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The Multiplicity of "I"

(Exegesis)

&

The Rain of the Praying Mantis

(Novel/Thesis)

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Primary supervisor: Mike Johnson

A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

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Irena Tovic

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Thank you

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Abstract

The Rain of the Praying Mantis is an exploration, a journey, into the life of Kataryna who returns to a place which she loves and cherishes, her childhood 'home'. Milan Kundera states that "[a] novel is a long piece of synthetic prose based on play with invented characters...Ironic essay, novelistic narrative, autobiographical fragment, historic fact, flight of fantasy: The synthetic power of the novel is capable of combining everything into a unified whole like the voices of polyphonic music." (232) The Rain of the Praying Mantis is fragmented. It consists of pieces from the past, the present day-to-day occurrences, fairytales and the protagonist's personal reflections. What keeps the fragments all in tune is the common exploration of the meaning of home, belonging, life and identity; all of which are complex and often contradictory notions.

The Multiplicity of "I"

Exegesis

By

Irena Tovic

2010

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Much has been written about the 'death of the author'[1] and while it stands that the reader does not need to know anything about the author's life to fully understand or appreciate his or her works, in this case (when the author is the reader and also the commentator of his or her own work) the author cannot be removed from the process.

Roz Ivanič, a linguistics and English language professor, states that:

> "all our writing is influenced by our life-histories. Each word we write represents an encounter, possibly a struggle between our multiple past experience and the demands of a new context. Writing[…] implicates every fiber of the writer's multifaceted being. Who we are affects how we write, whatever we are writing." (183)

Therefore it stands reasonable that I position myself before I explain the ideas and theories which have shaped The Rain of the Praying Mantis. I was born in Zagreb, a part of Yugoslavia which ceased to exist around my sixth birthday. Due to a civil war the country split and I found myself living in Zagreb the capital of Croatia, which it still is to this day. The Balkan has always been a hotspot ravaged by its own people. Towards the end of the war my family moved to New Zealand. Here I created a new 'home' for myself, but the memories of a 'home' I once had tainted my perceptions of the new society in which I lived. Upon my return to Croatia, after several years of absence, I realized that the memories of my childhood and the place in which I was born had over the years created a mystical and magical place which no longer, if ever, existed. My return 'home' made me realize that I was a stranger to this foreign place called Croatia which was still of great importance to my identity. From this experience The Rain of the Praying Mantis emerged.
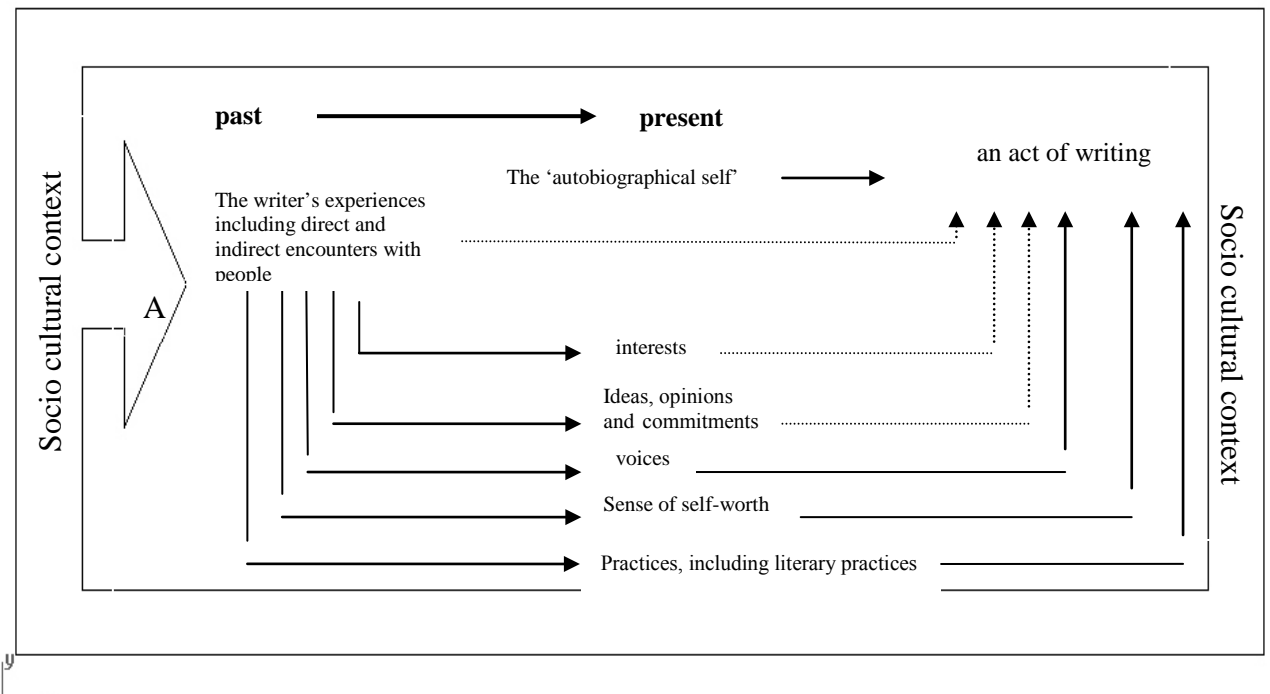
Fig. 1 - The effect of past experience on writing (Ivanič, 183)

All writing, whatever term we cloud it under tends to blur the boundaries between life and fiction. To produce a piece of writing entirely from one's imagination without any help from real life experience is an impossible task. To put it in the words of William Wordsworth

> "I cannot say what portion is in truth
> The naked recollection of that time,
> And what may rather have been call'd to life
> By after-meditation." (Burke, 214)

Thus, who I am determines what and who I produce upon a page. One's identity is comprised of many fragments and compartments all in turn informing the whole which makes up each individual human being. What is unique to human beings and what separates them from the rest of the animal world is their ability to consciously consider, construct and discover their own identity with respect to their past experiences, hopes for

the future, societal roles, immediate communication with others and memory. Thus, the human experience is, as Kundera says, "a unified whole like the voices of polyphonic music" (232).

Many diverse fields and theories, such as psychology, philosophy, cultural and social studies among them, concern themselves with the questions of identity and belonging. These questions are difficult to answer as the terms themselves are complex, problematic and contradictory. Every individual is a set of complex, intertwining, inclusive and exclusive categories as well as possessing an exceptionally unique world within their own mind. Psychologist Ulrich Neisser fragments identity into "five modes of self-experience":

> 1. The *ecological self:* "The self as perceived with respect to the physical environment."
> 2. The *interpersonal self*: "The self as engaged in immediate unreflective social interaction with another person."
> 3. The *extended self:* the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing outside the present moment"
> 4. The *private self*: the self of "conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else"
> 5. The *conceptual self*: "the extremely diverse forms of self-information – social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person – that posit the self as category, either explicitly or implicitly"(Eakin, 22).

When the contexts within which these five modes of self are created are in tune the identity is stable, secure and experiences a sense of belonging. However, we also know who we are by identifying who we are not. The sense of belonging to a particular community cannot be achieved without the belief that there is the 'other' to the 'self' which is different. If one perceives oneself to be part of the central majority the identity remains stable. However, if one perceives oneself to be on the margins of the society the self experiences, as Helena C. Buescu a literary critic states, "dissolution of unity" (Buescu and Duarte, 64). When one migrates from one's original country, or is seen as a migrant due to a different heritage or

place of living, the sense of not belonging and the need to reinvent and adapt the self to a new society is intensified and thus the individual becomes more aware of the notions of self and belonging. A migrant is bound to be changed by the new culture which he comes into contact with, a change which is perhaps best evident when one returns to the original culture and thus faces, upon return, a realization that one is the 'other' to the perceived place of belonging. Ha Jin, a migrant and a writer of fiction who also engages in literary criticism about migration and belonging, draws the conclusions from Greek mythology. Jin states that in his "years of exile, he (Odysseus) has changed and so has his memory of his homeland;…one cannot return to the same place as the same person."(66) Thus, Kataryna quickly realizes, much as Odysseus did, that she is different to the inhabitants of Punta as she has lived in and been shaped by another culture. She is in fact the 'other', a foreigner, an invader, in the place where she was born, Punta.

Marginalisation and exclusion from the central society can arise for numerous reasons, not only migration. As social psychologist Dominic Abrams states "exclusion can arise in several forms or modes, ranging from the ideological to the physical, communicative, and purely cognitive."(Abrams, Hogg, Marques, 13) The title of the novel stems from a natural phenomena which splits the inhabitants of Punta, but it is a metaphor for any hardship which falls upon the people and forces lines of differentiation to be drawn. There are those in Punta whose houses are not invaded by the praying mantises (a minority) and those whose houses are invaded (a majority) thus creating a point of differentiation between the inhabitants who otherwise share the same language, culture and history. As the invasion of the praying mantises intensifies and continues, frustration grows and manifests itself in the aggression of the two brothers upon the old shopkeeper and his wife (Tovic, 64-66). The old shopkeeper and his wife do not react to the aggression as "[o]stracism, rejection,

exclusion – no matter what label we give it is extremely unpleasant to receive"(Abrams, Hogg, Marquez, 64) and the individuals who find themselves in this situation "report lower levels of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence" (Abrams, Hogg, Marquez, 58) Thus, if one identifies oneself as being on the margins of the society, not part of the central majority, it is hard to feel that one belongs to this society and the self experiences "dissolution of unity, hybridity, dislocation in time and space, multiplicity and is in a haunted process of dis-remembering and re-membering"(Buescu and Duarte, 64); a state familiar to all those who in one way or another perceive themselves to be the 'other' to the society in which they live.

As Kataryna is a migrant she returns to the place of her birth in order to once again associate herself with the society in which she perceives herself to be part of the central majority. Ha Jin speaks of the individual migrant's understanding of his or her homeland. He says, that "[c]onventionally, a person's homeland is his country of origin, to which he longs to return no matter where he goes. A Chinese proverb summarizes this longing: 'Gold nests and silver nests, none is as nice as your own straw nest.'" (65) Punta is a place like many other which dot the Mediterranean coast, but Kataryna's emotional connection, as the place where her identity was stable and secure, makes it rise from obscurity. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, who concern themselves with the research of heritage sites and its impact upon tourists and locals alike, state that "sites are never simply locations. Rather they are sites for someone and of something" (11). Before Kataryna encounters any other characters she comes upon her grandmother's house, the mere sight of which evokes in her memories of her childhood so strong that she is able to live through them again. She comes upon "the frozen monument" in its "sterile vestigial state"(Waterton, Watson, 12), but is able, by stimulating her memories, beliefs and emotions, to "engage politics,

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dissonance, and the essence of culture as a process of knowledge production that is at once concrete and prefigured yet also challenged, negotiated, provisional and subjective" (Waterton, Watson, 4). Kataryna can be seen as what Watson and Waterton call "identity builders" (26). They define "identity builders" as "those visiting the site to strengthen their identity" (26)

Kataryna must return to what she considers to be her Origin, her birthplace Punta, in order to be able to discover the memories which have shaped her identity. She must face the past, return back, in order to be able to move forward with her life. Paffenroth, a religious scholar and a literary critic, states that "[e]pistemologically the order of the cosmos can be rightly understood only by a person who seeks a return to the Origin." (212), but he defines the Origin through the Platonist's "*exitus-reditus* scheme" which states that "as all things come forth (*exitus*) from God, so do all things return (*reditus*) to him." (Paffenroth, 213) Therefore, it can be seen that "[i]n this Platonist ascent to the Origin, then, the way forwards is the way back." (Paffenroth, 213). On the other hand, pphilosopher and one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers, Locke looks at the Origin of self as being tied to one's mind and memory. He states that "as far as the consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (119/20) Thus, only by searching through memory and knowing where one has come from can one begin to understand oneself and the world that surrounds one. Kataryna must return order to be able to discover the memories which have shaped her identity. She must face the past, return back, in order to be able to move forward with her life.

In philosopher Gerald E. Myer's words, "we use the memories as data for reinspecting our present selves in terms of what we know and are now, for reinterpreting our present selves

of what we knew and were then"(129). Thus, it becomes evident that in remembering there are two selves present: the present self remembering and the past self that is remembered. As Kataryna stands before the gate of her grandmother's old house she remembers herself as a child on a rainy day exploring it and immediately two Kataryna's emerge: one of present and one of the past childhood. (The tense of the narrative also follows the protagonist's movement through time shifting from the present to the past tense.) This idea is in tune with philosopher David Hume's theory who suggests that

> "every member of the series either would, given certain conditions, contain as an element a memory of some experience which is an element in some previous member, or contains as an element in some experience memory of which would, given certain conditions, occur as an element in some subsequent member; there being no subset of members which is independent of the rest."(Perry, 20)

This theory rests upon the idea that the self of the past is different from the self of the present; that in fact we are a concoction of multiple selves thinking of ourselves as one due to the fact that we have a common denominator, memory, through which we are able to relate and see a sequence of experience.

However, memory and remembering is never as simple as the images which are conjured up but is rather tainted by one's perception of them. St Augustine states, in his autobiographical work The Confessions, that within memory "are stored away all the thoughts by which we enlarge upon or diminish or modify in any way the perceptions at which we arrive through the senses" (214). Thus every moment, image, action, situation, or thought that is remembered is remembered how we perceive it to be, not necessarily as it had objectively occurred. In other words, our memory is a collection of our perceptions. Myers sees the self venturing into the past as undertaking the notions of recollection and retrospection in order to come to terms with what it comes upon. He sees recollection as involving "attention, selection of specific details and rejections of others, and

symbolization (recollection disguised in symbols)."(Myers, 119) Kataryna's past memories are sometimes reproduced through the stories and fairytales which her mother used to tell her. These fairytales serve to show that there is an imaginary, fantastical element to memory as Myers states that "there is always a "delusive" element in memory. The past is never exactly reproduced in recollection. It is remembered selectively, parts of it always edited out" (123). Thus, Kataryna does not merely recount her past and her beloved hometown but she rather remembers it selectively, in the process distorting what once was.

The memory does not only govern the development of Kataryna's character but also influences the structure of the novel. If our present thoughts are continually disturbed and broken by the delusive memory it can be seen that our thought processes do not run in a linear, chronological time. The memory rather acts upon its own accord interjecting our present state of being at its own will. It interrupts our flow of thought. It overlaps an image from the past with what lies here right in front of us. More often than not, however, these interjections and overlaps are brought forth by a present occurrence. They begin with a familiar sight, sound, smell or word which open the gate and let the memories flood through. The structure of The Rain of the Praying Mantis follows the workings of memory in that it jumps from present to past and back again. It interjects and jumps to the theoretical musings of the main character. The fragments inform, complement, overlap or contradict each other much like the human mind does. Kim Atkins, a philosopher with a special interest in Ricouer and the self, states that

> to be a person is to exercise narrative capacities for self-interpretation that unify our lives over time. Ricoeur argues that narrative is a form of understanding or practical reasoning that enables us to respond to the complexity of the human experience of temporality and in particular to mediate the irresolvable tensions between cosmological and phenomenological time (Mackenzie, 11).

We construct our lives, our identities and the world around us through the narratives we tell ourselves and others. We put one word next to another. Each symbol represents something. A word uttered or written creates a sound and an image. Our mind connects them to a concept and through the relationship between them, the signifier and the signified, our unconscious mind creates meaning. Put together these meanings create context. Through context they gain strength and become a narrative. Just as a Punta remains a mere place without the infusion of feelings, emotions, previous experiences, expectations and imagination, so too do words remain mere symbols until one engages with them and sees what lies beyond. All too often we forget that language is just a code for something greater; linguistic code is a representation of the world which has created it. The problem and the value of language is exhibited in the scene when Nona Flora and her best friend Gloria watch a Spanish soap opera (Tovic, 81-84). Gloria has had limited schooling and as such sometimes the language she comes across is not of her 'level'. As she reads the subtitles she reads them out loud, but not in the words which are written on the television screen. She manipulates them in order to make them her own. Once a thought is spoken it becomes real. It is no longer contained within the realm of the television, or the mind (a theatre in itself). Spoken, language shapes it and it becomes a means of adjusting one's thoughts, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is formed.

Fairytales are one of the oldest forms of narrative (certainly the first one I, as a child, came into contact with) and, as writer Schiller states, "[d]eeper meaning resides in the fairytales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life" (Davidson, Chaudhiri, 5). As Marina Warner puts it "fairy tales act as an airy suspension bridge, swinging slightly under different breezes of opinion and economy, between the learned, literary and print culture in which famous fairy tales have come down to us, and the oral, illiterate, people's

culture…and on this bridge the traffic moves in both directions" (Davidson, Chaudhiri, 2) Every fairytale in the novel begins with "[o]nce upon a time"(Tovic, 32) which is a, as literary critic Kevin Smith says, a "customary distancing device"(42) and somewhat of a cliché. However, "not using this device would be to *consciously* avoid it, in an effort to elide cliché (a massive difference between the *writer*(2) of the fairytale and the oral storyteller for whom clichés are a useful mnemonic device)" as these words signal to the reader or the listener that "the realm of wonder and enchantment is about to be revealed" (Davidson, Chaudhiri, 5). The character of Mama is a "storyteller"(Tovic, 130) not a storywriter as she is orally transferring the fairytales to her child and as such she is able to, as John Truby a story consultant and teacher of screenwriting says, "blur or even destroy the line between reality and illusion" (Truby, 311).

The fairytales are remembered by Kataryna but they are her mother's stories.A daughter's relationship with the mother is vital to her own sense of self identity. The daughter learns from her mother how to conduct herself within the society and the family. She also learns what her role as a grown woman will entail. However, Adrienne Rich, a feminist literary critic, speaks of ""matrophobia": the fear of *"becoming one's mother"* (Miller, 58) when she analyzes the daughter's relationship to the mother. She says that "matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free" (Miller, 58). Thus, Kataryna recreates her mother through the stories which she remembers but the mother never ventures outside of the imaginary realm. The mother is disconnected from reality and stuck within the realm of the past, something which Kataryna is trying to free herself from. The fact that the mother is also recreated only in Kataryna's remembrance of fairytales shows

the inability of a child to comprehend the mother as a person whose identity spurs further than this role.

Nancy K. Miller, a feminist literary critic, argues the following:

> "[h]aunted by our past we are forged in relations of likeness and difference. Showing our faces, telling ourselves, cannot help but betray the others who live on in our heads and dreams. Writing about oneself entails dealing with the ghostly face in the mirror that is and isn't our own."(x)

Kataryna's Mama and her stories invade her present consciousness. As Kataryna frees herself from her past, and in a way grows up, she is able to forge and accept the "relations of likeness" (Miller, x) to her own mother. When Kataryna dresses up for the Carnival she puts on her Mama's dress and looks at herself in the mirror. She says "[i]t is no longer I in the mirror. It is my Mama looking back at me." (Tovic, 126). Thus, Kataryna can be seen as going through the psychoanalyst's, Jacques Lacan's, mirror stage which is instrumental in the process of growing up. Although Lacan first developed the theory with regards to the infant he later considered it to represent "a permanent structure of subjectivity, or as paradigm of 'Imaginary order'"(author unknown, Mirror Stage, 1) The Mirror Stage can thus be seen to represent the "dual relationship" (author unknown, Mirror Stage, 1) between the ego and the body, the mother and the daughter, the past and the present, the real and the imaginary, the self and the other, understanding and misunderstanding, and between the unity and fragmentation.

The Rain of the Praying Mantis is an exploration, a journey into the life and mind of Kataryna as she returns to her perceived place of belonging and unity and seeks to discover her identity. The memories, the philosophical musings, the fairytales and the present day-to-day occurrences form a collage, a puzzle of sorts with hazy edges which do not quite fit

together but enable the reader to make his or her own connections and have a sense of unity, albeit fragmented, much like the mind does with respect to memory and self-identity. As I am so closely involved with the process it is difficult to view the novel as a whole, as a product, and the things which stand most clearly in my mind are the further developments needed to bring it to desired effect. "Creative writing, as an appellative, recognises what we need to keep constantly in mind – that we are a discipline whose principal concern is with the development, critique and articulation of *process* rather than *product*."(Bourke, Neilsen, 1) The thesis/novel The Rain of the Praying Mantis is still a work in process.

While the structure and the 'core' of the novel are in place I believe the plot needs further development. The Rain of the Praying Mantis falls under the category John Truby refers to as the antiplot stories. Truby states that "what I am calling antiplot [then] is really a range of techniques that [these] storytellers devised that would make the plot organic by making it express the *subtleties* of character. Point of view, shifting narrators, branching story structure, and non-chronological time are all techniques that play with plot by changing how the story is told with the deeper aim of presenting a more complex view of human character" (264). The story told in the present tense needs to flow chronologically and have the inherent, and used to, twists, turns and developments of more 'traditional' (for want of a better word) plots in order to capture and carry the reader through to the next page. Also as the past memories and the fairytales spring through and branch over and through the present story, almost invading it like the roots of the Pohutukawa which refuses to be subdued, there is a need for order and coherence on at least one of these levels. The following table is Truby's twenty-two-step story structure which needs to be applied to the present storyline.

STEP	CHARACTER	PLOT	STORY WORLD	MORAL ARGUMENT
1.	Self-revelation, need, and desire			
2.	Ghost		Story world	
3.	Weakness and need			
4.		Inciting Event		
5.	Desire			
6.	Ally or allies			
7.	Opponent	Mystery		
8.	Fake-ally opponent			
9.	Changed desire and motive	First revelation and decision		
10.		Plan		
11.		Opponent's plan and main counterattack		
12.		Drive		
13.				Attack by ally
14.		Apparent defeat		
15.	Obsessive drive, changed desire and motive	Second revelation and decision		
16.		Audience revelation		
17.		Third revelation and decision		
18.		Gate, gauntlet, visit to death		
19.		Battle		
20.	Self-revelation			
21.				Moral decision
22.	New equilibrium			

Table 1. A twenty-two-step story structure (Truby, 270) (3)

As the novel consists of many fragments it also needs to woven together in such a way that

the fragments flow from each other in a logical way, and foreshadow what will come next.

For example at the moment the Carnival is almost sprung onto the novel. It needs to be

foreshadowed earlier and subtly woven through the other fragments. Two great books come

to mind with regards to a Carnival or a festival, the <u>Steppenwolf</u> by Hermann Hesse and the <u>Master and Margarita</u> by Mikhail Bulgakov. Both of these books do what is still missing from <u>The Rain of the Praying Mantis</u>; they allude to the Carnival or the festival long before it occurs, and make it an integral part of the story. Carnival is a time of freedom from the shackles of everyday life when the morals and rules of society are overturned. Laughter, sexuality, irony and social criticism form an essential core of the festivities. In order to gain the maximum from the Carnival it needs to be woven through as it is a point in the book when all the issues are resolved and the imaginary and the 'real' realm of Kataryna's world come together. Also, the grandfather's clock, although woven through several fragments, needs to feature more prominently in the novel as it gives Punta, and the rest of the novel, a mortal element. Punta is not a place which never changes, but is rather a small town which is slowly dying. The grandmother, Nona Flora, also dies in the novel. And Kataryna's fragmentation of identity also nears its end. All together when these elements are completed the novel and the characters will be more complex and unified.

During the year I have found my reading glasses somewhat tainted. Numerous times I have picked up a book, attempting to read for pleasure, escape and entertainment only to find my interest vain after several chapters, the story lose its grip and the book be put on a night table only to be forgotten. However, some books have managed to hold my interest and they, I believe, have influenced <u>The Rain of the Praying Mantis</u>. I galloped through Kundera's work and found that theoretical passages entered my work. I savoured philosophical books on personal identity and memory. I read up on magical fairytales and magical realism, on the structures of the novel, how to deal with time, how to develop a character or a theme. I even read what writers have written about their own process of writing. The effects were twofold. I was more knowledgeable on the subjects which

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interested me and arose in my work, but on the other hand I was none the wiser. I thought reading literary theory and others' fictional works could put a distance between me and my work and thus help improve and strengthen it. What I came upon were many possibilities, a lot of dim lights in an otherwise dark and horrid corridor but none showed the way out. The story was still what it was; the characters persisted on remaining true to themselves. I was faced with a problem whether to try to artificially lift the novel to the desired theory or to simply let it be what it is.

If I have learnt anything this year it is that possibilities are many, common mistakes are easy to detect and fix, the work is hard, solitary, strenuous, times of joy and purpose are quickly overshadowed by self-doubt, criticism and despair, but if when I lie in bed exhausted the sleep refuses to come as the voices and pictures continue to pester, the theories and techniques must be put aside and the story must be allowed to come out, whatever it may be. The following passage written by William Grass I feel very clearly exemplifies the feelings which I encountered in the past year writing The Rain of the Praying Mantis.

> "Lowry could not invent at the level of language, only at the level of life, so that having lied life into a condition suitable for fiction, he would then faithfully and truthfully record it. No wonder he felt enmeshed. No wonder, too, that he had to revisit in order to revise; repeat the same difficult passage of existence in order to plunge further into it, make the necessary changes, get it right; and this meant only too often that he had to drink himself into madness again, to resee what was to be rewritten; to fall down in a ditch, to find vultures perched on the washbasin, fold fearfully up in a corner like a pair of discarded trousers, or bruise his head between toilet and sink in some dirty anonymous John." (Burke, 26)

And so I am left banging my head between the 'I' which is writing, the 'I' which is being written about, the 'I' which is remembered, the mythical, magical 'I' who serves as the

model for the written 'I', and the empirical 'I' who tries to look over my shoulder and objectively judge my writing. (Calvino, 15)(4)

Notes

1. – term 'death of the author' comes from a scholarly article by a French literary critic Roland Barthes from an essay under the same title, "The Death of the Author", but has since been used by many literary critics
2. – by "writer" Smith here refers to post-modern writers who use and intertextualise fairytales within their works.
3. - the table should be taken as a guide only, not a set of rules one needs to adhere to. As Truby says "each step can be an expression of more than one subsystem" (268) and "a story may have more or fewer than twenty-two steps, depending on its type and length" (268).
4. – the actual quote from Calvino is "the person 'I', whether explicit or implicit, splits into a number of different figures: in an 'I' who is writing and an 'I' who is written, into and empirical 'I' who looks over the shoulder of the 'I' who is writing and into a mythical 'I' who serves as the model for the 'I' who is written. The 'I' of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process." (15)

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