**BREAKING SILENCES: STRANGE AFFILIATION**

The idea for this paper was born during an undergraduate class I taught some years ago. We had been examining character-creation methods employed by the Australian comedian Barry Humphreys – in particular his approach to creating the vulgar, chauvinistic character of Sir Les Paterson[[1]](#endnote-1). I was illustrating how character-creation could proceed in two directions: from the inside working out, and from the outside working in. In each case, this involves blurring, or breaking down the hard line separating inside and outside, self and other. Sir Les could have been born from either method, or from both. Humphries observed an Australian politician at a party, and that politician could have been the seed that grew into Sir Les. Equally, Humphries describes Paterson as embodying everything in himself that he tries to suppress. This implies a strange affiliation, or sharing, between Humphries and the real-life politician who provoked him to create Sir Les. Strange, because on the surface the two men appear to have nothing in common, but affiliation nevertheless, because Humphries does imply that Paterson is *also* a manifestation of his *own* inner demons.

I set my students the task of trying something similar, but was met with resistance. Several participants insisted that their characters had absolutely nothing to do with their own inner life: in fact, they believed characters *should* have nothing to do with the author’s inner life. This could have been a high principled objection, but it also looked like an expression of anxiety. Were those students worried about exposing any aspect of their psyche to the scrutiny of readers? Did they fear being judged – even by association with the characters they bring to life?

This would be understandable. Polarised societies are more likely to be judgemental societies, according to the psychologist Jonathan Haidt[[2]](#endnote-2). Media and social media reinforce judgementalism. This is not the kind of climate to encourage young people to risk exposing the secret recesses of their vulnerable psyches. Recently, one of my students expressed it in these terms: ‘society affirms the value of being yourself, but you must keep that self hidden if you do not want to be judged.’

I want to affirm some extraordinary works of literature that *have* emerged from artists who dare to reveal strange affiliation; and I want to reveal how these works dramatize the complexity of that strange affiliation in motion. This is what happens in Joseph Conrad’s tale ‘The Secret Sharer’, which I’ll examine first. I’ll go on to reflect on the poet Ken Smith’s affiliation with inmates at Wormwood Scrubs Prison, as represented in his 1987 collection *Wormwood*; then I will explore the poet Peter Reading’s affiliation with the homeless as it is presented in his 1989 masterpiece *Perduta Gente*. I want to recognise the value of affiliations that transgress the lines drawn by pre-formed identities and divisive identity politics, and demonstrate how imagination and creative empathy can blur divisions, or enlarge the circle of humane inclusion.

In ‘The Secret Sharer’[[3]](#endnote-3), a novice sea captain sees his ‘own double’ in a fugitive first mate from another ship. This occurs when the sea captain is experiencing a moment of existential vulnerability in solitude. This is early in his command; his crew are still strange to him, and he is still a stranger to them. This fugitive is responsible for the murder of a violent and undisciplined shipmate during an incident in a storm at sea. This is narrated (later) by the fugitive, and this narration reveals the pressures brought to bear on conventional notions of free will. The fugitive does not know whether his act was volitional, reflex, or a strange kind of accident. Following his escape, the fugitive swims from one ship to the other. He crosses a gulf, displaying a desperate kind of faith. The captain / narrator harbours this man in his own cabin, and during their whispered conversations his secret sharing grows. The captain describes this experience as like being in two places at once; as a kind of insanity, but insanity without loss of one’s faculties. The fugitive is described as his twin and his ghost. This secret sharing could be taken as a representation of the process of creative empathy. The uncertain predicament of being a stranger on board renders the captain acutely receptive, and the tale serves as a powerful sketch of Conrad’s insights into the transgressive and disorientating powers of the imagination. This kind of association is clearly a potential threat to the rigid delineations of order on ship.

Ken Smith wrote his 1985 collection *Wormwood* whilst undertaking a position as the (first ever) writer in residence at Wormwood Scrubs prison. It is a collection full of masks and personae, and these reveal Smith’s affiliative sharing with wanderers, itinerants, displaced citizens, suicides and ‘lost boys’. I’ll focus on the poems that clearly respond to the predicaments of the ‘boys on the wing’ – the prison inmates Smith worked with during his term as writer in residence. It is clear that he is carrying their voices and predicaments inside him during this period. In ‘At the solstice’[[4]](#endnote-4), he sees a path in his own life that could have left him a ‘lost boy’ too: ‘Years back / in the paranoid self of myself / I recall in the seventyeight of it all / I would have killed a man and been here / meeting myself a prisoner …’ Only the prison censor and the righteous outside seem to believe in clear divisions and unblurred lines, and what the righteous don’t know is that the lost boys are their own shadows, ‘wherever they are in the light’. In ‘Talking with the censor’, Smith remarks:

‘Some days I meet monsters, men I encounter

in the house of green ginger, in myself

as it happens, drawn up or caught short

with my father’s lost knife in my hand.’[[5]](#endnote-5)

Smith’s father grew up in an Irish orphanage, and lived a hard life as an itinerant farm labourer in England. His silences, exhaustions, bad moods and sudden outbursts of rage have been the subject of some of Smith’s most affecting poems. Knowledge of these poems helps us unlock one strand of Smith’s strange affiliation with lifers and lost boys, of men who become ‘a record no one listens to / a book no one reads’[[6]](#endnote-6). If the lost boys are our own ghosts, or the shadows of the righteous, Smith’s father was his own personal ghost – a man who haunts the poet, who’s dream disturbs his dream, and whom he wishes would ‘go back up the long pale corridor / there’s no coming back from.’[[7]](#endnote-7)

Smith talked about ‘undelineated personae’[[8]](#endnote-8) in his earlier work, and this also relates to the effects of dislocation and violence on the lineation of self: lineation meaning ‘the action or process of drawing lines or marking with lines.’ Colin Raw reminds us that the ‘founding disorientation in Smith’s life originated in the aftermath of his father’s explosive rage. There was a shattering of concord between self and world, and relating to it thereafter became a matter of “beginning from what’s broken.”’[[9]](#endnote-9) Often, Smith’s articulation is both that of a mask, and the private language of the poet’s own voice in his own situation, so that poet and mask are interfused. Many of the best poems in *Wormwood* find Smith’s voice strangely merging with the voices of his lifers and lost boys, so that it is not always possible to identify what is poet and what is lost boy. Smith, too, becomes a secret sharer:

‘What we do here is count,

count, pencil in, turning

a smooth choeography- arm,

chain, keys, Whisky

2 on the walkie-talkie, slam

of the great gates shut –

a century, more. Oh,

you’ll see me dance, some

time you’ll hear me sing,

truth is we despise as we

count each other, as we

study the clock’s time,

ticking *knockback knockback*

the hours one by one on Sir

and as ever it’s a long time

to the next number 9 bus and this

urgent news out of nowhere.’[[10]](#endnote-10)

‘Don’t think it couldn’t be you,’ is the bracing phrase repeated five times in Peter Reading’s 1989 poetry collection, *Perduta Gente*. The book’s title is taken from the inscription above the gates of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*.

‘Per mi si va tra la perduta gente...’

‘Through me the road among the lost people...’

In Reading’s book, the ‘lost people’ are the dispossessed: the ‘wino unworthies’ who endure the empathy desert of homelessness on the streets of the modern city; those who sleep in rat-infested squats, drink bottle-bank cocktails, and parade their injuries and misfortunes before those hurrying to pass them by. The lost people are ‘Grief-bitten impotent owners of nothing, / holding opinions / gagged, disregarded, unsought.’[[11]](#endnote-11) This is a realm where ‘nothing can ever be done; / things are intractably thus’[[12]](#endnote-12); and ‘carrying on as if nothing is wrong is / what we are good at.’[[13]](#endnote-13)Impotence, fatalism and a sense of futility reign. In many ways, *Perduta Gente* is Reading’s most affecting and technically brilliant book, but its lack of fame perhaps reflects the author’s fierce and dogged compulsion to face up to troubling aspects of our society outside the insular idylls of what Ken Smith calls ‘the Rupert Bear school of poetry’[[14]](#endnote-14). These troubling aspects raise issues for which the author offers no ready-made solutions or consolation. What seems clear is that the book expresses an imaginative sharing with the lost people, and this manifests itself variously in this complex work.

As Isobel Martin observes, ‘*Perduta Gente* is a fragmented collage of a fragmented world, a cubist-like artwork of untitled poems, two prose strands, and photo-copied newspaper cuttings and excerpts from secret documents…’[[15]](#endnote-15)Reading has created a fictional author / persona, and in one strand of this collage, handwritten extracts from the author/persona’s field notes run parallel with excerpts from a (fictive) biography of the same. Both imply that 'he' had close contact with his lost subjects, or even lived amongst them. Whether or not this is literally true, it underlines the intensity of Reading’s imaginative sharing, and his desire to head off accusations of cultural tourism. Here is the first field note:

‘terribly sick with the meths, but she kept on vomiting through the night, but with nothing left to sick up (the front of her scraggy overcoat covered in the methsy, vegetable – soupy slime – the stench abominable) so that between honks she screamed horribly. The only sleep we got was after one of the old hands dragged her off, still screaming, and dumped her in the alley round the corner where the dustbins are…’[[16]](#endnote-16)

The metaphor here is not hard to interpret.

Martin also identifies three stylistic levels in the book: ‘demotic, neutral and elegiac.’[[17]](#endnote-17) I’ll focus on the demotic: on the instances where Reading enters into the direct speech of the lost people, or where their speech enters into him. The demotic voices break the silence that often closes around the author/persona as he struggles with the apparent impotence of his art to end their ‘unpleasant circumstances.’

missiz an me inda warm inda Euston

unnerground buskin

fuggingwell busted armonicaplayin

only da one fing

over an zover again

missiz gone arse-over-ed on da fuggin

downeshcalator

tryin to swing for some cuntinna bowler

wot giver two pee

bazshed up er face an er arm

cetched up er sleeve in da fing

where it gozshclackety-clack

mergency stop button presh

mashessa blood innacetchup da coppers

dragginerscreamin

stillwiver good arm out of er pocket

bockle of Strongbow

gizzera fifty or twennyferfuggsay

mister a tellya

savvy dis noosepaper see?

sonly bed we gotter nigh[[18]](#endnote-18)

In ‘missiz and me…’ the effect is imploring. The demotic passages take us deeper in to the horror and pathos of homelessness. Here even language is brutal and brutalised. Yet this idiom is perhaps the only one adequate to that predicament. Feeling its slurred and coarsened force, we are thrust deeper into that world and reminded just how cruelly different it is from our own sanitised reality. It deepens the reader’s sense of encounter with another stratum. These people disturb our silence, begging us to listen. If their words reveal the line between them and us, and how lost they are to the street, they also blur that line with the urgency and directness of their appeal to our common humanity. To employ a phrase from identity politics, Reading refuses to ‘stay in his lane’. Imaginative sharing compels him to cross a social gulf. His art is a rigorous and empathetic engagement with extremes of individual suffering and social reality. If he doesn’t prescribe solutions, he can bear witness and testify. This is quite distinct from condescension or cultural appropriation. Most importantly, Reading can make us question our desire to insulate or separate ourselves. His strange affiliation with the lost people serves a design that reminds us that we too could fall through the net and find ourselves ‘jobless, bereft of home, skint,’ as Reading himself did, only two years after *Perduta Gente* was published.

Smith and Reading are both not-so-secret sharers with the lost and disenfranchised. When Reading addresses us with ‘don’t think it couldn’t be you’, he is also operating in the spirit of the ‘un-delineated’ – a spirit embodied by the author / persona of *Perduta Gente*. In their different ways, both writers possess the same imaginative capacity for strange affiliation as that possessed by Conrad’s ship captain. The power of their work depends to a large extent on their willingness to make this a public dimension of their poetics. Smith’s imagination appears more familial and psychological, whereas Reading’s is perhaps more social or anthropological; but both writers have produced some of their most bracing and affecting work through this capacity to operate from both the inside out, and from the outside in – vocalising otherness in external and internal worlds. I wonder if this imaginative capacity is what rendered them both so effective at giving voice to those who are ‘gagged, disregarded, unsought’; who become a ‘record no-one listens to / a book no-one reads.’ *Wormwood* and *Perduta Gente* are fine examples of poetry’s capacity to offer testimony on behalf of those who have been silenced by the dominating social and political culture. They are complex and courageous volumes, and they deserve lasting recognition.

In his famous preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote: ‘… it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs…’[[19]](#endnote-19) Wordsworth’s ability to get mixed up with another person also sounds like a form of delineation or strange affiliation, and it gave us poems like ‘The Female Vagrant’, ‘The Mad Mother’, and ‘The Complaint of a Forsake Indian Woman’. These poems are all the more remarkable when you consider Coleridge’s words: ‘Of all the men I ever knew, Wordsworth has the least femineity in his mind. He is all man.’[[20]](#endnote-20) Perhaps Keats goes even further in this direction when he affirmed: ‘A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other body…’[[21]](#endnote-21) This seems to advocate a life totally immersed in cognitive empathy – where the poet abandons the ego in pursuit of complete self-effacement and self-displacement.

In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler celebrates art’s capacity to offer us experiences of what he calls ‘self-transcendence’ – that is, ‘it enables the spectator to transcend the narrow confines of his personal identity, and to participate in other forms of existence.’[[22]](#endnote-22) This feels even more desirable and necessary in our digital landscape of echo-chambers and filter-bubbles. It is central to Byung-Chul Han’s thesis in *The Expulsion of the Other*: ‘Art presupposes self-transcendence. Whoever has art in mind is self-forgetful. Art creates “I-distance.” Forgetful of itself, it enters the uncanny and unfamiliar…’[[23]](#endnote-23) He is invoking Paul Celan here- his Meridian address of 1960[[24]](#endnote-24): ‘I think that it had always been part of a poem’s hopes to speak […] *on another’s behalf* – who knows, perhaps on behalf of *a totally other*.’Byung-Chul Han fears that contemporary communication focusses all attention on the ego. He believes ‘the task of art and literature [is] to *de-mirror* our perception, to open it up to the counterpart, for the Other – as a person or an object.’[[25]](#endnote-25) The direction of enquiry in the poetry of Smith and Reading is frequently towards the other – ‘as a person’. Both poets write against the grain of filter bubble or echo-chamber, and they are both permeable to the voices and presences of those who have become socially foreign or strange. Smith and Reading are able to participate in the ‘hopes and sufferings’ of their subjects, and their capacity for strange affiliation frequently ‘de-mirrors’ egocentric modes of perception. Like most genuine acts of imagination, their work has a real potential to counter or undermine narrow judgementalism.

I’ll close with a poem from my new poetry book, *Cazique*. The title sequence dramatizes the confessions of a small-time conman. My character in this piece is both victim and victimiser, as many conmen and abusers are; and the vulnerable side of his fractured psyche often experiences strange affiliation with a variety of lost souls. Here I find myself strangely affiliating with a conman who himself affiliates with the lost. It has given me plenty to reflect on, especially on the subject of the writer’s role and responsibility. The conman persona has been a useful device for exploring our culture’s complex relationship with the ideal of truth: that is, we venerate it, but are somehow unable to live according to its strictures. Neo-liberal capitalism often demands that we manipulate and bend the truth – for our own, or for our employer’s gain. Few people are better at deception than those who can deceive themselves, and if you want to deceive someone, present them with a version of what they want to believe – a maxim employed successfully in advertising. What persuades my conman to keep playing this game is a nagging anxiety that the terms of engagement could so easily be turned against him, and that he too could be lost. Locked into these terms, he has crossed a line of trust (or self-trust) that there is no crossing back over. As Reading might warn the righteous: ‘Don’t think it couldn’t be you.’

**‘The Secret Sharer’**

When I find myself lost between stations;

unravelling nowhere, west north east,

I start to think about who I’d call

my people. They are mostly no-shows

no-one would speak for, or champion;

half cut and drooling asleep on trains;

lonely blokes on the end of platforms

who receive no replies, no acknowledgements

from those they reach out to, or recognise

in passing. I can feel them close by:

thickening women in station bars

waiting for men who never remember

to exist. Their extra time is ticking out

as they drink themselves far into helpless.[[26]](#endnote-26)

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