

Responding to Creative Writing

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Edited by

Graeme Harper

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INTRODUCTION

RESPONDING TO CREATIVE WRITING

GRAEME HARPER

Responding, Responsive, Response

Creative writing is a responsive human activity. We use it to respond to the world, to our feelings, to ideas we have, to our observations, to other people, to historical or cultural events, to the speculations produced by our imaginations. In itself, being responsive does not make creative writing distinctive. After all, every human activity is surely some kind of response to us being in the world. How could it be otherwise, given none of us come from another world, and existence in this world cannot but influence each of us in some way? That said, the thought worth pursuing here concerns how creative writing might be a distinctive response. And, if it is so, in what ways that might be the case. Assuming we acknowledge that is the case, how might our response to creative writing also have distinctive characteristics? In effect, here is a two-way exchange: our *responding by* doing creative writing and, then, our *responding to* how we are doing creative writing and what we are producing by doing it.

At its most basic, to respond is to reply or to answer. We use the concept of responding often as a judgement about the quality of an interpersonal communication. Common expressions such as “____ didn’t respond” or “I was waiting for a response” or “____ responded eventually” suggest we judge a failure to respond as the breaking of a contract between a person or persons and another person or persons. The idea here is that if any interpersonal communication is initiated then the conclusion must be a response. No response, even if the person to whom the communication is directed did not request or even desire the communication, is seen as negative and often worthy of comment. “I was looking for a speaker for the conference. I emailed Professor Smith, but she did not respond.” Worse still

if we know the person well, and get no response: “I left a message for my friend Liam but he hasn’t called back. I hope he’s okay.”

Of course, responding does not necessarily involve a verbal or written exchange. It could involve an expectation of a physical encounter of some kind. A tennis player might be said to have “not responded” to the pressure applied by their opponent rushing the net, or a street fight did not happen because when pushed by an assailant the person attacked “did not respond”. Turning the latter into the beginnings of a story, police would be said to be “responding to a call” if they were contacted about the assault. The notion of a response then would entail a reply to that initial communication, and it would apply also to whether they did or did not take any action. Some law enforcement agencies around the world have special units called “tactical response teams” – thus suggesting a response (in this specific instance and, we can see, generally too) has a character, a focus, often a duration, and frequently a result. In all instances, a response might be thought of as appropriate or inappropriate, weak or strong, targeted or untargeted, well-informed or ill-informed. A response might be arbitrary or ad hoc or it could be strategic, tactical, planned perhaps and then implemented. Not all references to a response refer to an action. Inactivity can also be the focus. In a medical situation, a patient who is said to be not responding is often considered to be in danger, their lack of response representing a failure or inability to confirm they are all right or to improve their condition.

Even in such a brief exploration our understanding of the notion of “responding” includes a range of potential elements:

Initiation and reaction. What inaugurates the interaction? Here we can consider the action, observation or thought that brings about a response, or a lack of response. This can be considered as the stimulus. If a response is a reply or an answer but also a reaction then it is not merely a generic rejoinder or random reciprocation it is also a type of behavior. It is the attitude taken. Stimulus and response thus equals initiation and reaction.

Type and style of responding can be examined. Types and styles of response will have both internal influences (individual psychology) and external influences (societal, cultural, economic, political). A simple, non-creative writing, example might be: it is a hot day and you, having a fine home with air-conditioning, inadvertently adjust the temperature upward rather than downward. The initiation or stimulus is the rising heat. Your type of response is based on your sense of available options (and your belief or realization concerning your ability to make such a mistake). Your style of response, also influenced by available options, relates additionally to how much the heat bothers you. Perhaps to whether you are sharing the space with others. Also maybe to learnt behavior (maybe you grew up somewhere

where the response to a hot summer day is to fan yourself or, alternatively, where the population stops working when it gets too hot). Types and styles of responding reveal personal and societal influences, and these are available for our analysis.

Focus and duration of a response relates to such things as perceived significance of the stimulus and the intended audience of the response, the intellectual and/or emotional intensity of the interaction, the sense of value, expectations about the responsive interaction with one or many people (or with the self, perhaps), strength of your belief in your contribution to the action-reaction, attractants in the initiation (such things as sights, sounds, smell – that is, sensory stimuli – and contextual reference points such as cultural heritage, social or group dynamics or inclusion or exclusion). Duration of a response might depend on levels of energy or on environmental factors such as the weather or the cycle of night and day or on the availability of materials. So, if we see the writing of a novel as a response to multiple stimuli, personal and public, we could say that the belief that a novel takes some time to write means that as a response it has considerable duration.

Pace, Rhythm and Cadence of response, noting that any kind of responding has a pattern of delivery, of sound (literally and/or figuratively), and in the relationship of one part of a response to another part. A response can be as defined by its delivery as it is in its content. So, for example, a response to a moment of historical significance, an event in natural, economic, political or cultural history, could be a short shout or a prolonged address. It could have the cadence of a sermon or the pace of a lecture. It could appear as casual conversation or as carefully structured oration. If responding is related to a stimulus and its initiation (as seems logical to suggest, being as it is a reaction not an action without origin) then a response can follow the lead of the stimulus or be a counterpoint in its cadence, its movement.

Intention and Meaning certainly also relate to responding, even if it is also accurate to see these as principles and messages that can't simply be contained within the concept of response. For example, we could spend some time speaking about the idea (and relevance) of writerly intention and only in part relate this to a discussion of how writers respond to the world or to a speculation of their imaginations or to a feeling. In that case, we might talk about intention as a goal-driven activity, wedded to expectation, though with a partial connection to the act of responding to stimuli. Nevertheless, intention can be said to be a key driver of response because it is a guide for us to whether our response is appropriate. A day-to-day example of this would be when driving on a slippery road and feeling your

car sliding you might back off acceleration with the intention of gaining grip. The response is an action, the intention is to ensure your safety.

Meaning is concerned with information and concepts. We could say, without meaning what is there? What, that is, would we know about the world? What would we know about ourselves? But meaning is also contained within response in that a response can be orchestrated to suggest meaning, or indeed an impromptu or improvised response could reveal what we believe something means, even if we have not fully considered our beliefs and the information and concepts connected with those beliefs.

Finally, responding involves **skills, techniques and aptitude**. These have their genesis in human nature. In other words, we tend to develop skills that build on our natural predilections and interests. One example is our varied prowess at the “fight or flight” response. This is a natural physiological reaction (that is, a response) to a threat to our survival. Our nervous system sends out impulses and our endocrine system releases hormones. We experience an increase in heart rate, our breathing speeds up, our pupils dilate, we sweat more and become more alert to the sights and sounds around us. All this is a natural response. However, our abilities to successfully fight or fly depend on the development of skills and techniques and aptitude. So it is with all responding. While we might draw on nature we benefit from nurture. Of course, in creative writing much of what we can do comes from the realm of nurture. We draw on our predilection to communicate with other human beings. But writing is a learnt skill, and writing creatively is a specific skill. To do this well we have to develop techniques and aptitude.

Responding through and to creative writing involves all of those elements.

This book is largely about *responding to* creative writing; however, a number of the contributors are drawing on their own creative writing (that is, their *responding through*) to consider their critical approaches to the making of a creative work and to the finished work. In essence, combining approaches.

The title *Responding to Creative Writing* also uses the shorthand “responding” to refer to three conjoined but particular conditions:

Responding – the actions entailed, the behaviors, the answering, the replying to stimuli, stimuli that can include thoughts and feeling and inventions of our imaginations as well as observed events. I can respond *through* creative writing and/or *to* creative writing.

Responsive - the sensitivity to stimuli that more or less initiates our action. We talk of someone being responsive when they react in a way that is apt and often productive. A responsive approach is seen as empathetic,

engaged, aware. Your responsiveness can relate to how you use creative writing to respond, or how you respond to your creative writing or the creative writing of others.

Response – general definitions suggest this can certainly be an activity. However, here responding is taken to be that activity and a response is taken to be the material result. So, you are responding to an historical event by writing a poem; your response is the drafts of that poem and its completed form. Alternatively, you are responding to your feelings about a particular place on the coast by writing a short story. Your response is the material evidence of that short story you have so far produced, but not yet completed. A response can be in the form of creative writing or a response can be in the form of critical writing about creative writing.

To reply or answer an observation, a thought, an imaginative leap, a feeling through creative writing is such a decidedly human activity. We construct written languages, and then use those languages creatively so that we can establish and maintain bridges between our intellects and our imaginations. In doing so our responses create not only a form of communication but wonderful works of art. We gain pleasure from doing this and perhaps even occasionally, all being well with how we create and what we create, provide pleasure for others that encounter the works we produce. When we respond to the making of those works, or to the outcomes of the actions of other creative writers we seek to reply to those writers, in some way, and to the works that they present, to answer questions about why those works were produced, and how, and for whom, and to whose satisfaction. When we are engaged in any way with creative writing, such is the dual nature of what we can call our responding.

Responding Through Creative Writing

A creative writer, seeking to respond to the world, an idea, an imaginative leap, a thought, might choose creative writing to do so. Might, because even though we are creative writers we have other choices at hand. General choices, such as simply commenting on something to a friend or sending a text or email to a colleague. Empathetic spontaneous choices such as shouting out loud or crying with joy or despair. Specific prepared choices, such as (assuming we have the skills and the interest) speaking to a public audience, or writing an article for a magazine, or even creating an online photo montage. In other words, responding is often a choice, even sometimes when it seems spontaneous. There are many, alternative choices readily available to us. We creative writers make one of those often well-

prepared choices – perhaps relatively frequently and often with considerable enthusiasm – our creative writing.

Responding through creative writing uses the intellect and imagination interacting and intersecting – such is the nature of creative writing. And in such writing we explore, construct and present responses that are distinctive but also have some clear associations with other human responses.

Responding through creative writing produces such familiar activities and things seen in innumerable other human undertakings, not only in our writing practices:

Exploratory materials that inspire, inform and contribute to your project, whatever you are doing and for whatever. The status of these materials (for example, what and who they represent and how, their ontological condition [how they relate to a worldview and support that worldview], their veracity, their combined effect.

Experiences of creating, the initiating, revisiting, refining that is taking (or did take) place. The environment where the project or projects are being undertaken. Associations with other people that influence our working or the works we produce – including professional associations related to the tasks themselves itself (for example, collaborations, editorial input, critical opinions). These experiences will likely vary over time and place and represent conditions well beyond these dimensions too.

Investigating subjects and themes in that much we do in our lives relates to our responding to what we see, hear or feel and that these often are undertaken (and considered) in terms of subjects and themes. For example, we paint a room in our house it might indeed be decorated according to a theme. We start a discussion in a corporate meeting and it often will indeed have a specific subject. Subjects and themes inform our response to the world, to each other and to our thoughts and imaginative speculations.

Working within/ working outside of conventions, so that the response can represent an application of or challenge to what we already do. A convention or paradigm is a model, and we follow these in many avenues of our lives. Any response we make to an event, a thought, an observation works in some way within or outside of such conventions.

Final material results, the end result of our responding. Of course, not everything we produce in the world can be predicted. But much that we do when we respond through our actions (or sometimes inaction) can be projected to its final material results. What will be produced if we react in a certain way? What things will result, what further actions will likely be inaugurated, by our response or responses?

An encouragement of critical opinion of others – because we judge the responses of others using the gauge of our own interpretations and beliefs. Encouraged to make such judgements, not least through our survival instincts, informed by cultural and societal expectations and our individual psychologies, any response by anybody to anything is potentially subject to critical judgement from others.

Those are all common manifestations of our responding through any kind of human activity. But responding through creative writing, specifically, also produces some activities and things that are largely particular to creative writing:

Style and types of action are produced that are only produced in their shape and form in creative writing. So, methods of composing enhanced by the heightened influence of the imagination. Finding actions largely focused on the written word, and arrangement of the written word. Types of literacy that are specific to both written communication and the use of elements within it such as description and image.

Some genre are specific to creative writing. So we use categories such as “romance” and “crime” to refer to forms that exist in many artistic compositions - film, TV and literature for example – but the novel and the poem, the screenplay and the short story are creative writing genre. Our responding through the composition of these therefore sees us using them as particular tools or conduits or methods of response. Because these genre are located in creative writing, they declare creative writing’s uniqueness, which is not to dismiss genre that are seen elsewhere but it is to say creative writers and creative writing is always an explicit and nuanced choice.

Imaginatively heightened writing (that is, creative writing) recognizes and promotes human feeling, creativity, psychologies, spirituality, ingenuity, inspiration, resourcefulness, vision, originality and artfulness. Responding to the world, an idea, an emotion or an observation using this kind of writing is therefore a declaration and promotion of these qualities. What happens to do this, and what results from doing this (in writing) can be investigated to provide us with more knowledge about what this form of response offers such as individuals, and even as a species.

Valued cultural artefacts result from our responding through creative writing. Of course, such a declaration comes with a number of provisos! What is valued and what is not valued varies over time and over place. Value might attach itself to what is “recognizable” (thus a well-known poet might be considered to have produced a more valuable cultural artefact, even if the technical or aesthetic qualities of it are exceeded by a work by a less well-known poet). Value is impacted upon by economics, politics, moments in

history and changes in taste and, sometimes, in acceptability of theme or topic. Nevertheless, these things aside (but not ignored), all cultures that produce creative writing also value it in some way. Responding through creative writing therefore often carries a certain degree of cultural kudos, and the artefacts produced by creative writers are regularly celebrated, revered and archived into cultural history.

Styles of critical response are explicitly suggested by creative writing – because it is a form of writing, because it declares itself creative (that is, inventive, novel, ingenious) and because such styles of critical response have built up over many years now in popular and academic venues so that expectations of how to respond, as well as often what to respond to, are embedded in education, in cultural discourse and in the popular mind. Literary criticism, which is by far the biggest systemic class here, is familiar to many of those of us who have responded to the world through creative writing. Whether we agree with the approaches taken by literary critics, the assumptions made, the methods employed, or the conclusions offered, it is to literary criticism many have turned over the past century and a half to assist them in understanding how those who respond through creative writing go about doing so, and what the results are of them doing so – the works they produce, the subjects and topics they have explore, the historical and cultural contexts of these, the meaning in the works, or the reasons why one work is more valuable than another.

More recently, building on a long history of creative writing in higher education the field of Creative Writing Studies has grown and diversified and is gaining even more momentum. It gains momentum from a dissatisfaction with how creative writing and creative writers are perceived to have been allocated some portion of literary studies. Or how creative writing and creative writers have been seen as an adjunct to engagement with literature. Or how creative writing has been viewed as a tool to improve literacy but not as epistemological realm grouping in its own right. Or how it has been presented as a creative activity on campus but not as an investigative one. Critical responses to our responding *through* creative writing are largely responding *to* creative writing, and the reader might notice that particular topic has a modicum of substance here in this book! However, not all responding to creative writing is Creative Writing Studies. Critical responses to creative writing might simply be personal, emotive, inquisitive, casually off-hand, part of some other field or discourse where knowledge of creative writing is not known, required or generally pursued, or brought about by someone else's interest and your participation in some social engagement. Exploring something through creative writing might well produce a response from yourself or others, but the depth and breadth

and understanding in such a response might not be the focus or the intention of the response. Creative writing is a popular and common human activity so it is part of our wider engagement with the world around us.

A unique combination of communication and art in words makes creative writing what it is. That uniqueness informs how we respond through doing it, why we respond through doing it, and who cares that we respond through doing it. That being the case, the nature, form, and shape of this combination is distinctive to the practice, and comparative consideration of how that is approached by different writers and to what ends can be revealing.

When we respond through creative writing we are answering or replying to something using creative writing as our voice, our tool, our discourse – responding, perhaps, to an observation, an idea, an imaginative leap, an historical event, a person, to people, to a cultural phenomenon. In doing so we will display varying degrees of engagement and understanding – that might indeed be called awareness and empathy – combined with varying degrees of technical skill. Writing, after all, is a learnt skill and we must nurture it in order to become good at it. But creative writing also involves the transcendental and the non-concrete, the metaphysical. To be responsive *through* creative writing therefore means not only developing technical skills but also having incorporeal abilities and insights that are sometimes difficult to quantify. In essence, while we can indeed point to the use of some or all of the many components of written language, celebrate accuracy and appropriateness, correctness and clarity, word choice, grammar and punctuation, and more, responsiveness through creative writing is also about why we are doing it. It is about for whom we are doing it. And about what ways our creative writing brings satisfaction to ourselves and/or to others. Some of this might be manifest in the final outcomes of our writing. However, for the creative writer, some of our satisfaction, perhaps even the majority of our satisfaction, can be located in our strikingly multifold actions of writing creatively.

Responding to Creative Writing

At the most basic level, we undertake creative writing, and because that undertaking leaves behind evidence of it happening we have manifestations of the actions and results of creative writing existing in the world - to which we can therefore respond. This is important to note because, of course, it is not a requirement of our responding to anything that it must exist in material terms. We can respond to an idea, or an emotion or an imaginative conjecture.

However, in the case of creative writing when we are responding *to* it we are responding to one or both of the following:

Actions and experiences of doing creative writing. These can be our own actions, the actions of other writers, or a combination of these things. We can respond to these “in motion”, as they are happening, or after they have happened. We need to develop methods of considering these, of course; and it can be that observation is not always practical or likely to produce accurate information because in the observing we might alter the actions themselves. With this in mind, responding to the actions of creative writing can involve inductive and deductive reasoning, developing and testing hypotheses (for example, a poet might propose their compositional technique is largely driven by connective speculations, seeing the figurative links between things), but find in considering this proposition that in fact they are more inclined to create story, narrative pace and focus being more significant to them than metaphor). Comparative study of writerly actions might draw on interviews or diary entries or consider drafts, basing this on genre or location or associations between writers, or on the influence of education, or on other cultural, social, economic or personal circumstances.

Material evidence here might indeed include those drafts, that correspondence, as well as final works – but us responding to these in this case not in terms of the actions that produced them but in terms of what they appear to offer in their material form. That is, how the writing appears, what meanings are projected, what representations are present. While it is true literary scholars have undertaken this kind of work, here we are approaching this material from the viewpoint of it having not existed, of it being contingent on creative writerly practice. We acknowledge not only that creative writers exist but that they create through their (our) thoughts and actions and feelings material evidence of these things and that this material evidence represents such practice, that it is not separable from the writer, but rather can best be approached as evidence of their practice, knowledge and understanding.

The field of Creative Writing Studies largely focuses on a response to creative writing – but it does not preclude doing creative writing as part of that approach. In other words, while as a field it is grounded in a response to creative writing it is possible to use creative writing practice as one of the methodologies. The difference between simply responding through creative writing and responding to creative writing through also doing it is that the writer is consciously considering the critical engagement they have with their practice, its place in the world, and its outcomes.

Responding to creative writing, while it might for many people be casual and informal and informed largely by personal taste and opinion, when it is undertaken within Creative Writing Studies or, even when it is simply taking the lead from the field in being critically engaged with the practices and outcomes, such response has an epistemological depth (that is, it is aware of and exploring a type of knowledge) and it has a methodological structure and intention (that is, it is criticism informed by analytical techniques that are understood and often systematic. Responding to creative writing therefore incorporates investigation of:

How it is done – whether through doing it or by considering how it is done by others (individual, groups, comparatively, over cultures, time, in relation to other arts practices, and more).

Why it is done – by an individual writer (who might be ourselves) or a group of writers at a particular time or in a particular place.

What material evidence is produced – in the initiation of a project or projects, during it and as an end result. These materials, as considered in Creative Writing Studies, might be more varied, more orientated toward practices (such as in the case of drafting and writerly correspondence of all kinds) and more likely to be interpreted in relation to the “how” of the practice than traditionally is seen in the field of Literary Studies.

How does it compare – that is, both the practices and the outcomes. Comparisons between projects and outcomes, between writers, over time, over place, in terms of different genre, in relation to themes or subjects, in terms of specific techniques, particular representations (these as just a few examples).

Responsiveness here is not greatly different to that seen in responding *through* creative writing. Responding *to* involves degrees of engagement with writing actions and/or results. To be responsive in this instance means developing a depth of knowledge that relates to practices and results and to the understanding of these. That is a baseline. More precisely it can include knowledge of the interrelation of practices – so, say, how initiation of a project relates to progress of it, individual actions that contribute to the project, how intermediate outcomes and activities (for example, unfinished work, additional research, changes in your environment) impact. Knowledge here can be comparative, between projects, between writers, between places and times – but responsiveness means and requires awareness.

Why Respond?

In medical terms, unresponsiveness is considered potentially dangerous, a sign of a life-threatening condition. A failure to react to a communication is interpreted as unhelpful at least and unproductive, even rude, at worst. A lack of reaction perhaps indicates a lack of interest, a lack of concern, a rejection of something or someone, a missed connection (something not seen, heard, touched). To not respond suggests we might not be all right, we might not improve our condition – whatever doing such a thing would entail.

For a creative writer to respond to the world through creative writing is frequently core to our being. Choosing this form of communication and art, why would we not use it to respond to things that interest us, concern us or attract us? As a Creative Writing Studies scholar our focus of attention is clearly creative writing, and so responding to it is also core to our field and our interests. And there are other reasons too why we choose to respond through creative writing and to creative writing. That is, it is a well-known and widely exchanged activity, its results travel across cultures, across history and across geography. It thus is what we might call a *lingua franca*, even though paradoxically its presence in a primary first written language is often a significant element of its identity. Creative writing is also in many ways an accessible practice – at least for those in the world who are afforded the opportunity to become literate. Certainly, this is not an opportunity offered to everyone. When and where we can respond through creative writing, cultures value both the practice and its final outcomes – so responding through it and to it comes with some sense of generally recognized value. Finally, if we are teaching creative writing (and many reading here will be doing that) responding through and/or to creative writing increases our knowledge and understanding. So, simply, the obligation to be as knowledgeable as we can be for our students about the practice and its outcomes is met by a critically informed responding through or responding to.

This Book

The chapters here in *Responding to Creative Writing* demonstrate responding, response and responsiveness. The shorthand book title references all three of these aspects, and it will be clear many of the contributors draw on their own creative writing practice as the starting point for their explorations. The range of themes and subjects here is a consideration – from methodologies of practice-led research in the field, to creative writing teaching, from

language use to genre, from uses of history to how to go about responding to defined themes and subjects. As a book in the field of Creative Writing Studies this is a specimen text; and, of course, the focus here is responding/responsiveness/response. However, Creative Writing Studies is a field with many dimensions and approaches, methodologies and outcomes. Similarly, while this is a themed book, it also draws on the concerns of the contributors, their interpretations, their goals and, ultimately, their seeking of satisfaction through practicing and/or analyzing creative writing. If there is a bigger answer or reply to be read here, a more general response, it is that critically exploring creative writing, through whatever means, produces inventive, energetic results founded not simply in the production of texts but in the exchange of ideas and feelings, and in communicating and sharing these.

CHAPTER ONE

RESPONDING TO THE IDEASTHETIC
EXPERIENCE:
WRITING A COMPARATIVE EKPHRASIS

DAN O'CARROLL

Abstract

This chapter proposes and explores the concept of “the ideasthetic experience” as a way of conceptually approaching and understanding moments of insight mediated by art. Such experiences involve a felt sense of inherent artistic value which is mediated by a particular set of artistic and sensory inputs, such that their apprehension evokes a balance of intensities between embodied emotional response and intellectual resonance. Ideasthetic experience is framed in terms of ideasthesia balance theory as proposed by Nikolić.¹ The chapter then attempts to trace, in the light of this theory, the formation of one particular ideasthetic experience in the practitioner-researcher which took place within the context of a research visit to a heritage site. The experience was catalysed by a spontaneous comparison of two paintings, one present in front of the practitioner, and one evoked from memory. The subsequent creative piece that resulted from the experience is then framed as an attempt to evoke a corresponding ideasthetic experience in the reader through multiple applications of the rhetorical concept of ekphrasis, that is, rendering images with words.

Keywords: ideasthesia balance theory, creative writing, decoloniality, critical heritage discourse.

¹ Danko Nikolić, "Ideasthesia and Art," *Cognition* 98 (2016), 53-84.

Introduction

What is it that is happening when we have a moment of what might be called insight that is evoked through art—that moment where a series or constellation of impressions, whether mediated through the standard five senses or, by the inclusion of what Buddhism enumerates as the sixth sense, the mind, brings something home to us that was not obvious before, or perhaps was seen, or believed, or considered, but not quite *understood* in that visceral bodily sense? This, in a less formal register than I can posit in an academic abstract, is the question I would like to tackle in the chapter which follows.

The chapter is an exploratory, rather than an explanatory one, in which I make an attempt, through engaging the critical language of ekphrasis and ideasthesia, to render verbally an experience which at the time *felt* neither verbal, nor entirely aesthetic, but seemed to include and transcend both.

Context and catalyst

What I will call my “ideasthetic experience” was catalysed by a visit to a small cathedral in Bangor, Wales. It took place in the middle of an extremely busy research trip, during which I was critically interrogating discourses used in heritage guidebooks and interpretation at Penrhyn Castle, a site that belongs to the United Kingdom’s largest heritage organisation, the National Trust. A key strand of my interdisciplinary PhD research is focused on interrogating official concepts of heritage through the lens of decoloniality, an approach which, in short, problematises “Eurocentric conceptualisations of modernity, globalisation, knowledge and ‘being.’”² The castle was built mostly from profits from a Jamaican sugar plantation worked by enslaved Africans. After abolition, it was financed through the work of local men at a nearby quarry who worked under gruelling conditions and were very badly treated during the longest running industrial dispute in British history. As such, it was a perfect site for my purposes, ripe for critique.

The three days previous to the experience I will look at had been spent talking to ex-miners and visiting the quarry with an expert local guide, as well as visiting the castle itself with members of the local Jamaican community. The overall impression I got, from both formal interviews and informal chats, was that grievances were still present, however deeply

² Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, "(Towards) Decoloniality and Diversity in Global Citizenship Education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 9, no. 3-4 (2011), 381-397.

buried, hidden from sight, or clothed in the garb of diplomacy. As an illustration, I will repeat an excerpt from the creative piece that arose from the visit:

The Jamaican High Commissioner arrives with his party and members of the Jamaica Wales Alliance. I join the party as a tolerated hanger-on and fall into conversation with a woman called Susan, one of only five or six people of Jamaican heritage accompanying the tour[...].

The High Commissioner is attentive and curious and accompanies the guide upstairs to the dining room. One of his party stays downstairs in her wheelchair because there are no lifts in the building. But nobody makes a fuss. Everything proceeds in that oddly nervous way attempts at relaxed goodwill often do. The Commissioner talks in detail with the visitor manager. They discuss the dining table and service, and the plush deep red velvet covers and carpets, and the portraits of the plantation-owners' patriarchs, including one of the second Lord Penrhyn: the self-styled 'improver' himself. I cross paths with Susan again. We discuss her research. We discuss mine. I gesture round the room.

'He liked his scarlet things,' I say. The carpet, the upholstery, the curtains, are all Caravaggio-cloak red. Rich and deep.

Susan pauses for a moment. She turns to me. Looks me dead in the eye.

'Well, he wasn't afraid of blood, was he?'

It is the single dark sentence I hear uttered by anyone during the whole visit.

Ideasthesia, ideasthesia in art and the ideasthetic experience

I first came across the idea of ideasthesia during a presentation by the author and scholar, Julia Prendergast, at the 2019 Great Writing conference in London, and found it a fascinating concept. The theory of ideasthesia has its origins in neuroscientific research into people who experience synaesthesia, a condition whereby one sense perception stimulates associative perceptual cognates in another, such that, for instance, a sound might be perceived as orange and crunchy, or a colour as bitter and loud. For people who exhibit synaesthesia, the research suggests that these unusual perceptual associations are mediated by concepts, rather than being the result of aberrant neuronal connections. Although there is strong evidence that synaesthetic experience "differs substantially from real events," there is equally strong evidence that it is "susceptible to lexical/semantic contexts," and it is on this basis that the theory of ideasthesia was

introduced.³ In its initial formulation, Danko Nikolić suggested the term *ideasthesia* as a replacement for the term *synaesthesia*, then applied the term specifically to represent the idea that “concepts precede sensory-like experiences in synesthesia [sic].”⁴

More recently, Nikolić ventured a theory of art whereby art arises from a balance of the two components of ideasthetic experience, namely conceptual meaning and experiential sensation, such that “art happens when the intensities of the *meaning produced* by a certain creation and the intensities of the *experiences induced* by that creation are balanced out” (my emphasis).⁵

What I will call here the *ideasthetic experience* is that human experience, whether momentary or sustained, where, through balanced intensities of embodied emotional response and intellectual resonance (thoughts, memories and understandings, verbal or non-verbal), an object or event is apprehended as of artistic value. In memorable cases of ideasthetic experience (and I think the experience I will recall here qualifies), there is a climactic moment where a sudden opening of understanding takes place, a broadening of sympathies: there is a *felt sense* of unity and coherence that could be described as insight, which is neither intellectual nor purely emotional, but contains elements of, and transcends, both.

Priming the ideasthetic experience

When I set out to translate the ideasthetic experience into non-fiction prose, it was important for me to make sure that the emotional timbre of the pivotal scene to come was communicated directly, as well as the external context and the varied kinds of thoughts and feelings that were prevalent over the preceding days of the visit. The piece, which is provisionally titled “Caravaggio and the High Commissioner’s reception” opens, as several sections in the book do, with an italicised maxim:

³ Rocco Chiou and Anina N. Rich, “The Role of Conceptual Knowledge in Understanding Synaesthesia: Evaluating Contemporary Findings from a “hub-and-Spokes” Perspective,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00105.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00105/full>.

⁴ Danko Nikolić, “Is Synaesthesia Actually Ideasthesia? an Inquiry into the Nature of the Phenomenon,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Congress on Synaesthesia, Science & Art*, (2009), 26-29.; Nikolić, “Ideasthesia and Art,” , 53-84

⁵ Ibid.

It's hard to be careful of things we don't know we're losing. But be careful we must.

Then the text proper begins with a declaration of preoccupations and themes and an admission of disquiet:

I'd been thinking about guilt and shame and the difference between them, and about remembrance and reparations, when I popped into Bangor Cathedral the following afternoon, a Thursday. Something had unnerved me about the previous day, though I couldn't put my finger on what it was. I needed a day off after the intensity of the quarry museum, the castle and the Commissioner's visit, and making unscheduled visits to chapels was something I had done since I was a child.

Some degree of contextual and thematic priming is included here, including the full section (excerpted above) on the Commissioner's visit, with its issues of inaccessibility for the entourage member in her wheelchair, and the just-below-the-surface tension revealed through reference to the bloodshed involved in the Jamaican plantations.

I list in some detail the intensity of the impressions of the previous three days, during which there has been a lot of travelling, a lot of listening and talking, a great deal of taking in and processing. I try to convey the intensity of the previous night's civic reception for the High Commissioner as a way of sign-posting, building-up a sense of disjuncture and tension that needs to be released and/or resolved in the final section, as well as attempts by officialdom to broker "official" versions of heritage with diplomacy and events—events which actually become subverted by a true artist, a daring and challenging poet.

...There is a performance by Rhys Trimble of a poem he wrote in Jamaica. He slips in and out of Welsh and English and he bawls it out from his feet while flailing a tortured wooden staff about his head. It is powerful and it is thrilling and I can barely understand a word he says but I know whatever he is saying, he absolutely fucking means it, and it fits. It fits the night. And he knows it. And everyone present knows it. And then moments later a male voice choir sings for twenty minutes and leaves me blown wide open and in tears.

And yet.

And yet I wonder what Susan is making of all this. And the woman who was left behind in the wheelchair.

Resonances come into play, memories are triggered of other events and themes that are autobiographically important to me as a practitioner and a

writer. Without the space in this chapter to reproduce long sections in their entirety, it will suffice to say that these resonances and memories grate up against theoretically-sensitised disjunctions and discomforts. The question of whether these theoretically-sensitised elements would have been noticed (or at least, noticed as strongly and with such clarity and force) without the theoretical reading that preceded the visit is one that ideasthesia balance theory addresses explicitly. According to ideasthesia balance theory, our experiences are mediated by concepts, and so, theoretically *priming* myself with questions of decoloniality and injustice, “official” discourse and marginalised experience, predisposes me to reference these types of resonances and associations in my experiential interpretive frameworks during my research trip.

Ekphrasis as catalyst for the ideasthetic experience

Ekphrasis has become a popular concept in critical circles in recent years, and attempts have been made to move its definition from a popular formulation given by Heffernan in the 1990s—“the verbal representation of visual representation” towards one posited by Renate Brosch which is perhaps more useful for contemporary creative practitioners working in a digital age: “ekphrasis is a literary response to a visual image or visual images.”⁶ This definition acknowledges ekphrasis as process and not a state or a simple one-to-one correspondence. It emphasises the performative over the mimetic, “gestures towards effects at the level of reception and audience”, and as such, by examining the experiential quality of ekphrasis, takes into account both its “persuasive function,” and “its capacity to appeal to an embodied and emotional response.”⁷ It is these capacities—to persuade, and not only to ‘appeal to’ but also *evoke* embodied and emotional response—that I see as resonant with the capacity of ekphrasis *as method* to evoke and bring about the ideasthetic experience. As Brosch puts it, ekphrasis can be a powerful aid and catalyst to insight and can “adapt, recalibrate, and recreate the reader’s knowledge.”⁸

⁶ James AW Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).; Renate Brosch, “Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Image,” *Poetics Today* 39, no. 2 (2018), 225-243.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 232

Comparative ekphrasis as critique

Nikolić's ideasthesia balance theory goes some way to describing the *felt sense* of the place where aesthetic appreciation and intellectual understandings merge in moments of deep artistic appreciation. The experience I want to discuss, and that I tried to represent in the final section of my creative piece, emerged from a complex set of factors, the dominant element of which was a period of internal comparative ekphrasis: that is, I compared one painting I could see in front of me with another that I had a very clear picture of in my mind's eye (because I had studied it in some detail and was very familiar with its details). It is through that internal "description" and comparison that the ideasthetic experience and its culmination comes about.

It is also at this point, however, that critical evaluations and descriptions of process become, for me as a creative writing practitioner, problematic. Much as critical conceptual terms help communicate experience, they are not (and can never be) a substitute for the experience itself. The "internal description and comparison" that I refer to above, for instance, took place at the time in the complete absence of any verbalisation: no words were involved, so in a strict sense, no ekphrasis was taking place.⁹ Nevertheless, any attempt to communicate that internal comparison to others without words is impossible, and critical conceptual terms may augment and inform the very structures of meaning that inform ideasthetic experiences (and their representations) with richer and more nuanced understandings than may be possible without them. It is in that hope that I offer the explorations in this essay.

On the right side aisle, affixed to the wall, were two large paintings, one of Jesus being laid in the tomb, one of Doubting Thomas. Both were modelled on Caravaggio's treatment of the subject, but the artist, John Granville Gregory, had rendered only Jesus in the shroud or robe of the time. The apostles were dressed in contemporary clothes: shirts, t-shirts, jackets in denim, leather and suede, a high-collared caban. The framing and the light, above and from the left, with skin highlights and deep shadow, were unmistakably Caravaggio's. But the centre-parted haircuts, the denim shorts, the goatee and the Lennon spectacles were unerringly here and now.

I felt, as I sometimes do, that I was supposed to see those paintings on that day. That could be nonsense, of course. But it might not be. In any case I moved from one painting to the other, standing in front of each for some time, until I settled in front of one. Still Doubting, the artist had called it.

⁹ As Chomsky has noted, "everyone who introspects will know that much of [their] thinking doesn't involve language." Bryan Magee, *Talking Philosophy: Dialogues with Fifteen Leading Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 188.

I describe how I had once had a slight obsession with Caravaggio, had read biographies of his in supermarkets before work, and had studied high quality reproductions of his paintings in detail.

I looked up at the 'new' Caravaggio and, like the previous day's events, it unnerved me still. Something didn't sit right, and it took me a while to understand what it was. It wasn't the craftsmanship. The painting, by any measure, was excellent. You could smell the old leather of Thomas' coat. Feel the stinging rawness in the wound in the new Christ's side. It was something else. Something gestural. The mornings I spent at Morrisons café lost in sixteenth century Rome and Naples and Malta and Sicily were not lost to me. Nor was the coffee table book my partner bought me when the biography became an obsession of sorts. I pored over those prints for hours, wiping fingertips to prevent smudges on the high gloss paper. I knew those paintings well. I could conjure them in my mind at will.

Here is a feeling of unease, a sensation caused by a comparative image not in front of me, but pulled from memory. (It is worth noting that in Buddhist phenomenology, there are six senses, with the sixth being the mind. Its sensory objects are the thoughts, feelings, emotions and perceptions which appear to the mind, such that this memory would be just as valid a sensory input as any smell in the room or light on canvas might be). The *unnerving* described here, the bodily discomfort felt, suggests an unconscious movement in the viewer towards the ideasthetic experience. And ekphrasis now comes into play, but a comparative ekphrasis, moving between memory and looking. As for the intense experiences of the previous few days, I could not have asked for a better preamble and setup to test out Brosch's assertion that '[t]he ekphrastic encounter can be used to stage a conflict or an attraction between unequal parts on the cultural inheritance of inequality.'¹⁰

In Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas*, Jesus is the youngest of the four figures in the painting by a margin of fifteen or twenty years. In John Granville Gregory's, they are all about the same age, late twenties, early thirties. In Caravaggio's work, Christ grips Thomas' hand with its filthy fingernails, and draws the index finger into the wound almost to the second joint. The surrounding skin wrinkles with the insertion and Thomas looks down, away, and slightly to the left. In Gregory's painting, Thomas is curious still, Christ's hands bloodied rather than pierced, the wound sealed, itchy healing and raw. Thomas, looking straight at the wound, is, as the artist named the painting, *Doubting Still*.

¹⁰ Brosch, "Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Image," , 225-243

Representing the ideasthetic experience of insight

By ‘insight’ here, I mean the apotheosis of ideasthetic experience: the moment every reader knows that comes at the end of a well-crafted short story, or a paragraph *engineered* by the writer to make you feel something, sense something, understand something, or, in the most memorable cases, all three at once. It is the moment a reader puts the book down and stares into space for a while. And it is here that the ideasthetic experience reaches its bodily-experienced apotheosis. Although this type of experience may be one that any person who has felt a deep connection with a work (or works) of art would recognise to a greater or lesser extent, it remains a difficult thing to communicate in the language of the academy. A fusion, a coming together takes place—of memory, association, experience, belief, emotion, predisposition, mood and attitude—with the artistic object(s) of attention, and there is coalescence.

I think of a term from Buddhist psychology: *hri*. It has several meanings, but one refers to the feeling of healthy shame that is experienced when one knows one has done something wrong. Not beating yourself up with guilt, more like having a deep, emotional sense of having not lived up to your highest aspirations. It is considered a very healthy thing. I look at the new Caravaggio and remember the old. I think of my tour of the castle and of Susan’s comment. I think of the reception the night before and the wall of singing men, the speeches and the poem. And I feel that Gregory landed on something important when he moved to paint Thomas as he did, and name his work as he did. Something about who we are now, and how we are now. How we are missing what Caravaggio’s Thomas did not miss: that sense of healthy shame that makes him look down and away as Jesus pulls his hand into a still-gaping wound. Gregory’s contemporary Thomas does not falter. Feels no shame. Points with his washed-clean modern hands at wounds that, though still raw and painful, have the appearance of something that is healing. And he touches. And he stares. Without shame. Still doubting.

Here is an attempt to render an internal experience, a moment of deep resonance and understanding, ideasthetically. If I over-emphasise the bodily experience, emotion or sensation, (Susan’s anger, my joy at the choir singing, my present sense of shame) I fall off the ideasthetic tightrope. If I over-emphasise the meaning, the ideas that have contributed to shaping the experience and the explicit last few sentences interpreting small ekphrastic details, the same happens: down I go. So I sketch the picture, showing parts but not the whole. I give hints’ and leave gaps. I step back, then give more hints. I refer back, and give time. And then slowly, I draw the rhythm of the piece to a close at what feels like the right moment, leaving the mind of the

resonant reader to do the work: to appreciate and come to know through an artistic, associative experience and not solely through a rational and reasoned experience (i.e. on a level which involves *but is not limited by*, both emotion and reason, both sensation and idea, both words and images) what I believe at that moment I appreciated and came to know.

What do I mean by resonant reader? I mean the reader with sufficient shared emotional experience to share the resonant meanings, the hints, the drawings-together that have gone before. (It is a rare writer who touches all readers all the time).

As described, the piece as a whole serves as an *ekphrasis* of insight, if you will allow me to imaginably stretch the meaning of the word. It is an attempt at a verbal representation of an ideasthetic *manifestation*, a description of what felt at the time like a steadily progressing sequence of mostly intuitive impressions (emotional, cognitive, verbal and sensory) that built up into a moment of coalescence, of coming together to catalyse a sense of understanding that includes but is not limited by any one of these impressions or dimensions of experience. In this chapter I have tried to describe in critical terms something which at the time of writing *felt* like an entirely subconscious, unwilling, unchosen experience. It was one of those writing sessions where there seemed to be very little decision-making going on: the words just arrived. As Prendergast puts it, I have tried here to examine ‘alogical processes in a logical way [...] processes that are deeply rooted in metaphorical associations based on webs of experiential knowledge.’¹¹ And these webs go deep, and are mostly unconscious.

Conclusion and discussion

The “ideasthetic experience” is a concept that describes a particular type of aesthetic/bodily/intellectual event or sequence of events which correspond to the apprehension of artistic quality and resonance. The concept is informed by ideasthesia balance theory as proposed by Danko Nikolić, and by Julia Prendergast’s work on ideasthesia and creative writing. As explored in some detail in this chapter, ekphrastic techniques can be used profitably to both examine the origin of the ideasthetic experience in the writer, and to evoke (or at least point to) a similar experience in the reader.

It is perhaps worth noting here the effects of such seemingly small experiences of insight on my practice-as-research methodology. I initially

¹¹ Julia Prendergast, "Grinding the Moor - Ideasthesia and Narrative," *New Writing* 15, no. 4 (Oct 2, 2018), 416-432. doi:10.1080/14790726.2018.1436567. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14790726.2018.1436567>.