1

The Age of Creative Writing

Living Beyond Ageing

The beginning of the 21st Century can rightly be referred to dually as the Age of Creative Writing and the Age of the Zombie. We might wonder if the two share a connection. By creative writing I am of course referring to the acts and actions of human beings, writing creatively. By zombie I am referring to the animated corpse that, despite its various laudatory and memorable appearances in numerous popular movies – the longing zombie, the lost zombie, the homemaker zombie, the comedian zombie, the loving zombie, the insatiably thirsty zombie, the child-like zombie, the friend zombie – is bereft of consciousness, beyond any further ageing, and essentially no more human than a gatepost.

Our recent enthusiasm for creative writing and our enthusiasm for zombies have been so thorough and so strong that it is a surprise there has not been occasional flesh-dripping protest against these, even outright pitchfork-defying revolt. Those working in academe might well admit to not being above some creative writing and zombie profiteering. Again we can wonder: is there a connection between these two things?

The Future for Creative Writing, First Edition. Graeme Harper.

While creative writing has yet to draw quite the level of philosophical engagement that zombies have drawn, the answer to the connection question might lie within the debates located in zombie philosophy. For example, in his 2005 book *Zombies and Consciousness* Robert Kirk sets out to "dispose of the zombie idea once and for all" (Kirk: vii) but he nevertheless begins:

> Zombies (the philosophical sort: this is not about voodoo) would be exactly like us in all physical and behavioral respects, but completely without consciousness. This seductive idea threatens the physicalist view of the world dominant in philosophy and science today.

Firstly, in his defense, Kirk's is a serious philosophical study of consciousness. It examines what in philosophic circles is called the "zombie argument" or "zombie arguments" – in which philosophers explore "phenomenal states" and "experiential consciousness" (Bailey: 482). These philosophers, while briefly acknowledging the movie zombie and the zombie of Voodoo, in fact have far more interest in the nature of the human mind than in dripping flesh and moaning.

Secondly, though, what we might wonder does Kirk mean by the idea of the zombie threatening "the physicalist view of the world"?

The physicalist view of the world (for a thorough consideration of Physicalism, see Stoljar, 2010) at its most basic holds that the only things that exist in the world are those that are physical objects. Even states of mind are said to have material conditions, either in themselves or in that they create physical changes in us.

For a creative writer, this physicalist view seems immediately intriguing because, though it is obvious that writing is a physical act – and cannot exist otherwise because creative writing must at some point become inscribed to be creative writing at all – it is obvious also that activities beyond the physical are widely involved. It is likewise true that creative writing in its emphasis on the creative employs not only the human mind in that non-physical realm but what we most often have called the human imagination.

Are our imaginations, then, aspects of our minds and creative writing a physical manifestation of the imagination's mind activities? This seems at least logically possible if slightly narrow in conception in that the imagination is situated somewhere between, or among, our higher cognitive functions and our emotions or emotional responses to the world, and in being so the imagination's relationships with our physical actions are not necessarily singular. You can indeed draw from your imagination, you can stimulate it and encourage it by exposing yourself to certain experiences, but how you directly engage your imagination, engage with it or elements of it, and employ it at specific points in time is not entirely clear.

Nevertheless, it is certainly true that we do not have to be physically writing to be engaged in creative writing, and much that happens in undertaking creative writing happens before, during, and after the physical activities that inscribe it. These things happen in the mind and in the imagination – the two of which, we might consider, may or may not be thoroughly enmeshed with each other. This further raises the obvious question of when creative writing *actually* begins and when creative writing *actually* ends, and whether the physical manifestations of creative writing happening represent changes or continuities in that physical/non-physical relationship that is at creative writing's core.

Returning to Robert Kirk's comment, and noting this phenomenon whereby creative writing is both physical and non-physical, if zombies currently threaten the physicalist view of the world, then perhaps the rise in zombie popularity is related to something that is also connected to the present and future for creative writing. But what is that something?

The New Creative Writing Consciousness

Staggering through a field in grassy rural Pennsylvania, the zombies in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) appear at first to be weary commuters finally heading home after a long day in the

city. Perhaps they are '60s creative writers escaping daily office jobs and trying to get home to their writing. If they are without consciousness, they are not without the appearance of personality, without a sense of personal space, or without character, and they are most certainly not without intention. But Romero's film was then and this is now. Forty-five years is a long time in the life of the non-living, an entire death-time in the story of the animated ageless.

The opening of the 21st Century clearly witnessed both creative writing and zombie life leave behind what might be called in Romero terms "the Pennsylvanian period" – a 1960s weariness with the mundane day-to-day work – expand their popular reach (arms outstretched, for the zombies; fingers flying across keyboards for we creative writers) and take on something of the personality and challenges of our time. Creative writing and our new found love of zombies have admirably met those challenges head-on, not least in offering an appearance of similarity to our daily contemporary lives but in not really being mundane at all.

In the case of the zombie, witness their contemporary popularity in the bestselling paperbacks and Emmy-award-winning TV series, *The Walking Dead*. "In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living"[1] (Kirkman, 2009). Such optimism in this declaration of collaborative zombie–human life probably bears some concerted consideration. Consider Max Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) – allegedly a parody, but who in our time has not seen the scrawled cries for help on the crumbling concrete walls of environmentally challenged cities? Brooks is also the author of *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006), later made into a film directed by Marc Foster and starring Brad Pitt. Add to this a random selection of other recent evidence: the Bowling Zombies Wooden Novelty Game by Front Porch Classics, described as "a zombie themed table top bowling game" in which you "knock over zombie-pins without knocking down the king-pin" – a "fun indoor activity and easy to play" (Amazon); *The Zombie Combat Manual: A Guide to Fighting the Living Dead*, Roger Ma's quite obviously essential 2010 offering; and the Youtube

video of "Doom and Gloom" a song from *GRRR!* (2012), the 50th anniversary compilation album by one of the most successful rock music acts of all time, The Rolling Stones, featuring zombies rampant in Louisiana in its opening sequence as casually as it features a septuagenarian rock and roll star singing "Baby take a chance/Baby won't you dance with me/Yeah!" (Jagger/Richards). Whether over time zombies have become more or less conscious of us, there is no doubt we have become progressively and enthusiastically very conscious of them.

In the case of creative writing, witness the global growth of courses in creative writing at all levels of education, the increase in the numbers of books and journals and magazines concerned with the practice of creative writing, the considerable growth of exchanges of completed works of creative writing – whether distributed via commercial means or directly between creative writers and readers, between creative writers and other creative writers – as well as the growth in exchange of "works in progress," discussions about creative writing, and creative writers exploring together. Whether over time creative writing has become more part of our consciousness, there is no doubt we have become progressively and enthusiastically very conscious of it.

This observation might strike creative writers as well as philosophers as notable, not least because of philosophic zombie arguments. Philosophic zombie arguments relate to ideas about both subjective conscious human experience and perception and are employed in exploring the role of our experiences in providing something important beyond the physical, yet linked to it. The rise of the zombie and of creative writing therefore appears to represent some kind of change in how we generally perceive shifts in our human experiences as they meet the physical condition of the contemporary world around us, and relates to our subjective consciousness.

These phenomena have not come about incidentally, and simply because they have manifested themselves in various material ways

(whether, for example, in popular entertainment in the case of the zombie or in the growth of creative writing courses in the case of creative writing), we cannot dismiss them as merely material things. Both the zombie and creative writing have become more popular because something we widely believe or communally desire has made them so.

Emerge New Life

Over the past twenty years there have been phenomenal changes in how we creative writers live and work. Not least this has been brought about by the impact of new technologies. The dimension of these technologies as human tools is worthy of a separate discussion. But here, to focus on the changes themselves, there is an initial need to acknowledge that this technological revolution is very far from a universal or global phenomenon. As with many things, access to the good (and bad) aspects of these changes has been dependent on where you live, how well you are able to live, and on what basis your life is supported. The Western world, the developed world, whatever label we might like to use, has been the site of these changes, and those empowered within it have largely been the beneficiaries of their impact. Not only, but largely.

With this in mind, many of us in the developed world have had the luxury of engaging in zombie fandom, but there are those elsewhere who have not. Creative writing is undertaken far more widely than just in the developed world. Its own technologies of production, of making, are more egalitarian: we could say they range from the tablet computer to the pencil. Creative writing takes place not regardless of those technologies available or those technologies chosen, because tools do have an influence on things that are being made, but it takes place in just about any circumstance and for reasons connected to our human desire to use creative writing for art and for communication. Creative writing, and the ability to undertake it, is therefore more accessible and more easily

employed by the individual and by the community than, say, an art dependent on a specific and more often sophisticated mechanical means of production (e.g., film making).

So we need to acknowledge that some parts of the world – primarily the developed world – have been heavily impacted upon over the past quarter century by what we have most often referred to as the advent of "digital" technologies. The entire world has not been equally impacted, and much in this has been dependent on the wealth of continents, nations, communities, and individuals. But transformations have taken place, and even where little direct influence has been occurring, breathing the air of such transformation in the global ways of work and life has occurred. What began perhaps with technologies soon has moved beyond them.

Operating as tools, late 20th Century technologies have directly or indirectly allowed for new ways of thinking, acting, and even of feeling in the 21st Century, which have now gathered momentum. From this momentum has emerged our improved and increasingly enthusiastic relationship with creative writing and with the zombie.

Fear

Once the zombie was a figure of fear, now she or he is an acceptable feature of our cultural landscapes, a recognizable contributor to the lived experience of being human. The paradox in such a statement would strike the reader more than it does were not the statement innately true to you. You reader, I would suggest, cannot dismiss the zombie from your landscape because you acknowledge you have access to books of our time, to cultural artifacts of the developed world, and to 21st Century modernity, and in having so you have seen the rise of the zombie into its current position if not of your unbridled affection then at very least of our shared tolerance. Why has this been so, and in what ways does this relate to how we situate creative writing?

One reason is that as soon as we were able to recognize the possibility of seemingly real material entities that are not real (i.e., that are created to be very "lifelike" by digital means), we were able to entertain the possibility of an acceptable, even familial, zombie. That is one feature of digitalism as it was and as it has underpinned changes that took place because of it: its ability to replicate in unreality, and with considerable veracity, the features of our reality. This ability remains unsurpassed: never in history has unreality (or the undead for that matter) looked so real or been so alive in our daily lives. Digitalism also meant advancing the metaphor as well as the actuality of a world made up of many discrete parts (the digital involves discrete parts joined together, whereas the analog was about continuous flow). Analog life – that is broadly life prior to the final decades of the last century – relied on physical application and measurement. Because it embodied a need for continuous flow, what came after practically relied for its existence entirely on what came before.

In recent years, and drawn from this kind of change, creative writers among others have come to embrace and in many ways live by such words and concepts as "interactive," "mobile," and "virtual." We have seen interconnection, involving varieties of sustained reciprocal connections, become the everyday, and deviation from these seems not merely outmoded but out of kilter with the philosophies of our times. Interconnectedness has become the norm because in a world in which we can, and do, attach discrete parts to other discrete parts it is possible – both literally and metaphorically – to imagine reciprocal connections that go beyond the connections of previously associated or nearby things and persons. We have come to be a generation of interconnectedness not only one of connectedness.

Developing an investigation of our contemporary mindset further, we might easily compare it to the revolutionary changes of latter decades of the 19th Century and the early decades of the 20th Century. We can see there the ideal of connectedness as such things as the telegraph, the telephone, and the automobile influenced ways of living and thus ways of thinking, and ways of thinking evolved into ways of acting, which in turn induced further ways of

thinking. So the cycle of daily influence of action and thought goes. There too, in the latter years of the 19th Century, the discovery of x-rays which, well beyond the science fiction of their name, breached what was previously unbreachable: letting us see the interior of our human bodies without damaging their exterior.

How much did such a thing, such a breaching of interior–exterior as the discovery of x-rays emphasized, influence our ways of behaving? Thomas Mann's famous novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924), which incorporates consideration of both x-rays and the cinema,[2] made something of this and as a parodic *Bildungsroman* effectively brought into question what education this might entail or need. How much does the evolution of the phantoms of the cinema and the possible insights of x-ray relate to the development of such things as psychoanalysis, which emerged around the same time too and, with Sigmund Freud as its increasingly well-known proponent, produced both theories and studies that bore in them some sense of how we might discover the previously undiscoverable nature of the human unconscious, the reasons for our thoughts, and feelings and actions which seemed before this to be barely approachable via reason at all? Could this be another example of connectedness, or the seeking of connectedness?

History has frequently shown us that treating human action as mostly logical and measurable is not often productive. Unpredictability, fortuitousness, and chance are just as much part of our human world as discernible spheres of behavior and influence. But a sense of connectedness borne on the discoveries, inventions, human actions, and reactions of the late 19th Century and early 20th Century period seems at very least a recognizable theme. We see too that such an evolving *fin de siècle* theme of connectedness bore in it something of a fear that we might be leaving behind some of our previous beliefs and ideals as we celebrated this new scientific revolution, this advancement of communication and transportation, interiors meeting exteriors, voices heard on devices without persons needing to be seen, speculations on the new lighting of the night using incandescent light bulbs, flights of the airplane, broadcasts of

radio, the invention of the ever-connected ever-moving mass production assembly line, and the mysterious work of radar.

Such fears that arose around this suggested that in all such activity we might also leave behind something of ourselves. Perhaps so; perhaps in every change we leave behind something of what came before, we abandon something. It would not be too great a leap to suggest that such fears of loss and abandonment had an influence on the fifty years between 1890 and 1940 in which the developed world produced two world wars, largely over the ownership of territory, and brought forth a monumental economic depression that, regardless of the brand of economic theory to which you commit, involved the deflation of the value of assets and the associated under-consumption. Things were suddenly worth less because, in essence, things were seen to be worth less.

Fifty years that reached the heights of mechanical connectedness and the depths of using such invention for war. Perhaps. This is not to be accusatory: it is easy to look at historical moments with hindsight and claim to be more advanced, more aware, and more moral. But it is to suggest that historical themes happen and, though not universal, not simple, and not singular in their influence, these themes emerge and influence our undertaking and understanding of many of the things we do, including creative writing. Connectedness was the theme then, interconnectedness is the theme now.

Our New Interconnectedness

Creative writing has benefited from our contemporary theme of interconnectedness or, in other words, connections with reciprocity. Zombies have benefited from it too. Zombies have benefited because if everything is potentially interconnected, everything is borne together as discrete elements brought together at our will, then the living dead can be part of our lives as easily as a Facebook page can contain any number of "friends" and the 140 characters

of a "tweet" can carry as much emotion as a hug, or as much value as a conversation. It does not matter whether all of the 400 million users of Twitter (Tech Crunch) actually tweet regularly. What matters is that this social media is believed to provide interconnectedness. It is a global phenomenon, as much as that is possible, and in being global and in being based in mobile, speedy, immediate communication, it highlights how much our world believes in association and co-joining even more than it perhaps believes in recognizing singularities. Be connected, exchange connectivity and realizing the advantage in this keep connected to as many others as possible, in as many ways, and as many times during a day/night to confirm that interconnectedness is solid. Expressions such as "I haven't got a signal" or "I can't login" or "it's dropped out" carry more than their literal meanings: they also suggest what it is that we find within the required norm and what it is that we consider to be outside of that norm. A preference for interconnectedness is an early 21st Century leitmotif.

Some transformations this new emphasis on interconnectedness has brought about already seem commonplace. For example, everyone who is listed as a "friend" on your Facebook page is not, in the previous definition of the word, actually your friend. Some are, some are not; but the fact that we have grown used to using the word "friend" in a new way, with relatively little debate, and in a relatively swift fashion, and given too that calling someone a friend once carried with it such emotional force and personal commitment, is surely worthy of a passing thought. To assist thinking about this, the Facebook company provides you with assistance on the question of friends and unfriends, even going as far as to suggest types of friends and how these might be managed. For example, the company advises:

> Mutual friends are the people who are Facebook friends with both you and the person whose timeline you are viewing. For instance, if you are friends with Chris, and Mark is friends with Chris, then Chris will be shown as a mutual friend when you are viewing Mark's timeline. (Facebook: Mutual Friends)

If this advice, and the role of a company in assisting you with this, does not strike anyone as strange it is only because being linked up has become the 21st Century's fundamental requirement. Therefore, this advice becomes no more strange than the comment that "by default, anyone on Facebook can send you a friend request" (Facebook: Friend Requests) or that "if you choose to unfriend someone, you will be removed from that person's friends list as well. If you want to be friends with this person again, you'll need to send a new friend request" (Facebook: Friend Requests). The expression "you can choose your friends but not your family" surely takes on an updated meaning, and the word "unfriend," which was used as long ago as the 13th Century, has returned to us in a new contemporary guise. To unfriend becomes, today, to disconnect, to remove from the favored position of interconnectedness.

Such things and new ways of behaving have been quickly accepted and in being so they have influenced, and will further influence how creative writers act and react in the world. Much of this influence has not yet been examined. Our question here becomes, then, what at its core does interconnectedness appear to be bringing to the present and future of creative writing?

Valuing the Creative

Interconnectedness has benefited creative writing because interconnectedness could be said to be the lifeblood of human creativity, that human sense of making reciprocal connections. Creativity has been examined from almost every angle and disciplinary point of view, whether in such fields as Psychology or Linguistics, whether Economics or Cognitive Science. All conclude that creativity entails originality and imaginative exploration and intention. Creativity is always considered to involve a process and/or end result that is valuable in some way and important to someone somehow in some fashion. Creative writing, which distinguishes itself from other kinds of written communication by using the

word "creative" to define its acts and intentions and outcomes, is writing that draws directly from these ideals of human creativity. Because creativity is located in process and ideas associated with the imagination, illumination, inspiration, insightfulness, and divergent thinking, it is a natural partner and participant in interconnectedness. The connected, the analog, the continuous flow associated with the late 19th and early 20th Century supported creative writing as a progressive medium – one that relied on the teleological bias of reading as well as the linguistic structures of one word or sentence or clause somehow relating to that which came before. Interconnectedness supports creative writing in a new way.

Because of digital interconnectedness, the combination of discrete possibilities brought together in a synchronized sequence, choice becomes heightened: the choice of combining, the choice of synchronizing, the choices in exchanging. Additionally, digitalism has involved kinds of shared and agreed languages. The most obvious example is the language of computer programming from which the lesson of ensuring compatibility is quickly drawn! Analog modes also result in more errors of communication or consistency of form than digital modes because analog is indeed dependent on flow and connection where as digital modes involve those discrete components or elements synchronized together. While digital modes can be interrupted and disturbed, the degree of disturbance needed to do so is greater, and their ability to maintain consistency means that such modes and types of digital communication or digital connection can be readily replicated and repeated. In this way, interconnectedness (if we compare this with the connectedness of previous history and of analog modes) can involve more links, reciprocal connections, more types of connections, more ways of interconnecting, more empowerment to connect and to maintain interconnectedness, and, at least possibly, more potential for originality and imaginative exploration. We only know something of how the imagination seems to work and not nearly as much as we might like to know, but we do know that stimulating

it through exposure to a wide variety of experiences plays some role. We know too that our concepts of value have become increasingly fraught as greater access to information, material goods bought through electronic means, artistic outputs, and indeed wider spread of human relationships (with no criticism intended of the "friends" defined thus on Facebook), has meant we have had to reconsider what criteria of value are required or impact upon our judgments. Ideals of creativity are located in examining value and in celebrating value too, so they quite naturally find some voice in discussions of this kind.

Thus, digitalism has supported interconnectedness and interconnectedness has raised the potential (at very least) for greater spread and development of creativity. Ideals of creativity are located in types and style of process and ideas associated with the imagination, illumination, inspiration, insightfulness, and divergent thinking. Because other types of writing – writing other than creative writing, that is – favor convergent rather than divergent thinking, making their defining characteristics such things as clarity of expression, purposefulness, directness, creative writing is related more closely to interconnectedness than these other writing forms. Situated between the conscious and unconscious, between higher cognitive functions and the application of our imaginations, between our physical actions and its material existence as inscription, creative writing could be said to be the medium for our historical moment. One final element of our present, and our observable future, comes into play.

Beyond Physicalism

I have suggested zombies became popular because they represent some kind of transformation in how we generally perceive shifts in our human experiences as they meet the physical condition of the contemporary world around us and relates to our subjective consciousness. I have said also that it is partly true that our imaginations are aspects of our minds and creative writing one physical manifestation of the

imagination's mind activities. But what we have also seen in our contemporary world, and increasingly this has become the case, is an evolution from digitalism – which was defined directly according to the technologies that instigated at the end of the 20th Century – to what I call "synaptic" context, whereby what we now encounter in the world is extensively not just material conditions but is related to experiences.

In other words, whereas at the beginning of the last century, our engagement with the world and with others was defined by clear physical and material entities and mechanical means that highlighted connectedness, here in the 21st Century, we increasingly place the material and the connected entities in a wider grid of immateriality and interconnectedness. Virtual, created, even zombie existences, are part of a wider range of experiential associations and possibilities. We live in a world of synapses, interconnected experiences that may or may not involve material conditions or material goods or physically identifiable entities. In this world, creative writing increasingly flourishes, not because the physical conditions of book publishing or media production or community arts projects flourish but because it is situated so well between that material condition of written language and the unconscious, imaginative, virtual condition of creativity.

The future for creative writing will be empowered by a greater willingness and ability to question physicalism, by a rise in the potential for expansion of creativity by more people in more circumstances, by the ease of attaining new knowledge that makes certain kinds of fear of the unknown disappear, by a re-definition of who and what and how people might associate, and by combining an established and recognized form of communication and art, a simple practice of making that is not dependent on highly sophisticated and heavily controlled means of production. That zombies have risen to declare for us that is the case might have us running for the nearest lockable barn. But the fact is they are only trying to alert us to a potential we have not yet fully pursued, a potential borne not necessarily mostly in things, in materialism, but in making, in doing, in the actions of creating.

Notes

1 Kirkman's "In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living" which appeared in his comic books as well as becoming a tag-line for the TV series is widely quoted. Whether this is simply because it attaches itself to popular entertainment or whether it is because it captures some aspect of milieu is worthy of a passing thought! Verne Gay, writing about the TV series in *Newsday* in October 2010 comments: "The press materials prominently quote Robert Kirkman, the creator of the comic book on which it is based: 'In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living.' Don't know about you, but I don't need zombies stumbling around to remind me why life is so precious." www.newsday.com/entertainment/tv/the-walking-dead-for-a-halloween-treat-1.2406668 (Last accessed: 1 October 2013).

2 Stephen D. Dowden's, *A Companion to Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain* (Boydell and Brewer, 1999) offers a variety of essays providing an excellent exploration of key themes in the novel. It is instructive when considering the relationship between creative writers and their historical influences.

References

Bailey, Andrew, "Zombies, Epiphenomenalism, and Physicalist Theories of Consciousness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (December, 2006), 481–509.

Brooks, Max, *The Zombie Survival Guide*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003.

Brooks, Max, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, New York: Crown, 2006.

Stoljar, Daniel, *Physicalism*, Abington: Routledge, 2010.

Dowden, Stephen D., *A Companion to Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain*, Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 1999.

Facebook, "Friend Request," http://www.facebook.com/help/301707886595168 (Last accessed: 30 September 2013).

Facebook, "Mutual Friends," http://www.facebook.com/help/151469804922694 (Last accessed: 30 September 2013).

Forster, Marc, *World War Z*, Los Angeles: Plan B Entertainment, 2013.

Kirk, Robert, *Zombies and Consciousness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Kirkman, Robert, *The Walking Dead Compendium: One*, Berkeley: Image Comics, 2009.

Ma, Roger, *The Zombie Combat Manual: A Guide to Fighting the Living Dead*, New York: Berkley Trade, 2010.

Rolling Stones, The "Doom and Gloom," *Grrrr*, Santa Monica: ABKCO/ Interscope, 2012. http://www.interscope.com/ (Last accessed: 18 December 2013).

Romero, George, *Night of the Living Dead*, USA: Image Ten, 1968. http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Romero__George.html (Last accessed: 18 December 2013)

Tech Crunch, www.crunchbase.com/company/twitter (Last accessed: 27 October 2013).

Thomas, Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1927. First published in Berlin in 1924 as *Der Zauberberg*.