

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the RMIT University crest. The crest is a shield-shaped emblem with a central sword, a laurel wreath, and a banner at the bottom containing the Latin motto 'A. M. P. A. R. O.'. The shield is divided into sections, with stars in the lower-left quadrant.

Seven Meditations on Writing

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Abstract

Ideally, writing a doctoral thesis should be a satisfying experience for a student, a time when the years of hard work come together. The reality is quite the reverse, however, and writing a thesis can threaten to destroy any pleasurable relationship with the written word a student may have enjoyed in a previous life. This was the situation in which I recently found myself when I was asked to contribute to a writing workshop for postgraduate students.

This paper records a moment in my endeavour to explore the source of my troubled relationship with academic writing. This exploration took me back to the books that first fuelled my love of reading, and led to a rediscovery of my own impulse to write. Starting as a record of my struggle to reconnect with the pleasures of the written word, this paper becomes a celebration of the creative/writing process itself.

Keywords: writing, literature, creativity, inspirations,

Seven meditations on writing

1. *The Joy of Words*

Writing is joy
so saints and scholars all pursue it.
A writer makes new life in the void,
knocks on silence to make a sound,
binds space and time on a sheet of silk
and pours out a river from an inch-sized heart.
As words give birth to words,
and thoughts arouse deeper thoughts, they smell like flowers giving off scent,
spread like green leaves in spring,
a long wind comes, whirls into a tornado of ideas
and clouds rise from the writing-brush forest.

Lu Ji 261 – 303

My inclination is to leave the poem to speak for itself, but I want to press on. This poem, calling from the past, with its invitation to the reader to participate in the pleasures of writing, found me at a time when I needed to be reminded of those pleasures.

I had decided to walk to town, after dropping my daughter at school, hoping the hour long trek would dislodge the sludge in my brain and put me in a more positive frame of mind for my writing. However, I was missing my husband, and fancied my footsteps matched his own, as he walked the 800 kilometre Camino pilgrim path across Northern Spain. With our anniversary coming up, I was wondering whether I'd be able to track down a particularly sweet Chinese poem I'd sent him years ago. My path took me past Readings, where I hoped to find a copy of the Penguin anthology of Chinese writing, which had disappeared from my own bookshelves years ago. I didn't find it, but, flicking through another anthology, Lu Ji's treatise on writing appeared to me with an impact no less profound than the spiritual revelations experienced by many a Camino pilgrim.

Lu Ji's treatise, in the form of a 'rhymed essay', contains both practical advice, as well as meditations, on the process of creation. What I was mesmerised by, at that moment as I knelt on the floor in the back of the bookshop, was the pure joy expressed in the first poem. I write now to liberate that joy. I do so acknowledging that the overwhelming sensation I've been experiencing of late is one of oppression and dread.

The dread centres on my PhD. I'm finding the business of writing my thesis grindingly difficult. I am in my sixth decade. For a long time I successfully dodged and weaved to avoid the implied expectation that as an academic I needed to obtain this warrant to practice in my field. Years ago, when I clocked on for this shift, a psychologist friend, who enjoyed high standing and respect in his field, and whom I liked and admired very much, showed sympathetic interest. Having seen several of his friends and colleagues crawling across the wasteland of their PhD, he had formed the intention, he said, to only commence a PhD upon receiving a diagnosis of a terminal illness. He imagined his friends and loved ones around his grave, lamenting his early passing, "just when he was on the cusp of completing his brilliant research!" So his plan was, as he described it, for his reputation to remain glowingly, if erroneously, intact.

These ideas all clamoured for attention when I was invited to submit a piece of writing to a workshop for postgraduate students. The invitation was to a writing retreat, evoking an island of respite. I thought: this is an opportunity to indulge myself a little, the writing equivalent of a weekend at the Daylesford spa – time out from the grim slog of writing a PhD, permission to relax, drop my guard, play a little, metaphorically get a little drunk (the image was suggested by my inspiration source, Lu Ji's poem. I was reminded of the wonderful drunken poets of the Tang dynasty: the legendary Li Bai, who drowned after trying to embrace the moon - in reality the moon was but a treacherous reflection on the water.)

There: I'm misrepresenting things already. I don't actually find the idea of writing so oppressive. As an idea, it is enticing, seductive; but intimidating. I fear that, like Li Bai, my endeavour to embrace the moon will only lead me to plunge into the murky depths.

2. Butterflies

"Once this spring I went for a walk with Clemens. All kinds of new herbs were blooming that I didn't know and that I wanted to pick"; he said, "If you stop at every hawkweed or forget-me-

not we won't get far." Now I always think of that when I experience something new within me, that others probably know all of it already, and that it may be nothing new for them anymore, like those violets and daisies I wanted to collect along the way. So I don't write it down – and also because my thoughts hang on me like butterflies on flowers. Who can catch one? They see you right away and fly off, and if I do catch one I've soon rubbed off its beautiful colour with my writing finger or its wings grow stiff. And a thought like that is so happy flying in the air but on paper it can't sway like it can on a flower, and it can't flutter from one rose to another; it just sits there like it's skewered. I can see it in the few I've caught and written down. – I was just at the end of the garden, I ran inside because I wanted to write it in my book, quickly before I forgot it. And now, whenever I open the book, the thought laughs at me and says, "You're really stupid".
(von Arnim 1860, p.180)

Bettina (Brentano) von Arnim (1785 – 1859) – gifted, complex, famous for her childhood friendship with Goethe – also expressed an ambivalent relationship to writing. Energetic sprite of the romantic circle in Germany, then married to writer and collector of fairy tales, Achim von Arnim, she would later go on to establish a political salon in Berlin during the revolutionary rumblings of mid-nineteenth century Europe. Her will-o-the-wisp nature was as difficult to pin down as her butterfly thoughts.

Years ago I read von Arnim's letter which described her struggle to write, encouraged by her brother the poet Clemens Brentano. Her image of thoughts "shot like hares on a miserable hunt" catches the melancholy experience of witnessing the wanton destruction of wild creatures from her "thought forest" occasioned by the act of writing. A more resigned, respectful relationship to the elusive relationship between thought and the futility of effort to express it was conveyed in her image of thoughts as butterflies, self-contained in their fragile beauty when free, crippled and de-natured once captured. As I stumble through my own jungle of ideas, struggling to net all those capricious, freewheeling thoughts, the image of Bettina and her butterflies brings a smile.

I recognise in Bettina a fellow-traveller, whose fears and frustrations are also mine. At the same time her vivid, evocative images reproach my own feeble attempts to write. My own images seem reheated, micro-waved beyond any relationship to the original inspiration. Like an egret perched on the rump of a cow, I can only wait for the insects disturbed by the meanderings of the oblivious beast. If thoughts are butterflies, then words to me seem like those very insects.

Words are floating around my head, always. They dance around, I observe their colour and shape, and play with different arrangements. They have followed me as long as I can remember, but I never really got the trick of taming them, disciplining them into a form to share with others - to line them up on paper, orderly, arranged according to colour sequence, size, properly referenced.

So there is silence. A void.

Avoid.

Others, I know, do not experience this 'silence'. They have no awareness of a 'void'. The inner life may be nurtured in many ways. For me for as long as I can remember the written word has always had the power to "water the heart like clouds and rain" (Lu Ji 2005, p. 73). Like Lu Ji when he reads the classics, I "drink the wine of words" and revere those who are able to create an "elegant balance of style and substance" (p. 68) to reveal the world in new ways. The written word assumes such significance that the act of writing becomes disproportionately daunting to me, rendering me prostrate in my reverence.

Ironically, my own silence has been partially created by growing up aware of being surrounded by an abundance of words. It seems I have been reading forever, greedily, curiously. Everything. Memories of sitting in front of my parents' bookshelves, which stretched waist-high across the living room, either side of the newly-installed 'sixties Castlemaine rock fireplace – and wondering over those curious titles and the cover sheets, with their intriguing images. I stored them away somewhere, until the time when it would make sense. '*A for Artemis*' – there was an amusing 1950's line-and-wash illustration on the cover, of a bosomy matron in the austere skirt suit worn by headmistresses in the post-war period, and a little hat perched on her head, which manages to suggest both the sensible and ridiculous. She's got a bow and arrow, and is aiming it, with a wicked grin, up in the air. I never did discover the story behind that cover. Others I did: *Bobbin' Up*, *Power without Glory*, *The Tracks we Travel*, *N'Goola* – the role-call of the Australian Left Bookclub. I read many of them by the time I was ten or eleven. World literature was there too - I remember being fascinated by an illustrated edition of Balzac's *Droles Contes*, with its mischievous nuns and monks, and read that avidly as well. The books had a life, too, their own story, beyond the pages. When *Power without Glory* was still seditious and libellous - banned literature - the first edition was put together in people's houses across Melbourne. Our family was midwife to some of those copies, our back laundry the birthing room.

Other people's words enlarged my experience. Other people's worlds became my own, part of me. The image comes to mind of an earnest ten year old, being inspired by one of the volumes in that bookshelf, to learn Kath Walker's - as Oodgeroo was then known - *Black Like Me*: "I am black of skin amongst whites and I am proud." I recited it to my class. Me, an Anglo-Irish-European mongrel kid from a left-wing working-class family in Brunswick, became that person and those words became mine.

Later memories of sitting in Biology class at fourteen, feet tucked behind the legs of the chair, with a copy of Voltaire's *Candide* under the desk, greatly amused, but unable to share this with my friend. There were no cack-up paragraphs to giggle over, like the ones that were passed around in the library, with breasts and bra-straps and groping. You had to 'be there' to get it.

Gorky, Balzac (the not-so-drole, but equally absorbing *Comedie Humaine*), Colette (how can I forget the seduction of *Sido* and *My Mother's House?*), Tolstoy, Zola, Miller, all came into my life during those teenage years. So too, I must admit, did Harold Robbins, Jacqueline Suzanne (what did I make of the sex- and drugs world of *Valley of the Dolls* when I was barely twelve?), the entire *Angelique* series, *Forever Amber*. My whole history education, not to mention sex education, came first from racy historical novels.

Later my world expanded as I studied languages and literature at uni. New identities through new words. The delicious discovery of new worlds through the magic door of a Foreign Language. I started reading in French in my HSC year. *L'Etranger* and *Bonjour Tristesse* – now *that* was adolescent literature. And then from French to the 'magic mountain' of German literature, culture and philosophy; and later on to Chinese and Spanish. I came from a family of autodidacts, comfortable with reading, but not possessing the ease of language, argument and 'holding forth' I imagined more common in middle-class families, so learning about the house of language by wandering through the individual rooms was an awkward, but rewarding 'crabwalk' into a deeper understanding of the nuances of linguistic expression.

3. *Buscar un interlocutor*

Why this impulse to write?

The thing about spending the first couple of decades absorbing, observing, marvelling at, and living in, the written word, as well as relishing the panorama of your own life, is that you can develop a

hankering to share that experience – to throw your own voice into the void. Your mind is brimming with ideas, notions, observations, images – whether trite or profound, you can't tell.

I was a very indifferent student of Spanish, which I took as a sub-major in my degree. I was dimly aware of the squandered opportunity to really apply myself to this melodious, lush, language, but I had my major studies to focus on, as well as family, work – the whole drama. One thing I really enjoyed – besides the achievement of (sort-of) reading that great 19th century realist novel, *Fortunata y Jacinta*, in the original - was a short course on modern Spanish women writers. This was just a decade since Franco's death, and an interesting time in Spain for the arts. There was a title from one piece that connected strongly with me, and has deepened in meaning over the years: "Buscar un interlocutor" - *Searching for an interlocutor*. I'm not even sure whether my memory records the phrase accurately, or if it even makes sense, but the phrase took on a significance for me in the way I thought about the connections made through the intersecting of different lives and cultural reference points. I took it to mean: searching for that person who will be receptive to the signals that you send out into the void, who will connect with what you are saying, and who can have a conversation with you that is founded on a shared background of knowledge, cultural references, interests and sensibilities – the sympathy that is understanding.

Of course the author of that piece probably meant someone with whom you could have a real conversation, who brings their own experience and insights to enrich your own understanding. Interlocutor implies dialogue. But I was greedy for someone who would recognise and connect with the 'heaven and earth' that was 'contained in my head' – the imagined reader.

It is, of course, a banal truth that people have always experienced this need to connect, and the advent of the internet has expanded (and exploited) this basic human want. The 'void' (which had in reality always been populated with scattered philosophic and writerly souls conducting conversations across the millennia of human culture) has in the intervening decades become a virtual hubbub of voices each clamouring for attention in the public space. This, however, has only intensified my own reluctance to break my silence.

In the meantime, the butterflies flutter around me.

4. I began to hunt, following the fiery track of a certain idea...

What is creative inspiration, the quickening force that inspires and gives life to ideas? This question has preoccupied writers since they first experienced the impulse to 'express the nature of nature' and words began to 'pour from their brush' (Lu Ji 2005, p.68)

Paul Valéry in his poem, *Les Pas*, imagines the creative muse as an ethereal, divine being, quietly, silently gliding into the place of the artist's repose, bestowing a gentle kiss of life to the author's lips.

Tes pas, enfants de mon silence,
Saintement, lentement placés,
Vers le lit de ma vigilance
Procèdent muets et glacés.

Children of my silence, they tread,
Your steps, saintly, gently, unrushed,
Towards the vigil of my bed,
Processional, polished and hushed.

(Valery 2007, p. 32)

The imagery is sensual, erotic. The poet has been "living for this moment", the exquisite state of watchfulness, waiting for the muse to awaken the slumbering inhabitant of his thoughts. He asks the muse not to hasten the tender act – the "sweetness of being and non-being". It is in the space immediately prior to creation that the most divine pleasure is to be found.

Lu Ji, writing a thousand or more years ago, speaks of a similarly meditative space as he reaches into the merged mythical/natural imaginary.

"At first I close my eyes. I hear nothing.
In interior space I search everywhere.
My spirit gallops to the earth's eight borders
And wings to the tops of the sky." (2005, p.68)

These poems speak of the relationship between inspiration and the creation process. Writing as art (art as art) is about inspiration and careful crafting, but also about creating a space for a work to take on a life of its own. And that requires courage.

In my office I have a poster of a work by Cai Guo-qiang, the contemporary Chinese artist who has been a personal source of inspiration. Cai works in an array of media, his creations deeply informed by the legacy of his artistic and cultural heritage, sociological and historical knowledge, and philosophical interests. Best known for his experiments with fireworks, involving elaborate preparation that both references and builds on technological knowledge emanating from his Chinese scientific heritage, Cai Guo-qiang has courage aplenty. Revelling in the possibilities of that space that is opened up when the inspiration and preparation/process waits for the moment for the work to be realised, Cai creates works that come together in an instant of energy: light, sound and fire. He lights the fuse and the spectacle is momentarily before us – sparking, sparkling into exploding bursts of pure energy, pulsing outwards to suggest layers of meaning by dint of their political, cultural and temporal location. This may be a post - 9/11 car bomb installation in Times Square, or a Chinese junk sailing into Venice for the Biennale: “Bringing to Venice what Marco Polo Forgot”. Moving from the public spectacle to the more intimate space Cai and his assistants (for this is collective art) create drawings produced by the imprint of gunpowder laid out to form images as the sparks and flames travel along the sheets of paper. The art created in this way is the product both of intense preparation and spontaneity.

Asked about his source of inspiration in an arts magazine interview, Cai answers by speaking of the creation process. He also turns to erotic metaphor, describing the relationship between the preparation, the material and the process of his art by likening it to preparation for love-making (“Laying down the sheets on the bed”, preparing the space). However, rather than being the passive receptacle of the muse’s embrace, as envisioned by Paul Valery, Cai as artist is actively engaged in establishing the conditions for creation - ensuring the setting is right, with careful attention applied to the preparation, the ritual involved, the elaborate build-up towards the climax. In the culmination of this process, the finished product - or event - is important, but “it’s your physicality there, how you’re involved in that moment” that is the decisive element (ART:21: 2009).

From love-making, to making art, to making things out of words: the pleasure lies in the process, the anticipation, the promise. Li Ju imagines a ‘long wind’, whirling into a tornado of ideas’ –a natural, creative/generative force. These artists may patiently await their inspiration in the stillness of meditation or vigil, or, like Cai Guo-qiang, start with ideas and work organically – “viscerally” - with the generative energy of the material that transforms into art.

I like A.D. Nuttall's image: "I began to *hunt*, following the fiery track of a certain idea" (Nuttall 1989 p.viii). The description of the writing process as an active, directed force puts a positive spin on the idea of the writer as hunter. No lamenting the skewered butterflies or slaughtered hares here, just the excitement of the intellectual chase.

5. *The uses of literature*

Of course, I'm cheating now. Nuttall is a literary critic, so his is the perspective of someone *writing about*, not creating, literature. Sometimes this is a distinction that is difficult to maintain. There is inspiration and creativity in any effort to understand the world, even when it is second order criticism.

I still find myself mystified by the neglect of literature (and other art forms) by fellow academics in the 'human sciences'. Their refusal to acknowledge the capacity of literature to reveal the world in ways that by-passes the analytic techniques of scientific and interpretive disciplines I find strange, when literature has been a well-spring of ideas and the imaginary of social science writers from the outset. By now hearing from a colleague that they "don't read novels" usually doesn't offend me (too much). However, sometimes this neglect spills over into downright hostility reminiscent of the very anti-intellectualism that academics claim so often to feel victimised by in Australian culture. Recently I was bowled over by an email from someone of whom I'd enquired whether they had read a certain novel that was relevant to our discussion. The assumptions about novels revealed in their reply did surprise me. With references to the "endless self-contemplation and modern tedium" of novels, and allusions to the lack of authenticity of their emotional content, the operating premise seems to be the bizarre assumption that only the 'social sciences' can represent an authentic reality.

It seems strange to have to revisit the argument that literature is a vital means of helping thoughtful people to make sense of reality. The line "uses of literature" comes from Italo Calvino, whose fictions demonstrate the power of literature to explore "the whole mosaic in which man is set, the interplay of relationships, the design that emerges from the squiggles on the carpet" (1986, p.34). "The power of modern literature", observes Calvino, "lies in its willingness to give a voice to what has remained unexpressed in the social or individual unconscious: this is the gauntlet it throws down time and again". The "more enlightened our houses are", adds Calvino, "the more their walls ooze ghosts" (1986, p. 19). For Calvino the character of literature is expressed most honourably in its continual attempt "to say something it cannot say, something that it does not know, and that no one

could ever know". Its struggle is "in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said" (p 18).

It is within the protected space of literature that a free-flow of image and thought is allowed – metaphor in its proper home. A number of scholars have argued, or proceeded from the assumption, that there is a fruitful relationship to be forged between the methods of (social) science and the revelations of literature. The philosopher Mary Midgley has carried a sustained argument about this across her elegantly written, powerful writings (see especially *Science and Poetry*, 2006). It is interesting that the forms and process of creating literature may allow writers thoughts they never would have allowed themselves in their 'technical work'. It has been said of Sartre that he succeeded in developing his ideas in the novel (*La Nausee*) in a way he never achieved in his philosophical writings. Conversely, the Nietzsche scholar R.J. Hollingdale has observed that the great achievements of German philosophy were born of the frustrated literary ambitions of creative writers: the overwhelming presence of Goethe across all the domains of literature led the most original and creative intellects to philosophy, where "the world figures of German literature" were to be found, the "German peers of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Balzac and Flaubert, Dickens and Mark Twain" (Hollingdale 2004, p.10).

We are not writing literature, but can accept sociologist John Law's (2004) invitation to think about how we may write things that people will read for pleasure in the hope that the writing itself, will enable the ideas to quicken and take breath.

The danger is, it often strikes me that what you find in literature is so perfect; that the author's single phrase nestles an idea so gently, holding it up for you to ponder over and admire, to reflect on and dream with, that it seems impossible to say anything else that will illuminate things any more sublimely. Anyone who knows their onions feels, at some point, the intimidation of the example set by the great writers. Observe Zygmunt Bauman's preface to *Liquid Love*, where he speaks of Robert Musil's "sharpness of vision, richness of palette and subtlety of brushstrokes" in depicting the plight of modern man, and of lacking Musil's "exquisite talents that made *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* into the definitive portrait of the modern man". Bauman modestly, if disingenuously, settles for a "portfolio of rough and fragmentary sketches" in his own work (Bauman 2003 p.viii). It is telling, and ironic, that Bauman is one of the most elegant writers of contemporary social theory.

So, how to find one's own style?

I am quite partial to the aphorism. Is it that the notion of expending the least possible energy on the exercise of an idea appeals to an inherent laziness; an unwillingness to follow an argument through long pages of exposition? Possibly. But the appeal is also in the concentrated, ready-to-explode energy that is condensed in such a small space. The potential of those images to ignite a line of thought-explosions, the juxtaposition of words, the resonances contained within a single paragraph, is both seductive and laden with imaginative possibilities. It is a true test of the challenge to the writer and reader to participate in the great narrative game in order to understand the world. The aphorism represents a potent example of the cross-over between literature and philosophy. It relies, as Nuttall has observed in another context, on the reader being alert to the 'echoes and correspondences' that are suggested by 'certain turns of phrase', that reference a universe of allusions.

This mash-up of ideas, meaning/s and genres is not the sole province of the aphorism.

This is how Chinese poetry works – condensed, layering of meaning through layers of cultural inheritance – poetry, myth, history, philosophy.

In writing we are privileged to be able to fossick in the treasure house of culture and experience. This is 'culture' in its most all-embracing sense. Literature – stories, poems, chanting, myth, - was the original way of making sense of the world. Not only social scientists, but also natural scientists, understand this, and have drawn upon literature and literary allusions and references, in their writing and to inform their thinking.

A sensitivity to the possibilities of understanding opened up by literature may alert us to, and instruct us in, the avoidance of that species of "analytic intelligence (that) operates as a sort of death-ray, withering all that lies in its path." (Nuttall 1989, p.176)

6. *Chaos and Order*

Again Cai Guo-qiang,

"Art cannot directly change society, but it can give people a new perspective for contemplation."

The inspiring thing about Cai Guo-Qiang is the courage displayed in his willingness, even preparedness, to fail – it is almost an inevitable feature, a constant companion if you like, of his work. He throws himself into the idea, the process, preparation, and stands back to see what

happens. He's had some spectacular failures – international festivals with crowds gathered to watch the fireworks 'Happening' become a literal fizzer; or a whole line of row boats, poised to light up in an intricate display, sinking in a chain into the Brisbane River in front of bemused onlookers.

Cai plays with chaos and order.

"So it's very important to me that there is always this uncontrollability that's a part of the work. My way of doing it is just to flow with the material, go with the material and let it take me where it wants me to go. So I continuously want it to give me problems and obstacles to overcome." (ART:21:2009).

Cai is referring to his art, but there are resonances here for me in relation to writing and doing social enquiry. The apparent chaos/confusion that often confronts us when approaching a problem we wish to understand. The 'mess' that John Law (2004) says abounds in all social science research is mess that has its own order – the researcher searches for patterns, connections, and in trying to make sense, makes meaning. The play between imposing structure ('control'), and 'flowing' with the capriciousness of the 'material' is a creative act. To what extent should the material suggest the form, and where your exploration will travel? How creative may we be in our interpretation and the interpretive framework we impose on it?

There is satisfaction in creating order, combining the ideas into order. Doing the riff on the quote. As with jazz improvisation there's the larger pattern – a chord sequence to follow, or a melody in a modal structure. A musician is given the chords, or melodic line, and improvises – creates – around that. The chords provide a structure, coherence, which is poor, or rich, depending on the depth of idea, emotion, history and resonances within that idea. The rewards of insight, the 'new perspective for contemplation' that may soar out of that improvisation around a theme - following a trail that's not on the map – is worth the risk of finding yourself stranded in the middle of wild country, completely lost and foundering.

Within the jazz tradition, (as, to a lesser degree, within classical music) there is a strong tradition of 'quoting' from works and masters that have gone before. In the middle of a Coltrane you'll hear the cheesy show tune 'Surrey with the Fringe on the Top'. There is humour - as well as recognition of a tradition - in the quote. It is both a reference point, and a point of inspiration, it is an acknowledgement of the well-spring of the culture that nourishes your art.

It is not such a long bow to draw analogies between social science writing and musical interpretation. Edward Said spoke of paying attention to Barenboim's approach to preparation for conducting 'Tristan' in order to better grasp his own work (Barenboim & Said, 2003).

7. Schreiben als eine Art, intensiver in der Welt zu sein...

Writing as a means of living more intensely in the world...

Christa Wolf, writing from a time and place that was then called 'East Germany', is reflecting here on the *hunger*, the urgent energy, that fuelled the passion for writing of the small, scattered tribe of women whose voices started to be heard around the turn of the century in Germany, a time connected with the social and intellectual upheavals that formed the backdrop of the nascent Romantic movement. Some of those women wrote, and published, in recognised literary forms - poetry, novels, dramas. Others found expression for their intensive experiences of the world, their being-in-the-world, and their reception of its richness, through their lively, witty, penetrating correspondence; letters within their friendship and family circle, who represented the 'cream' of intellectual and artistic life in the 'hothouse' of turn of the century Germany.

Some, like gentle, intense, Karoline von Günderode, all contained passion and intellect, who spent most of her brief adult life in a cloistered convent-like home for women from the impoverished nobility, but who experienced an extraordinarily rich imaginary life, as she ploughed the scant offerings of life and love and intellectual stimulation to produce poetry, dramatic fragments and letters rich in symbolic and mythic imagery. Publishing poetry under the androgynous, even masculine-sounding pseudonym of 'Tian', the power of her writing attracted both admiration and those who recoiled from her intensity.

In a piece about Günderode Wolf observed that women had lived for a long time without writing; then they wrote: "with their lives and for their lives" (1981, p.5).

What counts as 'a life' shifts in meaning and significance according to who has the power to name and describe it. Recently I was obliged to update my *curriculum vitae*. Each time I resubmit it I stubbornly begin at the beginning and keep on record the four years I spent on the trams, as a conductress, then driver; several years as a nurse (enrolled nurse, often referred to as the "bum-wipers") though I leave out the long year in a buckle factory, and sundry other jobs before I fell into community work, then youth work, then teaching. The late Marion Adams, an inspirational mentor and personal support at Melbourne Uni years ago, once tried to get me to drop the reference to

tram driving from my cv, whether from a belief that it was irrelevant, or from a concern that I would provoke prejudices, I'm not sure. I obstinately kept it in, nevertheless. That experience, which connected strongly with my family history (my father was union delegate at Brunswick depot during the six week strike in the 50's), was as meaningful to me as any of the things I've done since, and, I believed, says something about who I am.

Memories of those formative experiences are intertwined with the writings that accompanied me through those times. Carrying a copy of "Werther" in my pocket as I emptied bedpans and shrugged off the arrogance of Specialists on ward rounds; Tu Fu's poems tucked behind the running schedule in the pocket of my ticket bag as I struggled through crowds on the Saturday afternoon "Footy Special"; recalling Neruda's poetry with Chilean women as we loaded jigs of buckles for electroplating, bathed in the stench of the acid baths. I can still remember every book I was reading when I had my three children. My daughter's dramatic demand to enter the world on a stormy summer day (complete with thunderclaps and lightening – a 'pathetic fallacy' if there ever was one) is associated in my mind with Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits*.

Despite nods to 'family-friendly workplaces', recognition of the 'whole person', and other token affirmations of the complex ways that work, personal and public lives are interconnected, we are still obliged to live lives that are artificially segmented, to cordon off the 'personal' and to deny elements of our 'selves' that are perceived as irrelevant, in our jobs and in our writing. This is a form of silencing, as writers and other voices of the margins have long pointed out. I started this essay reflecting on the origins of my own 'silence'. Part of this is the pressure – both overt and subtle - to artificially quarantine our experience, which includes the vibrant *spirit presence* of literature and the broader culture in its various manifestations. Now I recognise that my interpretation of the world enfolds and is enfolded by these layers of experience, and that this in turn is inseparable from the words that have fluttered and skittered along beside me. So, I embrace my experience in all its messiness - including the resignation by postcard from holiday in the Whitsundays; the spectacular moonlight flit from slum landlord and terrifying workplace alike in Brisbane (sincere apologies to students in my *From Hegel to Heidegger* class); the regret at abandoning my first PhD because I was too restless and wanting to 'be in the world' - and I begin to write .

To those of you who have to check Google before accepting an invitation to coffee, don't Google me – I don't exist. However, thanks to some miraculous confluences of events that have led me to mentors who have been true 'interlocutors', who have listened and encouraged me to find my own 'voice', I have begun to write, to invert Christa Wolf's phrase: "for my life, and with my life" .

To understand, to connect, to find meaning, to illuminate – all of which belongs to the business of discovery through writing. Laurel Richardson notes that we learn what we think through writing, echoing Lu Ji's truth: "Words give birth to words ..."

"We live two lives", observes the poet Gwen Harwood. (2001, p. 227)

"One in the world, and one

In what others write about us..."

I'm ready to write my own story.

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