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Playing with ghosts in the nursery

Abstract:

This paper considers the genesis and meaning of our early words. It begins with forgotten baby-talk and reveals remembered – or mis-membered – experience. Bion explains that we learn from experience, Winnicott shows how we discover experience through play, and Fraiberg finds that experience is haunted by ghosts. When the paper is looking for a trail to follow these three psychoanalytic thinkers offer the means to construct and discover a path for ourselves; thus writer and reader make and re-make sense of the stories we tell.

Biographical note:

Dr Christine Hill is a perinatal psychotherapist, writer, translator, and researcher. Her PhD, by artefact and exegesis, included a play about the emotional world of a baby and her parents; it was nominated for SUT Best Thesis 2014.

Keywords:

Baby-talk – play – memory – psychoanalysis – writing

I sit at my desk. How do I start? The ghost train brings all sorts of associations, from Luna Park to Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre*, but nothing sticks. I wait...

waiting for a train of thought...

toot toot

Memory hits

like a train

at random crossings

I hear

ding ding, choof choof

baby brother

my mother.

Ding ding, choof choof. I have never written those words before. Where do they come from and why do they come now?

They belong to the days of family outings, before seat belts – the olden days, as my children call them. Mum and Dad in the front of the two-tone blue Chevrolet, all the kids piled in the back, fighting over rights to the push-button windows, and squashed up either side of the baby in the bassinette. 'Sit up and look around you', my mother would say, as we pinched and poked and teased. Every now and then, the noise would become too much for the driver, and his large hand would flash between the seats to blindly strike whoever was unfortunate enough to be in striking distance. As this was often the most innocent, the previously unruly pack would instantly unite in righteous indignation to chorus: 'It's not fair'! Unperturbed and unrepentant, my father – who had never recovered from the early wound of boarding school replacing mother – would reply: 'That's right; life never is'. Meanwhile my mother, consoling in the only way she could, quietly slipped a soothing Kool Mint to the injured party.

This paper is about the experience of the writing of a paper about making sense of early experience. It is one version. If I were to write it next week, or month, or year, it would be different but equally true, or untrue. This is not so much about writing and re-writing the truth as it is about looking for spaces where meaning can be made and re-made, for myself and for others.

At level-crossings the man would climb down from his look-out and close the gates against the traffic to let the train through. As we waited in the car my little brother would say: 'ding ding choof choof', and we would laugh and say it too, to humour him and to pass the time. The ringing bell heralded the steam train with its choofing smoke. Well, that's what I write now, to explain the 'ding ding choof choof', to justify its presence in my memory, and yet I do not remember seeing a steam train when I was a child. This non-memory sends me off to do some research.

I allow myself to get side-tracked. I find maps of railway lines charting the history of train travel. Stories of personal greed and political intrigue, of great wealth and

prosperity, of tragedy and decline entertain me for hours. When gold was discovered in Victoria in 1851 it encouraged a huge number of immigrants, boosting the population from 77,000 to 540,000 in just two years and providing over a third of the gold output world-wide (Wells 2015). Trains were just what was needed to transport all these people and their gold, and so the booming economy bought steam engines and built railway lines.

If we look at the history of the Victorian railways (Waugh 2000) we see that the 1860 map shows only a few humble lines. Ten years later, a bold black track bisects the state, from Port Phillip Bay to the Murray at Echuca. From 1880 to 1890, the black lines proliferate, as each farming community demanded its own station. Despite an economic depression and a war, construction continued so that by 1930 the entire map is etched in black. However, just in case we need reminding that stories change with circumstance, the maps from 1980 onwards show that those black tracks, which once signified great prosperity and hope, were disappearing as quickly as they began.

My historical detour was not in vain. Memories, like railways, are made and lost, and made again. I discover that steam locomotives were replaced by diesel-electric in the 1950s (Australian Railway Historical Society 2014), so, while it is unlikely that I ever saw a steam train, my mother would have known them well. She grew up in the white house on the hill, the one named after that far-away battle that claimed the uncles she never knew. Those young men would have taken the train to the port, to board the ship, to cross the seas, to be killed in the muddy fields of Flanders. The front verandah of the house on the hill provides an unimpeded view of the old railway line. I imagine my grandmother imagining their return, and my mother playing with her siblings, entertained by the sight and sound of big black engines choofing their way to Bendigo and back. Did my mother know or care, I wonder, that they sometimes stopped at the farm where my father lived? He remembers a train that delivered birthday cakes and visitors, and another that took him away. While his station and the railway line are long-gone, unknown by my generation, they survive in our minds and in the language shared with and borrowed from the memories of others; like the man, in rural Ireland, who once directed me to “turn left where the old mill used to be”, our family continues to find its bearings from a place we call the station paddock.

So now I am wondering: was ‘ding ding choof choof’ my brother’s invention or one of my mother’s, a part of herself that she shared with him? If I asked them, I would get two different answers, and yet both would be correct, each memory layered and filtered according to the individual. What *really* happened is impossible to know; it is also irrelevant. Why do I remember it? It seems to speak to my relationship with my brother and my mother, and my witnessing of theirs. This act of writing allows me to explore it.

When my parents had their own children, the first four were girls. We were not expected to be interested in trains but when the longed-for boy arrived so too did things with a boy flavour – blue clothes, toy trucks, cars, and an interest in trains. My sisters and I did not seem to mind. We knew that it was important to our parents to have a boy and we were very fond and proud of our baby brother. We still are. When my mother brought him home from hospital there was great excitement. There was probably jealousy too, but little time or space for that. Within a week my very ill

mother and our new brother were back in hospital, and there they stayed for what felt like an eternity. We prayed every day that they would not die. My tenth birthday came and went. Mrs. R, the kind lady who lived up the street near the church, baked me a cake but it was not the same.

When I wrote: ‘Ding ding, choof choof. I have never written those words before’, I lied. They were already there, in the preceding sentence, already thought about – however briefly – and written down. I was committed to doing something with them even though that ‘something’ had not yet shown itself. Despite some anxiety that these baby words would be perceived by others to be puerile, I could not make them go away. Like a persistent child, they insisted that I look at what they had to show me and demanded that I respond, authentically. From the first written sentence, this apparently benign and childish phrase, ‘Ding ding, choof choof’, was already acting on my brain and playing with my mind, sparking thinking, feeling, and remembering, but not necessarily in that order. That initial sentence was (and is) the beginning of a re-writing that not only enables me to re-make meaning for myself, but also to create a space for others to find their own meaning. This involves interrogating ghosts of generations past.

The child psychoanalyst, Selma Fraiberg, was particularly concerned with family ghosts and their role in the psychological problems caused by impaired infant-parent relationships. She found that when the ghosts were unmasked, talked about, and acknowledged, the problems eased. In the introduction (quoted here at length for its fairy-tale charm) to her landmark paper ‘Ghosts in the nursery’ (1975), we can see the creative potential of these ghosts:

In every nursery there are ghosts. They are the visitors from the unremembered past of the parents, the uninvited guests at the christening. Under all favorable circumstances the unfriendly and unbidden spirits are banished from the nursery and return to their subterranean dwelling place. The baby makes his own imperative claim upon parental love and, in strict analogy with the fairy tales, the bonds of love protect the child and his parents against the intruders, the malevolent ghosts. This is not to say that ghosts cannot invent mischief from their burial places. Even among families where the love bonds are stable and strong, the intruders from the parental past may break through the magic circle in an unguarded moment, and a parent and his child may find themselves reenacting (sic) a moment or a scene from another time with another set of characters. Such events are unremarkable in the family theater and neither the child nor his parents nor their bond is necessarily imperilled (sic) by a brief intrusion (387).

If these ghosts live within us, they must also populate and feed our fictions, and, as we know, they are not always benign.

This makes me stop and wonder where to go next. I wait...

Ghosts of uncles

brothers

mothers

and trains in puffs of smoke.

Writing the Ghost Train: Refereed conference papers of the 20th Annual AAWP Conference, 2015

Suddenly, another random crossing sends a crowded train from another war choofing through my mind. This train is full of Jews. It stops at Theresienstadt. My relatives are on that train. It is their last stop.

A tourist website site promoting the Czech Republic as the ‘Land of stories’ (Czech Tourism, 2011) tells us that the northern town of Theresienstadt, also known as Terezín, was originally a fortress built by the Enlightenment ruler, Josef II, and named after his mother, Maria Theresa. One wonders why a son would name a fortress after his mother, but perhaps that’s a story for another time. The town became famous for its unique place in Holocaust history thanks to the stories created by Nazi propaganda, stories that, tragically, everyone wanted to believe. Unlike other concentration camps, Theresienstadt was established by the Germans as a model Jewish town. Jewish history refers to it as a transit camp and a ghetto. One source, recounting the story of creative theatre and satire in the ghetto, tells us that ‘nearly 140,000 Jews passed through the camp between 1941- 1945’ (Patz 2009). Initially, Jewish people were especially chosen ‘based on their age, disability as a result of past military service, or domestic celebrity in the arts and other cultural life’ (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015). Older Jews were led to believe that they were going to a spa town to retire; some even paid for the privilege and bought life insurance policies from the Germans. A Council of Jewish Elders, appointed as municipal officers, was responsible for the general management of the town, but was effectively controlled by the Nazis. Food rationing, and selecting those to be sent to labour or extermination camps were among the Elders’ compromising duties. What stories did they tell themselves, I wonder?

In response to the Danish government’s concerns for its Jewish citizens, the Red Cross was given access to the camp to assess the health and well-being of the inmates. In preparation for the visit, the Germans moved the sick and malnourished to other camps, beautified the grounds, filled shops with food, and stage-managed a community of happy, productive, and well-cared for Jews. They then engaged the Jewish filmmaker, Kurt Geron, to film their activities – women sewing and reading, girls playing with dolls, and a football match in front of a large and appreciative audience. This propaganda film, ‘The Führer Gives a City to the Jews’, which still exists in part today, shows a thriving community at work and play, all smiling for the camera, and playing their part. When Red Cross officials left, persuaded that all was well, Geron and his film crew were sent to Auschwitz where they perished (IMDb 2015).

I search the propaganda film for familiar faces and feel ashamed.

When the Terezín camp was liberated by the Russians at the end of the war, Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund, took into her clinic six orphaned children, all about three years of age. She provided specialized care for them while studying their behaviour. At first they destroyed toys and furniture, and treated adults with indifference or hostility, finding solace and support only in each other. With time, and thoughtful, patient attention, they were able to develop trust and more positive relationships with adults while continuing their strong relationships with each other. This ‘experiment’ went some way to give those children the means to make a new

and hopeful story for themselves, and leave the re-visiting of the old one until it was psychologically safe to do so (Edgcumbe 2000).

British psychotherapist, Amanda Jones (2009) tells us how Sigmund Freud's concept, the 'repetition compulsion' introduced us to the notion of intergenerational trauma (76). We can see how Fraiberg's work with infants and their parents may have been inspired by Freud's (1909) description: 'a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaidd ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken' (280).

My mother dislikes the distinctive smell of daphne, the flowering bush. She tells me that her own mother could not bear its sweet scent. I do not understand. Sadly, she relates the story of her mother's second child who died of diphtheria at two years of age. It was late winter and the daphne was in full bloom. My mother was born ten years later. I love the smell of daphne but when I try to grow it in my garden, it dies.

Words stop. What happens now? Feelings take over and words must wait. Experience tells me to be patient, to allow space for the thoughts and their words to come. Even so, I say to myself, the paper must be written; how long can I wait?

I think of the British paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott (1964) describing the hungry baby who manages to conjure up the breast. The mother knows that it is her breast, that it is she who provides it more-or-less when the baby wants it, but, at the beginning, she unconsciously allows the baby to create it. She does this by waiting for her baby's cue. Then, she holds the baby comfortably, lovingly, close to her nipple, and waits for the baby to discover it. Winnicott (1964) explains:

These conditions are repeated time and again and the baby drinks not from a thing that contains milk, but from a personal possession lent for a moment to a person who knows what to do with it (46-47).

This creation of the breast marks the beginning of the baby's creative life. In time, and in space created by the mother – what Winnicott called 'holding' (1960: 43) or 'a facilitating environment' (1963: 239) – the baby creates other objects, and gradually learns to distinguish her/himself from them.

Winnicott (1971) goes on to describe three areas of cultural experience: one's inner or personal psychic reality, an external reality or the actual world in which one lives and is objectively perceived, and a third, intermediate reality which is an

important area of **experience** [author's emphasis] in the potential space between the individual and the environment, that which initially both joins and separates the baby and the mother, when the mother's love, displayed or made manifest as human reliability, does in fact give the baby a sense of trust or of confidence in the environmental factor (103).

This intermediate area is where we play. That is what I am doing now. As I write my paper, I re-write Winnicott's ideas, I re-make memories and re-discover my writing self. So I wait. Thoughts play, tumble, and fall. Feelings and memories jostle. I'm waiting for another crossing, or a crash, a confrontation, a jolt out of this uncomfortable writing-an-academic-conference-paper seat. A crisis is an opportunity for change. Move on, out, off the train. Cross the tracks. Try a new gauge.

Writing the Ghost Train: Refereed conference papers of the 20th Annual AAWP Conference, 2015

The railway boom of the nineteenth century may have started in Great Britain but Germany was quick to follow and, by 1850 boasted 5,822 kilometres of railway track (Milward & Saul 2013: 380). When my 20 year-old great grandmother ran away with my 32 year-old great grandfather, her father chased them across Germany and the Netherlands to Amsterdam where they managed to give him the slip. I have always imagined this scene, rather romantically, as a wild ride on horse-back but perhaps they travelled sensibly by train instead.

There is no diary but I like to think that my adventurous great grandmother kept one, and I sometimes experiment, imagining her writing voice and her life. As far as I know, the actual story remained unwritten and largely unknown, until my inquisitive father, chasing his own ghosts, journeyed to the village of his ancestors. Here he heard the story from an old man who had, in turn, heard it from his grandparents. In 1853, there were only 43 families in that village; one can imagine how tongues wagged. I wonder what has changed in the story's re-telling over the years. There was something else my father did not know, something that could not be changed: the old man went on to explain that the girl's father had given chase because he did not want her to marry a Christian; she was Jewish.

The Australian goldfields offered more than the promise of wealth. The multicultural, egalitarian environment gave many people an opportunity to re-invent themselves. My rebellious great grandmother took full advantage. Following a man she must have loved, she changed her name and her religion, disappearing her Jewish self in order to create a new story on the other side of the world. She could not have known that this would save the lives of future generations but did she ever wonder about the ghosts?

A baby was born soon after, and before they were married. The first of thirteen children, he must have had a difficult beginning. My father, who remembers his uncle as a stern and disagreeable man, crowed when he saw documentary evidence of the illegitimate birth: 'I always said he was a bastard!'

When the British psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion wrote 'Learning from experience' (1983), his subject was emotional experience which, he maintained, 'cannot be conceived of in isolation from a relationship' (42). Like Winnicott, but using very different language, he understood the mother-baby relationship to be central to the development of self and one's relationship with others. Concerned with elucidating the psychoanalytic encounter, his writing is full of scientific models which have the attentive analyst providing a reliable presence and thinking in ways that enable the patient to think his/her own thoughts. This attentiveness is not unlike Winnicott's mother and baby or this writer and her reader/s.

The Australian psychoanalysts, Joan and Neville Symington (1996) use the notion of transformation to explicitly link art and poetry with the analytic experience, as Bion understood it, for analyst and patient:

Each of them experiences it in their own unique way, represents it to himself, this being the first transformation, and then transforms it in and for communicating to the other just as does the artist and the poet (106-107).

Bion himself seems to be more comfortable with mathematics than with art. He quotes Poincaré's description of mathematical formulae creation to make a connection with the goal of psychoanalysis:

If a new result is to have any value, it must unite elements long since unknown, but till then scattered and seemingly foreign to each other, and suddenly introduce order where the appearance of disorder reigned (Bion 1983: 72).

This description also speaks to the task and process of this paper where apparently disparate elements are allowed relate to each other, and where 'order', or meaning-making, plays out in the space between writer and reader.

With the paper almost finished, I receive an urgent call from my father, now nearly 90 years old. He had been to see his kind and gentle dentist. Anticipating a simple check-up, my father was most upset to discover that a tooth must be extracted. After the procedure, despite the attentions of the lovely nurse who walked him home, he became terribly distressed, his face distorted by generous doses of local anaesthetic and wads of gauze. I tried in vain to calm him with soothing words and painkillers as he cursed and trembled. Only after I sat quietly and listened to him relate the story of his experience, as a terrified twelve year-old, of a rough-and-ready country dentist butchering four molars from his mouth in one bloodied sitting, was he able to relax and re-discover his good humour.

When we tell our stories we have an opportunity to re-experience them, differently. When we write them down we can re-make them, again and again, for ourselves and for imagined readers; and when it feels true we re-discover something within ourselves that feels not ghostly, but real.

We all have stories to tell; we just need someone to listen, really.

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