

# **THOUGHT, ACTION; IMPACT: MODES OF PRESENTATION TO ENABLE AN IMMERSIVE READER-RESPONSE**

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## **Keywords**

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## Abstract

This is a Practice-Led Research (PLR) program that addresses the following two research questions: What literary devices and modes of presentation increase the likelihood of an immersive, engaging reader response, and the impact of a literary work? and; How can I demonstrate and enhance the definition of the selected literary devices and modes of presentation through my creative practices in the historical fiction genre? To address the first question, I selected and refined the definition of an Absentee Narratee / Pure Reflector Mode form of Simultaneous Narration. I compiled a set of literary techniques that include: Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA), and Anomalous Replotting; and defined new definitions for Internal Focalization of Memory (IFM) and the theoretical foundations for the use of second person thought utterances in First Person-Present Tense narrative situations. The creative practice that forms the core findings of the research program is an historical fiction, *Boots of Spanish Leather*. Set in sixteenth century Spain, this is the story of a shrewd and ambitious young foot soldier striving to escape the peasant class, who, risking everything he holds dear, joins the ill-fated Spanish Armada. The Absentee Narratee mode of presentation developed for use in *Boots of Spanish Leather* leaves no room for authorial mediation, and so, removes two links (Author and Narratee) in the standard rhetorical chain (Author—Narration—Narratee—Reader), reducing it to just two levels: (Narration—Reader). The text is presented as a pure transcript of the protagonist's thought utterances and focalizations, as though captured by some just-invented technology.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

- FP-PT: First Person-Present Tense
- HF: Historical Fiction
- IFA: Interior Focalization of Awareness
- IFM: Interior Focalization of Memory
- PLR: Practice-Led Research

## Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: QUT Verified Signature

Date: 10 March 2019

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There is no doubt that this practice-led research program has transformed my creative practice. Through it I have refined my understanding of many literary devices and techniques that can increase the likelihood of an immersive and engaging reader response, but most importantly I have developed the theoretical foundations for the use of second person thought utterances in First Person-Present Tense narrative situations.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Sonam Dorje, the fifteenth Dalai Lama once explained:

A person will object when coerced down a particular path—even if they know it is for the better. It is primeval; they feel trapped and cannot surmount this awareness. The lead must be so gentle they forget it is there. (A Fettered Mind 2012)

I have continued to be a student of this *gentle lead* for nearly thirty years, beginning with my training in Aikido in 1986. In Aikido, practitioners must learn to be thrown before learning to throw, to sensitise their body and mind to the correct way for the body to fall, to perceive this safe path whether they are being led or leading. This is the impact I am compelled to achieve with my writing. The enablers or precursors of impact that are the focus of this research are Immersion and Engagement, as well as the key reader experience metaphors of *Being Transported*, and *Performing* the narrative.

This chapter is structured in four parts: the first section provides a background and context to this program of research; the second defines its purpose, research problems, objectives and research questions; the third section discusses the significance, scope, and areas of findings; and the final section outlines the structure of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

### Background and Context

The creative work at the core of this practice-led research program is an historical fiction *Boots of Spanish Leather*. Set in sixteenth century Spain, this is the story of a shrewd and ambitious young foot soldier striving to escape the peasant class, who, risking everything he holds dear, joins the ill-fated Spanish Armada.

The seed for this story is a family myth. My maternal grandfather “Tex” was dark-haired, dark-eyed, and olive-skinned, as are my mother and me. At first thought, this is quite at odds with our Irish Catholic ancestry. Tex once explained to me that these traits stemmed from The Dark Irish: those descended from sailors and soldiers of the Spanish Armada shipwrecked on the rocky west coast of Ireland in 1588. As a teenager, and even a young adult, I was often mistaken for being “continental”. Regularly, Italians, Greeks, or Spanish people would assume I was also one of them and begin conversing with me in their language.

This concept remained mostly in my subconscious until around ten years ago, when I heard Bob Dylan’s 1964 ballad *Boots of Spanish Leather*. This is an evolving epistolary story of a failing relationship, alternating between Dylan’s point of view and that of his then girlfriend. On hearing several stanzas from this song, the dormant family myth burst into my consciousness. I was transported into the mind of my many times great-grandfather, creating his thoughts and feelings, as he sails away from the people he loves, with the ill-fated, dangerous, but seemingly inevitably victorious *Enterprise of England*.

Below are several selected excerpts from the lyrics of the song *Boots of Spanish Leather* (Dylan 1964).

*Oh, I’m sailin’ away my own true love  
I’m sailin’ away in the morning  
Is there something I can send you from across the sea  
From the place that I’ll be landing?  
...  
Just carry yourself back to me unspoiled  
From across that lonesome ocean  
...  
That I might be gone a long time  
...*

*So take heed, take heed of the western wind  
Take heed of the stormy weather  
And yes, there's something you can send back to me  
Spanish boots of Spanish leather.*

Dylan's lyrics speak of his personal loss, but the storyworld I created and transported myself to, is that of a young Spanish soldier (my ancestor) finding himself "sailing away" from his love and his country with the ever-increasing likelihood that he would never return, either because of death, circumstance, or simply the tyranny of distance. In this storyworld, his fate gradually produces an attitude of resolve to make the best of his circumstance, despite the heartache and loss. This the story I am compelled to tell.

### **Research Purpose, Problem, and Objectives**

If my writing is to have impact, it must be read, and people's attentions are already contested by new and old media, all vying for prominence: computer games, cinema, television, sport and fitness activities, social media, and tourism. For literature to be competitive amongst this burgeoning number of entertainment options it must offer a more immersive and engaging experience.

This situation leads directly to my research problem:

To be an attractive and competitive entertainment alternative, a creative work must evoke an immersive and engaging reader-response.

This problem requires considerably more attention than is possible through a single masters thesis, so I have defined the following three-fold purpose for this research project:

To gain a theoretical, methodical, and phenomenological understanding of narratology and the act of reading to measure its potential to impact readers;

to refine the definition of literary devices that enhance engagement and immersion; and finally, to demonstrate their use through my creative practices in the historic fiction genre.

### **Research Questions**

The aim of this practice-led research program is to address the following Research Questions:

1. What literary devices and modes of presentation increase the likelihood of an immersive, engaging reader response, and the impact of a creative work?
2. How can I demonstrate and enhance the definition of the selected literary devices and modes of presentation through my creative practice in the Historical Fiction genre?

### **Significance, Scope, and Areas of Findings**

This research program follows an iterative cycle through three areas of interrelated research. Firstly, it builds on the theoretical grounding in narratology, paying specific attention to modes of presentation, literary devices, and reader-response. Next it follows a methodical refinement of the definition of selected literary devices, followed by a concentrated period of creative practice. Between each of these periods and at the conclusion of each cycle, a reflective assessment of the previous period is used to refine the direction for the next research period. Thus, through each research iteration, the research program's theoretical foundations are strengthened and its focus is narrowed onto the elements and techniques with the greatest potential for reader impact.

### **Literary Devices**

There are two aspects to literary devices: Literary Elements and Literary Techniques. Literary Elements are those that “have an inherent existence in a literary piece and are extensively employed by writers to develop a literary piece” (LiteraryDevices 2013).



These elements include plot, setting, narrative structure, characters, and themes, each of which is indispensable to a literary work. Literary Techniques, however, are employed by writers “to achieve not merely artistic ends, but also [to provide] readers [with] a greater understanding and appreciation of their literary works” (LiteraryDevices 2013). Some examples of Literary Techniques are metaphors, similes, alliteration, allegory, anomalous replotting, and thought utterances. Literary Techniques, however are not mandatory aspects of literary works, and their absence does not automatically exclude them from classification as a Literary Work. In the context of this research, I will focus on *Literary Techniques* that increase the potential depth of immersion and reader engagement such as: Anomalous Replotting, Reduced Narrative Distance, Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA), Internal Focalization of Memory (IFM), and Second Person Thought Utterances.

### **Scope**

To narrow the research program’s scope, the aim of my first reflective research period was to define the Point of View (POV) on which the creative practices would be based. I approached this with a critical re-reading of the first two chapters of my creative practice and then by reviewing the feedback I had previously received from an informal critique group. From this point, I embarked on a high-level review of Narratology, initially from an historical perspective: Plato’s *The Republic* (380 BC), *The art of fiction: And other essays* by Henry James (1948). I then moved on to more recent scholarly works such as *The Act of Reading: A theory of aesthetic response* by Wolfgang Iser (1978), and *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* by Gérard Genette (1980).

Prior to beginning this research program, I had written the opening chapters of *Boots of Spanish Leather* using First Person-Past Tense, but the first iteration of the

research program indicated that the use of Present Tense could deliver a more engaging reader-response. However, while considering making this change, I came across several rants criticising this form, such as that by former Booker Prize judge Philip Hensher in the *Daily Telegraph* (2010) in which he recommended that future “judges should take a stand against the modish present tense”. Philip Pullman expressed similar concerns in his column in *The Guardian* (2010), suggesting that present tense in fiction is getting more common, and that he “didn't like it.”

I dismissed these non-scholarly opinions when I stumbled upon the book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* by Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), and subsequent journal articles by Monika Fludernik (2012), Matt DelConte (2008), Theo Damsteegt (2005), and James Phelan (1994). Their work convinced me of the effectiveness of this mode of presentation to immerse readers in a narrative and increase reader engagement. Most of these contemporary narratologists have moved away from the term First Person-Present Tense, and in its place refer to this mode of presentation as *Simultaneous Narration*, or occasionally extending this to *Simultaneous Present Tense Narration*. From this point on I will also use the term Simultaneous Narration.

The two areas of findings for this research program are:

- I. Reader Impact and Engagement: narratology, narrative structures, the act of reading, reader response criticism, modes of presentation, and the definition and refinement of selected literary techniques.

This theoretical and phenomenological research analyses the act of reading and simultaneous narration, exploring elements such as: transportation to the storyworld, the reader's performance of a text, narrative as virtual reality, reduced authorial mediation, narrative distance, and the move toward realism in thought utterances, and finally to predict reader engagement. It then moves on to focus on the methodical

definition and proposed refinement of the literary techniques identified as particularly effective in evoking an immersive and engaging reader-response.

## II. Creative Practice.

Through my creative practice, I demonstrate the use of particular modes of presentation and literary techniques identified throughout this research program.

### **Thesis Outline**

The remainder of this thesis contains the following chapters:

Chapter 2: Literature Review: This chapter begins by outlining the topics to be discussed, followed by a separate section on each topic, critically evaluating them in an historical and contemporary context. The literature highlighted includes both critical essays, journal articles, and research papers on the chosen topics, as well as three published creative works utilising the Present Tense.

Chapter 3: Research Design: This chapter is presented in two sections: research methodology and research design. The methodology section presents practice-led reflective research and discusses its similarity to the experimental-based research methodologies used in science and engineering, and why this methodology is a suitable match for the research questions in this program. The research design section then outlines the set of objectives that will direct the program to answer the research questions. The design section also describes the creative work, *Boots of Spanish Leather*, and the unique perspective and opportunity this offers to demonstrate and experiment with the selected literary techniques, with a particular focus on how they immerse, engage, and impact the reader.

Chapter 4: Research Findings: Beginning with a brief introduction linking the findings to the research questions and objectives, this chapter presents the findings in

two parts: firstly, the methods used to enable reader engagement and the definitions for the selected modes of presentation and literary techniques; and secondly, an excerpt of the program's creative practice of approximately 20,000 words.

Chapter 5: Analysis: Here I engage in a sustained way with my creative work to examine whether the techniques I employed have indeed worked as I hypothesised they would.

Chapter 6: Conclusions: The chapter is structured around the two-fold purpose defined earlier in the introduction chapter. It summarises the research program, and the implications of the findings, restating the research questions as a definitive hypothesis, then identifies the limitations of the research and remaining gaps that can be addressed by further research, and concludes with a statement of closure for the research program.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction and Methodology

This review evaluates literature in the areas of Immersion, Simultaneous Present Tense Narration, Reader-Engagement, Reader-Response, Modes of Presentation, and Second Person Thought Utterances. It then moves on to examine three examples of historic and contemporary creative works that highlight the use of present tense narration, and the literary devices with the potential to evoke an immersive and engaging reader-response. It is structured around the following Research Objectives:

- a. Review, identify, and refine the definition for literary devices that increase the likelihood of reader immersion and an engaging reading experience, paying particular attention to those most effective in the historical fiction genre;
- b. Evaluate methods used to measure engagement and how they can be used to predict potential impact; and
- c. Demonstrate and enhance the definition of the selected literary devices and modes of presentation through my creative practice in the historic and future fiction genres.

This research will focus on the phenomenological aspects of immersion in a narrative world, as well as theoretical links between transportation, engagement and enjoyment.

### Immersion, Interactivity, and Engagement

Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) uses the two dimensions of the virtual reality experience: immersion and interactivity, “to describe the types of reader responses that may be elicited by a literary text.” She describes a reader’s immersive experience in a narrative as having “effaced the narrator and the narrative act, [and] penetrated the mind of the characters,” and laments that immersion “has been ignored by theorists [and] regarded

as a menace to critical thinking.” She suggests a possible reason for this is immersion’s “resistance to theorization,” and that “contemporary culture values those ideas that produce brilliant performances that allow the critic to deconstruct the text and put it back together again, but what can be said about immersion in a textual world except that it takes place?” This attitude is reinforced by Jay Bolter (1991), who casts readers whose goal is an immersive reading experience as “naïve or one who reads only for entertainment.” It also draws the critical eye of Ryan who rebuts that “this does not mean that immersive pleasure is in essence a lowbrow, escapist gratification,” instead proclaiming it to require “an active engagement with the text and a demanding act of imagining” (Ryan 2001). Ryan, as I have done in my research, looks to “scholars working on the outskirts of literary studies—cognitive psychology, empirical approaches to literature, or analytical philosophy...to address immersion...under a variety of other names”. When a reader is deeply immersed in a novel, they often cannot recall specific sentences or the words at all, except for dialog, and reading becomes more like an act of “conversion, a turning of codes into contents” (Birkerts 1996). Many schools of literary theory such as poststructuralism, criticize immersion, but Ryan suggests that their hostility toward immersion is “because it conflicts with [their] concept of language.”

The experience of narratives can be extremely pervasive and the classic metaphor of Transportation is often used to describe a reader losing themselves in a book. This appears constantly in Ryan’s analysis and has also been developed by Gerrig (1993) into the following theory of immersion in a narrative script.

1. Someone (“the traveller”) is transported
2. By some means of transportation
3. As a result of performing certain actions

4. The traveller goes some distance from his or her world of origin
5. Which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible
6. The traveller returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey.

This must not be confused with Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or the hero's journey from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), which focuses on the heroic journey of the protagonist to help a writer construct a story. The *journey* Gerrig describes is that of the reader experiencing the narrative.

A virtual reality experience such as riding a rollercoaster is safe, but this becomes more sublime as the experience becomes more immersive. The "delight of the narrative is its safety" (Nell 1988), and so it may be that some of this apparent *Safety* is lost when the reading experience becomes more immersive and therefore more sublime. The validity and effect of this potential loss warrant further study. The quality of the prose is a critical factor in narrative engagement, bringing about dreamlike brainwave states that make transportation both more likely for the reader and the reading experience more immersive. The reader's delight, and their enjoyment of the narrative experience, is the end goal according to Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004) who concentrated their investigation on a single factor of engagement, that of Transportation. Of particular interest to this research program are the three mechanisms that they consider to underpin enjoyment:

- a) the phenomenological experience of enjoyment through immersion in a narrative world,
- (b) enjoyment through beneficial consequences of media exposure, and
- (c) the circumstances under which enjoyment is enhanced or reduced.

In relation to mechanism (a), Green et al. suggest that although there are many entertainment media that offer the ingredients for transportation, and that “films and television...provide rich visual imagery,” books have the advantage because they allow “more imaginative investment from the individual as well as being self-paced.” This supports Ryan’s (2001) hypothesis that active participation in creating the storyworld immerses and transports the reader.

Mechanism (c) above instead switches our focus to “circumstances under which enjoyment is enhanced” (Green, Brock and Kaufman 2004). Under this definition of transportation, “stories become enjoyable to the extent that difficulties widen for the protagonist.” As these difficulties widen, the reader is called upon to perform participatory responses, to consider alternatives, to seek out actions for the protagonist to resolve the situations. Here, further literary techniques such as Anomalous Replotting (discussed below) can deliver their benefits and encourage transportation.

Both enjoyment and engagement are difficult to measure effectively and consistently, and so with this research program, I will focus on the construction and positioning of literary devices and to understand how these enable transportation, engagement and influence enjoyment.

### **Simultaneous Present Tense Narration**

Although some scholars consider Simultaneous Narration to be a “recent phenomenon” (Stjernfelt and Zeuthen 2010), the present tense has been utilised for several centuries in portions of many works of predominately past tense such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Brontë uses utterances in present tense to highlight the immediacy of the protagonist’s memory. Although Stjernfelt and Zeuthen (2010) consider that the “form really comes into its own in the first part of the 20th century with [works such as] Remarque’s novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928) (*All Quiet on*



*the Western Front.*)”, I assert that these works were merely infant steps in the use of present tense and that the form has evolved significantly over the past century.

There is a theoretical flaw in Genette’s model for narratives: that “it takes the existence of a narrator (or narrative voice) for granted” (Fludernik 2001). It is not present tense narration that conflicts with Genette’s model, because there are many examples of successful narratives in present tense, such as John Updike’s *Rabbit Angstrom* novels, and similarities have been drawn to live news and sports broadcasts on radio and television (Stjernfelt and Zeuthen 2010). But from this theoretical position, there appears to be no safe path toward first person-present tense narration or simultaneous narration. Simultaneous Narration has been labeled as unnatural or a non-narrative by many critics, such as Dorrit Cohn and also Monika Fludernik, who claims that “a story has to have happened in the past in order to become tellable” (Fludernik 2012, p 166). This has discouraged writers from embracing this narrative mode. Philip Pullman openly expresses a dislike for simultaneous narration, citing its limited range of expressiveness, and makes a plea to writers using this form:

I want all the young present-tense storytellers (the old ones have won prizes and are incorrigible) to allow themselves to stand back and show me a wider temporal perspective. I want them to feel able to say what happened, what usually happened, what sometimes happened, what had happened before something else happened, what might happen later, what actually did happen later, and so on: to use the full range of English tenses. (Pullman 2010)

This rant highlights a fixation on the writer-as-narrator and allows Pullman to pass over the fact that in simultaneous present tense the protagonist must show or focalize this full range of English tenses, not the writer. Pullman, Cohn, and Fludernik have each made similar and legitimate claims regarding most examples of this form to

date, but simultaneous present tense as a mode of presentation does allow the protagonist to express the full range of English tenses, as the text is the focalization of thought and a protagonist will think about what could happen, what usually happens and what might happen. As writers using simultaneous present tense we must look to include and expose these moments of thought to the reader.

It is argued that the narrative strategy of the homodiegetic simultaneous present tense “takes teleology away from” the acts of the narrator or the Experiencing-I, because “they do not know how events will turn out” (Phelan 1994, p 223). Phelan follows this with the precept that the reader implicitly knows they are reading a story, and so, will therefore also assume that the author, much like a director in a film, has shaped the story and selected the scenes to be portrayed or omitted. He then goes on to criticise the conclusions of Suzanne Fleischman (1990) in her study of tense and narrativity, where she states that the present tense “cannot be a narrative according to the rules of narrative’s own game”. This argument is characterised as “inadequate because it does not take sufficient account of actual narrative practice” (Phelan 1994), a claim supported by Matt DelConte (2008), who states that “retrospective narration is what we typically encounter in fiction and what has informed nearly all narrative theory.” This imbalance has biased mimetic standards and definitions, thus enabling narratologists such as Fleischman and Fludernik to classify simultaneous narration as an unnatural narrative based on Dorrit Cohn’s statement that “one cannot live and narrate at the same time” (1993). One response to this issue is a new narratological phenomenon of particular interest to writers using the simultaneous narration mode of presentation, the Absentee Narratee.

I term this phenomenon, particular to simultaneous present tense narration, the *absentee narratee*: the illusion (maintained by both narrator and author) that

someone within the story world is listening to the narrative even though the narrative structure does not accommodate that someone. (DelConte 2008)

The absence of a narratee removes “one link in the standard rhetorical chain (Author—Narrator—Narratee—Reader), bringing us closer to the ontology of the homodiegetic narrator,” DelConte (2008). This is one way to consider how simultaneous narration achieves its immediacy, but DelConte’s subsequent statement that “we have a narrator who cannot in any way be naturalized,” stems from mimetic standards that are heavily weighted in favour of retrospective narration.

The majority of works of simultaneous narration I have encountered are presented in traditional narrative modes with only the tense changed, and are correctly classified as *unnatural* according to mimetic standards. If a literary work presents the reader with thought utterances and focalizations of the protagonist, then this protagonist must be classified as *natural* as any retrospective narrator would be. These arguments, which are expanded later in this chapter in the review of works of creative fiction using the present tense, highlight that a refinement of currently upheld mimetic standards is long overdue.

### **Unnatural Narratives**

Simultaneous Narration has been classified as unnatural (Fludernik 2012), or a Non-Narrative (William Labov 1967), because “it eliminates the time between experiencing and narrating, [and] all but prevents retrospective analysis, a crucial component of narrative” (DelConte 2008, p 429), even though “the more reduced and the more neutral the framing narrative discourse, the greater the illusion of immediacy” (2001, p 625). The study of unnatural narratives suggests that narratives do not have to be “situated within a communicative context comparable to real-life narrative situations” (Alber et al. 2010, p 115). This study aims to remove the limitation of narrative models

to allow us to “depict situations and events that move beyond, extend, or challenge our knowledge of the world.” These unnatural narratives include the “fabulous, the magical, and the supernatural besides the logically or cognitively impossible” (Fludernik 2012). This can be as simple as a non-human narrator, or a story with an unnatural temporal flow, such as, for example, when time moves in reverse.

### **Modes of Presentation**

Modes of Presentation, also called Narrative Modes or Narrative Situations, refer to the predominant way in which the storyworld is presented to the reader. In order to highlight various scholars using different terms for similar aspects of narration, Cohn (1980) produced the chart reproduced in Table 1, Narrative Situations categorised by Stanzel and Genette (Cohn 1980), that compares the categories defined by Franz Stanzel and Gérard Genette. Stanzel’s Person category (First vs Third person), aligns with Genette’s Voice category (Homodiegetic vs Heterodiegetic), while Stanzel’s Mode category (Narrator vs Reflector mode), aligns with Genette’s Mode-Distance category (Diegesis vs Mimesis), and finally Stanzel’s Perspective category (Internal verses External), aligns with Genette’s Mode-Focalization category (Zero+External vs Internal). While this chart highlights the slight differences in focus by the two scholars and provides a simple enough reference to link the different terms, it does not extend to cover the Tense category (Past Tense vs. Present Tense). This again highlights the imbalance of currently upheld mimetic standards that appear to ignore the present tense.

<b>STANZEL</b>		<b>GENETTE</b>	
<b>Category</b>	<b>Opposition</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Opposition</b>
<b>Person</b>	First Person vs. Third Person	<b>Voice: Person</b>	Homodiegetic vs. Heterodiegetic
<b>Mode</b>	Narrator	<b>Mode: Distance</b>	Diegesis

	vs. Reflector		vs. Mimesis
<b>Perspective</b>	External P. vs. Internal P.	Focalization	Zero+External F. vs. Internal F.

Table 1. Narrative Situations categorised by Stanzel and Genette (Cohn 1980)

Critics such as Fludernik, Alber, and Richardson suggest that “there are no Pure Reflector mode works” (Fludernik 1996), and question the narrative validity of simultaneous present tense narration such as James Joyce’s *Ulyses* and Coetzee’s *Waiting for The Barbarians*. This is a gap that this research program aims to address in terms of its creative practice, *Boots of Spanish Leather*, which is positioned on the extreme end of Fludernik’s “authorial-figural continuum” (2001), where narrative discourse or diegesis are not just backgrounded but removed entirely.

### **The Act of Reading and Reader-Response**

Reader-Response, also referred to, as “Reader-Response Criticism,” is a key post-structuralist theory. Wolfgang Iser says “that the reader’s enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, that is when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play” (Iser 1978 p. 24). For my research, this is a key theoretical construct through which the reader creates the immersive environment. Iser’s theories suggest that “each text can only come to life through being read” (2000), which I analogise to an author creating a text as a seed that will, at any future time, germinate into the full literary work when the text is read.

It is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to ‘communicate’ with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate both in production and comprehension of the work’s intention” (Iser 1978 p. 24).

This section describes three specific components of Reader-Response Criticism: Transportation, Participatory Responses, and Anomalous Replotting.

## **Transportation**

The narrator in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* explains that he is “tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote, [and that he loves] to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts.” This longing is similar to the appeal I find in historical and science fiction, where I am transported to long past or future times, to places that may have existed or yet may still. Most readers remain scarcely aware of the effort they make to create the storyworld. For writers, this must be their goal: to enable the reader to *transport themselves* and to *perform the narrative* without conscious thought. I find direct parallels with the advice given by Takuan Soho, a Zen Monk of the Tokugawa period in Japan, on how to achieve the state of *No Mind*. In *The Unfettered Mind* (1988), which is a combination of several letters to prominent people of the time (Yagyū Munenori, head of the Yagyū Shinkage school of swordsmanship; and Ono Tadaaki, head of the Itto school of swordsmanship), Takuan advises Munenori to clear his mind and refers to “an old poem.”

*To think, “I will not think”-  
This, too, is something in one’s thoughts.  
Simply do not think  
About not thinking at all.*

A proficient reader cleanses their mind of the real world and transports themselves to, and performs, the storyworld without *thinking at all*, just as a master swordsman moves to strike or defend without conscious thought. Their minds are not vacant or dull, but primed and unfettered, ready to perform.

## **Participatory Responses**

When a reader is engaged in a narrative experience, they will often make participatory responses such as expressing their “hopes and preferences” for characters (Gerrig 1993, p 69). A narrative that does not present readers with situations or context in

which they can express hopes or preferences denies the reader an opportunity to participate in the narrative experience.

Engaged readers also contribute to the narrative experience by drawing inferences from their knowledge of the world. In some respects, our real world is as much constructed in our minds as any storyworld created through narrative texts, and we often “draw inferences and exhibit participatory responses in everyday life” (ibid, p 27). Sitting in my high-walled courtyard, I hear someone walking about in the kitchen of my home and construct a world based on known prepositions: the layout of the house, the sleeping habits of my family, and decide it is Jacinta setting the kettle to boil. Or the sounds of cars, trucks, buses, and pedestrians passing unseen beyond the walls of the courtyard allow me to make assumptions and build a world consistent with those sounds and my past experiences. An engaging narrative, therefore, will provide the reader with opportunities to make their own inferences that combine with the information in the text to assist them to perform the storyworld.

### **Anomalous Replotting**

When a reader transports themselves to a narrative world, this often “brings about partial isolation from the facts of the real world” (Gerrig 1993). Reading Historical Fiction is a prime example of this occurrence. If I am reading Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001), I distance myself from the well-documented fate of Ned Kelly and his fellow gang members, and revel in the anticipation of the moment. Despite what I know of Ned Kelly’s capture, trial and execution, I still find myself shouting, in my mind, for Ned and his gang to leave the Glenrowan Inn, where they are holed up and waiting for the police train to derail. Again. after a shootout with the police the next morning, when Ned is the only remaining gang member alive, and he finds himself safely behind the police lines, I shout “Run away,” knowing all along

that Ned will decide to attack the police line from behind. Somehow the distancing of myself from the facts enhances the reading experience making it more engaging than if I had no prior knowledge of Ned's fate. The act of replotting is not solely constrained to historical facts. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Hitchcock reveals quite early the key plot point that the two characters Madeleine and Judy are the same person. This allows the viewer to know more than the protagonist and so, from that point on, they are constantly considering and replotting how this character will react when he discovers this fact.

### **Internal Focalization of Awareness in simultaneous narration**

Many of the critics of simultaneous narration cling to the argument that "one cannot realistically 'live' the story and narrate it at the same time, or tell what one is currently experiencing *as a story*" (Cohn 1993). Arguments such as these were addressed by Damsteegt (2005) where he identifies and describes in detail a different concept for simultaneous narration, where "present tense action reports... indicate an awareness on the character's part of their actions at the very moment they are being performed." Damsteegt classifies these fragments of narration as Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA), as "mentally perceived [focalizations], by an I-as-character." This offers the possibility of IFA based on Cohn's definition of Simultaneous Narration (1993). Damsteegt's research, however, is notably absent in work by Stjernfelt and Zeuthen (2010) who continue to question the realism of simultaneous narration because "all non-verbal mental stuff such as, for example, actions and perceptions, must be displaced in relation to the narrative flow." Thus, by its definition, passages of Internal Focalization of Awareness are the utterances of the protagonist, and so they cannot be considered authorial mediation.



## Second-Person Thought Utterances

Based on my research of present tense narration and its application to my creative practice, I consider that the narrative style of *Boots of Spanish Leather* approaches realistic thought utterances when it includes second-person addresses such as *you* and *your*, rather than *he*, *she* or *they*, and that this results in a tangible reduction in narrative distance and a more engaging reader response. There is support for my claim from Cohn (1978), who argues that “the continued employment of third-person references indicates...the continued presence of a narrator,” thereby reminding the reader of the existence of this third person and thereby increasing the narrative distance. A true-to-life I-as-narrator will focalize their thoughts toward either themselves or the person / object of their attention using the pronoun *you*, for example:

And there *you* are, walking amongst *your* peers, but in *your* mind, *you* hold *yourself* above them.

Using traditional narrative language this is expressed using the pronouns she/he, her/his, or even a character's name, for example:

There *she* is, walking amongst *her* peers, but in *her* mind, *she* holds *herself* above them.

These utterances, addressed in third person, to the narratore and reader, positions this third person outside the I-as-narrator's mind and relegates them to be a side-participant, at a distance from the centre of the storyworld. A passage of simultaneous narration using second person thought utterances, however, positions the reader inside the mind of the protagonist. It is as though the narratee, implied by the use of third person utterances denies the reader from positioning themselves at the centre of the storyworld. However, my research has failed to locate any narratologist who has investigated how closely a narrative text can resemble realistic thought utterances,

whether first, second, or third person, and so, I turned my attention to scholars in the disciplines of Neuroscience, Psychology, and Communication Theory. Researchers in these fields express contradictory opinions on the possibility of second person thought, with Christopher Peacocke claiming that he is “confident that there are no modes of presentation for thoughts beyond first and third person” (2014), a claim supported by Richard G. Heck Jr. (2002). However, Jane Heal (2014), disregards their work and describes their assertions as “brisk denial[s]” and considers them “not argue[d] in detail.” She identifies at least two separate features of a narrative that “make it natural to identify them as instances of ‘second person thought’”.

- i. Shared Knowledge; and
- ii. Cooperation or a common project existing between agents

There are “thought(s) involving a second person mode of presentation of another, which might be expressed by an utterance involving ‘you’” (Heal 2014), and “that co-operative activity is the locus for such thought.” Heal’s definition of “co-operativity” is “a kind of action or activity where agents...have common purpose and hence common knowledge of their circumstances,” but she has not accounted for situations beyond action or activity for second person thoughts.

This study extends Heal’s definition of “co-operative” and suggests that action or activity are not essential between agents to define the focus for second person thought. Instead, I suggest that there need only be a “we” relationship between agent A and agent B, such that ‘we minus I = you’, and in contrast to Heal’s definition, that this ‘we’ relationship need only exist in the knowledge of agent A. This could mean that agent B may be unaware of the relationship or even the existence of agent A. Her argument rests upon there being this “common project”, that is common in the knowledge of both agents, to which the information agent A utters is relevant, and that

if the information or proposition is irrelevant to this common project, that the thought utterance “will not be a matter of second person thinking by A, even supposing it to be common knowledge.”

Heal does not exclude the possibility that “there are yet other kinds of thought, which also deserve the label [of second person],” so this study proposes one possible new kind of thought, that is, where the activity is not face-to-face in a physical sense. For example, if agent A's thoughts are focused on agent B, even if the two agents are physically and or temporally displaced, the activity can still be considered face-to-face. In the opening chapter of *Boots of Spanish Leather*, Franco's attention is focused on the character Cortez, who is located several miles away, yet his thought utterances take on the second person mode of presentation as show below:

I am no messenger boy, Cortez, my captain, my friend. You know this, but order me back here where my skills are wasted. I shove your battle report into my jerkin; at least our progress will please commander de Mendoza.

A few paragraphs later, there is another example of physically separated face-to-face activity that is also temporarily displaced, in which Franco recalls a time from his childhood (actually several different times), and his attention is focused on the young Consuelo. His thoughts of her are naturally expressed in second person despite the temporal and physical displacement of Consuelo of his childhood.

Sporadic musket fire resumes at the front line, cracking like joyous fireworks, flooding my mind with childhood memories of you, Consuelo: sneaking away from your family, ducking through the city gates, your hand warm in mine as we race for our rocky outcrop, sitting there, our legs dangling over the precipice, watching the bright bursts of light appear one after another over the high turrets of the castle Alcázar.

In both these cases the protagonist also demonstrates the existence of co-operative activity by expressing a *we* relationship between himself and the agent that

is the focus of their attention, by using the possessive plural pronoun *our* e.g. “our progress”, “our rocky outcrop”, and “our legs” This then fulfills the second of Heal’s narrative features to identify the focalization as second person thought.

### **Measuring Narrative Engagement**

Richard J. Gerrig (1993, p 7) aims “to make evident exactly how pervasive the experience of narrative worlds can be.” He describes two metaphors used to “characterise experiences of narratives,” the first *Being Transported*; and the second of the reader *Performing* the narrative. These conceptual metaphors are useful as they allow us to “structure domains of experience that cannot be accessed through literal language.” According to narratologists such as Busselle, Bilandzic, and Graesser, readers construct Mental Models to build meaning to a story, with Busselle and Bilandzic asserting that, to maintain reader engagement these mental models “must be constantly updated.”

These models, represent settings, characters, and situations, and are created by combining information from the text with knowledge the reader or viewer already possesses about life in general as well as about the specific topic and genre of the narrative. (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009, p 322)

Their research on measuring reader engagement first defines a set of dimensions for experiencing engagement, and then analyses several constructs for outcomes of, and threats to, reader engagement. Their measurements of reader engagement are based on a series of questions used to assess the scale of readers achieving these outcomes. The constructs they define are: Empathy, Sympathy, Cognitive perspective taking, Loss of time, Loss of self-awareness, Narrative presence, Narrative involvement, Distraction, Ease of cognitive access, and Narrative realism. They predict that these constructs are “more likely to occur or become more intense as

engagement with a narrative increases” (ibid, p. 326). Their dimension of Perspective Taking builds on Deictic Shift Theory, which suggests that to achieve narrative comprehension, readers must position their point of view to be within the mental model of the storyworld.

### **Creative works in present tense**

The selection of the tense for a story does more than define the form of verbs in the text, it must narrow the possibilities for how the story is presented to the reader; that is, in effect, its mode of presentation. In this section I discuss three prominent works that are predominately narrated in First Person-Present Tense.

#### ***Im Westen nichts Neues (1928)***

Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (lit. 'In the West Nothing New'), also known by its English title *All Quiet on the Western Front*, is the story of a young man who joins the German army not long after the outbreak of the First World War. Although this story is told using the present tense, it bears little resemblance to contemporary present tense narration. It is presented as a collection of sentences, sometimes mere statements or propositions that could be taken directly from written correspondence such as a letter:

We wake up in the middle of the night. The earth booms. Heavy fire is falling on us. We crouch into corners. We distinguish shells of every calibre.

...

I prefer to be alone, so that no one troubles me. For they all come back to the same thing, how badly it goes and how well it goes; one thinks it is this way, another that; and yet they are always absorbed in the things that go to make up their own existence. (Remarque 2012)

This story utilises a common trope of present tense narration, that of the narrative ending with the death of the protagonist. Remarque’s use of first person present tense neither reduces the narrative distance, nor provides the reader with a different

perspective on the experiences of the protagonist than if written in past tense, but the work provides a stepping stone for writers explore further along the Fludernik's "authorial-figural continuum" (2001), and present the reader with a protagonist thought utterances.

### ***Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)**

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) has been lauded as an exemplar for Simultaneous Narration. Damsteegt (2005) quotes several examples of Interior Focalization of Awareness (IFA) he has identified from the story and uses several passages to refine his definition for this literary technique. The story describes the experiences of a loyal *Magistrate*, who is never named, working in a town at the edge of a powerful empire that has encroached onto the lands of a people referred to only as *the barbarians*. Coetzee has made use of second person pronouns such as "you", but most of these passages are separated from the rest of the narrative by presenting them in quotation marks as though they are dialogue, though unspoken:

I am disquieted. 'What do I have to do to move you?': these are the words I hear in my head in the subterranean murmur that has begun to take the place of conversation. 'Does no one move you?' (Coetzee 1980, p 50)

This contrasts vividly with another passage, a couple of pages later in the story, where the narrative reveals an obscure moment of self-reflection of the protagonist considering his penis.

Sometimes my sex seemed to me another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites, anchored to my flesh with claws I could not detach. Why do I have to carry you about from woman to woman, I asked: simply because you were born without legs? Would it make any difference to you if you were rooted in a cat or a dog instead of me? (Coetzee 1980, p 53)

This is the single instance in *Waiting for the Barbarians* that approaches the Pure Reflector mode of presentation that I am striving to achieve in my creative practice, and reading this, I felt as though a wall had been dropped that separated me from the *Magistrate*, and I was suddenly able to experience his thoughts directly, rather than just hear them from a safe distance. The presence of his passage provided me with sufficient encouragement to explore the use of this mode in a consistent manner in a long form narrative.

### **The Handmaid's Tale (1986)**

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is often cited as an example of effective first person present tense (FP-PT) but whether this is an example of Simultaneous Narration is debatable. Although the majority of the text is presented in present tense mode, not everything unfolds in the present, and the narrative often slips into past tense for short passages, with the narrator describing the motives and past actions of characters including her own. In section 3 of Chapter II, Atwood inserts a flashback, signifying this with a scene break and a reference to the five weeks that have passed:

We stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I arrived at this posting. The Guardian from the previous posting brought me to the front door. On first days we are permitted front doors, but after that we're supposed to use the back. (Atwood 1996, p 20)

Here, Atwood presents a narrated flashback, as though the narrator has held up their hand for quiet, waiting for the non-present listeners to refocus their concentration. Only then does the narrator continue, and recount this important piece of backstory.

Atwood's use of present tense is explained somewhat in the afterword-like final chapter of the story entitled "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale," by suggesting it was transcribed from tape recordings, though these were recorded at a time after the story concluded, which brings into question the validity of the narrative. Her

protagonist, then, *does* narrate the story, and this highlights the difference between Simultaneous Narration and the pure reflector mode or Absentee narratee that I have attempted to achieve in my creative works for this research program. DelConte considered that “the narrator seems aware that no one within his ontology can access the narration, the narrator seems to narrate as if somehow conscious that someone outside his/her ontology can hear the story” (2008). The absentee narratee mode, however, assumes the reader is *inside* the protagonist’s ontology.

We are left to speculate as to Atwood’s intent in her choice to use, and lapses from, the present tense, and finally to deny the possibility of this tense in the Afterword. Valerie Martin warns the reader “Woe to the critic who takes her at her word” (p. xii), and asserts that for Atwood “there are always at least two stories, and both of them can’t be true at once.” In the final scene from Chapter III, Atwood presents the reader with an odd passage that puts into question the entire premise of the narration. It begins with a first person thought utterance: “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it” (p. 49). Then, as if the narrator is suddenly self-aware of her narration, and her words reflect the common criticism of FP-PT, that *nobody narrates their life as it happens*:

If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn’t a story I’m telling.

It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is forbidden. But if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else.

Even when there is no one. (ibid. pp 49-50)



The passage then mutates into an imagined one-way second person interaction that concludes:

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't. (ibid. p 50)

This passage, through its use of the second person pronoun *you*, supports my proposal that Heal's (2014) "we" relationship need only exist in the knowledge of the protagonist. In this case, the "we" relationship is with a non-existent agent. It is, however, one of only a few passages in *The Handmaid's Tale* that can be considered Simultaneous Narration in Pure Reflector Mode, and is both compelling, and engaging.



## Chapter 3: Research Design

In this chapter I describe the design structure for this research program. This structure is designed to achieve the research objectives of the program, which are:

- a. Review, identify, and refine, the definition for literary devices that increase the likelihood of reader immersion and an engaging reading experience, paying particular attention to those most effective in the historical fiction genre
- b. Evaluate methods used to measure engagement and how they can be used to predict potential impact
- c. Demonstrate and enhance the definition of the selected literary devices and modes of presentation through my creative practice in the historical fiction genre.

### **Methodology**

This is a program of creative Practice-Led Research (PLR), writing a long form narrative in the historical fiction genre. It makes use of reflective practices alternating between traditional research on literary subjects, and my creative practice, where I experiment with techniques, narrative devices and modes of presentation, then apply them to my long form work to enable an immersive and engaging reader-response.

PLR in the creative writing discipline can be closer to traditional experimental research. However, with creative writing, as with painting, it is difficult to determine the “criteria we use to judge the quality of art” (Mafé 2009). In this program, I direct my attention to sections of my creative practice where I have demonstrated a particular literary device or mode of presentation, but assigning a quality measure to this use is problematic, particularly for a long form creative writing work, where the quality of one section of text, or use of technique or mode of presentation, cannot be judged in isolation.

And, so, for this program I have used the reflective portion of creative PLR to consider and judge the effect on the quality of the creative practice. This assessment is rarely black or white, positive or negative, and in most iterations, I have pared back or elevated the particular usage in question to test its limits.

**Research Design**

Figure 1 below describes this iterative process. With each iteration, the definition and understanding increases and my creative practice evolves and matures.

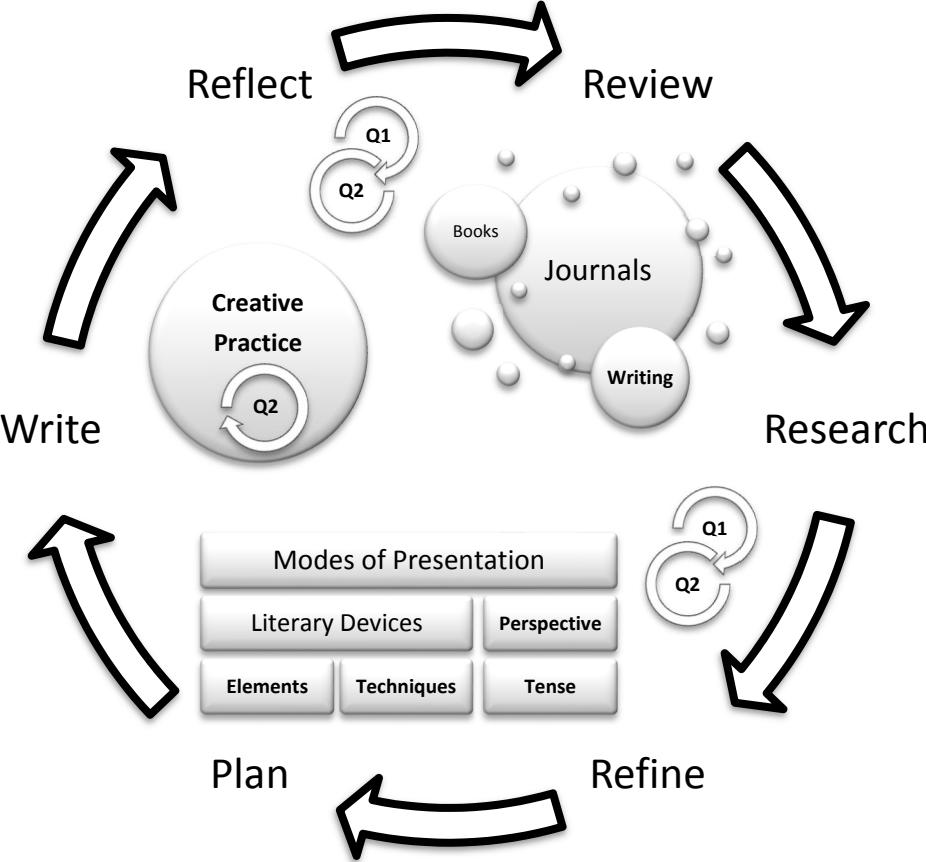


Figure 1. Iterative Research Methodology

This figure portrays the iterative nature of the research design, where each cycle can focus on a specific portion of the research program, beginning with a review of current practices, before delving into research, always relative to the program’s research questions. The findings are then documented and defined, and

used to plan for the next phase of creative practice. At the completion of this period of writing I reflect on the results in relation to the program's research questions, before beginning another cycle.

### **Summary of this Research Program**

This research program examines the questions: *What literary devices and modes of presentation increase the likelihood of an immersive, engaging reader response, and the impact of a literary work?* and; *How can I demonstrate and enhance the definition of the selected literary devices and modes of presentation through my creative practices in the Historical Fiction genre?*

The second question is the basis for my creative practice, in which I am striving for innovation in the literary techniques that can engage readers and create an immersive reader experience. My research approach was informed by traditional experiment based research methodologies used in science and engineering and the more recent attention of action research to achieve innovation. In an experiment-based research methodology, a researcher will determine a hypothesis and design and then conduct experiments to test the validity of the hypothesis and design. But action researchers have questioned the effectiveness of the linear nature of an experimental approach to innovation that “start[s] with science and end[s] with commercially relevant products” (Gustavsen 2005). Action research, however, is described as “evolving in a spiral to contribute to both industry and academia” (Price et al. 2014). Similarly, my practice-led research program included many iterations or spirals through research, refinement of knowledge, planning and hypothesising, creative practice, reflection, and finally a review to refine my research questions. The aims of my research also align to this definition of action research, which are to produce an

innovative but marketable historical fiction (industry) and to contribute to the theoretical understanding of narrative forms (academia).

The focus of each period of creative practice in these iterations is either a single technique, multiple techniques, or the refinement of my dominant mode of presentation. These iterations are conducted over many months, which enables deep focus on research, but also allows for a fresh reading of my creative work. The only period where research and writing occurred in parallel was during the planning and hypothesising phase where techniques are trialled in short, sharp sessions, often re-writing passages of other writers' works to retain objectivity.



Figure 2. Iterative Research Process

The research phase identified and increased my understanding of modes of presentation and literary techniques that could increase the likelihood of an immersive and engaging reader response. Then I refined these definitions for my creative practice, before producing a hypothesis and planning how these techniques could be trialled in my creative practice. I then experimented with these in both new writing and re-writing existing passages of my creative work followed by a period of reflection on the effectiveness of the experiments. Developments in my understanding enabled me to

refine and refocus my research questions and the definition of modes of presentation and literary devices, before resetting and returning to pure research, but the creative work forms the bulk of the results of this research program.

In each iteration, one or more techniques is pushed to its extreme, such as the inclusion of Spanish words and phrases, second person thought utterances, or formatting of dialogue. This process is used in science and engineering to define practical limits or breaking points of materials and techniques. The reflection and review phases determine the point at which the technique has pushed the reader's performance of the storyworld too far, or transported them too far, so that they lose their way. Each iteration refines and improves on previous works, sometimes paring them back, other times abandoning a literary device, a formatting platform, or mode of presentation altogether when it undermines, or does not deliver, an engaging reader experience.





## Chapter 4: Research Findings

The findings of this research are presented in alignment with the research questions outlined in chapter 1. Firstly, I describe the selected literary techniques; and secondly, I present an excerpt from the primary creative practice, *Boots of Spanish Leather*.

### Selected Literary Techniques

In response to the first research question: “What literary devices and modes of presentation increase the likelihood of an immersive, engaging reader response, and the impact of a literary work?” I have compiled a list of the literary techniques and modes of presentation selected to use in my creative practice.

- Simultaneous Narration – Absentee Narratee
- Internal Focalization of Awareness
- Internal Focalization of Memory
- Anomalous Replotting; and
- Second Person Thought Utterances

### Simultaneous Narration – Absentee Narratee

Simultaneous Narration, or more fully, Simultaneous Present Tense Narration is the mode of presentation for my creative practice. To increase the likelihood of its effectiveness, the use of this mode must approach Monika Fuldernik’s Pure Reflector Mode, where there is no authorial mediation at all, only the reflected thought utterances of the protagonist.

In addition to this, the form of Simultaneous Narration I have used also relies on several of the other techniques listed above to achieve my goal of engaging the reader. Stream of consciousness, where seemingly random thought fragments are often

presented with little or no punctuation, cannot be considered as Pure Reflector Mode. The form of simultaneous narration I am proposing for *Boots of Spanish Leather*, is a linguistic representation of thought utterances using similar punctuation to a traditional narrative, and so can be read without explanation or causing confusion to readers. Much like a virtual reality game or system, this proposed mode of presentation positions the reader at centre of the storyworld, inside the protagonist's mind, where the building blocks presented to them are almost exactly those encountered by the protagonist themselves. Even brief authorial mediation such as a sentence describing a jump in time, for example, "Three weeks later...", could disrupt the reader sufficiently so that they reposition themselves at a distance from the centre of the storyworld, or outside of it entirely.

#### **Internal Focalization of Awareness**

Here I follow Theo Damsteegt's and James Phelan's definitions of this technique, where the presence of descriptions and focalizations of dialogue, both of the protagonist and other characters, are presented as Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA). The differences of these focalizations to normal narrative descriptions are discussed in the analysis chapter of this work. Writers choosing simultaneous narration should consider warnings that when writers of monologues "become more enterprising, they begin to sound much less convincing, forced to describe the actions they perform while they perform them" (Cohn 1993). Otherwise, these focalizations could sound like a martial arts instructor, focalizing every movement of their body. This suggests that filter words such as *look* and *feel*, which relate to normal movements of the body, should be excluded from first person focalizations.

### **Internal Focalization of Memory**

In *Boots of Spanish Leather* there are two important scenes from the protagonist's childhood that provide important information and background to the story. The first shows how Franco and Consuelo first meet and provides detail of their "little rocky outcrop" that is the setting for a pivotal scene later in the story. The second provides the reader some background for Franco's desperation to escape the peasant class. Initially these flashbacks were separated from the main narrative with scene breaks, but I found this upset the flow of story because suddenly the protagonist had to become a narrator. It was as if Franco had put the story on hold so that he could provide important information to a listener or reader who was not there. To maintain the validity of the mode of presentation I rewrote the flashbacks as Franco's internal focalizations, so that the reader experienced Franco remembering these scenes. I have referred to this technique as Internal Focalization of Memory (IFM). These moments must be positioned carefully in the text, and must result from some catalyst: a sound, smell, or comment that brings the memory to mind. In many cases these moments will be brief, but it is not unusual for a person to relive an entire episode of their life, particularly when it is significant to the present moment. Although the thought utterances that make up IFM are presented in the present tense the focalizations will contain passages of past tense, as Atwood did in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### **Anomalous Replotting**

A reader, having transported themselves to the narrative world, often obscures their knowledge of historical facts and anomalously replots events. This is a common trait of historical fiction, and in *Boots of Spanish Leather*, I use this to build tension for the reader when they discover Franco's last opportunity to earn an officer's commission and escape the peasant class lies with joining King Philip's seemingly invincible Armada. Although most readers will be aware of the failure of the Armada, it will not

stop them holding some hope that Franco achieves his goal, even as the English fireships are being blown, by Dylan's "western winds" (1964), toward the Spanish fleet anchored off Calais.

So, what of readers who despite common knowledge remain oblivious to the failure of King Philip's Enterprise of England, and of the Armada being scattered by fireships? I have dealt with this in several ways: firstly, by referring to the Spanish Armada as *ill-fated* in the logline of the story; and secondly by using dialogue and actions in the text that link the assumed victory of the Armada with a Spanish-ruled and Catholic England. The reader, however, will remain unaware of Franco's particular fate. Historians specialising in this period, too, would be uncertain, even if they were aware that the ship Franco is on, the galleass *Zúñiga*, escaped virtually unscathed from the English forces, and avoided shipwreck on the rocky west coast of Ireland.

### **Second-Person Thought Utterances**

Thought utterances, expressed in second person mode, create a natural and engaging presence, helping to locate the reader inside the mind of the protagonist rather than as a side-participant. In the passage below, the second person pronouns are replaced with the third person form:

I am no messenger boy. Cortez knows this, but he orders me back here where my skills are wasted.

With the use of the third person pronouns, a narratee is addressed, positioning the reader outside the first-person narrator's mind, and off-centre to the storyworld. At this increased narrative distance, the reader listens to the protagonist's thoughts as an outsider or a third person. This therefore reveals a gap in possible narrative modes of presentation that my creative practice can explore and potentially fill.

According to Heck, thoughts are abstract, ideas, propositions, beliefs, or content, what he terms that-clauses such as:

*N believes that A is F*

*or*

*That superman flies*

The definition of thoughts expressed in narrative form are presented here as a linguistic conversation of the mind, which aligns more strictly with Heal (2014, p 322), who considers the use of third person pronouns for known people or objects as “pathologically odd,” citing the example of a thought utterance of a childcare worker whilst looking at a child pulling at their knee with their arms upraised. Heal considers the childcare worker’s thought would follow the second-person form of “Do you want to sit on my lap?”, rather than the third person form of: “Does that child want to sit on my lap?” This oddness of the thought’s structure is a trigger that could jolt the reader away from the centre of the storyworld, and so in my creative practice I took care to understand the attention and focus of the protagonist so as to avoid these “pathologically odd” utterances.

### **Creative Practice**

The creative practice portion of this research program is a long form Historical Fiction, *Boots of Spanish Leather*. Although the Enterprise of England was a failure, historical rhetoric has often labelled the Spanish Armada as having been defeated by the English Fleet, but only a single ship was sunk at the hands of Howard and Drake. It was the unusual weather of the summer of 1588, the arrogance of the Spanish leaders, their lack of experience sailing in the English Channel, and panic that were the major causes of this failure. They failed to “take head of the western winds,” nor “of the stormy weather,” (Dylan 1964). The first volume ends with the Spanish escaping relatively

unscathed north up the channel toward the North Sea, and the protagonist being awarded his much sought after officer's commission. Presented here are the first three chapters of this first volume of *Boots of Spanish Leather—Reino de España*.

I chose to present the story using several linguistic patterns drawn from the Spanish language: firstly, to present titles such as captain, pope, bishop etc. in lowercase, and also to begin dialogue that are questions or exclamations with an upside-down question mark (¿) or exclamation mark (!), and thirdly to use some Spanish words in dialogue particularly when they are commonly understood words such as *muchas gracias, señor, señora, señorita, perdón*. I use the English version of similar words in the main narrative, but their Spanish version in dialogue, for example captain / *capitán*, commander / *comandante*, bishop / *obispo*, bellringer / *campanero* etc.

**Excerpt from *Boots of Spanish Leather—Reino de España***

By A Fettered Mind

CHAPTER ONE

*Me considero bendecido en tolerar en este tiempo de guerra, no en paz, donde me estancaría en la clase campesina; constante languidez ablandando mi trasero y apagando mi mente. Conflicto Militar no es impredecible. Justo como los océanos, tiene modelo discernido. Rendido o vencedor, nosotros perecemos o mejoramos, nuestra fortuna crece o retrocede. Con vigilancia, yo montare las mareas de la Guerra y asegurar un futuro mejor—*

—I am most blessed to abide in this time of war, not in peace, where I would stagnate in the peasant classes; constant languor softening my arse and dulling my mind. Military conflict is not unpredictable. Just as the oceans, it has patterns to be discerned. Vanquished or victor, we perish or improve, our fortunes rise or recede. With vigilance, I will ride the tides of war and secure myself the future I seek.

## January 1588, Luxembourg

Eddies of smoke and fog linger over bloodied grass. Milky shapes whirl about me like spirits torn from still-warm bodies, then escape into the darkness between the tall grey trunks of the beech trees at the edge of the battlefield.

Two years' service on the Spanish Road, and finally we have the Dutch Revolt on the verge of collapse. A quarter mile away—where I should still be—my *colega*, plough with sword and pike against the enemy's left flank.

I am no messenger boy, Cortez, my captain, my friend. You know this, but order me back here where my skills are wasted. I shove the battle report into my jerkin; at least our progress will please commander de Mendoza.

I peer into the thick fog, searching for a familiar landmark, my boots settling into the sodden earth and stirring a rotting stench onto the air. A small rise in the terrain to my left is as good a direction as any. Within a few yards the ground firms and a view clears to a small hillock. De Mendoza stands near its peak, studying his maps on a makeshift table.

Alone? Your foolishness risks us all.

Sporadic musket fire resumes at the front line, cracking like joyous fireworks, flooding my mind with childhood memories of you, Consuelo: sneaking away from your family, ducking through the city gates, your hand warm in mine as we race for our rocky outcrop, sitting there, our legs dangling over the precipice, watching the bright bursts of light appear one after another over the high turrets of the castle Alcázar.

I stumble forward, the tip of my boot catching on an exposed tree root. My fingers squelch into the ground and a cold wetness seeps through to my knees.



My oath to you remains unfulfilled.

How long can you refuse the aspiring suitors your father parades before you?

His patience will not last. Neither will yours.

I swipe at the fresh mud on my hemp trousers, but should not bother; their black and yellow stripes are a faded melange. Cortez, you refuse to refit us, Cortez, instead saving your meagre wages to outfit new recruits.

Dashing up the slope toward de Mendoza, I pick my way between the flotsam and jetsam of battle. Three hours ago, the Dutch rebels held this hill, now it is littered with their bodies. Too many of my *colega* lie amidst them. I stop at one, and wipe closed his eyes, recalling the friendly words he spoke to me at camp this morning.

Reaching de Mendoza, I hold out Cortez' battle report. '*Comandante.*'

You maintain your sweeping gaze over the battlefield. The plumes of your morion helm are damp and limp, unmoved by the rising breeze. The fog, though, is lifting.

I shift on the spot, and widen my stance. It must be said. 'You are isolated here, *comandante*, you must take care of yourself first.'

You whip off your helmet, tucking it under your arm, and snatch the note away.

'¿Is that what your precious bishop says?'

'No *comandante*, it is what the ancients said: *Cura te ipsum.*'

You slam the helm on the table, sweat splattering the maps and parchments.

'I care not for your opinion. Not if you were raised in the Vatican itself and had pope Sixtus to wipe your arse. Outside that damned cathedral, you are naught but a peasant soldier.'

You force out a breath, your lips rattling, 'Tis a pity *capitán* Cortez did not

mention this failing in his recommendation.’

Your eyes reveal your anger, but confusion also. You are my superior by birth, but have neglected your education, and would do better with dice to tell a Psalm from a Prayer.

*’Si comandante.’*

You raise your chin. ‘Better Franco.’

Unfolding the note, you flatten its creases, one by one. So many of your class exhibit this frustrating latency; manners and process first, logic and action a belated second.

Finally, you hold the report up to catch the morning light, and a rare smile blooms on your sun-hardened face.

‘Some good news, young Franco, we may be home before this winter is out.’

If you recognised my worth I could return home with my head high and an officers’ commission and title to land in my possession. But, you are better than most commanders, who would refuse to promote any man whose family name has not already gifted them money and title. *Have patience*, Cortez often admonishes me. But patience is a sour chore for those yet to receive their due.

De Mendoza narrows his eyes. ‘Inform Cortez to remain vigilant. There can be no mistakes.’

I stifle a laugh and bolt away down the slope.

‘¡Franco!’ you call after me. ‘Your arrogance will cost you one day.’

Why do the old assume arrogance in the young is misplaced? I do not exaggerate my skills, my education, my worth.

A gust of wind whips past me and a sharp slap of cloth echoes across the field.

Behind de Mendoza, a banner flutters; the colours of the Low Countries.  
Ahead of it, the Dutch leader flees the battle. This will cost us dearly.

‘Their generalissimo, he escapes!’ I call.

De Mendoza glances over his shoulder, then whips out his sword. ‘To me, Franco,’ then disappears over the hillock.

I dash up the slope, my boots searching for solid ground, bodies squirming like disturbed worms beneath me. A clash of swords rings out.

Over the crest, de Mendoza fights hand to hand with the Dutch leader. A dozen yards from them a towering foot soldier plants the shaft of their banner deep in the soggy ground and draws his sword. Ahead of him, a Dutch officer sprints to his leader’s side.

I unsling my crossbow and arm it with the single remaining bolt, checking its tip, then lower it, centring on my target. Release.

The bolt skims past the foot soldier’s cheek and strikes true and deep under the officer’s outthrust sword arm. He tumbles dead to the ground. The foot soldier topples over him, but deftly rolls back to his feet.

Scrambling forward, I cross the fifty yards in as many strides, intercepting him, but must cede the higher ground.

His face contorts with effort, swinging his sword down, foolishly putting his full weight behind this single strike. I raise my blade and exhale slowly, waiting. His strike beats away my soft parry, but when his gaze shifts to his leader, I twist out from beneath the arc of his attack. His momentum tips him forward, opening his defences to me, and I pierce his laboured chest. Breath percolates from his lips, then slows as he twists and his body slips from my blade.

‘Franco,’ de Mendoza gasps, blood streaming from a gash on his forehead,

his legs buckling beneath him.

The Dutch leader smiles and lifts his sword, turning it over in his bloodied hand, savouring this small coup. I surge forward and swing up my sword, its tip checking his downward strike. His grip falters, flinging the sword from his grasp and the smile from his face. I step past and draw my short blade across his front, slicing through the folds of leather and deep into his stomach.

He collapses forward onto de Mendoza, who grits his teeth and pushes him back. The now dying man slumps to the ground.

De Mendoza cautiously lifts a hand to my shoulder.

I take his weight, and he raises himself to my side.

‘Proud work Franco.’

I have saved your life. This time, commander, you can ignore me no longer.

\*

Cresting the hillock, leading a small band of ragged soldiers, strides captain Jerado Herrera. His hand rests proudly on the pommel of his sword. It is set in the most elaborate scabbard of any captain in our *tercio*: dark polished wood panels, gold inlay, intricately turned and twisted steel.

I would have guessed you a cousin on Consuelo's father's side; only interested in benefiting yourself; the suffering or betterment of others of no consequence.

*Gracias a Dios* that Consuelo takes more of the countenance of her mother. But if it were otherwise, I would not cherish her so, she would not have spoken a word to one so lowborn, and you would not be so determined that I do not rise above the common ranks.

De Mendoza, a searching gaze in his eyes, pushes free of my support.

I step aside and search for a water barrel, my mouth as dry as parchment.

Jerado's men see the body of the Dutch leader at the feet of our commander and cheer, rushing forward, lifting de Mendoza onto their shoulders.

'Jerado,' he calls to you. '¿The rest of your men, where are they?'

You maintain your distance, pulling a clean white cloth from your tunic and wiping it along your bloodied sword. 'They gave their lives for this victory.'

De Mendoza twists on their shoulders to remain facing you. 'And Cortez, what of Cortez' company?'

You roll your eyes. 'Who can know.'

You for one, you would have been safe behind Cortez, out of range from enemy gunfire until victory was assured. Your men were not so fortunate.

You turn sharply to me and glare.

The men continue to cheer, bouncing de Mendoza on their shoulders.

He raises his sword in victory, but winces, and it drops from his grasp. Blood streams across his armoured chest plate.

I rush forward. 'Lower him.'

But you thrust out your sword, blocking my passage to de Mendoza. 'Be off, peasant.'

We are of a height. You lean in to me, the muscles of your jaw tensing in an inaudible challenge. You press the pommel of your sword against my tunic. 'Find the surgeon.' Then push me aside.

You can have the victory you will proclaim. But your men do not respect you. They are too anxious of your plans for them; how you will expend their breath, their lives.

I head for the front line, the air still and silent but for my splashing footsteps and hoarse breath. After a mile, a wave of soldiers from our company emerges from

the fog, the surgeon and his ambulance wagon ambling at their rear.

I wave my sword in the air. ‘*El comandante* de Mendoza, he is wounded.’

The surgeon whips at the hindquarters of his horse and the wagon jerks forward. Startled soldiers leap from its path. The horse is near full gallop by the time the wagon reaches me. I grasp at its side and swing myself up onto the rear step, holding tight as we bounce across the uneven grass.

We reach de Mendoza. Many more men surround him, squeezed in amongst the battle debris, looking on silently. The surgeon steers the wagon to one side. I leap clear, and shoulder my way through the gathered soldiers.

In the centre, de Mendoza is propped up against the wheel of a carriage. The scribe kneels at his feet, the *Tercio* journal opened, recording the commander’s notes of the battle.

De Mendoza sees me. He reaches out and jabs at the leather volume with a bloodied finger. ‘Franco, your deeds are here, your valour will be rewarded.’

Jerado snatches the journal away from the scribe and slams it shut. The other command staff step back too. ‘*El comandante* needs rest, not journals.’

‘Make way,’ the surgeon says, slipping past us.

The men make space, clearing away battle debris as they go, but I fix my gaze on the journal; filled with reports, orders, troop movements, and battle promotions. I want to rip it from your hands and read the words aloud. Consuelo, her face will beam when she hears I have finally won a commission.

The tip of Jerado’s sword taps at my chin, lifting my gaze from the journal.

‘Get back to Cortez, peasant. Have his men collect the boots and uniforms from the dead in my company. I’ll not have them wasted.’

You stand there, waiting for me to move. I could push you aside—probably.

You are an adept swordsman and an accomplished marksman, and yet you are reluctant to expose yourself to harm in battle. I turn away, angry at myself. You embody the same sense I chastised the lack of in de Mendoza. An officer should not throw away his life, he must know from where to lead. Though you, Jerado, could do more. You are no leader, simply a captain, directing fewer and fewer men.

\*

A week has past, and commander de Mendoza is still unconscious. There is little hope, now, he will recover. The *Tercio* are disbanded; given leave for three months. Our company, though, remains; a token guard for de Mendoza. But the men are only partially satisfied with Cortez' promise of fresh venison in return for these extra duties.

'Jerado had no right to take the battle journal,' I say, hovering at Cortez' ear while he collects his hunting equipment.

You stare, trying to silence me. Of anyone, you should know better.

'It should be yours to bring to Madrid.'

You slip a long blade into your belt and toss me a quiver full of arrows.

'Jerado can have Madrid. You know I have no love for the new capital.'

I move up close beside you. '¿But did you see it?'

'Know your place Franco!' We are friends, but I am still your *capitán*.'

Your pretence at anger fades and you smile, glancing out through the opening of the tent.

Yes Cortez, we are alone.

'Yes, I have read the report, and the recommendation from the commander.'

I leap forward and embrace you. My mind spins. Your eyes beam with pride too, but you shrug me away.

‘Let it pass, Mosquito. We must enjoy these last days as a company. Restful times do not last.’

You smile again, and it warms me. ‘Come we will hunt.’

\*

The forest thickens as we make our way uphill. In a small clearing at the top we rest and warm ourselves in the sunlight, looking south, down upon the camp. The remaining rows of our tents cover in the muddy paddock exposed around us by the departure of the other companies.

I follow Cortez down through the thick moist woodland on the northern slopes. ‘Jerado should have announced my commission before leaving.’

You motion for quiet, lowering to one knee, and reach for an arrow, knocking it in your bow.

Through the trees, a hundred feet away, a stag grazes. Huge, almost the size of a pony, its antlers rising four more feet above his head. We are downwind, a rumbling waterfall provides audible cover.

‘Not the stag,’ you whisper. ‘We do not hunt antlers. I promised fresh tender meat.’

We stay low and scan the forest behind the gently breathing stag. You motion to a point a little further upslope. There, a pair of young doe. I knock my arrow and draw back, holding my breath, but you fist snaps around mine, holding the arrow in place and shaking your head.

‘¿Have you butchered a deer? Where is its heart, where its organs, where the largest veins? You would pierce its lungs, or leave the arrow sticking from its rump. It would bolt in fright, panic, shit itself, and bruise its flesh. It would die badly and that is neither good for it, or the quality of the meat.’



You hold a finger to your neck, below the ear, feeling gently. ‘Listen, feel.’

We sit in the dark underbrush, the leaves rustling above us, the deer chewing on the tussock grass, their fur quivering.

‘Deeper.’

I press the tips of my fingers, copying your movements. What is it you expect me to feel? And there it is; the beat of my heart.

You nod, ‘I have seen a man faint from a sharp stab of a finger on this point. It is the same with any beast.’

You draw back your arrow and level your aim at the closest of the doe. Waiting. Breathing.

A gust of wind whips the canopy high above. The doe lifts her head. You release the arrow. It whips across the clearing and passes clean through the doe, between the thick muscles of its neck and larynx. It twitches, about to break into a run, but stops. The stag looks to her, its nostrils flaring just as the metallic tang of blood hits us on the wind. The doe smells it too, confusion in its eyes. The stag bolts. The other doe follows, but this one takes just one step before its head tilts and it lowers itself onto the grass.

We rush forward. You drop to the ground beside it and inspect the wound; a single puncture, barely visible if not for the river of blood oozing from it in bursts. You stroke the back of the doe’s neck as it breathes.

‘A gentle death, or a quick one, is the best any of God’s creatures can hope for.’

We sit beside the deer for a few minutes while its breathing slows, as does the flow of blood. It draws a long deep breath and then sighs, releasing it slowly. The breath softens, continuing out. I cannot discern the moment it stops, but after a quiet

moment you whip out your knife and begin to separate the carcass from its fur.

\*

My saturated boots hang by the campfire. The acrid aroma of hot leather permeates the air. Across the pathway, Cortez emerges from his tent, lifting the small wooden cross from the entrance pole; two smooth strips of dark timber tied together with a fine golden cord.

This has hung on your tent every evening, or from your mare's bridle, every day of this campaign. Your gaze caresses the child's letters scratched upon it: Natàlia, then slip it into your saddlebag.

The mare fidgets, stomping, and nudging your shoulder. A line forms on your brow. You inspect her, beginning at the muzzle, moving your calloused hand up its head, over its twitching ears, and down its mane to the saddle. Slipping your hand under the saddle, you flatten a large crease in the blanket and then tighten the girth strap, giving her neck a firm pat, then turn your gaze to me.

‘Consuelo, she will wonder at your delay.’

I glance to the commander’s tent at the end of the pathway. The *Tercio* has been disbanded and el comandante is to be moved north for treatment.

‘I must follow de Mendoza.’

You slip your foot into a stirrup and swing up onto the saddle. ‘It is rare to receive one’s worth. You cannot gamble on this, Mosquito.’

The remaining officers in our company bring their horses to a stop beside us.

You nod to the *alférez*, ‘The company’s wages, they have been distributed, the men dismissed?’

‘*Si, capitán*. Only Franco and the barber remain.’

You turn back to me. ‘Be careful Mosquito,’ and nudge your mare forward.

Your page falls in behind you, followed by the others, the *alférez* taking up the rear position. Their armour is freshly cleaned, brilliant in the low morning light.

‘God’s speed,’ I call.

You nod, your smile evident even from behind as your brave mare rises to a trot on the muddy pathway, heading south to Segovia.

\*

Three days, and the rain finally eases. The warm morning sun presses on my back while I scrape dried blood from the complex weave of my boiled leather jerkin. The roads will soon be firm enough to transport the commander.

The polished boots of the company barber appear before me.

‘A letter, Franco.’ He tosses it onto my lap. ‘I head west but will muster at the garrison of Segovia on Ash Wednesday, as must you.’

My name, written in your stiff script, dear *Campanero*, makes my heart beat audibly. I tear it open, scanning the page. One phrase stands out: the engagement of Consuelo, and I throw the letter down and kick at the fire, overturning a pot with the last of the venison. I snatch at its handle and set it upright, saving a little of my meagre luncheon. Stepping back from the heat, pacing back and forth, my fingers caress the wooden beads of the short rosary in my waist pocket, slipped there by Consuelo on our last tryst.

I pick the letter up, steadying my breathing, and begin again.

You delay your true message, dear *Campanero*: an acolyte with a tendency for theft...your latest timepiece...the harvest—you know I care not for these things.

A shriek echoes from the end of the path. The heavy red curtains lining the command tent are thrust aside. The surgeon emerges, his head downcast, his apron drenched with blood. I shove the letter into my jerkin and bound down the pathway,

mud squelching between my toes. I slide to a stop when the surgeon steps out, blocking my path. The curtains open again and two stretcher bearers carry de Mendoza out. He is conscious, but his face is grey.

The surgeon shakes his head. 'Go home Franco. He is dead in spirit; the body will soon follow.'

\*

Why they named one of the openings through the fortified city walls of Segovia *The Breach of Consuelo*, I do not know. Nor why Consuelo and I never discussed this coincidence. Even the purpose for these gates has faded with time; like the colours of an old war banner: bleached by the sun, stripped away thread by thread by the wind. The walls are relics; useful only for the beauty of their stonework and for the simple minded to ponder on their construction.

Cold sweat on my brow, frost crunching under my boots, I sustain this marching rhythm, even after five weeks alone on the road south. The high wooden spire of the cathedral de Santa Maria appears over the horizon. My heart quivers and I make the sign of the cross, mouthing a blessing to the holy mother. The Tierce bells from a dozen churches ring out across the valley, calling even the poorest soul to prayers. Now the stone walls of the cathedral catch the low morning light, shining like a beacon to all within and without the city; calling us home.

I do not tarry on the paths through the forest of Pinarillo, its tall pines filling the space between the ancient stone walls and the river banks at the confluence of the Eresma and Clamores rivers. A pair of storks rustle the branches high in the canopy and I cannot suppress a smile; snow fell only a few days ago and already they inspect the remains of last year's nest; impatient for spring.

I circle the city walls, making my way to The Breach of Consuelo.

Here, two soldiers stand guard, warming themselves in the sunlight slanting down between the tall mortarless columns of the aqueduct. I glance to the double tiered arches and the two niches high above, housing the carved images of san Sebastian and the Holy Virgin.

Pass to me your strength and patience, holy mother.

Ahead, a wandering peasant, his clothes tattered and soiled, steps in behind three noblemen as they approach the gate.

One guard heralds the well-dressed group through, but slips out his pike to block the dishevelled old man. The other wrenches his collar and pushes him away toward the smaller service entrance I have already passed. The man protests, but the soldiers keep their pikes levelled at his chest.

My foot soldier's clothes are little cleaner than this man's but I straighten the leather jerkin at my waist, check the knot and placement of the red silk belt holding my sheathed sword, and tilt my wide brimmed hat in the latest castilian military fashion. I have not travelled three hundred leagues to use a peasant gate.

One guard lifts his pike and steps forward.

I clench my jaw and rest my hand on the pommel of my sword, sensing its weight. His gaze falters and he flicks his head at his colega, lowering his pike. 'Let him through.'

I nod and enter The Breach, stepping out on to the grand plaza of Azoguejo, joining with the crowds assuaging their hunger at the market stalls and taverna.

Segovia, my city, you are ever crowded on a Sunday; all classes of people coursing up and down your cobbled streets, their pockets a little lighter in exchange for filling their hearts with the praise of God, but even the poorest retain enough coin to ensure the same feeling in their bellies.

Children chase each other in packs, their high voices shriek, diving between the crowds, in and out of stalls, trailing the enticing odours of fresh bread and sizzling meats. A man bumps me.

‘*Perdón,*’ he mumbles, slurping on a skewer of salted trout. A waft of steam from the blackened skin stops me.

Word that the trout are spawning would reach our cook at the cathedral a couple of times each year. For the next few weeks the *campanero* and I would escape morning prayers and the ringing of the bells. We leave the city in soft moonlight, making our way upstream, packs loaded with fishing gear, empty cane baskets slung over our shoulders, the cool flowing water always within sight, our senses attuned to its whorls and eddies, listening for tell-tale splashes, picking our way around lichen splattered boulders, following game trails through tall forests, trees a hundred feet high, growing right to the riverbank, their roots deep, securing themselves against the floodwaters that rush in torrents through the valley each Spring. Eventually, the *campanero* is satisfied and we would stop at a bend in the river or an old oxbow, setting our traps, sitting back, speaking in whispers, the old priest and bell ringer extolling stories of his childhood in the Pyrenees.

I stand, open mouthed, at a circular open grill. The heady tang of sizzling oily fish hovers on the air. An old woman cleans trout filets from a basket, scraping away dark layers of salt, and slapping them on the grill, warming them quickly for her impatient customers.

My stomach aches. If I had returned immediately after the battle it would have been fresh trout sizzling here and not this artificially preserved peasant food.

The old woman lifts a long thin filet from the grill.

‘Give my best to the bishop,’ she says and tosses it to me.

I catch the skewer. ‘*Muchas gracias, señora.*’

She presses her palms together in prayer, bowing her head.

The warm flesh tastes even better than its smell—peasant food or not.

I turn on to the street of Los Picos and quicken my pace, following it uphill toward the cathedral. Soon the cloister doors will be barred, and the bishop and the other holy men will retreat to the Chapter House for prayers, later sharing the communion wine offered so meagrely to the faithful.

The outer walls of Consuelo’s family home are adorned with granite blocks carved into large pyramidal shapes. As a child, I thought they would make the walls easier to climb but found the opposite to be true; my left hip aches in remembered pain. The aroma of fresh baked bread pervades the street. I accompanied the bishop or *el campanero* to many Sunday banquets here; *señor* Vázquez thought me no more a threat to his daughter than any other peasant boy seeking fun and a full stomach. The clamour and aromas from the kitchens suggest this feast will be one to savour.

I stride past the granite walls, holding my head high, peering through the curtains billowing from the slim balcony of Consuelo’s bed chambers.

\*

Choral voices echo from behind the locked north transept of the cathedral. I thump the heavy wooden door with my fist.

‘Open, *pronto.*’

The peephole slides aside and the ratty face of a young acolyte peers out. You do not recognise me. Though I must appear quite different to the boy you knew in the months before I joined Cortez’ Company. You were always fawning to me, but behind my back reporting my night-time escapades to the bishop. Your face may have sharpened but your wits remain dull.

I lean to one side, and peer past you. ‘When did Christ begin locking his doors?’

You bring your head forward, blocking my view, and then sneer at my soiled clothes.

‘A private ceremony.’ You slide the peephole shut.

‘¡Parar!’ You weasel faced coward. I thump against the door again.

‘*Mañana*,’ you say from safely behind the door.

No, rat, I will not wait another day. Gritting my teeth, I retreat and pass around the southern end of the cathedral. The architects have been busy. The curved walls of the new sanctuary have almost reached their full height. At the rear, I scramble up the outside of the cloisters, climbing over a low wall, and drop into the central garden.

In the bishop’s room, I remove my sword and rest it carefully on his desk, then push open the stiff wooden door and step into the cathedral. The gothic vaults rise a hundred feet above, magnifying the voices of the choir, and memories of the holy sacraments engulf me.

The altar is hidden from view. I skip up onto the raised choir platform. The conductor glares, but behind him the Campanero’s mouth curls into a smile, and he pats himself on the head, nodding to me, all without breaking his rhythm.

‘*Lo sentimos padre.*’ I sigh and slip off my hat and bow my head.

Sunlight filters through the coloured glass windows and reflects off the polished marble altar. The bishop stands between the altar and the baptismal font, holding his crosier high. You wear your most extravagant chasuble, normally reserved for cardinal Fernando de Toledo’s visits.

A large benediction chalice flies into the air, the crowd cheering as groups of



priests heave on ropes, sending the chalice speeding back and forth, trailing white smoke.

Two couples face the bishop and he whispers at their ears, turning the first of these to face the faithful. Consuelo's older sister and her husband. The other couple step out from behind a column and pass a cloth bundle to the bishop. The man is tall and young, his polished armour pristine. Close beside this battle virgin, too close, is Consuelo, my Chelo. Your long dark curls flow from beneath a high headdress and over a tightly laced white gown, your figure unmistakable. The battle virgin slips his arm around your waist.

Your face is radiant. You do not seem forced into a corner. I will not let this pass, whether it be your will or your father's.

I dash forward.

Jerado appears, blocking my path, pressing his palm to my chest.

'No, Franco.'

Your voice is low. We have lived in the same city most of our lives, served two years on the same campaigns, in the same *Tercio*, but I have never heard my name pass your lips.

'Consuelo pledged herself to me.'

Throwing back your head, you laugh; mocking me.

I duck and slip past, but am dropped to the stone floor, your arm about my neck and your knife pressed on my throat. I know better than to struggle.

Your face contorts to a sneer normally saved for the foulness of a privy. This hatred startles me; much more vehement than a simple disdain for the lower classes. You glance quickly around, then slip away the knife. I begin to struggle free. Your armoured elbow strikes the side of my face.

\*

Emerging from sleep, soprano melodies surround me. I breathe softly, opening my eyes, and raise myself up on an elbow, rubbing my jaw, my fingertips coming away bloodied.

The snarl of an unmusical voice interrupts, and I am jarred back to consciousness.

The bishop stands at his door, holding it firm, blocking me from Consuelo's father's view, but he stops me with the briefest glance.

'Calm yourself señor Vázquez.'

'The bastard has brought a blight on this sacrament. He is baseborn, just as his father.'

You knew my father? I step toward the door.

The bishop shakes his head for my benefit, but keeps his eyes on Vázquez.

'Franco has done no harm.'

'His presence is harm. My sister is distraught, her humiliation fresh again.'

I whip the door from the bishop's grasp. 'It is you who shame her. You care nothing for Consuelo.'

You smile, a knowing conniving smirk, while looking me up and down.

Your face betrays your relief; pleased to find no sign of an officers' commission. You feared my success.

'*¡Idiota!* It was Consuelo who requested the match. You are a relic of a foolish childhood. She has chosen well in Lieutenant Nemesio.'

I slap the side of your face with the back of my hand. You are slow, reacting only to the pain.

'*¡Suficiente!*' The bishop steps in, separating us, his movement sudden,

stunning us both with his agility and speed.

You rub at the welt already swelling on your chin, simmering with pure hatred. ‘Your secret is out *muchacho*.’ Then to the bishop. ‘You will harbour him no more.’ Then you retreat down the hall, the exposed nails in the heels of your shoes scraping the stone floor with each heavy step.

\*

The bishop watches Vázquez disappear, and then turns to face me.

‘*Hola* Franco. Welcome home.’

‘*Perdóname*, Obispo, I should not have struck him.’

Your hand is firm on my shoulder, pressing softly. ‘Vázquez is right. You cannot stay here. I will make arrangements for you at the church of San Esteban.’

I pull away. ‘So, the bishop of Segovia dances to the whims of the *hidalgo*?’

Your eyes enflame momentarily, then settle. You spin the chord with your keys around your wrist, first one way and then the other.

‘There have been questions. Questions from people neither you nor I need the enmity of.’

You slip a key into the lock of the arched vault behind your desk, and pull the heavy iron door ajar, and then step into the dark interior. You have rarely opened this vault in my presence.

A moment passes and you return, opening the baptismal register onto your desk.

The candle flickers, illuminating the interior of the vault for a moment, then darkness settles again. Its sides are iron too, not stone as I had imagined. The walls of the cathedral must have been constructed around this metal vault.

As a child I imagined it filled with silver and gold, or diamonds from the

deepest oceans, enough to make something of myself ten times over, half expecting one day the bishop would present some of this to me, an inheritance from my long dead father. But if there be treasure cloistered here, it is not of gold.

I lean in to you.

‘Just a little time, a few weeks, until I confirm my commission, then everything will change. This match is a farce, you know it so.’

‘Yes. Time Franco. It is time you cast Consuelo and your other childish notions from your mind.’

The door opens. An older priest steps cautiously inside, frowning and standing tall when he sees me in counsel with the bishop.

‘Your holiness, Lieutenant Nemesio and Lady Consuelo wish to thank you for the service.’

A glare from the bishop stops me.

‘Tell them I will join them in the chapel of saint Fructus.’

You wait for the old priest to withdraw.

I sit back on the lounge. ‘Her sister’s child?’

‘Yes.’ You pause, your gaze rising to the carved ceiling. ‘A remarkable child this one, and beautiful too. She has the same features as Consuelo at that age, giggling through the whole ceremony. And her eyes! So more amiable than the shrieking malodorous infants the peasants of the city bring to me.’

‘Not everyone can afford such finery.’

‘Franco, I was not thinking of your parents.’

‘I cannot think of them. They do not exist, even in my memory.’ ... Yet señor Vázquez remembers them.

You select an earlier page of the cathedral’s baptismal register.

Yes, ignore me again, dear Obispo, but I will have this information from you.

You slide your finger down the list of names, tapping a record there.

‘I baptised Consuelo too you know. I remember it as clear as if it were today.

I rubbed the scented oils on her forehead and her eyes locked on mine. I had to avert my gaze. It was like the depths of my soul were exposed. She is still the same you know. In your absence, her enthusiasm for *la Destreza* blossoms, especially with rapier and dagger. She regards me this same way when I correct her movements. She is wise beyond her years, was so from the moment the midwife pulled her from her mother’s nether regions. How an ignorant man like señor Vázquez sired her astounds me.’

Closing the register, you step back into the vault and slide the register into its position on a long shelf, then withdraw and close the iron door, locking it, then lift the dark, sweat stained chord over your head, tucking the keys under your robes. I have never seen you without them, even when you bathe they are always within reach.

I tug at your sleeve. ‘I must speak with her.’

You shake my arm loose and tread to the doorway. ‘This is not the time.’

‘¿Dear Obispo, you must tell me what has changed?’

‘Everything,’ you say, ‘and nothing. Now be off to the washrooms and clean yourself. The young ones will think you a drunkard I found in the gutter.’

My clothes are muddied and damp against my skin.

‘*Perdóname*, Obispo.’

You roll your eyes to the ceiling. ‘How many times?’

## CHAPTER TWO

The cellar below the bishop's rooms is as dark as pitch. Shadows from the candle dance on the wall like forgotten saints. I will not appear at the house of Vázquez wearing this greyed remnant of the shirt Cortez provisioned me with. Despite the appearance that no human has ventured down here for many years, my trunk is not where I left it. Dust cakes everything, imbuing the same colourless hue to all these disused objects. I lift a precisely folded but ancient altar cloth and it tears, the fibres frayed by a thousand rodent teeth, and the bottom half slumps heavily to the ground, raising a choking cloud of dust. When it clears, my trunk is here, its glossy exterior dark in the dim candlelight.

Inside, are books, hand drawn maps, and letters. Mostly books; you would be furious, my dear Obispo, if you knew I had not returned them to the cathedral library. But I could not part with them.

I am sure you had your reasons for including me in studies alongside the young priests and acolytes, but by twelve years old, even the washerwomen whispered that I had no ecclesiastical future. However, it did not stop me from scouring through every text in the cathedral I was permitted to touch—and many more in the dark of night.

If *el campanero* complained of my candlelight, in his chambers in the bell

tower, I would slip away to read in the stairwell. One moment my head would be bursting from the meanderings of some pox-ridden prisoner, the next the stupidity of some saintly cardinal would drive me to toss the ancient tome in the brazier, filling the air with the peculiar stench of burning leather.

I lift a bundle of parchments tied with a cloth ribbon and it opens to a graphite drawing of the castle Alcázar, its high round turrets lit by a three-quarter moon. Just visible to its right the wooden spire of cathedral bell tower. The warmth of your presence there beside me as I sketched this at our little rocky outcrop is as real as the candle's flame.

\*

My fourteenth birthday. The bishop invited me to join him at the military library in the castle Alcázar. The moment your attention to wavered, I sneaked passed the guards, climbing to the top of the tower of Juan the second and leaned out the window, gauging the textured esgrafiados relief of the stone exterior. The forest canopy of Pinarillo rippled like the ocean below me. The opposite riverbank rose steeply. There, hidden amongst the thick tracts of woodlands growing on the limestone hills, was a small rocky outcrop.

'There you are Franco,' you said, suddenly behind me. 'Come to the library.'

In the expansive hall, above the bookshelves, hung paintings of kings and queens, Castilian knights, and tall galleons riding high on waves, their hulls bursting with the gold of the New World. There were maps too, some so large that if they were laid upon the ground I could not leap across their painted oceans.

You stood near the doorway speaking quietly with an expensively dressed rotund man. I turned my back to you both, but listened to your conversation, moving my unseeing gaze over the gold embossed book spines.

‘Walsingham lives in such fear of the Catholics, he proposes to ship them to the New World,’ the man said.

But you scoffed. ‘The English spymaster knows more about the moon than he does of the Americas. He hopes they will drown.’

Your voice trailed off and I felt your gaze upon me.

I turned. ‘Obispo, is there a ladder?’ Indicating a map that filled the eastern wall.

The rotund man studied me closely. ‘I will arrange this obispo. It is the least I can do for the boy; for his father.’

You kept your gaze fixed upon me, waiting for me to acknowledge your wordless warning.

They brought me a tall dark timbered ladder, and then retreated to another section of the Alcázar. I borrowed three volumes on the history of the Kingdom of Castile and Homer’s *Odyssey* in English, but on our walk back to the cathedral, that little rocky outcrop dominated my thoughts.

‘I need to pee,’ I had said and thrust the books into your flailing arms.

‘Franco,’ you snapped, but I had already slipped away.

I left the city through the gate of Santiago, following the steep cobbled path down to the bridge over the Eresma River.

Peasants returning from their work in the fields choked the road, slowing my progress, so I jumped the low stone wall and sped through the woodlands until I was on the roadway below the south face of the castle Alcázar. I scoured the cliff face until I found the outcrop. Searching the verge, I discovered an animal trail leading under a thicket and crawled through. After a few yards, it opened into a meandering, rough-hewn path. Forced to backtrack twice at dead ends in the thick woodlands, my



cloak covered in leaf litter and small clingy seed pods, dusk settling quickly, I reached the outcrop. The soft tussock grass grew right to the edge.

Directly beneath were a few small gnarled shrubs growing out of the vertical rock face. A dozen feet below, a small level prominence, then a sheer drop to the roadway. I sat and dangled my feet over the cliff face, wondering if it were possible to climb down to the ledge below. The first golden slivers of the moon appeared on the horizon, rising slowly against the darkening silhouette of the city. I was so engrossed with this sight, I did not notice you sit beside me.

I had, however, noticed you many times; visiting the city's markets, or at the cathedral, singing in the choir with the Campanero. But at that age you dared not speak to a low born like me. You would have been twelve, your white and red striped dress tight with your new womanhood.

I braved a sideways glance, the moon reflected in the dark well of your eyes. We didn't speak until the moon had risen fully, suddenly back to its normal size, the air quickly losing its warmth.

You shifted slightly on the grassy brink, moving in close, your hip warm against mine.

'¿Why does our bishop abide you at his cathedral? You are no acolyte.' You peered down the cliff face. 'So why does he care for a smelly orphan boy?'

'He knew my parents; they were friends.'

That smile of yours.

'The bishop of Segovia is on such terms with a couple of insignificant—and probably smelly—peasants, that he takes in their son when they die of the pox.'

'How do you know they died of the pox?'

'Everyone dies of the pox. Either that or burnt at the stake by the *inquisidor*.'

‘It’s my birthday,’ I had blurted out, suddenly remembering.

That smile of yours again, while you inspected the ledge a few yards below our feet, with a curl of mischief in your eyes I would come to know well.

Then the bells rang for the Compline Liturgy.

You pressed your lips to my cheek, your warm breath brushing past my ear, then, jumping to your feet, ran off into the darkness. My thoughts rushed after you, my legs still swinging back and forth over our little outcrop.

The view there changed with the seasons; the snow drifts in the woodlands, the lights from the high turrets of Alcázar, or the way the full moon shone on the rippling waters passing each side of Segovia. In summer the ever-present drone of crickets and other nocturnal insects drowning out all other sounds; in winter, silence, broken only by the slow rhythm of wood chopping in the distance.

It became our habit to meet there. This rocky outcrop remained our secret place; even after we realised your parents would disapprove and your father assigned you a maid to control and monitor your movements.

\*

Reluctantly I set the sketch of the Alcázar aside and dig deeper, until there is the soft caress of silk. I pull out a long-sleeved white shirt and hold it up to the light. The strong aroma of cedar wood and the orris root the bishop insisted we boil in our washing water reminds me of years of laundry duties metered out as punishment for my...*disrespect*.

The shirt is loose. Food on the Spanish Road has been unreliable.

I glance up the ladder leading to the cloisters, my thoughts drifting higher to the bell tower and *el campanero*’s chambers. If I arrive with you, the Vázquez family cannot turn me away.

Entering the stairwell to the bell tower, the familiar malodour of guano is thick on the air. I suppress a childish grin. You have still not managed to purge the pigeons from nesting in the supports of the cathedral's brass bells. The cats of the cathedral are too fat and lazy to venture this high when there are so many stupid pigeons bobbing around in the gardens.

One summer you even persuaded the bishop to purchase a barn owl. Tethering it there, only letting it loose at night when its stomach was full, having fed it on offcuts of meat and offal or an unlucky mouse. But one evening, it failed to return and the pigeons resumed their lofty positions as though they had deposed an ill-deserved monarch.

The furniture in the bell tower chambers has not changed; two desks at either end, divided by wooden shelves piled with variously sized sandglasses and pyramidal stacks of candlesticks. In front is your beech writing desk with its two mismatched chairs. Taking pride of place is the cathedral's mechanical clock, dominating the room as it dominated our daily routine with its ceaselessly spinning hands. I step across the room and peer into the bed chambers. My former bunk, closest to the window, has been usurped, and a large grey mound of sheets sit on *el campanero's* bed.

In the next room the acolyte I had recognised through the peephole dozes against the tall thin window, a stiff bristled scrubbing brush in his hand. The brazier, in the centre of the room, is stoked high. You would never have permitted this when I bedded here; It affects my clock, you would say, and heap extra blankets on your bed and add another layer of stockings to your feet, angry even if you caught me reading by candlelight too close to your precious timepiece.

A glowing red coal cracks in the brazier and drops to the stone floor. The

acolyte wakes with a start and resumes scrubbing the guano from the stone windowsill.

‘That’s one chore I am glad to have behind me.’

The acolyte spins around. When you see me, your face contorts and you toss the scrubbing brush into the bucket, splashing grey water over the wall, the stone surface darkening.

‘Oh, the prodigal son appears.’ You glance to *el campanero*’s bed chamber.

‘The drunken fool throws me to the wolves; you know the ones.’

‘I’m here to see *el campanero*, not steal your bed.’

You are about to strike at me, but stop, and do not advance. Slowly, forcefully, you reduce the ferocity of your gaze. You have some discipline, despite your laziness. You wish to strike me. Not with a sword but with your fist; to feel skin clash my skin; you bone crack against my bone. What am I to a poor wretch such as you?

You take a furtive glance over my shoulder, then retrieve the brush from the bucket and return to the windowsill, dragging its stiff bristles across the stonework in long slow movements.

‘Forget him Franco,’ says a familiar voice.

The bundle of crumpled sheets rustles, and *El campanero* lifts his head from them. ‘The bed can be yours, if you would remember just once to remove that damned filthy hat in my cathedral.’

A warmth radiates through me.

‘¡*Campanero!*’ I rush to your side, slipping off my hat at the last. ‘I have missed you so.’

Steadying your bandied legs, you flick the old wooden rosary beads in your

hand in practised fashion, catching their end in your palm, and glare at the acolyte.

‘We have no argument, ¿do we boy?’

‘I will be fine,’ I interrupt. ‘There are other lodgings, and señor Vázquez has warned the bishop against helping me.’

You wave this away and waddle angrily to the window, looking past the crouching acolyte and down over the city. ‘I am too old for threats. What can he do to me? Remove me from the choir? Pay another to ring the bells? I condemn his soul to hell.’

You press the cross of the rosary to your lips, make the sign of the cross, then pause, a smile broadening on your face, then envelop me in your broad arms again.

I pull back, your breath stinking of wine. I thought this was behind you.

Your smile is now forced. ‘¿Well if you’re not to stay long, where do you go?’

‘When my commission is confirmed, I plan to claim the vineyard my father tended.’

You shake your head. ‘Your father tended no vineyard.’ Then search my face for a sign of mischief. ‘Though he was fond of the stuff.’

A little louder I say, ‘The old Benedictine monastery.’

Your face becomes oddly pale, highlighting the red blotches on your cheeks. Scowling, you face the acolyte, who stands with his back to the window, taking in everything like a scribe.

‘Remove your things and collect new bedclothes for Franco. Do it now, or I’ll hang you out that window by your feet so you can clean the outside too.’

The boy drops the brush into the bucket and rushes to the bed, rolling up the bedsheets and dashes to the stairwell.

‘Hold on *muchacho*,’ you say, shuffling across the room, barely able to lift your feet from the ground. You collect the bucket and toss the fouled contents out the window. ‘Get fresh water too. You only spread the shit around with that filth.’

The boy grinds his teeth, his eyes steely.

‘And don’t think I’m not watching your sticky fingers.’

The boy and his foul expression disappear down the stairs.

‘That one has not found his calling here.’

‘I’m sure you thought the same of me.’

‘Yes, but for vastly different reasons,’ you smile and chuckle slowly to yourself. Then looking up, watch me closely. ‘What of her engagement?’

I roll my eyes. ‘¿She could not seriously marry that pampered *hidalgo*?’

‘Lieutenant Nemesio is wealthy and his family have the ear of the king. Vázquez will keep a tight rein on her now the engagement is public.’

I take your arm. ‘Can I accompany you to their banquet this afternoon?’

You shake your head. ‘I no longer have the trust of señor Vázquez. Not since he discovered Consuelo’s feigned interest in the choir was a ruse for *la Destreza*. He found one of your letters too.’

‘¿What of *el obispo*, or other *clérigo*? Someone must be attending.’

You shake your head. ‘Let it rest my boy.’

I wander to the window.

Below, the red terracotta and slate roof tiles sprawl in sloping patterns this way and that over the city. This high outlook over the hilly prominence of Segovia reveals the unplanned nature of the streets, mirroring the pathways of the ancient Celtiberian tribes the bishop taught of, who inhabited the city long before the Romans.

A wooden crane looms dormant over the shell of a half-constructed building to the east of the cathedral, near the old city wall. The gaudiness of this freshly hewn stone will take a hundred years before it can compare to the patina of the Roman aqueduct, or even the newer Moorish buildings. The old stones of the cloisters, reconstructed here from their original position alongside the castle Alcázar, predate the cathedral hundreds of years, yet even they only hint at the beauty that time and weather will reveal. As a child, I would watch from this high vantage point, then run down the stairwell, squeezing out of one of the narrow windows, scampering out over the roof of the cathedral, leaping across the narrow streets, crashing down onto the lichen-encrusted roof tiles of nearby buildings, startling cranes in their nests or ravens perched in rows, until I reached my objective, normally a hidden courtyard whose owners I had seen depart. There I would wander about their halls, wondering whose hands cut and set their stone. Did they care what they built, could they see further than the single block they worked upon?

Snow covers the peaks of the sierra de Guadarrama. The mountains are just as I remember. I would sketch them at your desk; their snowy peaks dividing the central Iberian plateau, separating Madrid from the old Kingdoms of Castile & León, and Aragon.

Leaning out further, directly below, in the centre of the quadrangle enclosed by the cloisters, are four olive trees shading the pathways to the well in its centre.

The acolyte lazily winds the crank, bedclothes strewn on the mossy ground beside him. There were rarely any children my age, when I was raised here. You and I may have become close friends. I shrug. Why should I care? You are a simple acolyte, of no import to me.

My gaze shifts to the mechanical clock on your desk, its hands show the third

hour has come and gone.

'Damn that boy.' You stand, 'Quickly Franco, help me with the bells.'

I run up the stairs and into the bell room, the seven ropes hanging down through small holes in the arched ceiling.

I pull the ropes in practised fashion and the gong of bells fill the air, a moment later other bells ring out across the city.

'Come Franco,' you say. 'We'll find something to eat and drink.'

'No padre, my old ways of avoiding the family Vázquez must end.'

'Don't show your anger.'

'If I am angry I will not hide it.'

\*

The bright afternoon sun paints black shadows on the stone pitched walls and across the pavé. A maelstrom of chatter and music emanates from the open courtyard of the residence of Vázquez. Despite seeing you on the altar with this Nemesio, despite *el campanero's* letter, and despite the threats of your father, I feel as though nothing has changed. You wait for me, and our intimacy will revive, as though my two years' marching and fighting in mud and snow did not happen. Making a fist to knock on the door, the smallest finger on my right-hand cracks; it has healed but will never be the same. Yes, time has passed between us.

I thump the door. '*Hola,*' and then thump it again, stepping back to wait, listening for the latch.

When it moves, I heave against it, pushing passed Consuelo's stunned handmaid Magdalena.

'A thousand apologies,' I say and head along the hall.

'¡Franco!'



Lucia, Consuelo's mother, towers above Magdalena.

'*Buenas tardes*, señora Vázquez,' I say and bow. You have not aged a day since the you caught Consuelo and me eating raw lemon cake we had stolen from your kitchens. 'I must speak with my Chelo.'

'*Your* Chelo? You have heard of her engagement? Yes, but of course, you were there this afternoon.'

Magdalena tugs at my sleeve, 'Your sword Franco.'

I slip the sword and silk belt off.

Lucia moves close. 'Señor Vázquez will not be pleased to see you here.'

At the end of the hall, the double doorway opens. A silhouette against the bright afternoon sunlight; Consuelo, clutching an empty silver platter close in her arms.

'¡Franco!' Your voice rises, and then you quickly push the doors shut.

'¿When did you get back?'

'I was at the cathedral.'

'You did not greet me.'

'Jerado found me first.'

'¿What has he to do with this?'

You notice your mother behind me, and lift your chin to her. 'You knew he had returned? You should have told me.'

Lucia holds up her hand. 'Magdalena, see that señor Vázquez is kept entertained for a few moments.'

Consuelo's expression remains stiff. 'You have had your two years, yet I do not see the livery of an officer.'

'¿What do you see, then?'

Your face reddens, and you push past your mother and I and open the door.

Holding it open, you face Lucia. ‘¿Will you tell father?’

‘He will remain ignorant...for the moment. Now be off, before your absence at the table is noticed.’

We step outside into the bright afternoon sun, and I slip my arm around your waist.

You flinch, a fiery flash in your eyes, and grab a handful of my tunic and push against my chest.

‘You send no word for a year. You fail to deliver your promised commission...and now you take liberties?’

‘Just a little more time.’

Close now, your fragrance entraps me as it always does.

‘Jerado says that you abandoned your comandante.’

‘Jerado was not there; he knows nothing.’

‘¿Then why has King Philip rewarded his valour?’

I spit on the doorstep. ‘¿Ask your brave cousin how many of his company survived his valour?’

‘At least he shows advancement.’

This is how you reward my openness, my honesty. I steal a sideways glance, seeing you biting down hard on your lip. A faint rivulet of blood appears. My thoughts are drawn by the salty tang I would taste if we kissed, but turn my back and start up the slope. I am unable to fathom your thoughts. How can you be so naive, so blind to what is right in front of you? You were never so easily bemused.

The door to your home slams shut.

Wispy clouds, pushed along by strong high winds, pass unseen except for a

fool like me seeking guidance from heaven when all I need do is shut my mouth. All I asked, was a little more time. How can you be surprised?

Alone in the street, I let this anger pass.

*Patience Franco*, Cortez would say. You will be home too, and I know where you will be.

\*

Music from the taverna echoes across the *Plaza Mayor*. Patrons spill out across the street, blocking carts and passers by. Most of the crowd at the taverna Almazara are soldiers, awaiting assignment to the various squadrons of the Armada. The ones from the north-west regions of León and Galicia are thin, after their long march. I slip between the groups until I recognise Cortez's bellow-like voice ringing out from an open aired courtyard.

Here you are, sitting on a table, your feet on the bench alongside, the men and women crowding around you, laughing and encouraging your tale. You need no encouragement. You see me and stand, your face brightening, waving to me. There has been too little of this in you these past years.

'Franco, get an ale, I'll join you soon. Unless you want to hear this again.'

I wave, shaking my head, then duck under the low doorway and inside.

'*Alejarse*,' shouts a waitress balancing a half dozen foaming tankards of dark ale on a large wooden tray.

Yesenia pauses, seeing me, and calls. 'Franco, you're back? I knew you wouldn't be too far behind Cortez.'

I whisk away a tankard, and then let you through. '*Gracias señorita*.'

You frown, steadying your tray, and brush past men to the waiting crowd around Cortez.

I lean back on a rustic bench at the fringe of the plaza, and let the sights and sounds wash over me.

Yesenia, having emptied her tray, skips across the pavement and leans over the table, kissing me solidly, then smiles as my gaze drops to her gaping blouse.

‘I saw Consuelo earlier, holding tight to her fiancé. ¿Is he a colega, from your *tercio*?’

‘Nemesio is no *colega*.’

‘She baits you,’ Cortez says. ‘As does Consuelo with this Nemesio. She was always so as I recall.’ He swings his legs over the seat opposite me and pulls Yesenia back onto his lap, kissing her.

A group of teenage children race across the plaza, and down the street leading toward Consuelo’s home. Nemesio, he is of your class, Consuelo, your father does his best in making this match for you. But we had our own arrangement.

‘Consuelo will decide her own future.’ Cortez smiles, the way only a man with his thirst recently quenched can do. You pause, squinting at my face, then reach across the table, pressing your thumb to my chin. ‘You’re first day back and you have already come to blows.’ You hold out your thumb, smeared with fresh blood.

I force a smile and dab a sleeve against my chin. ‘You can thank the idiot Jerado for that.’

Your grin broadens. ‘I’m sure you did nothing to provoke him.’

I raise my glass.

Your face brightens and you lift Yesenia from your lap. ‘Natàlia.’

A young girl stops and waves, dropping the hand of her mother, and sprints across the square. ‘*Tío*.’

Cortez spreads his arms and the girl barrels into him, pressing her cheek to

his stomach.

‘Careful,’ he says and embraces her warmly.

‘¿Natàlia?’

I reach to pat her head but she shrinks away from me.

Yesenia kneels and draws her back to me. ‘¿You remember Franco?’

Cortez smiles. ‘Don’t worry, she was frightened of me when I first arrived home. You had forgotten all about your *tío*, hadn’t you?’ Cortez’ expression hardens when Natàlia’s mother approaches. After a pause, he nods. ‘Elena.’

Natàlia looks up to Cortez, ‘*Tío*, ¿can we go to the markets tomorrow?’

Yesenia absently tucks a few strands of hair behind Natàlia’s ears. ‘¿What does *mamá* say?’

Natàlia turns to her mother. ‘¿Can we?’

Elena shrugs.

A whistle from the tavern doorway, the owner of the Almazara stands there.

‘Yesenia,’ he snaps. ‘Tell your sister, her type is not welcome here.’

’That is in the past,’ Cortez calls back.

The man flicks his head to the street. ‘A whore is a whore.’

Yesenia whispers to her sister. ‘You had better go.’

‘Come,’ Elena says, taking Natàlia’s hand.

Cortez kisses Natàlia on the head. ‘We will see you in the morning little one.’

Then, turning to Elena. ‘Come to my apartment. I have washing from my platoon, if you can use the money.’

Elena nods.

When they have disappeared into the crowd Cortez breaks the silence.

‘¿Have you heard the Marques de Santa Cruz has died? And King Philip has

chosen duke Medina Sedonia to command his Armada. De Bobadilla is furious to be overlooked once again.'

'¿You were in Madrid?'

He waves this away, '¿You know of the Englishman Drake?'

'Yes, *el Draque*. Of course.'

'Well, de Bobadilla has appealed for information and let it be known that the company who can deliver experienced sailors who have fought Drake at sea, will win the right to serve as his honour guard in the Armada. Opportunities like this are rare for soldiers like you and me; we must seize them.'

'It is simpler for you, you have your commission, you have your name in the lips of generals. I don't need another service, I want what should be mine already.'

Your eyes are cold. 'De Bobadilla may be more amenable to our requests if we deliver what he seeks.'

'I cannot leave again. She can only delay this matchmaking so long.'

'Forget Consuelo. This is the Enterprise of England.' You fix your eyes on mine. 'This Armada will change the balance of power. Work with me, work with de Bobadilla, and all your ambitions can be assured.'

Your advice has always been true, you have earned my trust. '¿So, where do we find these men?'

\*

The band inside stops suddenly and one of the soldiers of Galicia falls from the doorway, his arse hitting the ground with a thud, his head swinging back and striking the pavement. He rolls to one side, lifting himself up onto all fours.

Following him out the door is *El Sodomista*, señor Vázquez's leading man. The brute arrived a year before I left for the Spanish Road. You have grown

markedly since then, filling out in both girth and breadth, but your intellect sloshes around inside your skull like oil in a water flask. You hover above the downed soldier for a moment, then land a roundhouse strike.

He falls back, out cold.

The dishevelled gang of El Sodomista's followers appear, cheering and patting his back. The apelike brute spits on his hands, rubbing them together, and strolls back inside as though he is returning from a quick visit to the privy.

The crowd return to their conversations and the band inside begins a new tune.

'Things haven't changed,' I say, raising one eyebrow to Cortez.

You lift your ale and take a long draft. 'We could have used that brute on the Spanish Road.'

'We did well enough.' I say, and lean in. '¿So, *el Draque* defends England?'

'The spies of the king tell us so, but the bitch Queen Elizabeth struggles to organise her fleet; English politics is never a simple matter; not since Henry cast aside our dear Catherine. Time is short and I must be first to de Bobadilla with this information. If we have no intelligence to report by sunset tomorrow I may be forced to head north to A Coruña and we will lose another month.'

'I will join you.'

'No Franco. You must remain here in Segovia. But do not offer money for their information; disguise yourself, it must seem no more than a passing interest.' You watch me closely. 'If word gets out that there is reward, every despot in the region will be posing as a sailor with their hands outstretched for money.'

'I will not disappoint you.'

Your expression remains serious. 'If you suspect they have what we need,

bring them to me.’

Yesenia slides two new tankards onto the table then takes an order from the table behind Cortez.

I take one and tap it against the other. ‘You worry too much, my friend.’

‘And you too little.’ You nod, and stretch your legs out along the bench. ‘It is good to be home.’ Noticing Yesenia standing at the table behind, you slip your hand under her skirt.

She yelps, but doesn’t slap your hand away.

Consuelo appears behind them, her face flushed, eyes darting through the crowd. Magdalena stays a few paces behind you. You see us, and stride forward.

‘Capitán Cortez,’ you say. ‘Still as free with your hands as ever.’

Cortez grins. ‘Consuelo my dear, have a seat.’

‘No capitán, Franco has two years to make up for.’ She pokes at my shoulder and continues into the taverna, not bothering to see if I will follow.

Cortez smirks. ‘You have been summoned.’

At the door, Yesenia greets Consuelo with a sarcastic curtsy, which she ignores and slips inside the taverna.

I nod to Cortez and lift my still full tankard and take a draught. ‘I will find what we need, you have my word.’

\*

Inside, the taverna is cleared of tables. Patrons fill the space, dancing and drinking. Consuelo moves to the centre of the crowd. They part for you, as you expect them to do. You move your body sensuously in rhythm to the music.

You stand out in any crowd; people always stare. It’s like a musical note emanates from you, alerting all that something remarkable is close by.



‘Give it back,’ Yesenia says beside me, and whips back an ale from a dark featured drunkard standing in the shadow of the doorway, his hands and wrists brindled with regular lines of burn scars. ‘Show me some coin and you can drink, otherwise get out.’

‘Here you go friend,’ I say and hand the scarred man my tankard.

His face brightens and he takes it eagerly. ‘You have a kind soul, señor.’

*‘De nada.’*

Yesenia sighs. ‘Drink up, then out the back with you.’

Scanning the periphery of the room, I half expect to see El Sodomista moving to intercept me. Magdalena, though, stands at the door, her eyes revealing the same worry as mine.

It is not my doing though. I slip through the crowd and pull you close. You press your hips against my thigh, your breath hot at my ear. I lead you toward a quiet corner but you twist aside and draw me back in to the centre. Spinning like a whirlpool, your skirt lifts higher, revealing silken skin.

Your anger may have subsided, but mine remains fresh. A hint of sweat on your neck catches the light from the fireplace, highlighting the flow of your skin. Use the wrong words, and this moment will end. Or any words. For once I maintain my silence.

A poke in my back. Yesenia tilts her head to the doorway. Jerado. I drag Consuelo deeper into the crowd, ignoring her questioning expression and slide in close, keeping my head low. Between the bobbing heads of the other dancers, I catch another glimpse of Jerado. Yesenia steps in front of him, offering a tanked of ale as Magdalena slips past him. He pushes Yesenia aside, and follows Magdalena.

Consuelo is oblivious. Her eyes have that damned mischievous curl.

I wrap my arms around your waist, my fingertips ring with the soft touch of your hips. How many nights, in the past two years, have I woken, breathless, imagining moments like this. You twist in my embrace and pull my arms down from your shoulders, slowly drawing my hands over your chest.

I cannot help them linger, sensing the soft weight of your breasts.

The song finishes, and the band put down their instruments. The street outside has darkened. I have forgotten how brief twilight can be here. Jerado will hope to catch us and use this against me with Vázquez.

‘I must take you home. I saw Jerado is out front.’

You stiffen. That curl vanishes, replaced by an impenetrable wall.

I squeeze your hands, drawing them together, but my Chelo is gone.

‘Yes, take me home. I am just a woman and must do whatever the man nearest me bids.’

‘We are not like that.’

Your eyes broaden. ‘It seems we are.’

‘This way.’ I drag you towards the rear door.

You shake of my hold, but follow me into the alleyway.

Three men hover at the privy doors, another is astride his horse. As we pass him, he whirls around.

Jerado, smiling, jerks my shoulder and presses me back against the stone wall. ‘¿Why do you defy me, peasant?’

\*

### CHAPTER THREE

Consuelo wrenches at Jerado's arm. 'Leave us, cousin.'

El Sodomista spreads his dark shadow behind her, grabbing her arms. She struggles but cannot break his grip.

'Yes cousin, a dark alley is no place for a lady, and one can only guess this peasant's intentions.'

I duck and twist out of his hold. 'She is safer with me than that dim-witted oaf.'

Jerado laughs. 'I think you've upset my large friend, peasant.' he grins. 'Do these cruel words harm you, friend?'

We wait while El Sodomista wades through the soft quicksand of his mind. Then he grunts and butts his forehead against the stone wall.

Jerado nods to the grinning man. El Sodomista relaxes his hold on Consuelo.

She breaks free, stepping away, straightening her dress and then standing tall. 'Cousin, you delay us, Franco escorts me home.'

Jerado shifts his horse to face her. 'I will escort you home, cousin, our mutual friend has some business with the peasant boy.'

Consuelo seethes, 'Leave me from your childish games,' and hurries up the alleyway toward the light.

Jerado stirs his horse after her.

But I block his path. 'Leave her.' I reach for my sword. But I am unarmed.

You smile. 'Missing something?'

You lift my sword from your saddle bag, along with the silk belt and its scabbard. You press the pommel against my chest, forcing me back against the stone wall. I take the hilt but you do not relent. The combined weight of you and your horse pressed against me, your eyes one fist from mine, your gaze darting from one eye to the other, your breath as foul as your expression. Suddenly you release the sword and pull away. It drops into my hands.

'Keep to your own class.'

'You do not control me.'

You smirk. 'You are a peasant, and that you will remain. There will be no commission, there will be no reward. You will die cold and poor, buried in a shallow grave in some dark lonely place, far from home.'

I lift my chin. 'I will outrank you before this year is out, there is already a commission for me in the wind. Cortez and I have the favour of don Francisco de Bobadilla. He will be most pleased with the information we've gathered.'

To El Sodomista, you mutter, 'Teach this one a lesson,' then whirl your horse around, and clatter up the alleyway after Consuelo.

I begin to unsheathe my sword, but my arms are taken by two henchmen. El Sodomista's huge hand wraps around the sword, and he tosses it over the stone wall into the stables.

I try and smile. '¿I don't suppose you'd prefer a drinking contest?'

He shakes his head, then spits on each palm, rubbing them together.

I steel myself for the coming blow, trying to sense which of the henchmen

has the weakest hold on my arms.

A flash of light. The side of a sword crashes against El Sodomista's temple, and he falls to the ground.

Behind him stands the drunkard from the bar, a devilish grin across his scarred face. '¿Who's next?'

El Sodomista's henchmen drop my arms and race away down the alleyway.

'Your sword, my young colega,' you say and place the hilt into hand. 'Now, be off señor, I will deal with these despots.'

You hold up your fist into the air, and then sprint up the alleyway after them.

\*

The first light of dawn steals in through the open tracery windows separating the cloisters from the courtyard garden. The stone hallways are deserted, my tentative footsteps jarring in the silence. I slip out of the cathedral and across the *Plaza Mayor*, wearing an old worn shirt, my boiled leather jerkin, and dirty sailors' pants, heading downhill to begin my search.

Leaving the third taverna, bloated with cheap sour ale, I no longer need pretend to be drunk. The street is shadowless, the sun directly above, the morning's efforts fruitless.

A gust of air carries out the aroma of fresh baked bread from a narrow alleyway. My stomach beckons. Ahead the pavé rises steeply, cobbled steps set between the worn stone wheel ruts. At the base of the climb is the open doorway to a small tavern. A voice echoes out; a drunken sailors' song. My stomach must wait.

A toppled wooden bucket lies across the entrance, some foul liquid dribbling down the cracks in the pavé. I gag but step over it and down a few steps into the dim interior. Tables are piled with half eaten food, the floor littered with broken pottery.

The owner must have simply pushed the drunkards out and crawled away to sleep.

‘Join me friend,’ says the singer from the shadows. I strain my eyes into the far end of the room, finally discerning the silhouette of a lone man propped at the bar.

‘The owner's a-resting out back so I helped myself,’ he slurs, smiling through brown stained teeth. He nudges a scavenged plate of roast suckling pig along the bar.

Even in the dim light I can see your filthy clothes would have been expensive. You disrespect the generous capitán who has supplied such fine livery.

‘Sailor, soldier?’ he grunts though a mouthful of pork.

I watch you closely in the darkness. ‘Fresh home from the Spanish Road.’ Your smile broadens, revealing more repulsive teeth and reddened gums.

‘It is you, my generous young friend.’

Looking closer. The scarred man from the alleyway.

‘Sit colega. I guessed you a fellow soldier.’

I rest myself on a stool and tear off some cold pig flesh.

You struggle to stand, then change your mind, slumping back onto the stool.

‘Lieutenant Reuben Costoya de Pontevedra.’ You hold out a wine casket instead of your hand and thump it on the bar beside me. A droplet of spit pools on its rim.

I should not appear reluctant, or rude, and lift it to my lips, taking a short draft of the watery wine. ‘*Encantado* Lieutenant. I am Francisco de Segovia.’

You wave a hand, lazily. ‘Just Rueben.’

I nod. ‘*Si*, Franco. ¿Do you join the Armada?’

You roll your eyes and take back the cask. ‘No fucking sea for me.’

I sigh. This search is pointless.

‘¿What upsets you, friend?’

‘The English pirate Drake, I seek intelligence of his tactics. For the King’s Enterprise of England.’

You nod in silence.

Wandering from bar to bar in a search is throwing dice; pure chance. If we do not find them, Jerado will.

You tilt your head to one side. ‘¿There is profit in this search?’

I shift a little on the stool. Cortez did not say I could not enlist others in the search.

‘Si, I understand,’ you nod. ‘There will be payment for the correct information.’

I grab your hand. ‘¿Where are they?’

You flinch at the touch, pulling away, holding your hands close to your body, tugging again your sleeves to cover them.

‘Our Lord has smiled upon you today, for I myself have seen *El Draque* at close quarters.’

Your gaze drops to my jerkin.

Instinctively I tap there; the sharp sound of silver.

‘All in good time, yes,’ you say and nod to the wine casket.

Reaching over the bar I lift down a large wine glass and fill it with the remains of the dark wine. Its sediment churns like sand in the waves, collecting adagio in the base of the glass.

You smooth down the front of his shirt, grab the glass with both hands, and gulp it down.

I raise my eyebrows. ‘¿*El Draque*?’

‘*Si, El Draque.*’ You nod unsteadily. ‘He did waylay our ship—a few days out from the New World. We’d lost the flotilla in a fog. The fools in the rigging uselessly searching for our compatriots. Hollering through megaphones and clanging bells. *El Draque* emerged from the fog without warning. His ship, it was one of the new light ships, but heavily armed.’

‘How did they come about?’ I ask, spitting the words out.

‘Easy lad. This be too early in the day for such haste.’ You take a breath, your eyes becoming slightly crossed. ‘They came about our larboard side.’

You almost fall from your stool, catching yourself at the last and stand, looking pale and pause. Then let out a long belch. ‘Wasn’t sure what end that would come out.’ You laugh and stagger back onto your stool. ‘They gave us a broadside. Cannon balls tore through our sails. Still the useless gunners fumble with their balls. It was left to me to cast the grapnel, but it fell short. A mate in the rigging swung from the top mast and reached the railing of their aft castle. Some English hound hacked off his fingers and he fell into the waves. And then they were gone.’

Your shoulders slump back against the bar and your eyes lose focus.

I shake your shoulder. ‘¿Then what?’

Your tale is confused, muddled by the drink. Cortez will not meet with you in this state.

You laugh, suddenly waking up. ‘Our captain, he shat himself. Just standing there look’n out into the fog. Muck and shit and splinters everywhere.’ Your voice trails off.

I nudge you gently and your eyes burst open.

‘You will pay, as you promised?’ swaying on your seat, then crumpling to the floor.



Tugging on your jacket, I am unable to roll you over; your body like a sack of loose turnips. Spit drools from your gaping mouth.

I suppress a scream; I cannot carry you to Cortez.

I lean back on my seat, my mouth suddenly dry, but I push away the half-emptied cask and instead drag you by your feet into a dark corner behind the door.

\*

The bright midday sun slants down the length of the street, warming the pavement. I pull down my hat, hesitating for a moment, then head for Cortez' apartment in the Jewish quarter.

Reaching Cortez' building, I bolt inside and onto the stairs, crisscrossing on them, back and forth around the open central courtyard. On the second flight my passage is blocked by an enormous old woman. Stopping suddenly, I trip, striking my shin on the step, and fall to my knees, cursing her under my breath. The lazy wretch turns around.

'*Perdón señora,*' I say, contorting my expression into something pleasant and squeeze past her.

On the top floor, Cortez' door is ajar.

'*Hola?*' I call. Nobody in sight, but a large quart of Manchego cheese and an empty glass of wine rest on the table near the fireplace. Light streams in from the carved lattice door to the rooftop terrace.

'*Capitán,*' I call breathlessly. 'I've found someone.'

The door to the terrace scrapes open and Elena steps in, naked but for a bundle of clothes in her arms.

I glance around again. '¿Cortez, is he here?'

Your eyes roll skyward. 'They took Natàlia to the markets and left me with

this lot,' dumping the clothes on the bed, and turning back to me. You rest your hands on your hips, standing tall, pulling back your shoulders, accentuating the prominence of your breasts with practised ease.

Time has been kinder to your body than I expected.

'¿Will they be long?'

'Sunset,' you say and tread close. 'We can pass the time though.'

I take your shoulders; your skin supple and enticing.

'Tell Cortez I have found what he seeks.'

'¿Are you sure?' you say with a subtle twist of her hips.

I turn and leave. 'Just tell him.'

\*

Rueben has gone.

The owner of tavern glares at me. '¿Is that the drunkard name? He owes me for the wine, his pockets were empty.' Pausing, you look me up and down. '¿You can pay his debts?'

The silver ducats are still in my pocket. 'I must find him.'

'The lad dragged the laggard into the street,' you say with a flick toward the boy scrubbing at a table.

The boy smiles, his eyes bright.

'¿Which way did he go?' I say and roll a ducat between my fingers then toss him the coin.

The owner snatches it from the air. 'I will look after that, *muchacho*.'

The boy smile does not fade. The man treats you well.

The owner slips the coin into his pocket. 'Has any drunk headed uphill? Exactly what I told the others.'

‘¿Others?’

‘Soldiers from the garrison. He is a deserter.’

I hold out another coin. ‘Send the lad to the cathedral if you see him again, ask for Franco.’

He snatches it away, but retrieves something smaller from his pocket and tosses it to the boy.

\*

No sign of Reuben at any taverns or alleyways downhill from the tavern. I buy a small loaf dowsed with balsamic and olive oil. Out of sight but with a good view of the plaza, I rest my back against the stone of the aqueduct. These pillars have stood for a thousand years. Touching my palm to the stone I imagine the events they have witnessed. The stone is cool despite the warm sunshine on its opposite side.

Obispo, you have taught me many things but who my parents truly were. You are open about their status: simple peasant farmers, and repeatedly eulogised how lucky I am to be educated at the cathedral. *Your mother was an interesting woman, you would say when I pressed you. Not nearly enough worldly goods to see her family through the next season, yet I never saw her without her long hair brushed and clean, her clothes the same, a smile always on her face.* You are less forthcoming about my father. He has failed you in some way, but the meagre details you bestow upon me have the ring of fabrication. Your anger was sometimes blatant, sometimes tempered, but you never revealed the details I crave. There must be some documents to explain how an orphaned peasant comes under the tutelage of one of España’s most eminent religious men. I head back up the hill to the cathedral, tossing what remained of my loaf to a beggar.

\*

The high ceilings do nothing to distract me from the teetering stacks of books that pervade this space. It is crammed with dusty religious relics, brightly painted wooden crates nailed shut, thick curtained alcoves built with crisscrossed timber compartments, congested with scrolls; from diminutive hand rolled parchments through to some more like carved tree trunks, and just as heavy. It has not changed. About to step away, I pause. Hanging over the edge of your desk is a loop of chord with keys. You would never have been so careless or forgetful when I was young. I lift the chord and stand in front of the iron door; nestled in a perfectly formed stone archway, barely room to slip a parchment between its gaps.

I am no thief. I do not seek the treasure locked inside, so there can be no harm. I flick up the key, slip it into the lock and rotate it sharply. The padlock falls open and drops to the wooden floor with a crack. I had expected the lock to be stiff. I listen, holding my breath, but no sound comes from the hallway. I pull the door open and reveal a long narrow storeroom, extending several yards into the darkness, one side lined with timbered shelves. I retrieve a candle from the main room and scan the shelves until I locate the cathedral diary. I tug it from the shelf and bring it to the desk. Flicking back through the pages a handful at a time, I pass my gaze over the bishop's embellished script, documenting the comings and goings of musicians and singers, the punishments allotted to priests, rents paid for housing the staff, payments to architects, builders, and suppliers of stone, and of course your sermons.

When the script changes to the more restrained style of your predecessor, I stop, and then work my way forward again. It would take hours to read it all and so trust my instincts; passing my gaze over the pages without trying to read individual words or names. Turning a page, a loose parchment flies out. A bill of sale for the vineyard adjoining the Benedictine monastery the bishop and I often stopped at on

his journeys to surrounding parishes.

Mid-page I see my name; three years old, accepted as an acolyte with several others, aged between eight and fifteen.

‘¿Franco?’ A voice calls.

I slam the volume shut. Consuelo stands at the doorway.

‘I’m guessing our dear bishop would be angry to find you snooping here.’

‘¿What are you doing here?’

I heave the register back into place and close the door, slipping the padlock through its hasp and click it shut, then push the bishop’s chair back into its place.

‘¿What is it?’ Consuelo says, closing the door and moving to my side, then leaning down and peering under the desk.

‘Nothing. We should go.’

Voices sound from the hall. I return the chord to the desk, dropping it over the edge just a little, trying to remember how it was before I touched it. If you left it here unguarded, how could you remember how you laid it.

‘*Vamos*,’ I take your hand, your skin soft, and you do not resist my touch.

I lead you out into the cloisters and around the corner, huddling against the stone wall.

‘You’re filthy,’ you say, leaning in closer, sniffing. ‘And you’ve been drinking.’

‘*Sí*, but I have found a man who could help Cortez earn the trust of de Bobadilla.’

You squint your nose. ‘I came to invite you to see a new comedy but you look like a gutter rat.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say and pull off the soiled shirt and pants, stripping to clean

stockings and an undershirt, then retrieve the doublet and cape from my bag.

\*

Lucia and Magdalena wait in the north transept.

‘*Buenas tardes,*’ Lucia says, a knowing smile on her lips, Magdalena avoids eye contact. ‘Would you be so kind as to carry my packages?’ she continues indicating two large boxes resting on the ground. ‘It seems one of our boys has forgotten himself and left us unattended.’

‘It would be my pleasure, señora,’ I say and ignore Consuelo’s reddening cheeks.

When we pass their residence, I run around to the rear entrance with the packages, catching up with them just as they pass beneath the aqueduct and we head out into the lower, newer buildings of the city.

‘Magdalena,’ begins Lucia, ‘please wait on Consuelo and this gentleman. I have a brief errand to run.’

Once her mother has moved away Consuelo too glares.

‘Thanks to you, my father insists I have a chaperone whenever I am out. I cannot see why I should be locked away day and night because you can’t hold a civil tongue with your betters.’

‘¿Betters?’

‘Franco,’ says Yesenia approaching us, hand in hand with Natàlia.

‘¿Cortez, where is he?’

‘He met with his *alférez* and left us.’ She flicks her head back down the street. ‘You would think he would have had enough time with his *colega* in the past two years but it seems not.’

‘Where did they go?’

‘I do not know,’ she sighs. ‘That was early this morning, and he has not returned.’

Natàlia peers around me to where Consuelo and Magdalena wait, her eyes fixed the long polished wooden necklace around Consuelo’s neck.

‘¿What’s your name?’ Consuelo asks.

‘*Soy Natàlia,*’ she says, stepping forward now and reaching out a tiny finger to touch the wooden cross at the end of the necklace.

‘I am pleased to meet you, Natàlia. Do you like my necklace?’ She holds it out for her to have a closer look. ‘¿Would you like to try it on?’

Yesenia takes Natàlia’s shoulder. ‘Stop bothering the señorita.’

‘She is no trouble.’ Consuelo places the necklace over Natàlia’s bowed head. ‘It matches your hair too.’

Natàlia beams, peering down at the neckless around her neck, and back up to Consuelo. ‘My *Tío*, he brought me back a comb from the wars.’

‘No wonder your hair is so beautiful.’

‘Come Natàlia, give the señorita back her necklace, we have chores to do before dinner.’

Consuelo looks to me, then back to Natàlia. ‘No, she can keep it.’

‘We do not need your charity, señorita.’ Yesenia lifts it off Natàlia and hands it to me, rather than Consuelo. ‘*Adiós*, Franco, señorita.’

Natàlia follows her away, but smiles back at us over her shoulder.

‘Such a lovely mannered young girl. Surprising.’

Consuelo looks down the streets. ‘Quiet.’ She presses Magdalena and I back into the crowd of people on the side of the street.

\*

A little way ahead, Jerado has emerged from a dilapidated building, his shoulders slumped, his eyes downcast, avoiding eye contact with the people milling about him on the street. He drops a sack of clothes onto the pavement and looks about.

We slink back deeper into the shadows.

He whistles sharply and holds up two small coins. A passing boy approaches him. They speak quickly, the boy nodding eagerly. Jerado hands him one of the coins and then holds up the other. ‘When you return from the garrison.’

The boy slips the coin in his pants, throws the sack over his shoulder, and scampers down the street.

Jerado watches him leave, brushing the dust from his clothes. He removes his hat, straightens his hair, before placing it back on his head and standing tall. Looking up, his face has regained its usual arrogance.

‘Dimwitted fool.’

Consuelo frowns. ‘He is your brother in arms and deserves your respect. His father was a famous soldier, and if rumours are true, a frequent guest of pope Sixtus.’

I hold my tongue as Jerado passes by, rubbing the back of his neck, heading back up the street.

‘The apple has fallen far from the tree then.’

‘He was only young when his father died. They lost everything, and he has struggled to live up to the reputation of his family. My father only purchased a commission for him to keep him from taking his mother and my aunt to the new world.’

‘His arrogance is unfounded, living in that hovel.’

‘Until his recent victories, he’s had to rely heavily on people like my father.’

Once Jerado is out of view we move back onto the street. The first-floor



window sills of his building are lined with cracked herb pots, thread-bare clothes drying in the breeze.

\*

We enter an old warehouse, finding inside a voluminous space. Most of the roof has been stripped away, allowing warm sunshine to illuminate the raised stage and rows of seats in the centre. But this also allows in the rain and snow. Patrons step gingerly along a line of large terracotta tiles laid over the damp earthen floor, taking seats at benches or climbing onto wooden galleries, which line the three walls opposite the stage where a band of gypsy jugglers, dancers, and musicians entertain the crowd.

An elaborately dressed young man greets us at the doorway, the high wooden pattens under his shoes lifting him well clear of the mud. He grins down at us, towering over Consuelo and Magdalena. He kisses Consuelo's hand and her cheeks redden.

A loud call from one of the gypsies gains our attention and he tosses a large steel sword high into the air. It twirls, flashing sunlight to all corners of the room, before dropping toward a man at the end of the stage. He catches the sword cleanly and the crowd sighs as one.

'Franco,' she says formally, 'This is Alejandro Lloberas, the playwright.'

I touch my hat to him and then return my attention to the stage. The man draws Consuelo forward and the rest of us follow them into the second most row of seats.

'You must excuse me,' he says and gives a half bow. 'The actors require my final directions.' He slips away, nodding to the gypsies. They cease their acts and follow him in through a door beside the stage.

The silence is broken by Lucia rushing in to the theatre. You see us and

squeeze along the row, taking a seat beside Consuelo. Your face is flushed, your eyes dart from side to side. I look questioningly to Consuelo.

‘Father’s sister,’ she whispers, rolling her eyes. ‘They are always at each other’s throats.’

‘Enough,’ Lucia snaps.

‘A comedy of epic proportions,’ expounds the playwright, emerging from the closed curtains of the stage.

The booming words put to end any discussion. The curtains divide behind you revealing a model of a galleon rocking back and forth on wooden waves painted alternate shades of blue. You scan the crowd, locking your gaze with many of the audience.

‘It is a tale of brave men, travelling the lonesome ocean to a new world, delivering the words of God, and their inevitable salvation, to a rich abundant land, with hopes of returning with treasures of silver and of golden.’

You are a skilled orator, projecting your voice adroitly out over us. The room hums with anticipation of your words. You lift a hand high and the tarpaulin above the stage is pulled back banishing the darkness behind the curtain.

A man stands there, visible now behind the model galleon, his armour as decorative and useless as Nemesio’s.

‘Where are the golden shores of this new world,’ he says.

The panels of wooden waves, below the galleon, gyrate simulating heavy seas.

The playwright is gone. I look to each side of the stage. He has slipped away while we were distracted by the actor. An imp in sailors’ slops drops into the crowd’s nets. The crowd laughs and he stops and bows before pulling the proud smile from

his face and replacing it with a serious expression.

‘Land ho,’ he hollers and points into the crowd.

The armoured hero peers forward, his eyes focussed far beyond us, as though we do not exist. Hidden theatre labourers pull the ship to one side, leaving only the man astride the forecastle. He leaps down from it, onto the stage. A curtain unrolls behind him, replacing the blue sky with tall mountains covered in deep green forests.

‘A new world to fill with the grace of God,’ he calls and bows his head, making the sign of the cross.

Three men and a woman, their faces covered in brown paint and dressed in the rags of the natives of this new world, run on stage. They holler with intelligible voices, poking at the hero with short spears.

He holds up a large wooden cross, and a soldier on the forecastle unfurls a miniature banner that bares the device of the Virgin Mary.

I laugh.

Consuelo elbows me.

The play continues with a mock battle using wooden swords of painted silver. The swordsmanship is embarrassing: the actors have never swung a weapon in anger.

‘This is nonsense,’ I whisper. ‘The fabrication of a mind accustomed to idleness. What good can come from this pretence.’

I stop, suddenly uncomfortable, scanning the room. Off to the side of the stage, the playwright watches me. I meet his gaze but he does not flinch. It is simple enough for you to feign strength from a safe distance. It is altogether different with cold steel in your hand. The pampered rich, with your safe protected lives, you cannot truly understand the military ethos, how it is to end another life, watching the whites of eyes expand in waves, mirroring the spurts of blood from their bodies, their

pupils darting from side to side, searching for the one thing they did not accomplish—did not say. Having to turn your back and face your next opponent, not even granting them the honour of watching them complete their crossing to the next world. Knowing that it could be you lying there. Alone.

Consuelo gasps at some action on the stage.

I lean in. ‘This is folly.’ I shift in my seat. The world is passing me by.

‘Listen,’ she scowls. ‘His words transport you.’

‘To a land of lunacy.’

‘Shoosh,’ says an old fat man behind me. I glare until he looks away.

‘I must go.’ I slide along the row of seats, nodding to Lucia, and walk out onto the street.

\*

I make my way to Cortez’ apartment, but duck in at any taverns I pass, but find no sign of Reuben. An hour later I reach the alleyway at the rear of Cortez’ building. The high walls funnel a cold wind through it, so I shelter in an alcove made of hand-hewn stone.

The cobbled surface here is always damp this time of the year, despite the strong wind. Direct sunlight does not reach the pavé, even at midday.

Two children run into the alley, followed by several others brandishing wooden swords, simple long sticks with a scrap of wood tied near one end to form a crude guard. Halfway along the alley, the two front children stop and hold out their weapons, mimicking the prima on-guard stance. Quite a good attempt; their wrists held at eye level, their swords steady and direct at their opponent’s throat. When the other children reach them, they whoop and strike with all their might. Their shouts and clacking echo against the stone walls.

*'Marcharse,'* screeches a parrot-like voice from above. An old fat woman pokes her head out her window, and empties a privy bucket on the children, but the liquid falls several yards short, and the children taunt her.

One lowers his knee-length panted slops, bends over, and exposes his pale rump to her. The children laugh together, until one of them slaps the boy's exposed rear with the flat of his sword and the chase resumes.

Their weapons are well matched to their size, a contrast to the painted weapons brandished by the actors. When they have disappeared, the alley is suddenly quiet and lonely. Where are you Cortez? Time is our enemy again.

Elena steps out of the rear entrance, counting coins.

I block her way. 'He's back?'

She nods, but walks around me, unwilling to break her concentration.

\*

When I burst into his apartment, Cortez stands at the small cast iron stove near the doorway to the rooftop terrace, heating spiced wine. You hold up your hand, silencing me.

'¿Did she tell you?'

You decant the wine into a glazed cream coloured bottle and flick your head toward the terrace. '¿Who is he?'

'His ship escaped Drake, not more than a year ago.'

'And the name of this treasure ship?' you say, your gaze now drilling into me.

'He did not say.'

'His name?' you bark.

What upsets you so? I assumed you would be pleased with my success.

'Reuben,' I blurt.

You sigh and look out over the railing, scanning the skyline of Segovia. 'I will miss this place,' you say and fill two glasses with the warm mulled wine.

The scent of cinnamon, orange and ginger permeates the cooling air.

You hand me a glass, but do not let it go.

'Burn scars on his hands? And teeth the colour of shit?'

I nod.

'Lieutenant Reuben is lucky to have escaped the gallows. He is a coward and a liar.' You spit onto the terracotta tiles that line the railing, watching the spittle congeal with the patches of moss and lichen, then turn back to me, holding my gaze.

'Give me your word that you did not pay for his useless prattle?'

'His story had the ring of truth.'

Your eyes enflame, 'You paid him?'

'No...no I did not.'

This is not a lie. No money was exchanged. I look away, feeling your gaze heavy upon me.

You let a moment pass, then hand me a glass of the warm wine, and slide the plate of dates along the railing. 'Eat. Drink.'

'If Reuben is so corrupt, how does he keep his commission?'

Your face softens. 'Some leaders find it simpler to ignore incompetence.'

'The same dolts who ignore my accomplishments, delaying my commission.'

'Never underestimate the laziness of a bureaucrat, my colega.'

A pair of armoured men on horseback clatter at speed up the cobbled street below us. Leaning forward my elbow bumps the plate of dates and it falls from the railing. It tumbles in silence, dates falling from it, until crashing onto the pave. This

spooks the horses, and the men look up.

‘*Perdón*,’ I call. ‘An accident.’

They eye us suspiciously but calm their horses and continue on their way.

‘Franco,’ Consuelo calls from further along the street. Lucia and Magdalena are with her. She bids them goodbye and runs into the building.

\*

‘Alejandro,’ Consuelo says breathlessly, running out onto the terrace. You take hold of the railing, steadying yourself.

Cortez frowns. ‘I have no visitors for weeks, and now in one hour two friends burst into my home as though racing to the end of the world.’

Consuelo takes the wine from my hand and drains it. ‘Franco, the playwright, he did battle with Drake and his new ships.’

Cortez takes her elbow.

‘Which ship was he on?’

‘They were returning from the Indies. The *São Felipe*. Only a handful escaped.’

I wave this away. ‘Forget him Cortez. He is a pretender, his comedy a farce.’

Consuelo’s eyes flash a challenge, but Cortez takes her arms and regards me over her shoulder. ‘We trust your judgement Consuelo.’

She relaxes into his hands. ‘He returns to Madrid as we speak.’

‘You should have brought him to us.’

‘You should have stayed with me,’ Consuelo glares.

Cortez asks slowly. ‘Where is he now?’

‘There was news from the capital. He left with barely a word.’

Cortez glances quickly to me. Plans churn in your mind: do you chase him

yourself, send word ahead? Will others find him first?

‘Come,’ I say and make for the door. ‘With good horses, we will catch him before San Ildefonso.’

‘Patience, Franco.’

Consuelo rolls her eyes. ‘Franco would already have this precious information, if he had patience.’

‘How could I know he had battled Drake? He looked a fool.’

‘At least he doesn’t acquire his clothes from a slop chest.’

Cortez stifles a laugh.

This only incites Consuelo. ‘¿And where is this commission of yours? You are the pretender.’

Cortez reaches out a calming hand to her, but she flicks it away.

‘You, my dear capitán, are no better. You are only home a few weeks, and already you are set to abandon Yesenia.’

Cortez steps back, his hands raised in submission. I have not seen him react this way.

Consuelo shoves him backward. ‘¿Are we nothing to you, only fit to wash your clothes, and warm your bed?’

Consuelo presses her empty glass against me, her teeth barred through her lips. Her anger is spent just enough to not boil over. She drops the glass and makes for the door.

I catch it as it falls, then look up. ‘¡Wait!’

‘Let her go,’ Cortez says. ‘I will leave at nightfall. The moon is full, I can travel light and fast. I will catch this man long before he reaches Madrid.’ He passes the wine decanter. ‘Drink, send me off with a high heart.’



## CHAPTER FOUR

El campanero is at his bells, waking me, as he always did. I cover my head with the blankets, waiting for the gongs to dissipate.

'Up, Franco.' The bishop tosses a practice blade onto the bed beside me.

I bounce out onto the cold floor before you can slap the back of my legs with the flat of your blade. The body remembers.

'We have a few hours before you must report to the garrison, let us make good use of it. Consuelo is here, she woke me more than an hour ago. Her father left for Madrid at first light. It appears the both of you have equal disregard for my warnings.'

I slip on some clothes and race after you down the bell tower stairs. At the wash basin beside the doorway off the cloisters you place your sword and the silk ribbon attached to the scabbard to one side and wash your face and hands meticulously, drying them with the same frustrating enthusiasm. When the ritual is complete, we each push one of the large double doors open and enter the foyer of the chapter house.

Sweat already moistens your brow. You wear black hose with strips of woollen fabric panted at your hips and a herringbone padded leather belt. A long dark cape is fastened diagonally over one shoulder and under the opposite arm, its strap pressing your white silk shirt tight. You sweep your cape back over your

shoulder with a flourish, its weighted lower corner caresses the stone floor as you spin and thrust. Your left-hand clasps the scabbard and sheathed sword at your hip, tied there with a black ribbon, a matching ribbon restrains your long curls, a few errant strands dancing on either side of your face.

You take the on-guard stance, inching your feet in and out, bouncing your torso, flexing your knees slightly, finding your natural posture, your body poised to attack or to defend. Then you lift your rapier, holding the fine Toledo blade high, directed to the throat of an imagined opponent; your dagger, retrieved from the holster at your thigh, also at the low position, pointing to the throat.

You try too hard. ‘¿Do you fight many opponents that short?’

You complete a smooth pass-forward, changing your front foot, and resume your stance with weapons directed at my throat. Before I left Segovia, you would have screamed and attacked without thought, your defences degraded to beat-parries, mindlessly slapping away my attacks. You have transformed, my Chelo.

The bishop pushes me aside. ‘None of your childish stratagem, Franco. Take your weapons and move through the parry forms. Do not take liberty to instruct or correct.’

Consuelo smiles, adding a malevolent flicker of her long dark eyelashes.

‘*Uno, dos, tress, cuatro,*’ you call in quick succession, and Consuelo and I rush forward and take up our positions.

Again, you count, this time at a speed we can match and we move through the forms while you put your back to us and ponder the sound of our rapiers as they clash.

‘*¡Parada!*’

You whirl around. ‘This is noise, not *la Destreza.*’

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as you close on me.

Your voice rises from the depths of your body; quiet and menacing.

‘¡Franco! Your thoughts have the stench of obnoxious intent, yet you attack as though Consuelo were a snowflake that will collapse beneath you. You cannot train, with your mind in such conflict.’

Consuelo smiles.

‘Unfold your arms,’ you snap, flicking at my hands with your rapier.

I flinch. A small line of blood appears on the back of my hand.

\*

‘Take refreshment,’ the bishop says and indicates the stone fount against the interior wall, beside it a flask of his preferred watery wine.

I fill two of the wooden mugs with the cool wine and pass one to her.

I take a deep draught. ‘And how do your wedding preparations proceed? I have yet to meet my usurper.’

Anger flashes momentarily in your eyes. ‘Lieutenant Nemesio is aware of the resentment you hold. He wishes to earn the respect of his fellow soldiers, and trains incessantly. He returned to the garrison immediately after the christening. And yes, Jerado has taken Nemesio under his tutelage.’

‘The *pajero* takes an apprentice,’ I smirk.

The flat of the bishop’s sword slaps against my back, knocking me to the ground. ‘Need I remind you of where we train, Franco? This is holy ground, and we learn the true art for the protection and prosperity of the Word of God.’

My back burns.

‘Come.’ He motions to the centre of the room.

I draw my sword and follow.

‘I did not ask you to draw your weapon Franco. This is practice for the soul, not the sword. Steel can only withstand so much polishing before it becomes thin and brittle, while the soul only functions truly when all the evils of the human mind have been purged.’

I raise my eyebrows questioningly toward Consuelo. Her smile betrays her.

‘Do not talk. Face each other. Extend your right hand at eye level and advance a half step.’

I slide forward a few inches, taking up the slack with my rear foot. Consuelo, mirroring my movements, touches the back of her hand to the back of mine. My focus oscillates from her eyes and our hands.

She shifts her position and presses her hand against mine.

The bishop stands behind us, watching our movements intently.

A hint of sweat surrounds your warm hand. I steel myself, and then thrust against you, but you flick me aside and your hand comes about mine, pulling me forward.

The bishop moves in deftly behind me, pressing his palm on the small of my back, and I topple forward.

Consuelo smiles again.

‘Again,’ he calls. ‘This time, Franco, do not attempt to prove you are the strongest. A contest based on strength is pointless. You must sense your opponent’s mind.’

He takes our hands and roughly presses the backs of them together again.

‘Look,’ he says. ‘Feel,’ then nods. ‘*Comenzar.*’

Consuelo’s eyes remain focussed on mine not our hands. I push softly, and sense no resistance, but then, it grows, with every fraction of an inch until I could be

pushing against the granite walls themselves. Your arm betrays none of this deep-rooted strength. Your fingers flutter gently. I release my pressure, and instantly your hand moves over mine and you throw me backward. As I fall I snatch for your leg but you whirl your cape, flicking aside my hand and kick me in the arse.

I stand and wipe the dust from my hands.

The bishop chuckles. ‘You’ve become rigid, Franco. But,’ he glances to Consuelo. ‘I did not ask either of you to win.’

You have planned this, and probably practised for weeks to make me look a fool. We shall see. This time I keep my focus on Consuelo’s eyes, an arm length away, her dark pupils slightly larger for a split second each time she blinks. I take up the slack against the back of her hand; neither pushing nor succumbing, mimicking her faint retreat, using the distance to harden like soft cloth that is like stone once compressed to its limit.

We smile together and I step in closer. You exhale a soft breath that rustles the hairs on my wrist.

How often do binds with swords become like this? Close enough to see the flecks of colour in an opponent’s eyes, the hairs of their brow; their breath is your breath, as intimate as a kiss.

Your lips part with a quick inhalation. Your eyes brazen, growing dark; a warm restful place of refuge.

The bishop steps abruptly between us, breaking the spell. He glances my way, the same look in his eyes as many years ago.

\*

Consuelo and I had conspired for her to arrive early one day for language lessons with the bishop at the Alcázar, appearing at the doorway of the Galley Room, during

one of my *la Destreza* sessions.

Your expression was inquisitive. Somehow, you've remained unaware that you need only bat your eyelids and men would do your bidding. We thought our friendship a secret, but the bishop's knowing look said otherwise. He kept a watchful eye on us and never permitted Consuelo to leave the Alcázar or cathedral at my side. He negated any suspicions from señor Vázquez, by adding language studies to our practice, working us through drills with the sword, while repeating phrases and verses in French and English. Having our minds kept fluid in these difficult languages while our bodies moved through complex twists and turns made for fast progress in both.

The bishop is a busy man, and at the Alcázar the bureaucrats regularly called him away, to translate or decode some message from spies in courts of Italy and England.

That day, he was absent more than an hour. We continued, choosing our favourite moves. At one point, Consuelo and I entwined ourselves in a close bind, the guards for our swords together, and our faces inches apart. Consuelo fluttered her eyelids, and I suppose this worked for I felt a familiar stirring.

I feigned a wavering of concentration and waited for your next move. Your attack came. I twisted and pressed you to the ground; your arms and weapons trapped behind your back, your breath hot and panting.

My lips touched yours, and you drew my tongue into your mouth. Our weapons clanged against the stone floor. You pressed your hand against my loins and I stroked the soft material covering your inner thigh, tugging also at the buttons of your blouse.

'¡Franco!' The bishop bursts into the hall, his face red, his eyes inflamed.

‘Get the devil out of you. Consuelo is no plaything.’

He held out his hand, and Consuelo raised herself from the floor, then turned his back while she smoothed her blouse and retrieved her weapons.

He slapped my face, when I failed to oblige Consuelo the same privacy. ‘If you cannot control these base impulses, your lessons will cease.’ He ground his teeth, teetering on the verge of another tirade. ‘Sometimes I regret not taking the cardinal’s advice and sending you to the galleys.’

He bowed to Consuelo. ‘Forgive us, señorita, I assure you Franco will not take such liberties again. Our practice has ended. I suggest you return home before dark, and your father uncovers our deception.’

While Consuelo placed her weapons in the stand, the bishop leaned in and whispered. ‘I have not betrayed the trust of señor Vázquez so you can despoil his daughter.’

Consuelo paused near the doorway.

‘Come,’ he said, and escorted her out of the room.

A few minutes later the bishop returned, jingling a leather purse as though measuring the value of its contents. ‘Follow me,’ he said and walked back through the doorway.

We descended the stairs and passes through the outer hall and out into the street. Twilight had fallen and a few drops of rain dotted the pavé. You turned sharply down a small alley leading to the north. I quickened my pace to stay with you. Our leather sandals scraped on the pavement and the screech of a tomcat echoed along the alleyway.

‘Hurry Franco.’

The tall stone city walls loomed closer. Are you to be rid of me?

At the end of a dank alley you stopped at a wooden door with heavy metal locks, and rapped upon it. Stepping back, you patted your thigh as though calling a stray dog to your side.

I came forward and stood in silence.

The latch slid aside and an older woman, her face hideously painted, opened the door.

‘Dear bishop, what brings you here?’

He grabbed me by the collar. ‘The usual reason. Make sure she is clean but not pretty.’

He handed her the purse, and then left me standing in the doorway.

A cruel smile distorted her face.

Behind us your footsteps stopped and we turned to you.

‘That will suffice until the boy leaves my care. I do not expect to hear from you again.’

‘*Si padre,*’ she said, and then studied me closely, jingling the purse.



## Chapter 5: Analysis

In this chapter I reflect on the literary techniques I have researched and developed, and their effectiveness to engage the reader, as well as each technique's specific application to my creative practice.

### **The evolution of my Mode of Presentation**

The form of my chosen mode of presentation, Absentee Narratee Simultaneous Narration, evolved over several iterations of research cycles. Having initially written the story in first person-past tense, my first activity was to make the switch from past to present tense. When I began my reflective phase, I found the resulting narrative to have developed a similar form to Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, and that the switch in tense had not delivered the immersive experience I had expected; the descriptions of action and setting felt like authorial mediation. My own authorial voice remained prominent, rather than the thoughts or narration of the protagonist, leaving Franco almost mute.

My next review phase concentrated on the theoretical foundation for FP-PT and the works of Ryan (2001), Fludernik (2012), DelConte (2008), Damsteegt (2005), and Phelan (1994) lifted my aim to that of Simultaneous Narration. The narratological phenomenon of Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA) offered the potential for Franco to come into his own and share the stage. I then sought out several books written in FP-PT that scholars considered to demonstrate IFA such as Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), taking critical note of the *Magistrate's* focalizations as an I-as-character. Reflecting on Coetzee's narrative, I began to listen to, and consider, my own thoughts and focalizations as I went about my daily life. I took particular note of moments of reflection and the linguistic structure of my thought

utterances, and was surprised to discover my use of the second person pronoun *you* while I was considering the actions of a work colleague, as in, “What are *you* doing that for?” This triggered an intense period of research into the second person point of view, but having found no work that matched this particular usage I broadened my research to include the field of neuroscience and concluded that these focalizations were what these scholars termed second person thought utterances.

In my next period of creative practice, I sought out passages where Franco was thinking of, or focalizing the actions of other characters, and switched the text's third person pronouns for second person. It was as if Franco had suddenly attained his voice and the authorial mediation was transformed into Franco's thought utterances; he had not only revealed his voice but had removed my authorial voice entirely from the text. To maintain the validity of the text, every sentence had to be grounded in the mind of a sixteenth century foot soldier. At an obvious level, every simile and metaphor had to be based on Franco's direct experience and knowledge including the religious teachings and philosophy of the time period. The description of people and place, also, had to be valid focalizations of Franco: things he could see, hear, smell, and would notice or find of interest. This allows the narrative to reveal Franco's private anxieties and prejudices and also to juxtapose them with his dialogue that may form part of a very different public persona.

The cellar below the bishop's rooms is as dark as pitch. Shadows from the candle dance on the wall like forgotten saints. I will not appear at the house of Vázquez wearing this greyed remnant of the shirt Cortez provisioned me with.

; and a conversation between Franco and commander de Mendoza:

You force out a breath, your lips rattling, ‘Tis a pity capitán Cortez did not mention this failing in his recommendation.’

Your eyes reveal your anger, but confusion also. You are my superior by birth, but have neglected your education, and would do better with dice to tell a Psalm from a Prayer.

*'Si comandante.'*

The protagonist in this absentee narratee form of simultaneous narration does not narrate. It is as though their thoughts and focalizations are simultaneously heard and transcribed into text. This resulted in a narrative form that engaged the reader directly, positioning them inside Franco's mind. This is an extension of the *show, don't tell* maxim, where the reader can approach experiencing the thoughts of Franco rather than having those thoughts told, and thus inhibiting their potential performance of the text.

In the passage below the focus of the thought utterance is more complex, with Franco in a scene with two other characters; Vázquez (the father of Consuelo), and the Bishop or *Obispo*. The second person focus remained on Vázquez to limit confusing the reader as the goal for the scene was to show the conflict between Vázquez and Franco. When the Bishop speaks, however, Franco focalizes this in third person.

'The bastard has brought a blight on this sacrament,' Vázquez shrieks. 'He is baseborn, just as his father.'

You knew my father? I step toward the door.

The bishop makes a furtive glance my way, then shakes his head. 'Franco has done no harm.'

You seethe. 'His presence is harm. My sister is distraught, her humiliation fresh again on the lips of gossips.'

I whip the door open. 'It is you who shame her. You care nothing for Consuelo.'

You smile, a knowing conniving smirk, looking me up and down. There is relief on your face, and you do not hide it; pleased to find no sign of an officers' commission. So, you feared my success.

'Fool,' you scoff. 'It was Consuelo who requested the match. You are a relic of her foolish childhood. She is now a lady, and despite more politically

advantageous suitors than Lieutenant Nemesio, her choice will sufficiently help our family business.’

I whip the side of your face with the back of my hand.

You are slow, reacting to the pain rather than avoiding my strike.

‘¡Suficiente!’ The bishop steps forward, separating us.

My first attempt at this scene, reproduced below, had the focus switch back and forth between Vázquez and the Bishop, but I found it required too much effort for the reader to distinguish who was speaking or moving in the scene.

I recognise the ceiling of the bishop’s rooms.

‘Calm yourself señor Vázquez,’ you say, holding the door firm, blocking Consuelo's father from entering and hiding me from his view.

‘The bastard has brought a blight on this sacrament,’ you shriek. ‘He is baseborn, just as his father.’

You knew my father? I step toward the door.

The bishop takes a furtive glance my way, shaking your head. ‘Franco has done no harm.’

Vázquez seethes. ‘His presence is harm. My sister is distraught, her humiliation fresh again on the lips of gossips.’

I whip the door open. ‘It is you who shame her. You care nothing for Consuelo or her happiness.’

You smile, a knowing conniving smirk, looking me up and down.

There is relief on your face, and you do not hide it; pleased to see no sign of the officers commission. You feared my success.

‘Fool,’ you say. ‘It was Consuelo who requested the match. You are a relic of a foolish childhood. She is now a lady, and despite more politically advantageous suitors than Lieutenant Nemesio, Consuelo has chosen well enough.’

I whip the side of your face with the back of my hand. You are slow, reacting to the pain rather than to avoid my strike.

‘¡Suficiente!’ says the bishop, stepping forward, separating us.

I experimented with other techniques to define the characters speaking, one of which was to have Franco focalize a character name at the beginning of dialogue much like a dialog tag or the format of a screenplay:

The Bishop: ‘¡Suficiente!’ You step forward, separating us.

Or

Vázquez: ‘Fool,’ you scoff. ‘It was Consuelo who requested the match.’

Although this method made it clearer to the reader who was speaking, I considered that stating the speakers name before the dialogue interrupted the reading process and required the reader to perform another layer of interpretation. This was against my original aim to remove these layers of interpretation. Scenes with three or characters are problematic for the reader and I have tried to avoid multiple back-and-forth switches of focus in each scene. In large groups, I have had Franco’s focus remain on a single character or leave him as an observer and referred to all characters in third person. But this is difficult when Franco interacts directly with several of the characters.

Reviewing my creative work, I found instances of IFA that did not make sense from Franco’s ontological perspective and seemed to jar the reading experience. These were mostly focalizations that contained filter words and I rewrote many scenes to avoid words such as hear, touch, feel. In the following passage, Franco focalises a sexual encounter with Consuelo:

I trace my fingers on your cheek, then press my lips to your neck. You pull me close, and then down the smooth skin of your chest. The soft weight of your breasts presses on my cheeks.

Dialogue tags were also problematic as a sentient protagonist would not repeatedly focalize thoughts such as “he says”, as Franco already knows who he is speaking with or hearing. But the achievement of this pure reflector mode presentation of IFA needed be balanced with readability or the reader could become confused about who is speaking. I found some relief from this complication by using the action of

other characters or to interspace the dialogue with Franco's second person utterances to focus the reader's attention on the character about to speak. In the passage below Franco has focused his thoughts on the Obispo, but this is immediately followed by a focalization of action involving Consuelo.

Voices sound from the hall. I return the chord to the desk, dropping it over the edge just a little, trying to remember how it was before I touched it. If you left it here unguarded, how could you remember how you laid it. 'Vamos,' I take Consuelo's hand. Your skin is soft and you do not resist my touch.

To help lead the reader to make the switch to Consuelo, I had Franco focalize Consuelo by name in third person before focalizing the soft texture of Consuelo's skin. But the third person utterance jars the reader. In this case, it is clear enough to just make the switch to Consuelo as the reader already understands that she is the only character in Franco's physical proximity:

'Vamos,' I take your hand, your skin soft, and you do not resist my touch.

The use of *you* in thought utterances can cause confusion in close proximity to dialogue containing *you*, *your*, and *you're*. Below Franco's second person utterances seem to blend with the dialogue of the Obispo that refers to Franco with *you* and *your*:

'¡Parada!'  
You whirl around. 'This is noise, not *la Destreza*.'  
The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as you close on me.  
Your voice rises from the depths of your body; quiet and menacing.  
'Your mind stinks of obnoxious intent, yet you attack as though Consuelo were a snowflake that will collapse beneath you. You cannot train, with your thoughts and actions in such conflict.'  
Consuelo smiles.

Here I must modify the dialogue of the Obispo to use Franco's name in place of *you*, at least in the first instance.

Your voice rises from the depths of your body; quiet and menacing.  
'¡Franco! Your thoughts have the stench of obnoxious intent, yet you  
attack as though Consuelo were a snowflake that will collapse beneath you.  
You cannot train, with your mind in such conflict.'

Although my chosen mode of presentation limits the text to the focalizations of Franco, this still leaves room for elegant prose, particularly with his classical education. I find the passage where Franco loses himself in a memory of his childhood at the cathedral delivers a great deal of information: his raising in the cathedral, his paternal-like relationship with the Campanero, Franco's knowledge and thoughtfulness of the common people of Segovia, the food they ate, and the chip on Franco's shoulder about his own peasant class. These details were originally told using narratorial mediation in my original draft.

Segovia, my city, you are ever crowded on a Sunday; all classes of people coursing up and down your cobbled streets, their pockets a little lighter in exchange for filling their hearts with the praise of God, but even the poorest retain enough coin to ensure the same feeling in their bellies.

Children chase each other in packs, their high voices shriek, diving between the crowds, in and out of stalls, trailing the enticing odours of fresh bread and sizzling meats. A man bumps me.

'*Perdón*,' he mumbles, slurping on a skewer of salted trout. A waft of steam from the blackened skin stops me.

Word that the trout are spawning would reach our cook at the cathedral a couple of times each year. For the next few weeks the campanero and I would escape morning prayers and the ringing of the bells. We leave the city in soft moonlight, making our way upstream, packs loaded with fishing gear, empty cane baskets slung over our shoulders, the cool flowing water always within sight, our senses attuned to its whorls and eddies, listening for tell-tale splashes, picking our way around lichen splattered boulders, following game trails through tall forests, trees a hundred feet high, growing right to the riverbank, their roots deep, securing themselves against the floodwaters that rush in torrents through the valley each Spring. Eventually, the campanero is satisfied and we would stop at a bend in the

river or an old oxbow, setting our traps, sitting back, speaking in whispers, the old priest and bell ringer extolling stories of his childhood in the Pyrenees.

I stand, open mouthed, at a circular open grill. The heady tang of sizzling fish hovers on the air. An old woman cleans trout filets from a basket, scraping away dark layers of salt, and slapping them on the grill, warming them quickly for her impatient customers.

My stomach aches. If I had returned immediately after the battle it would have been fresh trout sizzling here and not this artificially preserved peasant food.

The passage above is an example of the technique I have termed internal focalization of memory (IFM). During one iteration of my research I reflected on Pulamnn's challenge to writers using present tense to show "what happened, what usually happened, what sometimes happened, [and] what had happened before something else happened" (2010). This allowed me to identify several shortcomings in my creative practice, one of which was my use of flashbacks as separate scenes. One specific scene that I began to question is where Franco recalls the day he met Consuelo. This scene was presented in past tense and separated from the main narrative by a scene break. The only introduction being: "On my fourteenth birthday".

On reflection, I found this scene jarring because it was at odds with the style of absentee narratee simultaneous narration that was developing in my creative practice. I decided that the scene had to occur in the present. I first listened to my own recollections of past events and situations and how my thought processes occurred in the present while pondering how these events unfolded. Immediately I noted that these memories do not occur in isolation but are summoned up by some sight, scent or sound I encountered in the present.

I considered what the catalyst could be to have Franco recall this first meeting and what immediately came to my mind was one of the visual aids that inspired my



writing of this story; the view from the hillock where Franco and Consuelo first met. From there the city skyline of Segovia is presented in surprising clarity: The Castle Alcazar, the high roman city walls, and the cathedral itself, including its bell tower and high wooden spire. Although I not included a scene where Franco had sketched this view, it had existed in my thoughts and I imagined the young friends sitting close together there as he sketched. In the scene that followed the original flashback Franco is looking through his old possessions in a dark cellar of the cathedral and decided to use this scene as the catalyst for the memory of meeting the young Consuelo.

I introduced the scene of internal focalization of memory with this passage:

I lift a bundle of parchments tied with a cloth ribbon and it opens to a graphite drawing of the castle Alcázar, its high round turrets lit by a three-quarter moon. Just visible to its right the wooden spire of cathedral bell tower. The warmth of your presence there beside me as I sketched this at our little rocky outcrop is as real as the candle's flame.

This positioned the scene in the present as a recollection and reflection of a strong memory. In the final passage of this present tense focalisation I show what happened that particular day, what usually happened when Franco and Consuelo met there, what sometimes happened there, and what had happened before this happened, thus meeting Pulman's challenge in the present tense.

The view there changed with the seasons; the snow drifts in the woodlands, the lights from the high turrets of Alcázar, or the way the full moon shone on the rippling waters passing each side of Segovia. In summer the ever-present drone of crickets and other nocturnal insects drowning out all other sounds; in winter, silence, broken only by the slow rhythm of wood chopping in the distance.

It became our habit to meet there. This rocky outcrop remained our secret place; even after we realised your parents would disapprove and your father assigned you a maid to control and monitor your movements.

## Measuring reader engagement and impact

In this research program, I concentrated on incorporating literary techniques based on the Narrative Engagement Scale and its subscale constructs that can trigger engagement (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009). I have expanded on and tabulated this scale below. It defines a set of four dimensions of experiencing narratives: Narrative Understanding, Attentional Focus, Narrative Presence, and Emotional Engagement. The items in italics are my extensions to this scale based on this research program.

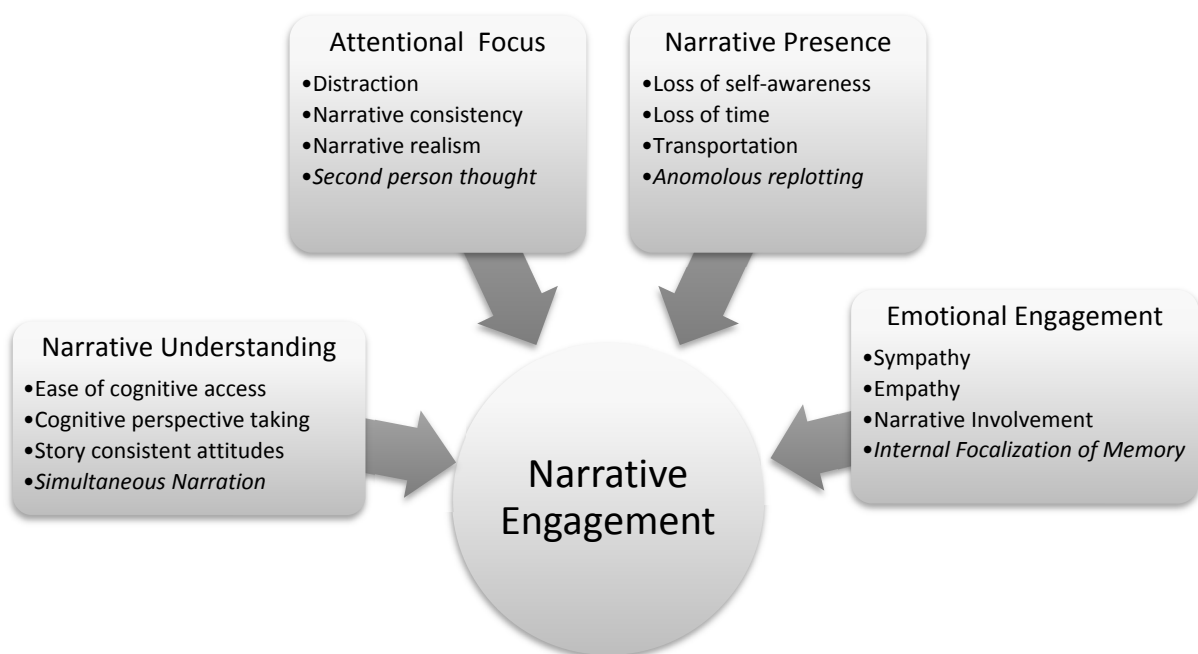


Figure 3. Expanded Narrative Engagement Scale.

As a reader progresses through a literary work they construct “models of meaning that represent the people, places, and problems of a story” (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009), so to retain the reader’s engagement with my work I have tried to provide information that allows the reader to regularly update their mental models of Franco’s storyworld. I have tried to vary the type and scale of new information Franco delivers in the narrative, and have been vigilant to ensure the information is relevant to the storyworld and its characters, otherwise it would encourage the reader to build

mental models that are illogical and inconsistent and leave them holding pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that are never used in Franco's storyworld.

Below are two examples of the information delivered in the narrative that allow the reader to develop relevant mental models. The first describes Franco's reaction to the "stench" of the galleass *Zúñiga*, an oar-driven ship of the Armada.

A freshening onshore breeze strikes us from over the water. I gag. You did not exaggerate the stench Cortez; the malodour of two hundred souls tethered by the ankle to the benches of these galleys. Here they row, eat, sleep, shit, and piss.

The next example provides more details of the lives of galley slaves.

The moonlight illuminates the corsia but I dare not write. Now the scratching of a quill on parchment rises above the lapping of water against the hull and the snoring and wheezes of the men. Several benches behind me a man has laid out a large stack of parchment on the edge of the corsia, weighted down by a hand-carved wooden ship and a small bottle of ink. Scanning the long rows of benches, I now see many men writing. Why had I not noticed this before, was I blinded by my assumption that they were all illiterate peasants?

Twisting sideways to straddle the bench I lay out my own parchment. But the pencil remains motionless in my hand.

### **The Absentee Author**

The Absentee Narratee form of Simultaneous Narration I have chosen for my creative practice leaves no room for authorial mediation. If the reader were to discover evidence of an author, the storyworld will become a house of cards and collapse in on itself. Can there be a more prominent place to highlight the presence of an author than a book's front cover? No, and so this is why I have elected to remove myself as author from the standard rhetorical chain (Author—Narration—Narratee—Reader), and so, having also removed the Narratee with the Absentee Narratee form of Simultaneous

Narration, the chain is reduced to two: (Narration—Reader). I therefore present the text as the focalizations of *A Fettered Mind*, not a narration by the protagonist, not the reader listening to the author speak and act out the protagonist's words; it must be a pure transcript of the protagonist's thought utterances and focalizations, as though captured by some just-invented technology.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions**

This chapter summarises this research program, including its limitations, and the research implications of the findings described in chapter 4. It restates the two research questions as a distinct hypothesis, and identifies the gaps that can be addressed by further research, ending with a statement of closure.

### **Research Hypotheses**

The reading experience of a creative work is more engaging when the text delivers sufficient building blocks and knowledge to enable the reader to construct and then perform the storyworld, transporting and positioning themselves in the centre of this storyworld and the mind of the protagonist(s) that inhabit it. These building blocks can take the form of pure information but can also be triggers the reader uses to perform thought processes such as anomalous replotting that help complete the construction of the storyworld in its entirety, not leaving vacant or hazy areas at its periphery. These building blocks must suggest the other objects and beings that inhabit the world beyond the immediate areas described in the text. To achieve this the writer must create the work in the full knowledge of the integral part the reader plays in the performance of the storyworld. They must also be aware that to provide too much information leaves no room for the reader's performance and will inhibit or negate their desire to participate in the reading experience.

### **Limitations of Research**

Several iterations of my practice-led research were focused on thought utterances. The research phase in these iterations led me away from narratology and into the domains of philosophy and neuroscience. When a creative work uses the simultaneous narration mode of presentation, the author and their voice are removed, the text approaching a

transcript of the protagonist's thought utterances, internal focalisation of awareness (IFA), and internal focalisation of memory (IFM). In this space, I identified the natural usage of second person thought utterances. Having selected absentee narratee – simultaneous narration, the research program did not evaluate literary techniques that are incompatible with this mode of presentation.

### **Gaps to be addressed**

Although there has been some research in narratology, philosophy, and neuroscience that proposes how a person thinks and the phenomenological processes at play, this this could be the focus of further research across multiple schools of study including creative industries, communications, and neuroscience.

I have identified minimal quantitative methods of assessment for the level of immersion or reader engagement in literary works, though some research has been made in other media. Most assessment is qualitative and based on personal preference rather than a scientific approach. There is a research opportunity to define qualities and characteristics that lead to immersion or engagement in a literary work, rather than focusing on the value judgment of this or that reader on whether they felt immersed or engaged by the literary work.

### **Closure**

There is no doubt that this practice-led research program has transformed my creative practice. It has defined and refined many literary devices and techniques that can increase the likelihood of an immersive and engaging reader response, and described the advantages and problems associated with the simultaneous narration mode of presentation. But the most dramatic transformative realisation I take from the program is the criticality for a writer to consider the multifaceted role played by the reader in

actualising the storyworld imagined by the writer. Just as letters are the building blocks for words, so the text of the literary work provides the building blocks of the storyworld.

Just as some people prefer to visit the local beach, or to stay at a typical western-style hotel regardless of the country or region they are visiting, others choose to travel further, explore their location deeper, and experience new activities. The same breadth of transportation can be noted in reading habits; some preferring narratives with contemporary and well known storyworlds that require fewer adjustments and being transported shorter distances and times, while readers of Historical Fiction, and Science Fiction, at minimum entails transportation over time and in most cases to new and unknown locations. The more adjustments required, and new information to be absorbed in performing the narrative world, the further they transport themselves. To many readers, this is one of the driving factors in their choice of genre.

As a writer, I focus my attention on thought utterances rather than abstract or conceptual thoughts, and so my interest and intent lie in the linguistic representation of thought, and have identified that the use of second person pronouns and modes of presentation engenders a text with less mediation/alliteration, therefore making it more likely to trigger a tighter, more immersive reader-response.

There are several motivations for an author “to invent new forms of narration, [such as] ‘to make it new’ [or] to take successful techniques and develop them further” (Richardson 2006). Future textual works must immerse and engage the reader to such an extent that they are led to a position where they can do nothing but transport themselves to, and perform, the storyworld. Not only must they be positioned at the centre of this storyworld, they must *be* its centre. They must exist at the core consciousness of the protagonist(s), and while performing the storyworld they will

become the protagonist. This will produce a frightening, enthralling, funny, joyous, heart-stopping reader-experience that will impact and realise an irreversible change of their consciousness and understanding of our existence. Otherwise, textual works will not deliver sufficient time and cost benefits to make themselves a competitive entertainment medium, and they will become little more than historical oddities, and no longer a driving force for expanding knowledge and understanding of what it is to be sentient.



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