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Ambiguity and Resolution

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Abstract:

This thesis is submitted in conjunction with published works of fiction for the qualification of PhD in English (Creative Writing) at Nottingham Trent University. The essay is a critical commentary and reflection upon the conception, construction and revision of two published works in particular, Smoking Poppy (2001) and Leningrad Nights (2000). The thesis argues that principal impulses in creative writing can be seen in emblematic form in the ancient, proto-musical story accompanying instruments of the drum and the lyre. The drum marches the narrative towards its ritual ending, while the embellishments of the lyre seek to lift the story out of the flow of time. It is the job of the writer to resolve these often conflicting impulses, and considerations of authorial voice inform that resolution.

Contents

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Introduction

Writers resist talking about their work in close detail, in the same way that conjurers won't admit light on their stage-magic. I know only a little of the conjurer's art, having spent a season at a holiday resort readying props and assisting with the stagecraft for a magic show. What might look impressive from the auditorium comes to appear mechanistic and even shabby from the wings. The creation of a fiction has many similarities to that of a magic show. There are levers and pulleys and trap doors, all engineered to create surprise at the right moment in the unfolding of the narrative. There is misdirection to draw attention away from the joins. Smoke and mirrors soften and dazzle. There is a sleight of hand in writing dialogue that appears to mimic real-life precisely when in fact it does nothing of the kind. Why would anyone want to admit light onto this? Especially when the Magic Circle seems locked in a conspiracy to resist.

I teach Creative Writing both to undergraduates and post-graduates, and one of the demands is that they write a commentary on their work. This commentary requires a degree of analysis of the creative piece in question, and helps both student and tutor to understand what the writer sought to achieve, whether they achieved their aims, and what were the strengths and weakness of the piece in terms of the writer's

craft.

Writing as craft interests me. In teaching writing, I am not much interested in the point at which writing becomes art. A writer accomplished in a craft will be able to repeat an effect over and over, and to order. A work of art on the other hand must demonstrate all the appurtenances of craft but will be further characterised by its individual uniqueness. Craft comes first, then, and so in teaching writing we teach the elements of craft, and in that teaching the commentary is a useful tool.

If it is reasonable to ask a student to write a commentary on his or her writing, it seems not unreasonable that I should write one, too, on my own work. Perhaps it is because I am a professional writer that I hear from the wings and the orchestral pit voices of derision and warning, urging me not to turn up the house lights for fear that the entire theatre company be thrown out of work.

But I do admit to feeling impatient with authors who say that writing cannot be taught when what they really mean is that some writers cannot teach. With this uppermost in mind I intend to make a commentary upon two recent works, the novella *Leningrad Nights* and more specifically the novel *Smoking Poppy.* These were the current works at the time I was first invited to think about writing this essay. My primary aim in this is to make clearer to myself some of the hitherto unexamined processes at large in creating a work of fiction. A subordinate aim is

to dismiss some of the notions of *mystery* about the creative writing process, and again to look at the creation of a fictional work as an operation of craft rather than as the quasi-religious experience many readers and some writers seem to want it to be.

I have variously been described as an author of horror novels, fantasy, science-fiction and thrillers. I have also been described as a Fantasist (important upper case), a Magical Realist, a purveyor of Slipstream literature, and a Fabulist. All of these labels tend to say more about the interests of the reviewer than they do about the fiction they describe. I admit that this genre perplexity is of my own doing (and occasionally my undoing) and relates entirely to an enjoyable battle between genre and mainstream interests and between artistic and commercial interests.

All story-tellers, Thomas Hardy tells us, are Ancient Mariners and if they go around detaining people who may be in a hurry then they'd better have a decent tale to tell (Allen, 1948). What's more, that story should be more unusual than the daily experience of the average man or woman.

Hardy said this at a time when, by common consent, you took your time on the way to a wedding. Modern readers are story-sophisticated in a way their precursors never have been. Through the rapid and rapacious media of film and television it is possible to be exposed to countless stories, and thereby become sophisticated in

judging the effectiveness of a story purely in terms of narrative force. Attention to narrative structure or shape seemed for a while (in this country at any rate, and at least in 'literary' offerings) to fall out of favour, perhaps as a rebellion against the narrative predicates of the cinema. The novel of language, of the lyrical scene above the narrative one held sway for a while. But it was a passing moment. Judging by popular literary fiction in the awards listings and review pages (as opposed to popular genre fiction - this latter never having shown much sign of wanting to desert the narrative frame) the 1990s showed a swing back to a concern for the conventional structures of story-telling, and a return to the proper competing interests of *narrative* on the one hand and the *lyrical* on the other.

In classical terms, *lyric* poetry was distinguished from *narrative* and *dramatic* poetry. By extension here I am using the word *lyrical* to mean a commitment to the playful properties of language; to an interest in the gorgeous plasticity of language; to an experiential concern with the textures, tonalities, nuances and acoustic patterns of words and phrases in which concern for story is subordinate. In this sense the word imports with it a notion of display, in which the rich surface patterning of language, syntax and imagery (just to make a non-exhaustive list) manipulated by the writer is more highly valued than any beat-by-beat story progression. Narrative is mortal: it lives inside of and does not to seek to escape from time in the way that lyrical poetry does. Lyrical poetry typically seeks to trap

a moment of emotion and to crystallise it. It hangs above time. The two modes seem to me be at odds, though their integration is what is at stake and this is one of the things I intend to discuss.

Before that I add here some very brief remarks about the pleasures of research for these two books, if only because my methods for each were so utterly different. Both were set in 'exotic' foreign locations. *Leningrad Nights* was based almost entirely on documentary, paper research. *Smoking Poppy* was based on field-research, travelling in Asia and living with the poppy-cultivating tribes for a short while.

I had already been to the city of Leningrad ten or twelve years before writing the novella. The iron curtain showed no signs of corrosion and the name of the city hadn't yet reverted back to St Petersburg. While strolling in the city I saw lots of people fishing its rivers and canals. I saw one man catch a fish, tap it on the head and stuff it in his *pocket* before hurrying away quickly, as if someone might take the fish away from him. Perhaps because I don't normally associate angling with furtiveness I was impressed by this scene. Later when I heard about the dreadful '900 days' as the siege is known there I started to think about the nature of survival in that place, and I had an image of a starving boy making a hole in the ice.

This image must have lived with me for over a decade before I wrote *Leningrad Nights*. I had made one false start at this story as a tale within an unsuccessful larger novel. This time I resorted to documentary research: history books, personal accounts of the siege, photographs of Leningrad both modern and during the war, and maps.

In particular I was influenced by an account of the siege called *'The 900 Days: The siege of Leningrad'* (Salisbury1969). It offered details from eyewitness accounts, such as the full-face winter masks with tiny mouth-holes as worn by the suffering people; and the ticking of the metronome on the radio broadcast. For once I didn't need to invent ghostly or spooky detail. It was all there in the personal accounts. The historical background, the locations and the buildings at least, are accurate. The case for cannibalism during the siege has never been proven, though as a matter of decency and sensitivity. There is however common consent in the anecdotal accounts that it was rife.

Researching for *Smoking Poppy* was entirely different. I knew nothing about the opium-growing ethnic hilltribes of Thailand and Burma. I wasn't even aware that these people are chiefly Tibetan migrants who settled the rather infertile hills some two hundred years ago. I understood that they were animistic spirit-worshippers

but I knew nothing of the character of this animism, so I made an early decision to visit in person.

I had done most of my documentary research before travelling to Thailand. In particular I had read around the history of opium cultivation and trafficking. There is plenty of material on the subject but '*Opium*' (Booth 1996) proved very useful for a general background. It was from this book that I saw that the metamorphoses of the drug are extraordinary to the point of uncanny.

The most difficult thing to research sensibly was the tribal animism. There are plenty of anthropological studies of animism in general but nothing I could find about the spirit-worship of these opium-growing hilltribes in particular. Maybe this was a good thing. I had to go and encounter what I saw without the filter or even the props of rational interpretations. The function of spirit-gates and fertility swings and the like, which I saw in the villages, had to be communicated to me in pretty much the same way my characters would experience. My Thai guides spoke almost no words of Lisu or Akha language, and the tribespeople spoke little Thai. My guides however understood the principles of spirit-worship plainly enough, and in fact their own Buddhist beliefs overlay a rich matrix of spirit-worshipping principles and practices. I quickly learned the totemic and the taboo.

Staying for several days in the tribal villages was invaluable. Not just with respect to detail but specifically in matters of deportment. For example I was advised - through my guides - that before swimming in the river I should ask permission from the spirit of the river, expressly if I wanted to avoid getting a bad stomach. It was fascinating to see how working in harmony with the spirits had such a pragmatic benefit. This visit to the tribal villages directly influenced the way I wrote the character of Danny. It also presented me with a number of narrative solutions to my story.

From conception to delivery, the creation of a fictional work for a commercial publishing house forces any author to address a number of dynamic issues, all of which have a sculpting effect on the final work. In particular, in an assessment of how they affect the drafting of a full-length work I want to address in this essay what for me are recurring or devolved issues that I have defined as:

(1) Genre tropes and subversion of genre.

(2) Narrative versus Lyricism.

(3) Surprising the authorial voice.

I want to report on the structural influence, constraints and shaping powers of these issues over the work while it is in the drafting and redrafting process.

Genre and the subversion of genre.

A question guaranteed to vex writers concerns the genesis of an idea for a novel, story or poem. To be asked: "Where do you get your ideas?" has become something akin to a music hall joke amongst writers. Yet the question is as legitimate as it is irritating, especially for those people who don't write and who are mystified by the apparent production of something out of nothing. The correct answer to the question is, of course, equally vexing: "The same place you get your dreams".

Though the question itself is flawed. The word *idea* suggests something rather more evolved than the seed-notion that may - possibly - ultimately be developed into an idea. The seed notion will often announce itself in the form of an image or a snatch of dialogue; perhaps as a complete sentence or fragment of a scene; sometime as a partial memory or a projected fear. In other words, the announcement arrives located in an unstable matrix in the same way that snatches of dreams present themselves from the unconscious mind. It is the job of the writer to pluck the fragment of dream from this chaotic matrix where it resides and then to try to get it home; to incubate it; to subdue it; to groom it; and finally to present it in an enclosure. All without puncturing it.

This self-announcing pellet of dreaming does not come from the ether any more than do the minds of writers operate in a state of sequestered inspiration. Writers take their ideas and their dreams from life. They then find forms for their creations from other writers, from what they have *read.*

My own writing has always been located at the edge of genre rather than in its mid-stream, and this matches my reading influences. I belong to a generation that grew up not on books alone but on the narrative rocket-thrust of film and super-hero comics. If I tire of a self-conscious or meandering literary work I hurtle back to a genre-venue where I can find uncontaminated *story.* If I start to blunt on the busy protocols of the genres, I decompress with poetry or litarary fiction, canonical or otherwise. This is not a reader's problem. It only becomes an issue when you claim to be a writer operating at the interstices of these venues. Such a wilful approach can, obviously, make something new happen: but it always risks failure by undermining conventional genre shapes in the interests of other literary expectations.

These are the "dream-pellets" I choose to work with. They take their form from powerful genre impressions as much as they do from canonical influences. They already exist in hybrid form at their incubation.

I have long been a reader of and enthusiast for crime, science-fiction and horror novels, to which I attribute my addiction to narrative. It is often a character of novelists unfamiliar with the traditions and classic landmarks of a genre who make a foray into genre territory that they recapitulate a "daring experiment" or fail to take seriously the conventions of the genre in which they are vacationing. Martin Amis (and he is not the only author to have committed to this trope with patchy results) enjoys the literary re-mix. In *Time's Arrow*, (Amis, M. 1991) the author was hailed for his conceptual daring in writing a novel with a backwards-running time sequence, notwithstanding the fact that at least since *Counter-Clock World* (Dick, 1967), this trope had been imitated by Ballard and Aldiss to name but two authors and had ultimately become a cliche in the world of speculative fiction. Amis is an impressive stylist and in that arena far surpassed Dick's work; but his novel ultimately lacked Dick's sense of moral resolution, subsuming the moral weight of his subject matter under a surface and stylistic playfulness.

Similarly when we look at the re-mix of the *noir* crime novel in *Night Train*, (Amis, M. 1997) the failure to deliver a coherent structural resolution in respect of the conventions raided suggests that only style matters, and that narrative shape is unimportant. But even for those outside the cognoscenti of crime the conclusion of the novel disappoints, and the reader feels cheated. Strict genre conventions come shrink-wrapped from the factory, but once spread out on the floor they are

not so easy to repack at the end of the game, as Martin Amis found out. By comparison, in another undertaking, *The Name Of The Rose* (Eco, 1980) flourishes better as a novel because it refuses to take lightly the forces of genre it invokes.

Historically, crime novels and science-fiction novels have often been criticised for being plot-driven machines peopled by automatons or cardboard figures. The genres have long caught up with that criticism, but in many cases they remain primarily committed to the narrative engine and still operate at the expense of character delineation, language and insight. My own novels attempt to splice the more mainstream interests of psychological insight and character study with some of the standard tropes of genre fiction. For that reason they are seen as edge-of-genre (though for some reason are never labelled edge-of-mainstream).

What I do is certainly not unique. When mainstream novelists like Martin Amis and Umberto Eco move into genre territory it is seen as adventurous, gamesome. When genre novelists amplify issues of character and insight, the result is sometimes seen as confused or confusing to the marketplace. Though genre is an aesthetic category rather than a commercial one, there is always in publishing a relationship between genre and the market place. Publishers tend to see genre as a brand, and it is true that readers respond more to the genre-stamp than they do to

the true marketing brand, which is of course the imprint of the publishing house. And though it is wholly inaccurate to describe a genre such as science fiction as a commercial category, publishers tend to see it that way: the category is a clean and unambiguous "sell" in which narrative is king.

The creative issue though, baldly stated is this: a genre novel, called upon to satisfy the demands of narrative appropriate to that genre, is often trapped by those conventions. The nearer to the centre of genre a novel moves, the higher the demand that the resolution of the novel satisfies the narrative in terms of its plot. Plot takes on an increasingly important role. As the novel steers towards the edge of the genre, it takes on a new set of interests that may be emotional or thematic in patterning, concerning character and insight, and this new set of interests demands a different type of resolution. It will no longer be enough to simply ensure that the novel satisfies in terms of plot. It must now also be emotionally satisfying and deliver rich character insight. In addition to these concerns there arrive the more literary issues of congruent patterning of language and theme; what's more all of these must be delivered in a contiguous manner.

The writer who seeks to take on this layered structure has set himself or herself a complex task. The skilful author may find a plot solution that resolves the story; the lucky author may also find an emotional solution that resolves the character's

humane predicament; but the compound task of providing these in twin-resolution at the same point in the story's unfolding is intricate and challenging.

Story telling is a temporal art. Students of writing don't always grasp this, likening it instead to painting or to the visual arts. In reality the sister arts to writing are dance and music. Writing is a sequence of steps, an unfolding over real time as opposed to the virtual time covered by the story, which admits of flashbacks and other devices. Timing in the revealing or withholding of information is one of the most difficult and elusive of the writing skills to teach - and one that as a teacher of writing I've never found an effective way to communicate.

Occasionally I spot well-crafted prose, but I want to say there's nothing wrong with this other than it comes at the wrong place, or, this is inch-perfect but it drags when the story should quicken. This temporal sense may determine where we will have a scene as opposed to an expository lead or transitional section; or it will compress or expand the flow of information according to its value and place in the narrative. Further, genre tends to engender different expectations of pace, amplification and compression, and these demands in themselves may compete with lyrical interests.

Thus it is not a simple matter of finding a "genre case-sensitive" plot resolution followed by, for want of another term, an "emotional" resolution, or indeed the other way round. The effect would be barbarous, to use Orwell's favourite word. And to surrender the resolution in either case spells failure. Contrasting with Amis's *Night Train* another recent novel exploiting crime-genre traditions is *Motherless Brooklyn* (Lethem, 1999). Both are 'literary' novels and both play the game of *noir* hard-boiled detective fiction in a tradition descended from Chandler and Hammett, but the treatment is utterly different. In *Night Train*, Amis triggers off the usual dead-body conceit of mystery investigation, a reliable enough engine to power any story, but by the end of the novel the conceit has been surrendered. No effort is made to respect the genre conventions triggering the story. We may interpret this disregard as a kind of post-modern contempt for the genre's predictable force, but ultimately the other interests of the novel, whatever they are, fail to deal with or even overshadow the disappointed burden of the plot structure. *Motherless Brooklyn* on the other hand is written by an author with a clear respect for - and one might guess an *aficionado* of - the traditions of the noir crime genre. Thus the story is resolved on a satisfying (if ultimately prosaic) plot level while the emotional resolution of the work is powerful and accomplished.

The demand on an author to resolve both narrative and emotional conditions of the work are not new or exclusive to hard-to-categorise, blurred genre authors. It just fell out of fashionable critiquing early in the twentieth century.

The genre tropes I used in *Smoking Poppy* can be listed. Danny is stalked, or subtly haunted by an unseen presence. The presence makes itself felt in incremental scenes (this is almost a sub-plot in the story) until Danny is forced to recognise the presence for what it is. I used a similar trope in Requiem, and it is very common to fiction of the supernatural, with antecedents in MR James and Sheridan Le Fanu. Another trope more common to the thriller genre can be seen in the search for a missing family member in a progressively darkening story. A third (and I believe it to be a trope rather than merely a device) is what might be called The Body In The Woods. I think there is another island trope in there too, somewhat more obscure, but again akin to the original Homeric journey to a circumscribed kingdom of outlandish mores. Though the location is not exactly an island, the borders of the place are ill defined, and for a while at least the travellers appear trapped if not sea-girt.

I understand - or ask - the term *tropes* to mean a little more than the usual figures of speech of metaphor, allegory, symbol and the rest. The etymology of the word suggests *turns* in the story and carries an ironic or metaphorical weight beyond

the plot implications. The Haunting may be an inner-demon or spirit; the Search may be a search for self; the Body In The Woods may come to represent the guilty conscience; and The Island may merely be a state of mind. Far better if they can proceed on all levels, and thus make the story of interest to both a genre and a mainstream audience. The trope may operate on one of these levels and proceed on a simple plot level, too. Nevertheless, whatever it stands in for, it still has to be *answered* on a plot level.

About demons and spirits: clearly if the genre trope concerning a haunting or a stalking is to be answered then there does need to be some resolution over the nature of the entity doing the stalking. Horror and supernatural fiction tends to arrive at one of three conclusions about the nature of the beast. (1) that the haunting spirit is of supernatural origin (2) that it is of human origin and evolved a supernatural status (3) that it is human, and rationally explained after all.

I might commence a work thinking that I am writing about the second of these. But often what happens is not a complete transition from one position to the other. On the contrary, a shuttling between positions two and three takes place, in which I want my characters - and my readers - to be wrong-footed by an inability to be clear about whether the psychic threat is supernatural or psychological. Thus I may

shuttle towards one polarity only to shift back again; to appear to confirm one position before deliberately undermining that certainty. The tension resides in, and depends upon, the preservation of this ambiguity.

There is another tension at large in the work, created by the juxtaposition of the presence of the *fantastic* and the *mundane*. I have avoided imitating all forms of world building and the hermetically sealed fantasy, of which the exemplars are Mervyn Peake and J R R Tolkien. In the sealed fantasy the conditions of awe, magic and the suspension of disbelief are established from page one and are never surrendered. In my stories the mundane is the given, with the ever-present possibility of the numinous flaring but briefly. In this case it is the sense of immanent revelation - immanent and imminent - which I want to sustain. So rather than sustaining an aura of magic or enchantment, I might arrange for the numinous to threaten, promise, disappoint, return, promise again, appear in blinding form and then vanish.

This is neither a new nor modern approach. Consider the following from the extraordinary period of publishing at the end of the nineteenth century, in which the following horrors all concern the fragmenting of the human psyche: Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886); Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894); H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896); Henry James's *The Turn of the*

Screw (1898); Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901); and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Inside this blizzard of highly evolved quasi-supernatural publishing we also find Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and W. W. Jacobs's *The Monkey's Paw* (1902); though these latter two are quite distinct from the other titles in that they incline towards the para-human supernatural force.

The position I am interested in is represented by the above tradition. I am not much interested in spirits and demons unless they are the kind generated by human behaviour and have therefore a moral context. In Maori tradition a tormenting 'ghost' is just as likely to emanate from a living person as a dead one: a spirit, malign or otherwise, may perch on the shoulder and even continue to exist and cause mischief independently of the psyche of the individual who propagated its being. Here we are at the interface of psychology and anthropology. It seems to elude a Western tradition that seeks to neatly classify irrational force as natural or supernatural; though it didn't elude authors such as Stevenson and Wilde.

In other words, I am interested in manipulating the notion of spirits and demons as a metaphor for extreme psychic distress, in the same way Stevenson did in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* or Wilde did in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Modern psychology still operates very much around constructs and conceptual frameworks (the notion of an id, though useful, is no more empirical than the notion of spirits). We are sophisticated enough in the language of psychology to entertain

concepts of denial, unconscious behaviour, group dynamics. The spirit worship of tribal groups around the world is remarkable mostly for its ubiquity, and in many cases operates in a tribal context as a form of psychological hygiene. It is very much a lived experience, deeply internalised, and a form of common sense as knowledge (perhaps what anthropologists call *habitus*: a cultural habitat which becomes internalised in the form of dispositions to act, think, and feel in certain ways.) Witch doctors, shamans and the like are very often shrewd psychologists.

My protagonist Danny in *Smoking Poppy* knows there is something wrong with his life but he is unable to articulate it or mend it for himself. But his distress has generated a ghost, or at least a small spirit, one might say a weeping spirit. The closer he gets to the source of his current distress, the more the spirit begins to take form until it demands confrontation (and in psychological terminology, integration).

Similarly in *Leningrad Nights*, Leo's psychic distress at the depredations of his environment has also generated a ghost. In this case a doppel-ganger, a split, and one that seems to grant him permission to do anything in order to maintain his fragile identity. The doppel-ganger does whatever deed is required to maintain survival.

In terms of the conventions of genre that I discussed, the spirit must perforce manifest. It would not have been acceptable to me had I engineered the trope and

augmented the sense of revelation that comes with it only to discard the spirit at the crucial moment. Yet I had other interests, too. I was not committed to handing the story over to the irrational or the supernatural. The ambiguity of this position is a critical element in *Smoking Poppy*. I insist on allowing the reader to choose whether Danny is experiencing a supernatural manifestation or a psychological one, but not at any price. Whichever of these readings they choose, there must be an element of doubt, because it is in the uncertainty that the imagination soars.

In *Leningrad Nights* a reader with no relish for the genre elements is given an easier way out. The ghost generated can be more easily incorporated in psychological terms: a socio-pathic split has occurred. But for my purposes it doesn't matter to me whether the 'ghost' moves into a place of psychological incorporation or stays just outside of it, because I am always more interested in the character generating the ghost than in the ghost itself. I suspect this loses me some readers who have no time for the idea of holding an ambiguous position in their heads for the duration of the journey. But it might recover me other readers who have no patience with the charnel-house variety of ghost.

Here we come to the role of language. In a mid-pitch genre novel language might be carefully marshalled to continually ask the question of what might happen next. The language in my novels might be different in that it continually asks how does it

feel not to know what is going to happen next. It is at this point that the lyre takes over from the drum.

The presiding instruments accompanying classical literature, the drum and the lyre, exemplify the competing impulses of storytelling. The drumbeat may quicken or it may slow, but in remorseless fashion it marches the story on to its conclusion. It stops, like the heartbeat, only when the story is done. This is the temporal principle I mentioned earlier. In classical times, lyric poetry was seen as quite distinct from narrative and dramatic poetry, in that it sought to sequester a moment of intense emotion or experience and to crystallise that moment. The music of the lyre embroiders and augments. The embellishments of the lyre seek to lift the story out of the flow of time. The quicker the drumbeat, the less room there is for the lyre to perform. The modern author sets the tempo, and the operating genre conditions inform that choice.

So in my own novels, where the lyre might be said to take over from the drum it is never for too long. Artistically my aim is to leave a sense of both ambiguity and resolution. The narrative drumming demands resolution while the lyrical mode will live happily in perpetual ambiguity. These two things appear to me be at cross-purposes, yet that is precisely the dynamic I am after in these books. Whether I succeed or fail in achieving this contradictory aim is for other people to say - and say they will. But this is what I want to achieve.

Some of the solutions I use in order to allow the ambiguity - and lyricism - to flourish while at the same time offering a rational framework, are again what I would call tropes: dreams, false memories, timeslips, mesmerism, drug or alcohol induced hallucinations, madness and mania in all its forms (bipolar disorder, multiple or split personality disorder). In *Leningrad Nights* the hellish privations of a starving, grieving boy induce a psychological and moral split that triggers the doppel-ganger. In *Smoking Poppy* I resorted to drugs.

Danny has travelled to Thailand in search of his daughter, whom, it at first seems, has been arrested for smuggling opium. When he does find his daughter, she is indeed mixed up with opium, but in a hillside village where the poppy is cultivated. It became obvious to me that Danny, violently opposed to drug-taking and the social evils associated with it, was going to have to have his own encounter with the stuff. I tried strongly to resist this. One might occasionally hear a writer talk about being surprised when their characters behave in an unexpected way and 'insist' on doing this or that thing quite against the author's will. This has always struck me as self-serving - not to say phoney - and anyway that's not what I mean in this case. The inevitability of Danny's appointment was the thing I resisted, and I tried to find ways out. But it was Danny's nemesis. It was for Danny the lowest point, the place he had to go to begin to understand what was happening around him, and sometimes in the creation of stories there is - as one approaches resolution - a plot

gravity to which you have to surrender. Having said that, I did try to make his response to the inevitable somewhat surprising. Danny smokes the blighted opium and he encounters the spirit that has trailed him from England in the form of the Lord Of The Poppy. Though the exchange between him and this exotic creature is barely rational, Danny emerges with perception. He understands, by perverse equation, a relationship between the incising of the poppy and fatherhood. The Lord of The Poppy grants him *insight.*

It is in this key scene that the emotional resolution of insight about the nature of fatherhood (the primary thematic engine of the novel) is addressed and where the genre conditions of the encounter with the mysterious spirit (the second engine) is delivered. Technically the resolution begins after this point, but the two key questions have been answered. There is still some muddling out of the emotional issues ahead of Danny, and a good few plot turns to go, but this is the point of critical mass. The two things have to arrive - and arrive together - *here.*

In *Leningrad Nights* I attempted the twin resolution by having the moral decline of the protagonist (the exposure of Leo's descent into cannibalism) coincide with the re-integration of the doppel-ganger into Leo's psyche. Once his moral position has been exposed and his virtuous identity has collapsed, Leo has no further use for the doppel-ganger. He tells his doppel-ganger to "go to hell" which is indeed where he goes himself. Exposed, he is cut off from the spiritual

salvation he found in moving about the city "doing good". The hallucinatory quality of the city retreats, the doppel-ganger is re-integrated and the illusion is over; and it all happens when the plot-engine mystery of Leo's food supply is revealed.

There is of course a major tonal difference between the resolutions of these two stories. *Leningrad Nights* has a downbeat ending, whereas *Smoking Poppy* has an ironic ending. By ironic I mean that the upbeat conclusion is subtracted from by great personal cost. I should stress that the tonal difference has no bearing at all on the structural need for proper resolution. *Smoking Poppy* follows a redemptive structure: Danny emerges with the moral insight of self-knowledge. The redemptive structure offers the possibility of new life for the protagonist. *Leningrad Nights* is non-redemptive. Leo is exposed, and it is the people around him who escape from illusion, but with negative insight. In each case resolution is reached, because the arc of the story has descended. The characters have emerged from their story. It would be a simple, technical adjustment to make a tonal modification, still preserving the strong sense of resolution, though this of course would violate the tone - and even the themes - of the respective stories.

I am haunted by the notion that if *Leningrad Nights* had been subjected to the same market-place pressures in place for *Smoking Poppy* then might I have forced

myself to find a different, perhaps more upbeat ending? Firstly I don't think this is a genre-specific question. Though the literary author might entertain the delusion that he or she works in service of a higher muse, you can address commercial or non-commercial literary categories just as you might for genre novels. I think the answer to my question is no: the pessimistic trajectory for *Leningrad Nights* was locked into its genesis. Once I had begun the project I wouldn't have been happy with the ending landing in a different place. Though, significantly, I might not have chosen this or a similar work to be fashioned into a full-length novel.

There are of course writers who will make the fraudulent claim that they have no interest in what happens to their book once it is written, that commercial exigencies have no influence upon their work; but these are all unpublished writers. A downbeat ending could be the point at which an editorial intrusion might be expected to remind the author that this book has to get out into the world and earn its keep.

It has been remarked that the relationship of editor to author is that of knife to the throat. I have never found this to be remotely true. While most publishers are - more than ever before - departments of multinational trading corporations no less interested in shifting acres of beans than in selling books, the editors with whom

authors collaborate are bibliophiles. Power in the publishing boardroom has switched from the editorial teams to the accountancy and marketing departments, but the integrity of editors hasn't necessarily been changed by this shift. I can only think of one occasion when an editor wanted me to change something because of the logic of the genre in which I was being presented at the time. The editor in question wanted me to speed up an ending by deleting one of the closing chapters, claiming that readers would find my resolution too drawn out. Because her editorial advice had been impeccable up until that point, I acquiesced. She was wrong. Several critics felt the ending was rushed. Not even the very good editors are always right.

Editing is a discrete creative skill and a good editor can recognise an imbalance of themes, a lost strand, a stray character or an extraneous scene. An editor can suggest augmenting a theme, propose the re-ordering of a particular scene, or point up a character that might need to be amplified. No editor I have ever encountered has *insisted* on anything, and the final call has always been mine. Yet no single novel of mine has *not* been improved by editorial input, sometimes minimal and occasionally considerable. This is heresy to some authors, but orthodoxy to most.

I make a point of this because any concessions or movement towards genre protocols or commercial imperatives are my own and not the work of editors at all. In the case of *Smoking Poppy* there are a couple of significant decisions which may have been predicated on commercial interest. The first of these was the decision not to expand the literary context mentioned above. It was very tempting and I saw ahead of me a fascinating game in which I might have traced - through Danny's apprehension of the literature available to him - the many and various references to narcotics and writers influenced by narcotics in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. I could have made the text dense with quotations and philosophical reflections on those quotations, trusting in the speedy narrative to impel the reader from section to section. I saw a further variant in that I could have had Danny research the fascinating history of the development of opium cultivation, from its first proliferation by the East India Company trading the drug in the Eighteenth Century as a means of helping with the balance of Import-Export payments right through to the brutally short-sighted role of the American CIA in supplying a transport infrastructure to international heroin trading during the Vietnam war.

Though I did research all of this area, I rejected the dense literary, historical and philosophical strands. I felt they would imperil my notion of writing a novel about a father-daughter relationship spliced with an adventure novel, and that the

emotional interests of my story would collapse under the weight of literary reference.

Secondly I felt this would wreck the voice I had constructed. I might have got away with my working-class autodidact struggling with Rimbaud and wanting to do other than toss him in the swimming pool. I doubt it. The plodding and methodical nature of studious attention to literary forms would have been incongruent with Danny's anger, impatience and experience. Commercial decisiveness was this time congruent with the artistic aims I discussed earlier: further complexity of that nature would relegate Danny to acting as a vehicle for intellectual rumination rather than a flesh and blood, hurting individual I wanted him to be. I'm relieved now that I didn't betray him, though it came close.

The other genre-directed decision relates to the murder scene that I have characterised as The Body In The Woods trope. This is a shameless device for restarting a somewhat stalled plot. Danny, Phil and Mick had arrived in the village. They had found Charlie, but she was stuck in the hut. The story was stuck there with her. There were some lessons learned from confining this character in an impoverished environment, and I will deal with these in a later section.

I originally had in mind some process of magical transformation involving the shamanism of Khiem, but the process had lost urgency. The company posed no threat to the opium-bandits, and the villagers - having been tolerant of Charlie's presence for some months - seemed happy to go about their business. I needed to put a time-lock on the narrative. In other words I had to create a crisis, and the urgent sense of a clock ticking, to get the company to move. Thus The Body In The Woods: a thriller-genre device for restarting the plot anxiety. It works quite well, and not used by me for the first time either, though I managed to subvert the device somewhat in *The Tooth Fairy* by adapting it as a false spine, creating a thriller element in what is actually a rites-of-passage novel. Ultimately the murder didn't happen at all, but having used that trick once I couldn't possibly do it again.

In *Leningrad Nights* there is no similar anxiety about time-locks and similar genre devices. As I said before normally publishers will run screaming from the notion of publishing a work of this commercially disastrous length[1]. But two editors found an imaginative way to publish the novella, however, and in being commissioned to write it I was freed from the normal commercial imperatives.

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[1] It seems that the reading public has no taste for the novella. It is difficult enough to persuade publishers to support short story collections, but novellas rarely see the light of day. A pity - because a novella length is ideally suited to readers who enjoy a long sitting with a book and who enjoy the possibility of finishing the work in that long sitting.

Thus, having been freed from the constraints of the market place I would like to say I wrote an enormously different type of work. But I didn't. I instantly chose to do more of the same. That is, I wrote an edge-of-genre narrative with my standard concerns of psychic disintegration expressed in tropes of horror and the supernatural.

I have to add, tough, that I hadn't realised a time-lock was already built in to the chosen scenario. The siege would be broken, the ice-road would open. These factors - and my characters' discussions of these factors - signalled the march of nemesis for my protagonist. The exigencies of narrative are fascinating when you can see yourself choosing narrative instruments on an intuitive level.

There are *some* differences in that the prose is somewhat more descriptive: there remain one or two adjectives and possibly the odd detested adverb that might not normally have escaped the blue pen. But the vision I had for the protagonist was coloured anyway by a melting, swirling picture of Leningrad under siege and seen by a starving, terrified, opiated boy. The visual hallucination was important so I opened up a lyrical register I normally deny myself, and indulged a much more whimsical narrative of delusion that had to be represented through extravagant metaphor.

This might sound as though I was after all seduced in the direction of *lyricism.* Perhaps that is so, but the only bearing this has on the genre issues is in the switch of register. The register is rather more literary, but the content is still very much genre. But I note (purely in retrospect, because this didn't occur to me at the time of writing *Leningrad Nights*) that I had circumscribed myself again by selecting the naive point-of-view of a young boy, as told by a frame-narrator in the third person. These convolutions are revealing. I went on to make the boy a poet, thus granting him the literary measure of lyricism and a larger field of diction than one might expect; and then I redeemed him by making him a *bad* poet.

Somewhere inside this double helix and corkscrewing of creative intention the sensitive reader might recognise an author still struggling with issues of *narrative* versus *lyricism*, and a related but more elusive discourse concerning *voice*.

Narrative versus Lyricism

I have already suggested that the creation of a modern fiction forces an instant confrontation between modes of writing, namely the subordination of writing to the gravity of formal story structure (Narrative) on the one hand, and the free drift and play, or perhaps centrifuge, of language (Lyric). These modes command different *registers*. Each of these competing registers has its own rules - or more accurately protocols - for organisation of the creative effort. Neither can be said to be more *creative* than the other, and very little writing can be said to ignore either of these modes, though fashion and the changing interests of writers and their audiences will cause the author to lean more heavily on one than the other. Though there is not a shred of canonical evidence to back up the prejudice, there is, today, an assumed superiority in the literature of *lyricism* as opposed to what Dennis Potter[1] once famously described as "the despised genres". Potter was referring to his TV work in particular. Interestingly enough the language of film

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[1] An Interview with Melvyn Bragg (Without Walls, Ch 4 TV, March 1994) Further, in the 1993 James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture in Edinburgh Potter referred to "the characteristic media ploy of separating the "popular" from the "serious" – which often means the distinction between the Solemn and Lively and not just the truncheon-like measuring rod of class and educational status".

studies tends to label narrative-led work as *Horizontal* and character and lyrical patterning as *Vertical*, with none of the value-laden judgements of literary criticism.

Though the primacy of the narrative mode is a characteristic of genre, the writing issues here are broader. Before the advent of Modernism there was no apparent divide in the novel form. Primacy of narrative was repeatedly asserted by the Victorian novel. Modernism offered by contrast James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, exemplars of the mode I am calling lyrical. Joyce moved further and further towards this position until his last work was a complex poetic and linguistic game where the drumbeat was but a distant memory.

By contrast Graham Greene started as someone very much influenced by Modernism. By the time of his late novels such as *The Human Factor*, (Greene, 1978) the author had moved in the opposite direction. Graham Green's prose became progressively more pared down until, spare and precise, his later books became models of psychological insight based on narrative interplay rather than linguistic texture. Furthermore, Greene drives the engine of *The Human Factor* with the tropes and plot devices of a thriller. Both Joyce and Greene can be said to be modern 'literary' stylists, but their concerns could hardly be more different,

and the concerns of the two writers over the course of their careers were almost diametrically opposed.

I should here clarify what I mean by narrative. The Russian Formalists usefully separated out the notions of *Fabula* and *Siuzhet*. *Fabula* relates to the chronological string of events as it happened; *Siuzhet* relates to the sequence of what is revealed by the story through the use of delay, digression and other techniques. As an example of the latter, in a late Graham Greene story, what is revealed often emerges from behind the events, so brilliantly elliptical did his style become. By the word narrative I mean exactly both of these things *plus* a third notion, which is one of *deep structure*.

Exposition, Complication and Resolution are the time-tested triple pillars of storytelling: even the three words themselves arrive with the classical authority of a Corinthian porch. No story (novel, short story, movie, drama) will stand effectively without these pillars. It is of course possible to have them present in any order. You may begin with your Resolution. You may commence in the middle of your Exposition and work both backwards and forwards against linear time. These are all effective techniques frequently deployed in modern novels and in the cinema. The conventions afford acres of room for playful variation and novelty of form, but if you remove just one of the conditions, the edifice

crumbles. Even the most worthy of *lyrical* literature is put to observe this dictum or forever be banished to the category of *experiment* (for which word one normally reads failure). After all, structure is no more than a mechanistic device - though an indispensable device - by which one maintains the attention of the reader in order to seduce him or her into the shadow-play of theme, mood, emotional response and, occasionally, subversive thought.

In fact these structural conditions don't just administer to fiction. In discussing this matter with colleagues teaching poetry and non-fiction, it has become clear that the very same structures apply. A poem offers a predicate that in turn delivers a wordplay or exploration culminating in a resolution addressing the predicate. Non-fiction writing observes the same patterns. Again, writing is a temporal art, and the temporal lock in which it operates is simultaneously a bind and an immense liberation in its possibility for desired closure.

Ursula Le Guin is fascinating on the subject of structure. In her essay "*The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*" (Le Guin, 1989) she challenges any speeding-arrow or exclusively linear notion of narrative in a wonderfully understated feminist critique of the Action Hero. Le Guin disputes the idea of the weapon as first cultural artefact (in the Arthur C Clarke/Stanley Kubrick movie the evolving ape reaches for a bone as a weapon and the bone becomes a spaceship) in favour

of the idea of container as first cultural artefact - a leaf, a gourd or a shell in which to carry surplus food. She connects this with narrative in seeing the limitations of any linear-obsessed model of story telling, preferring the sack or the bag as a model, in which the end of the story is contained, but successfully delayed.

Le Guin is actually comparing this concept of the complex novel with that of the structure of Heroic Myth, its limited action hero and its linear obsession. But the point is well made that the novelist, by contrast, carries a heavy sack of apparent contingencies, where one part alludes to another and numerous poetic elements stand in creative relation to others. Le Guin's sack is actually a magic-bag, a shaman's bundle. But the elements of exposition, complication and resolution must all be in place in the bundle in order for the flint to spark the fire and for the magic to work. The elements are not random, after all.

In conceiving a novel in structural terms, it is (for me at any rate) usually the *Complication* that drops into the post-hole first. The *Exposition* is relatively straight-forward since that is simply a matter of establishing the milieu, the social conditions and the personal details, and can be dealt with quite rapidly. It is in engineering the *Resolution* of a story that always proves to be the toughest work of all, and anyone who has attempted to write between strict genre demands and some mainstream conditions finds this doubly so.

To illustrate from a truncated version of Homer's *The Odyssey*, the simple Exposition is that Odysseus and his crew are returning from the Trojan wars and are blown off course. The Complication is that they are lost and can't navigate their way home; needing supplies, each island they put into is enchanted or dangerous in some way. There is an impressive crafting in this part of the structure of *The Odyssey* in that each island adventure exhibits perfect narrative structure in itself, as each adventure find its Resolution. This epic can go on for as many islands as the storyteller considers necessary before his campfire audience starts to fall asleep. The nodding campfire audience are woken with a rousing Resolution (the return of the King, the eviction of the Suitors, the reunion with Odysseus's faithful wife) and sent happily off to their beds.[1]

For me the novel of narrative has a structural primacy. This can be partially attributed to my interest in genre fiction, but I must complicate things by admitting to a distaste for what seems to me the elitist pleasures indulged in by writers who seek refuge in recondite language or obscure form. I don't know

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[1] To be accurate this is my notion of how a travelling minstrel might tailor the narrative elements according to how sleepy or enthusiastic is his audience around the campfire. In the above I am deliberately isolating a few books from the centre of the 24-book *written* epic. Homer's epic is a much more meandering narrative than I present above. But the much tighter narrative discipline of the oral storyteller goes right to the heart of my argument. My imagined campfire version is more of a genre creature than is Homer's. It is the genre of Fantasy Adventure.

when or why the alienation of the majority of people became a virtue in Art, though I have my suspicions. Modernism and some of its experimental formulations and difficult refinements occurred as a reaction to mass literacy. Art, contaminated by the vulgar people, loses its *frisson* for the aesthete snob. Perhaps Modernism and its exclusivity were an unconscious restoration of an inaccessible Latin High Mass, a reclamation of the sacred status of Art.

Even so, no writer is going to claim to be uninterested, or even disinterested, by the bells and incense of language and its shining effects. The pared writer, writing *short,* is as interested in language as the flamboyant writer who writes *long*; but the former is more concerned, artistically, with what can be subtracted than with what can be elaborated. This pushes the writer towards the condition of poetry but without the density of poetic language or the attempt to triumph over time as in the aforementioned. A writer here looks for a patterning of scenes and events to make an aggregate thematic impact. One consequence of this for my own writing is my tendency to seek organic rather than set-piece opportunities for poetic or lyrical moment that will not threaten or overbalance the narrative form. I find that *genre*, particularly the melodramatic possibilities of science-fiction, fantasy and horror for example, offers me those conditions.

Typically I have used forms of fractured consciousness to lodge *poetic moment* in the narrative in places where it will not threaten to swamp the boat: dreams, hallucinations, drugs, psychic distress, altered-states. I can bend my language at these moments and as the consciousness of one character or another sinks towards the subconscious my authorial language may become more lyrical. Although many novelists have written entire novels in a voice of fractured consciousness, I haven't ever done so. It has always suited my purposes to maintain a tension between competing versions of reality, so I've avoided the fully extended form of this fractured delivery. In this way poetic moment can be made to poke through the narrative at the same time as a sense of the numinous or other-wordly, so on these occasions the form and the content might be (or I intend them to be) in harmony.

More recently I used a post-modern technique to give me this breathing space. In *Indigo* for example, the horizontal narrative is punctuated at every fourth chapter by short extracts from a crackpot's so-called Manual of Light, the subject of which acted as a McGuffin (Alfred Hitchcock's generic word for the object-of-the-chase, be it a suitcase of money, or the microfilm or a vial of plutonium) for the advancement of the novel. The author of the Manual of Light, inspired, authoritarian, dangerous and unstable was thus given "permission" to deliver his

book in a highly stylised and poetic mode that might have been unforgivable (to me) in a different context.

This was a technique I'd used in more muted form in a previous novel, *The Stormwatcher*, (and in earlier novels *Requiem* and *Dark Sister*, though here the fragments were lodged in the free narrative rather than configured in isolated chapters, through the technique of using fictional *found texts* in the form of fragments extracted from diaries, scrolls, cuttings and the like). With the works in question, *Smoking Poppy* and the novella *Leningrad Nights* I opted for techniques differing from the above.

For the early drafts of *Smoking Poppy* I initially adopted an identical technique to that described above for *Indigo*: namely the regular intrusion of extremely short chapters offered in a different (but consistent) voice to that of the horizontal narrative. Every fourth chapter was to be a - mercifully short - intervention offered in the voice of a zoned-out, opium-addled mystic introducing bizarre but intriguing pellets of information about the extraordinary history and character of the opium drug itself. Whoever he was, this fellow, I got tired of both him and his snickering voice; but only after the third draft did I abandon these chapters, going back and incorporating some of the material they contained into the main body of

the story. Having abandoned that I was forced back on the more difficult method of finding a greater sense of playfulness in the vernacular of the narrator.

This too became the preferred technique in the novella. In *Leningrad Nights* I chose to tell the tale through the viewpoint of a fourteen year old boy-poet experiencing hardship in the siege of Leningrad. I have to be clear here about this choice. I had been commissioned by a publisher to write a *novella.* The novella length (typically 20-45,000 words) is probably the most commercially disastrous category known to publishing. Nevertheless this publisher had calculated that I had a solid enough following for him to sell it, and he paid me in advance. This liberated me from some of the normal commercial imperatives involved in submitting a piece of writing. There was no sudden rush of helium to the head - I remained committed to the notion of narrative - but it did give me that margin of expansion. Thus I made my protagonist a poet, about whom and with which I could be both satirical and lyrical according to the mood I was in while writing. This choice of character perspective does reveal a step towards the lyrical mode of telling the story.

But to return to the reasons why I abandoned those post-modern techniques for *Smoking Poppy*: it was because I'd found the tricksiness of it rather stale. It was too easy. The method of switching the register around in order to give the work

density is superficially attractive and, when first encountered, artistically exciting and therefore seductive. But the appeal of post-modernism is sometimes specious and often suspect. It allows the author a posture of intellectual distance and superiority, and excuses emotional commitment. The intellectual position of the author may be plain from the juxtaposing of material, but the cerebral jigsaw method of storytelling is frequently a cold game, blocking a good deal of emotional force. Whereas I am thoroughly committed to the notion that fiction is the proper medium for a confluence of the cerebral and the visceral, the rational and the irrational.

The voice I'd chosen for the fragmented alternative narrative displeased me. It was the voice of a hardened, drug-weathered hippie, cynical and amused, detached and wry, reporting on both the human condition and offering despatches from the trenches of the drug war. The trick had been to employ a patently - sometimes outrageously - unreliable voice that came up with surprising or even shocking insights. I worked hard on refining it, trying to keep it witty and maintaining it as an effective counterpoint to the emotional rawness of the voice of my main character, Danny. It was only after I'd crafted some ten short chapters (this mode was to have been offered in every fourth chapter) in this voice, having got the voice exactly where I'd wanted it, that I junked it. I realised I had arrived at an unconscious method of not merely counterpointing the main narrative, but of

undermining my main character. I'd been afraid of the emotional intensity of my protagonist and had tried to signal my aloofness through this literary device. Whereas I'd conceived of these chapters as lyrical embellishment, they merely slowed and skewed narrative progress. Naturally I was pretty annoyed to discover that I'd tripped myself up like this. It's no fun to arrive at the conclusion that an emotional cowardice (rather than intellectual brilliance) has led you into writing several wasted chapters.

Perhaps not wasted, after all, but a significant breakthrough not just for this novel but for my writing in general. It clarified for me my feelings about the post-modernist collage methods of writing. I can look back at my previous novel *Indigo* (about which I have always felt there to be an emotional chill at its heart) and wonder if the same technique was responsible for keeping me from finding the requisite warmth for one's own characters.

In *Leningrad Nights* I had no escape from the emotional rawness of my character. I'd made him a boy. Yes I could be satirical about some of his awful poetry, but his moral intensity and emotional nakedness had to be forgiven because of his youth. His feelings - and my authorial sentiments behind his feelings - had to be paraded. Was this character chosen because he offered me more of a crack at lyrical register? That is probably one-tenth of the truth. Once again the creative

unconscious is resourceful and devious in reminding the author of what he's supposed to be doing.

With *Smoking Poppy* the material from these junked chapters was partially salvaged and spliced back into the narrative, and consequently some of the playfulness at large in those chapters was gifted back to the character of Danny. In some cases this did mean facing the hoary old writing problem of "info-dumping", namely the handling of those expository lumps or knots of vital information so often painfully navigated in science-fiction or crime writing. I'd used the subordinate chapters to offer a skewed insight into some of the history of the opium trade. Much of this had to go, but it did lead to the invention of new scenes to accommodate vital information.

A significant thing happened after the decision to junk the subordinate chapters. The move had a direct influence on the development of one of the supporting characters, Danny's son Phil. The further shift from *lyric* to *narrative* set other mechanisms to work. Much of what I am describing here is of course a post-rationalisation of things that happen during the creative process and are only dimly apprehended at the time. Although I can sound decisive on paper afterwards a nagging anxiety about loss of heft was already producing something of a solution.

The phrase *plot is character and character is plot* is generally considered by writers to be an unhelpful truism.[1] Yet it makes perfect sense to me. The delineation of character is about behaviour, and behaviour needs an interesting context. Interesting context, and the fluctuations of that interesting context, is plot. In turn, plot that serves only a sterile story mechanism will quickly desert the character. A protagonist who goes into a darkened building in search of an axe-wielding psychopath is clearly not a character at all, but an automaton, and a stupid one at that, subject to the plot-dictates of a genre happy to accept a condition of absconded wit. Character must respond to plot *humanely*; and the plot itself will in turn be shaped by human character response.

The solution hatching in the back of my brain after ditching those subordinate chapters was that the life of my main protagonist Danny needed to be enriched to restore heft to the narrative. One can only enrich character by enriching the environment in which the character moves. I chose to improve the environment by developing one of the minor characters.

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[1] A phrase often wrongly attributed to Aristotle. In fact F Scott Fitzgerald when he said it was elaborating on Galsworthy, who might have been reminting Heraclitus, who said something like "A man's character is his destiny". Character took second place to plot for Aristotle.

Phil, Danny's son, was originally introduced into the early drafts *en passant.* I am not even sure why he was there at all - he served very little function other than to vex Danny about the state of his children and was of no help to him in his plight. He was a sack of misery, a bundle of woe, entirely passive and an invention that merely slowed down the narrative. I cannot think why I even allowed the initial and entirely extraneous scene between Phil and Danny to reach the second draft. I must have been enjoying his misery. I'm glad I did, because Phil became a major player in terms of service to the plot *and* to his own character. He also became a significant foil to the character of my chief protagonist.

Phil became a fellow traveller who saved Danny's life at great expense to himself. Importantly his presence on the journey allowed me to further complicate Danny's essentially conflicted nature. I had been very careful to set up the fact that Danny didn't want to take this journey. He had to be in Thailand, but he didn't want to be there. Neither did he want either of his two companions, Mick and Phil, to be there with him. The development of Phil as a travel companion - a plot complication - allowed me to illuminate Danny's character by giving full rein to his bitter frustration and his wild prejudices. A twist presented itself (about which I intend to say more later) in which plot and character were able to come together. For Danny, at least, Heraclitus was correct.

Significantly, the introduction of Phil also gave me an insight into Danny's other travelling companion, Mick. Fictional characters must go through a process of change. If they do not then the fiction will be unsatisfying to the reader. This is true of short stories as well as novels, and also of film and drama. It is a structural imperative. If the process of change does not happen, then the story has no moral significance. I now had three unlikely travelling companions, roped together. Each of these had to go through a different process of self-discovery and commensurate change.

This issue of character and environment came home to roost with respect to Danny's daughter Charlie. For most of the novel, Charlie is nothing more than a McGuffin, something to chase after, and I was faced with a real problem when Danny met up with his daughter. I had confined Charlie to a hut in the mountainous jungle district of Northern Thailand. There she lived in the most spartan of conditions, unable to leave the hut. The consequence of this was that her behaviour and the possibility of her interaction was immediately circumscribed by the poverty of her environment. I had effectively reduced her to a character of dialogue. I tried hard to breathe extra life into this character, but she was - half way through the novel - never able to compete with the three men who had come to find her. Even Miss Havisham in Great Expectations had her wedding dress and decaying banquet and finery. Charlie had very little in the way

of props with which to work. She is a thinly drawn character and, artistically speaking, a failure in that her dynamic role is weak.

A lesson learned.

There have been times when I have created characters that lie flat on the page defying all efforts at resuscitation. This is a perplexing and exasperating hazard in character writing. The warning signals come for me when I have to invent dialogue in front of the character as it were, rather than hearing it in my head as I commit it to paper. If it is the former then the character itself can be felt to have no unconscious. (I recognise the absurdity in this - the character is not a real person but a construct manipulated over the course of the story - but intuitively if I feel that a character's motivation proceeds from the "front-brain" of their being, then something is wrong. If there is no sense of an unconscious, or a shadow of hidden motivations, then they move through the story without ballast, and threaten to tip over at any moment). My instincts respond when characters start to speak in dialogue which conceals as much as it reveals. It is always possible to dress up or enhance a minor character, but if one's central protagonist fails to exhibit this vital energy then they can't be allowed to go on. There have been times when a character has failed in this way, to the point where I have had to give up on them. For *Requiem*, I wrote 40,000 words of a first draft in which the

chief protagonist was a woman. Half way through a novel is a desperate place at which to abandon it, but she simply wasn't responding to the - increasingly stressful - situations in which I wanted to place her. In exasperation I dumped both the draft and the character. A male protagonist took her place, and the novel turned out very differently to the one I had originally conceived.

But to return to *Smoking Poppy* this narrative improvement and character development all came about, I want to stress, because I'd chosen to junk ten chapters of non-linear *lyrical* material. Elimination of the vertical in favour of the horizontal and the strictly linear had the effect *not* of reducing the density of the overall project (which had been my fear) but of enriching it under radically different terms. Alternative solutions presented themselves, and this is one of the most stimulating features of the creative process.

To offer a specific example of how narrative unfolding deepens character and insight, I must refer not to Danny but to the actions of his travelling companions. Danny is deeply shocked by the world into which he has been plunged. He has moved into a psychic and material "zone of change" in which the normal rules of everyday experience are suspended, and the only zone in which storytelling can sensibly takes place. But it is in the zone that he is also shocked by the conduct of his companions Mick and Phil. Their behaviour frequently

wrongfoots him, and, by increments, Danny is forced to review his concept of himself. It is not his own behaviour that changes in the zone, but his prejudices; his notion of himself becomes unthreaded with each surprising turn taken by his companions. Thus the swings of plot are not a machine to provide thrills and spills along the way (though I hope there *is* a bit of that along the way) but a sequence of psychic jolts acting indirectly on the chief protagonist. Again I would like to offer this as evidence of the inter-relationship between plot and character, and of a hidden structure which would not necessarily have been available if the preferred mode had been lyrical.

Leningrad Nights has far less of a plot going on. Set in Leningrad during the horrific nine-hundred-day siege of the Second World War, a boy goes about the city trying to do good. Not much *fabula*, on the surface of things, but I hope plenty of *siuzhet*. Every time the boy - because of his unique character - finds someone and does something his actions propel him along a narrowing gauntlet where each action appears to be an unavoidable consequence of the preceding one until the horror of his actions in trying to maintain his pursuit of moral good is revealed. It is actually a very narrative-driven story. This is disguised partially because of the step towards the *lyrical* mode I mentioned earlier, but also because of the use of an island device.

The island device can be offered literally, from *The Odyssey* to *The Tempest* to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; extended into space through the genre of science fiction, where every planet is an island (Star Trek is a science-fiction Odyssey); or it can be offered figuratively as in *Leningrad Nights*. The point is that no-one can get in or out of Leningrad. It is under siege, iced-up. For all purposes it is an island. The rules are different there, a new currency has to be mastered. Everyone is starving and the old morality is no help.

The effect of the island device is to telescope the intensity of action. The zone of change has been made physical in these stories. The psychic space and the geographical space have become one and the same. Small actions become magnified in their significance. If I understand how this works at all it is because of the hermetically sealed nature of the location, with the island existing as a tiny crucible in a place horribly outside the quotidian yet genuinely - indisputably - of the real world. The *leak-to-now*[1], the transfer of meaning from an apparently fantastical story to the reader becomes more acute at the puncture points in the story.

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[1] A very useful phrase for Fantasists, given to me by the novelist M John Harrison

This hermetic seal on the story lends weight to each plot step, each action and the moral consequences of each action. The *pressure* on the characters in *Leningrad Nights* is much stronger. The choices for action are reduced. The consequences of each action are more likely to ricochet down the narrowing chamber or gauntlet. So while it may appear that *Leningrad Nights* is less tightly plotted than *Smoking Poppy* for example, in fact the pressure for characters to act in magnified ways is greater. The heightened currency of the *in extremis* situation of the island binds character ever tighter to plot.

It leads me to speculate about how wildly different are the enterprises of narrative and lyrical endeavour in fiction writing, and what a marriage there is to be made of the two when a peaceable solution is found. There can be no value inherent in one mode over the other. There is nothing more *creative* in the lyrical than in the narrative-based when it comes to writing. The lyrical dreams up new approaches to storytelling, and in doing so enjoys the license that comes with experiment. The narrative mode acts within greater structural constraint, and the creativity of the author enjoys equal exercise in the problem-solving demanded by those constraints. The former requires divergent creative thinking. The latter requires convergent creative thinking.

Time for something dangerously near to prejudice: I have always suspected that for those writers who prefer the exotic, the elaborate, the free flowing, the lexical gymnastics and the gaudy carnival of language, that life is easier. That composition is easier. That the really tough part about writing is coming up with a decent story where imagery and diction function under strict control and the themes have to add up to a coherent pattern or risk being expunged. As Maugham noted in his end-of-career reflections *The Summing Up,* (Maugham, 1938) a good story is obviously a difficult thing to invent, but its difficulty is a poor reason for despising it. Having demonstrated one's courage and charm as a divergent thinker, how will the same author's talent cope in the creative arena of convergent thinking and the kind of reductive problem-solving frequently associated with that "other culture" of mathematics and science? I know I could go on expanding a novel at all compass points, but that I must eventually face the brain haemorrhage inducing resolution. For this reason and for no other, I habitually bring in a novel at between eighty thousand and a hundred thousand words. It sometimes surprises readers to be told that there is never an *aesthetic* reason why, for me, it should be any different.

I have an unpublished novel in my drawer, written before I was first published. A respectable publisher would like it to see light of day and he wants to convince me that enough people out there would like to get sight of it. In this unpublished novel I

allowed myself a fairly full workout in the mode I have called lyrical. It is a self-consciously "artistic" or literary novel, the full-feathered variety, much interested in display. It's the kind of novel that doesn't trouble itself too much about the notion of an audience. It does not altogether cohere. It is experimental, worthy in places and overly referential in others. I am sure it is about *something or other*, but I'd be hard pressed to tell you what that is. It is a flabby novel, choke-full of "brilliant" lines, and as was pointed out in the *Poetics* XXIV "character and thought are merely obscured by a diction that is over-brilliant" (Aristotle). That unpublished novel was a lot easier to write than any of the novels coming after it.

But that novel was written before I had developed a voice as a writer. What's more, I didn't understand about writing - whether in the narrative or the lyrical register - what I do today. Namely that an authentic voice with which to tell a story enjoys the properties of quicksilver, and will much more readily fill a convenient narrative shape than will any voice that is tentative or unresolved.

Surprising the authorial voice

Much is made of the issue of *voice* in the teaching of writing. Young and aspiring writers struggle to grow into this voice and are faced with a bewildering array of styles, tones, registers, canonical and modern influences, vernacular movements, and, finally, challenges to the hierarchy of lofty and debased or despised genres. Voice is something that emerges only after a served apprenticeship. Voice requires a fluidity associated with confidence.

Yet there is an assumption behind this that an author, having arrived at his or her voice, will inhabit that voice for the rest of their writing days, give or take a moderate curve that might come with maturity. Though this is true for many authors, it seems to take a lot of fun out of the game. I don't see why an author might not want - in principle - to switch voice with each novel, or set of novels, or with each new project. So long as each voice is crafted to a consistent pitch or register, so long as it can hold the note without a wobble, so long as it is internally consonant with its own character and vernacular rules, then I see no loss of virtue. With nine novels now published and a raft of short stories, I don't quite know when I'm going to find an absolute or platonic voice. It changes, from book to book and sometimes radically. This may of course mean that I'm just a

shockingly bad writer, one who doesn't know his own mind. Perhaps after fifteen books the books will start to arrive with a vocal pattern. But I don't think so.

First let me make a rather obvious distinction between character voice and authorial voice. A character voice might be exhibited in a first person narrative, or it might inhabit a subjective third-person point-of-view. In effect, this is a piece of ventriloquism, a sophisticated mimicry adapting specific diction, idiom, social reference and language-codes and even vernacular; along with cadence, timing, idiosyncratic grammar and suitable ellipsis.

Authorial voice however, whether operating through first or third person modes, stands behind the character voice like the master-ventriloquist. The author's voice, with its sometimes satirical or ironic purposes, is rarely congruent with the character voice. Irony and satire are blunt examples of this position. On a subtler level, often the author is happy to simply present a series of tableaux and to allow an alternative intention to emerge. In these discussions I am referring principally to *authorial* voice, but I want to suggest the distinction is never as neat as authors usually like to claim.

The distinction between authorial and character voices is easiest to make in the first-person narrative, as evinced in *Smoking Poppy*. Danny Innes tells us the tale,

whereas the author is manifestly not only not Danny Innes but plainly disapproves of many of Danny's attitudes and prejudices. *Leningrad Nights* is more complex. This appears to be a third-person narrative, but the last paragraph of the story reveals, after all, that we have been tuning into a first-person narrative; moreover the voice belongs to a very minor character in the story. This changes the moral position of the story: the narrator only survived at all because of the actions of the protagonist. The person telling the tale is now reporting from a position of extra sympathy for the protagonist. The intention of the *authorial* voice behind the *narrative* voice is to make the moral position of the latter open to even greater interpretation. My purpose in doing this was to add to the sense of psychic fracture experienced by the protagonist, looking for a formal twist that would echo content.

This is an interesting technicality in writing but it holds less fascination for me than the alarming things that begin to happen once voice selection has been made. The key word is *selection.* The most fun, the most challenging and most fully creative moment (by which I mean both rational and unconscious decision-making forces are aligned) comes in that decision about register, tone, vernacular and so on. It may be the key to the riddle of where this sort of writing comes from at all, or the answer to the hated question of "where do you get your ideas?" mentioned earlier. For me, there will be the haziest notion of theme and the

slender apprehension of a story-line (I won't yet dignify it with the word plot). But there will arrive, with a tiny shudder, a voice appropriate to both, a voice that begins to tell the tale. It would require a brave author to define, at this early stage of germination, this seedling voice as authorial rather than narrative.

Where authors have stumbled upon a commercial success and seek to repeat the formula for as long as the market will bear it, an interest in exploration of voice is likely be the first casualty. Both narrative and authorial voice in this case tend to become conflated in the formula. The restlessness of the authorial voice is itself closed down. I try to resist this. Of my previous publications, each has a different voice register, and that is because my authorial voice is in hunting mode, even though it is possible to trace a trajectory in the thematic interests of the novels. I feel I can keep the authorial voice in hunting mode by continually varying the registers and point-of-view positions in my fictions.

For *Smoking Poppy* I chose, for the first time, to write the novel in the first person. Though I have published a number of short stories written in the first person, I have tended to avoid the first person point-of-view. Post-rationalising this I would say that the reasons relate to control of narrative. In a complex novel it can become irritating to spend so much time in the protagonist's voice, enduring his prejudices and refining the quality of his bleatings for eighty thousand words.

Secondly, and this is a more technical objection, it can be frustrating to be restricted to relaying only that which your protagonist can reveal, when a jump-to-scene could take care of many narrative issues. Nevertheless, having arrived at my vague character, hazy theme and ghost of a story, I was satisfied. But it was not until my *authorial* intentions began to train my ears on my *character's* voice that it became clear there was more going on inside that character's voice than I had at first guessed.

I wanted Danny to be *conflicted.* I wanted him to be *worthy of respect.* I wanted him to be *cynical.* I wanted him to be *prejudiced.* I wanted him to be largely unaware of both his vices and his virtues. Conflicting him was not difficult. I placed a man with no interest or inclination to travel in an exotic environment, and made travelling companions of two men who infuriated him: he didn't want to *be* where he was and he didn't want to *be with* the people he was with.

These are basic mechanics of character positioning. It allows access to anger and other emotions that might emerge on a pretextual basis. Similarly, while I've never felt that one has to *like* the central protagonist (as the conventions of a Hollywood studio script might demand) I do feel it necessary to respect, or at least respond to some human flaw in the character's psychology. Danny is a curmudgeon. Life has fossilised him. He thinks everyone is out to trick him, but

he believes he "sees them coming". In order to deliberately undermine this perception of him - as cynical and hard-bitten - I decided to open the book with a passionate sequence I had originally laid down a couple of chapters into the narrative. He is a dry and bitter character, but, as the story will reveal, underneath he's full of juice, and I felt it necessary to prefigure this.

Thus although Danny's voice didn't reveal this part of himself in his opening words to me, it was the most genuine thing about him. True to form, he wouldn't tell me about the most vulnerable part of his make-up. He kept that buried for a while. Though you must trust the voice as it pays out, you don't have to trust the *order* in which it delivers information. Danny's voice will reveal all these things as the narrative unfolds. All of the aforementioned relates to the machinery of effective story telling rather than voice. What is much more organic and fluid and provisional is the *nature* of Danny's voice.

"Trust the voice" is a maxim of writing. It means if you recognise its authenticity, even if comes from outside your own milieu, then you should let it run, and I sensed this almost as soon as I had apprehended Danny as my central protagonist. There were some essential elements that made me want to stay with him, and as the character voice flowed (and it might flow on a *good* writing day) I heard anger, compassion, humour, frustration and bewilderment. I also heard a lot of

denial. At this stage of having lured the character on stage as it were I had no idea what his story was, I just sensed that I had a character with a story to tell. As an author, while this is happening you just hope it is going to be worthwhile.

The story aside, what intrigues me about the full tide of this voice, about its energy and the fact that it didn't want to cease flowing is *where it came from.* Remember that this is not the authors' voice. This is a crafted simulation, a constructed and fictional figure. But then why not any different voice? Why not other diction, a softer tone, a higher pitch?

Dreaming up Danny was not a fully cognitive process. Quite apart from the prosaic story-mechanics mentioned above I didn't assemble him out of an intellectual apprehension of what might make an authentic character with a ready-made package of interesting themes. He arrived, blinking and rubbing his eyes in the limelight, looking for a way out.

So where did he come from? Anger, compassion, humour, frustration and bewilderment. When I review that list of emotions, it sounds familiar enough. That is, I am personally not unfamiliar with any of them. But here again, Danny is not me. For one thing he speaks radically differently. He is a verbal construct. If you compare Danny's voice it will sound nothing like the voice at play in this

composition. He would never use a phrase like "verbal construct", unless he were taking the rise.

But on reflection I find that Danny is something of me after all, if only a fractured part. I suspect there are, in my writer's psyche, a number of competing voices. This is not yet a clinical condition, but a method of talking about what feeds creativity in general and writing in particular. As a writer I am fascinated by the range and variation of the linguistic patterns dividing the social classes in the United Kingdom and was easily impressed by what the sociologist Basil Bernstein called the *elaborated* and *restricted* codes[1]. Bernstein's seminal work never went far enough. In addition to codes of diction and grammatical elaboration might be added differences in emphasis, tone, delivery of speech and the massive weight of body language which shows a commensurate increase or decrease according to the restriction or elaboration of verbal language.

I grew up in the mining community of Keresley, north of Coventry in a mining family, speaking in what Bernstein would designate the *restricted code* of

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[1] Bernstein, Basil. (1960), "Language and Social Class." *British Journal of Sociology* 11, 271-6. Bernstein's fundamentally correct premise is controversial and has been criticised because of his conclusion that a disadvantaged child not only lacks critical skills but has also learned a language code that bars him or her from acquiring them.

language. I find the word *restricted* to be precise. There was social disapproval of breaking the language code, in that one risked derision or at least teasing, for courting the social vice of pretentiousness or even pomposity. But the implication that the language is impoverished is inaccurate. Within the 'code' as spoken by this particular community there is a great deal of irony, banter, word-play, jocularity, mimicry and other forms of linguistic sport. I should add some tonal details: talk tends to be very loud, aggressive, warm, teasing and direct.

An enormous contrast, then, with the language codes to be encountered on entering college or university. Far beyond variance of diction (academic emphasis on the Latin side of the English language had already been apprehended through school studies) the para-verbal and tonal differences are radical. The tone becomes muted. The emotional content of the exchange becomes flattened and somewhat cooled. The grammatical style and the diction become elaborated and more precise. A quality of indirection enters into the discourse. Aggression and teasing is (comparatively) expunged. The posture of playfulness is attenuated. In fact a complex set of signals and a new mode of communication has to be quickly internalised not just for university life and the requirements of study but for a subsequent career which is to involve writing and its attendant publishing circles. And here, in *Smoking Poppy*, we have the working class Danny (in this case an

electrician) railing against the world for what education (in this case Oxford University, that exemplar of social division) has done to his daughter Charlie.

It always comes as something of a surprise when, half way through a novel, you figure out a little of What Is Going On. I am immediately minded of the sub-genre of Horror tales and films where the master ventriloquist finds his psyche blending with that of his stage dummy. He suffers a kind of psychic penalty for having made the voice too authentic.

Smoking Poppy appears to have a hidden structure, quite independent of the narrative one. The hidden structure is an argument between the two voices mapped out above. Danny represents the loud, the vigorous, the mocking and the emotionally raw voice. But he is ardent, and beneath his bitterness he is deeply loving and ultimately compassionate. Since I wanted Danny to be an intelligent though not highly educated man, I made him an electrician, a technically accomplished individual who should have gone on to enjoy educational opportunity but who through social circumstances did not. I also made him an avid reader. The other voice, the sophisticated, the erudite, the lyrical is not specifically embodied in another character (other than Charlie, but she occupies a rather different position, and one whom the argument is about). It is exemplified in Danny's bookish search. Because he is an avid reader, he naively thinks that

books might offer him some insight into whatever it is that drew Charlie towards the refuge of opium.

I am by no means the only author to stumble across What Is Going On when writing a novel. Novelist Jonathan Lethem reported a similar discovery during a talk given to students[1]. His own experience was of being a Brooklyn New Yorker (where the mode might be described as loud, playful and high-pitched) on the Californian West Coast (where the mode is muted, easy-going and restrained). In Lethem's case the figure of a protagonist suffering from acute Tourette's syndrome came crackling through the fault-line of these two cultural language styles. This seems to me an important rationalisation of some of the dynamic forces that go into the - some would say pathological - habit of writing. One can think of conflicted psychological forces, ambivalence and vacillations that might contribute to a dynamic and creative force in the same way. Writers should not be too insistent on the clean distinction between character voice and authorial voice. The dynamic may be more volatile and more necessary than we like to think, and taming it to the point of a clean distinction might drive us from the novel to the pamphlet.

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[1] Talk given to MA Writing students at Nottingham Trent University 31/1/2000.

This particular notion of psychological conflict - of the ventriloquist in distress - affords a writer the opportunity to respond to previously hidden energies alive in the manuscript, and even to feed them. This is the real purpose of redrafting. Writing is rewriting. There are a (very tiny) few writers who will claim not to rewrite. I can only think that for them that there is very little "backbrain" activity going on in the creative act. The dream-pellet, torn bleeding from the matrix of dreaming and still talking, is of far more interest to me than one that has already stated its purpose and departed long before it has been committed to paper.

It might be better to illustrate my point by talking about the use of symbols in a novel. It is feasible, in the search for greater heft or philosophical meaning, to shoehorn this or that symbol into a manuscript after the first draft. But the lack of organic relationship with the rest of the text will be obvious. Symbols in writing should emerge naturally: if the symbol hasn't announced itself in an initial draft it is unlikely to have the power to work on the unconscious of a reader. The pond in my novel *The Tooth Fairy* comes to symbolise the power of the unconscious mind itself. In recognising this I can have my characters return to this natural scene over and over, and I can draw key scenes there, but it wasn't until a moment of redrafting that I was able to recognise its potential power and therefore augment the significance of the pond in the novel. Redrafting re-arranges the spotlights, brings this scene up and tones that scene down, introduces foreshadowing of

event, interposes layers of irony and reminds of us of primary symbols in the text. This latter leads us back time and again to the bubbling forces of unconscious energies at large in the manuscript.

Similarly with *Smoking Poppy*, upon recognising the significance of the war of voices, I was able to augment the dynamics and insert new ironies and forshadowings that were absent from the first draft. Danny is misdirected into a bookish search for insight into the opium mystery by a college lecturer, a casual acquaintance of his, and immerses himself in the writings of Keats, Coleridge, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, De Quincey et al. This of course gives Danny full opportunity to vent his spleen at the pretentiousness and uselessness of writers of all stripe, and indeed at university lecturers who have no interest in doing other than alienating his daughter from him.

It was good fun for me too, now that I had granted myself permission to introduce a decisive anti-literary note into the proceedings by bringing in my favourite preoccupation. Significantly, Danny is attempting to educate himself at the precise venue he claims to reject, namely the Palace of Literature. Even more significant is the fact that it is ultimately through these books - and in a passage written by Thomas De Quincey for whom Danny seems to have little but contempt - that Danny makes a breakthrough. De Quincey's passage on The Dark

Interpreter[1] helps Danny to understand something about the nature of fatherhood. It is a passage congruent with what is happening around him in that it hints at the world of spirits. It also shows him what he must do, in that any encounter with The Dark - reports De Quincey - results in an emotional growth-spurt.

Danny's voice is now enriched by his autodidactic mission. His pride needs to be able to say he has read and rejected these things and can talk with some authority about their content. At the same time he doesn't like the way either of his university-educated children speaks. He is suspicious of the implied superiority in the language codes adopted by Charlie and Phil. Phil, a bible-toting fundamentalist, speaks to him in a rather chilly, formal manner (and has his own literary model of the world and indeed their journey handed down from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). Charlie, the maypole figure around whom all the action moves, talks to Danny in somewhat supercilious tones. Danny recognises that the emotional divide existing between him and his children has been cemented by language patterns.

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[1] The Dark Interpreter was the name De Quincey created, in *Suspiria De Profundis,* for the education he believed occurs through suffering. Through suffering the individual crosses a dark place in the human spirit, where he or she will encounter The Dark Interpreter, itself a spirit. Quincey argues that a sudden growth-spurt follows all negotiations with one's own suffering. The "dark" is interpreted" for our spiritual edification.

For this reason I had language break down completely during Danny's opium-smoking sequence, during which he experienced and even visualised both Charlie's and Phil's words as incoherent, incomprehensible, exotic and alienating. It is an example of the lyrical mode I discussed earlier, but *in extemis*, a small style-sample snatched from a page of James Joyce. Later, he articulates his anguish that his children talk in "strange languages" and "incomprehensible accents" but it is at the point of the breakdown of language (in the dislocated Opium-induced hallucination) that Danny meets the Lord Of The Poppy.

Thus the language texture of my main character, the competition over registers and vernacular and the accents of the formally educated, is a battleground that has been fought over for many years in my own head. And while I was puzzling over some surface issues of theme, narrative, imagery and the like, a hidden exploration was taking place, offering me a unique voice which is in itself almost a discourse on the very issue of the writer's voice.

This language discourse and texture spreads out to the secondary characters. Dialogue in fiction is not mimetic. It is not intend to be an accurate representation of the way people speak. Rather, robust dialogue is arrived at by techniques that convey the illusion of the way people speak. So too with Danny's first person

voice telling the story. The construct is buttressed by the characters of Mick, Phil and Charlie, each of whom act as foils for this wrestling over language.

Mick's language is minimal, vulgar and uncouth. At one level this has the effect of softening Danny's uncultured behaviour. Phil's language is formal, ordered and repressed. His presence, by way of contrast, makes Danny appear to be in touch with his feelings. Charlie's voice is educated, critical, deconstructing. These supporting voices operate in turns to undermine or lend sympathy to Danny's position.

Once I'd decided to use the literary references as part of the texture not for their own virtues but for Danny's responses to them the possibilities for a very different kind of novel opened up. As I stated earlier it would have been easy and enticing to interleave the basic narrative with a much more comprehensive exploration of literary history. I could have let Danny study the canon purely in terms of references to narcotics or hallucinatory experiences. This would have made for a piquant 'literary' novel, but, I suspect, one self-consciously literary. I rejected the idea in favour of the compound of adventure novel and intimate family study. I also rejected it because such a course would have committed me to a very different presiding voice.

I did not want that presiding voice to be rational, literary and aloof. I wanted Danny to be equally possessed of the *howl*, and to be torn between the two positions. The howl was the sound that I heard when I pulled the dream-pellet from its chaotic bed. The finished work had to offer its refinements and remain loyal to the raw emotional attachment of a father to a daughter on which this novel is predicated. So that Danny can open the novel with this:

> Oh that Charlie of mine, how I wanted her back. When a baby is born the fontanel at the top of the head yawns open. You fill the hole with shimmering, molten, free-running love and it sets and hardens over the hole with something like bone. For the first few weeks of a baby's life you are intoxicated by the extraordinary scent of its head. The chemical fix. A gift from the gardens of paradise. You want it all the time, and you only get it when you cradle that baby in your arms...
>
> ...Yes, how I wanted her back. My Charlie. Just for two minutes. Just so I could hold her and sniff her hair to check that she was all right. But I couldn't. I couldn't because she was rotting in a prison cell in some Far Eastern Jail. And it made me want to howl like a dog.[1]

The point is that Danny wants to howl like a dog, but he won't. He speaks humanely, even eloquently, about his predicament. Yet the howl is never far from the surface. Danny's voice exists in a dynamic relationship between the instinct to howl and the need to speak eloquently. Just as it exists in the need to get on with the telling and to suspend the agony of the moment in an act of lyricism. Perhaps he feels, like his author, that this act might create a miraculous balance or orbit that will somehow triumph over the tyranny of both time and reason.

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[1] Smoking Poppy, p 1.

I hope that my novels at least partly defy rational reduction. The fully interpreted dream is after all a deflated dream. My job as a writer is still to the find the incubating voice that might ultimately bring the dream home. Here it should be dressed and made accessible to readers; logically developed but with its dynamic character preserved; but most of all unpunctured, and still talking long after the close of its pages.

Summary

Consideration of the creative mechanisms behind a work of fiction by an author is usually considered to be supererogatory. Yet in the teaching of Creative Writing at NTU, at both undergraduate and post-graduate level we insist upon a rational framework to underpin all creative work, usually in the form of a critical commentary, and that is what is offered here. I have focused on technical issues and have generally avoided a discussion of what the novels mean. What these novels *mean* is for the critic to say.

The exploration at the edge of genre continues of course, but on a different and less rational level altogether, in the next novel. At the time of writing this projected novel is to be called *The Facts Of Life.* In it I plan to test the axioms of genre just a little further. I want supernatural content in the novel, but I don't want it to structure the novel. Most novels of the genre (and indeed *Leningrad Nights* and *Smoking Poppy*) follow the structural design of escalating tension until a revelation of some kind is made, and that revelation usually concerns the true nature of the beast (human or supernatural in origin?). In the proposed novel I intend to lay a thread of supernatural event but have my characters refuse to let their awareness of supernatural event motivate their actions. In other words, they will work around that element rather than let it shape their lives. Such a novel will no doubt enrage

those who like a decisive genre line, but it might still delight those who resist the quarantine laws. We will see.

What has surprised me in writing this was the close, possibly symbiotic relationship between what I had laid out as the second and the third of these issues, namely the issue of narrative/lyricism and the question of construction of voice. I originally had it in my head that clarity about the first of these determined the quality of voice with which one might lead. Now I suspect that deeper issues regarding *voice* may have been assembling rational arguments for me about the war between narrative and lyricism.

This particular enigma will not be unravelled precisely because the essence of creative writing is a dynamic battle between powerful unconscious, deeply felt emotional forces on the one hand and the rational assembly and filtering of language and image on the other. What I do know is that if the dynamic conflict is ever resolved, if unconscious force wins out over technical control, or vice-versa, then the art is impoverished. The conscious mind and its shadow are together the creators of new possibilities, which must after all be the purpose of all art.

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