

An Introduction to Contagious Fiction

Investigating strategies for a further engagement with literature

1. Fiction is Contagious

A cinema usher I once knew, a sly, observant type, told me he liked to watch audiences file out of James Bond movies. He said a transformation would have taken place in the men. They were now quite different from the chatty, expectant crowd that went in. Now they would walk several feet in front of the women with a quiet certainty and a renewed gravitas. Some would tug on their shirt sleeves, others would scan their immediate surrounds. There was a feeling of controlled power that simply wasn't there several hours earlier. What's more, their behaviour towards him as an usher had changed; a class difference had opened up, they were respectful towards him but those nuanced markers of status were nevertheless now there. In other words, something in the material of the film had transmitted itself to receptive members of the audience.

Contagious Fiction is a useful metaphor. It only takes us so far; probably fiction, of any variety, does not quite hit us like a disease, (although it can be infective!) but the phrase does incorporate the sense of transmission that is central to my study. In reality a contagion takes hold against your wishes; where as I am suggesting you can increase the rate of contagion through a greater engagement with the contaminator.

For the purposes of this essay I will investigate how literature can be contagious. Many of the approaches discussed can easily be applied to other art forms, in fact many are borrowed from other art forms. It is also true that the terms of this study can be applied to non-fiction equally as well, indeed they are applicable to any art form in which there has been attempt to weave truth. For reasons of scope I will confine myself to literature.

To begin there is a brief survey of how literature is currently studied beyond school level in the UK. This is certainly not exhaustive and much of it is entirely subjective, and I will touch on my personal difficulties with English Literature courses and, in particular, literary theory. I have absolutely no doubt that some of my difficulties were intellectual, and of this I am happily guilty - ideas have always hit me on an emotional rather than intellectual level, and although this long essay borrows the forms of the academic essay, it should not be confused with one - a few scattered footnotes do not an academic study make. However, the ideas discussed I do take seriously, and in fact much of it I wrestle with on a daily basis teaching and running workshops.

I will discuss the genesis of these ideas; from my misgivings having studied literature to working with Hiroshi Ishikawa in 2009. Completely without meaning to Hiroshi inspired an approach to literature I have adopted ever since, an engagement beyond literary analysis. Hiroshi simply couldn't understand fiction on any level but his own, and was entirely aware of his failings, but supremely focused on overcoming them. We spent a very happy 3 months together, and I'll always be grateful for the long lasting effect he has had on my work.

Equally, actors have been very influential in the progression of my thinking, perhaps because of their emotional investment in texts. They live it. The centrepiece of the section dealing with drama is an interview with an actor who wishes to remain anonymous, and I'm grateful to her, and many of the actors I have mixed with over the years for their insight. Simply put, if a company putting on a play in the West End has several weeks of rehearsal to get under the skin of a play; its characters, its themes; could not a greater engagement with literature be found by adopting many of the same methods?

After a brief attempt at a contagious fiction review of selected novels I will discuss the various methods so far devised to eke out the substance from works of fiction. I've called this *the Toolbox* (itself a phrase used at drama schools for the skills given to actors to take into the workplace) and this section will look at ways of harnessing the collaboration between writer and reader, the teaching potentials of a contagious approach to literature, and ideas for exploring using the same general terms. Prompt Arts and Bathsheba, two possible approaches have come directly from my interest in this area, and obviously there is more information on them in other parts of this website.

I hope to demonstrate that not only do we absorb fiction unconsciously, but often, entirely consciously, we work in tandem with an author to produce works that are as much part of our own imagination as belongs to the credited figure on the front cover. There is a complex layering process at work, a kind of creative reading, and we as an audience are giving and taking from the work simultaneously.

On a personal level friends will tell you that my contagious approach to fiction has not always been kind to them. I won't disagree. I feel that literature is the transmission of certain states through writing, and often I have found that my memory of life's events have been coloured by false thoughts; romanticized flourishes, brought on by strange concoctions of the senses; the sharp smell of polish on a lift door, or that certain way in which the breeze hits you, and, it has to be admitted, the strange, beguiling power of fiction, infiltrating the now, altering the ways in which we see.

2. A Critical Impasse

Working from the premise of Derrida's contre, the relationship developed between these texts is not so much textual as countertextual: each text re-enacts the procedures of its counterparts, simultaneously rearticulating and interrogating their status. In this triangular mode of reading, the contact zone between the countertexts becomes the site on which new readings are generated, readings that use the ambivalent relationship between writings to mark an analogous self-difference within writing itself.

Contingencies and Masterly Fictions: Countertextuality in Dickens, Contemporary Fiction and Theory.

It is perhaps too easy to lampoon. Pseuds Corner in Private Eye Magazine is a treasure trove of constructivist gems; University Prospectus's jostle for space among corporate memos and design manifestos. In his recent, gloriously high-minded essay in the Aeion, Roger Scruton, bemoaning the modern culture of fake scholarship, gave his own example;

...it is the connexion between signifier and signifier that permits the elision in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation using the value of 'reference back' possessed by signification in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports.

In this case it is Jacques Lacan. It is hard not to be swept up, Paris '68 style, by the revolutionary tide of Latinate verbiage. I remember my own response at university to a comment from a tutor, reassuring her that I *appreciatized* her point. Despite this momentary appreciation, I developed difficulties with the spirit of the course, a knot evolved in my stomach at the thought of writing the essays, before hardening into a position of post-adolescent defiance. I simply didn't understand the course.

For those who read slowly, an English Literature degree is a sedentary experience. I vividly remember reading Wilkie Collins's 'Woman in White' from start to finish throughout a day that started at 7am and finished at midnight. The book and I endured long sessions, with only a couple of breaks for the student equivalent of a meal. It was an extremely enjoyable experience, sitting on the bed next to the radiator, the rain tipping down outside. With so few distractions I was able to engage fully with the twists and turns of the plot and develop a relationship with the characters. I felt confident enough to discern certain faults in the writing style; one hundred or so pages from the end Collins becomes just a little too concerned with his rapid plot machinations at the expense of the style he has so carefully built upon.

It was with a huge amount of shock that I sat down at the tutorial the next day and discovered the book was actually about a menage a trois. How could I have missed this? Did some prudish Victorian censor tear out the graphic sex scene from my copy of the novel? No, I was being too literal. A *symbolized* menage a trois. The tutor selected her reasons, all of which stacked up, all of which seemed reasonable as she explained them at length, while I imagined what the symbol for a threesome might look like, perhaps some variation on naked Twister. By that point in the course I knew there would be an essay question coming, and I would have to discuss the latent sexuality in *Woman in White*, a sexuality I hadn't even known was there until I had had it pointed out.

Because reading a book is by definition a solitary experience, there is something disconcerting about discussing it. Rather like other solitary experiences, we can't quite grasp the idea that others might be doing it too, and so discussion often centres on which bits everyone liked and to which characters the readers were most empathetic. My rainy day of reading had been a relatively profound experience and had left its residue, and it felt sobering to have the novel so deracinated.

There is an extremely good argument that the study of English Literature is not an academic subject. Presumably, one could counter that the study of English Literature is *only* an academic subject. Edinburgh University is proud to house the oldest department of English Literature in the world, having first offered courses on 'rhetoric and belles lettres' nearly 250 years ago. That puts it relatively late compared with other academic disciplines in the UK, and certainly by comparison to Law, Medicine or Theology.

As the study of literature has developed, its scope has broadened and its reach is now thoroughly global. Universities give B.A. undergraduates a fleeting overview before pressing them down into microscopic research patterns. Here are some of the modules available to students at Cardiff University;

- Global Literatures
- Contemporary Identities: Race, Gender and the Self in Contemporary British Fiction
- American Dreaming: Suburbia, Literature and Culture
- Writing Women in the 20th and 21st Century
- How NOT to read a book: a survey of contemporary literary criticism

As a consequence of the great ambition of most English courses, a language had to be developed that could unify the many strands a study of literature might bring into play. After all, a study of books is in reality a study of the contents of books, and surely the scope of a novel is uncontainable? What axiom would allow a student to explore such an unbordered world? Luckily, the French were on hand to first lasso meaning and then label it. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Guy Debord and Louis Althusser, the influence of these thinkers changed the study of the Humanities in the second half the 20th Century. Derrida, for example, was of the opinion that Western thought from Plato onwards laboured under the illusory promise that language was capable of capturing a reality beyond language. He was pessimistic about the meaning of what we say or write, explaining that it is *always* undecidable, struggling to take shape, tumbling and tearing in a battle of ‘differing and deferring.’ Foucault, co-opting Marx, reduced this battleground of meaning still further to the binary forms of the oppressed and the oppressor.

This deconstruction of ‘the inherited order’ became the *Modus Operandi* of analysis and university syllabuses to this day pay homage to its reductive forces. Derrida’s critique, so sexy and bound up in the world view of the 1960’s, undoubtedly contained an internal, structural logic, and could often be very useful; there is an old Indian saying that there are 360 different ways to look at an elephant. In fact, as a technique, deconstruction has many merits, the problem comes from its ubiquity. Not least of its advantages is that deconstruction benefits from a dexterous approach to added syllables, a pleasing concomitance of prefixes and suffixes. At University I would occasionally note down some of the compound lexemes thrown into a lecture. 50% of them were unlisted.

Advances in Literary Theory developed alongside Deconstruction. Rather than enter into the novel, Literary Theory refers not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. In other words, the theory deals with the tools by which we understand literature. Or rather, I would say some of the tools. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work, lays out themes and classifications, develops the significance of race, class or gender in a novel, and investigates the role of linguistics or the unconscious in a text. (The novel is often reimagined as a text.)

These techniques are as valid as each other, no more, no less. How useful they are depends entirely on what the theorist sees as the function of the inquiry and once the dissection of the patient has been carried out, the remains are filed away on the shelf with the other body parts. For the literary theorist no text is ever dissociated from its author or context. The battle

over Josef Conrad's soul is a good case in point. In a famous essay in 1974 "An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Chinua Achebe identified and highlighted the many signs and symbols of Conrad's latent and not so latent racism. Achebe's 'reading' of the text gained some currency. Essays were fired off in defence of Conrad, amongst them Caryl Phillips, who suggested that Conrad was in fact *attacking* the racism of colonialism. Very few chose to read the text *only* as a metaphorical journey or an inner exploration, but an interpretation like this is impossible if the reader refuses to disentangle the novel from its surroundings, from its time and from its author.

Of course interpreting the metaphors in Heart of Darkness may only be the result of indistinct writing, of a failure in the construction of the novel in the first place. The drawbacks of this approach are, for all but the most pedantic, that it drains some of the pleasure from a novel, what should be the collaboration between two creative people; writer and reader. This partnership, I suspect, is the reason why the novels of Vladimir Nabokov prove so instructive to so many writers, Nabokov is always making the reader work. I have a friend who when he first bought an Ipad, when they were very new, rearranged the tracklisting. He carefully relabelled both the names of the tracks and the artists, giving them new titles as he saw fit and inventing exotic names for the singers. Of course, he discovered he was powerless to talk about his musical tastes because there was no one else with his frame of reference.

Similarly, a while ago, when I still went to the Cinema, I developed a habit of entering a film screening with absolutely no prior knowledge, without having seen a poster or read a review. The pleasure lay in the total lack of prejudgement or context, it felt like a purist's approach. To begin with I'd pick the film with the best title but after a while I'd experiment by just asking for a ticket to the film on Screen 3. I saw the film 'Festen' this way, a movie with many twists of the plot including a surprise announcement at a family function. This development at least would have been given away by the previews. It was the purity of experiencing a genuinely unknown progression that was uplifting. When we pick up a novel, any novel, but especially a classic, we have some idea of what it is about.

What is hidden by academic approaches is the human dimension and the exploration of human experience. As early as 1922, TS Eliot was wryly humorous enough to publish a second volume appendix to the Wasteland in which he explained all the mysteries inherent in the first volume. His essay, one would assume, is a less valid approach than that of a critical annotation. Where would his essay stand in the pantheon of essays on the wasteland? How much insight did Eliot have? Was it a joke? That Eliot's creative faculty had a role to play in the construction is rarely acknowledged, at least beyond the idea that his creativity was influenced by material factors such as his nationality or his gender.

To the young litterateur there are several options. The basic approach would appear to be read, read, read and then write. It is a model that has worked well for generations. There are variations: read, live, write is another, whilst read, live, write, live is also popular. Mario Vargas Llosa, who has won the Nobel Prize, says that he alternates between reading and writing so regularly he can no longer tell what he is doing at any one time. Martin Amis, who hasn't won the Nobel Prize, divides his life, in equal measure, to reading, writing and living. It is unclear where sleeping comes in this scheme. William Faulkner's tripartite formula was experience, imagination and observation. Some people, harassed and harried by parents, find themselves enrolling on an English Literature course.

With the exception of academia, there is no route through to the labour market that would benefit from a specific English Degree. It could even be argued that an employer may see English Literature, often the choice of an undergraduate less certain of a career plan, as a disadvantage. The student prospectus of the Open University lists popular career paths as; ‘advertising, marketing, journalism, publishing, copy-writing and a wide range of other roles in the media and other creative industries.’ We can assume that the publishing option they suggest is likely to be publishing someone else’s novels.

There is, however, a post-graduate course that is proving increasingly popular with students who view writing as a sensible career plan. The University of East Anglia’s Creative Writing Programme was founded in 1970 by Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson, shortly after the foundation of the university itself. The M.A on offer was the first of its kind in the country and took the belief that; ‘there are a good number of young (and not so young) writers of originality and potential who would welcome the chance to develop their work on a postgraduate course within a university which emphasized the importance of contemporary writing.’ The original brief has expanded to include research (for which scholarships are available) and, in 1995, a B.A programme. Importantly, students operate in workshops, rather than seminars or tutorials. This distinction colours much of the criticism of university creative writing programmes, the discipline of English is seen by many academics as the critical study of literary forms rather than the *creation* of literary forms.

Perhaps, in response to these criticisms, university creative writing has expanded to include creative and critical writing and UEA, for one, ensures that ‘practice and critical understanding develop in tandem.’ The University also boasts of its connections and has hosted Nobel Winners Doris Lessing and Iris Murdoch for interviews at its year-round international Literary Festival. The courses offer the student contacts with agents, publishers and important connections in the world of theatre and television. The prospectus sums up the type of student who would most benefit from its tuition; ‘those whose work is self-aware rather than instinctive.’

The question of whether writing can be taught is one that will never be satisfactorily answered. Opponents of Creative Writing programmes might cite Shakespeare, Chaucer, Proust or Faulkner, to name but four random scribblers without a degree as examples of an untutored creative impulse at work. This would disregard the potential greats whose talent lay dormant because it was not harnessed. There is also a supposition in this argument that the creative writing student aspires to greatness rather than just completing a manuscript. The University of Iowa in the United States has produced sixteen Pulitzer Prize winners, but rather than selling this achievement, it has a refreshing explanation on its online prospectus;

‘this success, we believe (is) more the result of what the students have brought here rather than what they have gained from us. We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged.’

Courses such as these have earned the invective of many of those who reached the summit without climbing apparatus. Writing in the New Yorker Louis Menand claimed creative writing programmes are designed on the theory that students who have never published a poem can teach other students who have never published a poem how to write a publishable poem. Menand reserves his bile for the workshop process, identifying these courses as unacademic;

'People who take Creative Writing workshops get course credit and can, ultimately, receive an academic degree on the subject; but a workshop is not a course in the normal sense – a scene of instruction in which some body of knowledge is transmitted by means of a curricular script. The workshop is a process, an unscripted performance space, a regime for forcing people to do two things that are fundamentally contrary to human nature: actually write stuff then sit there while strangers tear it apart.'

Critical theory and creative writing degrees have their amateur equivalents; the reading group and the writer's retreat. The first experienced a brief fashionability a few years ago, prompted initially by Oprah Winfrey's Book Club and then Richard and Judy's British version. A fictional T.V series followed which placed the book club firmly in cozy suburbia and crystallized in the public's imagination the link between novels, living rooms, and extra-marital sex, with plenty of wine thrown in. There is a nice circularity in this – the same associations might have sprung to the mind of a Victorian in response to the notion of reading a novel – by the mid-nineteenth century the novel was perceived as vulgar, gossipy and strictly for women. The immediate currency of the book club is that without the trappings of critical apparatus, the book club reviewer must take an avowedly, and unashamedly humanist approach to a novel; 'I like this because of how it made me feel' or, 'this chapter reminded me of my childhood.'

The popularity of book clubs has had a large impact on publishing and the exposure lent by Richard and Judy could send sales into the stratosphere; Monica Ali and Audrey Niffenegger's careers took off after kind reviews on the sofa.

Advertisements for summer writer's retreats in the London Review of Books are traditionally placed next to that of the Infidelities introductory service. 'A room of your own, inspiring surroundings, good food and the company of other writers.' 'Has life become stale and routine? Get back that special spark.' This is not to belittle the services that any of these groups provide, but it does illustrate how a communal approach to literature appreciation and craft, as well as relationships, can be conducive environments. It also suggests that to many the environment in which to most effectively write is not a natural one and proposes the notion that something must change to precipitate creativity. Of course, identifying a want is not quite the same as fulfilling a need. Both the L.R.B and the Times Literary Supplement carry advertisements for short and long term letting of writer's homes, as if the very perspiration seeped into the soft furnishings might be sufficient to encourage, or even transmit creativity.

Such veneration also exists on a greater scale. Fidel Castro insisted on turning Hemingway's home into a museum, which would presumably have mystified Papa. Hemingway, rather than living in aspic saw museums all around him. Speaking of his voluminous reading he said; "They were a part of learning to see, to hear, to think, to feel and not feel. The well is where your juice is." Hemingway was able to recognize the utilitarianism of novels and equally their didacticism. Perhaps it is wrong to classify the various collusions with literature, perhaps Hemingway, Derrida and Richard and Judy share a single motivation, as yet undefined but no less real for that. They are searching for something they don't know, something elliptical that they can't explain and literature is in a position to give answers. In Matthew Arnold's eyes culture is "to know the best that has been said and thought in the world" but has the study of literature been organized to be of greatest use? There are answers in literature, but it can also ask the most perceptive questions, give and teach. There is a layered richness in writing that comes out under the microscope of engagement that is missed by Literary Theory. Literary Theory cannot analyse the forms of creativity. It is that engagement that we will look at in the next chapter.

3. Hiroshi Ishikawa

Henry, who runs a wonderful tutoring website called *The Tutor Pages* emailed me one day saying he'd given my details to a student. He described it as 'an interesting proposition' and 'an unusual situation'. The next day I received the first of many emails from Hiroshi Ishikawa.

Dear Mr Parkinson,

I have read Harry Potter series volume 1 through 5 with the assistance of English Teachers in Malaysia and Ne the next in the series 'Half-Blood Prince', if possible in the same manner in the U.K.

I will work under the conditions below;

1. About me: I am 64, male, retiree living in Tokyo

Scheduled date of arrival at London August 31st.

2. Total Lesson Hours: 150 hours (3 hours/day, 5 days/week, 11 weeks incl. extra dates)

3. Morning lessons are desired (90 minute lesson, 10 minute break, 90 minute lesson)

Starting date of lessons September 1st.

4. How to proceed lessons: I read the whole story beforehand and prepare a list of questions. During the lesson ask you questions, you correct pronunciation simultaneously and answer my questions.

5. Payment weekly advance in cash in UKP.

My Questions

Have you enjoyed reading HP series? Your brief questions about the book if any. Can you help me find accom neighbourhood? How long have you been teaching English?

Await your reply or further enquiries on your side.

Regards,

Hiroshi Ishikawa

I was interested primarily because it was a guaranteed three months work and I thought I could do it. On the debit side I hadn't read any of the Harry Potter series and I found the fuss surrounding JK Rowling and the cultish adoration amongst adults for what was essentially a children's series extremely off putting. It struck me, from what I had heard, that Rowling had

spliced together the more effective elements of Narnia, Oz and Camelot, and the resulting publishing phenomenon had been marketed to death. It was selling childhood to the children. Put simply - nothing that is that popular can be any good.

Dear Mr. Ishikawa,

Your email was forwarded to me personally by Henry and I read it with interest. I think I am in a position to help.

I have taught to both groups and individuals but your email interested me because I have always wanted to teach. I am a big fan of J.K. Rowling's work and was present two weeks ago when she read excerpts from her work at the school. The way in which Rowling has depicted the quaint serenity of an English school system and updated those same qualities in her work recognize a lot of this from my own school days. I would enjoy the challenge of working on the text with you.

I am free for the whole of September and have enough contacts to help you find accommodation.

Regards,

Nicholas Parkinson

Dear Mr. Nicholas Parkinson,

Thank you for your quick reply.

It would be appreciated if you could wait for a week for further action.

Best Regards,

Hiroshi Ishikawa

Exactly seven days later;

Dear Mr. Nicholas Parkinson,

Please be advised that I have an intention to take lessons from you if accommodation and meals are available.

For your information:

1) My background - Accounting

2) Arrival at Heathrow August 31 but one night stay at Heathrow during stopover on August 11th. It is advisable.

Best Regards,

Hiroshi Ishikawa

In the meantime I had a lot of reading to do. Rowling's ambitions had grown with every volume of the series. The first two books I polished off easily enough but the third and fourth volume were well over 500 pages. The book Hiroshi and I were tackling was the 'Half-Blood Prince', the penultimate volume in the series and itself 768 pages. I spent the whole summer reading those books, all the time not entirely sure what we would be doing with them when he arrived. Meanwhile Hiroshi was threatening to call the whole trip off because of the worldwide flu pandemic. I contacted the World Health Organization to reassure him and the last email before his stopover he seemed to have calmed down;

Dear Mr. Nicholas Parkinson,

With regard to the influenza, the information in the subject website seems to be helpful one to understand the

You could infer from the data that the situation in the UK is not an uneasy one at present.

Best Regards,

Hiroshi Ishikawa

A meeting room at the Sheraton Hotel at Heathrow Airport had been booked for the 11th of August stopover. I wrote his name on a piece of card and stood at Arrivals with the taxi drivers and the corporate chauffeurs. He arrived in the midst of the occupants of a Japanese Airlines flight. I just stood with the sign to my chest and a grin on my face and there he was, lugging a huge roller-suitcase half his size. I certainly don't believe he was over 5 foot and he was wearing a baseball cap. He looked like an enthusiastic pro-American millionaire just back from a golfing trip. At the Hotel, after a shower, he strode into the meeting room carrying a briefcase and ordered coffee for both of us. He explained that he had retired after a long career in accounting and had been leafing through a bookshop one day when he chanced upon the first volume of Potter. At this point Hiroshi opened his briefcase. I looked over his shoulder - there were several volumes of Potter bundled and taped together like notes of the same denomination in the case of a kidnapping bag man. He started to read me the first page of the first volume:

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.

Hiroshi had had an epiphany in that Tokyo bookshop. He knew what the words meant, but it was that final sub-clause – ‘thank you very much’ that threw him. He told me that he knew something was going on – that there was something about the context of the remark that wasn’t letting him in. He felt the frustration of being on the outside but he continued to read. He bought the book, polished it off and the next volume and the next and more and more. The world of Harry Potter intrigued him, put him under its spell, but simultaneous to this was the nagging feeling that he just did not ‘get’ the book. Gradually he hatched his plan – he needed to have these books explained.

Originally Hiroshi told me that his goal was to use J.K Rowling as a route to learning English properly. When I met him that first time his English was at a good standard, certainly better than the strange syntax of his emails had led me to believe. This motivation for the lessons seemed to dissipate over time and it became obvious that it was actually a total communion with Potter that drove him on. He was an extremist as I was to discover. He had spent the two years since retirement travelling the world and staying for three month periods in Malaysia, New Zealand and the Middle East. He had never been to the UK before, apart from Hotel stopovers and I tried interesting him in some of the attractions that London in autumn had to offer, but he just nodded benignly. As we said goodbye it was obvious he couldn’t wait for the sessions to start. He would return to the UK in two weeks; “I am looking forward to the fantasy to begin,” was almost his parting shot, smiling at me and checking to see I’d understood, that language hadn’t got in the way.

The sessions, as he had designed, began at 9.00 on Monday morning. We worked for 3 hours with a 10 minute break after 90 minutes. They would continue until 12.10 and I was paid for three hours of my time. Hiroshi and I sat side by side at the table each with a copy of ‘The Half Blood Prince’ and a note pad and pen. I would pile up next to me a dictionary, thesaurus, a book of Latin and Greek derivations (useful for Spells), and occasionally encyclopedias, maps or other reference books relevant to some minor point in the text. Hiroshi would begin reading. His reading voice was sharp, inflected with swallowed Japanese vowels and unsplit rotics. I would interrupt if a word was heavily mispronounced. His copy of the book would be annotated in red before the session. His prepared questions would fill a side of A4. We would read between 12 and 15 pages a day. Before arrival in the UK he had read the entire novel and before each session he would read a section to himself and make notes of questions to ask or passages that he needed elaboration or wider questions about the cultural context.

To his great surprise the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point.

A sentence like this would always leave Hiroshi nonplussed. If my explanation was not sufficiently enlightening I would have to pitch it a second or third time.

“Question: I know stab is to make incision and dictionary say ‘fleeting’ is passing quickly. How do these two factors coincide?”

“The Prime Minister is not literally stabbed. He merely feels the sort of pain akin to that of a stabbing and this feeling is temporary.”

“The feeling of a stabbing is in the form of pity”

“No, it is more that the feeling of pity takes the form of a feeling of being stabbed.”

At other times he struggled with English idioms;

“...the truth hit him with the force of a stampeding troll.” Is this a common expression?”

“No.”

It soon became apparent that any of J.K Rowling’s failings as a writer were immaterial. It really didn’t matter who was forming the writing as, analysed under the microscope of 13 pages a day, the text became pure abstraction. In fact, the subject areas explored by the Harry Potter novels, arcane and varied were often lit up by such microscopic treatment. It felt sometimes that no one, with the possible exception of Rowling herself had given these words such weight. Our deliberations were careful, considered and at times genuinely enlightening. Hiroshi wanted the text to come alive for him. I would attempt to enact the novel’s many onomatopoeia. If Harry was startled by a crashing and banging I would drop my teacup onto a saucer letting the teaspoon jump up. “What is pop?” He asked. We spent five minutes making popping noises with fingers in our cheeks.

Can’t be long now, it’d been a month

He read from his notes; “Pronoun omitted - straight to verb. Is this correct?”

“Quite correct.”

Under this analysis ‘not really’ equalled ‘quite negative’. A typical Hiroshi construct was ‘delete detail’. When Hermione recalled that she was holding hands with Fred ‘and everything’ Hiroshi would shout triumphantly “delete detail”. It was hard to argue. It was the first of many of his codes which owed more to double-entry book keeping than literature. Any omission in the verbs construction, particularly a past tense verb, had to be located and entered into the ledger, the gerund or participle neatly annotated in red. The first use of parenthesis, on page 546 was another red letter day.

If bad grammar worried Hiroshi, any kind of figurative speech terrified him. He was quite unable to cope with gazing at the world in anything but a straight line. It made one wonder if his travails with Potter were some extended torture he had set himself, surely magic and fantasy would be guaranteed to tie him in knots. It often did.

There is a scene in the book where Professor Dumbledore uses the Pensieve (an object used to review his memory using siphoned off excess thoughts) to follow his younger self down the street. Our lesson was derailed completely by the temporal shifts necessary to pursue the action and the panic this induced in Hiroshi. Unfortunately for us both, this incident happened a day or two after I had painstakingly explained an extended metaphor, and with renewed diligence Hiroshi had his metaphorical antenna up.

“Dumbledore is examining himself using the Third Person.”

“Well often he is, Hiroshi, but in this case the chase is real”

“This is not figuration?”

“No - it is a conceit. Old Dumbledore is following young Dumbledore down the street.”

He looked up at me amazed. “But this is not possible!”

“Much of this book is not possible Hiroshi. There is a lot of magic in this book.”

It was never a good idea to overestimate Hiroshi. It was clear that he considered metaphorical incident witchcraft enough and plain magic an intriguing conspiracy of possibilities. These heightened levels, so innately alien to him, clashed regularly, he was a novice struggling with forces he had only just learned the existence of. One of the frustrations of Hiroshi the learner was how little his facility improved. One might have thought that questions would dry as we progressed through the book, but my marginalia actually increased as we went on. Page 494 is almost illegible, the text disfigured by biro. He seemed incapable of learning a rule, so much so that *every* rhetorical question would be itemized and explained and *every* omitted pronoun had to be reinserted. A sign of progress might be followed by a relapse. Unhelpfully, J.K Rowling introduced Fleur, a character whose demotic Frenchness was rendered phonetically and this required a new colour of ink in Hiroshi’s copy of the book;

Zere is not much to do ‘ere at ze moment. Enjoy your breakfast ‘Arry

I recall one session in which I laboured for 40 minutes to explain a joke that Ron, one of the characters, had made. Diagrams were drawn. Looking back at my comments in the margin of page 340 is the single sentence “This man has no sense of humour!”

This isn’t to say that the sessions weren’t immensely enjoyable. One of the most fascinating elements of our work together was the Japanese Tea Ritual. When it became apparent that Hiroshi couldn’t stand English Tea I went into Soho and bought some Japanese equivalent he had recommended. After taking a sip he suggested that it would always taste better brewed in a Japanese Tea Pot and served in finger bowls. Having bought the equipment he announced that it was perhaps the quality of water available in Japan that gave the tea its distinct flavour. Scouring Brewer Street for spring water from Mount Fuji I served it and wondered if he would notice. ‘No,’ he said, ‘it’s just not the same.’

Our ten minute breaks began to follow a pattern. Keen to change the subject from Rowling and Potter, Hiroshi suggested we follow an ancient Japanese ceremony. Alternating daily, the person serving the tea would bow and the receiver would talk. The rule was that the subject was of the speakers choosing, and would be uninterrupted for ten minutes. Architecture, love, airports, gardens, cooking, baseball, laundry, sex, marriage. When the time was up there would be a brief, muttered thank you and seamlessly we would return to Hogwarts. Somehow, this ritual infected the whole procedure, lending the three hours the consistency of a sacred rite. When examining the text I developed a reverence to the moment, as if it were a state I could deliberately switch on and off. The important idea seemed to be that it was a ‘process’, a process that the bare constructs of the text would generate afresh.

It was a craftsman's technique – a workmanlike pleasure in dramatizing an extended passage, with ritualistic solemnity, the explanation, or to be clear, one possible explanation of it, an act of communion with the text. It is possible that I learned more from Hiroshi than he learned from me. He was the King of the Synonyms. 'Incidentally' was 'side-subject' 'embarrassing honesty' became 'excessive honesty' and Hermione's periodic 'trilling' was reworked as 'modulating like a bee in a bottle'. He reminded me at times of Alexander Perchov, the Ukrainian translator in Jonathan Safran Foer's 'Everything is Illuminated' who learned his English from a thesaurus and was always visiting 'famous nightclubs'. Often these abstractions were more interesting than the mapping of inner life or the explanations for the character's actions that I was also forced to outline. 'This is contempt and this is jealousy'; 'Harry's unconscious action is betraying him'; 'Ron has low morale and low self-esteem'. As these specifications came and went I would wonder at what level Hiroshi was actually enjoying the novel. He looked engrossed, his face nodding several inches from the text, the layering of the books many imponderables took up his waking day.

A week before his departure I asked him what he had thought of London. He mumbled something about 'grey skies' and when I next spoke to his landlady she told me he had hardly left his room for the duration of the stay, but always arrived for breakfast punctually and was continually harassed by the family's pet dog, which greatly amused her teenage children who had really taken to Hiroshi. She said that he was the perfect guest but perhaps he could do with a night off from his studies. I bought tickets to The Phantom of the Opera. Afterwards he said he had enjoyed it but unfortunately his poor English had not allowed him to adequately assess the situation on stage but that a second viewing would no doubt be enlightening.

I asked him where in the world he was considering going for the final book in the Harry Potter series; The Deathly Hallows. I was angling, not too subtly, for a return visit. He told me he was intrigued by Hawaii, that the climate in the UK had not been to his liking. I suggested that if he had difficulty finding an English teacher in Hawaii that I'd be happy to fly out. He didn't laugh. At Christmas he sent me a photo of him and a friend on Mount Fuji and explained that his plans for the final book were on hold due to a recent health examination; 'My body deteriorates.' I looked closely at the photograph, both of them had notebooks in their gloved hands, wrapped up warm against the mountain snow and Hiroshi had a pen behind his ear, his glasses resting on his head, as if interrupted in the course of his analysis of the substance of what it means to be alive on a beautiful Japanese mountain.

4. Actors

K.D is an actor and artistic associate with a South London Theatre Company. In 2006, they put on a production of 'Three Sisters' by Anton Chekov. As part of the rehearsal process they conceived of a dinner party, specifically designed to shed some light on the situations and characters of the play...

Q: So, whose idea was it to have a dinner party?

A: It was one of the cast members. She had trained at the drama school East 15 which is renowned for being very 'Method'. As part of the programme at East 15 there was an exercise they called 'The Project'. This was something they did every year and the students would all be given a scenario and a character and a huge resource of background information, who they were, their relationship with the other characters etc. They would enter whatever environment they belonged and live those characters for a week. In her year the scenario was an Amish village and they went to live in a camp for a week! I think East 15 don't do it anymore because it made everyone go mad.

At the time she was dating someone in her year and in The Project they were given the character of husband and wife and so they were living together 24/7, sleeping in a tent. Her 'husband' was given the note that he was having an affair and so he spent the whole time sneaking off into the woods to snog one of the other characters. It all got very out of hand. There was a famous year in which they did Nazis and Jews. I think they stopped it after that! It's a bit gimmicky for me; there is a point at which you stop learning.

Q: Did you pick the dinner party because you were having difficulties with that scene in the play?

A: No, we chose a dinner party because it was relevant to the show we were doing. I'm in a Harold Pinter play at the moment and the play starts with a couple having had an argument. The Director rehearsed the argument even though it wasn't in the play because everyone wanted to know what had happened. One of the things in Three Sisters that is different from today is the idea of class and one of the main reasons the dinner party was useful was that it allowed the servant characters to feel what it was like, momentarily, to be in a position of waiting on someone. Equally, it was useful for the middle class characters to feel waited on in as natural way as possible. A lot of the shared conversations in Three Sisters are about being 'at dinner' so it felt like a logical thing to do.

Q: Was it in costume?

A: Yes...but only to an extent. We weren't in full costume because we didn't have it at that point. I wore my practice skirt but more importantly for the all the women we had something tied around our waist to replicate the corset because it would mean you sit differently. We weren't in character when we arrived because we had arranged to bring some food with us and we gave instructions to the cooks as ourselves so catering wasn't too unpleasant for the unfortunate actors playing servants, and I certainly helped set up the tables. The scenario was worked on in advance.

Q: Was there any discussion in advance as to what to look out for or were you left to your own process?

A: Well interestingly, the Director didn't want to have anything to do with the dinner party! You can't really decide in advance what you are going to learn and if you go into a situation like that thinking 'I want to know this, that or the other' you aren't really being the character. The dinner party didn't give me anything specific about the play it just gave me a much richer life to draw on. Now there are some plays where this wouldn't be important but with Chekov there is so much material just under the surface.

Q: So rather like Hemingway's Iceberg Theory that the writer may omit things he knows truly enough as, he said, the dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water?

A: Yes, that's it.

Q: Was there a starting point? How did everyone know to begin?

A: I think it was signaled by everyone coming down to dinner. We all got changed upstairs and gradually descended. We weren't staging the actual dinner party in the play. There is a specific scene in *Three Sisters*, the first time Natasha meets the family and if we had recreated that we would simply have ended up rehearsing the scene. We set our party slightly later on so we all knew Natasha but didn't like her. We discussed the point we were in the play because it was important that the actors knew the point in time we were at.

Q: Did you remain in character for the duration of the evening?

A: Yes, because in a situation like that if someone breaks character it just becomes ridiculous. There is however, only so far you would go with that...

Q: I know, I spent some time living in silence in a French Monastery and we were specifically told that if you wanted something it would be better to whisper 'pass the salt' rather than engage in any contorted semaphore. That a whisper was more 'silent' than saying nothing...

A: Yes, but it was set up well so we didn't really need to break character... well, until towards the end...

Q: Obviously in a scenario like that there are all sorts of behaviours you would indulge in that you wouldn't in real life. You will be used to that as an actor with a script, but of course this wasn't scripted and there must have been some characters who were treated disgracefully. I'm thinking of Kulygin...

A: ... and Amphisa. She had a horrible time.

Q: Afterwards she said she didn't enjoy it?

A: (Firmly) She had a horrible time.

Q: Not even in a vicarious "I'm an Actor, I'm playing a Maid" way?

A: No. It was pretty horrible. There were genuine difficulties. I was playing Masha who during the course of the dinner party does her best to avoid Kulygin, her husband, for the whole night. A week or so earlier the Director had asked me to take a walk with Vershinin, the Battery Commander and the object of Masha's affections. We were recreating the moment when Vershinin tells Masha that he has to leave. In the meantime she sent Kulygin off to write a love letter to me and finally she called us all back and made us demonstrate what we had come up with. Vershinin and Masha played out this passionate, intense scene and then I had to watch Kulygin read this beautiful, terribly heart-rending love letter. I cried a lot and felt really awful.

Q: That's interesting because that might be the reaction you might have as Kas but not as Masha.

A: Well if Kulygin had been that honest with her, she might. But then of course, he never is. The point is she that she despises him because he glosses over it and tells her he doesn't mind, which only makes her despise him even more because he is so weak.

Q: Did you feel at any point that your reaction was different from that of the character's?

A: Well that's part of being an actor, dealing with that. Luckily, in this case I had a similar set of reactions... maybe it was the casting that was clever and manipulative! At the dinner party I remember desperately trying not to sit next to Kulygin and then periodically sneaking off to snog Vershinen in the toilet.

Q: That might be a difficult situation for an actor but at least you didn't have to be a Maid.

A: Yes, being so utterly at someone's beck and call is so foreign that it really is hard not to find it irritating or frustrating. When we did Homer's Odyssey one of the things we had to learn was that being a slave wasn't irritating. It was just what was.

Q: In terms of the structure of the evening, how was it set up? Did you have someone doing the serving?

A: The Maids did the serving. We had a couple of members of the production team to help out, to play the roles of maids as well. Dinner was useful because it is so self-contained. There is so much ritual to it and it is, in a way, a perfect vehicle for exploring something because of its inherent structure.

Q: Did you actually sit down and have a proper dinner, with wine?

A: Three courses, I think.

Q: A three course meal?

A: Yes

Q: Did you get drunk?

A: Yes

Q: So there was a lot of wine?

A: No, not much wine but there was a lot of Vodka.

Q: Vodka? And that was deliberate? How did you drink it?

A: Shots.

Q: Vodka shots. Excellent stuff. So someone had done their research and that was typical of the period?

A: Yes, everyone drank Vodka. Even the women. Down in one. (Mimes the necking of Spirits and slams imaginary glass down.)

Q: As you became drunker to what extent did the process become more or less useful?

A: There was a point of drunkenness that I think was very useful for me. Having made the decision that my character was drowning her sorrows, even though there was no massive evidence that this was what she did (there was no evidence to the contrary either) the evening became about how she covered it up. When Kulygin left the party he tried to make me leave with him. This happened a few times in the play. But... then the night got a bit hazy for me and I woke up in the middle of the night on the sofa still wearing my corset.

Q: In character?

A: (Laughs) Don't be stupid.

Q: So you might say that the evening degenerated?

A: Yes, but I do think that we stopped at some point, but as I say, my memory of that part of the evening is a little unreliable.

Q: Did you have a debrief a few days later? Did you talk about the dinner party again?

A: Not really. To be honest, it was, in many respects, a personal exercise for a lot of the actors. There might be some actors who might find this kind of method off-putting for them but it isn't the type of actor I would want to work with. There is a definite strand of the profession who would sneer at this sort of thing. I remember Colin Cook, my old Head of Acting at LAMDA would have called them 'technicians' - people who don't go any deeper than that. I also think that as people get older they become more scared of playing.

Q: So you felt it was playing?

A: (Firmly) It *is* playing.

Q: I think you're right.

A: It's not just actors. All adults love being given permission to play. Ian McKellan once talked about how babies are born with the ability to put themselves in imaginary worlds and as adults we forget to do that. Actors are people who haven't forgotten.

Q: I know. One of the things I've noticed is that if one's life goes according to plan, the last opportunity within the education system to come up with a piece of creative writing is the age of 13. The vast majority of adults out there haven't written a story for 20 or 30 years or more.

A: Yes. You are conditioned to think it is childish to imagine. Perhaps that's why some people think actors are juvenile.

Q: Does this approach feel different from a more orthodox rehearsal with a script?

A: I think the best rehearsals are a combination, in that, any rehearsal period that doesn't include any playing is so limited. One of the reasons I hated working on another play I did recently, 'Extremities' by William Mastrosimone, was that literally all we did was read the play, read the play, read the play, then block the play, run the play, block the play, run the play and we *never* looked at anything outside of that. When I tried to suggest that we tried something different, I was bashed down as 'wanky'. For me, in Teatro Vivo even when we are working with scripts we always play because that is what actors do. They play. If you want to find anything unusual, anything exciting, I think you have to allow a certain amount of play. It gives you freedom, and it gives you the ability to take risks and it doesn't matter if it cocks up. It puts you in the frame of mind where you're not thinking, you're just doing.

Q: Are you talking Stanislavski here?

A: I think both Stan and Lee Strasberg would say that this is a bastardization of their ideas. However, my old teacher at LAMDA used to say 'we're just giving you a toolbox, a lot of different techniques to try and when you leave here you'll pick the ones you like best. There'll be ones you never touch again but one day you'll be really stuck and you'll remember it and it'll come in very handy.'

Q: We've talked about technique but it strikes me that there were no rules to what you were doing at the dinner party. Would you say that there were rules at work that evening?

A: I think there are a certain number of rules that come from being a professional actor.

Q: For example?

A: The biggest rule is that you don't break character.

Q: Were there any others?

A: Mmm... (long pause)

Q: How about going too far? What would have been going too far?

A: It's really hard to answer that because it would entirely depend on the situation and there have been times when I have felt that things have gone too far because what was happening just wasn't warranted by the situation...

Q: ...but if person feels something is warranted because their character is behaving in a certain way and the other person has a real sense that this *isn't* necessary I suppose it is the prerogative of the person who feels things have gone too far to say 'Stop!'

A: Yes. There are also obvious rules - don't do anything illegal, don't assault someone. Just don't be stupid about it. I think on the whole actors are pretty good about not going too far.

Q: If this was a useful procedure why haven't Teatro Vivo gone to those lengths since?

A: We do, but within the confines of the rehearsal studio. It is quite a difficult thing to set up and some plays merit it more than others. Chekov is so rich and dense, it is so layered, that the deeper you delve into it the more you find out about your character and the 'forms' of the play.

So, the second and third time you do it you think ‘ah, that refers to this, and this to that. There are so many different ways to say something that it is sometimes only after months that you appreciate the layers. You wouldn’t take this approach for something like *Alice in Wonderland* because it wasn’t a rich enough script.

Q: Is it easy to replicate the type of dialogue found in the play when you are improvising off-script? To what extent are you mimicking the style of the playwright?

A: Well with Shakespeare you don’t even try. You’d never get it right and it would just end up tying you in knots. The danger with someone like Harold Pinter, whose style is so recognizable, is that the result is cod-Pinter. Truthfully, replicating writing style is not at all how an actor would see it. You would have a simple approach, if your character swore all the time you’d keep that or if they spoke in short or slow sentences or paused a lot in thought, you would work that in. You certainly wouldn’t talk in the style of the play or of the dialogue in general because that would not be your character. That’s the playwright’s style.

5. The Cloud of Unknowing

“...But there is a comforting feeling,” said Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev meditatively, “one can borrow on the strength of a legacy. Doesn’t it amuse you to imagine that one day, on this very spot, on this lakeside, beneath this oak tree, a visiting dreamer will come and sit and imagine in his turn that you and I once sat here? Try to experience that strange, future, retrospective thrill...all the hairs on the soul stand on end!”

From ‘The Gift’ by Vladimir Nabokov

If the many layers of a play can be revealed by an intense engagement with that play, doesn’t it follow that a novel must contain layers that a single reading leaves untouched? If a musician plays the same piece of music twice does he or she play it identically? In the same way that choreography and musical notation are charts for the dancer or the musician, the reader is guided by the words on the page amidst an unfolding narrative. Perhaps one day we will recognize the great readers of literature the same way we admire Glenn Gould or Yehudi Menuhin their interpretations of Bach and Mozart.

It is in our childhood reading that our antennae become attuned to the various tricks of the writers’ trade and classic children’s literature is utterly playful; full of flirtations with form and suggestions of the transforming power of the novel, even as it is being read. The rabbit hole, the wardrobe and the cyclone of Carroll, Lewis and Baum stand as sub-structures within the pages of a childhood novel and are all the more magical for it. They are beautiful introductions to altered states; in fact I cannot think of a book that has shaped me more as a person than *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. There was, however, a small corruption at the heart of my initial readings of the book. I had an early 1970s edition published to coincide with the release of a new film adaptation. Instead of the illustrations of the original I had ‘colour’ photographs (back in the days when colour was a selling point) of Fiona Fullerton as Alice and Michael Crawford as the White Rabbit. These are the mental images of the characters I took away from the novel and I sometimes wish, in answer to Alice (‘What is the use of a novel without pictures or conversation?’) that instead of taking my cues from photographs, I had had only Carroll’s language to guide my imagination. Thinking back, my memories of the sequel novel ‘Through the Looking Glass’ are darker, more in tune with an English Grimm brother

than the technicolours of the original. We only have to examine the difficulties in reading a novel having already watched its film version to see the effect actors and a film set have on the constructed contents of a novel.

The voraciously reading child is often wrongly compared to an escapist, and the great children's authors have hung up veils and built labyrinths to separate this world from the worlds on the page. Just the titles themselves are redolent of the unmasking of masks; 'the Box of Delights', 'The Secret Garden' etc. My feeling is all this searching for 'queerness' and 'curiousness' is the early unveloping of layers and the gestation of an inner life.

In C.S Lewis's book, as Lucy makes her way through the sensual delights of fur against her skin, kicking mothballs at her feet, the coats are transformed into something hard, rough and even prickly, they become branches of trees and the mothballs turn to crisp snow. She becomes aware of a second layer; chapter one of *A Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is called 'Lucy looks in the wardrobe' and Chapter Two 'What Lucy finds there'. The suggestion is that looking and finding are two separate actions and what you find depends very much on how you look. The title of Chapter three; 'Edmund and the Wardrobe' itemizes Edmund's discoveries in the same piece of bedroom furniture. Lucy encounters the kind faun Mr Tumnus whilst Edmund is seduced by the sexy Queen of Narnia offering him Turkish delight.

6. The Toolbox

One afternoon I was watching the Oprah Winfrey show on TV. One of Oprah's sidekicks is Dr Phil McGraw, a balding clinical psychologist with a moustache, who offers no nonsense advice with a southern twang. He accepts very few excuses from people for their bad lives, bad marriages or simply, bad attitude.

Towards the end of his segment Dr Phil turned to camera and offered up this wonderful combination of nutritionism and Zen Bhuddism. Suggesting that the audience, like him, have eaten apple after apple their whole lives without giving it a second thought, (although a glance at his studio bound audience indicates it might not just have been apples) Dr Phil offered an alternative method. He recommended giving the apple your undivided attention:

Just concentrate on the apple and don't think of anything else. Most importantly be still. Being focused and slowing down will allow you to truly savour the qualities the apple offers: its sweetness, aroma, freshness, juiciness and crispness.

He went on to suggest an intense way of looking at the apple;

What kind of apple is it? What colour is it? How does it feel in your hand? What does it smell like?

This flirtation with the apple is to be accomplished before you go in for the kill;

Then, give the apple a smile and slowly, mindfully take a bite and chew it, savouring the taste of the apple and its nourishment. Immerse yourself in the process 100% and you become fully aware of the present moment, you experience what the apple offers you, and you become more alive.

To a degree this technique, (which I've never tried, preferring to pulverize apples in a blender), depends on the quality of the apple. It does, however, put its finger on a reverence for the moment that has useful applications. For many, the delight of barbeque season is the opportunity to prepare and eat food outside like our earliest ancestors, with the summer promise of how much the weather enhances the cooking and flavour of the food.

This same sublime intensity was noticeable in the sessions with Hiroshi Ishikawa. Whilst alien and testing at first, and shot through with my anxiety over what exactly it was that we were doing, our time together was occasionally lit up when I glanced over at the expression of delight on his face as we delved deeper into a book which obviously fascinated him. Never having had the opportunity to repeat our scheme with anyone else I'm unable to tell whether a similar approach to a favourite novel would benefit others, and it has to be said that Hiroshi brought his own peculiar sensibilities to bear on Rowling, rather than the other way round. I vividly recall the hidden reserves of patience I unearthed but also how much I learned myself. One of the unacknowledged bi-products of teaching is how much the teacher discovers at the point of explanation and I'm grateful to Hiroshi for a formula that seems to have served him well whilst working with several different teachers.

The precision with which he approached the work, not to say his timekeeping and the gentle exhalation of breath that was the tea-ritual, created an environment of anticipation and low-level excitement; a hard-working laboratory dedicated to 'the work'. Hiroshi's almost clerical love of ritual, his sense of spiritual drama, his attentive, detailed, systematic reading was, I would say, highly skilled. Recently I was asked to give a talk on my most successful learning experience as part of a workshop on teaching adults at Lewisham College. I mentioned that I was intrigued, after working with Hiroshi, by how Discipline, Intensity and Ritual could be applied to teaching. I wrote the three words in big capital letters on the white board. Perhaps I'm over sensitive, but I gathered from the faces of the audience, who were mostly students, that I had transgressed some hidden dimension to the Victorian era, as if I were standing there wearing a mortar board and waving a pointed stick. These words are *deeply* unfashionable and there was polite skepticism over whether enough people 'learn that way' to make it useful. I could only say that, amidst all the talk of different learning styles, that I had learned more by applying those three words than I ever did taking notes at university.

So, what if this technique was tweaked to make it less specific to a Japanese accountant and extended to a workshop approach? The texts (the word must suffice until we come up with an alternative) could be grouped by theme, for example, 'the sea' and 'the mountain', 'broken' or even 'lions in the jungle'. It remains to be seen if some sort of thematic resonance will emerge from a carefully selected set of books and poems about cars or trees or whether these categories can ever really be divorced from their political context and re-engaged with their metaphorical clout, I'm quite prepared to admit that there might be little difference between a course on 'horses in literature' and one on 'Women in Post-War Literature'. Alternatively, one text could be investigated in depth. There is more than enough in a work like Anna Karenina and the modern Ulysses to play with for months. For those who think in terms of categories, these sessions could be classified as Creative Reading.

Given the workshop format there would be no need for postulations from the person up the front because, a form that takes for a pedagogue various works of literature, needs nothing more than a facilitator, and as we would anticipate individual and personal reactions to the texts, a group dynamic in which to foster and then collate those effects should maintain momentum, with direction gently guided by the facilitator.

There are indeed pitfalls to all this high seriousness (as Jean Des Esseintes discovered) and given some of the terminology I have used we could easily call this approach a ‘technique’. The usefulness of this word is that it builds a distance from academia (although some may say that there is no danger of these explorations ever being mistaken for academia), but also that it positions us alongside practices like the Alexander Technique and Gurdjieff’s ‘work’¹ as systems that promote well-being; techniques that give us new ways of looking at the world, and harness different elements of our interior life. Intensity relies on the level of application demonstrated by the participants, but as well as being hard work, my sessions with Hiroshi were playful and fun, though perhaps only fun on the level a Radio 4 panel game is fun. This group mentality would also preserve the work from its direct antithesis, literary theory, although I’m very much aware this could merely be my attempt to make the solitary acts of reading and writing more sociable, more adrenalized. Adrenalin has always struck me as dangerous during the writing process, whereas, by comparison, I have often witnessed actors’ performances come alive because of it.

The tools I am about to outline are ways of looking at literature. None of them are entirely new, some borrow from other art forms, and others are a change of emphasis from standard models of studying literature. They have in common a desire to mimic the act of discovery that makes reading a great writer or a great novel so exciting. Could a course be taught that takes out of the text as much as literary theory puts in? And in nominating this course, what would be the aim; thesis, performance, a sharpening of writing skills, or indeed something less tangible, something that provokes the senses? A search as capricious as a crossword.

Lectio Divina and the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola

In constant combinations of reading and writing the student is improved as a wave breaks against the shore. Just as a great conversationalist provokes us to wittier and more various talk and the good footballer is elevated by playing with a great team, we have all been prompted by others to approach a book in new ways. Many people report certain novels that accompany them their whole lives and with each periodic reading a new layer is unearthed as the advancement in their own age uncovers what was once hidden. Conversely, it is often the case that when we return to a work we once loved it feels very ordinary and has none of the effect it had previously. How much of this is due to the ideas and effects of the book having become part of the reader? Has the reader simply worked the novel into their life without realizing and so feels only disappointment when the revelations that were once so vivid now seem so underwhelming?

By contrast, I always found literary theory drained me of any desire to see the book ever again. But whereas the French theorists demanded that no text be read without one eye on its context, the toolbox that I suggest, under the umbrella heading of contagious fiction, only generates afresh.

¹ University courses make no references to the transformative powers of literature, never mind certain health benefits!

These techniques are there to be *developed*, and I propose a variety of approaches, the first of which focuses on an intense reading. For all the pedantry Hiroshi brought to Rowling, I found myself wondering if, just as an actor after a performance will ask an audience member who has come to chat, not whether they liked the Play but *what* they liked about it and which parts specifically; is the writer on a quest for the hyper-attentive reader? Surely no novelist who has put in the hours, would ever be comfortable with their work read so very, very cursorily?

There are precedents for this almost devotional relationship with the text. They are to be found, unsurprisingly, not within the disciplines of Literature, or within academic institutions, but in several obscure practices within history of the Christian Church.

It was in the 12th Century that *Lectio Divino* was formalized into a 4 step system, prior to that St Ambrose had taught it to St. Augustine, a man with a wide-screen sense of the proportions of life. The Benedictines defined the process of scriptural reading, appreciating the capacity of the Bible, as the Word of God, to offer an opportunity to know Him through his writing. Importantly, the four movements *were not* a theological analysis – it seems that even in the 12th Century there was an acknowledgement of the limits of man’s abilities to interpret the words of others. These movements were;

- Read
- Meditate
- Pray
- Contemplate

The scriptures were ‘performed’ (if this is the right word) as sacrament, as, because the Word is incarnate in scripture, it can thus touch and then teach its readers and hearers. Once a calm and tranquil state of mind has been achieved, there follows a slow reading of a particular passage. This is done deliberately, and some might say ponderously and can be repeated several times. Having achieved this, the meditation process then involves listening for the word of God in what has just been read, the illumination that His voice will bring and the consequent impact of it upon the passage. This is followed by a prayer which may take the form of a two way conversation. The last movement is contemplation, which seals the union with God.

In another metaphysical analogy, *Lectio Divina* has been compared to feasting on the word of God, with the four movements resembling the biting, the chewing, the savouring, and the digestion of the word of God, an ecclesiastical approximation of Dr. Phil’s approach to eating an apple.

There are several methods but most suggest that the text to be studied is chosen carefully and that the reader finds a comfortable position and allow themselves to become silent. The passage can be long or short, but is often merely a word and the reader is advised to focus on their breathing and to enjoy the silence. The text is to be read and the reader is warned not to expect anything too profound immediately and not attempt to reach for something that is not there, but rather wait for the substance to reach for the reader;

Take the word or phrase into yourself allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. Do not be afraid of distractions. Your own memories and thoughts are part of this process.

It is certainly true for me that I often switch off whilst reading a novel and begin to contemplate some detail in my life or recollection from the past, all the while continuing to read without taking anything in. This dual process can continue for up to a page (It is rare to actually turn the page in this state). When I finally catch myself I have to double back and re-read. Often these digressions have been prompted by the text (equally often they are symptoms of a distracted mind). To be generous, it is almost as if some novels, the great ones, have a surplus of material poured into a vessel that cannot contain it, and our periphery thoughts are other books that will never be written, or thoughts that will never be spoken. Whatever they are, these thoughts are a response, a suggestion that reading is never passive.

The practice of *Lectio Divina* expects a dialogue with God the author, an interaction with the text. This approach was developed to incubate an understanding of a living Word, but then, I cannot corroborate this, not having attempted the technique I am unsure of the exact nature of the supernatural transaction. My own reading, on the other hand, is now mostly confined to public transport and to be more specific, it is an activity that takes place as I glide along rails, the jerky stop/start rhythm of buses and cars making reading nauseously impossible. The solitary practice of reading in a public arena has strange side-effects. I recall finishing an incredible novel on a rush hour commuter train and literally having to fight the impulse to applaud, so vivid was the novel's conclusion. In a theatre or at a concert no one would think twice about reacting so spontaneously.

In modern times the practice of *Lectio Divina* has enjoyed resurgence as a group activity with the endorsement of Pope Benedict. Passages are read aloud and often repeated with a different focus, their meaning gently considered from a different angle. Advocates of the technique talk of acquiring a rhythm which they then take into daily life and how often their concerns, relationships, hopes and aspirations naturally intertwine with their meditations on the scriptures.

There seems little history of using religious techniques as a means of acquiring greater understanding in the secular world, despite the language used bearing a notional similarity to some in the field of education. We talk about the teachings of Christ and of how prayer can deepen spiritual understanding, but there has been scant study of the techniques used. This is perhaps due to the different taxonomies. Today, teaching is increasingly viewed as a science, the focus of educational research.

The spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola

Amongst Jesuits in Spain, St Ignatius developed his spiritual exercises in the 16th Century, an attempt to provide a precise scheme to the reading of the Bible. The course was to be completed over 30 days and broken up into 4 week sections. As with *Lectio Divina* the work was designed to be completed in retreat and includes many deprivations and sacrifices that have no bearing on our subject (although they perhaps illuminate the reference to Ernest

Hemingway in Paris in the next chapter). What is interesting, however, is the approach that the spiritual exercises take in week one to visualization;

By an effort of memory, I will recall the first sin, next I will use my reason to think about it, then my will, striving to remember and think about all this, in order to develop a sense of utter shame, as I compare myself with the angels' one sin.

The retreatant is then advised to visualize the sin of anyone who has gone to hell and commit it to memory, 'recalling the gravity and monstrous nature of the sin committed by man'. Of course, this doesn't sound a lot of fun and I'm certainly not advocating anything similarly grueling, only possible applications of the imaginative facility to a work of fiction.

The meditations form part of a month-long course with detailed notes and directions for each day's work. A typical day will start with a meditation or a preparatory prayer and end with a discussion; which, in the Thomas Corbishley translation of St Ignatius's instructions he calls a colloquy;

The colloquy is really the kind of talk friends have with one another, or perhaps the way a servant speaks to his master.

In between the retreatant is given the job of imagining, and tasked with visualizing the setting for a variety of Biblical episodes;

- *Christ hanging on a cross. Seeing the state Christ is in, nailed to a cross, let me dwell on such thoughts as present themselves.*
- *The place of nativity. Is the cave spacious or cramped? Low or high? How is it furnished?*
- *Look at the persons, Our Lady, St. Joseph, the servant girl and after He is born, the infant Jesus. I must see myself as an impoverished attendant, not fit to be there, but watching and studying them, looking after all their wants as if I were actually present, in the spirit of complete and respectful subservience. Then I should think of myself to derive some benefit.*

The last example demonstrates a novelist's awareness of characterization and offers a general encouragement to go and create. The exercises don't make clear the extent of the free hand that the retreatant has in creating the image of the nativity, and presumably the compilers of St Ignatius's exercises come from a base position that God is guiding the retreatant's imagination throughout the process. As such it is difficult to measure the true creative force that may or may not be at work. It is, however, interesting that the exercises suggest a practical benefit from a stock skill of the writer's craft - that is, the power to imagine a scene and then substantiate it.

What are we left with? Free from doctrinal niceties what remains is an intense book group of attentive readers. Perhaps what remains beyond that, after all the cultural baggage is removed from the waiting room, is in fact, only the quality of our listening.

However, without the fervor of religious discovery, our intense investigations lack a focus. It is hard to develop a reading intensity when your day to day reading tends to be recreational. The daily bubble of life's routine is enough for most people and a good book is the chance to invert life's daily characteristics and switch off and relax. This is entirely

justifiable. The scheme I'm attempting to come up with here, though, is for those who want a *greater* engagement with literature, and this requires a greater effort. Perhaps we can examine the motivations of those who read books as part of a degree course. What is the goal that channels the mind of a literature student? For some, it is undoubtedly the qualification that lies in store for them after three years of providing essays at regular intervals and a final year dissertation. These minor publication events are the feedback of the degree, several thousand words on an aspect of the course by a certain deadline and the necessity to collate material over a range of texts. Often a theory is proposed which must then be discussed, but often the essay is an attempt to answer a question.

The Question

Having just let go of a whole series of religious analogies we can pause, somewhat inelegantly, to observe another one. Zen Buddhism uses questions as part of its meditation techniques; queries such as "When are you?" and "What happens next?" By focusing on these puzzles the questioner, ideally, pushes back certain assumptions about experience and moves towards a pure cognition. That's the theory.

The question drives people, it is the question that moves people toward any religion, it prompts philosophers to think and explorers to travel and similarly, what pushes a reader to continue reading is the puzzle of the book. These puzzles range from common or garden murder mysteries to rosebud-style origin laments; who really raped Justine in Lawrence Durrell's quartet, to more existential enquiries; will Henderson, in Saul Bellow's novel ever satisfy the needs of his spirit? We have already discussed that Alice, playing proxy for the reader investigates the rabbit hole (as she falls; 'do cats eat bats? Do bats eat cats?') The university course will apply a question to the text, but will do so from outside of the text, promoting value judgments and treating the events and the characters as fiction;

- 'Identify places where Marlow expresses distance from his reader in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'. What parts of his experience does he think they will be unable to relate to and why?'

Never, will such a course ask questions from the perspective of the characters.

- What impression of Mr. Kurtz develops in Marlow's mind as he travels upriver?

Mortimer Adler in his guide to intelligent reading 'How to read a book' says that the reader of a work of fiction 'has not grasped the whole story until they can summarize its plot in brief narration.' He regards this as evidence of the unity of a novel. He is right in so much as it is via plot that a world is rendered. The machinations of the characters take place against a background of a craftily created world and we take pleasure in successful worlds, but roll our eyes at the odd dud - clunky exposition, or implausible narrative twists. By contrast, certain readers find it easy to inhabit created worlds. Perhaps they measure the escape that reading famously offers by how much they enjoy living in a specific literary landscape. By this measure, pose them an essay question from the perspective of an inhabitant of this world and they may have no problem answering it. They may even have fun answering it - completing a type of literary jigsaw puzzle. This is an approach to fiction that has already been embraced by

computer games. Elaborate worlds are concocted and players are invited in to make their own histories, their own fictions amidst the furniture and ornaments of a pixilated world.

Adler's book, written in 1940 is a very useful approach to reading non-fiction. (Adler once admitted he would only watch television with a pencil and paper in hand, taking notes as he went.) By his own admission, his ideas cannot be so readily applied to fiction. His book, however, is full of examples of how the didactic properties of novels can be harnessed in ways that are utterly un-academic. Aware that an act of communication is going on, he recommends an entire scheme for the reader to best understand it; from defining the exact meaning of certain words, to 'x-raying' it by coming to terms with its structural integrity – skim reading initially, studying the contents and index pages, underlining key words and continually summarizing its arguments. Adler suggests that the purchasing of the book is only the prelude to ownership of it, that the reader must take full possession of the book, filling it with marginalia, thus making it part of themselves.

I remember an English teacher at school who was similarly enthusiastic about damaging his copies of the set text. (He had been a jobbing actor before giving it all up to become an English teacher. His first choice for us, when we were thirteen was Peter Shaffer's play 'Equus', full of swearing and bestiality. He would gush authoritatively on the subject of stagecraft and rush around the school buildings with his scarf flowing. He quickly became known as 'The Actor'). The Actor insisted on pupils writing notes in the book margins and would proudly demonstrate his own copy, with post-it notes marking pages, whole chapters folded and dog-eared, and half the front cover ripped off. He often seemed on the verge of hurling it against the wall, so delighted was he by the malleable properties of his book. I can't imagine what he would have made of the Kindle.

Reciprocal reading

It is established that the purchaser has property rights over a book, but rarely is it acknowledged the extent of involvement the purchaser-turned-reader may have over the content of the book. I would suggest that the ability to enjoy a novel is less an innate skill born out of the reader's gift of perception coinciding with the author's gift of description; but is in actual fact a reciprocal skill. The author and the reader are working together, in various combinations, and at times it is possible for them to meet as much as halfway. At its heart reading a novel is collaboration. Consider this example;

We turn our attention to the left-hand characteristics. They were flatness as regards the river, verticality as regards the wall behind it, and darkness as regards both. These features made up the mass. If anything could be darker than the sky it was the river underneath. The indistinct summit of the facade was notched and pronged by chimneys here and there, and upon its face were faintly signified the oblong shapes of windows, though only in the upper part. Below, down to the water's edge the flat was unbroken by hole or projection.

'Far from the Madding Crowd' Thomas Hardy.

Hardy saw himself primarily as a poet. Whilst his novels included many examples of his poetic gift, the description above seems exacting and demonstrates a preoccupation with the geometry of dark shapes. Hardy takes up a promontory that includes us, the readers, and his

style appears as clipped and workmanlike as that of an architect embarking on an initial assessment of a building project.

But for all his attention to detail there is so much we *don't* know about the scene;

- Chimneys placed here and there. Where? How far apart were they? What type of chimney? A contemporary design? Were they in good shape or a state of disrepair?
- Does the scene come from a perspective? If this is the potential view of a person standing at the location, what is the scene behind them? If they switched their point of view a degree would the optical effects that Hardy describes vanish?
- The river is described as flat? How flat? Surely a lake has more a capacity for flatness than a river? So, was it gurgling, trickling or flowing? Surely never stagnant.

Before we have a chance to ponder these possibilities, and perhaps before we even have chance to take in the limited scope of Hardy's description, he has Sergeant Troy throwing snowballs at one of the windows ('Morsels of snow'), all this nature is abandoned and it is now human characteristics under the microscope. The reader continues filling in the gaps, their imagination placing a tree here, or the sound of a church bell there, fleshing out the scene.

Thomas Hardy was chosen as an example because it was his express desire to depict the County of Wessex (a fictional amalgam of various West Country counties) before industrialization changed it forever. His rural tales, sometimes criticized for sentimentalizing their characters and settings, (in the 1895 preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* he described Wessex as 'a merely realistic dream country') were, in part, an act of preservation, and this is palpable in long, descriptive passages in which he discusses agricultural machinery or peculiarities of local dialect. '*Far from the Madding Crowd*' contains an interminable exchange between a group of cider drinking farm workers, in which the writer seems to be enjoying transcribing their speech idioms in detail.

So, if Thomas Hardy requires help from the reader to provide a specification of a scene, how much more help will a writer need who has less concern with preservation through depiction? My suggestion is that within reading lies a process. This process continues throughout the reading of a novel until the reader becomes in tune with the writer. It is a form of **reciprocal reading**.

So where does the process start? Educational research has gone to enormous lengths to illuminate learning processes and modern Linguistics provides a scientific rationale of language. Both disciplines have a tremendous amount to say about how our brains develop. My interest, however, is in what happens when our synapses have reached the level of maturation (one might even say sophistication), where reading a complicated, multi-faceted novel becomes an engaging experience. So, having begun at an early age with the narrative arc of a lost cat or a muddled duck, we now recognize, seemingly innately, the tricks of the writer's trade, and our duties as a reader - the point at which we have developed a willingness to go about the busy business of reading without fuss because we have built up an apparatus that has been assembled specifically to glean all we can from a novel. This is the apparatus we are already in possession of before we start reading the novel. We refine it over the course of a lifetime, but it is always there, to greater or lesser effect. I believe, though, there is secondary process that takes place *whilst* we are reading a novel. The style of the writer will gradually infiltrate the apparatus

of the reader. Depending on the individual writer (and to an extent the individual reader) the infiltration may be instantaneous (some styles are utterly contagious -a generation of American males spent their lives pretending to be Hemingway) or it may take place gradually over the course of the novel. For some people the contagion will continue after the novel has been completed, they may take it into their own work or it may form part of their being in a more subtle way - poetry, for example, often lives inside people in ways that are barely perceptible.

My contention is, however, that a writer *needs* the reciprocal skills of a reader. No writer can cover everything. They are bound by words, bound by their selection of content and perspective and, in order to fill in the gaps, the generous reciprocity of the reader is essential. This is something we do gladly if we are enjoying the book. *Quid Pro Quo*. I would like to explore this transaction in more detail in a later chapter.

What are the practical implications of this? The first is to acknowledge our facility for creative reading and perhaps record, in some way, our contributions, as reader, to a novel. The second might be to treat these contributions themselves as a viable 'product'. There is an exercise I have done with 9 and 10 year olds that is based on a descriptive passage from a Mark Twain short story. It describes a man haunted by movements from upstairs. The passage is quite long so here is an excerpt;

...I heard the clanking of chains faintly, in remote passages, and listened while the clanking grew nearer - while it wearily climbed the stairways, marking each move by the loose surplus of chain that fell with accented rattle upon each succeeding step as the goblin that bore it advanced. I heard muttered sentences; half-uttered screams that seemed smothered violently; and the swish of invisible garments, the rush of invisible wings. I heard sighs and breathings about my bed, and mysterious whisperings...

From 'A Ghost Story' by Mark Twain.

The passage continues in this vein for what seems an eternity, but the vaguely overwritten prose style is ripe for stripping; meat and drink for a close reading. We discuss the allusions, the metaphors, the details listed about the room, the reaction of the protagonist. We place ourselves in the room; would we react differently? We re-write the odd simile, turn sentences inside out, dramatizing moments by turning objects in our room to objects in Twain's room. We switch verbs to synonyms, change the narrative from first to third person, imagine the scene from the perspective of the ghost, replay the scene in 2014, turn the tables on the ghost by walking up behind him and shouting 'boo!', all the while recording our findings in our exercise book.

The Book of the Book

We must work on the assumption that the writer has created as complete a novel as they are capable of at the point of printing, and that the drafting and redrafting is finished and the structure of the book fits its content with a happy, if not exquisite knack. The novel you are reading subsists in its own right and the fact that you hold it in your hand is testament to its existence. It has been created for the express purpose of you, and people like you, to read it.

So where does that leave our mental marginalia? Much of it deserves to be forgotten; ('I must call David.' 'I'll just finish this chapter and then sleep.' 'That's a great comeback line - I'll use that one!'), but it is possible to create a receptacle for the rest. In response to Biblical reading some Catholics compile a *Lectio Journal* and actors are known to fill notebooks with details from a Play, both seen and unseen, in preparation for a rehearsal and a run.

Book reviews and student crib sheets like the York Notes series borrow heavily from the object of their examination, elucidating, criticizing or even going so far as organizing the material of another writer. In his book about the Andrei Tarkovsky film 'Stalker', 'Zona - a book about a film about a journey to a room', Geoff Dyer struggles with a definition of the book he is in the process of writing. He simply doesn't know how to categorize it, convinced his book is more than a synopsis but falls short of being a commentary;

In my defence I would say that 'Stalker' is a film that can be summarized in about two sentences. So if a summary means reducing to a synopsis, then this is the opposite of a summary; it's amplification and expansion...the exercise is, or course, its own purpose, an end in itself. Whether it will amount to anything - whether it will add up to a worthwhile commentary, and whether this commentary might become a work of art in its own right - is still unclear.

Dyer's book acknowledges that description *is* interpretation and whilst pursuing the chronology of the Tarkovsky film he offers us many, many asides. The footnotes in the book are epic, his asterisk announced comments take up the bottom of many successive pages.² The effect is similar to that of being taken on a bus trip through the hometown of a garrulous and kindly friend who illuminates certain landmarks by telling you what they mean to him. However, instead of travelling, you are accompanying the writer in 'a read' of another author's work. (In this case the second author is a film-maker, but you take my point. To add to the confusion, one of the characters in the film is called Writer.)

In one passage Dyer pauses to compare the depiction of the Zone in the film to his childhood memory of an abandoned railway station in Cheltenham. This is an entirely subjective analogy, but an example of the type of personal association which *must* be replicated across the arts. How many momentary and entirely individual approximations do we make when viewing a painting, listening to music or watching a film? *Figure 1* was one such example, mined from within the contours of my own brain. One Saturday morning, fairly early (there was no one about) I was walking down a path by the railway tracks in Lewisham when the passageway in front of me called to mind the reproduction of the Monet painting 'The Sheltered Path'. I knew the painting, primarily, from the front cover of the Penguin edition of Proust's 'Swann's Way'. Aware that this kind of simulacrum happened fairly regularly, I had my phone's camera at the ready. The picture, of course, cannot capture the mixture of elements that made the analogy real - the odd descriptions of the Guermantes Way that young Marcel had described so well, the smell of the early morning dew on the leaves that brought nineteenth century France to Lewisham. All lived within me for a brief but sensual second, and killed at the point of capture, the outline of a vague similarity all that remains in a photograph.

If I recall the morning that my university lecturer told me that 'The Woman in White' was about group sex I would now counter; that was her personal response, as real for her as the industrial wastelands of the Zone were for Geoff Dyer. If we accept that these responses are

² One starts; 'As I child I loved quicksand...'

amplifications (and even the most self-effacing university lecturer would admit to no less) than the practical benefit of subjective assertions about a novel are contingent on the quality of the speaker, and perhaps renowned lecturers like W.S. Leavis or C.P. Snow³ might have pulled off that special quality in education; touch and teach. But they are few in number, and regardless, all that really matters is that the amplification is personal.

Of course there are many who are as willing to develop a hierarchy of insight into literature as they are to establish a hierarchy within literature itself. Shakespeare sits impregnable atop of drama, but outgoing National Theatre Director Nicholas Hytner feels commentary on Shakespeare could be more egalitarian;

Simon Russell Beale is fond of describing acting as three-dimensional literary criticism. And in my personal experience, the most mind-expanding insights into Shakespeare have come from actors in the rehearsal room.

There is logic in this as regards to drama. A Play is not regarded as being 'finished' by some Playwrights until it has completed its opening night. A script, like sheet music, needs players. This is something more openly acknowledged than is a novel's requirements of the reciprocal skills of a reader - the reader of novels is regarded rather more like a consumer of goods, a customer, if you will.

The actors 'process' in getting a part ready for performance is both individual and collaborative and includes not only the period of rehearsal of the Play, but also fine tuning during the nightly run of shows as well as often sharp deviations in the energy and focus of the Play whilst it is being performed. This can often be measured by buying a ticket for both an early and late performance within the run of a Play but is possibly more tangible in, say, a 3 month repetition rather than the year long runs that often provide diminishing returns to scale. Having said that, performance after performance, month after month, does allow a character to 'bed in'.

An actor might explore a character's development in a notebook, as individual to themselves as lecture notes are to a student, and often as legible. The aim is to take the character off the script and bring them to life and this often involves creating details that are not mentioned by the playwright. These details need not end up being directly utilized in the production, but they give the player a sense of the depths of their character. A whole history can be created; actors quiz each other about moments from a character's back story. The part can be broken down into single code words that hold significance for the actor.

Animal: Magpie

³ Leavis's almost spiritual approach to literature was moral in character, a refusal to separate art and life.

Element: Gravel

She is; watchful, wary, alert, manipulative, covetous, and implacable.

Note: everyone is playing a game.

Various personal positions in relation to the other characters are solidified;

What I say about myself

Sometimes I walk to the sea, there aren't many people, and it's a long beach.

What I say about others

She is dark, she was a thief

What others say about me

She used to queue all night for the ballet – a charming companion, delightful to live with.

The actor in rehearsal or performance can experiment with their character; dropping the intonation at the end of a line may provoke a different emotional reaction in the other actors with whom he or she shares the stage. It is hardly worth mentioning that different actors treat the same work with a different emphasis; so, David Tennant's was a sardonic Hamlet, Jamie Ballard was disturbed and Angela Winkler's Hamlet, was not least feminine but also candid. Only nominally were these the same plays – they contained the standard words but they were very much different pieces. The same is true, by extension, of a reading of a novel; the reader bringing their sensibilities to bear and the writer provoking certain interpretations, but always collaborating. Perhaps it is also true that male and female readerships emphasize different characteristics.

A second book, on top of the first one (or indeed under it or beside it) would act as a repository for the displaced material of the first book. Would that we could all collate our personal responses in a book – the book of the book. It would make an excellent end-product to a short course, the non-academic version of a dissertation.

A second book might be the most appropriate container for superfluous literary material but there are more interesting ancillary models.

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Spatial Index Grids

Modern received wisdom is that within every good novel is the potential for a great film. This is something that is taken as a given both artistically and commercially: if there is an audience for one it follows there must be an audience for the other. These possibilities often filter down to the reader in the act of reading; I can't be the only person who maps out a possible feature film in the contours of the book I'm reading, casting well-known actors and hunting for locations amongst places I once visited. On the other hand I have never once sat in a cinema and felt the impulse to mentally translate the action in front of me into a densely plotted novel. It is something in the nature of reading that one's thoughts drift and by comparison with the narrow focus that a film requires, a good novel offers an engagement that is perhaps more authorial on the part of the reader. At the very least the he or she can control the time period in which the plot or characters unfold, the narrative arc is dropped and picked up again whenever the reader feels like it.

This act of translation or perhaps transliteration is also evident in non-fiction. The contents page provides a super-structure, perhaps indicating natural resting places for the reader and the indexing system at the back of the book provides an alphabetical arrangement of the contents by subject title. So, for example, it is possible to see in an autobiography the rate of impact made by a cast of characters on the subject.⁴ The novel is not thought to require an alphabetical index, perhaps because it is designed to be read from start to finish, and its pages are never traditionally viewed as success stories in their own right. However, applying standard indexing practices to a great novel might perhaps result in entries like the following for Anna Karenina;

Vronsky, Count Alexei Kirillovich, jealousy, p107,345-347

For those wanting a greater engagement with a novel beyond a mere reading of it, (and I am prepared to believe this is a small but significant clique!) there are perhaps ways to locate and tessellate the *essence* of a novel, or rather its very own novel-ness rather than its novelty. Of course the beauty of the novel lies in its completed state and the unwritten contract between writer and reader is one in which the structural integrity is seldom breached. (There are exceptions to this, several famous examples of explicit and ironic authorial voice.) I remain convinced that some novels come alive through the occasional abstract reading, or even that some readers can be revitalized by *dipping* into the works of certain writers. In his book review of his own autobiography, Vladimir Nabokov, appraising himself, writes; 'The real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech, which one critic has compared to; 'windows giving upon a contiguous world... a rolling corollary, a shadow of a train of thought.'" Would it be vulgar to reduce Nabokov's works to their unrefined form? To distill their essence?

Our units of aggregation could very well include metaphors and similes or perhaps a character's inner monologue. It could log sensual descriptions of sound, light or colour, or baldly, the physical descriptions of characters at various junctures. These fields could then be more easily placed in relation to each other - a grid-like arrangement which would act as an

⁴ In Christopher Isherwood's Diaries 1939-60, W.H. Auden has 48 entries in the index, including 'character' and 'smoking'; Don Bachardy, who replaced Auden in Isherwood's affections earns 115 including 'Haemorrhoids' and 'outbursts and resentfulness'

alternative to the super-structure of the novel. In a way this is what every Literature student started doing at GCSE level, arranging the themes in 'Of Mice and Men' or 'To Kill a Mockingbird' into neatly colour-coded tables. To an extent this mirrors the architecture of the *construction* of the novel, but a full grid might prove useful in uncovering patterns unbeknown even to the author. The novel is displaced into the grid as a precursor to... well, anything; analysis, mapping, presentation. There is a danger that this sort of deconstruction meets, full circle, the deracination I found so unhappy in Literary Theory so, importantly, this indexing is only useful if it allows the reader to breathe life into the spaces between the units. I would personally not be interested in arranging the innards of the animal into an attractive pattern and displaying it on the wall with the rest of the hunting trophies! Indexing is just another tool in the toolbox.

Figure 3 demonstrates an example tessellation. The units are taken from 'Snowdrops', a Booker Prize nominated novel by A.D. Miller, a novel which, to borrow the macho-existentialist style of the writer, promises more than it delivers.

Figure 1 reproduced elsewhere

Figure 2 is a sample page of actors' notes

Figure 3 is the sample grid index.

* The final tool in the toolbox is 'Writing Prompts' see www.promptarts.com