

The Question of the Trip

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Abstract: *This paper addresses a weaving-writing; a writing of crooked/uneven lines that make in the midst of no-return, and of failing to constitute a worthwhile consistent thing (object, place, story, room, etc); a writing, a practice, that doesn't argue or conclude, and that exercises itself little by little (perhaps by attenuating an intensity (toward weakness)); a tending-toward spaces that barely make their presence present, and are, in a sense a letting-come. I take as a landscape/interior, the Coorong (an inland sea in the south-east of South Australia, which lies between where I live now and where I once lived (homes) – a place that's taking me all my life to see, and that's in a state of dying. This seeing touches upon an ecology of thinking/making/writing that lightly uses a method of infinity/mood toward inquiry – whereby feeling orients critique or knowing, or letting-it-be, and the said/written is almost-nothing in the hope of leaving-together (the inside with the outside, for instance); and, so as not to embroider too thickly (but rather to pick at/fray threads and unfix views) or cover all the cloth (and stop breathing). This writing, or practice of coming-and-going, is a diminishing writing, perhaps, and a quietness.*

Keywords: *writing, Coorong, friendship*

Setting off

It only takes two hours from one end to the other, but it's best to do the trip during the day, even then it's easy to drift-off; depending on your frame of mind you can be in-and-out of it before you know it, but in terms of the overall journey – country to city, city to country – it's the dreaded bit.

This writing is a movement toward the air and light of the space of those two hours, and about seeing and unseeing (or hearing and unhearing).

I've been travelling by car along the same road for twenty-five years. It's a five hour trip from Adelaide to my home town in the country, and two hours of that drive, the dreaded bit, is alongside the inland sea called the Coorong.

The title, 'The question of the trip', signals *toward* something, rather than *about* something; this something is something-like a saying, like *time flies* or *far and wide*; in this context, here, it's more an inquiry prompted by the length/breadth of time/space it takes sometimes to see what is there, and to see, in the sense of know, what it might be that one has not seen, or

not known to see; and what it is, what sort of an undertaking it might be, then, to write of this (seeing) as an experience of interiority, and of interiority as a continual be-coming.

I have made these trips through an-interior as if unaware of seeing, and of hearing, and of duration. As if the body of myself had locked itself up as an *individual*, self-contained; as if its surround of skin, skin-tight, protected it from the inside of the outside, while at the same time living constructed, unacknowledged, inside a lived-present, a turning-instant-present – present with the turning-instant-self; *the trip*, in a way, was *the trap*. Yet not really too, not thought as such during most of those years; time did pass, and the trip was prolonged somehow, *it* became a twenty-five year trip, attenuated; *the trap* stretched thin, to breaking point.

I'm writing of this un/seeing-while-seeing (not knowing what other name it is) to take note of, or give notice to, the bigger picture of non/unseeing or of what one is doing when one is thinking one knows what *is there*, or what, in the mode of a practice, *should* be or is imagined to be acceptable or even wanted (there – visible, tangible), longed for, or praised – that is, what is *advised* (and taught) in the act of bringing about *the something* which is not there already, and will be there by my or our actions (writing, space, object, conversation).

The Coorong, is my *engine* (my outside cause, driven from the inside) to practise, to-write. I am writing to-write; but to do so I need an *outside* to bring love toward – that's the Coorong. I am writing toward a landscape, a place, an inland sea, an *interior* space (for me), named the Coorong.

Coorong, the word,

is a corruption of an aboriginal word 'kurangh', meaning 'neck' or 'long neck' or 'narrow neck', and it is generally believed that the first usage ... was provided by Major Thomas O'Halloran in his journal of a punitive expedition against the aboriginals in retaliation for outrages committed against the passengers and crew of the ill-fated vessel the Maria in 1840 (Doolette, 1997, p. viii).

The tragedy leading to this expedition included the murder of twenty six white men, women and children and the execution by hanging of two aboriginal men on a makeshift gallows in front of other aboriginal people of their tribe who had been brought to watch (as a warning *toward* them about white law).

The Ngarrindjeri, whose homeland the Coorong was and still is, were a nation with their own country/language, way of life, culture, and physical characteristics (Jenkins, 1979, p. 12).

There were eighteen tribes of the Ngarrandjeri, each with their own territory, government and justice system.

The Coorong is not a *past*; it's within the fabric of present-time and future-time, as well as the immense past-time. It's vital, and, in terms of the *appearance* of continuous-time, invisible; and lays, as all times do, at the heart of writing (this fragility of language), and this writing now: how to-write the infinitely invisible, the light, the air.

The Coorong is an a/mazing landscape to see; it barely seems to be there. It's flat, often grey in colour and atmosphere, and housed beneath an enormous sky, which during the winter sits low like a heavy tarpaulin and during the summer rises high like a vast parallel universe – dwarfing the land, making it even flatter (like a pencil line).

The inland sea is over 6,000 years old. It formed after rises in sea-level flooded a passage between sand dunes. It became isolated as a lagoon 3,000 years later. Water comes into the lagoon-sea through rain, through the Murray River and the Salt Creek, through the ocean at the mouth of the river, and through an underground aquifer. It's listed as a National Park¹; it's part of the National Estate, and it's included on the *List Of Wetlands Of International Importance As Waterfowl Habitat (1975)* – this is known as the *Ramsar Convention*, as well as the *International Migratory Birds Agreement*. The Agreement is signed by the governments of Australia, Japan, and China to protect birds that migrate between these countries.

Throughout the sand-hills of the Coorong there are ancient middens; the small ones – perhaps 5,000 years old – mainly consist of molluscs, the larger ones – up to 3,000 years old – are huge mounds of shells, and bones of fish, birds and mammals; they are the remains of Aboriginal camps of many generations.

As a writing I'm bringing a *few friends* to this landscape, to see it and hear it, and to offer to *it* some of their thoughts (about other things) – to consider the thoughts of others about hearing, listening, thinking, writing, and to consider the place itself as a weave/tangle of material and immaterial knowledges (flora and fauna, stories and histories, land and water and sky) of various forces in relation with each other – as if *making* a small momentary gathering of *friends*.

When I come to the southern outskirts of the town of Meningie, to where the Coorong begins for me, I seem to enter a *room*; besides space, this room is the two hours it takes me to leave it – at the northern outskirts of the next major town, Kingston. For two hours I am in(side) the Coorong. I am inside an outside, I am interior to an exterior. I am trapped in

this part of the *trip*, and an aspect of the *trap* is that this *room* taps (and trips up) thought. I become a fleeting element/thought of the place, abandoned to myself (whether alone or not). For decades this thought-trap was called *boring* – and everyone I knew who did the *trip* found it interminable. There was nothing-to-see, and the road (which runs along the eastern shore of the Coorong, with the sand-dunes of the western shore cutting off the Southern Ocean) was narrow and in bad repair and one had to be on one's guard.

It's a place for/of thinking and dreams/nightmares. Colin Thiele, whose writing on the Coorong is extensive, including 'Storm Boy', wrote that it's '... a place of solitude so haunting and all-pervading that one can imagine the prophets emerging from it as they did from the desert in ancient time' (Thiele, 1986, p. 32).

At times, as you pass, it seems a desolate uninhabited place, stirring up an inner taste, or a scent perhaps; an ambivalent desire for belonging, perhaps – to somewhere, to someone – that slides slowly toward the far tremors of one's self. And, you don't stop, even though your breath, shallow now, as if in sympathy with the shallow sea, could do with a rest, a brief stroll. An early explorer (1844) described it as '... a grand and solemn scene: a dull haze shut out the horizon, and the utter and almost awful solitude was unbroken by any living thing' (Doolette, 1997, p. vii).



Passing through

A momentary gathering of a *few friends* is how I imagine writing; one draws upon others whose work has given friendship through the years – a tentative and puzzling friendship. However, in the body-act of writing, of bringing together writings, one can believe that the core intention is friendship. I bring together a *landscape, writing* (I mean the making of writing, the matter of it), and *writers* on the Coorong, like Graham Jenkins and Colin Thiele, and writers who've never heard of the Coorong, like Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray, and make from that a provisional or makeshift work, that is a visitation, an impression upon the Coorong (as both a physical and a written reality).

To touch upon friendship, I use Derrida's book *Politics Of Friendship* where his ground, his terrain, his *Coorong* or *engine*, is Nietzsche on friendship, on friendship toward the dead, the dying, the other, the self, the world, and where he attempts to think toward a friendship undetermined by proximity, by family, by fraternity/filiation – his project (addressing the issues at stake in re-thinking the politics of the friend/enemy, including the political-being of politics) is one of urgency, of our being-in-the-world, and of how we live that being; for instance, how in that living we might make the world, through thinking and doing, a place of peace beyond violence; violence meant as exclusion, as acceptance of given concepts, ideas, laws, as well as injustice, conflict, war. (Here these are delicate moves between three *scenes* of love: landscape/place, the work-of-others, and writing).

This is a road-trip (of sorts), a setting-off-all-alone and the resistance to and fear of that; the *lovence* (to use a tricky uncomfortable word) of the doing of it (both actually going, and actually writing), of the get-up-and-go energy needed to step out *there*, off-my-tree, and into an acting – into/onto loving you, who/whatever. That is, loving (*lovence*²) is *the* act; time-taken or time-given, a coming and going. 'The friend is the person who loves before being the person who is loved: he who loves before being the beloved ... One loves only by declaiming that one loves' (Derrida, 1997, p. 9).

A landscape knows nothing of this *lovence*, it's already there, toward me, before I have even thought about it in terms of love; without this thought of *love* it's potentially at risk – the difference between the time of non-love and the time of love is incommensurable. 'One cannot love without living and without knowing that one loves, but one can still love the deceased or the inanimate who then know nothing of it' (p. 10).

While something knows nothing of its being loved, one's conducting/attending of oneself toward it makes the place, the thing, the *whatever* it might be, different, brings it into the

world (with one), somehow, despite its already being there. It's different (all the difference in the world), for instance, to write with the texts of others in friendship rather than non-friendship (opposition, comparison); to think of the Coorong, and the writing of it, as *friendly* makes the *coming* of Derrida and Irigaray less strange or aggressive.

The calling, or naming, of a place *friend* is still awkward – despite having gazed upon *it* in awe and impatience for twenty-five years, *it* has been a friend to me – it's my rite of passage between two selves, two homes, unreconciled, yet alive-and-well. It is, and has been, the place right under my nose, still and constant (in both effect and appearance).

In a written work, in an act of making – for example, one that moves between various theories and practices, such as art and spatial practices can – this notion of friendship needs a careful approach; one with deep respect for, and regard (devotion) to, *distance*, one with discretion and tact, as *friendship* is a situation, a condition, of relations, of chances, of troubles, of powers, and disappointments; for friendship's sake, one keeps one's distance to keep from appropriating, from possessing, the other one. This amounts to, in a sense, a re-remembering of the irreducible differences of beings and things, and of their state, or of our possible state toward them, and of their real and virtual appearance in the world.

This distance and re-remembering – is what Luce Irigaray means, perhaps, by the *giving of silence*, which is a listening:

This silence is a space-time offered to you with ... no pre-established truth or ritual. ... It is a silence made possible by the fact that neither I nor you are everything, that each of us is limited ... If I am to be quiet and listen to you, without presupposition, without making hidden demands – on you or myself – the world must not be sealed already ... And moreover ... I do not consider language to be immutable. Otherwise, language itself controls, and hinders freedom (Irigaray, 1996, p. 115).

This silence, this giving, initiates another *way of love*, of intimacy.³

For Irigaray, to listen is to dwell, to move into sound, as it comes from the other, or *whatever* it is that comes from the other, its movement, its look, its joy or sadness, its age and well/unwell-being. Here, the inside and the outside are continuous with each other, are 'with' each other, together, where we live.

Irigaray (1996) begins her small essay 'In Almost Absolute Silence' with a question: 'Let us begin with: how am I to listen to you?' (p. 115). The essay speaks directly of a '... sort of communication ... to weave a web of alliances and histories between two subjects'

(p. 115). This listening listens to hear what is new and unknown of the other, you, *it*, me; a horizontal-listening to a mystery, rather than a vertical-hearing of an already-known (learned, memorized, believed). A horizontal-listening listens to someone/something that 'I do not know yet ... I encourage something unexpected to emerge, some becoming, some growth, some new dawn, perhaps' (pp. 116–117).

Derrida and Irigaray, in their own ways, both write of the being of human-beings and their being in the world of infinite animate and inanimate subtleties; I read their speculations to think toward places (familiar and unfamiliar) and our sense⁴ of them as here/there and not-here/there – always quite elsewhere to the head-on gaze.

Listening, offering the ear, rather than *chewing* the ear, is a making of space between other spaces, in which can manifest the unforeseen, the odd and singular appearance or expression of a landscape (here, the Coorong) existing, intricately, numerously, without *it* having to *call* for attention, or to expose itself in a clear and unambiguous sense.

Derrida, in his essay titled 'Tympan', writes of the possibility when speaking or writing *of or about or on or to* something – usually *inside* a genre, and a topic – of writing on the outside of *it*, on the other side of it, along its edges, of coming-and-going at the same time, giving (creating) impressions and taking (receiving) impressions, of welcoming (fleeting) impressions of other kinds without putting them to-service, without enveloping them.

Derrida, quoting Nietzsche, asks what it might take to listen in order '... to hear with [the] eyes too' (will it take a *puncture*, a *battering*, cymbals or drums) (Derrida, 1982, p. xiii). The tympanum is the middle ear, the tympanic membrane is the obliquely stretched membrane separating the middle ear and the passage to the external ear – it's the eardrum.

One of the effects of this obliqueness is to increase the surface of impression and hence the capacity of vibration. It has been observed, particularly in birds, that precision of hearing is in direct proportion to the obliqueness of the tympanum (Derrida, 1982, p. xv).

In other words, the direct route is the least-lasting, whereas the oblique route (the counterpath, the back-road), is quicker (by reputation only), and often dangerous, surprising, and unhinging (sometimes leading to entirely different events and places), and perhaps most-lasting/memorable. In writing, this can mean a blurred text, or an asymmetrical text, a stuttering text, a cracked text, a bodiless text, a passionate and/or impressionistic mad text, and importantly, an infinite text, one that doesn't wind-up/down to a denouement.⁵

I *sense* therefore (belatedly), that I have been looking at the Coorong, in passing, front-on, as if it is all-there, as I see it, and not as *something* mysteriously impressionistically completely other than itself as seen. It's cavenous, inside with inside and outside with outside.

The visitation of the philosophers is over, nothing-nameable changes, a thought or two has scratched around in the margin (of thought), where it's endlessly possible to glimpse '... a weave of different forces without any present centre of reference' (Derrida, 1982, p. xxiii). The margin is the place, the landscape of '... an inexhaustible reserve ... an entirely other ear ...' (p. xxiii), and where the place (Coorong) continues to be (seen or not) – the margin is not outside of an inside; it's the inside of another inside, or of the inside-continuum.

Moving on

This writing is simply proposed ... it enters a space, a place, a landscape, autobiographically, with memory, momentarily; space, place, landscape doesn't *turn* itself inside-out for writing; instead only a trace, a faint ember, a glimmer, shows-up, figured and de-figured in the material convention of writing, of letters, signs, more abstract, more distant, than any deliberate intended abstraction (more abstract for being *readable*, in a sense).

The space/place/landscape entered, a territory of dying-life, comes in fits and starts, over time (with intensities of infinitely complex and connected matters) –

(and being *an impression* '... is made on some tympanum, whether resonating or still, on the double membrane that can be struck from either side' (Derrida, 1982, p. xxv) (from what might be named *outside* or *inside* – or at the same time, and either cancelling/ringing, or as a cacophony), and as woven, or as being a weaving, we remember that '... to weave is first to make holes, to traverse, to work one-side-and-the-other of the warp ...' (Derrida, 1982, p. xxviii) and here, now, I hear, remotely, *warp* as a distortion, where being pulled or pushed it (whatever *it* might be) becomes less flat and symmetrical and more corrugated and off-centre).

– and not time spent deaf or deafened (aurally and optically), without the ear/eye listening and hearing (shaking); it comes about by being felt/sensed as a limit and a passage, a way of learning reception or welcome; a learning through *reading*, or goodwill toward *it* variously, so that *it* drifts vaguely ever further away by (the fact of) a continual distancing ... (*it* being further away the closer one gets, as if the *atmosphere* is unbearably thin, and what seems just-there, at my fingertips (under my nose), is a day's walk away) ... (a continual distancing) within oneself, and within the relationship of oneself to the other of *it* – in *its* living breathing dying state, and (with)in the relationship with *it* being called *friendship*, if that's appropriate

(proper), and even if it's not, a friendship without basis, without an agreeable starting point (from which to move-away or set-off from) or commonality, or family, but one based (or found) on the fact, again, of being in the same time and space (air and light) of the same world – no more than this, giving an ear, and thinking, and only doing this (perhaps); that is, producing a thought that passes instantly, that summons a space or a thing or idea unknown, all at once, in a flash – and lasting, forever.



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Endnotes

- ¹ 'The national park is an area of 46,745 hectares. At a maximum it is five kilometres wide. It is described variously as wild, harsh, gentle, ugly, always beautiful, of many mood, many colours, fickle, wilful, and unforgiving' (Doolette, 1997, p. vii).
- ² 'Beyond all ulterior frontiers between love and friendship, but also between the passive and active voices, between the loving and the being-loved, what is at stake is "lovence". You must know how *it is more worthwhile* to love lovence' (Derrida, 1997, p. 7). In Derrida's text one is left to this word, as if *at a location*. 'Before even thinking about what *loving, love, lovence* mean, one must know that the only way to find out is by questioning first of all the act and the experience of loving rather than the state or situation of being loved' (p. 8).
- ³ The word *sense*, and the sense of that word, is an opening onto meditations of *meaning*; of the phrasing/extracting/requesting of meaning. Jean-Luc Nancy:

Thus, the world no longer has a sense, it is sense. In this sense, today anew it is precise to say that it is no longer a matter of interpreting the world, but of transforming it. It is no longer a matter of lending or giving the world one more sense, but of entering into this sense, into this gift of sense the world itself is. ... (Nancy, 1997, pp. 8–9).
- ⁴ Sarah Kofman's philosophical texts move writing around as if time and space are one. Nancy writes of Kofman's love of anecdote, of stories and comments antithetic to her work and the work of others; responses that move in a contrary direction – that is, as an inquiry, set-off to make work on/from work already made (a writing, a landscape); obliquely bringing *it* to thinking/speaking/writing without *eating* it up, aligning it to self, fitting it *in*:

The law of the story and its economy is to bury all strangeness with the Stranger, to disguise the fact that the return of the Stranger in the night, like a ghost passing through all the cracks in the house, far from bringing about its destruction and collapse, can alone provide a true foundation for the idyll. The affliction of the story, intrinsic to its Apollonian happiness, is that it deceptively conceals Dionysus in all his glory (Kofman, 1998, p. 30).
- ⁵ 'On the one hand, therefore, is the outside; on the other hand, the inside; between them, the cavernous' (Leiris, in Derrida, 1982, p. xx). Leiris is writing of the eardrum, the outside (so-called) world, the inside (so-called) body; and the vibrations which bring us sound. And all of the outside is an inside, and all of the inside is an outside – it's impossible to distinguish out and in; hearing comes to us invisibly; waves moving through air strike the thin fragile obliquely stretched membrane and bring us the world.

Credits

Photography by the author Linda Marie Walker.