THE DEFLECTED SUBJECT: ETHICS, OBJECTS AND WRITING

This discussion explores deflection as a narrative tactic for memoir writing, based on using material objects as sites of subjectivity. As a way of grounding this discussion, I employ the example of my own brief memoir ‘Antidote’, a fictionalised account of a collector and his collection, which provides the foundation for the story. In ‘Antidote’ I approach my account obliquely, as a restorative inventory. As I argue, however, it is not only the process of writing and remembering that provides a source of renewal. Rather, the objects themselves offer a mechanism of restoration. While imbued with ambiguity, they are an anchor against the constant slippage between the old world and the new. Roland Barthes has argued that the material details of a story can never denote the real: ‘all that they do ... is to signify it’ (1989: 148) In ‘Antidote’ the assembled objects, the place that holds them and the collector who gathered them all exist. Even so, arguably, it is the selection and provenance of these objects, whether known or unknown, and their framing in language, that bring them into the realm of fabula and give narrative life to their form.

Keywords: narrative writing—memoir—collection—ethics—loss

‘The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle.’ (Benjamin 2007: 60)

Years ago I asked Michael if he had ever made a list of the hundreds of collectable items that he keeps in his apartment. He opened his eyes in semi-mock horror, the large brown irises suddenly surrounded by white. ‘Are you kidding, that would be horrific,’ he said. ‘If I did that, I’d have to face the reality!’ He poured me a martini and I did not ask again. Reality should never be faced, he once told me. You had to creep up on it very quietly to get a close look at it, and then be ready to run. (Green 2012)

In this discussion I want to consider some of the implications of writing from still life, in the sense of using remembered and collected objects as sources for creative writing, and how this may create or limit story formation. With this purpose, inspired in part by Walter Benjamin’s exploration of loss and the material world in Illuminations (2007), I will address the writing of my short story ‘Antidote’, in which I conduct a partial account of a manifold assemblage of collected objects belonging to Michael, a friend of mine, who has collected them over many years. Working between the two axis points of the story and my selective account of the collection, my themes are memory, recovery and the ethics of authenticity. The research
questions I address are to do with the ethics of selection, accuracy and appropriation in fiction. On what basis of judgment does the writer include or omit key objects, facts or memories in order to construct a narrative? In what sense is it ethical to use that which belongs to another as a field for creative writing? And, whose story is being told?

Michael’s apartment, filled as it is with so many enchanting and amusing objects, had always seemed to me a tempting site for the exploration of wonder. In fact, I had long considered its possibilities as a touchstone for a piece of creative writing, even for a series of interconnected tales using the objects as tokens or signifiers. I had done this with other objects in my writing: a pair of earrings, a handturned ceramic vessel, an icecream maker. I didn’t tell Michael about this. I don’t know if he guessed. I doubt it. Quotidian yet magical, for him the objects themselves were what mattered.

For reasons of no interest to this argument, however, it took some seven years before I began the first draft of my story. By then I was living across the other side of the continent without immediate access to the objects—or their mercurial owner—and I knew little about their provenance. It was, rather, their strange and wonderful resonance as they lingered in memory that seemed to be the initial provocation for the story. Only when I had written the first draft, and after I read Lawrence Weschler’s *Mr Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonders* (1996), did the problem of the enterprise strike me with undeniable force.

Observing that the sensibility of wonder arose with the ‘age of discovery’ as the amorphous New World began to give up its treasures to European expansion, Weschler remarks that the:

> awakening of wonder also drew on a recovery, as it were, of the Old World and in particular that resurrection of various Alexandrine/Hellenistic and early Christian doctrines regarding the nature of the universe and the human capacity for free agency. (1996: 129)

The notion of free agency was indeed where, as a writer, I began to fear I would come unstuck. For, no text can be ‘free’ of the cascade of emblems and associations that meaning entails and no object, however enchanting, can bring the past fully to life. As a writer, of course, I rely on being able to draw on that rich array of shifting allusion. But, materially speaking, I also acknowledge the gestures of inclusion and exclusion that writing entails. For every object, every text, comes at a price: whether that price is memory, utterance, time, the lives of a people, or the last breath of a forest.

Weschler’s extended essay, a kind of paean to the Museum of Jurassic Technology, reminded me that objects offer, in one sense at least, an inherently meaningless currency of value. This was a lesson I should have learned more thoroughly at the age of 23 when almost all of my possessions were stolen on the platform of a train station in a small French town and I was left with only the items that then really mattered to me: my passport, my money and my journal. It was a lesson I had seemingly forgotten. Weschler’s disputably ironic disquisition on the quirks and seductions of wonder reminded me that no collection of ‘art’ objects, serious or otherwise, can exist without wearing the cultural politics of possession on its sleeve. As he writes of the era of New World acquisition, with reference to Stephen Greenblatt and Walter Benjamin:

> In the years after Columbus, the European sensibility’s virtual debauch in the wonder of the New World allowed it to disguise, from itself, the unprecedented human decimation that was taking place over there, on the ground, at that very moment. Wonder-besotted Europeans were so bedazzled that they could simply *fail to notice* the carnage transpiring under their very eyes, in their very name. (Weschler 1996: 122)

In other words, my story was at risk of exercising a form of writerly blindness. In selecting which objects from Michael’s collection to write about, imposing my own sense of wonder upon them, I was forgetting Benjamin’s fierce injunction ‘to brush history against the grain’
But how could I judge ‘history’ from among Michael’s cobbled and whimsical collection? And, after all, whose history was I really trying to tell?

The green-and-white striped ceramic cow that Michael bought in India sat on a high coffee table beside the window that overlooked the beach. He had found her in a village market—the kind of place he loved to visit. She was too big to carry in his luggage so she was posted to his apartment wrapped in alternating layers of newspaper and straw, tied with string. She wore a slightly comical expression on her face. In her high position in front of the sofa, she was hard to miss. If you stared out of the window for a while she made a dark outline, one feisty horn and a square striped shoulder that hovered at the edge of your vision after you turned away. (Green 2012)

Walter Benjamin argues that the discarded objects of bourgeois consumer culture belong to an unrecoverable past in which they ‘attain to legibility only at a particular time’ (Benjamin 1999 N3.1: 462-63). Their abandoned fetishization alludes to the passage of history, to past pleasures, uses and meanings, but their allusive power is fleeting. Instead it is their alterity, their present otherness to which our attention is drawn, in a way that—I would like to think—‘opens the possibility for something to be said for the first time’ (Mellamphy & Mellamphy 2009: 168).

In ‘Antidote’ I approach my partial inventory of Michael’s collection obliquely, as a kind of therapy for loss. I don’t mean by this that the process of writing and remembering offers some source of epiphany or ‘cure’. Rather, the objects themselves are portrayed as the mechanism of restoration—the loci, if you will, of rupture and renewal. They provide a material pause, a respite from the constant slippage between past and present, ancient and modern. At the same time, the inventory itself offers a device or illusion that enables a story to unfold.

I described ‘Antidote’ at the outset of this discussion as a short story, although it is perhaps better categorised as a memoir since each of the objects, the apartment where they are held and the person who lives there all exist. The account is embroidered, however, with small fictional gestures which, as I wrote, allowed me to reflect and extrapolate in order to assemble the narrative. Strangely, once these fictional elements entered the story, they too disturbed me. I was impelled to make choices about what I should include or exclude; on the basis not just of what would best fit the story, but also of what I could or could not rightfully claim as a record ‘from life’. I found myself attempting to establish some kind of demarcation between that which belonged to me, in the form of memory and imagination, and that which did not. A private collection is, after all, just that: private. And although a private space may be, in some ways, permeable, its private character may also suggest resistance to public appropriation. Arguably, however, fiction works best by referencing the real, or at least some sense of a shared reality that may be experienced as mutuality or privilege. As Levine (2010) observes:

the fiction writer who draws on their experience will at times find themselves in a bind. Surely characters and incidents, if not plot, are going to be drawn from, and in various degrees and modelled on, those they know - and to some of whom they have such obligations. Furthermore, the quality of the fiction and the interest it generates may well come to rely on recounting, in some form or another, the very beliefs, knowledge and information that one has obtained by means of the privileged relationship.

In order to write ‘Antidote’, as previously explained, I drew from known and remembered objects that belong to Michael. When I began the story the objects and their location had inhabited my imagination for many years and perhaps, by that time, they were no more than a lost idea of the real. Some were objects of considerable longevity: a centuries-old botanical illustration, a tiny Buddha, a Persian rug. Yet these objects also reflected the lived experience of living persons. In other words, I had to consider the tension between what would make my story authentic and what I could legitimately reveal about real people. Sitting in my room, thousands of miles from the original source of my story, I wondered if I had committed a quiet
kind of burglary? Did the story, in any sense, belong to me? Was my need to assert my authorship inherently unethical? Had I simply failed to invent?

Even more strangely, other objects, other realities, found their way into ‘Antidote’. In one case, I refer to a string of red and green Peruvian clay beads draped over the upturned fingers of a large Buddha as if it is part of the collection in Michael’s apartment, when, in truth, they have not left my own home since I received them as a gift 30 years ago—because they are literally such a weight around one’s neck. The Buddha statue in Michael’s apartment does hold a string of beads, but they are not the beads in my story. They are some other beads and I have forgotten what they are like.

Writing about the controversy over her historical novel The Secret River, Kate Grenville remarks that:

it would have been simpler to answer all questions about The Secret River in the way Clendinnen describes Peter Carey doing when interviewed about The True History of the Kelly Gang: by saying flatly, unanswerably: ‘I made it up.’ But I was interested in trying to do something a little more nuanced than that: to acknowledge the complex relationship, backwards and forwards across an invisible line, between the world of fiction and the world inhabited by living people. (2007)

The ethics of appropriation is not, of course, a new or original problem and its perplexities have been somewhat overtaken by the rise of a seemingly unbounded textual field where strands of digital communication are filled with a profusion of life narrative in the form of blogs and text messages, much of it ethically unproblematised and with sources unacknowledged. In this context, any concerns about human research and creative writing may be said to have as much to do with the publication of creative research within the current academic framework, as with the judgments, freedoms or responsibilities of the writer.

Anne Surma has argued for an ‘ethics of temporality’ in the teaching of creative writing, partly in the face of the accelerated multidimensionality of ‘network time’:

An ethical orientation—positioning ourselves as writers in relation to others—directs us to a notion of writing as a future-oriented endeavour, rather than as a static, reactive or even regressive account. Ethics enables us to question what writing should do … An ethics of temporality will further enable us to ask questions about what or how a text might become: how it might be interpreted and transformed, how it might ... change. (Surma 2009)

I find Surma’s essay an immensely sympathetic account, but it does not address two elements that seem crucial to me in any consideration of ethics and writing: first, how we approach our debt to the past, not regressively but in recognition of its formative power; and second, how we identify creative writing as a discipline within the framework of university research.

The South African writer Damon Galgut observes that ‘memory is fiction’: not the rendition of actual experiences and events but a re-creation of the past. ‘The act of narrating a memory is the act of creating fiction’ (in Armistead, accessed 2011). If so, even the act of selecting remembered rooms and objects, visited years before, can be said legitimately to form the first step of a new piece of work. Further, narrating the past can also be an act of inquiry, an investigation into the tensions between transformation and continuity.

Michael’s collection had many remarkable qualities. One of them was its size, the numbers of things all crammed, with seeming deliberation, into that one small place. Twenty-five sets of Irish bed linen, never used, thirty-seven hand-woven oriental rugs and at least twelve antique Japanese Kimonos ...
Even the everyday things, though, Michael likes to have in multiples. One time, after a trip to the States, he came back with eighteen plain white tee shirts. 'I hate running out of things I need,' he explained.

'I know what you mean. When I find a pair of shoes that I really like, I always regret that I didn’t buy two pairs’, I answered.

'Well, I guess that’s almost starting to get the idea. Next time, buy two pairs! Hell, buy three,' he replied rolling his eyes at my terrible parsimony. I promised I would. I wanted to, but somehow I never did. (Green 2012)

Roland Barthes has argued that the material details of fiction can never denote the real: ‘all that they do … is to signify it’ (1989: 148). Their verisimilitude alerts the reader to the category of the real itself, to ‘realism’ and thus, correlative, to artifice. Fiction offers an imagined world to which we ascribe significance. The material details of ‘Antidote’ refer to a distantly remembered and (if Galgut is right) thus to a fictionalised assemblage of objects. These may be regarded as a kind of mnemonic for the collector, an aid to memory, but their relevance, their precise significance within their original time and culture, is lost. It is ‘precisely at the juncture’, Dan Mellamphy and Nandita Mellamphy argue, in which the object of the past exists ‘as a “has-been” that its potential to reveal the “not-yet” emerges (its chance to be “born[e] again”)’ (2009: 164).

Arguably, then, it is the account of these objects, their rendering through language, which brings them into the realm of fabula, and beyond. Rather than claiming for itself what Barthes calls ‘unavowed verisimilitude’, this story, this paper as I present it to you now, strive for, if not referential plenitude, then for a conversation between the imagined and the real. Perhaps nothing more than that: I am telling a story and thinking about a story I have written. Whether the story is homage or theft, representation or verisimilitude, memoir or fiction, creation or appropriation, must be up to readers to decide.

One question remains: what is owed? To whom does the debt fall? With whom does it lie? With the narrator, the author or the text? Or, in some new and uncomfortable sense, with my university employer? I wrote ‘Antidote’ simply because I could not resist. But it was immediately apparent to me that I could not publish my story ethically without the subject’s permission. And, because my university requires an ethics clearance for any kind of ‘human research’, it was necessary to obtain that permission officially. Here, too, I was required to be selective, presenting the project in such a way that it would be comprehensible to a non-specialist review panel.

**Why is the research being conducted?**

This creative research project contributes to my ongoing study and practice of narrative production as a scholar in the Humanities. The work offers a theoretical and creative investigation of the use of material objects both as initia for creative writing and as a structuring device for story development.

**What the participant/s will be asked to do?**

The research project asks the participant to permit these objects to be written about and discussed from an ethical and creative standpoint. On occasion the project also asks that the participant allow his persona to appear in the story in relation to the objects themselves.

Fortunately for my project, my friend Michael allowed me to appropriate his collection as a subject. He wrote to me very kindly that he thought of it as a ‘gift from a painter who paints your portrait or your house’. ‘Antidote’ may be considered, then, as something like a house-painter’s incursion into the private domain. While not foundationally transformative, the
quotidian act of house painting can be likened to a performance, a selective delineation and recoloring of inner space that enables the interior to be re-envisioned, reconceived, and re-inhabited, in order for new narratives to be formed.

With thanks to Professor Michael Levine for his kind permission to appropriate some of my favourite items from his marvellous private collection and to publish this work.

End notes

• 1. I am tempted to say that they exist ‘in real life’ for, although that is essentially a tautology, in the realm of the imagination nothing can be taken for granted.

WORKS CITED:
Barthes, R 1989 The rustle of language (trans Richard Howard), Berkeley: University of California Press
Levine, M 2010 ‘Kissing and telling: ethics and writing about the lives of others’, personal communication

Weschler, L 1996 Mr Wilson’s cabinet of wonder prolonged ants, horned humans, mice on toast, and other marvels of Jurassic technology, New York: Vintage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Green

Stephanie Green lectures in writing, literary and cultural studies within the School of Humanities at Griffith University. Her recent publications include ‘The Rainbow Bridge’, TEXT 14.1, 2010 and ‘Dexter Morgan’s Monstrous Origins’ (Critical Studies in Television 6.1, 2011). Stephanie has won prizes for her short fiction, poetry and essays and produced a collection of short stories, Too much too soon (Pandanus Books) in 2006. Her travel essay about experiencing the 2011 Egyptian uprising is forthcoming in Griffith Review. She is currently working on a full-length biographical study of the relationship between sex education and birth control campaigner Marie Stopes and her mother Charlotte Stopes for UK publisher Pickering and Chatto.