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Ethics, writing, and splinters in the heart

Abstract

Six years ago, my son was attacked by a stranger and suffered head injuries. Over the time I spent in hospital waiting for him to wake I was, at one level, attending entirely to him. But simultaneously, I was attending to the world of that hospital ward, observing and recording its rhythms and its stories. Graham Greene's maxim, 'there is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer', came to mind then, and subsequently, as I found myself both grieving, and with *ice in the heart*.

Is it possible to be a writer, and not appropriate the sufferings of others, not betray those who become the material of our writing? Despite my ethical concerns, I am pleased I was able to produce an account of those days. My son too was pleased because, he said, my story gave him material to rebuild his memory. Well, he would say that: Gerda, in Hans Christian Andersen's *Snow Queen*, similarly forgave her beloved Kay for the unkindness he showed her after the splinter entered his heart.

Andersen's story is about the struggle between good and evil: it is a moral tale. Mine, by contrast, is an ethical tale, which is to say (following Certeau): one where there is something I have to do. In this paper I present the short piece I had to write about my son's head injury; and, drawing on key philosophical texts, I discuss the ethical problems I experienced in this writing.

Biographical note:

Jen Webb is professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra. Her current research investigates the relationship between art and critical social moments. She is also investigating the role of poetry in generating thought and the possibility of 'knowing'. Her recent book-length publications include *Understanding Representation* (Sage, 2008), the short story collection *Ways of Getting By* (2006: Ginniderra Press), and the forthcoming *Understanding Foucault* (2nd ed; 2011: Allen & Unwin). Her recent exhibition of visual poetry, 'What we forget', was presented at the Belconnen Arts Centre group show, *Creative Practice* (2011).

Keywords:

Ethics—life writing—Wittgenstein

At about 2am on the morning following my younger son's 24th birthday the phone rang, and it was the call I'd been waiting for all my life. My daughter was calling to tell me that both my sons had been hurt. It was an altercation following a gig, but they would be all right, she assured me, using her professional voice. She had been there too, I learned later: had seen first one and then the other battered into unconsciousness, and had plunged into the street fight to reach them, had called an ambulance, had rolled them into recovery position, and had gathered friends to form a wall around her brothers, to protect them from further harm. She had delayed waking me until they were both safely in the hands of professionals.

We hung up, and I called the hospital. They told me it would be a good idea to fly up to Brisbane, but that there was no need to panic. When I phoned again, a few hours later after daybreak, there was fresh news. The older of the two was sporting fresh stitches in his face, and massive bruising, but had discharged himself and staggered off somewhere, concussed. The younger had lacerations and stitches too; his skull was cracked, there was a bleed on his brain, and he wasn't waking up. But, they said, I shouldn't worry. I shouldn't worry too much.

I flew to Brisbane, taking with me small treats – chocolates and raisins, novels I could read him, and a Gameboy; forgetting that for all these one needs vision, hearing, brain function, motor skills. He was in Neurology, sharing a ward with a young man who had been there long enough to have gone foetal; an old woman who wailed in unconsciousness and kept falling out of bed; and a very still man who was there the first day, and on the following morning his bed was empty.

For days I sat with my son in the hospital from 8am to 8pm. In the early mornings I drove my daughter to her work and then headed down Grey Street and across the William Jolly Bridge, not looking back at the conservatorium of music where he had been studying composition, and then, avoiding Milton where he had been hurt, I drove down Caxton and Hale onto the inner city bypass, past Kelvin Grove where he had completed high school, and into the parking building beside the Royal Women's and Children's Hospital. Each morning I sat in the car for a moment, and then went up to the neurology ward to spend the day with my unconscious child. All day I was perky, confident and well informed (my New Zealand-based neurologist brother phoning me every couple of hours for an update, giving me the questions to ask, giving me the phrases to say). The nursing staff came and went, the exhausted interns trailed through, the specialist appeared occasionally and briefly. My son's friends visited every afternoon after work and stood around his bed, their faces creased with sorrow, and spoke to him hopefully, hopelessly. At 8pm each day the hospital tipped me out, and I drove back to Highgate Hill, collecting my daughter from her work, collecting take-away food, preparing to spend the evening with her, and with our shared distress.

During those days, most of my attention was focused on my son. But, in a gesture that is so familiar to writers that it has become cliché, the recording device in my brain was taking notes, observing the particular sounds and smells and colour and air of that part of the hospital. I listened to the mother of the damaged young man in the bed opposite Caleb as she talked to her son, as she tried to persuade the neurologist that he was showing signs of responsiveness. I eavesdropped on the conversations of the

hospital staff. I watched people just like me drive in each morning, weeping as they negotiated the parking spaces, and then render themselves calm and full of smiles as they made their way to the bedsides of the people they loved. The recorder in my brain took it all down, this raw material of story.

We all know Graham Greene's maxim: *There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer*. It comes from Greene's autobiography, *A Sort of Life* (1971), where he describes how, while he was in hospital, he observed the grief of a woman whose son had just died:

To shut out the sound of the mother's tears and cries all my companions in the ward lay with their ear-phones on, listening – there was nothing else for them to hear – to Children's Hour. All my companions but not myself. *There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer*. I watched and listened. This was something which one day I might need: the woman speaking, uttering the banalities she must have remembered from some woman's magazine, a genuine grief that could communicate only in clichés. (185, emphasis added)

I felt Greene's splinter of ice in my own heart – the same heart that simultaneously felt utterly broken. The recorder in my brain took down my own tears, my own banalities; I saw my son reduced to mere life, and knew I would die if he did, and yet still I ruthlessly recorded my notes: *This was something which one day I might need*.

So how genuine were my tears, I wondered; how genuine or how disingenuous was I? What kind of person could appropriate their own child for the idea of story? Well, any writer could, I suspect. I try to find excuses for myself: I was *putting this thing on record*; I was *publishing something that could offer consolation* (to others who found themselves in that same boat); like Flaubert, I was *longing to move the stars to pity*.¹ But these were post-facto justifications. In truth, I did it without thinking about it, without considering the ethics; I did it like a reflex; I could not have not-done it, trained as I am to observe and to record.

Wittgenstein's negative ethics

In this paper I am doing what so many other writers have done over the centuries: I am asking how we can write, or more so, how we can live as writers, in a way that is ethical. It is more difficult, I think, than for workers in other intellectual fields, because everything is, potentially, material for a writer. The world is our data source, our archive – the world, which Wittgenstein defined as 'everything that is the case' (point 1 of the *Tractatus*, 2010: 29). How do we sift through that *everything*, and establish criteria for what must see the light of day, for what must remain hidden, or must be forgotten? The early Wittgenstein does not offer much hope for a clear answer: he argues: 'In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen' (6.4.1, p105), and that therefore there is no value-as-such in the world.² Value, or rather ethical judgment, for Wittgenstein must lie outside the world-that-is.

Well, absolute judgments must; he acknowledges that relative judgments are made all the time: judgments about the extent to which something serves its purpose, for instance, so that we can say something is good if it meets an established standard

(Wittgenstein 1965: 5). This is important, of course – things need to meet standards – but their importance is ‘trivial’, in Wittgenstein’s terms, as opposed to the weight borne by the absoluteness of ethics (1965: 5). Something that is good in relative terms does not fulfil an ethical requirement: it is simply a statement; it can be presented in the form of a proposition. Ethical good is, by contrast, good in absolute terms: and ‘the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about’ (1965: 7). We ‘know’ that there is a distinction between the meaning of ‘good’ depending on the context of its use: a ‘good’ football player is good in relative terms – she or he does the job well, measured against established standards. A ‘good’ person, on the other hand, is not measured against such standards, but against the unsayable absolute (1965: 9). Good in absolute (in ethical) terms can’t be subjected to propositional logic because it can’t be put into words; ethical good either *is*, or it *isn’t* (see also *Tractatus* 6.42).

Of course we do at least attempt to subject ethics to propositional logic, to say the unsayable. This conference is just one of many examples where people attempt to do just this, and there are shelves of books in libraries that are filled with words, evidence of struggles to make sense of the world, of ‘everything that is the case’, and to apply propositional and axiological analyses to it all. A number of these texts take on Wittgenstein’s work, and a particularly lucid account of the *Tractatus* is offered by Cora Diamond, who reduces his views on ethics to: ‘i. What is it that I am doing? ii. Should I not be doing it? and iii. If the answer to that is that it is not necessarily something to stop doing, am I doing well or badly whatever it is I am doing?’ (Diamond 2000: 165).

It seems to me that this three-step contemplation could offer some comfort to writers who become aware of that splinter of ice in the heart – who find themselves coldly observing a mother in her moment of terrible grief, or being that mother, observing herself and her son while he is hovering between two states. But surely it cannot be the whole story; surely there is more to ethics than *doing it well*?

The problem of the splinter, and of the ethical context, takes me to Hans Christian Anderson who deals with something similar in his ‘Snow Queen’, a story that features perhaps the most famous splinter in any person’s heart. It describes how little Kay changed from being a tender and loving child when the contaminated glass splinters entered both his eye and his heart. In a reprise of the Garden of Eden story, he became knowing, but exchanged his innocent ignorance for cleverness and cruelty. Kidnapped by the Snow Queen who captivated him by her icy love, he disappears from the world and from all who care for him. But his closest friend Gerda hunts for him to save him from the Snow Queen and from the splinter in his heart. She eventually finds him not through her cleverness but through her capacity to connect with others – to garner practical knowledge from the most unexpected of sources. She finds him, and her tears warm him, help to wash away the ice, and restore him to himself.

This is a fairy tale, of course, and as such it seems to me a good text to use as an analogy for ethics and writing when thinking Wittgenstein. It is, after all, a nonsense to write that an evil queen should set up a local child for this transformation from

gentle to cruel, innocent to knowing. It is a nonsense to write that flowers might tell a child where her friend was last seen. It is a nonsense to think that love, expressed through tears and affection, can melt a cold heart. It ‘runs against the boundaries of language’ (LE 12). But in the *Tractatus* (5.47), Wittgenstein points out that the bridge between sense and nonsense, between word and world, between ethics and argument, is built by the imagination. Diamond writes, in this respect:

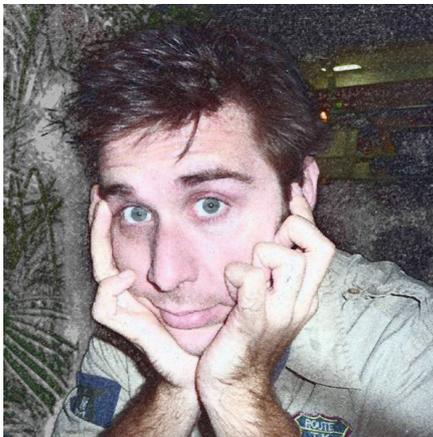
When I ascribe a thought or belief to someone, I must use an intelligible sentence of a language I understand. And if I understand a person who utters nonsense, I enter imaginatively into the seeing of it as sense, I as it were become the person who thinks he thinks it. I treat that person’s nonsense in imagination as if I took it to be an intelligible sentence of a language I understand, *something I find in myself the possibility of meaning*. (2000: 165)

This is the work of a writer, and a writer writing ethically: seeing nonsense; imaginatively entering into it; making it have meaning. So now I’ll turn to the writing itself, and my response to my family crisis.

The writing

The beeping; that’s the only real sound in the room. A beeping that is steadier than a pulse. It is unlike any sound I would have associated with him: him and his musical tastes. *beep beep beep beep* – perfectly regular, all on one note. The rhythm of the machine is the rhythm, now, of his body. A sound without a score.

He is asleep, my son. He cannot hear. From time to time I lean forward, my elbows on his bed, and by chance crush the tube that runs from the metal scaffold beside us to the back of his left hand. The hand that shapes the chords. (I will not say: *shaped* the chords.) When I do this, the machine shrieks, its red eye flashes, I jump back, and he twitches in his sleep. And then again he is quiet, the machine settles down, and again there is just the beep, the sound of his suspended life.



The beep. It never becomes just white noise. This machine: its sound insists, it patterns the air, it patinates the air as it measures out the fluids his body needs; the food, the drink, the drugs. He sleeps on, undisturbed. He has been asleep now for five days, lying grey on the harsh white linen, in this dull white room, as aware as a plant.

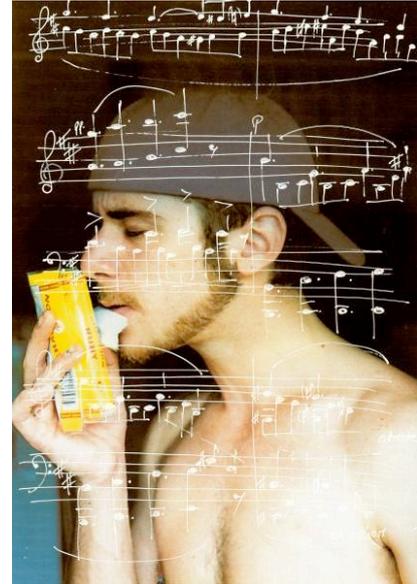
I will tend him like a garden: tenderly; ruthlessly if that is what's needed; attentively.

At home my garden is growing, out of control. It is spring and the weeds and the spring blossoms are jostling for space. Fecund. The vulval flowers, the corms like breasts beneath the surface, the phallic thrust of the new shoots. If you sit very quietly you can hear my garden grow, listen to the triumphant shouts of dandelion and dock, or the whimper of the precious wee plants that have no hope against the weeds.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary – how does your garden grow?

Out of control.

I am out of control too, or rather I fear falling into that state. I sit with him, being calm. I read to him sometimes, I talk to him, I imagine he is listening to me. Now and then he vocalises: usually a vowel or, rarely, an interrogative – *what? who? what?* Questions we can't yet answer. When this happens I walk out of the ward, I lock myself in the toilet stall, I shove my fist into my mouth. When I return to the ward I talk to him again, brightly. He does not stir. He has hardly stirred since that unexpected blow, since the judder that ran through his brain, since the splintering of the skull, the settling in of blood. He has been switched off, like a lamp.



The nurse comes in, taps the machine, checks his vitals, writes up his chart. Runs a hand over his hair. Says 'how're you doing?' to me. I say 'fine, thank you. Just fine.' That's the nurse who made me familiar with the Glasgow Coma Scale. My son starts low on the scale. 'Does not open eyes': that's a one. 'Makes incomprehensible sounds': that's worth two. 'Responds to painful stimuli': that's another two. One plus two plus two

equals five, which equals 'brain injury: severe'. He is switched off, like a lamp.

His bed is the third and last in this ward, so I sit with my back to the window, my face to the door. I watch my son. He does not stir. From time to time I unbend my frozen back and stand, and spread out my arms till I am espaliered against the wall.

I must move, and soon, before I am fixed there like a tree.

We are all of us plants. In the brain the synapses fire and misfire, and then the engine coughs into life. In the body the fluids circulate. But turn down the brain, switch off the lights, and then the sap rises in the stem, and the plant in the person begins to stir.

He is asleep. The plants in my garden are more aware than is he. But I tend him. Wipe his face, sponge his body, squeeze his hand; his right hand, the one whose long fingers pluck out the patterns of the chords. (I will not say: *plucked* out.) The machine beeps and beeps and drips life into his veins. He begins to moan. The nurse comes running.



Next day the neurologist visits again. What is going on in my son's head? Well, he has begun to 'open eyes in response to voice' – my voice. That's worth three points. But he is still uttering 'incomprehensible sounds'. Two points. His movements are poor, his motor is out of control. Another two, for a total of seven points. The doctor raises her eyebrows and looks at me.

What was the question again? Can I phone a friend? I breathe in the world, and breathe myself out into it again. She gives me a partial answer, the doctor, and I hold it like a child.

It will be weeks before he consistently 'opens eyes spontaneously' (4 points); it will be months before his body 'obeys commands' (6 points); he may never quite reach 'converses normally' (5 points). He may never be a 15: 'fully awake'. But 14 will do, or even 13, and he will get there.



He has begun to mutter, and the attendants begin to ask him the questions they will ask, hourly, over the days that follow: *what is your name; who is the prime minister; can you tell me where you are*. At first, if he answers them, it is only in vowels. A. E. Sometimes O. Not yet an I, but that will come. My son is struggling to get

back to the I, to bury back beneath the surface of his skin the plant part of himself. And the machine beside his bed beeps, and drips life into his veins, and he turns his head painfully on the pillow, and looks at me, and I smile.³



Conclusion

So, I ask, do I have a right to write this? I asked the person whose story it is, my son.⁴ I have appropriated him, certainly, but I would not make it public without his agreement. His response was that I may and should write it, because it happened to me too, which makes it my story as much as his; and because that short text has given him a chunk of otherwise-lost memory; and because, he said, it is what artists do. We take the things that go wrong, and make something of them.

I am less sure than is Caleb that I had a right to write this, but I know that I behaved as I did because there was nothing else I could do. I could not make sense of what had happened to my family because it was nonsensical – a random act of violence. I could not undo it; I could not resolve it; but I could figure out what it was doing to us, to my sons, my daughter and me, by gathering data – observations, eruptions, feelings, all the qualia – and then applying both a scholarly and a poetic technology to it, to pin it down, to contain it, to find a way of understanding ourselves, to find a way out of this small local disaster.

What I think, finally, is that the work of living as a writer – of possessing the splinter that is always lodged in the heart, that takes all of Gerda's tears to melt – this is not the ethical problem. Rather, it is what we do once we have acknowledged that ice in our own hearts; it is how we make use of the sufferings we observe, or experience. Wittgenstein suggests something along these lines; Michael Anderson paraphrases him thus:

There is nothing in language that shows our ethical involvement with things. But this means that what has ethical significance for us ... is not something that we have to look for in the proposition or beside the proposition ... but in our involvement with propositions. The point may also be expressed by saying that anything can become ethically active for us; any talk can express an ethical intention, because what makes it ethical does not reside in any of its internal features but in our ethical use of such language. (Anderson 1994)

Does a struggle with the conscience amount to ethical use of such language? No, not per se; but the fact that the question became ‘ethically active’, and open to the agonistics of interchange, of communication, of social and familial responsibility ... this, I hope, gives me some grounds to say *this happened*; and, *I will make something of it*.

Endnotes

1. Greene finishes his splinter-of-ice story by quoting Flaubert, from *Madame Bovary*: ‘Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity’.
2. ‘value’ is used here in its axiological sense, rather than referring to social or economic utility.
3. The two photographs of Caleb in hospital were taken by his sister, Hannah Byrmand. All other photographs were taken by me. I altered all of them, some on Photoshop, some by manipulation and then scanning-in of the printed photo.
4. My son did recover, remarkably well: achieving 13, at worst, on the Glasgow Coma Scale, and creeping up to 14 as the years have edged by.

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