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Consider, for a moment, the thrill of reading fiction. You are transported to a different place, time or being. Absorbed in the story, you are somewhere else, someone else, seeing a different – sometimes uplifting, sometimes uncomfortable – vision of things. Nevertheless, the experience is always ultimately about the nonfictional you. It is about what you bring back from the reading: how it affects your mood; how it shifts your understanding of yourself and your world; how it makes you see or dream anew. In that way every reader engages in a highly individual creative act: re-envisioning his or her relationship with the world in terms of the patterns offered by literature. When a reader transcribes that vision into words, he or she becomes a writer.

That is how I see what I do. A lifetime of reading has shown me how I might write; that is, how I might transform the chaotic flux of my life into something with potential significance. Thus the act of writing always involves a doubling up of inspiration: life and literature enfold and interpenetrate.

‘Three Sisters’ – the subject of this commentary – foregrounds this creative doubleness. The story is based, in part, on my experience of working in a roadhouse in Tooradin, a swampy town in Southwest Gippsland in Victoria, with three sisters of Dutch
origin. In that way, the story finds its inspiration in life. However, this story also acknowledges Anton Chekhov’s famous play of the same name, which made my autobiographical experience of working with three sisters so distinctive and potentially poignant to me in the first place. My story, calling itself after Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, identifies its primary source of inspiration in literature.

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To explain my philosophy of writing further, let me take you back to my years as an undergraduate student. Gerald Murnane was my fiction tutor at Victoria College in Toorak in the early 1990s, and he was always encouraging us to ‘write what you know’. It was his mantra.

To begin with, I ignored him. The first story I wrote was about a paedophilic priest. Gerald accused the story of being ‘topical’, by which I assume he meant inauthentic and exploitative. However, he did identify the only passage in the story based on personal experience. After that, despite being stung by his criticism, I was convinced that Gerald had preternatural powers. For my next story I wrote an autobiographical piece, which was what I mistakenly thought Gerald wanted when he induced me to ‘write what I know’. Naïve and narcissistic, I thought that I must be of inherent interest; I thought that it was the secret truth of me that was being sought. When the story was workshoped in class, Gerald was lukewarm in his response. More to the point, my fellow students did not seem to care for what I had written; no one believed in the meaningfulness of the material that I had drawn directly from my life.

I continue to ‘write what I know’, although now that category is broadly conceived. My writing is informed by places I have inhabited, people I have encountered, stories I have been told, films I have watched, emotional states I have experienced, ideas that have captured my interest, situations I have witnessed, and events that have happened to me. There is indeed a lot that an
individual person might ‘know’ – and write about with the kind of attachment that can pass for authority. However, I write with the recognition that my autobiographical experience is not *ipso facto* interesting; it is not readymade literature. That material has to be forged into fiction; that is, transformed into something that will engage a reader’s sense of meaningfulness. It has to be selected, elaborated on and crafted with a view to creating narrative, significance and ambiguity.

In other words, to write successfully, I have to read life in the way that I have learnt to read literature, intuiting and identifying prospectively interesting characters, evocative settings and powerful themes. It is a practice that requires a certain distance from one’s experience – in the way that carrying a camera does, as one continually thinks about what might be photographed and how best to frame subjects. However, it is also a practice that requires an understanding of the appropriate and successful conventions for choosing and representing material. In this way, the activity of reading becomes of paramount importance to the ability to write, so much so that while it could be said that I ‘write what I know’, it could also be said that I ‘write what I read’.

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I would like to spend a little more time elaborating on what it means to be a reader – and then on what it means to be a writer. I have always been a voracious reader, which means that I have always lived in a world reverberating with the characters, symbols, settings and dilemmas provided by books. That world, unlike the material one, is infinitely rich with meaning – inclusive even of meaninglessness – and further enriched with every great book I read.

In a way, literature is like a religion that provides me with an imaginary landscape to inhabit. That imaginary landscape runs parallel to my material one; or perhaps it is truer to say that my material environment is resonantly overlain with the meanings
provided by the imaginary one. However, perhaps less like religion, literature provides me with an imaginary world that is open and inexhaustible, always provoking me to consider different ways of thinking and being. Sometimes I feel located and comforted by a book; at other times profoundly dislocated and discomfited. However, I always feel intensely engaged with the world in which I live.

That sense of engagement with life is forged through the imaginative transactions with the world that books continually encourage me to make. The world, literature tells me as a reader, is not given; it is there for me to think about and to meaningfully, or playfully, re-create.

In *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, the writer Jeanette Winterson addresses how reading literature can be thrilling and confronting precisely because it is constantly changing us and challenging our hold on things. ‘Mostly,’ she writes, ‘we work hard at taming our … environment.’ Indeed, many people don’t read, or they read genre formats that won’t unsettle them with new patterns of meaning. However, for Winterson, symbolically endangering ourselves via imaginative experience is important. If we hide from the risks of literature, we risk letting a small body of stories, as Winterson puts it, rust into our flesh. If we read widely and boldly, we inhabit what Winterson memorably describes as ‘energetic space’.

That ‘energetic space’ is the space in which we, as readers, continually and creatively rethink our lives in the light of literature’s grappling with the human condition. If we, as readers, put the proverbial pen to paper, that ‘energetic space’ also gives rise to writing.

*Writing, thus conceived, is an intensely readerly activity. Yet there exists significant anxiety about the practice of writers reading. Contextualising creativity, acknowledging the powerful tradition
of literature out of which every writer writes, inspires fears of plagiarism and unoriginality.

The literary critic Harold Bloom famously gave expression to such concerns in *The Anxiety of Influence*, in which he represents writers struggling against their literary precursors to achieve independence. I don’t experience writing in this way, and I believe that an antagonistic position vis-à-vis literary predecessors is unnecessary, especially if one reads — to re-appropriate Winterson’s word — energetically.

It is also the case that each of us lives an individual life, so that a single book marks each of us differently. It is probably impossible to read — and write — the same piece of literature twice, as the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges comically suggests in ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’. In this short story, a fictional twentieth-century French author called Menard re-creates an identical, but also richer, version of Miguel de Cervantes’ classic seventeenth-century Spanish novel *Don Quixote*. After Borges, Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* portrays a character copying out parts of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

I have heard students profess that they avoid reading in order to maintain an original voice. Such a hostile stance to literary tradition is counterproductive. As the literary critic Mustapha Marrouchi argues, our reading, ‘from pre-school nursery rhymes to high school Shakespeare and university Milton provides us with the keys to nearly all the imaginative experience that it is possible for us to have in life’. Reading also provides us with the keys to imagining the unique experience of our lives. That is to say, reading the work of others ironically teaches us how we might write our own original stories.

* ‘Three Sisters’, most clearly in its title, explicitly acknowledges the ways in which I was mindful of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* when I
wrote my story – just as the lives of the three Brontë sisters are said to have been on Chekhov’s mind when he wrote his play. Chekhov’s text, as I have suggested, provided me with the vision necessary to identify my life experience of working in a roadhouse with three sisters as potential literature. It also provided a prevailing mood for my fictional transformation of the autobiographical material.

Chekhov’s play is marked by an exquisite sense of loneliness and nostalgia: the three sisters and other characters in Chekhov’s text constantly long for another time and place. Likewise, the three sisters in my story are displaced and foreign, although it is the other characters – the men who visit the roadhouse – who express their isolation and despair. Chekhov’s play provides the impression of seasonal change and an image of migrating birds, thereby suggesting a natural environment that is vast and free, as well as profoundly indifferent to the small and melancholy conditions of the characters’ lives. Similarly, my story draws attention to the inhuman environment – the tide, crickets, crabs, bird life – that continues outside the roadhouse, mindless of the pathetic human dramas played out inside. Indeed, staging events much like a play, my story insists that attention be paid to such things. Evoking pantomime, my story attempts to directly engage readers, prompting them to heed certain elements of each scene.

However, my story probably hinges most on a line delivered by the elderly doctor in Chekhov’s work: ‘Perhaps I’m not really a man, and am only pretending that I’ve got arms and legs and a head; perhaps I don’t exist at all, and only imagine that I walk, and eat, and sleep.’ It is a sentiment that has always stayed with me, in part because it coincides with similar sentiments absorbed from other texts – such as Shakespeare’s Macbeth (‘Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player’) or Beckett’s Waiting for Godot – which have collectively attuned me to the brevity and unreality of the lives we lead in the measureless and otherworldly context of time and space. There is something profoundly alien about us. This theme has become something of an obsession for me.
My story does not rehearse Chekhov’s play – and it was never in any danger of doing so. My life experience in late twentieth-century rural Australia was very different from Chekhov’s experience of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Russia. As an ‘energetic’ reader, my writing is also influenced by more than Chekhov’s play. It is inspired by literature that has long explored the human condition of melancholy estrangement, as well as by a haunting cross-cultural tradition that mobilises the mythic trope of the three sisters.

Nevertheless, without Chekhov’s play, would I have been inspired to conceptualise my prosaic experience of working in a roadhouse as the material for a short story? The answer is no. We write in an echo chamber, as fiction such as Borges’ and Calvino’s reminds us, reverberating with the stories of other writers that have come before us. And that’s okay. In fact, it provides the enriched experience of being alive that we, as readers and writers, look to literature for in the first place.
Bibliography


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