk is beginning to encounter living reality and, with it, a spiritual discernment that is not hidden, but is merely out of sight, like the tip of your nose.

The monk finds footprints on a path like a reader follows letters on a page. Derrida thought of language or, more specifically, the sign as a trace. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks us to remember that 'this word trace in French has notions of the word track in it'.¹⁷⁹ She writes: 'The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent'.¹⁸⁰ Words and sentences are like paths that can take the reader on journeys of discovery—a discovery of Being that is simultaneously revealed and uncatchable. Like the monk, we walk cautionary paths noting the marks or writings of others—what they say and what is silent. We note how the structure of the sign itself has limits and excesses. A

¹⁷⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. xvii.

¹⁸⁰ Spivak, p.vii.

plethora of reading material exists in a variety of genres that produce diverse choices or chances for the reader. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the choices and unsure of which path to take. Like the monk in *Discovering the Footprints* the reader needs to learn how to discriminate or discern his or her reading path. The verb to discriminate or to discern comes from the Greek verb *krínō*, meaning to judge.¹⁸¹ When this verb is combined with prefixes, it produces a number of words related to the process of coming to know something, for example: *diákrisis* (discernment), *krísis* (judgement), *anákrisis* (hearing), *anakrínō* (to investigate) and *synkrínō* (to interpret). These form the basis of modern English words, such as ‘criticism’ and ‘crisis’. In the journey of intellectual growth, a type of crisis may be required to produce new modes of learning. There are costs, moments of uncertainty and loss as old knowledges are stretched or disbanded to travel towards the new. *Dehiscence* is a narrative that turns on this type of crisis.

Mumon Rōshi in his commentary on this poem wrote: ‘First, we must study the *Sūtras* and ponder the records left by the teachers of the past in order to determine where our own nature is’.¹⁸² Footprints are a metaphor for this type of learning quest. A real person has walked this path before you and may have some useful pointers to assist you in your journey. Similarly, great writers begin their vocation by recognising something in their predecessors. Kafka’s reading quest and inspiration via Hebbel’s *Diaries* is an example. Heidegger (1889–1976) once described philosophical communication as ‘speaking from mountaintop to mountain top, with Nietzsche (1844–1900) being the nearest mountain peak’.¹⁸³ And Cixous, when she discovered Lispector, wrote:

I let myself be read according to C. L., her passion read me; and in the burning and humid current of reading, I saw how familiar and strange texts, by Rilke or by

¹⁸¹ G. W Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of The New Testament*, ed. by Gerard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Michigan: Edermans, 1985), p. 469.

¹⁸² Mumon, p. 30.

¹⁸³ Leland de la Durantaye, ‘Being There’, *Cabinet* 25 (2007), 44–51
<<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/25/index.php>>

Heidegger or Derrida, had been read already, carried away, answered, in the writing–
living of C. L..¹⁸⁴

There is perhaps a need for a type of literary companionship on long quests that are essentially solitary. Reading, meditating and writing are all essentially solitary acts. Yet, fortunately, they also exist in communities and traditions where virtual writers, teachers and communities of other readers and meditators are companions. Texts and stories create companionship and communities via reading. In fact, philosopher Adriana Cavarero posits that the self is a unique existent comprised of stories created in communities of relationships. Stories of self and identity are created by expositive and relational interactions between people. These performances of our own unique story for the other, by the other and to the other enable a type of self-awareness or, put in a more philosophical way, an ontological experience of existence.¹⁸⁵ There is a constant exchange of stories between others and ourselves and, like breathing, story-making becomes the very way we experience ourselves as living existents. We live through and out of the stories that are told and they become vehicles for transformation.

We begin the act of reading like the monk, with a rope in hand, hoping that we will catch something meaningful and perhaps unexpected. We are often up against our own fears and limitations and yet spurred on by curiosities, desires and passions. Coming to understand what type of reader we are is a quest.

¹⁸⁴ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 60.

¹⁸⁵ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000).

Third Bull Poem: 'Perceiving the Bull'



Figure 3 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—'Perceiving the Bull'¹⁸⁶

I hear the song of the nightingale.

The sun is warm, the wind mild, willows are green along the shore.

Here no bull can hide!

What artist can draw that massive head, those majestic horns?

Comment: When one hears the voice, one can sense its source. As soon as the six senses merge, the gate is entered. Whenever one enters one sees the head of the bull! The unity is like salt in water, live colour in dyestuff. The slightest thing is not apart from self.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

¹⁸⁷ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls*, p. 140.

Reflective Narrative Three

The monk is running. He has sprung into action, chasing the bull with rope in hand. Only the bull's bucking buttocks, jutting legs and flying tail are visible. The bull moves quickly. The monk is within steps of grasping its tail. The monk smiles and looks awake, alive and energised.

It is a strange scene of appearance and hiddenness. We cannot see the bull's face. Interestingly, the drawn lines create shapes and synchronicities—the curve of the bull's rear and the monk's back, the angular legs of both insinuating a synchronous running and each with one foot off the ground, exposing the pad of hoof and foot. Motion, speed and pace are the motifs of this painting.

In 1953, Yamada Mumon Rōshi gave a series of *Lectures on The Ten Ox-herding Pictures* to the monks of the *Shōfuku-ji* Monastery in Kobe, Japan. He proposed another way of understanding how we create a unified sense of self, one located more in the body: 'In Buddhism [...] our consciousness has six roots: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind'.¹⁸⁸ All six roots are *self*. The comment on the poem explains: 'As soon as the six senses merge, the gate is entered [...] one sees the bull'.¹⁸⁹ This means that, when the whole body and mind are united, it is possible to experience revelation. Mumon speaks of how, through the practice of meditation, one stills the mind to the point of *samadhi* (one-pointedness or concentration). From this 'state of concentration our self-nature externalises and throbs into life'.¹⁹⁰ At this point, he states: 'we experience the sound and I are one, the sound and I go "Gong!" when subject and object are one, the ox comes trotting along'.¹⁹¹ This is strangely evocative of Virginia Woolf who wrote:

The way to rock oneself back into writing is this first gentle exercise in the air.

Second the reading of good literature. It is a mistake to think that literature can be

¹⁸⁸ Mumon, p. 38.

¹⁸⁹ Mumon, p. 38.

¹⁹⁰ Mumon, p. 39.

¹⁹¹ Mumon, p. 39.

produced from the raw. One must become externalised; very concentrated, all at one point.¹⁹²

Senses Converging

The qualities of senses converging, one-pointed concentration and a self-nature that externalises and throbs into life are apparent in the writings of Virginia Woolf. Woolf spent considerable time reflecting on how inner and outer worlds and states of being and non-being related and how to depict these in writing. ‘Being’ she referred to as consciously lived moments and ‘non-being’ as non-descriptive moments, those that are not conscious, which she named ‘the non-descriptive cotton wool’.¹⁹³ She sought some sort of reconciliation or wholeness in their unification. She wrote: ‘The real novelist can somehow convey both sets of being’.¹⁹⁴ Although Woolf grappled with how to depict non-being in her writing: ‘Often when I have been writing [...] I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private short-hand “non-being”’.¹⁹⁵ She writes ‘I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but I cannot describe the stream’.¹⁹⁶ Freedman suggests, in Woolf’s writing: ‘Poetic imagery evokes meaningful intersections of mind, objects, and associations to portray the various stages of awareness through which the moments are created’.¹⁹⁷ A good example of this is the dinner-party scene in *To the Lighthouse* where senses converge with thoughts: the ‘scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish as Marthe took the cover off [...]’ and filled the space with an aroma that mingled with Mrs Ramsey’s thoughts about how to bring Paul and Minta together, while simultaneously deliberating the selection of a succulent piece of meat for Mr Banks.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, p. 41.

¹⁹³ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1985), p. 70.

¹⁹⁴ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 70.

¹⁹⁵ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 70.

¹⁹⁶ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 80.

¹⁹⁷ Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 198.

¹⁹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 93.

she peered into the dish, with its shiny yellow walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bay leaves and its wine, and thought, This will celebrate the occasion—a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her at once.¹⁹⁹

Mrs Ramsey's sense is described as 'freakish' and 'tender', opposites entangled infusing the space as they poetically rise in the scene in concurrence with the scent of bay leaves and wine and brown and yellow meats.

In such moments where senses, thoughts and objects converge, the reader experiences seamless and relational exchanges between the character's inner life and outer worlds. Scattered throughout *To the Lighthouse* are smaller passages in which lists of objects create a poetic sense of the outer world: 'The wheelbarrow, the lawn-mower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling' (3).²⁰⁰ In a type of concentrated clarity, Woolf compactly reveals the scene of the beach house:

flannels, straw-hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long-frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing.²⁰¹

Woolf carefully builds outer worlds or scenes out of poetic sensations and observations. This style of composition allowed, as Freedman suggests, 'moments to thrust themselves into consciousness as the passively borne stream finds itself conjoined with particular objects in the external world: trees, waves, and human figures on the beach creating significant forms'.²⁰² By writing in this way, Woolf hoped to attain a level of *depersonalisation* in the writing: 'Worlds in time and space are not precisely reproduced but are rearranged in aesthetic designs which become universal and symbolic.'²⁰³ Woolf, according to Freedman,

¹⁹⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 93.

²⁰⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 3.

²⁰¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 7.

²⁰² Freedman, p. 200.

²⁰³ Freedman, p. 188.

thought it was important ‘[...] to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality’.²⁰⁴ Freedman notes: “Since the conventional novel of motive and environment had proved insufficient, she suggested that it give way to form that provides, like poetry, “the outline rather than the detail” and that stands “further back from life” in order to achieve the symbolic distance of impersonality”.²⁰⁵ Woolf was so skilful in this method that in 1927, when Louis Kronenberger reviewed *To the Lighthouse*, he wrote of Woolf: “The method of “Mrs Dalloway” is substantially retained in this new novel, “To the Lighthouse,” but though one encounters again her strikingly individual mingling of inward though with outward action in which the “stream of consciousness” style is liberated from its usual chaos and by means of selection and a sense of order, made formally compact—one finds the method applied to somewhat different aims’.²⁰⁶

Another powerful example of this style of writing is created through her ‘compact’, poetic listing of objects in a scene in the empty house of *To the Lighthouse*:

What people had shed and left—a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass held a face.

[...]

Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying wind, and soft nose of the clammy sea airs rubbing, snuffling, iterating, reiterating their questions— ‘Will you fade? Will you perish?’—scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Freedman, p. 187.

²⁰⁵ Freedman, p.188.

²⁰⁶ Louis Kronenberger, ‘Virginia Woolf Explores an English Country Home: “To The Lighthouse” Is A Brilliantly Ambitious Analysis Of Domestic Psychology’, *New York Times*, 8 May 1925. Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/06/08/reviews/woolf-lighthouse.html>>

²⁰⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 123.

In this scene, the narrator creates an emotional inner world of the empty house, united with external objects in such a way as to evoke time passing. Through metaphor the wind and sea become interlocutors of time. In Woolf's novels, Freedman claims that 'Worlds in time and space are not precisely reproduced but are rearranged in aesthetic designs which become universal and symbolic'.²⁰⁸ Woolf's use of language in rhythmic patterns enhances the poetic aesthetic; for example, in the passage quoted above, the phrases 'shed and left', 'a pair of shoes', 'a shooting cap' and 'some faded skirts', contribute to a melodic as well as a dramatic reading of the passage. The link between objects and consciousness is important to Woolf, Freedman argues, noting that 'towards the end of her essay "Modern Fiction", when remarking on Chekhov's story "Gusev" how the furniture of life is illuminated by a vision in which consciousness and things require one another to create a scene of wider symbolic dimensions'.²⁰⁹ Woolf brings things together in scenes of convergence—convergence of inner and outer, of being and non-being, objects and people; through her writing we experience a type of literary wholeness and unification. She is attentive to the limits of a narrow self-perspective and continually seeks to widen her consciousness, while remaining rooted in real objects and sensations. She blends the literary forms of poetry and prose to successfully achieve this in her novel *To the Lighthouse*.

Cixous and the Non-descript

Cixous also describes how to write about non-descript experiences: those that come before what is named and defined as 'flashes of being' or as 'lightening-like bursts'.²¹⁰ She wrote: 'In the beginning, I adored. What I adored was human. Not persons; not totalities, not defined and named beings. But signs'.²¹¹ These experiences beckon her to look (or read) and, in looking, she blazes—or perhaps loses herself. These experiences occur for children and are introductions into mystery and excess. Cixous wrote: 'I sensed that there was a beyond, to

²⁰⁸ Freedman, p. 188.

²⁰⁹ Freedman, p. 191.

²¹⁰ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 1.

²¹¹ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 1.

which I did not have access, an unlimited place'.²¹² Is she describing something similar to that addressed by Woolf and the *Bull Poems*, to a different type of consciousness, one that points beyond to an unlimited place, like a stream or like the unified sense of inner and outer worlds? Cixous claims that Clarice Lispector's writing does have some access to this unlimited place. She explains that Lispector gives us an example of how to do this: 'it is a matter of receiving the lesson of things. If we know how to think in the direction of things, letting ourselves be called to it, the thing leads to a space composed of the thing and us; of the thing and of all things'.²¹³ How does Lispector do this? Cixous continues, citing Lispector:

I try to see strictly within the moment when I see—and not see through the memory of having seen in an instant now past. The instant is that. The instant is an imminence. At the same time that I live it, I hurl myself into its passage to another instant.²¹⁴

In Woolf, Cixous and Lispector—as well as the *Bull Poems*—efforts to capture the moment are depicted. This kind of writing requires an aesthetic of seeing and expression that, unlike the static 'frozen sea', accommodates pace, speed and motion.

²¹² Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 1.

²¹³ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 62.

²¹⁴ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 69.

Fourth Bull Poem: ‘Catching the Bull’



Figure 4 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—‘Catching the Bull’²¹⁵

I seize him with a terrific struggle.

His great will and power are inexhaustible.

He charges to the high plateau far above the cloud-mists,

Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.

Comment: He dwelt in the forest a long time, but I caught him today! Infatuation for scenery interferes with his direction. Longing for sweeter grass, he wanders away. His mind is still stubborn and unbridled. If I wish him to submit, I must raise my whip.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

²¹⁶ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls*, p. 141.

Reflective Narrative Four

The monk and the bull are captured in a moment of tension. The little monk is exerting and heaving with all his might trying to catch this muscular wild bull. Like a tiny fisherperson reeling in a gigantic tuna, the monk pulls and holds his rope tight. It looks like a scene depicting something impossible but perhaps possible. We are held in suspense, asking: will the bull just tear off, dragging the monk behind him? How will the monk win his catch? It certainly will not be through pure strength; the bull's muscular torso and flighty angles are testimony to that. What will give the monk an advantage over brute force and excessive wilfulness? Moreover, is it right for the bull to be captured, seized and possessed at all? What does this bull represent? One story is how the bull is a projected symbol, a false object representing an unruly mind that, once tamed, will allow an experience of *satori*—‘the apprehension of the continuum of all things undivided, indivisible, and infinitely cumulative’.²¹⁷ For Zen thinkers, *Satori*, unlike enlightenment, is sometimes glimpsed but difficult to hold on to because of the distractions of mind and the wandering ego-self who always desires something sweeter: more height, more depth, more fun and greater novelty.

Another interpretation, following the themes of this thesis, might be that catching the bull is like reading at the edge of one's knowledge and experience, seeking the new—an interest in catching, seizing and being possessed by that which is other or different to experience creative growth and spiritual development. Cixous wrote about the importance of such things in the quest of reading and writing:

And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no fixed signs, no ground, no thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are lost, beside yourself, and you continue getting lost, when you become the panicky movement of getting lost, then, that's when, you are unwoven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come

²¹⁷ D. T. Suzuki, *Living by Zen*, ed. by Christmas Humphreys (London: Rider and Company, 1972), pp. 47–48.

through, defenceless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated with otherness, it's in these breathless times that writings traverse you.²¹⁸

I want to incorporate this trajectory of thinking to explore how one opens one's own poetic, narrative and philosophical language worlds. It is easy to feel rather small and out of one's depth (not unlike the monk facing the bull in the painting) when reading creative writers such as Woolf, Cixous and Lispector, philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault and Zen poetry. Nevertheless, I am called by these texts, although the discipline of expanding and demonstrating my reading of them is daunting. However, I persevere because by practising receptivity or hospitality to the foreignness of another via acts of reading, new and complex personal relations between knowledge and self are created. It is useful to think about how words and meanings travel across time and extend borders. This is no easy feat, as communication via words is complex. Woolf reflected on this eloquently and humorously in a talk she presented on BBC radio in 1937:

...Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today – that they are stored with other meanings, with other memories, and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past. [...] You cannot use a brand-new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet always mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. [...] They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most un-teachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. [...] And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, ranging hither and thither, falling in love, and mating together. It is true that they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are.

²¹⁸ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 30.

[...] In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.

Perhaps that is their most striking peculiarity – their need of change. It is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being many-sided, flashing first this way, then that. Thus, they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity, this power to mean different things to different people, that they survive.²¹⁹

Woolf's insight into the power of words to mean different things to different people as a crucial factor in their survival is useful. It values words as an interface between people. It recognises a type of spirit that Antonin Artaud pointed to and resisted: 'Protest against the dead letter which absents itself far from breath [*soufflé*] and flesh'.²²⁰ Derrida claimed that 'Artaud initially dreamed of a graphism which would not begin as deviation, of a non-separated inscription of the letter and a bloody tattoo'.²²¹

I think about how the Chinese *Ten Bulls* poems and paintings composed in the twelfth century and sixteenth century have survived and travelled far to me, an Irish-Australian woman in the twenty-first century. The paintings symbolically etch their way into my consciousness like a tattoo. How can I make sense of them? The Fourth Bull Poem is about catching something. The ability to catch something implies that it is outside of the self, that it is an object. This poem reflects on the monk catching the teachings of the Buddhist patriarchs. The monk found their teachings or footprints in the previous poem. He struggles with subject–object relations, just as all new students do. This is accentuated because what he is trying to learn cannot be apprehended by any objective teaching but must be

²¹⁹ BBC radio, 'Craftmanship', Words Fail Me (1937). Available at:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWIOdueG6T4>> [accessed 30 January 2015].

²²⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 236.

²²¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 236.

experienced for itself. However, he starts with small seeds within that call him into relation with big texts—like bulls. It is difficult to navigate the subject–object divide through intellectualisations. Philosophers over the centuries have debated what is objective and subjective; for example:

Philosophers of the eighteenth century argued over whether a beautiful object is so by virtue of satisfying the definition of the object or independently of definitions. (Is this a beautiful doorknob because it is so perfectly what a doorknob should be, or would one call it beautiful even in ignorance of doorknobs and what they do, on the basis of its shape and colour?)²²²

One can search for objective truth in perpetuity, which, while important for scientific advancement, may not proffer spiritual growth. This thesis is a journey into resignation and becoming lost—or a way of valuing reading under the sign of one’s own limitations in the hope of extending these limits. To follow unknown mysterious calls from literary and spiritual texts at a dehiscent pace undoubtedly results in confronting a force much greater than the self: an experience analogous to putting on shoes that are too big. The struggle at this stage is how not be discouraged by the enormity of the field (or the feet of the predecessors)—whether it be the Buddhist canon or literary criticism—and to wander off to some sweeter grass for more fun and novelty. This work involves remaining faithful and patient within the struggle.

Staying with the Difficult

In ‘Lemonade Everything was so Infinite’, Cixous makes apparent the difficulties for the writer when writing about the mystical or about a miracle encounter. She chooses religious words to describe the scene and the encounter, but imbues them with literary form. In this story, she describes an encounter between three men that she wishes to narrate as ‘occurring

²²² Nickolas Pappas, ‘Plato’s Aesthetics’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014). Available at: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/plato-aesthetics>> [accessed 4 February 2017].

in the deep region where the things that happen can barely be grasped by words but imprint themselves in the fabric of time and are ineffaceable'.²²³ She speaks of the agony of trying to describe these types of experiences: '—Maybe I used words which were too big, too visible? And which close like shutters and shut out the radiance'.²²⁴ She writes 'what makes this scene so fragile, a word could break it [...]?'²²⁵ A word can break the scene and then there will be no adequate form to carry the experience: 'We have too many things and not enough forms,' said Flaubert.²²⁶ Cixous's story describes a meeting in which Max Brod is introducing Franz Kafka, who is dying and unable to speak to 'O', who is blind. The scene opens with Kafka, who knows that 'O' is blind, bowing to him; 'a wordless scene', as Cixous puts it. Many words are used to describe this 'wordless scene', such as eternity, sacred, moist blessing, miracle, temple, inner light, soul, secret, spiritual story and revelation. They are placed carefully and lightly and are dispersed throughout the text:

There were these three visions. Brief and ineffaceable as three flashes of eternity.

[...]

At that moment a sort of climate lighter than breath prevailed in each.

[...]

Each had this extremely rare sensation of coolness, which spreads within the soul. It is like a moist blessing.

[...]

None knew the name for this sensation, which is once material and spiritual. But the miracle was: all three were sure they felt 'that'.

[...]

²²³ Hélène Cixous, 'Lemonade Everything Was So Infinite' [1982], in Segarra, *The Portable Cixous*, p. 109.

²²⁴ Segarra, *The Portable Cixous*, p. 111.

²²⁵ Segarra, *The Portable Cixous*, p. 112.

²²⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 1.

this would be again a place of a dazzling simplicity like this small, discreet, sacred chamber, like a temple for close friends.

[...]

And this instant becomes the most precious secret of his spiritual story

[...]

he had gently removed a night from in front of his soul

[...]

in this reserve of silence, above calculated kindness up to the incalculable kindness of nature itself.

[...]

his soul full of this blue-gray clarity

[...]

what he called the pain was the violence of the revelation. A contact so faint, and involuntary, giving away a vertiginous secret.²²⁷

Spiritual language is used to convey a layer of story that occurs in the invisible realms—in the blindness or inner light. It is effective at building a mystical–poetic narrative landscape but does not necessarily convey a direct encounter. There is perhaps a distinction between describing a mystical encounter or making it an object and a more vital presentation that reveals directly. Cixous attempts through creative writerly gestures to keep catching this bull by describing what cannot be seen. It is a tender meditation on the delicacy of writing in which she appears to aim for qualities that she obliquely attributes to Kafka—‘to become as transparent as a dragon, as light as a grasshopper, as absolutely discreet as Kafka’.²²⁸

²²⁷ Segarra, *The Portable Cixous*, pp. 108–116.

²²⁸ Segarra, *The Portable Cixous*, p. 112.

Reading as Ripening the Seeds

If my experience of reading is not to shatter the frozen sea within and the book is not a metaphoric axe, then what sort of instrument is the book; and what am I doing when reading? Reading and meditation, I have proposed, contribute to a process of self-becoming. However, how do they do this? There appear to me, at this point, to be two questions that require further contemplation: when reading what does the ‘the book’ do to me and what do I do to it? It seems a bit of two-way tussle, reminiscent of that depicted between the bull and the monk, between subject and object, between objectifying and acquiring or simply letting something else be. Perhaps, as Maurice Blanchot, suggests:

The reader, without knowing it, is engaged in a profound struggle with the author. Whatever intimacy may subsist today between the book and the writer, and however sharply the figure, the presence, the history of the author may be brought into focus by the circumstances of the book’s circulation (circumstances which, while not arbitrary, are perhaps already somewhat anachronistic)—despite all this, every reading where consideration of the writer seems to play so great a role is an attack which annihilates him in order to give the work back to itself: back to its anonymous presence.²²⁹

Blanchot wrote this in 1955; it reflects his own descriptions about reading, which occur in a space beyond both the limits of the author and the reader. He goes on to say:

Reading makes of the book what the sea and the wind make of objects fashioned by men (or women): a smoother stone, a fragment fallen from the sky without a past, without a future, the sight of which silences questions.²³⁰

He continues:

²²⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 192.

²³⁰ Blanchot, p. 192.

Reading simply ‘makes’ the book, the work, become a work beyond the man (or woman) who produced it, the experience that expressed in it and even beyond all the artistic resources which tradition has made available.²³¹

His comments provide poetic affinities with the organic processes invoked in reading as dehiscence. He marks both book and reader with relational edges through which the activity of reading spurs the reader on and beyond. Over time, sea, wind and sun will stir, animate, erode and ripen both book and reader. These metaphors of interrelationship adhere to the dehiscent approach of my reading in that they value raw encounters, slow exchanges and transformation over time.

²³¹ Blanchot, p. 193.

Fifth Bull Poem: 'Taming the Bull'

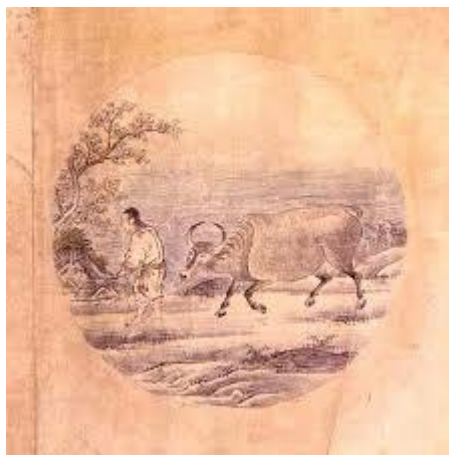


Figure 5 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—'Taming the Bull'²³²

The whip and the rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down some dusty road.
Being well trained, he becomes naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.

Comment: When one thought arises, another thought follows. When the first thought springs from enlightenment, all subsequent thoughts are true. Through delusion, one makes everything untrue. Delusion is not caused by objectivity; it is the result of subjectivity. Hold the nose ring tight and do not allow even a doubt.²³³

²³² Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

²³³ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan 'Ten Bulls', p. 142.

Reflective Narrative Five

The first thing that I notice about this painting is the lowered neck of the bull and the bull's face. I notice this in contrast to the previous picture *Catching the Bull*, where the bull's head was upright, looking ahead and trying to pull away or escape the monk who was holding and heaving a taut rope. Now, the little monk leads with a loosely hanging rope, implying that the bull is following with ease. There is no struggle. There is mastery. This is the first time in this series of paintings that the bull's face has been seen. This is significant because of Buddhist expressions about the 'original face'—the original face is relayed throughout Buddhist teachings as the true nature or the original Buddha-mind: the enlightened state that monks, through their variety of practices, seek to obtain.²³⁴ It was first coined in *The Platform Sutra*, composed by the Sixth Chinese Patriarch, *Huineng*. The *Dunhuang* is the earliest complete version of this text. In this text, *Huineng* asks the question, 'What was your original face before your parents were born?' This question is used as a *koan* for training a Zen monk. There is also a famous sermon by Zen Master *Daito Kokushi* (1281–1337) called 'The Original Face'. *Daito Kokushi* explains:

Every time a thought arises, throw it away. Just devote yourself to sweeping away the thoughts. Sweeping away the thoughts means to perform *zazen*. The thoughts are clouds; when the clouds have cleared, the moon appears. That moon of the eternal truth is the original face.²³⁵

Contemplating these connections and re-examining the painting, it can be speculated that the monk is not at one with his original face even though he knows it is there: a division or a duality exists. The monk has mastered the teachings, the ideas and the elements of the practice, but they are still separate from his self. The monk and bull symbolise a subject–object dualism. The rope symbolises the stream of thoughts that promote this perspective.

²³⁴ Peter Haskel, *Bankei Zen*, trans. by Peter Haskel, ed. by Yoshito Hakeda (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 136.

²³⁵ Trevor Leggett, *A First Zen Reader*, trans. by Trevor Leggett (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1960), p. 22.

The bull for the monk at this stage is still a representation of an eternal principle or practice; it has been made into a knowledge object to be contained and followed, rather than something that is beyond such individualistic notions. In the novella, *Dehiscence*, Aoife similarly tried to tame sex by making it into an object of knowledge instead of a flow of life and love.

In the Fourth Bull Poem, the monk is trying to tame and control the eternal, ever-changing spirit or ‘original face’. Meditation assists one to notice how thoughts arise and how to let go of them, which is essential to return to a state of *satori*. To overcome ignorance is to seek *Prajñā*, commonly translated as wisdom, which ‘is the understanding of a higher order than that habitually exercised in acquiring relative knowledge. It is a faculty both intellectual and spiritual, through the operation of which the soul is enabled to break the fetters of intellection’.²³⁶ The monk in the poem has obtained knowledge and is awakened but unenlightened. The monk must work at remaining in relation to the state of awareness that was apprehended when the bull was caught. It is not yet a natural state of being.

The monk walks with a curved back and bare feet. A gentleness, perhaps even a tiredness, pervades his stance. This is not surprising after all the effort that it has taken to catch the bull. Sometimes the monk seems blind to me—eyes closed, as if he is using his feet and his whole body to gauge the next step.

Dehiscent Readerly Qualities

Just as the monk works within the discipline of meditation and the teaching of the *sūtras* to remain in states of awareness, the reader on a dehiscence path has to cultivate certain readerly qualities and guides. Woolf writes: ‘You must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist—the great artist—gives you’.²³⁷ Cixous is an example of a reader who is capable of

²³⁶ Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 124.

²³⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader, Second Series*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Harcourt, 1986), p. 261.

great fineness of perception and boldness of imagination. She wrote an essay on reading Lispector that illuminates Woolf's reading qualities. It was written in 1991 and its title is followed by two subtitles: 'Clarice Lispector: The Approach, Letting Oneself (be) Read (by) Clarice Lispector, and The Passion According to C. L.'. The final subtitle is a reference to a book that Lispector wrote in 1964 called *The Passion According to G. H.* The title introduces the imaginative style of reading that pervades the essay. Cixous makes transparent how she reads Lispector but also how the text reads her. It is relational way of reading that is more personable than Blanchot's tracts but it also models a type of emerging dissolved space, where both text and reader meet. In this essay, Cixous explores the question of how to read Lispector and, in doing so, develops an elucidation of reading that demonstrates important readerly qualities if one wants to practice reading as a dehiscence of self-becoming. It is a type of reading from the space of 'your original face' that requires a self-forgetting.

Forgetting Being

Clarice Lispector: This woman, our contemporary, Brazilian (born in the Ukraine, of Jewish origin), gives us not books but living saved from books, from narratives, repressive constructions. And through her writing-window we enter the awesome beauty of learning to read.²³⁸

Reading across disciplines can create openings between poetic prose and philosophy. To demonstrate this, I will draw as an example the way that Cixous makes bold poetic links between some of Heidegger's writings and Lispector's writings. She begins by re-naming Clarice *Claricewege*, after Heidegger's term *holzwege*, which is a metaphor he used to describe an approach to thinking. There is a brief note at the back of *Coming to Writing*, which says: '*holzwege* are trails in the forest, trails that lead nowhere'.²³⁹ De la Durantaye explains that Heidegger's *holzwege* has to do with what he called 'forgetting being'.²⁴⁰ It

²³⁸ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 59.

²³⁹ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 202.

²⁴⁰ De La Durantaye, p. 48.

relates to what Heidegger saw as necessary to escape from dominant modes of reasoning that focused on instrumental values and immediate results. De la Durantaye notes that Heidegger's writings grouped under the title of *holzwege* were translated into French as 'paths that lead nowhere'.²⁴¹ He explains that Heidegger 'collected his philosophical writings under the name *holzwege* not because he wanted to lead people astray, but because he wanted his readers to think of philosophy [not as] a means to an end [...] or an unreflective dependence on instrumental reasoning'.²⁴² The purpose of *holzwege* thinking is to explore; it is in the exploration that something is discovered. A real thinker, a free thinker, should be prepared to explore and to find themselves in unexpected and sometimes fruitless places. Therefore, '*Claricewege*' means following a 'Clarice way' or 'Clarice-wise' path—a way of self-forgetting to enable an encounter with the unusual.

Cixous highlights that laziness and conceptual reductions are key ways that we avoid encountering texts, people and moments in life. She responds to this concern by listening to Lispector and writes: 'we must learn [...] how to let things make themselves known by themselves, before translation, in the Clarice way, her way of being an open window, of being full of soul, of being in front of each of the innumerable lives, of coming ahead softly wide-open to meet each thing'.²⁴³ The type of noticing that Lispector and Cixous want to draw attention to is a noticing that makes room for things just to be themselves. To do this requires a level of spaciousness and the loss of ego. It is a way of allowing things to be without colonising them, giving them a chance to be, before rushing towards them and extinguishing them by the forcefulness of our presence. Lispector calls us to notice things and their particular ways of being. I am reminded of the Zen poster picturing a cucumber with the caption 'a cucumber unaccountably cucumbering', which humorously illustrates this type of uncluttered noticing. A discipline of meditation can enable such interior spaciousness by the practice of attentive surrender, so that one can be present and allow all

²⁴¹ De La Durantaye, p. 48.

²⁴² De La Durantaye, p. 48.

²⁴³ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 64.

things to be present. To develop a creative reading practice that is committed to this type of attentiveness is different to what literary criticism calls a close reading or practical criticism. A close reading, typically in university literature departments, reflects the conventions for writing about what you have read focusing on the details of the text's meanings and form. 'Benson and Connors state: "It focuses on areas of nuance, ambiguity, tension, difficulty or felicity. But its governing aim is [...] to give a valid account of the relation between poetic form and poetic meaning"' .²⁴⁴ While this is important in coming to know a text in its literary context, it can also produce writing that does not address the text very closely, that seems distant from the text. As Benson and Connor argue:

When you are really close to something, you don't see it whole. You love it to bits, or become fixated on a particular part of it. You look at it from odd angles, or see how it relates to other things. Or else you internalise it, learn it, or aspects of it, by heart. Sometimes it becomes part of you, its idiom weaving itself into the fabric of your response to it, or to other things you read, look at or hear, so that it's not always clear where it stops and you start. It changes you, so that the 'you' who 'gives an account' of it is not the same as the you who first came to it.²⁴⁵

In their guide to the emerging field of creative criticism, Benson and Connors (2014) have compiled an anthology of authors whom they consider to be reading and writing, at times, in a creative–critical capacity: Barthes, Cage, Carson, Cixous, Derrida, Dyer, Frielander, Gizzi, Kopelson, Riley, Sedgwick, Smith, Wilkinson and Wood. Cixous's approach to reading Lispector and learning to read according to the sensibility demonstrated by Lispector is an example of creative criticism, whereby the reading and writing converge and there is closeness, odd angles, idioms, associations and assimilations. There are also explicit invitations to read attentively and slowly, to allow strange things to enter, to pay attention,

²⁴⁴ Stephen Benson and Clare Connors, *Creative Criticism* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2014), p. 4.

²⁴⁵ Benson and Connors, p. 4.

to cherish small things and to contemplate. How enigmatically compatible these ways are with the path of meditation.

Reading as Attentive Slowness

In these violent and lazy times, in which we do not live what we live, we are read, we are forcibly lived, far from our essential lives, we lose the gift, we no longer hear what things want to tell us, we translate, we translate, everything is translation and reduction, there is almost nothing left of the word sea but a word without water.²⁴⁶

Living far from our essential selves is the identified problem according to Cixous and her attraction to Clarice is that she goes forth in ‘attentive slowness [...] learning to let things give us what they are when they are most alive’.²⁴⁷ Lispector often plays with moments where things come to life. For example, when her character G. H. is trapped in a room and discovers a cockroach: ‘It was that the sudden discovery of life within the nakedness of this room had frightened me as though I had discovered that the dead room *was in fact* fecund’.²⁴⁸ Finding the unexpected fecundity that is always there in all moments is a core mark of Lispector’s work (*The Passion of G. H.*, *Hour of the Star*, *Stream of Life* and *A Breath of Life*).

Lispector listens to hums and thirsts, invisible and visible, internal and external, imaginative and real. She listens so deeply that eventually she dissolves, like a Brahman. ‘To become Brahman is to merge into the infinite Being in which all sense of “ego”, all sense of separate individuality is lost’.²⁴⁹ Lispector listens! Her ears gaze upon things, hearing alongside things and from within things. Her senses converge and, through her concentrated meditations, the reader enters mysterious and uncharted realms.

²⁴⁶ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 65.

²⁴⁷ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 65.

²⁴⁸ Lispector. *The Passion According to G. H.*, trans. by Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p. 39.

²⁴⁹ R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. by R. C. Zaehner (London: Everyman’s University Library, 1966), p. xi.

Cixous points out that Lispector allows things to enter in their strangeness. When reflecting upon how Lispector allows a thing to enter in its strangeness, I think of the iconic scene in *The Passion According to G. H.*, where G. H. meets the cockroach face to face: ‘I looked at its mouth: there was a real mouth. I had never seen a cockroach’s mouth. I, in fact [...] I had never really seen a cockroach’.²⁵⁰ Lispector creates an absurd scene in G. H.’s encounter with the cockroach, somewhat like an Ionesco play. Unlike Ionesco, her point is not to display the absurdity of things but, rather, the possibilities for mystical encounters within seemingly irrelevant circumstances. The story shows how one might transcend the limits and constructions of oneself to see and notice as one has never seen or noticed. A veil is lifted, a curtain torn, a virtual world exposed. Lispector teaches appreciation of the inexplicable. She forces the reader into uncharted territories and then creates mystical taxonomies. For example, when G. H. traps the cockroach, she reflects:

Looked at up close, the cockroach is an object of great opulence. A bride with black jewellery [...]. By pinching the middle of its body in the wardrobe door, I had isolated the only specimen. All that showed was half its body [...] I felt impure, as the bible speaks of the impure. Why did the Bible spend so much time on the impure, even to making a list of impure and forbidden animals?²⁵¹

The scene goes on until the cockroach spurts white matter out of its broken body and G. H. cries out:

Holy Mary, mother of God, I offer you my life in exchange for that moment yesterday’s being untrue. The cockroach covered with white matter looking at me. I don’t know what a cockroach sees. But if its eyes did not see me, its existence existed me: in the primary world that had entered, beings existed other beings [...] the two eyes were alive like two ovaries [...] Could its eyes be salty? If I touched them—

²⁵⁰ Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.*, pp. 47–48.

²⁵¹ Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.*, p. 63.

since I was slowly becoming more and more impure anyway—if I touched them with my mouth, would I taste salt in them?²⁵²

The reader begins to ask: have I ever taken the time to see a cockroach? We read Lispector and begin seeing. We look through her eyes and see the cockroach:

they are made up shell after shell, grey and thin, like the layers of an onion, as though you could lift one layer with your fingernail and there would always be another one underneath and another. [...] It was an auburn colour. And covered with cilia. Maybe the cilia were multiple legs. The antennae were quiet now, dry, dusty filaments. [...] Cockroaches don't have noses. I looked at it, with that mouth of its, and its eyes: it looked like a dying mulatto woman. But its eyes were black and radiant. The eyes of a girl about to be married. Each eye looked itself like a cockroach. Each fringed, dark, live, dusted eye.²⁵³

We read and perhaps contemplate what else have we not seen? We begin to look and see both the strangeness and the exotic in everyday life. With strangeness, we swing from this noticing to that, allowing things to enter and be really seen. Cixous describes it as 'seeing to see and to see before the eyes narrate'.²⁵⁴

Reading to Develop a Patience That Pays Attention

Through her writing that details descriptions of the smallest and most unusual things, like a cockroach, we see something of the fruits of a hard-won, quirky patience. Clarice sits and contemplates. She may not sit in a cross-legged meditation pose but she sits with her mind in stillness, focus and patience.

Her observations are warm and intimate. There is a story by Italo Calvino called *Reading a Wave*, where his character Mr Palomar observes, with concentrated effort, the forming, rising and breaking of a wave. It is a well-crafted story but it has a mechanistic,

²⁵² Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.*, pp. 68–69.

²⁵³ Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.*, p. 49.

²⁵⁴ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 66.

detached observer. Mr Palomar is trying to develop a methodology of seeing—‘it is not ‘the waves’ that he means to look at, but just one wave: in his desire to avoid vague sensations, he establishes for his every action a limited and precise object’.²⁵⁵ On one level, Calvino and Lispector are doing the same thing, but Lispector’s gift is in her capacity to stay warm, close and in relation to her very precise observations. Calvino aims to logically observe in a detached manner with a flavour of absurdity. It feels more like a kind of intellectual cleverness than relational attention. Conversely, Clarice brings herself, the whole of the self, to this event of attentive writing. Cixous describes her as having ‘an attention that is regular, twenty one days and twenty one nights at the kitchen window, and at last an egg is’.²⁵⁶ With watchful, uncomplicated attention, things come; they arrive like guests and we are there to welcome them. Meditation also requires this faithful patience; it is through daily practice that awareness comes. Receptivity to more arrives and the abundance of the moment is staggering. In generous abundance, the meditator proceeds, more able to receive and more able to give. Giving a self without a self: at last this being is.

Reading to Cherish the Smallest Thing Across Time

Lispector, according to Cixous, teaches that the first lesson is ‘to bring a chicken’s egg the attention that a mountain would inspire us with’.²⁵⁷ She would like to announce the egg, like God announcing, ‘Let there be light!’ There is something about this first utterance and a wish to stay fresh to the livingness of things.

In this first lesson, Lispector introduces us to something that helps us to see the egg: ‘No sooner did I see an egg than I have seen an egg for the last three thousand years’.²⁵⁸ This simple phrase orientates the reader to think not only about seeing this particular egg but also about seeing that which has brought it to be, across deep time and geological time scales.

²⁵⁵ Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, trans. by William Weaver (Florida: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1985), p. 3.

²⁵⁶ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 66.

²⁵⁷ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 68.

²⁵⁸ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 69.

Things take time to come into being, each thing reflecting the source of life. Now, through her, we contemplate more deeply and see why the simple egg can be as inspiring as a mountain and how writing can reveal the scale of time.

Reading as an Art of Contemplation

Contemplation is an act of love. Reflecting on reading Lispector, Cixous wrote: ‘Whoever knows how to contemplate an egg will know how to contemplate a smile’.²⁵⁹

Reading as Seeing the Moment

Lispector teaches: ‘I try to see strictly within the moment when I see—and not through the memory of having seen in an instant now past [...] the instant is of an imminence that takes my breath away’.²⁶⁰ To see within the moment could be a definition of enlightenment. The practice of meditation is a training ground for seeing and attending to the present moment. Lispector is like an artist monk: she is trying to see what all the great Zen masters have seen and she conveys it to us in writing.

Reading: Attention is the Key

Last steps, quietly we approach; circling around this text, we arrive at the key, at the source, at the very thing that allows us to perceive all things. It is a simple step towards a type of attention, a disciplined practice of loving. Children are good at it. When reading this text, I compiled all the ways in which attention is depicted to illustrate both the beauty and complexity of its meanings for both Cixous and Lispector. The collection came together as a type of found poem, each line deserving a pause, a space, and each feeding the next with a type of cumulative impact that their dispersal throughout the text restricts.

attention that brings un-hoped births

²⁵⁹ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 68.

²⁶⁰ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p. 69.

magical attention: attention is magical matter

attention that can pick up the hatching of an egg

attention that is fragile and powerful like electronic retinas

attention that allows things to happen or not happen

attention that waits

audacious attention

an attention that never leaves me

that is perhaps life itself.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, pp. 70–71

Sixth Bull Poem: 'Riding the Bull Home'



Figure 6 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—'Riding the Bull Home'²⁶²

Mounting the bull, slowly I return homeward.

The voice of my flute intones through the evening.

Measuring with hand-beats the pulsating harmony, I direct the endless rhythm.

Whoever hears this melody will join me.

Comment: This struggle is over; gain and loss are assimilated. I hear the song of the village woodsman, and play the tunes of the children. Astride the bull, I observe the clouds above. Onward I go, no matter who may wish to call me back.²⁶³

²⁶² Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

²⁶³ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls* p. 143.

Reflective Narrative Six

The monk is sitting on top of the bull in a contra pose, playing his flute. The bull looks up to the sky with head raised, pleased, following its nose, mouth open. Its legs proceed in a light trot. Its tail is relaxed and the hairy ends are blowing in the breeze. The sharp bullhorns almost form a complete circle on the top of the bull's head, like a halo. The bull looks smaller now and the monk sits on top, balanced with a straight back. The bull knows where he is going and the monk does not need to look ahead, or to wilfully guide the movement. The monk plays a flute. In Buddhism, there is a saying that 'you hear the self through sound'. The landscape revealing tree and the edge of lake is like the landscape scene in the first bull painting—'In Search of the Bull'. The title of this painting is *Riding the Bull Home*. Do we ride towards that which we have already seen without our knowing—towards a type of home, like a womb, towards an intimacy with self and the world that can only be known through a mind tamed and quietened by breathing? The breath or spirit is thus that vital force that gives life. It mysteriously comes as a gift, like the first stirrings to take up a path of reading, writing, meditation or love. Breath is the physical presence of the gift of life. Breath in its coming and going is not pure presence but differentiated presence. It contains within it both the promise of life—in its presence—and the reality of death—in its absence. Breath awareness is a cornerstone of Zen meditation practice. Within this breath practice, one can appreciate the universal connection with all living beings and the intimate particularities of one's own being.

Just Breathing

At some point, I stopped using a mantra as a form to enable concentration and tame the distractible mind. I could find the necessary focus by simply attending to my breathing. I began to just sit and follow my breath. I could attend fully to my breath throughout a twenty-minute meditation period by just breathing—opening, and receiving—breathing in and out, never leaving the breath, always staying with the breath, in complete attention, riding the

bull with ease and steadiness. The more still and at one with my breath that I became, the more open my being was. I could notice more of what was occurring in the moment—multiple bird calls, four different frog croaks, flies buzzing, wind in trees, wind in grasses—each a distinctive sound; the smell of water and grass prickling my skin. Everything was so alive and pulsating with livingness. The quieter my mind became the more capacity I had to receive through all the senses at once; sight did not dominate, nor hearing: sensations arrived in whole units that were not broken up into constructed bits. By writing, I am forced to dissect the moment into parts and segments to convey something but, in reality, this moment was one and layered, more complex than a linear account can reveal. In this state of openness, each moment felt full, abundant, eternal and never ending.

Through stillness and silence, concentration and breathing, one dissolves and merges into this great emptiness. It is an attentive surrender: a dehiscence, not an axe. Reading, writing, living, reflecting movements correspond to an organic motion of breathing—in and out, in and out. There is a sustained and practised attentiveness learned through meditation that enables the noticing of relationships between things inside one's being and things outside. This type of noticing promotes a layered way of experiencing existence through the senses and body. It also produces a way of experiencing things in constant living relation to each other, thereby growing a capacity to reflect on and narrate relationships between oneself and the world. Ultimately, there is capacity for union between subject and object, self and other: a non-dualistic way of seeing.

Writing With Non-Dualistic Seeing

In her diary of Tuesday 23 February 1926, Woolf wrote:

I am blown like an old flag by my novel. This one is *To the Lighthouse*. I think it is worth saying for my own interest that at last, at last, after that battle *Jacob's Room*, that agony—all agony but the end—*Mrs Dalloway*, I am now writing as fast and

freely as I have written in the whole of my life; more so—20 times more so than any novel yet.²⁶⁴

She reflects: ‘I think this is proof that I was on the right path; and what fruit hangs in my soul is to be reached there’.²⁶⁵ As her reader, we ask why, how and what has happened to propel her sense of her own writing and flow? What does this change of flow, this fluidity and awareness, indicate? She goes on to tell us a little more about her insights into her own developments as a creative writer. On Saturday 23 March 1926, she writes, ‘as far as I know, as a writer I am now only writing out of my mind’.²⁶⁶ Through these quotes, she is claiming both a clarity of mind and her own individual written expression. She questions herself and this change in her writing: ‘why am I so flown with words and apparently free to do exactly what I like?’²⁶⁷ She writes: ‘I have finished—sketchily I admit—the second part of *To the Lighthouse*—and may, then, have it all written over by the end of July. A record. 7 months, if it so turns out’.²⁶⁸ Of course, things do not move as quickly as hoped and Woolf finishes the book on Friday 14 January 1927. Nevertheless, her post-reading of her finished work again illuminates something of her sense of rightness concerning what she wanted to express and how words expressed it. She writes: “‘Dear me, how lovely some parts of the lighthouse are!’” Soft and pliable, and I think deep, and never a word wrong for a page at a time. This I feel about the dinner party and the children in the boat [...]—23 March 1927’.²⁶⁹

In *Dehiscence*, the beauty of the dinner scene is highlighted and reflected upon. However, what was Woolf referring to in this statement in relation to the scene with the children in the boat? Was it the beauty of her written poetic descriptions—‘The sails flapped over their heads. The water chuckled and slapped the sides of the boat’; [...] ‘waves breaking in white splinters like smashed glass upon the rocks’²⁷⁰—or was it how seamlessly the

²⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1982) p. 84.

²⁶⁵ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 84.

²⁶⁶ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 87.

²⁶⁷ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 87.

²⁶⁸ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 88.

²⁶⁹ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 105.

²⁷⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 153, 193.

consciousness shifts between Cam and James's thoughts and at times unifies them: 'They hoped the whole expedition would fail [...]'²⁷¹—or was it how the landscape interacts with the psychological mood of the characters to create the sense of silence, bitterness and tension: 'Now and then the sails rippled with a little breeze in them but the ripple ran over them and ceased. The boat made no motion at all. Mr Ramsey sat in the middle of the boat. He would be impatient in a moment, James thought [...]'²⁷²—or was it how Mr Ramsey's oppressive parenting is revealed in even intervals that have a cumulative effect? For example: 'James would be forced to keep his eye all the time on the sail. For if he forgot, then the sail puckered, and shivered, and the boat slackened, and Mr. Ramsey would say sharply, "Look out! Look out!"' Cam is quizzed about and ridiculed for not knowing North or South or the points of the compass—a criticism of mind that he proceeds to extend to his wife, Mrs Ramsey and all women in general, about whom he claims that the 'vagueness of their minds is hopeless'.²⁷³ Alternatively, is Woolf referring to how the children inwardly chant against their father—'they must fight tyranny to the death'²⁷⁴—or perhaps to how Maclister, the sailor smoking on his pipe, relishing his thoughts of masculinity, enabled a clever, writerly return to the gender politics that pervade the novel: 'He liked that men should labour and sweat on the windy beach at night, pitting muscle against the waves and the wind [...] and women keep house, and sit beside children indoors.'²⁷⁵ Through the character of Maclister, Woolf creates, with such a light touch, a nautical-fictional atmosphere.

There are also moments in the writing where sharp juxtapositions between the present and the past are well executed in the writing:

her father broke off exclaiming 'Look! Look!' [...] But Cam could see nothing. She was thinking how all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal, and now this

²⁷¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 156.

²⁷² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 155.

²⁷³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 156, 159.

²⁷⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 160.

²⁷⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 157.

was real; the boat and the sail with its patch; Macallister with his earrings; the noise of the waves—all this was real.²⁷⁶

The boat scene is a small scene of only six pages but it is powerful, eventful, moving and tender. It cumulatively depicts the psychological monstrosity of the father Mr Ramsey and his complete ignorance of his own nature as experienced by the children. It seamlessly weaves together inner and outer worlds at a fast pace with attention to detail. It is not surprising that Woolf finally felt at home with her writing and expressed ‘this is easily the best of my books: fuller than *Jacob’s Room* and less spasmodic, occupied with more interesting things than *Mrs Dalloway* [...] It is freer and subtler [...] I have made my method perfect [...]’.²⁷⁷ She was now riding the bull!

²⁷⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 158.

²⁷⁷ Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, p. 101.

Seventh Bull Poem: ‘The Bull Transcended’



Figure 7 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—‘The Bull Transcended’²⁷⁸

Astride the bull, I reach home.

I am serene. The bull too can rest.

The dawn has come. In blissful repose,

Within my thatched dwelling I have abandoned the whip and rope.

Comment: All is one law, not two. We only make the bull a temporary subject. It is the relation of rabbit and trap, of fish and net. It is gold and dross, or the moon emerging from a cloud. One path of clear light travels on throughout endless time.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

²⁷⁹ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls*, p. 144.

Reflective Narrative Seven

The monk kneels, hands together, head slightly elevated, looking out near the edge of land and water. Before the rising sun, the mountain peaks and the mists, he kneels. The monk's eyes are closed and it looks as though he is smiling, perhaps giving thanks.

There is a neat, little hut with a chequered floor mat and a lightly drawn curtain that is empty, full of no-thing(s).

There is no bull; there is no more music; that has passed; there is only home, only mountains, clouds, sun, water, flecks of grass and the slightly bent branches of trees.

This scene is quiet, still.

The drawn curtain connects us to the place of sleeping, dreaming and rest.

It is dawn: the liminal space between night and day; the edge where night softly meets day.

The edge of the land is meeting the edge of the water; there is no this or that, just meeting.

What is next for the monk? The bull is gone and the next is yet to arrive. The monk kneels in expectancy, pregnancy, looking out at the beyond. This is a pause, a comma, a holding of breath, a still moment, a silent interval, a dawn before ... something—something that one can only kneel before and smile and to whom one can offer oneself. There is finally an ease, a homecoming, a disbanding of discipline and tools for, within the intimacy of the self, something is now known. The monk has journeyed far to arrive here.

Writing Dehiscence: A Coming Home

Paul Celan writes eloquently of poetic writing as a process of searching for oneself (1961):

Does one, when one thinks of poems—does one travel such paths with poems? Are these paths but circuitous paths, circuitous paths from thou to thou? There are, however, among possible paths, paths on which language acquires a voice; these are encounters, a voice's paths to a perceiving thou, creaturely paths, sketches of

existence perhaps, a sending of oneself ahead to oneself, in the process of searching for oneself [...] A kind of homecoming.²⁸⁰

Celan wrote this when noting a relationship between two pieces of his writings that occurred on the same date, years apart. ‘On both occasions, I had written myself from one “20 January”, from my “20 January”, toward myself. I had encountered myself.’²⁸¹ To encounter oneself through writing and through time, to send oneself ahead in the process of searching for oneself and to discover a language with which to perceive a thou is not unlike this poetic journey I am undertaking with the *Bull Poems*. We are walking creaturely paths, hearing the voices of other poets and writers.

In a ‘Sketch of the Past’ (1939), Woolf retells her first two memories. She interrupts her own writing of Roger Fry’s biography to recollect and consider the dilemmas of memoir writing. The first is a very early memory of lying in bed in the nursery of St Ives:

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills— then my bowl without a doubt stands on this memory. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking one, two, one, two, behind the yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.²⁸²

Here, there is depicted an experience of sound, light and a feeling—a feeling of the ‘purest ecstasy’. Ecstasy is defined as ‘an exalted state of feeling which engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought; rapture, transport’.²⁸³ Woolf was a small child when she had this

²⁸⁰ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, trans. by Jerry Glenn (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 184.

²⁸¹ Paul Celan, *The Meridian*, trans. by Pierre Joris, ed. by Bernard Boschenstein and Heino Schmull (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 11.

The Glenn and Joris translations are both referred to as they each add to a more nuanced reading of the speech. In my opinion, the Glenn translation is more playful and poetic, whereas the Joris translation is more formal, stiff and academic.

²⁸² Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 65.

²⁸³ *OED Online*

experience. In 'A Sketch of the Past', she grapples with the 'who' she was as a child that led to this strong experience. She identifies an external reason as the contrast and change between London and St Ives. This, she speculated, made the impression of the waves and the acorn as: 'like lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow'.²⁸⁴ However, she also identifies the converging of her senses in an inner way as leading to this strong experience: 'Sound and sight seemed to make equal parts of these first impressions'.²⁸⁵

She continues by relaying another significant memory and then conceptualising what these experiences signified:

It still makes me feel very warm; as if everything was ripe; humming; sunny; smelling so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop—as I stopped going down to the beach; I stopped to look in the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on level with one's head. The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one in such complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked.²⁸⁶

Woolf makes meaning of these two early childhood experiences in the most mystical way; she writes: 'I often wonder—that things we have felt with such intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence'.²⁸⁷ She sees the past as 'an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions' and there, at the end, remain the 'garden and the nurse'.²⁸⁸ It is these experiences of ecstasy and rapture, in which sound and sight are of equal part and that she is hardly aware of herself, that she metaphorically kneels before

²⁸⁴ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 65.

²⁸⁵ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 66.

²⁸⁶ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 66.

²⁸⁷ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 67.

²⁸⁸ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 67.

in reverence like the monk in the Seventh Bull Painting. One could speculate that these experiences are indeed like the ‘one path of clear light that travels through endless time’.²⁸⁹

Woolf describes experiences of ecstasy and rapture. In these memories, she glimpses something, a type of consciousness that is not about breaking things up into this category or that, or looking at things as single entities, but rather about opening and apprehending the total relationship between things. The reader with ease and simplicity is introduced to a fledging example of the experience of non-dualistic reality, a type of *satori* experience in which small things are situated in relationship to the whole universe across time. In the first memory, she is in the whole, with the sounds of the waves, the light through the window, the roll of the acorn, and the breath of the blind. She experiences and records for us the whole. Woolf wrote ‘A Sketch of the Past’ in 1939–40 when she was 57 years of age: ‘the final entry made just four months before her death’.²⁹⁰ If self-identities are created and re-created through narration and reading events that occur over time, writing could be considered the final act of blossoming, blooming and seed dispersal.

²⁸⁹ Shiyuan, *Ten Bulls*, p. 144.

²⁹⁰ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 61.

The Eighth Bull Poem: ‘Both Bull and Self Transcended’

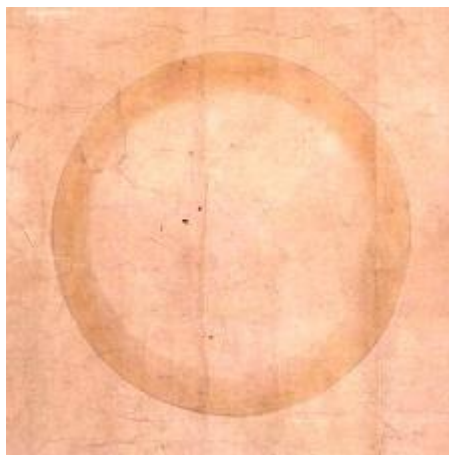


Figure 8 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—‘Both Bull and Self Transcended’²⁹¹

Whip, rope, person, and bull—all merge in No-thing,

This heaven is so vast no message can stain it.

How may a snowflake exist in a raging fire?

Here are the footprints of the patriarchs.

Comment: Mediocrity is gone. Mind is clear of limitation. I seek no state of enlightenment. Neither do I remain where no enlightenment exists. Since I linger in neither condition, eyes cannot see me. If hundreds of birds strew my path with flowers, such praise would be meaningless.²⁹²

²⁹¹ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

²⁹² Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls*, p. 145.

Reflective Narrative Eight

Looking at or into this painting called ‘Both Bull and Self Transcended’ I notice the weave of the paper—that which sits behind—that which came before any marking. The circle has a dark, thin outer line and a band of brown, which becomes more golden as it moves closer to the centre. The inner circle line is indistinct: it melts into space. White light bounces luminously off the circle. If you keep looking and looking into the centre, you might feel as though it is receding further and further into space, into all things, across all time. Nothing and everything fit into this type of circle.

Myokyo-ni Rōshi describes the essence of this painting poem as depicting the realisation of ‘dying the Great Death that needs to be died in order to awaken to the Great Life which is not “mine”’.²⁹³ Loori Rōshi describes the poem painting as ‘full realization of emptiness [...] complete falling away of body and mind, self and other. The absolute body fills the universe’.²⁹⁴ An excess of being is in relation to the whole, a spirit of being that does not seek, nor emanate a desire for praise and recognition. There is no self, no ego and, therefore, even if ‘hundreds of birds strew my path with flowers, such praise would be meaningless’.²⁹⁵

Writing and the Original

There are moments in original writing where one gets to the edge, boundary or limits of what has been done before, either by the writer or within the canon. Woolf, felt that she had arrived at this by the time she had completed *To the Lighthouse* and Cixous, following Lispector’s inspiration, pushes the creative–critical form by drawing attention to the distances between creative and critical writings that are not so easily defined. When writing defies description,

²⁹³ Myokyo-ni, p.120.

²⁹⁴ Loori, p. 56.

²⁹⁵ Shiyuan, *Ten Bulls*, p. 145. Mumon Rōshi tells a story of where this line originates: ‘This verse refers to an anecdote about a Chinese monk, Gozu Hōyu Zenji, who went to receive Dharma transmission from the Fourth Patriarch Dōshin Zenji. Gozu retired to the mountains in order to devote himself to relentless practice and discipline; many people came to see him [...] it is said that even the birds in the mountain forests came before him [...] when finally, he penetrated the Great Matter under the Fourth Patriarch, the birds stopped bringing flowers to him’; see Mumon, p. 82.

something else happens, something new. There are also moments in stories where characters reach a type of saturation point that heralds the new. In my novella, *Dehiscence*, there is such a moment. The ripening of love becomes so unstoppable that the old identity reaches an edge that stretches and spills out towards the new. In this moment, there is a death–life intersection. No longer can the character Aoife be a mother, a wife, a therapist, a lover, a Buddhist or a Christian. It is a moment in which she dies to each of these to let something else come. It is a confronting moment and yet it is also the moment of being most alive and real, which is not easy to live or to write about. It is a moment where one experiences a certain type of clarity, where the mind is freed of limitation and, somehow, the magnitude of life comes in like the sun’s rays that have finally opened the seed pod. It is a moment in which there is no holding back:

She drove to work and stopped by a lake that was still and cold, stark and barren, silent; no birds or leaves, just rotten stumps and grey, cold, spiky, bushfire-blackened branches reaching out, like brittle bones. They seemed to stretch upwards towards the heavens, towards life, calling out like the prophet Ezekiel: ‘Can these bones live?’

She arrived at work, switched on her computer and knew that it was now or never. She wrote without thinking:

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin.

Dance me through the panic ‘til I’m gathered safely in.

Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove.

Dance me to the end of love, dance me to the end of love.²⁹⁶

Her hand moved the mouse decisively to the send button; one click and it was done.

One click like one breath can mean the difference between life and death.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Cohen, *Dance Me to The End of Love*.

²⁹⁷ Wood, p. 97.

Writing a first novella has been an exercise not only of writing in the dark towards the unknown but also of noticing points where literary swelling occurs. At these points the writing requires the incorporation of literary techniques that are not just about building the practical narrative scaffolding to tell the story; for example, lyrics, metaphors and poetry as well as a relationship to other, more culturally significant texts, such as the Bible or mythic fables. Woolf's boat scene in *To the Lighthouse* is an example of this type of ripening.

Ninth Bull Poem: 'Reaching the Source'



Figure 9 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—'Reaching the Source'²⁹⁸

Too many steps have been taken returning to the root and the source.

Better to have been blind and deaf from the beginning!

Dwelling in one's true abode, unconcerned with that without—

The river flows tranquilly on and the flowers are red.

Comment: From the beginning, truth is clear. Poised in silence, I observe the forms of integration and disintegration. One who is not attached to 'form' need not be 'reformed'. The water is emerald, the mountain indigo, and I see that which is creating and that which is destroying.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

²⁹⁹ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls* p. 146.

Reflective Narrative Nine

I look and see rivers and roots, flowing and anchoring, flowering and fruiting. The tips of new buds burst forth, red and delicate. I look and ask: what are the sounds of absolute inner stillness? I hear the softness of air enter and travel down deep into my body and then a gentle expiration of release—however, there are not really two parts to this process, this is just how language requires it to be described. In reality, there is just a circle, a one, a continuous flow from root to bud, a stillness that is observant and present to the living moment. This painting and this poem reveal the mysterious comings and goings of forms—or the impermanence of all things, as Buddhism names it—life and death, being there and being gone. This flow is not dependant on whether I am attentive to it or not, on whether I exist or not. However, if I can be a little more attentive, I am curious to feel what it is possible to experience. In the painting, a sense of time is reflected in the gnarled, curvaceous roots that spill out of the earth like boulders and in the river flowing by—time past, time present and time future.

Rivers flow from a source to the sea—in fact, to the mouth of sea, back to the eternal dispersal and dissolution. Paradoxically, my mouth and breath are openings to receive the gift of life. My sex and womb are channels for new life. These feminine bodily parts place me more in touch with the creation of life than death.

In the painting, there is a landscape marked by a tree, exposing both blossom and root, and a flowing river. Landscape is an important theme in all the *Bull Poems* and paintings. The flow of the river enters the painting series at the Second Bull Poem: ‘Finding the Traces’. This flow is always there, whether the monk or the viewer of the painting, is aware of it or not. In the painting for the Ninth Bull Poem, images of nature are presented as very close; they are the centre—‘the picture’—rather than peripheral or background scenery.

In the poem, the consciousness that is returned to is one that has always existed but has been rediscovered and reawakened. It is a type of consciousness that has been named in the previous poems as a self-forgotten consciousness. In this poem and this painting, we see how a self-forgotten consciousness apprehends. This consciousness presents a landscape

scene that is at once earthy and material. There is no person in the painting, as there is in the Eighth Bull Poem, which depicted an empty circle. However, nor is there emptiness; rather, there is a sort of ‘fullness’ without a self, a capacity to see the natural world across time—beginnings and endings. ‘Returning to the Source and Origin’ can be compared to a return to ‘one’s own original mind that is originally pure without afflictions or illusory thoughts, and is the essence of all real phenomena’.³⁰⁰ In the picture, there is a grounded capacity to perceive the origin, the source, the essence of all things in nature and the world of matter—in the rocks, river, tree, stone and grass.

While the Ninth Bull Poem depicts a sense of being deeply still, this is certainly not as a negation of the outside, as the fourth line in the poem (and the picture) testifies: ‘Still, the endless river flows tranquilly on, the flowers are red’; ‘The water is vast; the flowers red because it is so’; ‘Behold the streams flowing—whither nobody knows / And the flowers vividly red—for whom are they?’; ‘Let the streams just flow on, the flowers just bloom red’; ‘The river flows tranquilly, The flower simply being red’; ‘Boundless, the river runs as it runs. / Red bloom the flowers just as they bloom’; ‘Streams meander on and of themselves, / red flowers naturally bloom red’; and ‘The rivers flow tranquilly on and the flowers are red’.³⁰¹

Some words that are used to describe the monk and his state of mind at this stage in the translated commentaries that accompany each poem are: ‘without illusory thoughts, without afflictions’; ‘abiding in the immoveable serenity of non-assertion’; ‘residing in the serenity of non-doing’; ‘from the realm of non-being’; ‘collected in the peace of non-volitional doing’; ‘He observes the waxing and waning of life in the world while abiding unassertively in a state of unshakeable serenity’; and ‘poised in silence’.³⁰² In other words,

³⁰⁰ Shiyuan, *The Poems on the Ten Ox-herding Pictures*, p. 21.

³⁰¹ Loori, p. 61; Shiyuan, *The Poems on the Ten Ox-herding Pictures*, p. 21; Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p.133. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 375; Mumon, p. 87; Wada, *The Oxherder*; Myokyo-ni, p. 123; Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 342; Shiyuan, *Ten Bulls*, p. 146.

³⁰² Loori, p. 61; Shiyuan, *The Poems on the Ten Ox-herding Pictures*, p. 21; Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, p. 133, Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 375; Mumon, p. 87; Wada, *The Oxherder*; Myokyo-ni, p. 123; Kapleau, p. 342; Shiyuan, *Ten Bulls*, p. 146.

this type of being is able to exist in full relation to the ever-changing dynamics of existence without attachment. Mumon Rōshi expresses it like this: ‘with a mind like an empty mirror, without calculation or discernment, you see the ever-changing world pass by just as it is’.³⁰³

Writing and Source

In writing, as in love and meditation, there is a return to one’s source—to one’s own writing style and voice. If this is truly authentic it will reveal something of the universal story, as the *Bull Poems* do. In this thesis, I have attempted to listen to the poems in two ways: first, as a way to understand how they reveal the journey of Zen enlightenment and, second, as a touchstone to reflect upon the journeys of becoming a reader and a creative writer. The first five Bull Poems—‘The Search’, ‘Finding the Footprints’, ‘Perceiving the Bull’, ‘Catching the Bull’ and ‘Taming the Bull’—have been inspirational for reflecting on the effects of reading, the development of reading qualities and the practice of reading at dehiscent edges. The last five poems and paintings have been a source for reflecting on writing—on writing as the final act of dehiscence. The movement from reader to creative writer involves a substantial shift in being. Cixous’s reflection on the relationship between the two may be somewhat enabling: ‘Writing and reading are not separate, reading is part of writing. A real reader is a writer. (A real reader is already on the way to writing)’.³⁰⁴ Perhaps a return to the source is a return to that place where there is no longer any individual reader or writer, to the place, instead, where writing becomes a type of wild landscape—a sea or forest.

³⁰³ Mumon, p. 89.

³⁰⁴ Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 21.

Tenth Bull Poem: 'In the World'



Figure 10 Shūbun *Ten Bulls*—'In the World'³⁰⁵

Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the people of the world.

My clothes are ragged and dust-laden and I am ever blissful.

I use no magic to extend my life;

Now, before me, the trees become alive.

Comment: Inside my gate, a thousand sages do not know me. The beauty of my garden is invisible. Why should one search for the footprints of the patriarchs? I go to the market place with my wine bottle and return home with my staff. I visit the wineshop and the market, and everyone I look upon becomes enlightened.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Tenshō Shūbun, *Ten Bulls* (Kyoto: Shoko-ji Temple, 1414).

³⁰⁶ Poem and Commentary, Shiyuan *Ten Bulls*, p. 147.

Reflective Narrative Ten

A large, hairy-bellied smiling man encounters a pale, small, young, thin person. Both are on a journey carrying staffs and sacks. The large, hairy man carries a very large sack—like Santa Claus. Sliding off his shoulders are his clothes, as if at any moment, he could stand naked before us. His skin is fleshy, peachy and full in colour, unlike that of the small person who is pale and stooped. The large, hairy-bellied man smiles with both his eyes and mouth; his head looks straight at the young person. Perhaps the young person reminds him of a previous life, a previous picture, a quest or a search.

The hairy-bellied man holds a basket in one hand; some say it is ‘a precious basket containing mystery’.³⁰⁷ I speculate that it is a wicker basket that holds an earthenware bottle for carrying wine. The natural landscape of tree, rocks, grass, earth and river is in the background, unlike in the Ninth Bull Poem. This scene is a person-to-person encounter. In fact, it is the first time throughout this painting series that we witness the encounter with another.

How lucky the young man is; however, will he notice more than the tattered clothes and surface smells? What will linger? Moreover, what will be awoken because of this meeting? This journey begins not with a text, but with a living encounter with something broad, generous and unexpected, something that you meet without will or effort—in the way that first-time love for another is stirred.

Mumon Rōshi titles the Tenth Bull Poem, ‘Entering the Market Place with Extended Hands’ and, in his commentary, he tells a story that illuminates the nature of a being that is reflected in this painting and poem. He links the poem to a figure in Chinese legend called *Putai Hoshang* (Japanese: *Hotei Oshō*) whose name means cloth-sack monk. Legend has it that *Putai* was a native of *Ming-choi*, of *Feng hua* Province in China, in the early tenth

³⁰⁷ Myokyo-ni, p. 140.

century. As does Santa Claus, he had a sack. If he received things he would put them into his sack and, when he met children, he would take them out of his sack and give them away:

When it finally came time for him to pass away he seated himself in zazen posture on a great rock just beyond the temple called *Yüeh-lin ssu* and composed the following poem:

Maitreya, the true *Maitreya*,
Embodied in myriad selves,
Time and again reveals himself
Yet no one at the time knows.³⁰⁸

Mumon Rōshi states that what is significant about *Putai* (or *Hotei*) is that he was both the reincarnation of *Maitreya* Buddha and the *bodhisattva* of loving kindness and yet he was ranked the lowest in terms of social status and power. He was unknown, a type of giver that Derrida describes as unrecognisable.³⁰⁹ Mumon Rōshi writes: ‘*Putai* was not worried about his appearance or social standing and, instead, spent his life living among the common folk, helping all sentient beings’.³¹⁰ Mumon sees the poem and painting as a political critique of some religious establishments where religious leaders are privileged by wearing special robes, giving lectures and maintaining high-level statuses as opposed to the monk who is unknown and embodying being or heart. In relation to the spiritual journey, Mumon states, ‘you must throw everything away, become naked, melt completely in with the ordinary people, and live alongside everyone else covered in dust’.³¹¹ Hence, the lines in the poem ‘with bare chest and feet you come to the market. Under dirt and ash, your face breaks into a laugh’.³¹² Translated another way: ‘Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the

³⁰⁸ Mumon, p. 96.

³⁰⁹ Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), p. 41.

³¹⁰ Mumon, p. 97.

³¹¹ Mumon, p. 100.

³¹² Mumon, p. 95.

people of the world. My clothes are ragged and dust-laden and I am ever blissful'.³¹³ This being who is a *heart being* does not require social, political or cultural power conventions to relate to other people. Rather, they see themselves as intricately linked to the shared wellbeing of others. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes a similar sensibility or ethics, but within a Heideggerian schema: 'If the world is *Mitwelt*, shared world, Being insofar as it is "in the world" is constitutively being-with, and being-with according-to-the-sharing'.³¹⁴ In this trajectory, 'the shared world as the world of concern-for-the-other is a world of crossing of singular beings by this sharing itself which constitutes them [...]'.³¹⁵ To be human is to live as an existent sharing in the existence of all existents. This is not unlike what philosopher Cavarero posits in relation to identity and becoming through a process of community narration: "'who I am" is an experience of sharing my life with others for through being exposed to others only then do I obtain a unified constituted sense of self and love'.³¹⁶ In many ways, my attempt to tell the story of *Dehiscence* through a fictional memoir is an attempt to take the fragments of my life and order them to give myself (and others) a unified sense of self and love. The Buddhist ideal takes this further, claiming that, through the non-discriminating exposure of my 'no-self' in warmth, love and laughter to all selves, a wellbeing is conferred on them or, as the poem suggests: 'everyone I look upon becomes enlightened'.³¹⁷ Mumon Rōshi states that this being 'drinks with everyone he (or she) meets and leaves all feeling satisfied. They let everyone attain some peace of mind'.³¹⁸ The *heart being* emanates a light and, in their relations, all who meet this 'no-self' will come to feel the point and purpose of life, 'like flowers blooming on a withered tree'.³¹⁹ This is what is meant by the radiating light—the clear light that travels across all time—or by one being an empty mirror, allowing the other to experience the fullness of their own beauty, goodness

³¹³ Shiyuan, *Ten Bulls*, p. 147.

³¹⁴ Jean Luc-Nancy, "Shattered Love", in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), pp. 83-109 (p.103).

³¹⁵ Nancy, 'Shattered Love', p. 103.

³¹⁶ Cavarero, pp. 22, 34, 59, 82, 111.

³¹⁷ Shiyuan, *Ten Bulls*, p. 147.

³¹⁸ Mumon, p. 99.

³¹⁹ Shiyuan, *The Poems on the Ten Oxherding Pictures*, p. 101.

and potentiality. A flow of love belongs to no one and to the singularity of each person at the same time. This is a key idea or a type of metaphoric soil that the novella *Dehiscence* grows within. In this idea of encounter, one *heart being* partakes of another *heart being* or, more rigorously, they mutually partake of each other. Mumon Rōshi uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe this type of relationship and its connection to enlightenment:

Absolute subjectivity is the mirror itself. A mirror reflects all things but a mirror projects no image itself [hence in ‘Bull Poem Nine’ in which the still mind reflects exactly what is in nature]. The Buddhist term, ‘Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom’ refers to this. There is also an old saying, ‘Between two mirrors no image is reflected’.³²⁰

Nancy writes something bold about love that is worth reading alongside Mumon Rōshi’s metaphor of the mirror:

As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and that disconnects the elements of the subject proper—the fibres of its heart. For the break is a break in self-possession as subject, it is, essentially an interruption of the process of possession as subject [...] an interruption of relating oneself to oneself.³²¹

This is, in the terms of this thesis, a dehiscence. The Tenth Bull Poem: ‘In the World’ or ‘Entering the Marketplace with Extended Hands’ reflects the ideal of all encounters as sources of love when there is a disbanding of the self-possessed self or the *bodhisattva*, as Buddhism depicts. Nancy writes:

[...] love arrives in all the forms and all the figures of love; it is projected in all it shatters. There are no parts, movements, types or stages of love.

There is only an infinity of shatters: love is wholly complete in one sole embrace or in the history of a life, in jealous passion or tireless devotion.³²²

³²⁰ Mumon, p. 4.

³²¹ Nancy, ‘Shattered Love’, p. 96.

³²² Nancy, ‘Shattered Love’, p. 101.

Love, like the word God or Enlightenment, exceeds any of attempts to narrow, contain and objectify. Hence, the importance of an ethics of opening and a reading journey spurred by the metaphor of dehiscence.

In a spiritual journey, as in a dehiscent reading–writing journey, one’s usual path must end or perhaps open out further, stretch into something unknowing so as to propel one into a greater mystery, a greater reality and a more secret truth. A history of self (or being) moves into a mysterious landscape in which a type of self-originality, enlightenment or resurrection becomes possible.

Conclusion: Open, Blown and Buoyant

These words or steps or breaths take us (me the writer and you the reader) towards what is at the heart of this writing: *Dehiscence*—a love story. A story communicated, I hope, with love. Through a series of iterations, we have been moving closer to a unification of the creative and the critical. I have explored different kinds of love: spiritual love, erotic love, love of children, love of reading, love of writing, love of human beings, love of ideals—the good, the just and the ethical—love of the earth, of nature, of one’s body and love of sex. These iterations are productive and fecund returns, circles that offer an ever-widening deconstruction of loving and thinking. Behind them sits the space of silence and stillness discovered through meditation. Silence shapes the text like white space on a page before words. Continually, openings have been sought as this thesis gives signification to the possibilities of loves. It stretches towards relationships with readers yet to come, who are barely imaginable. Today, as you read, we are both alive and, therefore, live in the excess of words, pages and books. Moreover, because of this excess there is a desire to keep on discerning and mapping, to come to know these terrains further through the gift of language. This thesis has come to know language as the ultimate gift, which provides never-ending possibilities for re-inscription and resurrection. Love, thinking, language and silence allow for multiple approaches and circulations through bodies, texts and memories. This beloved language, which represents the interiority of my own thoughts, records, roams and circulates like blood.

Dehiscence—the creative work—and its accompanying critical thesis have been conceived differently but we may find in their voices, echoes and resonances, a type of unification and wholeness. There are no cognitive conclusions or theories to uphold in this type of reading–writing. What is needed is a hermeneutics of reading, whereby the reader brings his- or herself, his or her being—‘*that be a heart*’—to the task of reading. This is how I read and how I love. Any attempts to draw limits or to defend totalising accounts of human beings will be thwarted by the continual openings and possibilities of other ways of noticing

and other relations, because both the writer and the reader are irreducible. Something beyond each meets when they encounter in this reading space the beings of each other as heart.

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