

the landscape of Gerald Murnane: the fictions of everyday life

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When I prepare to read a piece of fiction I look forward to reading something that is true in a way that no piece of scientific writing or philosophical writing or biographical writing or even autobiographical writing can be true. The narrator of “Landscape with Freckled Woman” in my book of fiction *Landscape with Landscape* speaks for me when he claims that he can never be sure of the truth of any words except the words spoken by a character in a work of fiction whose narrator has declared that the character in question is speaking truthfully.

When I speak or write about what I call *true fiction*, some people think that I think of the best fiction as a sort of confessional writing. I deny this. What I call true fiction is fiction written by men and women not to tell the stories of their lives but to describe the images in their minds...²

We find the above penned by one Gerald Murnane in an essay in which he reflects upon his role as a “fiction consultant” for the journal *Meanjin*. Risking a certain impertinence, we may ask – who is Gerald Murnane? Gathering together the official biographical details which adorn the dust jackets of his various works, we find that Murnane “was born in a northern suburb of Melbourne in 1939. He spent part of his childhood in country districts of Victoria, then moved back to the suburbs of Melbourne in 1949 and has never since left”.³

Murnane himself notes that he has rarely travelled outside of Victoria and had never travelled outside Australia. He has, as Peter Craven writes in a loving review of Murnane’s last work of fiction *Barley Patch*, “For 30 years been exploring the same inch of fictional ground and has made it seem like the site of the love that moves the sun and other stars”. Craven regards Murnane as “a writer’s writer, a visionary who is content to dwell forever in the rag-and-bone shop of his own heart. [...] It would be surprising if people were not still poring over Gerald Murnane in a hundred years’ time”.⁴

In addition to a collection of essays, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*, Murnane has published seven previous works of fiction, *Tamarisk Row*, *A Lifetime on Clouds*, *The Plains*, *Landscape with Landscape*, *Inland*, *Velvet Waters* and *Emerald Blue*. Delving further along biographical grounds, we are told that Murnane is “regarded by many as Australia’s most innovative writer of fiction”, and is a recipient of the Patrick White Literary Award, as well as being awarded an Emeritus Fellowship by the Literature Board of the Australia Council in 2007.

What we encounter in particular with these biographical details is the public face of Gerald Murnane. Indeed, these details are often accompanied by a public face. This is the Gerald Murnane who has been there in a trajectory of his own unfolding history, waiting for me, a reader, to encounter him otherly, other than biographically. The *facts* therefore, these apparent truths about Murnane, do not make him quite real. They are perhaps even yet to constitute what we could quite call the biographical. Most certainly, they appear in a different landscape than the one which may resemble Gerald Murnane the “breathing author”, to borrow from the title of one of his own essays.

Now, how did I first encounter Gerald Murnane? How did my history intersect with this trajectory? Were it not for a relatively recent coincidence Murnane may well have remained

for me an insignificant figure in a distant landscape. I do however also wonder if I had not encountered Murnane in this singular way – as a certain accident of history – whether, though incontestably a writer of genius, he would have not held the importance for me that he has developed. As a potential reader I bring the weight of my own history to bear upon my expectant encounter with the author.

What was this coincidence? At this point I will begin to speak in hushed and confessional tone as I make an excursion into events that are quite personal. Or, does the hushed tone simply lend apparently biographical weight to what is a piece of pure fiction? Will it matter?

In 2009, in the same year in which *Barley Patch*, Murnane's last work of fiction is published, before I had any knowledge of it or any other of his published works, or even of the "personage" – which is by the way one of Murnane's favourite words – of Murnane, I was in Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art in order to see an exhibition titled *avoiding myth and message: Australian artists and the literary world*. The exhibition took up several rooms with numerous artworks and installations. In quite a large white room I noticed a thin red line which kept its course around the entire room – at around hip height. It invited closer examination and upon same revealed its secret to be the repeated typewritten word, in fact the collapse of two words – "redline". By typewritten I mean produced on a typewriter – perhaps a Remington Monarch 1965 vintage – with the hammering of letters upon ribbon. Following this red line around the room I was eventually led to a smaller room set up in order to project a film. Pushing through some layers of curtain, through the tabernacle into where is housed the ciborium, I encountered an author I had not yet read... a line of.

This was my first encounter with Gerald Murnane; drawn to an unread author by a repeating red line of text around which joined and separated the provinces of biography and fiction.

The film is one by Phillip Tyndall titled *Words and Silk: The Imaginary and Real Worlds of Gerald Murnane*. It is a film which plays with the fictional biography or biographical fiction of the work of Gerald Murnane, drawing greatly, I was to later learn, from Murnane's first work of fiction *Tamarisk Row*. Murnane himself plays out scenes which insist repeatedly in several of his works. Above all, it is a film which makes abundantly clear Murnane's argument that contrary to the assertion that all art aspires to the condition of music, that all art, including music, aspires to the condition of horse racing.

What particularly interested me about this film, initially at least, was that it assailed me with a galloping succession of images of my own childhood, my own biography. My gaze was beckoned by grainy images of the town in country Victoria where I spent part of my childhood and of the very school that I attended for a period of time. I felt extraordinarily compelled by this imagery; a cascading of memories – Marist Brothers College, which Murnane had also attended for a period of time (as did, I believe, the film maker, and at least one of his brothers), Rosalind Park, the Capitol Theatre, where, as I would later be, he "was one of a line of school children shuffling through the dust under the elms in Rosalind Park and up the hill towards the Capitol Theatre to practise for our end-of-year concert".⁵

Now, in writing this, the question that occurred to me was whether I was engaging in a form of nostalgia which was singular to myself, perhaps shared with a few fellow travellers who may have recognized themselves in this particular reference. In short, I was wondering about indulging in the excesses of the biographical and whether there might not be a danger of inundation in biographical detail, whether mine or Murnane's.

What conclusion, after all, am I leading you towards? Because we went to the same school for a period of time, and because we similarly spent time in the same country town, shuffling through the same park, I must, like Murnane, be a literary genius! It reminds me of my excited discovery, more than 25 years ago now, that Lacan, a genius in his own regard was also educated by the Marist Brothers in France, and that such a biographical coincidence somehow lent weight to my own aspirations to be a psychoanalyst.

Such reliance on biographical coincidence is, of course, a cheap means of authorizing oneself. However something of this functioning of memory, of the memorious, persisted beyond the transient ejaculations of narcissistic rapture involved in seeing images of my own personal, singular history revealed in film and then written form. I was not able to sustain the fiction that Murnane was addressing me personally. Rather, addressing me as a reader of fiction; drawing me further than the foreground of the coincidence of images of my own biography and their tenuous links with famous personages.

Confessions aside however, the biographical and its relation to the fictional is maintained as an absolute tension, to the point of being something of a hallmark in Murnane's writing. Indeed, such a tensional coincidence is more than notable in the film *Words and Silk*, where, as I commented a moment ago, Murnane the author of fiction plays the chief character, or is it characters, of these works of fiction.

The account of this film, which is split into two parts, is as follows: "the first half of the film explores the idea of the *Imaginary*, focusing on the fictional account of Murnane's past and his memories. This account is constructed through the semi-autobiographical character, Clement Killeaton, from Murnane's first novel *Tamarisk Row*. Contrasting the *Imaginary* with the *Real*, the second half of the film draws on aspects of Murnane's life and working methodology. Seen together, the two parts begin to explain some of the nostalgic and observational sources of Murnane's work."⁶

Whilst therefore I experience the invitation of the film in a biographical way, the genius of the film and indeed of Murnane's fiction is that it invites each of us into the singularity of memory and history despite the particular biographical features which constitute the foreground of the landscape of memory. This is, to my mind, the very nature of Murnane's fiction: the construction of a tension between the biographical and the fictional which fuels the very generation of that fiction.

The biographical Murnane, to call him by that name, lends himself, gives weight, to his fictions. His last work of fiction, *Barley Patch*, appearing after a period of 14 years during which he thought he would never again write fiction, particularly takes up this tension of the biographical and the fictional, though it is also apparent in earlier works. I will however concentrate on this last work which, as Peter Craven notes, offers us something of a "summa of Murnane's themes".

Throughout *Barley Patch* Murnane is constantly on guard against the conflation of the biographical and the fictional. Sometimes as a simple reminder – "While I was writing the previous paragraph, which is, of course, part of a work of fiction, [...]".⁷ Or, the kind of fictional self-consciousness generated by the following: "Before I began to write the first of the three preceding paragraphs, I was about to report that a few images had come to my mind while I was writing the last two sentences of the paragraph preceding that paragraph".⁸

At other times Murnane feels the need to direct his chief character to offer us something of a treatise on the matter as he apparently fears the reader's retreat back to the biographical foreground of his work. Consider the following:

Surely some readers of these pages are able to think of the writer of the pages as being no more than the narrator of a work of fiction: a personage supposed by those readers to exist on the far side of their own minds for as long as they go on reading these pages. For the sake of those readers, whose prowess as readers of fiction I admire unreservedly, I report the following.

I travelled back to Melbourne on the day after my youngest uncle and I had talked about plovers and other matters, but I never afterwards attended any Sunday morning group. I was no longer willing to listen to the opinions of the would-be psychiatrist and his ignorant patients. I was no longer willing to hear them talk as though a scribbling theorist in some or another gloomy city in central Europe had long before explained away the existence of a far-reaching network of images of swamps below tall cliffs and of racecourses among level grassy landscapes and of paddocks where quails and plovers lay low and of female personages seen from a distance, which far-reaching network was, in fact, no more than an image in my own mind. In short, I behaved as a fictional personage is obliged to behave; I remained true to my belief that no so-called real world could exist among the scene after fictional scene where I was believed to live and to write.⁹

My favourite however, tantalizingly autobiographical, is the following:

I wrote in secret and hid the finished pages each morning before I left for school. I hid the pages under a corner of the frayed linoleum in my bedroom, but after I had written the first few hundred words my mother found them. She quoted several of my sentences to me one afternoon as soon as I had arrived home from school. She took out my pages from the pocket at the front of her apron and she questioned me in the way that many a person would question me at writers' festivals and such gatherings thirty and more years later. My mother wanted to know how much of my fiction was autobiographical, so to speak, and how much was imaginary, so to speak.¹⁰

By now, given the extent of the citations, and there are plenty more in the storehouse of Murnane's collected works, we realize that this question has a certain insistence. It is why, we might argue, Murnane resists with his reminders of the fictional nature of the work. Its importance, despite any possible or plausible reference to biographical and historical veracity, is in its insistence that truth is fictional. What most matters to Murnane and the personages which populate his fiction, is what he explicitly refers to as "true fiction". The tension between the autobiographical and the fictional makes mother's question a false one; the imposition of a dichotomy which might resolve a tension and ease mother's mind.

In continuing to address the question of why he had written, the chief character or narrator of *Barley Patch* offers us the following:

In short, I may have written those works only so that I could write at last about the images that had persisted for fifty years and more in the background of my mind no matter whom I fell in love with or who became my wife or what children were born to us or what befell us during the onrush of events that might be called my seeming life.¹¹

The *work* of fiction, a product of the drive to fiction, is something which pushes further than the biographical foreground. This is echoed in the contention of Mark Rothko in the work *The Artist's Reality*, that:

[...] the fact that a man was rich or poor, that he lived in a flat or hilly country, that he was shy or forward with women, or that his parents had inherited traits that are associated with temperate or torrid climates or with what are considered to be attributes of the Anglo-Saxon or Latin race – these circumstances may explain why the artist's part in the plastic continuity showed this or that peculiarity, he nevertheless functions definitely and inexorably within the plastic process – nothing else is possible here.¹²

We find in Rothko's inexorable plastic process what we are referring to as the fictional drive as it proceeds to a landscape beyond the, albeit unavoidable even necessary, biographical details of an artist's or author's life. The inexorable movement of the plastic process, the fictional drive, is found in the opening words of *Barley Patch*. A question – “Must I write?” In effect, Murnane's work stands as testament to this drive to fiction – an imperative given by the “Must” of “Must I write?” – which inhabits anyone who lives in the house, the mansion, the presbytery of two maybe three stories, of language.

Murnane further hones this distinction between the biographical world of reality and the fictional world in a poignant reflection to be found in his essay, a work of non-fiction, *The breathing author*. We find there the following, in reference to why he had left to one side the fictional work *O, Dem Golden Slippers*, out of whose ashes arises *Barley Patch*.

For thirty years past I had written fiction without caring how many readers might be so careless or so foolish as to suppose that the narrator or chief character of any piece of my fiction closely resembled the breathing author; but in 1991, in the fifty-third year of my life, I drew back. I drew back partly because what I was about to write might have seemed to certain readers to have revealed more than was seemly for a man of my years, a husband and a father, to have revealed. But I drew back for another reason: quite a different reason. In writing certain passages of *O, Dem Golden Slippers*, I had discovered certain images and certain connections between images such as seemed to reveal to me that my thirty years of writing fiction had been nothing less than a search for just such a discovery. I had tried to describe this discovery to several persons by writing that I seemed to have crossed, at last, the country of fiction and to have discovered on its farther side a country no less inviting. I will be hardly less evasive today, but will assert something that should provoke you to think about the purpose of fiction.¹³

Might we argue that the purpose of fiction, its purposefulness, its drive and power, given through this tension with the biographical, is what fails Murnane in regard to *O, Dem Golden Slippers*; that he is unable to escape the gravity of the biographical? My argument here, my reading of Murnane, suggests that unless the biographical is subjected to the force, the drive of fiction, one's history, the facts of one's biography, remain “pathologically innocent”.¹⁴

How might we further situate this fiction whose purpose, whose drive, is to transcend the biographical in its search for a landscape, a country, on the farther side of fiction? Dispensing with the “r” for a moment, the father side of fiction finds its imperative in separating itself from mother's false question – is it autobiographical or is it imaginary?

Whilst there are many references in Murnane's writings to images and the imaginary, he will not confuse this fictional drive, this production of true fiction, with the products of imagination. Indeed words like “creative”, “imaginary” and above all “imagination” are to be distinguished from the word “fiction”. The force of fiction is not driven by imagination. This is absolutely and unequivocally clear in the theory of landscape which supports Murnane's works of fiction.

It would very much suit my purpose in writing this work of fiction if I could report that I learned in my childhood that a work of fiction is not necessarily enclosed within the mind of its author but extends on its farther sides into little-known territory.¹⁵

This “mind” of the author, of which Murnane writes, is not the landscape of imagination; of brightly lit images which connote a convincing reality. Rather, his “mind”, the “only mind”, is a “vast and possibly invisible landscape which is invisible to these eyes, but which I am able to apprehend by other means”.¹⁶ By what means? Fiction, or more exactly what Murnane calls “true fiction”, whilst maintaining its tension with the autobiographical, arises at the point of the failure of imagination, the failure of the image – a place in the landscape which remained remote or even invisible.

“I secretly despise most of the artists of the hill country” – the chief character of *Landscape with Artist* tells us – “I believe their work only reproduces the appearance of things and that none of their paintings or prints or sculptures will ever make my throat tighten or my eyes water as a novel sometimes does.”¹⁷

The landscape which interests Murnane is not concerned with the appearance of things, with the dominance of the image, but rather a fading or failure of the image; its non-appearance. This is clearly articulated by Murnane in the non-fiction essay *On the Road to Bendigo* where he contends that “The best vantage point for studying a brightly lit landscape was a dark place within the landscape”.¹⁸ This dark place attracted Murnane as place from which a force of fiction emanated insofar as “nothing seemed to happen there”. Not being seduced by the frantic action of the imaginary foreground, Murnane is able put the force of fiction to work in his “empty places”.

It was in the manner of his for such a landscape that a man or indeed a woman – as we note in an exquisite passage from the short work of fiction *A Quieter Place than Clun* – was to be distinguished.

In those days I believed that people were distinguished mostly by the landscapes they thought about. I was sure I had not yet met a young woman whose landscapes could compare with mine. The public service typists in the office where I worked seemed made up of layers of streets in places like Elsternwick or Moorabbin or crowded beaches on the Mornington Peninsula. The young women I saw in church on Sunday gave onto the sandy plain south-east of Oakleigh where houses could be built with loans from the YCW Cooperative Housing Society.¹⁹

The landscape which this generates is one of a fictional, “literary landscape”, those words muttered by the chief character of *A Quieter Place than Clun* in a life changing moment. Such a literary landscape is situated beyond imagination and the imaginative embellishments of reality; beyond biography to the glands and ducts which give rise to that “poetic emotion” which gives real presence – real presence beyond reality – to his literary landscape.

Murnane’s theory of landscape, the importance of landscape in his writings, posits a purpose and function of fiction, a force of fiction beyond the biographical. On the far side of where the reader had once recognized himself in those flimsy traits and coincidences which have littered the path along which he has travelled to this landscape, Murnane realizes the “preposterous project of becoming a personage in his own fiction” a writer in the landscape rather than a writer of the landscape.²⁰

This “preposterous project of becoming a personage in his own fiction”, to make a preposterous and even blasphemous proposition of my own, is an effect, not of imagination, but of unconsecrated transubstantiation created through the force of fiction.

One of the remote and hidden landscapes which makes a powerful re-entrance in *Barley Patch*, already having been mentioned in earlier works, is that of the tabernacle on the altar. The tabernacle houses the ciborium within which are held the wafers which, upon consecration and through the effects of transubstantiation, became the REAL PRESENCE.²¹ Something material, having ordinary reality – the wafer – through the truthful fiction belonging to the pronunciation of certain words undergoes transubstantiation and assumes real, sensual presence – the body and blood.

Such is the invitation offered the reader by Murnane’s fictions of everyday life; to move through the biographical and the world of imagination, which detain one in the foreground of a landscape, and to encounter a force of fiction, a fictional drive, which pushes through the layers of gently resisting plushness concealing the tabernacle and inwards toward the real presence housed in the ciborium. The force of fiction produces a transubstantiation of reality to arrive at that real presence which gives the reader “direct contact with eternal verities”, writes Rothko, “through the reduction of these verities to the realm of sensuality”.²² The fictional drive gives truth the real presence of sensuality.

Before I conclude, I will consider the importance of what Murnane has to say for psychoanalysis and for psychoanalysts. Very briefly, what matters is not therapeutics – which for Murnane constitutes an inferior fiction. Nor is the importance of Murnane to be found in notions of writers writing for medicinal purposes, like aunty sipping sherry. Rather, as Murnane puts it, writing to cultivate an “aesthetic sense”; to heighten the senses rather than succumb to the anaesthetic offered by a bland therapeutics.

In this, the psychoanalysis which interests me joins with Murnane and with the arts in general in the cultivation of an aesthetics which speaks against the anaesthetizing effects of therapeutics; joining rather with that force of fiction, the plastic process of art, which cultivates an aesthetics in the direction of a real presence of sensuality.

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