

Hidden
Reflection Statement

“I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.”¹

– Virginia Woolf.

In Simone Weil’s *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies*, she likens the act of being attentive to a man on “a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains.”² Weil describes attention as an act in which the soul empties itself of its own contents, and thus receives the world in its “naked truth.”³ It is this capacity to see beyond oneself that I hope to invoke in my Major Work. Namely, through the creative nonfiction form I seek to conjure a surrendered reading that, in forging Weil’s self-forgetful attentiveness, demands a tacit recognition of the essential hiddenness of our condition. By urging an acceptance of our inability to know ourselves in our totality, I aim to make a contribution to the universal endeavour towards authentic personhood.

My Major Work began in a more explicatory stance. Initially, I explored Lacan and Wittgenstein in an attempt to make sense of the complex dynamic between self and place I had witnessed in Nuremberg, Germany, which I visited in September 2019. An adherence to Wittgenstein’s theories of language⁴ and Lacan’s “mirror stage”⁵ directed me to believe that place, like language, served merely as a vehicle through which fictionalised tropes of identity were constructed. I thus planned for my character, alongside myself, to undergo a gradual release from this “contextual amnesia”⁶, disrobing contrived notions of personhood induced by exterior setting. However, subsequent exposure to Rowan Williams’ “human” concepts caused me to see that my original plan was deeply removed from lived experience, neglecting both the human capacity and need to attain a holistic sense of self. In pointing to the words of theologian Vladimir Lossky, who wrote that the “‘person’ signifies the irreducibility of man

¹ Lee, H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009, New York, p. 13.

² Weil, S. Trans. Eric O. Springsted. *Essential Writings*. Orbis Books, 2003, Maryknoll, p. 96.

³ Ibid, p. 98.

⁴ Wittgenstein, L, revised fourth edition trans. G Anscombe. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing, 2009, UK.

⁵ Lacan, J. ed. Miller, J.A. trans. Grigg, R. *Formations of the Unconscious*. Polity, 2016, Cambridge.

⁶ Brown, D. 2010. *Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys’s Critical Discourse*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 568–591.

to his nature,”⁷ Williams suggests that it is our mysteriousness that constitutes our individuality. This was solidified further by Jane Hirshfield, who reinforces the elision between concealment and substance as she writes, “mystery increases the conviction that there is meaning,”⁸ hence my title, *Hidden*. It was this understanding of the ironically unknowable nature of the authentically known self, therefore, which became the guiding conceptual framework for my piece.

The creative nonfiction form is crucial to my Major Work, enabling me to account for the “self” as well as the “stream” – the exterior environment – that “holds it in place.”⁹ The aptness of the life writing genre, with its self-reflexive focus on truth, subjectivity and interiority, is clarified by Hermione Lee, who discusses how it “hums with possibilities”¹⁰ and ultimately directs us to “the figure of a real person in all his or her peculiarity, accidentalness and actuality.”¹¹ By invoking a literary world wherein the subjective mindscape presides over exterior reality, life writing fittingly houses a composition aiming to illuminate unconventional modes of *seeing*,¹² within which the yearning for self-understanding, and the self’s fundamental opaqueness, are reconciled. By probing alternative ways of thinking and being, my piece therefore extends upon the English Extension 1 elective, Literary Mindscapes, with its Faulknerian interrogation of the hiddenness innate to both individuals and physical landscapes.¹³ Like Faulkner, my piece is revealed in fragments, drawn from vignettes of writing journalled throughout my travels last year. The Austerian utilisation of both the first-person and third-person voice,¹⁴ through which such fragments are elucidated, captures interactions between self, others and the city of Nuremberg. The silent connection forged between myself, Miriam and the craftsman, in a place still grappling with its own troubled memories and brokenness, forms the essence of my piece. Positioning myself as the primary focaliser, I invite readers to share in my return to

⁷ Williams, R. *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons*. SPCK Publishing, 2018, London, p. 30.

⁸ Hirshfield, J. *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry*. Bloodaxe Books, 2008, UK, p. 17.

⁹ Lee, H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. p. 13.

¹⁰ Lee, H. *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing*. Random House Publishing, 2008, London, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹² Williams, R. *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*. Fons Vitae, 2011, Canada, p. 43.

¹³ Faulkner, W. *As I Lay Dying*. Vintage, 2004, London.

¹⁴ Auster, P. *The Invention of Solitude*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 1982, London.

genuine landscapes, people and the self, as part of my textual quest to reconcile a longing for personal identity with the ultimate unknowability of this COVID-isolated, present self. The creative nonfiction form is thus central to the execution of my concept of hiddenness, enabling me to “make contact with mystery”¹⁵ by again *bringing to life* moments of insight facilitated by past encounters with people and landscape.¹⁶

The poly-perspectival nature of the piece, facilitated by the “shape-shifting, contradictory and variable”¹⁷ quality of the life writing genre, evinces individual identity as inherently interwoven with others and place. The interlaced fragments that constitute the work’s structure, bound together by sustained aural patterns and musical motifs, demonstrate how *vicarious experience*¹⁸ – the ability to walk in another’s shoes – underpins authentic self-understanding. Indeed, Martha Nussbaum substantiates the importance of empathy in “humanising” the individual, positing identity as elided with “learning to be a human capable of love and imagination.”¹⁹ The importance of an awareness of the “stream”²⁰ is explicated moreover by my multiple focalisers’ return to the city of Nuremberg. As a place still contending with the darkness of its past, setting gives credence to the intelligent reading of another’s story as a vital necessity in realising the shape of one’s own. My literary endeavour to account for the *gaps* surrounding my understanding of Miriam’s life, the struggle of which I was only able to catch in glimpses during my time in Nuremberg, represents a desire to incite a Rilkean expansion of consciousness in both myself and responders, producing a sight “beyond [one’s] own heaviness.”²¹ This is emblematised by the Modjeskan “vantage point”²² of the hotel room. Mirroring the threshold position of the verandah in *The Orchard*, the room in Hotel Victoria simultaneously affords the self-forgetful ability to *gaze unseen*, as well as a contemplative solitude in which such encounters are made sense of, reflecting the

¹⁵ O’Connor, F. ‘On Her Own Work’, *Mystery and Manners*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 1972, London, p. 108.

¹⁶ Morrison, F. ed. Madeleine, R. *To Have Loved and Lost: Life Writing and the Rhetoric of Consolation*. UNSW Press, 2008, Sydney, p. 110.

¹⁷ Lee, H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. p. 18.

¹⁸ Arnold, M.R. *Empathic Intelligence: Teaching, Learning, Relating*. UNSW Press, 2005, Sydney, p. 62.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 63.

²⁰ Lee, H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. p. 13.

²¹ Rilke, R.M. trans. Mitchell, S. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Random House Publishing, 1989, New York, p. 247.

²² Modjeska, D. *The Orchard*. Pan Macmillan, 1994, Sydney, p. 20.

generativity of the writing process itself. My piece thus encourages a movement away from the self-alienating, often narcissistic absorption in one's own interiority which can characterise the modern struggle to know oneself. Rather, my piece urges a self-forgetful attentiveness to the "stream"²³ surrounding oneself, so as to navigate the shape of one's own life.

I was first exposed to the struggle for adequate self-identification in the English Advanced course's critical study of T.S Eliot's modernist oeuvre. Eliot posits the struggle to *articulate one's essence* as the source of modern restlessness. The Prufrockian inability to "say just what [one] means"²⁴ evinces language's inadequacy in reconciling the individual's perennial spiritual hunger with a concurrent inability to be without answers. And yet, Eliot's evocation of the metaphysical via the representation of the common, as in "Preludes,"²⁵ denotes poetry's profound capacity to "make contact with mystery."²⁶ As such, Eliot provides significant inspiration to my work's stylistic and technical quality. The use of leitmotifs concerned with music, light and monastic life forge an alternative, non-referential "language,"²⁷ or mode of perception, through which the characters' interiority is simultaneously revealed and concealed.

My piece thus strives to reconcile the yearning for coherent identity and the "irreducibility of man to his nature,"²⁸ our central hiddenness of being. Specifically, the use of aural and musical figuration was inspired by the lyricism of Rainer Maria Rilke, who harnesses poetry in order to "utter what is unutterable."²⁹ His recurrent use of "birds" that "feel themselves more inwardly flying"³⁰ exemplifies the poetic capability to engender a sight that expands beyond oneself, implicating a state where we are "most ourselves", and yet "least personal,"³¹

²³ Lee, H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. p. 13.

²⁴ Eliot, TS. *Selected Poems*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 1954, London, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 13-15.

²⁶ O'Connor, F. 'On Her Own Work', *Mystery and Manners*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 1972, London, p. 108.

²⁷ Heidegger, M. 'What are Poets For?', *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Harper & Row, 1946, New York.

²⁸ Williams, R. *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons*. p. 30.

²⁹ Wittgenstein, L. Letter to Paul Engelmann discussing a poem by Umland.

³⁰ Rilke, R.M. trans. Mitchell, S. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. p. 150.

³¹ Mansfield, K. ed. Smith, A. *The Collected Stories*. Penguin Books, 1981, London. p. 15.

as mirrored in the work of Katherine Mansfield, studied in Extension 1. I believe music, as a wordless and yet potent artform, similarly possesses this ability to better narrativise a transcendence in which the self, through being forgotten, is most authentically felt, even if only in “lightning flashes.”³² The important moment of recognition between Miriam and the craftsman, in which *the hard masquerades fall to the floor like a feather*, is therefore juxtaposed with the playing of the violin. The alternate mode of seeing that music facilitates, like an absorption in the writing process, is manifested through the craftsman’s ascetic single-mindedness.

My Major Work urges a “fidelity to the ungraspable.”³³ Specifically, I aim to reach a young adult readership, due to their particularly acute self-consciousness as they attempt to firmly situate themselves in the world. The young person’s habitual self-monitoring, I believe, has been escalated by the recent coronavirus pandemic, which has forced the self into a solitude one has a natural tendency to evade. Stripped of instruments, like language and place, by which we conveniently, and often erroneously, define ourselves, my work aims to function as a source of consolation by encouraging a fruitful acceptance of one’s own unknowability. For me, the writing process has indeed provoked a realisation of the generativity brought about by a self-forgetful immersion in artistic composition. In the same way music does so for Miriam, the surrender of the creative process has imparted the Chekhovian desire to “be simpler.”³⁴ Through an enhanced attentiveness to the world’s various shades of meaning, and the places and people that constitute such nuances, I have come to better understand my own interiority as well as the “stream”³⁵ that holds it in place.

³² Weil, S. *Love in the Void: Where God Finds Us*, Plough Publishing House, 2018, UK, p. 76.

³³ Hirshfield, J. *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry*. p. 9.

³⁴ Gorky, M. ed. Krupin, A. Bunin, I.A. trans. Koteliansky, S.S. *Reminiscences of Anton Chekhov*. Project Gutenberg, 2011.

³⁵ Lee, H. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. p. 13.

