

‘Hidden’

and

‘Looking in a Broken Mirror:

Reflections on the Split Writer and the

Visual Artist Character’

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‘Looking in a Broken Mirror:
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Introduction: Breaking the Mirror

As for the artists who are also writers, they are doubles twice times over, for the mere act of writing splits the self in two.

Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, 32.

In *Negotiating with the Dead* Margaret Atwood writes about the idea of the writer as doubled, arguing that the person who exists in life, who drinks tea and feeds the dog, is somehow replaced during the act by the person who does the actual writing, the creator, as though these two people are separate individuals cohabiting the same body. “The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life, neither one thing nor the other, though at the same time she is all of these at once” (57).

Paul Auster refers to another form of doubling in *Hand to mouth*. “Most writers lead double lives,” he says. “They earn good money at legitimate professions and carve out time for their writing as best they can” (4). Helen

Garner says, "You've got two selves, I think. One of them's the deep one that can do the work, and the other one is constantly discouraging you and saying: Oh come off it! Who do you think you are?" ('Helen', 69). But the doubling is not just a matter of confidence or feeding one's self. Kevin Brophy talks about a myriad of different selves: "'I' is split and shared between a writing person, the figure of an author, a fictional character who is never quite fictional and a reader who can enter into the empty 'I' of a story" (*Creativity*, 161-2). Siri Hustvedt comments that "[t]he writing self is multiple and elastic" (*Plea*, 228).

In his short meditation 'Borges and I', Borges also addresses the idea that as a writer he is doubled. "The other one," he begins. "[T]he one called Borges, is the one things happen to" (1). This piece poses an interesting paradox. It is written from the perspective of the I who "walk[s] through the streets of Buenos Aires" (1), the non-writer, yet he is the one who has written the page. Hence his last sentence, "I do not know which of us has written this page" (1). These two sides of a writer are inseparable and symbiotic. Yet many writers seem to feel this distinct difference or separation between the two.

In an essay like the one you are now reading, a third I is added into the mix. We have the I who wrote (is writing) the creative part of this thesis, the I who patted the dog this morning, and the I who is writing this, the critical part of this PhD, the one who is supposed to, somehow, be an outsider, someone commenting on fiction rather than writing fiction. I find myself experiencing what Roland Barthes calls "the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical" (8). It is impossible to take the stand point of an outsider despite and because of our insights into this triangle of I-s. The position of critic is unreachable as all three I-s are impossible yet present, the

prongs of Schuster's Conundrum, the two or three pronged optical illusion that will never make visual sense. This is especially problematic when writers are talking about their own work, twisting themselves around, jumping between brains, wearing different hats.

For this essay I will face this philosophical illusion and split myself, again, in two. In my first chapter I will look at Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and the doubling that can occur when writing an artist character. In my second, I will consider the ways in which I have been split in writing my novel and look at other forms of doubling. This essay will "proceed with the spreading movement, horizontal and meandering, that the essay – a porous, conversational, sometimes moody creature – makes its own" (Modjeska, 20). I will explore the idea that an artist character can be used by an author to explore ideas about creativity and being an artist (a writer, visual artist or any other kind of artist). A novel is never about only one thing – it is multi-faceted – and the critical part of the creative writing thesis is only 20,000 words; it is after all a creative writing thesis. The problem is to choose a topic from many, something "narrow enough" for those 20,000 words, something "implicitly or explicitly related to the creative work, or the literary and/or cultural fields relevant to the creative work" (University of Adelaide, 9): hopefully something that will, in its turn, inform the creative work. My task is to find a topic that will explore ideas and issues in the creative work from a different angle. I have chosen to explore an issue I thought about, in different ways, before, during and after writing my novel, something that has informed my relationship with the novel. The writing of this exegesis has in turn reflected back on my novel and, I think, the result is a better novel. I cannot address every facet of the novel and my writing in this essay, so I have chosen to

explore the idea of the doubled writer, specifically in relation to the artist character.

Some writers express this doubling differently. Rather than feeling split or doubled, they talk of feeling like some sort of conduit for their art, as if it comes through them from somewhere else. Writer Elizabeth Gilbert, in her *Technology Entertainment Design* speech, speaks of an historical shift in the way creativity was thought of. Before the Renaissance, the common belief about artists was that they had a “divine attendant spirit that came to human beings from some distant and unknowable source for a distant and unknowable reason” called a *genius* in the Roman language or a *daemon* in the Greek. The artist put down on paper or canvas or instrument what was dictated to them by this genius. Of course, the artist had some part in the creation of their work but the success or failure of their product was only attributed partially to them. Creativity was seen as coming from the gods or somewhere equally mysterious. In the Renaissance this idea shifted and, rather than having a genius, people were Geniuses. “Creativity came completely from the self” (Gilbert). As Atwood says, the creative product “was self-expression – the expression of the self, of a man’s whole being – and if a man wrote works of genius, then he had to be a genius himself, all the time” (*Negotiating*, 52). This expectation is different from the artist’s experience and leads to conflict in the artist; the living part becomes a double, something separate from the art creating part. In Alex Miller’s *Prochownik’s Dream*, when Toni’s wife says, “I don’t know how you do that,” as she watches him working in his studio, he replies, “Me neither,” (149); his own artistic process and creation are a mystery to him. Similarly, Gilbert mentions Tom Waits asking a song to come back later when he has a chance write it down. Gilbert argues that this view of

people as Geniuses (rather than having them) is still the case today and that the weight of this responsibility is, perhaps, responsible for ‘madness’ in creative people. I would suggest, however, that the feeling of being a conduit is certainly endemic to artists themselves. Many artists express the idea that the creative side of themselves is not entirely connected to the other part of them: an idea of their art coming through them which leads to the feeling of having a double.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen in the light of this idea; Dorian Gray and his portrait show two sides of the one person: the genius and the one who is left. Dorian Gray’s life is his work of art, along with his “extraordinary personal beauty”(8), and the portrait of him an expression of this genius, although he didn’t paint this portrait himself. But while Dorian Gray lives a depraved and decadent life, his portrait grows more and more decrepit, taking on the sins or physical degradation of the man it depicts. In the end, the life and the art are integrally connected; they are one and the same yet separate. Through stabbing the painting Dorian kills himself. Artists cannot exist without their more banal living selves, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents the idea that the living self cannot exist without the artist side of the self.

Are these two sides always going to be separate, never to be reconciled? Are people who adopt pseudonyms just being honest about this doubling of self? Are they simply calling the living, eating self by one name and the creating self with books or art to their name by another? What of someone like Sylvia Plath who originally wrote *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, while the plot of the novel very closely echoes parts of the life that she lived? Did the pseudonym provide her with enough distance to write with lucidity about her lived life? Did it allow her to be “crazily, absurdly honest” as author Nikki

Gemmell claims writing anonymously did for her ('Identity', 297)? "With anonymity I'd entered this strange, liberating psychological state of secrecy: it was as if I were stepping out of my everyday self and becoming someone much braver and in control" (297). And there it is again, this idea of 'stepping out of everyday life', as though one has to become a 'someone else' in order to write.

Part of this doubling involves a denial or erasure of the body, of the hand that holds the pen, the fingers that tap the keypad. Novelist Siri Husdvedt comments that "In every book, the writer's body is missing, and this absence turns the page into a place where we are truly free to listen to the man or woman who is speaking" (*Plea*, 102-3). It can be a jarring experience if the reader is reminded of the physicality of the author, as writer Drusilla Modjeska comments, "As if the 'I' on the page should have known better than to let slip a messy reminder of the body that holds the pen. As if there weren't in any case gaps and fissures between that 'I', that body, that pen" (31-2).

Writers, perhaps also other artists, often have difficulty talking about their work, especially before they have finished it. They find it difficult to rationalise the metaphors they are working with and sometimes to explain their process or the nitty gritty of what happens when they sit down with a pen or keyboard.

I believe this comes back to the (more than) three-way split. It's as though there are two different modes of thinking: the rational and the creative. The analytical brain can work well when approaching other people's work; we have no problem seeing that X is a metaphor for Y or that the novel structurally echoes the triptych of paintings that occupy the character throughout Miller's novel, *Prochownik's dream*, but when applied to our own work we find ourselves stuck

in the marshes, unable to move. As Sue Woolfe says, “I am used to analysing the metaphors of other writers with reasonable competence. My own metaphors, particularly ones that enhance or exaggerate ordinary reality, are inaccessible to my analysis” (*Mystery*, 11). We often fear that the application of the rational brain on our own work will kill a project with the precision of a steel blade to the heart. Rationality is perhaps the creative’s kryptonite. Other people acknowledge this difference between types of writing: Sophie Cunningham says “My struggle as a non-fiction writer is to develop an intimate ‘I’ as a way of relating to my audience, without making all I write about me. My struggle as a fiction writer is to develop a style that is engaging without drawing attention to itself” (131). She is split, in this case, by the type of writing she is doing, fiction and non-fiction requiring different parts of herself to be effective.

The usual way to think of this division is in terms of the left and right brain. The left side is responsible for linear and analytical thinking, the right for intuitive and spatial thinking. However, as Artist and academic Charles Stroh points out, this is a little simplistic. Creative activities also use the left brain (formation of language, for example, predominantly uses the left brain, and if we are creative writers, words are the tools of our trade) and activities that traditionally aren’t considered creative, such as science or mathematics, or even writing an academic essay, use the right brain (personally, however, I think these areas are very creative). However, even without assigning a hemisphere to these modes of thinking, most people would agree that creative thinking and rational thinking are very different.

Sue Woolfe, in *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady*, explores the creative process, beginning the investigation because she was “baffled by her own creative

processes” (ix). I think it is telling that rather than examine her own process in relation to what she is working on (although she does refer back to her own process and writing) she turns instead to neuroscience, taking, in a way, an uncreative approach to the question of creativity, with traditional research forming the basis of her theories. I think this indicates the difficulty in approaching one’s own creativity, as Woolfe comes at the question side on, from a different angle to that from which she’d approach her actual creative work.

One way to approach this split is with the theory of loose and tight construing, which Woolfe outlines in *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady*. Tight construing can be likened to secondary processing which is oriented towards finding a solution to a problem. Loose construing is more like primary processing, which can involve a ‘defocusing’ of attention. “Openness and uncertainty prevail. Logical thought is slowed down. [...] Judgements are suspended. Self consciousness and self-censorship are minimised” (92). Creative insight seems to come from loose construing although tight construing comes later in the process. “The key seems to be to avoid tightly construing too early” (95).

Charles Stroh, claims that the theories of creativity that are generally accepted are variations on the theory that there are four stages of creative behaviour: *preparation*, which is a kind of research stage, where information is collected from experience and other sources, and stored for later retrieval; *incubation*, in which this collected research “float[s] free without any specific attempts to organize it or apply it” (73); *illumination*, when new ideas form or solutions are found; and *verification*, which “involves the modification, adaption, and synthesis of the three prior stages” and the actual creation of the object (73). I think that in a larger project such as writing a novel, it is necessary to move

between these stages throughout the process. I'll make an example of some of the scenes from my novel that are set in Barcelona.

Preparation before I travelled to Barcelona involved looking at books about Gaudí, travel guides, friends' photos, books about art, novels set in Barcelona, books about Barcelona, travellers' websites, and more official tourism websites. It also involved a type of research that is harder to pin down and put into words, involving the story's and the characters' personal links to Barcelona and travel. The movement between these two types of research happens in the *incubation* stage. For me, the *illumination* stage included, for example, seeing the scene in which Clement finds out about Hannah's relapse. I wrote this scene and others before I left for Barcelona, entering *verification* stage. Arriving in the city itself sent me back to *preparation* stage, gathering sensual information about the city and architecture, as well as details and further information about, for example, Gaudí. While there I continued to write as well as returning to scenes already written and 'correcting' them.

I think it is necessary to move between these four stages in this way, and at times occupy more than one at once. I would suggest that loose construing occurs in all four of these stages and that tight construing enters at the last stage: *verification*. There is a danger that if construing tightens in any of the earlier stages the project will grind to a halt. Perhaps one way of moving past 'writer's block' is to go back to the first stage: reading and researching without moving into the *verification* stage. Once there is a full draft, tight construing – the arrangement and development of themes and ideas – can be entered into without the risk of putting a stop to the other important stages of creativity. Brophy, when talking about Max Ernst's creative process says, "Do it first and see it later. Do it first and

discover it later. Do it first and understand it later. Perhaps not good advice for life or politics or economics, but important for an artist” (*Explorations*, 121), showing the importance of not construing too tightly, too early.

A lot of what happens during these stages is unconscious. I think that is the key to loose construing: letting your unconscious do what it needs to do. As Winnie-the-Pooh says when writing a song, “I shall sing that first line twice, and perhaps if I sing it very quickly, I shall find myself singing the third and fourth lines before I have time to think of them” (Milne, 109). This is also linked to the feeling of being a conduit. Because one doesn’t (can’t) examine the source of what is being created at the same time as creating it, it feels as though it is coming from somewhere else.

Tight construing is what is required in writing an essay such as an exegesis. Atwood comments in an interview with Geoff Hancock: “I don’t think any writer can be in a state of creation and in a state of contemplation about that creation at one and the same moment. If they try to do that, they would certainly interrupt their concentration. Or [...] whatever you call that place we go to when we write, a place that is not the same as analytical thought.” (270-1). You can’t think objectively about what you are creating at the same time as you are creating it. You can’t construe both loosely and tightly at the same time. This is one of the difficulties of writing an exegetical essay: you need to find a way around this problem, a way to use both languages: the critical and the expressive.

In Alex Miller’s *The Sitters*, the narrator shows this inability to share work in progress in his reaction to someone wanting to see his sketches for a likeness. “I can feel how closed my features have become. Not that I mean to be this

closed. It's just the way I am. It's being an artist that's done it. Keeping things to myself in case they lose their charge. So I close off. Especially when I'm working. I can't help it. I wish I could be light and open and friendly. But I can't do that."

(22) He fears that the project will "lose charge" if he is asked to change or even examine his thinking about it (shift into tight construing). He fears this because of experience.

How can we explore our work and creativity without losing the charge of our projects? One way, I think, in which a writer can explore creativity is through writing about a character who is an artist. Atwood acknowledges this in compiling a list of reasons people write, gathering them "also from the words of fictional writers – all written of course by writers – though these are sometimes disguised in works of fiction as painters or composers or other artistic folk" (*Negotiating*, xx). This doubling is true also from a critic's point of view, "[a]s a *kunstlerroman*, the novel [*Cat's Eye*] seems to license a double substitution: for painter, read writer; for writer, read writer of this novel" (Hite, 135). However, this could also lead to the character being read as the author. Many writers get frustrated with critics, theorists and readers identifying their character as the author. Atwood complains that "[r]eaders and critics both are still addicted to the concept of self-expression... the notion that everything you write *must* be based on personal experience. *Must*, because those making this assumption have no belief in the imagination" ('An End', 342). Like Atwood, I don't believe everything writers write is about their lives or their friends' lives. Nor am I suggesting that the author is not present in any way within the work. I think they are, but in a transformed or altered way. Hustvedt wrote about the link between memory and invention in relation to setting a novel in her home town. She found

that she moved landmarks and shops around and created people to live there: “The collapsing and shifting of that known landscape came about because it ‘felt right’” (*Plea*, 40). It’s as though there is a truth within the fiction that she had to remain faithful to, as if the changes to what we’d call ‘reality’ were dictated by the reality within the novel, a world transformed into something different yet the same, a double of itself. “Fiction exists in the borderland between dream and memory” (41); there is always something of memory in it, even if it is memory of stories, memories of other people’s experiences. As Atwood goes on to say, “Of course all writing is based on personal experience, but personal experience is experience – wherever it comes from – that you identify with, *imagine* if you like, so that it becomes personal to you” (‘An End’, 342).

According to Atwood writing “is opening yourself, discarding your *self*, so that the language and the world may be evoked through you. *Evocation* is quite different from *expression*. Because we are so fixated on the latter, we forget that writing also does the former. Maybe the writer *expresses*; but *evocation*, calling up, is what writing does for the reader” (‘An End’, 348). It comes from you and through you. The writer finds herself spilt in her roles as expresser and evoker. Perhaps this is part of what Atwood is referring to when she speaks of split writers: the way that the author is and isn’t her words, her character is and isn’t her, the story is and isn’t hers.

I believe that one important part of examining creativity through fiction, through loose construing, is that it may allow for insights unavailable through traditional forms of research. Loose construing allows for broader imaginative links. Woolf mentions an experiment in which people were asked for words associated with the word ‘table’. The people who were able to construe loosely

mentioned the same words as those construing tightly but also went further, mentioning more abstract words where the connection wasn't as obvious such as ocean (*Mystery*, 90). Similarly, examining creativity in fiction may lead to new or different insights unreachable through more traditional examination. Also, removing the self from the examination (and replacing it with a character) may allow for insights that we'd be more resistant to if we were to identify with them ourselves, especially if we wanted to see ourselves in a certain light, and were unwilling to move out of that paradigm.

Another facet of the creator's relationship to their art is the manner in which their art moulds them. Writer and academic Inez Baranay says "it became clear to me that my self and my life were shaped – created or written – by what I was writing to at least the same extent that I, or what I could call my 'self', was shaping or creating the text" ('It's the Other', 1). She talks of how the decisions she made in her life, especially on the trip she took to India to undertake research for her novel *Neem Dreams*, were shaped by the novel itself: the way she lived her day to day life was informed by her novel. "To create character, it's as if you let your thoughts and dreams be colonised by them," (3) it's as if you have to become your characters to write them – does that mean they are you? The writer here is split again between self and character, like Alice at the moment of passing through the mirror: both self and character, but neither at the same time.

Writing is an intensely personal occupation. In an interview with Ramona Koval, Alex Miller says, "With every artist and writer I know, the process of knowing yourself through your work has been critical," ('Prochownik's', 6). I don't think he's suggesting that writing is some sort of self discovery process, but

more that you know yourself in relation to your work. You see yourself – split or otherwise – and your work, and looking at them both is critical to the work.

I am not arguing that the author is hidden in the text, that an author must be their character, but that writing about a visual artist, or indeed any other kind of artist, can be a way to explore notions of creativity, the creative process, and how an artist fits into and relates to the non-art world. (For artist read writer, for writer read this writer.)

Novelist A. S. Byatt points out that “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is of course also a Portrait of the Artist, who was Oscar Wilde. All three main characters have large elements of Wilde in them, Dorian’s aesthetic detachment, Lord Henry’s cynicism, Basil Hallward’s gentle love for the younger man” (64). And Wilde himself writes (in Basil’s voice) “every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (13). We could argue that every story written with feeling is a story of the writer. In the same way as it is not the artist’s face you see on the canvas, yet Basil fears the secret of his soul lies bare in its surface, a story may not be about a writer, the writer may not be any of the characters in the story, but there is something of their essence in the story, something of their soul.

Novels about artists can also examine the slippery relationship between creator and created. They often consider the idea of visibility: “who sees and is seen [... and] the seeing that is the precondition and product of art” (Hite, 136).

The person being looked at in the case of portraits is the model, although it is not as simple as that, as is shown by Basil Hallward's feeling that the painting reveals him, rather than Dorian Gray. He feels that the portrait makes him visible.

Drusilla Modjeska writes in *The Orchard*: "painting has, however, everything to do with sight: with seeing, with being seen, wanting to be seen; and with not being seen" (135). Where Basil is made visible, Dorian is hidden, in a way, by the existence of the portrait. The ravages of age and depravity show themselves only on the portrait, not on the man himself, and the portrait is only seen by three people. Some essential part of himself is hidden from the world by the portrait. It is his human-ness: the passage of time and marks of life that show on the portrait and not on his body. Academic Elana Gomel comments that when he first sees the portrait he sees an ideal self, and "[t]he portrait becomes the real, physical Dorian, while Prince Charming is the image passing itself off as the man" (83). In the end Dorian "hates both what he was and what he has become" (84), both the portrait and what it reflects back at him. Even if a work is not based on a specific individual it has a complex relationship with the reality it reflects. As Byatt says: "Nothing has only one original in a fiction" (5). The models are many and varied for a single piece of fiction. Even though fiction is not a portrait of the artist, or a portrait of their world, or a portrait of a model, its relationship with these things is complex. As Gomel says, "Art both is and is not life; writer both is and is not (in) the text" (87).

Janette Turner Hospital looks at this relationship between art and life in her novel *Borderline*. Jean-Marc, the son of the artist, is the narrator, the person who creates and tells us the story. His story revolves around Felicity who was his father, Seymour's, lover and model. She is a model twice over – for Jean-Marc's

story and for his father's paintings. Jean-Marc is, as White says of fictional artists, "a product as well as a creator of art" (*Studio*, 14). In turn he creates his father who is also product and creator in one. Turner Hospital says that "central also to the novel is an inquiry into the nature of art and the artist, the nature of the creative process, the nature of narrative" ('Letter', 562). Jean-Marc includes in his story things he couldn't possibly know: dreams, thoughts, events and conversations for which he was not present. He acknowledges that he imagines parts of the story "I temper, I stretch, I embroider" (189) and is aware that the Felicity he writes may not be accurate. He and his father are in fact doing a similar thing: claiming to have invented Felicity, claiming some authorship over her existence. "In a catalogue, below one of Seymour's portraits, she read: The woman is not real. She is an idealization, an embodiment of the painter's fantasies" (17). Later, Felicity asks Seymour why he had said that: "[W]ere you claiming to have invented me? Implying that outside of your paintings I was... insubstantial?" (17). Seymour goes even further. When Felicity comments "My entire history. Nobody believes it's real," he says, "Anything's real once I've painted it" (22). This is reminiscent of Barthes when he says "I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice" (11). The subject of a painting is created by the act of being painted. Their attention is brought to their physical existence, their objectivity, through being looked at. They create their bodies through posing for the artist, and then the artist creates them through the depiction of their bodies on the canvas. In *Borderline* Jean-Marc comments that, "I have to admit, there has always been a quality of absence about her" (18), showing that he too believes more in the Felicity he has created than the one of flesh and blood (or should that be paper and ink?). He also argues against the Felicity his father portrays: "The

whirlwind of tropical colours around her unmistakable lopsided eyes? I can assure you: This is not Felicity” (16). Just as he creates Felicity, Jean-Marc creates his father in his text. His artist father only exists in this portrait of him: “your paintings only live in my chapters” (287). The artist is a work of art. Turner Hospital suggests that her novel *Borderline* examines ideas around creation and creativity, and seems to make a case for the unreliability of all representations. Perhaps our only possible path is “steering for the essential [truth] rather than the merely literal” (189) although this narrative leads us to question even that. As Roberta White comments, “the rendering of paintings in novels makes us aware of the tentativeness of all art, of all ‘takes’ on the world” (*Studio*, 21).

Unlike Turner Hospital’s Felicity who objects to Seymour’s claims that he is “making her real” (but isn’t given a chance to object to Jean-Marc’s), Frances in Sue Woolfe’s *Painted Woman* feels herself to be made real, first by her artist father, and then by her boyfriend. Her father murdered her mother and is abusive and Frances is disembodied for much of the narrative, “I remember, I watch myself remembering, I get sleepy, I watch myself getting sleepy” (61). She grows up isolated and very dependent on and in awe of her father. “I would have seen he’d created her in my mind, just as he’d created her in his own, just as he’d created me” (45). When she is older and has a lover, she says of her lover, “[before] there’d only been tatters of me, scattered, unknowing, he’d formed me” (120). It is as though she feels she’s been imagined into being by her father and then given a body by her lover. Her ultimate desire is to be her father’s amanuensis, to be one with him. In the end, through discovering her own artistic voice, she frees herself from her creator; through becoming an artist she creates her self.

Similarly, in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Elaine's painting teacher, Joseph, tells her in his Eastern European accent that she is an "unfinished woman [...] here you will be finished" (273), meaning that he has the power to complete her. He means, partially, through a sexual relationship with him, but also through her learning how to draw life rather than objects, with passion. In her typically wry style, Elaine comments that "He doesn't know that *finished* means over and done with" (273), but there is some truth in what he says, as through her paintings she subconsciously examines her life and comes to some sort of reconciliation with her past. In both of these cases it is as though the act of creating opens up a sort of imaginative space for the artists to be created themselves, not by someone else but by themselves.

The meaning of art is always splintered. By concentrating on the art and artist character aspect of a novel I am looking past the many other things it may be about. The meaning of art within fiction is also splintered, but often we are guided to read it in relation to the artist's life; in relation to the story and context we "see" the art. Perhaps, then, it is misguided to highlight this link between the fictional character and their fictional art in relation to the real-life artist (the writer) and their art (the story or novel). We are not given life-as-context in which to 'read' the story. The work stands alone in a way the fictional art cannot. But I think it is reasonable to look at novels about artists as novels that look at creativity.

In this world of splits and doubles there is another that we cannot forget: the reader. Gomel asks of the portrait of Dorian Gray, "Whose true image is it: the painter's, who puts the colors on the canvass; the model's, who lends his beauty; or the connoisseur's, who interprets and thus completes what he sees?" (81). As Brophy has said, the reader enters the "empty 'I' of a story" (*Creativity*, 162).

Without the reader, the novel is incomplete. Margaret Atwood would agree: “Every time someone reads a book, a new book is being created in the reader’s head. Reading is a creative activity” (‘Conversation’, 178). This is especially so in novels in which the reader is asked to “envision with the mind’s eye an aesthetic visual arrangement attributed not to the writer but to the painter, herself a construct of words” (White, *Studio*, 21). The visual artworks within a novel are only seen by fictional characters, and the reader is asked to imagine these works of art, becoming the creator themselves.

The relationships between artist and artwork (and viewer) are complex and convoluted. I will be exploring the relationship between the artist character and the author (or, if you like, the art and the artist). Rather than trying to unite the multiple sides of my writing self I will write two chapters. In the first I will not refer explicitly to my own work. I will explore representations of artist characters as explorations of how artists fit into and relate to the world, looking specifically at Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*. I will then take a more personal perspective on this form of doubling in my own work and process.

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: Reflections of the Artist

But are not all our images subconsciously images of ourselves?

Alex Miller, *The Artist as Magician*, 43.

In Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* the protagonist Elaine Risley returns to Toronto, the city of her childhood and early adulthood, for a retrospective of her art. She says, "I don't like admitting I'm old enough and established enough to have such a thing [as a retrospective...] I find it improbable, and ominous" (15-16). The novel itself is also a kind of retrospective. Being back in Toronto reminds Elaine of her time there and we are told her life story through a series of flashbacks interspersed with her present experiences preparing for the opening of the retrospective. In this way the novel examines the relationship between her life and the art that is shown in the retrospective. Throughout the novel Elaine describes her art and it is juxtaposed with both her current experience and her memories of her past. Although artist characters are common in post modern

novels and Atwood is writing in this atmosphere, I'm not approaching this novel from that perspective.

Roberta White comments that “there are interesting consonances and resonances between Atwood’s verbal art and Elaine’s visual art, although one cannot say with any certainty that Atwood’s writing is animated as much by resentment and grief as Elaine’s art is” (*Studio*, 158). People often point out, for example, that *Cat’s Eye* is Atwood’s most autobiographical work (Hite, 135; White, ‘Reflections’, 61; White, *Studio*, 158). The similarities between Atwood’s life and her character, Elaine’s, are striking. Both spent their early childhoods in Northern Canadian Forests with their entomologist fathers, their mothers and their only brothers. When Atwood’s family moved to the city Atwood felt that “little girls were almost an alien species” as she says in *Negotiating With the Dead* (10). Atwood’s character Elaine, on her family’s move into the city, felt that she wanted “some friends, friends who will be girls. Girl friends. I know that these exist, having read about them in books, but I’ve never had any girl friends...” (*Cat’s Eye*, 28). She declares, “I’m not used to girls, or familiar with their customs” (47). Yet, Atwood is not Elaine. I believe Atwood has written about Elaine, an artist, in order to explore ideas about creativity, that she has chosen to write about a visual artist partly to explore the relationship between the art and the life of the artist.

The common (but not mandatory) disclaimer in the front of novels often insists that the novel is a work of fiction, that the characters are products of the author’s imagination, and that any resemblance to real or actual people (living or dead) is a coincidence. In *Cat’s Eye*, whoever wrote the disclaimer (the author? The lawyers? The publisher?) seems to go a step further. Along with the usual

claims, they say: “Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. Space and time have been rearranged to suit the convenience of the book.” Do we wonder who that ‘auto’ is referring to? The book is written in first person, as if someone (Elaine) is talking about her own life. It is her biography, narrated by herself: an autobiography. Yet we all know Atwood is the one who actually wrote it. What of the rearrangement of space and time? Does that indicate that time past and space present have been collapsed and shifted, to borrow Hustvedt’s words (*Plea*, 40), to create the fiction? Is this an admission of the link between the lives of the author and the character? (Would this line of questioning make Atwood groan and throw this paper across the room?) If it’s just lawyer-speak, why does it sound somehow like Atwood’s voice?

This doubling of the artist’s life and their work is echoed in Elaine’s own art. The stories of her life and her paintings are inextricably linked. Not only do characters from her life appear in her paintings but the paintings are about the way she relates to the world. Subconsciously, her art is partly about the torture she suffered as a child at the hands of her so-called friends. As Atwood herself wrote in a letter to a friend, “everyone has neuroses granted, but the artist has a way of working them out (his art) not available to those who ain’t, the latter have to work them out in their lives” (Cooke, 16). She goes on to say that “[t]hat’s probably a lot of crap” and admits that “not all art is sublimated neurosis” (17) but there is something in what she says. When the character Elaine starts painting outside a learning environment, she finds herself painting old domestic objects from her childhood: a wringer washer, a toaster, sofas. “They arrive detached from any context,” she says (337). She knows that they must be memories but says, “I have no image of myself in relation to them. They are suffused with anxiety, but it’s

not my own anxiety” (337). These objects are from her childhood, when she used the excuse of having to help her mother to avoid having to go out and ‘play’ with her friends (119). She says: “I’ve been told to be very careful when doing this: women can get their hand caught in wringers. [...] A whole person could go through the wringer and come out flat, neat, completed, like a flower pressed in a book” (122-3). She has blocked the memory of this time and so does not connect the anxiety of the objects she paints with her own anxiety from that time or the anxiety that is still with her about being a misfit, about not knowing the rules and so being somehow wrong. Her inability to picture herself in relation to these objects shows her disconnection from these memories as well as representing the coping mechanism she developed during that time: she learnt how to “slip sideways, out of my body, and I’m somewhere else” (173).

She starts painting portraits of Mrs Smeath, the mother of one of her friends who, as Roberta White puts it, “openly countenances the other children’s cruelty to ‘heathenish’ Elaine” (‘Reflections’, 63). She paints Mrs Smeath over and over again in various demeaning postures: “Mrs Smeath in metamorphosis, from frame to frame, naked, exposed and desecrated” (353). She says, “It’s still a mystery to me, why I hate her so much” (352). Like the anxious objects, Mrs Smeath represents the part of her life she refuses to remember. But through doing these paintings something shifts and after a while she moves on to paint other things. It’s as though her art moves through her subconscious, moving deeper with each ‘period’, from the anxious inanimate objects (337), to Mrs Smeath, to her five most recent paintings.

These paintings of Mrs Smeath also satisfy Elaine’s desire for revenge. While teaching a creative writing class, Atwood asked her students why they

wanted to become writers (she also asked them why they want to write, but that is a different question altogether). “What about [...] the desire for revenge and the wish to be important?” she asked (‘An End’, 343). Elaine degrades Mrs Smeath on her canvases. She depicts her half naked, copulating with her husband like a beetle, with a heart “reptilian, dark red, diseased” (*Cat’s Eye*, 352). She’s punishing Mrs Smeath who, at the time of the torture, had “known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it serves me right” (180). When Elaine exhibits one of the paintings in a group exhibition and it provokes a woman, who she thinks is Mrs Smeath’s daughter Grace, to throw ink on it, she thinks, “I have gone way too far. [...] I am aghast, and deeply satisfied. She is making a spectacle of herself, at last, and I am in control” (353). Later, after she has remembered the details of her childhood, and partially ‘worked out’ her neuroses, Elaine tries to look at it from Mrs Smeath’s perspective: “I laboured on [the painting], with, I now see, considerable malice. [...] I have not done [her] justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance” (404-5).

One of Elaine’s five latest paintings, itself called *Cat’s Eye*, is a “self portrait, of sorts” (407). It shows the top half of her head, as she is now. Behind her a mirror reflects the back of her head, “but the hair is different, younger” (408), and three girls – her bully-friends – walking towards her. This painting can be seen as a kind of acknowledgement of the link between Elaine’s artist-self and her past. The person she is now is looking back towards her past, as she has done through her whole painting career, consciously or not. The girls approaching her may be grown up like her but in the reflection they are all trapped in their old dynamic. In a way Elaine is still trapped in this world because her fear of being punished for breaking unknown rules is still with her, but she is no longer

powerless. She is the one in control of what is shown and seen. She is in control of the rules that govern her paintings. "I didn't like being looked at from behind: it was a view over which I had no control" (294). In her paintings Elaine can control the view. However, she is not in control of how other people look at her paintings.

White says that "[f]or Margaret Atwood, the arts are a strategy for survival; writing is both necessary and dangerous" (*Studio*, 152). Painting is also dangerous and necessary for Elaine.

For Elaine, the time of her life in which she was in most danger was the time when she was being teased by her friends as a child. Their judgement has affected her throughout her life. They had systematically punished her for everything that she did. Cruelly, they found fault with her no matter how she behaved. Elaine says, "I am just not measuring up, although they are giving me every chance. I will have to do better. But better at what?" (117). Because the reasons for her punishments are never clear, Elaine develops a fear of all social conventions. When going to a play she comments, "I ought to be excited. Instead I am filled with dread, because I know nothing of the etiquette of play-going and I'm sure I'll do something wrong" (127). And later she admits "I see that there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way" (138). It is this danger that surfaces when she starts painting. When someone attacks her at the early exhibition, she says, "I am afraid of her. Not of anything she could do to me, but of her judgement" (353). Even as an adult Elaine is haunted by these feelings of inadequacy: "There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my wrongness, awkwardness, weakness" (419).

Painting, for the character Elaine, is dangerous because of what she might expose about herself in art. There is something threatening about exposing your soul. You can't control what people see or think, just as Elaine can't control how she is seen from behind. As Oscar Wilde's artist character Basil Howard says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* while talking about his portrait in the title, "without intending it, I have put into [the painting] some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry [...] and I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes" (20). Elaine says, in a promotional interview for her forthcoming retrospective, "I feel as if I'm at the dentist, mouth gracelessly open while some stranger with a light and mirror gazes down my throat at something I can't see" (89). The something that she can't see may be one of the inexplicable things for which she was punished. Once her paintings are in the public eye she can't control what they mean to people. This makes her want to destroy them, as though destroying the evidence of her wrongdoings. "A leaky ceiling, a match and some kerosene would finish all this off. Why does this thought present itself to me, not as a fear but as a temptation? Because I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean" (409).

As White says, art is also necessary. Although I don't think you can talk simply about causes for suicide attempts, there are a myriad of contributions to Elaine's. Her marriage is unpleasant, she's depressed and "can't think about painting" (372). "Whatever is happening to me is my own fault. I have done something wrong, something so huge I can't even see it, something that's drowning me. I am inadequate and stupid, without worth" (372). This suicide attempt motivates her to leave her husband and the city of Toronto. In Vancouver: "Gradually I grow back, into my hands. I take to getting up early in the morning,

before Sarah is awake, to paint” (377). Painting is more therapeutic to her than the psychiatrist she goes to for a short time.

Elaine also finds painting is necessary in other ways. When her mother dies, she creates six panels, the top three showing her mother first in coloured pencil, then as a collage and then in white pipe cleaners on a white cloth background. For the bottom three she uses the same media but in reverse. The first image and the last (the two in coloured pencil) show her mother first in their kitchen in the city, and then cooking over an outdoor fire. As White says, Elaine’s parents “have twice abandoned her, most obviously by dying [...] and less obviously by [...] her mother’s mute bafflement in the face of Elaine’s torment” (*Studio*, 171). This painting is the way Elaine grieves for her mother, while acknowledging her complex feelings about her. Her mother rematerializes where Elaine was safer and their family more cohesive: in the forests in which Elaine spent her childhood. Elaine herself acknowledges, “I suppose I wanted to bring her back to life. I suppose I wanted her timeless” (151). It’s as though through making her mother fade out (from colour to white on white) Elaine is acknowledging her mother’s helplessness in the face of what was happening to Elaine. In making her re-materialise from the pipe cleaners Elaine is trying bring her back to life and trying to make her present to what happened all those years ago. “She must have realized what was happening to me” she says. “What would I have done if I had been my mother?” (150). Also, after the death of her brother, she paints a kind of tribute to him: “This is the kind of thing we do, to assuage pain” (407). Painting has become her way of responding to the world. Rather than hardening herself like a cat’s eye marble or “spend[ing] time outside my body” (173) she paints and experiences her grief in painting.

Through painting Elaine comes to some sort of resolution with her past. Even though she doesn't know why her "gut clenches in fear; then there's that rancid hate, flashing up in an instant" (352) upon seeing Mrs Smeath she still paints her and eventually she sees something else in her paintings of Mrs Smeath. "I used to think these were self righteous eyes [...] but they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty" (405). Through Elaine's painting career things shift and she comes to some sort of reconciliation with her past. Painting provides her with a mirror of her life, or a lens through which to look at her life.

At one stage of Elaine's career she is fascinated by reflective surfaces and especially with Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*, which shows, in the background, a convex mirror in which the artist himself can be seen, although he is not painting or in front of an easel (327). Most of Elaine's paintings can be seen as reflective surfaces: they reflect her life, but like the mirror in her painting *Cat's Eye* and the mirror in *The Arnolfini Marriage*, we cannot know which truth they reflect. What they reflect is both her life and not her life, as for Alice in Wonderland at the moment of passing through the mirror.

When Elaine is looking at the triptych she has painted of her brother who was killed by terrorists, she comments: "This is the kind of thing we do, to assuage pain" (407). She has depicted her brother, a World War Two aeroplane and a moth, but the triptych is also a portrait of her pain and grief at the loss of her brother. This connection to its meaning is doubled, the personal meaning hidden from the other characters in the book. Elaine says that Charna, who has written the exhibition notes, "thinks it's a statement about men, and the juvenile nature of war" (407). In the same way, a story (a novel) may be "the kind of thing we do",

yet this personal meaning can be hidden from the reader, the story doubled.

Indeed, this potential personal meaning is perhaps better hidden from the reader.

As Oscar Wilde writes in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim”. The artist is in the art, their job is to try and conceal that fact.

The exact nature of Atwood’s connection to her own work may be hidden from us. *Cat’s Eye* is not an autobiography, but it may well depict Atwood’s own path to becoming an artist. It may explore her own ideas about creativity and the creative life and it may explore her relationship to her art through exploring Elaine’s relationship to her paintings. I believe that writing about an artist character is a useful way to step past this split self and examine what it means to be an artist. Writing about fictional creativity can be a way to explore your own creativity.

Roland Barthes’ theory of *punctum* and *studium* can be applied in an interesting way to Elaine’s and Charna’s differing relationships to Elaine’s paintings, as well as Atwood’s and the reader’s differing relationship to the novel *Cat’s Eye*. This theory is based only on photographs, so parts don’t apply here, particularly the way a photograph represents a specific moment in time and as such contains allusions to death or time passing. The day, time, light, person, object in the photograph has passed. The moment will never be again. Paintings, on the other hand, do not refer to a specific moment. A portrait may be a constructed image. The person may be constructed from drawings, placed in a different setting, have bits and pieces from different people inspire the different body parts, as in Joyce Carey’s *Horse’s Mouth*. A. S. Byatt wrote, “Nothing has only one original in a fiction” (5). Alex Miller’s character in *The Sitters* says,

“Portraiture is the art of misrepresentation. [...] You’ve got to reach into the dark and touch something [other than likeness]. The problem is always to visualise the person. Portraiture is an act of faith” (38). Works of fiction are more like paintings than photographs. They can be constructed out of bits and pieces of life, created entirely, or copy the author’s view of the world quite accurately. “[I]t’s the shy beast you’re after not the mask” (38-9), Miller’s character insists. Photographs can also show both the shy beast and the mask, but paintings and works of fiction do not contain the fatality that Barthes talks about in relation to the photograph.

Studium is a basic level of interest in a photograph. It is liking or disliking it, rather than loving or hating it (Barthes, 27). “To recognise the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers” (27-8). It’s engaging with the photograph in a non-personal way. Barthes found himself reacting differently to a particular photo of his mother, other photos “provoking only [his mother’s] identity, not her truth” (71). *Punctum* is what ‘pricks’ the *studium* of a photograph to give it specific meaning to the viewer; it “bruises me, is poignant to me” (27). It is the detail that makes your heart ache or joy soar in your heart. It is the thing that made Barthes’ mother present for him when he looked at that specific photo.

“However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic” (45). The *punctum* has personal meaning and so can expand out into the world of the viewer; the links bounce back and forth between the image and the personal elements. Elaine, when looking at her paintings, wants to “take an Exacto knife to

them, torch them, clear the walls” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*, 86). This emotion rises in her because of the *punctum* in the paintings: they remind her of her sense of inadequacy, they remind her of her sense of self, yet this inadequacy, this sense of self, is layered onto the painting – both what is there and what is not there. “Last thing about the *punctum*: whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*” (Barthes, 55).

Someone else, Charna for example, may not be affected in the same way (may not feel the *punctum*), they may be pricked in a different way as with the ink-thrower, but *punctum*, by nature, is personal. Charna engages with Elaine’s paintings on the level of *studium*. Yet you don’t have to be the artist to be pricked by something; the woman who throws ink on one of the canvases reacts because, for her, there is *punctum* in the painting: something that pricks her and causes her anger and hurt. Whatever it is that pricked her in the work was what she saw on the canvas in front of her, yet at the same time the painting itself wasn’t personal to her. The detail that provoked her was a substitute for whatever it was that was personal that caused the reaction. Here too the rational is separated from the emotional. Intellectual comment belongs to *studium* (Barthes, 45). Charna’s exhibition notes are evidence that she is not pricked by these paintings.

Charna’s interpretations are not any less valid than the reader’s. Just as the fact that Charna is ‘seeing’ the work while the reader can only ‘see’ it in their imagination doesn’t make their understanding of the paintings less valid. As intellectual comment Charna’s interpretations can only belong to *studium*; they cannot happen in the irrational place that *punctum*, emotions and creativity occur.

“What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (Barthes, 51). The thing that pricks the viewer is something that penetrates into their life (and penetrates the art from their life), or it is something that they “identify with, *imagine* if you like, so that it becomes personal to [them]” (Atwood, ‘An End’, 342). What part of it is *punctum* is difficult to give words to, just as it is often difficult to give words to parts of the creative process or *what it is you’re actually trying to do* in a work of fiction.

The reader is given insight into Elaine’s paintings that Charna doesn’t have. And like Charna, the reader does not have the insight into Atwood to provide an extra dimension when reading the text. I do not believe this is to the detriment of the novel, but the meaning of the work will be different for Atwood and for me. In the same way as there are these different reactions to Elaine’s art, there will be many different reactions to *Cat’s Eye*. What is *punctum* for me may not be *punctum* for you. What pricked Atwood while writing the novel may not prick me while reading it. And if a reader does find *punctum* in the novel, then that relationship becomes personal to them. We can never know what details are *punctum* for Atwood yet I have no doubt that while she may have imagined (invented) the novel, it is personal to her (identified with, *imagined*).

I think the ineffability of *punctum* is related to the ineffability of the creative process. The emotional reaction is deeper than words, just as the creative process is deeper than words. In retrospect, a writer may be able to see why they reacted to an image a certain way or why a character had to go to the toilet in front of the other, but at the time of feeling or writing this can remain a mystery.

Elaine's reactions to what people say of her work are similar to what Atwood says about different interpretations of her work. Elaine is dismissive about Charna's exhibition notes. "If I hold my breath and squint, I can see where she gets that" (406), she says, reading one of the descriptions. "'Early forays by Risely into the realm of female symbolism and the charismatic nature of domestic objects' says Charna. In other words, the toaster, the coffee percolator, my mother's wringer washer" (404). Remembering the reactions to her painting of her mother, she says, "some people thought it was about the Earth Goddess, which I found hilarious in view of my mother's dislike of housework" (151). Similarly, as an author Atwood seems somewhat bemused by some of the ways her work is read. When Hancock asks her to respond to a quote from an academic about her work, she says, "I probably do them that way because I get bored" (281), and responding to another quote she says, "I'll buy that. I'll endorse that one! I've got to endorse something in this interview" (281). Of the scholarly work on her writing she says, "None of it has much of an impact on me, to tell the truth" (282). She avoids reading much of it and it is as though it exists in a different sphere to fiction. Like her character Elaine, Atwood is unwilling to take the criticism too seriously and lets readers think what they want about her work.

These academic and scholarly readings would be *studium*. *Punctum* is by definition personal but *studium* can also vary individual to individual. In the case of art in a novel we, the readers, are guided as to how to interpret the work of art. We may still have varying 'readings' but are commonly guided to read the art in relation to the artist's life. The juxtaposition of the art next to the story encourages us to read them together, as Toni's installation deepens our understanding of his relationship with his father in Alex Miller's *Prochownik's Dream* or Clara's

revised painting of an eye shows us how the different generations of women have different choices (or perhaps the naivety of youth) in Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*. The ekphrastic passages often illuminate an element of the character's life or story, adding to the symbology or deepening a theme. If the art work itself wasn't important to the story or characters then why would there be a description of it? Ekphrasis is an attempt to provide the detail that will prick the reader, or at least show the detail that has pricked the artist.

I'll return for a moment to the quote from Barthes, "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (51). In a way it is this disturbance that drives the writer or painter to write about or paint a subject. It is only what *has become personal* to them that they are driven to investigate. This disturbance can be likened to the spark the narrator in Alex Miller's *The Sitters* feels drives his work. Elaine's unremembered past is what drives her to paint the subjects of her paintings, the anxious toaster (337), Mrs Smeath who "floats up without warning, like a dead fish, materializing on a sofa I am drawing" (338). These things prick her. She can't name what they mean to her, she doesn't even identify with the anxiety, yet she is driven to paint them: "I'm aware that my tastes are not fashionable, and so I pursue them in secret" (327).

White points out that "the artistic effort of the novelist converges with that of the artist" ('Reflections', 63) at the end of the novel. At the end of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe says, "I have had my vision"(224), conflating her artistic vision with Woolf's (or more accurately, Woolf conflates hers with Lily's). A similar moment takes place in *Cat's Eye*. At the opening of the retrospective, Elaine says, "I have said, *Look*. I have said, *I see*" (404). Her

vision, her paintings lined up chronologically on the walls around her, corresponds with Atwood's vision: her novel.

Through her preparations for her retrospective, Elaine remembers her life and we are shown the relationship between that lived life and her paintings. I believe that in writing *Cat's Eye* Atwood has explored a possible kind of relationship between the art and the artist, whether that artist be her, or Elaine.

Pricked by Shards of Glass: Writing ‘Hidden’

There is never only one, of anyone.

Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, 6.

While reading Alex Miller's *Prochownik's Dream* I was struck by how often I identified with the protagonist (a visual artist), Toni's, process. I thought that the creative processes depicted in this novel must surely be based on Miller's. I was gratified when I read Miller, in an interview with Ramona Koval, say, "I mean, let's face it, it's a book about me. It's a book about how the creative works" (2). I was right! Not only that, but I am not alone. I felt like my creative process was validated. The novel itself echoes this notion. The main character, the artist, Toni, comments that he's doing drawings not of his sitters, "[n]ot them, in the end, but [of] himself" (118). This is another form of doubling. Just as Atwood explored the relationship between the artist and their work, Miller explores his own process through exploring his character's.

I find I have a strong resistance to writing this essay from a personal perspective. I want to avoid writing about my process and my research. I want to avoid writing directly about my work. I would rather talk of Toni's process, highlighting the way it echoes mine, than speak directly about my process. Toni, in *Prochownik's Dream*, comments that "My work's not something I can *explain*. I'd *like* to explain. [...] But you give someone a reason for this and you know that's not what it is. You know that's not the reason. You try to explain this and you start lying. Most of the time I don't *know* what I'm doing" (198-9). There are many reasons I don't want to take the personal approach in this essay. I don't feel that I start lying when I try to explain, but I feel the reasons splintering into shards of truth, and because none of the reasons are whole they all feel false. I try to explain, and each reason (although true) feels like a lie. I find my own process uninteresting. I don't want to make claims for or about my work: I want it to speak for itself and I am scared my claims will be false. I am scared that my process is somehow wrong or incorrect, even though I know there is no such thing as incorrect process.

I'm also resistant to putting my friend at risk. I have a friend who wishes to remain anonymous who spoke with me frankly about her self harm and her attitude to her self harm. This suggests that Jemima is based on her but this is not the case. She is not Jemima: their stories, lives and personalities are very different. I did other sorts of research: psychological texts, explorative journalistic texts, websites, but my personal conversations with my friend formed the base of my research. Why does she self harm? How does it make her feel? What does she feel before, after and during it? What situations trigger it? How did she start? How does she feel about someone else knowing? Although her answers and Jemima's

answers to these questions are different I hope the truth in them is the same.

Perhaps my research was led by our conversations – I noted what I recognised from our conversations and also the things she that seemed different for her.

I now wonder if my original desire to write about a character who self harms came from a desire to create a sort of testimonial. I knew I wanted the character to continue to self harm at the end of the book. I didn't want to write the simple and obvious journey of someone coming through a problem, a damaged person healing. But, also, I think I wanted to make an argument for 'sustainable' cutting. I know of people who live with anorexia nervosa or bulimia in their lives. People who have accepted that they personally are never going to escape the clutches of this disorder and have found a way to stay alive and live their lives within the constraints these disorders put on them. In my research I also came across people who cut over long periods, for example, Fran, a fifty three year old mother interviewed by Marilee Strong. "Cutting has become, over the years, such a part of my life I really don't think about it that much. [...] If I'm not hurting anyone but myself, why are people making such a big deal out of it?" (6). My friend did not know if she would ever stop. She could see her own mild form of self harm continuing throughout her life as a coping strategy, and, like Fran, she didn't see the problem with it. I found this interesting: self harm not as a behaviour to overcome, not as something to get better from, but as something that can be lived with. Not even something that has to be managed but something that is just an element of a life. I have to stress that my friend considers her self harm to be 'mild': she has not taken first aid courses to learn how to attend to her wounds; she has never needed stiches.

(At the same time I worried about the book being a ‘trigger’ for people who already self harm or, worse, giving people the idea of trying it out. In the end I had to ignore these fears and try to remain true to the story and the characters. Otherwise I would end up doing exactly what I didn’t want to do: produce a cling wrapped version of self harm, a cushioned or preachy version.)

Aside from this dangerous territory of suggesting sustainable self harm, I think I also wanted to create a character that people could understand. I wanted people who, before reading the book, might have found the idea of self harm repugnant and confronting to be able to understand Jemima and her behaviour. I wanted people to come to see self harm the way I had come to see it. I saw self harm to be, in a way, like smoking. Those who smoke know it is bad for them, yet they continue to smoke. People know they *should* give up, yet they don’t. Addicts rely on smoking in times of stress. The addiction has multiple hooks (for smoking physiological and psychological and emotional). In the long run it is bad for your body but the short term benefits are enough to ignore these dangers. Perhaps the dangers associated with self harm are more psychological and emotional than the physical ones associated with smoking, but I think the analogy stands. I think I wanted the reader to understand what is at stake for Jemima. In the actual act of self harm it’s not much. Perhaps I wanted something to offer my friend, something to say “I may not really understand, but I do understand that for you the act itself is not a big deal”. I do not know if I’ve been successful in making Jemima understandable but I hope that I’ve shown the dangers to be more psychological than physical. It is not the knife on the skin that is dangerous; it is the emotions before, after and about that.

Writers and artists are often flummoxed when faced with the question, “how does the creative work?” “I do [creative writing]” Kevin Brophy says, “but I cannot easily talk about it or analyse it” (*Creativity*, 187). Margaret Atwood says, “I have nothing to say about [my writing] because I can’t remember what goes on when I’m doing it. [...] It is not time I myself have lived. [...] Writing about writing requires self-consciousness; writing itself requires the abdication of it” (*Curious Pursuits*, 144). The questions of where ideas come from and what happens between the artist and the page, canvas or clay are difficult to answer. In *Prochownik’s Dream* Toni’s process is a mystery to him, “She watched him painting a while, saying nothing. Eventually she said with grudging admiration, ‘I don’t know how you do that.’ ‘Me neither’” (149).

I cannot say where my ideas come from but I can say that at the beginning my idea for the novel consisted of a female art student who self harms and a male who discovers this, and then urinates in front of her. There was a third character, with a pet owl, who was quickly discarded. Toni, in *Prochownik’s Dream* rediscovers his creative spark when he meets Marina on the island to look at an exhibition space. He is drawn to sketch Marina as she naps in the afternoon shade. Afterwards he sees, “[t]he drawing was a beginning. It was an offer of work” (58).

I had two offers of work, which rolled together into the one project. I had a dream. There was a man with scraggly black hair, bloodshot popping eyes and pale sickly skin. His name was Gently and although he was someone most people would avoid in a dark alley, I knew he was safe; I knew he had power to protect. The dream was so vivid that, as I walked around for the next week or two, I kept expecting to see him.

My second offer of work was a more slow burn offer. It is often thought that a writer's first novel is their most autobiographical. As a naturally private and almost secretive person, I've never been drawn to write autobiographically. I may discover a jumping off point in my life – but it becomes exactly that – a point to spring away from. My first novel 'Dust and Seed' (still in first draft stage) has no autobiographical elements. I wondered at this phenomenon. It almost seems like most aspiring writers need to purge their creative self of their life's build up of personal baggage before they can create things entirely new. Is this kind of autobiographical novel a sort of rite of passage? Do the links to the author's life give the work some sort of authenticity or truth? If I were to write a novel with autobiographical elements, what would I write? My life is essentially dull. I love my family, my dogs, my friends. I went to school and to university and have travelled a little. What does it mean to a life if you write about it? How does that life change? How does sharing a secret change that secret?

Memory is notoriously unreliable. I often wonder how much we construct as we remember. I have more memories about childhood moments of which there is a photo. Is this because the photo has reinforced the memory over the years or because it has allowed me to develop the memory in my imagination through giving me a visual starting point? Siri Hustvedt writes about fictionalising her home town in *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. "[T]he imaginary cafe where Lily works has supplanted the one I remember and become more 'real' to me" (*Plea*, 41) she says. Movies and novels about real events seem to replace the historical events in popular culture. My personal knowledge of history was for a long time based on *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. In a way I think I know more about the story of the formation of The Church of England because I have seen the

Other Boleyn Girl. My image of Jim Morrison is actually Val Kilmer. These fictional versions stand in for what really happened; they become the truth. Is this what happens when you incorporate your own life into your fiction? Cannibalising friends, events, stories. Do you re-write your own history? Do you change your life's meaning?

Helen Garner explores the relationship between life and fiction in her novel, *The Spare Room*. The narrator's name is Helen; she is a writer who "sounds remarkably similar to Helen Garner" (Steger, 1), and, as happened with Garner, a friend who is dying of cancer stays in her spare room. Garner says that writing fiction meant that "I just felt free and I didn't have those shackles of responsibility to discernible fact that I've had all these years writing non-fiction. It was fabulous" (Steger, 3). But surely naming her narrator Helen is going to make the question of this novel's relationship to her own life unavoidable. Garner questions "What difference would [being fiction or non-fiction] make to the meaning or worth of the story?" (Steger, 1), yet it does make some sort of difference. She says, "If you can stitch in the invented stuff with the stuff that comes more from the real and people don't see the stitches, then you know you're on the right track" (4). Steger says Garner "believes there are different ways for a writer to use her experience in opening out a territory 'where other people can meet you, other people can come into the text with their own feelings and be met there'" (2). It is almost as though Garner is arguing that the inclusion of those real elements, or similitude to life, gives the story more depth or meaning (despite claiming that there is no difference in the meaning or worth between a work of fiction and a non-fictional story). This is not an uncommon idea. A writer friend of mine believes that something that actually happened weighs more heavily in a

piece of fiction than what is purely imagined. I don't believe that what is imagined automatically carries less weight than something that has its roots in the real world; I believe that truth can be reached through fiction, and that sometimes fiction conveys truth more effectively. Malcolm Knox says "personal experience is the soil that we till" (10). The line between fiction and non-fiction is always going to blur, as Garner acknowledges in writing *The Spare Room* and calling it 'a novel', exploring the "dangerous and exciting breakdown of the old boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, and the ethical and technical problems that are exploding out of the resulting gap" (Garner, 42).

At the Singapore Writers' Festival in 2007 Hsu Ming Teo was asked if her first novel *Love and Vertigo* was autobiographical. She replied that while it was not factually autobiographical it was "emotionally autobiographical". This is an interesting notion, and one that hints at the idea of finding truth in fiction, in things that are imagined. It also refers to the complex relationship that an artist has with their work, the Alice through the looking glass moment.

I was not considering writing non-fiction, but thinking about the slippery line between life and art informed my work. Fiction allows for both satisfying resolutions and for complex, murkier truths. Lehman has observed that "[u]nlike Garner's two big nonfiction works, the tension at the centre of *The Spare Room* [sic] is resolved" (2); it would not have been possible to resolve the tensions in her two non-fiction works. Fiction allows for exploring the subtleties of life, where non-fiction is bound by fact, as is indicated by a writer who "wanted to explore his past through the art of fiction to glimpse fresh angles on what he [...] would never otherwise understand" (Rabalais 24). Miller commented at Adelaide Writers' Week in 2006 that "the camouflage [of fiction] allows us to enter [the

story]”. Garner felt freedom in writing fiction, able to explore the story in a different way. The parts of a fictional story can “contradict and reflect on each other in ways that reveal the type of story-truth that the best fiction achieves” (Rabalais 25), rather than being bound to a perceived accuracy of the facts. Fiction can be thought to be “truer than nonfiction” (Lehmann 2).

Some people think that there is a truth that can be more easily reached in fiction than through the close adherence to fact. Miller comments that the fictional element of a story he wrote “was the most vividly true incident in my fiction” (‘Written’, 9). He also mentions Virginia Woolf who, in her ‘novel-essay’ *The Pargiters* says, “If you object that fiction is not history [...] I prefer, where truth is important, to write fiction” (9). The arguments about the accuracy of non-fiction seem to be based on the idea that there is a single objective truth, rather than multiple subjective truths. For me this idea is problematic. Further, I think this idea of single/multiple truths can also be applied to ideas of tight and loose construing. Tight construing generates the idea that there is a single solution to a problem and includes the pursuit of that solution; loose construing is a more spreading way of thought : “defocusing” as Sue Woolfe puts it (*Mystery*, 90). Reducing the multiple to the singular is problematic in many ways. It blocks or reduces creative thought, as well as limiting interpretations of texts. Perhaps this is one of the reasons people find truth in fiction: it is not bound to a single perspective.

As Nikki Gemmell has commented, writing under a pseudonym can also result in a feeling of freedom while writing. In writing fiction instead of non-fiction you become free from depicting an objective truth (even though, I believe, there is no such thing as an objective truth, people seem to expect it from non-

fiction, accusing *it wasn't like that*, if the work does not depict the world or events as they see them). In writing under a pseudonym you become free from the pressure of other people's reactions and judgments: Gemmell discovered she "could say whatever [she] wanted" ('Identity', 297). Not all non-fiction is bound to a single perspective but I think it is worthwhile considering this relationship between non-fiction and fiction, tight and loose construing, singularity and multiplicity.

Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar* was originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. At first I thought that this was because Esther Greenburg's experiences echoed Plath's own, but have since discovered that it is because Plath didn't want to ruin her reputation with this "potboiler" (*Letters*, 490). However, while the *Bell Jar* was somehow building into my second offer of work, I thought the desire for anonymity came from something else, from a desire to hide from making personal experience public. A strange desire: almost like confession. In the darkness of anonymity you can say more and more honestly. But to reveal parts of yourself publically, yet hide behind the pseudonym means the public and private play off each other in an interesting way. The secret is revealed, but the person revealing it remains hidden.

Sister Wendy Beckett, talking about Titian's 'Flaying of Marsyas' in her documentary series *The Story of Painting*, says, "Now of course Titian understood ... that to be an artist was to challenge the god and, of course, to lose and to have your skin taken off you, to be completely exposed, to have all of you put there for people to look at". When I first heard this I thought she meant you had to expose something *of yourself, of your life*, but I came to realise that the exposure she means is in the audacity of the risk of creating. There is something deeply

personal in the relationship between the artist and art work, and the artwork is what is exposed. In the presentation of the creation you are peeling back your skin – not so people can see the blood and muscles of your life but in your boldness and in the exposure of the work itself. Hustvedt comments that, “I’m afraid of writing, too, because when I write I am always moving towards the unarticulated, the dangerous, the place where the walls don’t hold. I don’t know what’s there, but I’m pulled toward it” (*Plea*, 228). Here, as with the slippery line between fiction and non-fiction, what is actually exposed is blurred: the art-object, the self, the desire to create. And in this way, I do end up exposing something of myself because, I believe, this is the same realisation Jemima comes to at the end of the novel: that it is not necessary to expose your *self*, but it is necessary to take a risk in art; it is necessary to be willing to be flayed.

This idea of creation and creativity as dangerous, of art as dangerous, is an interesting one. As Roberta White comments, “writing is both necessary and dangerous” (*Studio*, 152) for Atwood. “Like Virginia Woolf, Atwood is familiar with the terror of venturing into those desert places, the blank page or the empty canvas” (152). But it is not just the emptiness of the space before the creating is done that is dangerous – it is the journey itself, the act of creating that is dangerous. Like Orpheus, with his gift for song, going into the depths of the underworld to rescue his bride and returning, in the end, with only the mournful song of his adventure. He also has, from his adventure, the mark of death and he is ripped to shreds, his head saved to sing his song. The act of creation is dangerous for multiple reasons. It is unknown, both the act and what will be created. As Gilbert says, creativity comes from outside the self, some ‘mysterious place’. There is the risk that the creator will expose something they are unwilling

to expose, as Basil Hallward says in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. This shiftiness, the fact you can't pin it down, the uncertainty of it, the mysteriousness makes it dangerous. The creator knows they will be flayed.

I'll say again that this novel is not autobiographical. But thinking about autobiographical first novels, about the idea of fictionalising aspects of one's own life, about secretive revelations, about the slippery line between fiction and life, leads me to my second offer: a female apprentice or student artist; someone new to the idea of pushing her creations out into the world, to the idea of taking her own creation seriously.

I began my research into self harm by reading books written by psychiatrists and psychologists. I read that self harm can be seen "as a creative unconscious solution to the formidable problems of living" (Farber, xxiv). I read that the emotional reasons for self harm are many and wide ranging:

For some who are deadened by depression, feeling bodily pain is to be jolted momentarily out of a depressed state and to come alive once again. For those who are deadened by dissociation, inflicting bodily pain on themselves is like turning on the switch that makes them feel real once again. For those who live with a constant anxious hypervigilance that deadens them to pleasure and joy, inflicting pain to their bodies can provide them with a release that is as close to joy as they will get. (Farber, 3-4)

I also read that “To feel pain in the body is to experience the body as alive and vital” (4), and it can “divert one from one’s emotional pain” (10).

Cutting may serve as a way to reclaim control over one’s body, as with anorexia and bulimia. Or it may allow the tortured individual to play out the roles of victim, perpetrator, and finally, loving caretaker, soothing self-inflicted wounds and watching them heal. For others, the sight of blood is literal proof that they are alive, drawing them out of terrifying dissociative states. (Amando Favazza in introduction to Marilee Strong’s *A Bright Red Scream*, xviii)

Although these contradictions were part of what interested me about self harm, the language the psychiatrists used distanced me from the people they were talking about. The perspective is that of an outsider, that of someone who wants to understand their patient and who wants their patient to stop. The perspective is an intellectual one, not an emotional one. The language used examines the activity, rather than expresses it. Although I saw truth in what I read, I didn’t feel that truth.

Gaylene Perry, in her exegetical article ‘The Double Life’, talks about the research she did for her novel. “With my exegesis in mind, I extended my research to doppelgangers in literature. [...] But I found myself unmoved by such reading” (4). She found herself continually returning to a particular film about doppelgangers, and to other films by the same director “that were not about doppelgangers but that wounded me in other ways” (4). She is using the word ‘wounded’ in connection to Barthes and his theories of *studium* and *punctum*.

“Just as Barthes did not wish to research photographs in terms of family rite or history, I did not want to research doppelgangers in terms of psychology or in terms of German romantic literature. I found nothing to wound me in that research, nothing that discomfited me” (4). In the same way, I found no depth in the psychological descriptions of self harm; I found they blocked my way into Jemima. “The researcher looks for something akin to *punctum* in the material being read. She or he seeks that which is personally significant, that which bites, has teeth: *wounds*” (4).

I found a book written by a journalist, Marilee Strong, also an outsider, someone seeking to understand, who had interviewed a lot of people who self harm. These interviews felt a step closer, reading that “[f]or me it’s a kind of hope, a way out. It’s not giving up” (3), that “I just hurt too bad – too deep for tears – so I cut and it lets out some of the hurt” (9). The real voices bit, this was more like Jemima’s voice, rather than someone talking about her. I also looked at pro self injury websites. Because the crux of my novel depends on someone finding out about someone else’s self harm, I was interested in the boundaries between public and private, and how a secret changes once it is shared. The idea of choosing to share this secret in a public sphere where you can remain anonymous is interesting to me. One of my supervisors had suggested I talk about shame in my exegesis, assuming that self injury is a shameful behaviour. I was interested in the pride the web posters felt as they wrote about their experiences. Farber said “an important component of the self-harm behaviour consists of some degree of public demonstration of one’s ‘wounds’, with an expectation of evoking a response from others” (12). I thought the idea of demonstrating wounds was interesting in the context of the internet forums. The public demonstration was

taking part in these forums, the response was support and understanding, as opposed to the expected response from non-self harmers: disgust? Pity? Disappointment? These websites provided the *punctum* for me, allowed me back into Jemima's character after being distanced from her through the psychological texts.

Another way to approach the differences in thought required by these two types of research is the idea of loose and tight construing. The psychological texts pushed me into construing tightly. The perspective was an analytical one, from outside, examining the behaviour. I needed to construe more loosely: rather than focusing on the why, I needed to look at how it feels. Reading what people said about their experiences to people who they expected would understand their experiences, I managed to step closer to Jemima. I didn't need their specifics; I wanted their truth. I needed to be pricked; I was writing about an insider and needed to get into the space of an insider.

It seems that loose construing is essential to a lot of people's creative processes. As Marion Milner says, there needs to be "a way of letting hand and eye do exactly what pleased them without any conscious working to a preconceived intention" (xvii). The epigraph to Alex Miller's *The Sitters* is a statement by Paul Klee: "The trained hand often knows more than the head". This suggests loose construing: let your hand do the work, avoid letting the head interfere.

Loose construing allows broader associative thinking and so writing fictionally about creativity or the creative process enables a wider examination, making space for insights that wouldn't otherwise be available. This shows the

difference between examining your creativity in an essay like this compared to within the confines of a novel. Looking at it in a critical essay one would primarily use secondary processing, or tight construing. Looking at it through fiction, as Miller does in *Prochownik's Dream*, through the guise of an artist character, allows loose construing and so a broader look at the ideas of creativity or process. While it can be useful to look at creativity tightly, loose construing can provide a different perspective.

Some people speak of being lost in the experience – forgetting themselves in the work. Toni experiences this loss of self in creative process: “As he stood in front of the painting, seeing the figure with a feeling of surprise, he had little recollection of the hours he had spent painting it” (*Prochownik's*, 254). Miller also experiences this feeling: “[I]t’s the same for all of us when time ceases to pass and we dwell in this timeless space of our creative forces” (*Prochownik's*, 4). As Sue Woolfe says, “People often talk of experiencing an altered sense of self, with a loss of the sense of time and place and a blurring of self and others, and self and the world” (*Mystery*, 92). Because of this sense of an altered self, writing about creativity through fiction can provide a way in to that other place, not available through tight construing.

Others talk about their art as though they are the tool used to create it, rather than the designing mind behind it. Toni feels like his creativity comes from somewhere imaginary:

A heady liberation from the daily insistence on the governing norms; an acknowledgement that one’s creative decisions and motives were generated in a place of which one possessed no

practical knowledge and over which one exercised no conscious control – an imaginary place, in other words, without the morbidity of accumulated responsibilities. (166)

Author Sarah Hall, for example, says, “The strangest thing about writing is the combination of secretarial and supernatural elements, knowing you are both dictating and channelling the goings on” (‘Sarah Hall on *How to Paint*’, 1).

Perhaps it’s this feeling of channelling that creates the urgency one feels to get an idea down before it disappears. It’s this feeling of channelling that is the part that can be lost if the creative urge is not responded to. Woolfe, again acknowledges this: “In loose construing, there is often a sense of being guided, or being intuitive” (*Mystery*, 94).

My construing had tightened through the writing of the proposal and reading the psychological texts, so, in addition to finding other, closer, perspectives, I needed to take a step back from what I thought the novel was about before continuing. This allowed a shift of the focus of the novel: no longer about cutting and more about two student-artists finding their way. Looking at the websites also allowed this shift, as it encouraged me to think more generally about issues (such as public/private secrets) that weren’t directly part of my characters’ experiences but that, hopefully, would create a sort of soil for my novel to grow out of. Or perhaps it was vice versa: the shift in focus allowed me to approach the websites in a looser way which then allowed me to think more widely about the experiences of the people posting. (Here, again, we come across the notion of multiple, splintered, truths. Perhaps both of the above are true. Maybe my previous thinking about *The Bell Jar* and anonymous confession is actually what opened me to think broadly, maybe it was both.)

While writing I thought about confessional art as I understood it, such as the work of Frida Kahlo and Tracey Emin. I wondered how Jemima's art could be linked to her self harm. How it could have a confessional, personal nature without her letting any of her friends know that she cuts herself. I had difficulty linking the two in a concrete way. It seemed to me Jemima was struggling with the public and private. She had two forms of personal expression. One was private, secret, yet she found it to be honest. The other was public and visible, but not reaching for any truth. As Beckett says, "to be an artist was to ... be completely exposed, to have all of you put there for people to look at". This is the tension within Jemima: between her wanting to be an artist and her unwillingness to be flayed, to be exposed.

You need both loose and tight construing while writing a novel. Often the tight construing comes in late drafts when the pages are full and themes and arcs are revealing themselves. But I think the tension between loose and tight construing, and the ability to switch between these two modes (or selves), is important throughout the novel.

I wanted all time to be accounted for – I wanted the reader's time to pass with the characters'. "Because I want the picture to be complete. That's why I describe the place. That's why the menial conversation is there" (Doube, April 18 2007). I wanted to write the novel chronologically, as I had written my first novel in bits and pieces and pulling it all together into a cohesive draft was difficult. And I had only written one novel before so I didn't (still don't) know what kinds of process work best for me. These two desires came from tight construing: trying to see the novel as a whole before it was completed.

Trying to impose order onto my process made it stilted and stuttering. I had difficulty entering the novel at the ‘now’ points. I knew early that Clement would find himself unable to eat, and wrote it into the story – where I was in the story. It was obvious that this wasn’t working and I kept having to push it back. At each stage of the story I tried to insert the fact that Clement was unable to eat and it didn’t feel right. If I hadn’t been trying to control my process I would have written the scenes that involved this plot point and then found out where they went later. Rather than trying to control my process and the story – tightly – I would have let it flow – loosely – allowing for a more natural process. Trying to account for all time meant that I had a lot to delete in later drafts, and that I wasted a lot of time writing bits and bobs that weren’t needed. It meant there were a lot of scenes in which not much happened and this made my own journey through the plot uncomfortable, even worse for the reader.

Part of allowing loose construing is accepting that, often, there is something that resists complete understanding in one’s own creative work. For example, Toni doesn’t know why he has to be naked in the painting ‘The Other Family’. “For the first time ever he was seeing himself in his work [...] a presence bearing a dangerous power to disrupt reality” (237-8). He can see himself in the painting, but doesn’t need to examine the symbolism or why; he just knows this must be the case. As Anne Bartlett, author of *Knitting*, said in a personal email: “The image is first and the metaphor follows. And then, much later, I’ll understand what I’ve done”.

Woolfe describes a similar process of realisation. She discovers a ‘me’ in her omniscient third person narration. “There is no ‘me’ in the third person. [...] Who was this errant, insistent ‘me’?” (*Mystery*, 103). This puzzles her but rather

than try to understand what is going on she continues to write, ‘loosely construing’, until she makes a “shattering realisation: that [one of her characters] could be an omniscient third person narrator [...because] he was a spy” (104-5). Just as Toni suddenly ‘sees’ himself in the painting, Woolfe suddenly finds her narrator’s voice. This process is present throughout *Prochownik’s Dream*. Toni is continually working towards something as yet unknown but that will reveal itself along the way. Woolfe points out that these insights “rarely come from conscious calculation” (90).

This process also requires you to be willing to be absorbed in a project without quite understanding what it is, exactly, you are doing. The project seems to become all Toni can think about, to the extent that his wife accuses him: “‘You’re not with *us* anymore.’ [...] ‘Of course I’m with you,’ he said absently,” (148-9), showing that what she says is true; he is *with* the portrait. Despite his constantly thinking about the new project it seems he can’t quite understand what he’s doing. “It was a private thing and he did not yet understand it; the exploration of its human landscape was still a place of uncertainty and struggle” (221). Woolfe also mentions this lack of understanding of your own work. “My own metaphors, particularly ones that enhance or exaggerate ordinary reality, are inaccessible to my analysis” (*Mystery*, 11).

Similarly, I knew Jemima had to see the slaughtered pigs at the start of the third part. I didn’t know why, or what they meant, or what they were doing there. I felt like they were floating in the novel, without strings to attach them to anything. In my third draft I tried to connect the pigs to Jemima’s feelings about finding out about Hannah. Still, they just floated there. In my fourth draft, during a discussion with my supervisor, it occurred to me: the pigs, bodies, possibilities

in art. I tried to connect the vision of the pigs to Jemima's potential artistic future. I knew there were pigs in the first draft, I just didn't know why. Even now the whys and wherefores of the pigs remain loose for me and, like Toni, I'm not sure I want to examine them too closely. "He did not want to be clear. Clarity about such things offended his sense of their authenticity" (36). For me, it's not so much my sense of authenticity, but a resistance to pinning things down. As trying to explain a singular reason can make truths feel like lies, being clear about the meaning of the pigs, for example, might make them feel false and forced.

Sometimes, what is loose in the writing never tightens into substance in the plot. I was drawn to the architecture of Barcelona while reading Hughes' description of La Sagrada Familia "sliding, dripping, dissolving, re-forming, changing colour and texture" (237). Self harm, I thought, is attempting to do the opposite – instead of making the solid liquid, it is trying to make the fleeting, the ephemeral solid. "A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh" says Leonard Cohen (8). Physical pain, I thought (as someone who has not experienced extreme physical pain) has an obvious cause, a shape and size. Self-inflicted, it is something one can control. It is an escape. This reflection is never expressed in the novel but it is part of the soil that the novel grew out of.

Nelly, an artist in Michelle de Kretser's novel *The Lost Dog*, has an experience of suddenly seeing a part of her work that had remained hidden to her while she was working on it. "I was walking around the gallery after the installation," she says, "and I stood in front of those paintings and it hit me for the first time" (244). Her "gruesome"(244) and disturbing paintings, which incite "an ancient horror" (239), give her an insight into the things she had found gruesome and disturbing during the time she painted them. They came from her disturbance,

even though, at the time, she didn't know consciously what she was so disturbed about.

This willingness to follow the unknown is connected to the unwillingness to talk about it. As the artist character in *The Horse's Mouth* says, "Dangerous to talk too much about your work. It fixes it. It nails it down. And then it bleeds. It begins to die" (Cary, 175). While Toni is working on 'The Other Family' he finds that he doesn't want to talk about it: "His connection to it was still too tenuous and he feared he might lose it" (221). Woolfe points out that "[m]any writers anecdotally report that telling a new, only partially formed idea to an audience, or even a sympathetic person, can destroy it" (*Mystery*, 94). This is because talking about an idea can shift it from primary processing to secondary – the construing is tightened and the ability to work on an idea is lost. Brophy points out that writing "works best when the writer, it seems, does not yet know how to find a way out of the dilemma so foolishly entered into – and is willing to let the writing go where it will" (*Creativity*, 198).

There are ways around the problems that would usually lead to tight construing. Reading other people's work can generate ideas and reflect on your own problem without your having to directly face the issue, and thereby kill the creativity. I worried about art. "Things I'm worried about having too much of: – descriptions of character's art. –references to known art/ists. –travel style journal stuff. –peripheral/meaningless characters" (Doube, September 28 2007). I worried that references to known artists might alienate people who don't know the artists or the work I am referring to, especially as I wanted Jemima to see the work of some more obscure Catalan artists while in Barcelona. I worried that ekphrasis about the characters' art would bore readers. Butcher Bones, the artist in Peter

Carey's *Theft*, says, when trying to describe one of his paintings, "Forget it. This stuff can't be talked, or walked, or *garnered* from the auction record" (40). I worried that any attempt to do so would fall flat from the reader. I remembered a workshop I'd been in once where a participant had said that he usually skips any poetry that breaks up a narrative and I wondered if passages describing a non-existent work of art would generate similar responses. I watched what other writers did and observed how I felt when I did or didn't know a work they referred to. I took note of how much effort I put into picturing the fictional works they describe and whether the descriptions were built into the narrative or stood alone. Unsurprisingly, I found no single way others had written about art.

In Woolfe's *Painted Woman*, some of the paintings are written as part of the action, as part of Frances' mental escape from her father, part of her struggle for an independent self. "It's not merely an onion I'm painting, this onion will be a metaphor for all that I've known, its shine, shadows, smoothness, its glistening crispness, the white way it burrows into itself" (180). In Sarah Hall's *How to Paint a Dead Man*, the art is referred to mainly in passing. "[A] journalist from the city came [...] and asked me [...] Why do you paint bottles and bottles and bottles?" (9). In Siri Husdvedt's *What I Loved* there are long passages describing many works in detail with the protagonist thinking about the meanings of the works. In de Kretser's *The Lost Dog* there is more discussion of what Nelly's works could mean and people's reactions to her paintings than descriptions of the works themselves. For me, the work was startlingly absent for the first part of the novel. The list could go on. Different approaches to fictional constructions of visual art, different approaches to existing artists and works. But the descriptions

did not bore me, the ekphrasis did not take me out of the story. For the most part I wanted to see (read, imagine) what the works looked like.

My fear of the novel becoming a travel journal was allayed when I thought about the experience of travel. It is at once extraordinary and ordinary.

Purposeless travel can turn one into a narrator of one's own life. Things are seen through a camera lens, through the imagined recounting of the story, through the fact that once you arrive you are still having your own experience. The experience of travel seems to me to be essentially fleeting. Time is fragmented into moments – grand and small. The first time you sight the cathedral reaching up out of the cityscape, the refusal to accept your concession card at the entrance. The smaller moments fade away quickly. You are left with disconnected memories. Glimpses into yourself, the other culture, the people you meet, the things you see. I remembered reading Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and enjoying the way Atwood tried to align the reader's experience with Marian's. The book is divided into three parts. The first and last are written in first person, the second in third person. At the start of the third part Marian comments, "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his" (278). I wondered, could I attempt a similar way of constructing Jemima's experience of Barcelona? Could I write it in scattered fragments, to try and echo her experience, her state of mind at that time?

The problem of travel was also allayed due to the fact that Jemima and Clement's journeys to Barcelona were, in different forms, always part of their stories. For Clement, the main reason for travel was because the idea of an artistic journey or apprenticeship held sway, like Picasso going to Paris. For Jemima, it was primarily her wanting to escape her self through travel, as well as wanting to

access some part of Clement without risking real intimacy. I could argue that Barcelona was a rational choice: Europe first, because that is where our artistic tradition originates; we are still euro-centric, although other influences are starting to creep into our art world. Paris, Rome, Barcelona. Barcelona and Gaudí were inseparable in my mind. No other city to my knowledge has an artist so deeply entrenched in its character. Barcelona, where the city itself is constructed as art, where the buildings themselves are art objects. If I am honest I will admit that I never actually considered another city. Barcelona came with the project; it was part of the story before I started writing it. While loosely construing, it was an obvious choice; rational reasons did not become apparent until later.

Barcelona's gothic quarter took me by surprise when I first arrived in the city. My reading had been centred on Gaudí, on the modern elements of the city. I walked through the warren of narrow pedestrian streets, under arches of the ruined city wall still standing, passing World War Two shrapnel damage in hidden away squares, past crumbling frescos, under ancient looking lamps and between darkened buildings. It was so utterly different to what I had imagined. My research focus had blinded me to the doubled nature of Barcelona. A city both modern and ancient, both Spanish and Catalan. This seemed to reaffirm my 'choice' of the city for my novel.

When reading about self harm, one of the things that stands out is that often it is an attempt at a positive step. It is doing something instead of nothing. It is creating feeling where there was numbness; it releases tension, stress and pain; it is trying to take control of one's emotions. As Farber says, it can be seen "as a creative unconscious solution to the formidable problems of living... Even the most seemingly self destructive acts often have creation as their goal" (xxiv). It

could be considered to be doubled: the harming and the healing the Jekyll and Hyde of the behaviour.

As I've already mentioned, Gaudí's architecture, like self harm, is full of contradictions. It is both celebrating nature, as well as subverting it. La Pedrera, for example, "looks as if it had been freely modelled of some malleable substance" (Janson, 705) yet it is made from cut stone. The excessively ornate decorations are underpinned by careful design; "Beneath Gaudí's fantastic undulating surfaces there in fact lies a profound understanding of structural design" (Coppystone, 326). Gaudí was a man of deep faith and patriotism to Catalonia and the extravagance of his designs was underpinned by religious and patriotic symbolism. Even on a purely aesthetic level, if you look at individual buildings, they seem to have split personalities. The façade of Casa Batlló is covered with white, blue and green mosaic, balconies like the jaws of fish curving away from the building. Inside there are banisters and doors made of golden wood next to smooth walls that turn into ceilings on which scaly droplets form. The top floor, the laundry floor, is a meditation on light and white. After the busy designs of the previous floors, the smooth white curving doorways and spiralling stairs feel like the peace at the end of a fever. Climb then on to the roof and find yourself once more in a wonderland. Towers shine in the sun; there are scales on the back of the dragon slumbering next to you. Like Jemima, it pretends to be what it is not, at the same time as being what it is pretending to be. I could give further examples of Gaudí's other designs but, like Barcelona itself, like self injury, the designs are split, doubled, multiple. As I mentioned earlier, the links between Gaudí's architecture and self harm never became explicit in the novel,

however, I think that these sorts of echoes add to the substance of the novel, like a tapestry with finer stitches.

Gaudí's fleshy excessive architecture is almost the opposite of Picasso's *Guernica*, the other work that affects Jemima strongly while she's in Spain. Gaudí found inspiration in the structures of nature, for both aesthetic and practical ends. He built courtyards surrounded by glass of different thicknesses making you feel like you're under water, courtyards that reach from ground floor to the top of the building, allowing natural light to enter each and every floor. *Guernica* is black, grey and white, full of sharp lines, jagged edges and corners. While Gaudí's architecture places us in nature, inside these fleshy buildings and seashell structures, *Guernica* seems to alienate us from nature, highlighting the emotional, making us feel rather than observe. These extremes, I believe, are also in self harm. People who do it talk about both trying to stop the numbness as well as trying to escape. If you like, trying to place themselves in their bodies, and remove themselves from their bodies at once.

The peripheral/meaningless characters problem, I hope, was solved in a way that I think is a good example of loose construing. I found that slowly the number of Clement's housemates dwindled. Two characters became one, a room disappeared. Soon there were only three. This didn't happen by design – I just found the characters weren't there anymore. I hope that Jemima's university friends aren't meaningless characters, even if they are peripheral, but they are part of what remains of the desire to make the 'picture complete'.

I feel I have been doubled or split in many ways while writing this novel. The writer/person who lives split, loose/tight construer split. I'm doubled by my

interest in public and private secrets, by that interest playing out in Jemima and Clement's relationship and in Jemima's hesitant use of the internet. I've been split in writing this essay, between writer and critic. Like Miller, I'm doubled by writing about creative characters. My answers to questions about why I've written about a character who self harms are splintered, as are my answers to questions about public and private secrets. Even though I am not writing about myself in my novel, I am doubled through the act of writing and in the product of that writing.

I believe that writing about artist characters can be a useful way to explore any aspect of creativity and the creative process. The writer is split in many ways and by embracing this split and writing about issues that affect the writer's own life in a fictional way can be a useful way of exploring those issues and ideas. Where else can our writing come from than within ourselves, from ideas we are already interested in, from our experience of the world and its stories, from things that prick us? Exploring ideas in fiction gives the writer freedom from fidelity to facts as we see them, tight construing and ownership of the ideas being explored.

Writing fiction requires loose construing and so allows for examination of such issues from a different perspective, allowing for broader associative consideration. This does not lead to the fiction being an expression of the self but the peculiar relationship between artist and art work cannot be denied. The work comes through the artist and from the artist, created uniquely by the artist, inspired by the real world (even if the inspiration is to step away from that real world, because it cannot be argued that we create in a vacuum). Negotiating the relationship

between life and art, between self and art, is complex and can be fraught and fiction can be a useful tool in exploring these relationships.

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