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Discoursing love: The classroom. A fictional response to Roland Barthes

Shady Cosgrove

University of Wollongong, shady@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Cosgrove, S. "Discoursing love: The classroom. A fictional response to Roland Barthes." *The Creative Manoeuvres: Making, Saying, Being Papers – The Refereed Proceedings Of The 18th Conference Of The Australasian Association Of Writing Programs*, 2013. Ed. S. Strange & K. Rozynski. Canberra: AAWP, 2013. 1-14. 2014

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'Discoursing Love: The Classroom' offers a series of microfictions written in response to Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse Fragments* (1978 [2002]). In *A Lover's Discourse* Barthes seeks to 'stage an utterance, not an analysis ... confronting the other (the loved object) who does not speak' (3). Likewise I have written short pieces—outbursts, ripostes, manoeuvres—each less than six hundred words and connected by meditations on love as experienced by a fictional teacher towards a student. Questions include: How does love confront us? How does the emotional complexity of love, and of the loved Other, find voice in language? And how might this play out within the classroom? Barthes' work is particularly relevant within this context as he explicitly addresses the self-aware romantic subject, and this in turn serves as metaphor for the self-aware author. I have experimented with structure, using Barthes' text to structure my work as well as provide pivotal plot points. The idea for this piece was conceived in collaboration with Dr Catherine McKinnon, and is the first stage of an ongoing project concerned with the interplay of theory and creative writing within the context of *A Lover's Discourse*.

Keywords

era2015

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

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University of Wollongong

Dr Shady Cosgrove

Discoursing love: The classroom

A fictional response to Roland Barthes

Abstract:

‘Discoursing Love: The Classroom’ offers a series of microfictions written in response to Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse Fragments* (1978 [2002]). In *A Lover’s Discourse* Barthes seeks to ‘stage an utterance, not an analysis ... confronting the other (the loved object) who does not speak’ (3). Likewise I have written short pieces—outbursts, ripostes, manoeuvres—each less than six hundred words and connected by meditations on love as experienced by a fictional teacher towards a student. Questions include: How does love confront us? How does the emotional complexity of love, and of the loved Other, find voice in language? And how might this play out within the classroom? Barthes’ work is particularly relevant within this context as he explicitly addresses the self-aware romantic subject, and this in turn serves as metaphor for the self-aware author. I have experimented with structure, using Barthes’ text to structure my work as well as provide pivotal plot points. The idea for this piece was conceived in collaboration with Dr Catherine McKinnon, and is the first stage of an ongoing project concerned with the interplay of theory and creative writing within the context of *A Lover’s Discourse*.

Biographical Note:

Dr Shady Cosgrove is Sub Dean of Creative Arts and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Her novel *What the Ground Can’t Hold* (Picador) was published in August 2013, and her memoir *She Played Elvis* (Allen and Unwin, 2009) was shortlisted for the Australian Vogel Literary Prize. Her short stories and articles have appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Small Wonder*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*.

Keywords:

Fiction – Love – Desire – Roland Barthes – Meta-fiction – Collaborative writing

The Absent One

absence / absence

Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object—whatever its cause and its duration—and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment. (Barthes, 13)

I enter the classroom. I've been in here before – casing the perimeter, arranging desks in a rectangle – but nothing's prepared me for this. I sit down with sixteen third years and we're all watching each other, trying to figure out who's the teacher. It doesn't help that I look twelve – I've tried growing a beard and still look twelve. I've never taught before so I don't realise I need to kick things off. Take roll. Hand out subject outlines.

I should probably write my name on the whiteboard but it's covered with ghost equations from a maths class, drawn in permanent texta.

The waiting has momentum. A boy with energetic hair shreds a Styrofoam cup. A girl with twitchy limbs flicks through her notebook.

'So. This is WRIT305 – The Short Story to the Novella.' It's my voice but I don't recognise it. The syllables are too loud: coming at me, not from me, absurdly high. My hand pinches the fabric of my jeans. It's just a performance, I think. Play the teacher.

They're all watching me. No one says anything.

I'm surprised by how little the girls are wearing. My friends would laugh at me – life is hard, mate – but the beaming breasts make me feel old. The boys are slouching, unconvinced. And then the door jolts open and a girl with neon purple hair scurries in, sits down. I take the opportunity for a long drink from my water bottle.

'Let's get into it,' I say, passing out the photocopies. It's an absurd reading list, I know that – I've had three days to plot the syllabus. I'm only sitting in this room because the real teacher moved interstate for a family emergency. Late Purple starts tapping her pen against the table. Two boys wearing fedoras are whispering – but I give them my best alpha stare and they take the stapled packets, passing them on.

I clear my throat. 'For roll, tell us something about your break – what you got up to, who you saw. Doesn't have to be true. The crazier the better, but you want us to believe it. We'll take a vote. See what we reckon.' I call the first name on my list.

'What? I'm not ready.' The boy with the hair.

I sigh – the sound is too loud and I can tell I’m being judged as judgemental. There’s politics in teaching. ‘Okay. We’ll come back to you.’

I want to pack my things. But we work our way around the group. Scuba diving accidents (true) and dying grandparents (not true). Pierced scrotums (apparently true – though no one was game to check) and extraterrestrial sightings (convincingly told but unfortunately not true). And each time we vote, our primary school hands strike the air.

I’m trying to make a point about the stories that pull us in – they all have convincing details, and this grounding is what makes the story. The students don’t care. Or don’t seem to, anyway. A couple of girls are taking notes, and I remind myself that you never know what hits, what misses. Besides, each story gives me a way to remember the person telling it. I work my way down the yellow attendance sheet, writing notes.

We’re halfway down the grid. ‘X? Is X here?’

No one answers. I leave the box next to her name empty.

Atopos

atopos / atopos

The loved being is recognized by the amorous subject as ‘atopos’ (a qualification given to Socrates by his interlocutors), i.e., unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality. (34)

I’ve been thinking about them. Quizzing myself on names. The only one who’s still an enigma: X. In her enrolment photo, she’s smiling, albeit grudgingly. Dark brown hair, curly, pinned back. Lines around her eyes. A pointy chin, thin lips. She was born exactly ten years and two months before me. The only mature-age student in the class and I’m already afraid of her.

There’s irony in me teaching anyone to write. Two walls of my bathroom are papered in rejection slips. I figure I can give up when the entire room is covered. If it comes up (and of course it will) I’ve decided to tell them how hard it is. All the boring Greek myths – Sisyphus and his rock, Prometheus and his eagle. I’m hoping this honesty will seem radical, endearing.

I’ve got fifteen minutes before class – I’ve rewritten the lecture twice and I’m standing at the photocopier. I’ve found a passage about a grandfather dying and another about alien sightings. We’re going to keep talking detail. I know detail alone doesn’t make a story. Something needs to happen, shift. But it’s a way to let the reader start imagining. It’s a starting point.

The photocopier smells of toner. My hand is holding down the spine of the book as the line of light flashes across.

Someone clears her throat in the doorway. It’s X. I’d know her anywhere.

She’s staring at me and I’m stranded – the photocopier is a buoy, the carpet an unravelling sea. She’s shorter than I imagined. Her face reminds me of Melbourne. My hand presses against the closed lid. I know I should say something, one of us should say something.

Her back’s against the open door, behind her shoulder, a sign: ‘Staff Only.’

She says my name as a question and I nod. She asks about the readings for WRIT305 and suddenly I’m a teacher again. I rifle through the stack of photocopies and dole them out like gifts.

Her voice is deep. ‘Sorry I missed last week.’

‘Make sure you read the subject outline. If you have any questions...’

She’s nodding. She’s wearing a dress and a 1950s cardie. ‘I was up in Sydney. Court. You ever been?’

‘No.’

‘Judges have a lot of power.’ She says this indifferently – like it’s an observation, nothing more.

Maybe I shouldn’t ask. ‘What were you doing?’

‘Outside, it’s elaborate architraves, sandstone steps. Inside, the fluorescent lights make everything look second-hand. And the wigs, they’re ridiculous.’

She’s watching me, and I’m watching her watching me.

Her weight shifts from one foot to the other: ‘Fraud. I used to work in finance. I’m not sorry. Just sorry I got caught.’

‘Wow.’ I’m staring at her eyes – emphatic liner, intense pupils.

‘It’ll mean gaol.’

Suddenly I’m wondering what the University protocols are – how much class can a student miss, does gaol constitute ample cause for Academic Consideration?

X shrugs. ‘So, what do you reckon?’

I have no idea what she’s talking about. Is she asking my opinion on breaking the law?

She smirks. ‘Did I get you?’

‘What?’ My hands are clenched.

‘The class exercise. What we did during the break.’

It takes a moment to realise she’s made it all up. My relief is disproportionate, clammy. ‘Oh!’

‘I know you said it’s detail – I read Y’s notes – but I think it’s more than that. It has to be. Sure, details help, they’re part of it. But if you don’t believe the character telling the story it doesn’t matter how specific you are.’

X is right. Of course she is. But she’s walking down the hall before I have a chance to respond.

The World Thunderstruck

déréalité / disreality

Sentiment of absence and withdrawal of reality experienced by the amorous subject, confronting the world. (87)

Tuesday morning: 9.30am. Class begins. The girl who convinced us her mother won \$1000 at Keno (not true) has a zombie story that ends with a threesome. Half the class wants a zombie in the action. The other half (the ones who know their speculative fiction) is furious – it can't happen, the zombie's dick would fall off. They're actually yelling, and weird alliances are forming, based on a canon of fantasy literature I've barely heard of.

Late Purple leans across the table, her shirt hitching up. 'Who says a zombie can't fall in love?'

The kid, who's called Fat Z; even though he's skinnier than a handrail, scoffs. 'If the zombie's close enough to have sex with her, he's going to eat her fucking brain. It's the rules.'

'Depends on what kind of zombies we're talking about.' The redhead who's into scuba diving.

I'm ready to talk about genre and convention but X interrupts with the word 'sub-altern'. That maybe zombies are constructed as Other because they're not the western, liberal subject and I can't tell if she's joking or not but I don't care. I'm freaked out and excited, afraid of Gayatri Spivak in the context of zombie sex but grateful that she's relevant. That representation matters.

We have a break and then we're looking at a story about a cop, written by a kid who's never set foot in a police station. His homework: spend a couple of hours in lock-up. Everyone laughs and I tell him I'm joking but I'm not. X catches my eye. I stare back, surprised by my fearlessness. The other students must notice but the kid with the story is babbling on about some crime scene television show. My heart is revving like an engine out of gear. Finally X looks away. And then we read eight paragraphs of medieval dragon-fighting that meanders through present and past tense, no consistency.

'I probably should have proofread it,' one of the Fedoras says. He's apologising to me but his eyes don't leave Late Purple. He's the kid who never does his reading, and I want to throw my useless whiteboard eraser at him.

We move onto a story set in an office block where the protagonist is in a dysfunctional relationship with a man called Work. And at 12.30pm: it's over. Just like that.

Everyone gathers their notebooks and packs up, scuffling out en masse. X doesn't linger to talk about the upcoming assessment and I'm alone. Stacking my books. Turning off the light. Waiting through another week until we have class again.

I walk out of the building, the door swinging open automatically like there's an invisible doorman, and the sun is too bright.

Blue Coat and Yellow Vest

habit / habiliment

Any affect provoked or sustained by the clothing which the subject has worn during the amorous encounter, or wears with the intention of seducing the loved object. (127)

Everything is inadequate: jeans, t-shirts, boots. Even my belt is offensive. I feel like a teenage girl prowling in front of the mirror.

'When my finger accidentally...'

contacts / contacts

The figure refers to any interior discourse provoked by a furtive contact with the body (and more precisely the skin) of the desired being. (67)

We're in the middle of class, talking about why you have to research your subject material.

'But it's fiction. Isn't it obvious I'm making it up?' It's the boy who told us his grandparents were dead (not true). None of us believed him but the class hesitated anyway – afraid to get it wrong. Now he's writing about POWs and wants to know if the atomic bomb was dropped in World War I or World War II.

X raises her eyebrows and it takes effort not to laugh.

'You could just drop the bomb on Gallipoli.' It's the Fedora with bad acne. He sits alone now that his friend is going out with Late Purple. My inner proletariat won't let me give up on the others but I wish I could pitch the class to him and X. They're the best writers.

I've launched into a monologue about intertextuality when the fire alarm starts bleating. It starts soft and increases in volume until it's overpowering the room. Everyone's excited, gathering their things. I try to keep my handouts in order, balancing the stack of photocopies with my books.

'Okay, okay. Take it slowly.' I say, but I've got no idea where the emergency meeting area is so I let everyone rush out first. X waits for me, holding the door. I edge by, too close. She touches my back, and we stand there, alone in this blaring building. I lean into her hand, and the pressure is sweet, tangy. She's half-smiling. My stomach is convulsing. It must be a matter of seconds – ten or fifteen – but time loses context: each second could be days or weeks. I imagine myself naked, her palm pressing into me, through me.

The fire warden, frocked in a yellow security vest, lopes down the brilliant white corridor, and tells us to evacuate.

The Dedication

dédicace / dedication

An episode of language which accompanies any amorous gift, whether real or projected; and, more generally, every gesture, whether actual or interior, by which the subject dedicates something to the loved being. (75)

A pile of assessments migrates through the house. Sitting on the desk. Stacked next to the couch. Dark orange cover slips stapled to each front page. Within two sentences I can tell who's been paying attention. We've been talking about beginnings. About catching the reader and grounding the action, naming the characters and establishing the setting. No matter what, the reader cannot be lost. The story is not a pirate map.

X's portfolio sits patiently at the bottom. I am waiting for it.

One by one I edge closer. But I enjoy the delay. There are spots of brilliance in the reading. And if not, there's power in feedback. Contrasting the story Late Purple is trying to tell about her mother with the one that resides on the page. She treats her reader like an idiot. The girl with twitchy arms writes about a bulimic cat but the story doesn't kick off until page two. The boy with the amazing hair is all drugs and daydreams, and while the line-by-line is great he loses the reader in the ramble. Casanova Fedora writes about a shit-stained public toilet that can talk.

All this time, I'm scrolling in margins. Drawing arrows. Circling repeated words. Working at my desk, my bed, my armchair. They've come home with me. I begrudge and adore them this audacity. One-by-one the stack diminishes but it takes longer than I expected. And then there's just one left.

X's handwriting is wispy, which surprises me. Her student number all nines and sixes. She's signed the declaration that this is entirely her work – it's impossible to see her name in the signature. It's not an autograph but a symbol. I'm sitting up in bed, under the army-issue wool blanket I borrowed from my mother's house when I started University ten years ago. It's late afternoon. Outside, the sun-faded city buildings are receding. Gentle traffic whirls by. A siren fading. I know she won't disappoint me – we workshopped the story in class. It's guttural – graphic, even. Two people having sex for the last time. All of the anger and care that goes into that negotiation without the clichés. And there I am, reading and re-reading. Wondering what on earth I'm supposed to write or add to this story with my inadequate green ink.

'What is to be done?'

conduite / behavior

A deliberative figure: the amorous subject raises (generally) futile problems of behavior: faced with this or that alternative, what is to be done? How is he to act? (62)

I can't proposition X: ludicrous and unethical.

But doing nothing: unbearable.

Fade-out

fading / fade-out

Painful ordeal in which the loved being appears to withdraw from all contact, without such enigmatic indifference even being directed against the amorous subject or pronounced to the advantage of anyone else, world or rival. (112)

Last class of session: week thirteen. We take turns reciting a favourite paragraph that we've written. I read from the one story I've been reading from for years, published in a decent journal. I can't tell what they think.

The students all emphasise details – a yellow toothbrush, the graffiti at Central station, wheels of a pram – and they're having a joke at me, at that first lecture.

X reads about a parachute that doesn't open. The metallic taste of sky. The glint of beach below. I watch her throat, her mouth, as she speaks. Everyone pays attention: even Late Purple and the Fedora have stopped playing footsies. I want her to keep reading. I want to go hungry sitting in this classroom, listening to her.

Of course she finishes. Three more readers and class is wrapping up. The guy writing about POWs is trying to get everyone to the bar but no one's interested. I'm panicking inside. What happens when everyone leaves, when the classroom is empty? This is it. The not-yet-begun is about to be over.

X and I both linger – my books stacked between us – but her girlfriend, the note taker who briefed her on that first class, waits and our goodbyes are awkward and undernourished.

The Ghost Ship

errance / errnatry

Though each love is experienced as unique and though the subject rejects the notion of repeating it elsewhere later on, he sometimes discovers in himself a kind of diffusion of amorous desire; he then realizes he is doomed to wander until he dies, from love to love. (101)

The next time I see X will be in four years, at the grocery store. I'll have my kid with me – a dad with his two-year-old – and we'll be trapped between the deodorant and the shampoo as my son stacks the soap into an aisle fortress. The lights will be fluorescent and I'll try to remember X's description of the Sydney court that first day when I saw her at the photocopier.

Research Statement

Research background: Many writers have appropriated, incorporated, or responded to Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse Fragments*, both critical (Robert Solomon [2004], Stephen Dunning [2010] and Eric Meljac [2011]) and creative (Derek Tsang and Jimmy Wan's film *Lover's Discourse* [2010] as well as Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Marriage Plot* [2011]). This research is interested in how Barthes' work can inform the structure of a creative text, specifically as a series of microfictions. Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse Fragments* is particularly relevant within this context as he explicitly addresses the self-aware romantic subject, and this in turn serves as metaphor for the self-aware author.

Research contribution: Cosgrove's collection of microfictions 'Discoursing Love – The Classroom' uses Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse Fragments* to inform the structure of the creative work 'Discoursing Love – The Classroom'. Each microfiction is based on one of Barthes' entries so the theoretical is bound in the storytelling at a structural level, as well as functioning to advance plot. Cosgrove also uses levels of meta-fiction to draw attention to the writing of the creative text, as the story takes place within a creative writing classroom, raising the question: what *is* the text we're reading?

Research significance: The significance of this research is that it functions as an independent creative work while also reflecting on creative practice. It addresses the question: how can critical work inform creative work meta-fictionally without losing narrative momentum? Its value is evidenced by its inclusion in the double-refereed stream of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs' 18th annual conference.

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