

The Body of Text: Beverley Farmer's A Body of Water
By
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Abstract

A Body of Water was written by Beverley Farmer as a notebook which would grow and evolve in an organic way, like a body, in conjunction with her body of writing. She kept this journal between 1987 and 1988 in order to comment upon her own process of composition and that of the writing of others which informed and influenced it. The metaphor of the text growing 'like a placenta in the womb' is a recurring one as the writer views her creativity in writing fiction as allied to the process of conception and gestation of a child.

The Body of Text: Beverley Farmer's A Body of Water

A Body of Water, written by the Australian author Beverley Farmer, is sub-titled A Year's Notebook, but it is much more a unified body of work than a collection of notes, as its main title implies. Farmer's early writings from the 1980s include the short story collections Milk and Home Time and a novel, Alone, which has loosely autobiographical aspects. A Body of Water, which was published in 1990, comments upon these collections, her work in progress, and the process of writing as well as her perspective of its intrinsically autobiographical nature. Farmer's established reputation as a prize winning Australian writer gave a literary and cultural context to a book which is essentially life writing, since it is a series of diary entries based on her experiences in a particular time of her life. But while it consists of a writer's journal, extending from February 1987 to 1988, Farmer does not simply write of the events in that year: the book encompasses her thoughts and ideas on writing and life, excerpts from other writings, newspaper reports, poetry, and short stories which she includes along with comments about the way she has written them. So the book is a collage of her own and other's writings; but even when she includes the work of others, it is always with a focus of how this writing is special to her, what it means to her and her work. It is a very difficult text to classify, since it is not completely autobiography, not totally fiction, and not really documentary. This paper proposes that it is probably best viewed on its own terms, that is, using the metaphor which Farmer has introduced in both the title and the structure of the text, that it is a body of work, related to an organic body since it is a product of

the writer's conception, but it grows and develops apart from her, while still being connected to her.

In *A Body of Water* Farmer presents fiction which has an autonomy and growth analogous to that of the physical body. In her own terms, she creates a 'notebook' which will 'grow side by side with the stories, like the placenta and the baby in a womb.' (Farmer, 1990a: 3) Despite Farmer terming *A Body of Water* a 'notebook,' it includes a range of diverse fictional and non-fictional forms, such as quotations, references, images and associations which have personal connotations for the writer, but which achieve a new set of meanings within the context of the book. A body of text is constructed which, like a baby, grows from and apart from, Farmer's conception.

Farmer reveals that the narrative underlying her work is directly related to her personal vision, and is a product of her life experiences. She presents herself as having learned to 'chant the cold dirges of the baffled' (Farmer, 1990a: 153) through a trope for the author writing herself into the fiction, which she introduces through this Walt Whitman quotation.

Don Anderson discusses Farmer's refusal to prioritise any position within the interrelated structure of writer, text and reader when he indicates she is a short story writer who has offered, in *A Body of Water*, 'not a novel, not a volume of short stories, but rather a volume that contains several short stories and a notebook account of their genesis, an account that privileges neither the stories nor the journal, but dramatically undermines any notion of primacy, of privilege' (Farmer, 1990a: 57). This development has involved Farmer incorporating herself into the narrative such that the agent of the writing, the author, becomes part of the narrative structure, and the process of writing becomes indistinguishable from the text. Farmer outlined her view of the writer's role in a paper given at the 1989 Warana Festival Writers' Week:

The writer is not, or not necessarily, just manipulating structures, patterns, sequences of events in time; these can embody psychic states, show them forth, and thereby free the writer of them. The structures, patterns and sequences, are metaphors, diagrams, mandalas. Maps of the island of the self. (Farmer, 1990e: 391)

In *A Body of Water* Farmer is aware of herself constructing fiction, and this becomes itself the narrative basis. She writes, in Hutcheon's terms, 'narcissistic narrative,' or metafiction which 'is fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity' (Hutcheon, 1980: 1).

A Body of Water presents a commentary upon fiction through a collage of different narrative levels and forms. The confessional and autobiographical elements incorporate the agent of the writing into the narrative structure, and are associated with the author as self-conscious artist. This integration of personal experience and perspective is represented through a trope of the 'body' of text being related to the organic body. The writer constructs a space or site within which the reader may invoke the author. Since the narrative is implemented by the writer in reaction to, and as a product of, the writer's experience, the author

acknowledges his or her function by the inscription of the body of text.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe concludes an essay on autobiography in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* with the comment that ‘an understanding of the role of the authorial subject in autobiographies sheds light on the construction and contractual obligations of all literature’ (Wallace-Crabbe, 1988: 570). His definition of the elements of autobiography is interesting when applied to a work such as *A Body of Water*:

Autobiography seems to be a parody, or at least a black-and-white caricature, of other literary genres. It makes the same claim to refer to life as other genres do, but a good deal more crassly. It makes the same claims about truth and edification, but is more blatant about them. And it brings rapidly to the fore all those coarse, nagging questions about whether it is art—formal, aesthetic, beautiful and all that—or merely documentation. (Wallace-Crabbe, 1988: 560)

Farmer’s text raises such questions as the boundaries of truth, art, and documentation through the foregrounding of the author-function, or in Wallace-Crabbe’s terms, the authorial subject, and the repetition of episodes, so that they acquire the status of biographical information, while also being acknowledged as fiction. What Wallace-Crabbe terms the ‘autobiographical contract’ problematises the limits of ‘fiction’ by incorporating the experience of the writer in an obvious manner, inviting questions such as that posed by Ray Willbanks in an interview with Beverley Farmer, where he asks, ‘I’m trying to separate autobiography from fiction. What about the story ‘At the Airport?’” (Willbanks, 1992: 78). Farmer’s reply, which discusses what she terms the ‘self-reflectiveness of life and fiction’ (Willbanks, 1992: 78), refers to the overlap between the episode as written and the experience which prompted it. Curiously, within this interview there is no questioning of the innate difficulty of separating ‘fiction’ from ‘autobiography,’ or the point at which they converge, and the function of the authorial voice in this process. The proliferation of collections of interviews such as *Speaking Volumes*, *Rooms of Their Own*, and the *Yacker* series further clouds the issue, since the writer is giving personal information which the reader is able to bring to the text to provide a different reading: one which is presumably more alert to autobiographical aspects. But the suggestion of biographical material is not confined solely to the situation where the reader has access to the writer’s recollections, since in texts such as *A Body of Water* the author indicates that she is incorporating autobiographical aspects within the fiction.

To do this, Farmer self-consciously constructs fiction based on the role of fiction and writing in her life. She reveals the physical genesis of fiction, while simultaneously creating fiction from it. She emphasises the formulation of the work, its congruity with and meaning for the writer. Farmer reveals that the creation of fiction can itself become the narrative, a body of work distinct from the author, but connected to her. The role of the reader is depicted as the focus, and the creative process depends upon the reciprocal involvement of the reader as a nexus to draw together the elements of the fiction. As Farmer points out, there is

No point in fiction which doesn't in some way expand, at least redefine, the boundaries of what fiction has said and been (fiction is what it says). Fiction can make events take place convincingly in a dimension beyond or within the ordinary one we are accustomed to: . . . Perhaps the only factor that makes 'real' life different is the absence in it of a reader: there being no observer, no focus of attention, no witness. (Farmer, 1990a: 196-97)

A Body of Water explores the creation of fiction firstly through the narrative, so that the process of writing is itself the narrative. The writer then shows how experience creates ideas, which are then represented as short stories. The reader constructs the text through connecting the linear pattern of the writer's journal, as thoughts and ideas flow, to the creation of the stories presented within the work. The reader connects the comments Farmer explicitly makes upon fiction into the presented stories to create a new interpretation of the story, and this process is reciprocal such that multiple interpretation is possible for the larger body of work. In this manner, *A Body of Water* is also reinterpreted, giving the text a fluidity of meaning appropriate to the title metaphor of a 'body' of water.

This process extends not simply to the works detailed within *A Body of Water*—such as the story 'A Drop of Water,' from its original inception from a haiku, to the enlargement into a short story, and finally its relation to the title volume—but also between collections. The reference to the illness of Farmer's mother can be related to the short story 'Inheritance' in the anthology *Milk*, so both works possess further connotations relating to the confusion of ontological boundaries between autobiography and fiction. In *A Body of Water* the narrator details:

At the end of my first year at University Women's College she had an operation which revealed an early cancer of the colon: they decided not to tell me until after my exams (my results were good). After her colostomy she had twenty more years to live with plastic bags sealed to the hole in her side, leaking, farting, the great slit bulging out inoperable hernias. She had to give up eating fruit, it gave her diarrhoea. Bravely she went to the beach one or two times. That was enough. After her stroke eleven years later she had to stop smoking, and be taught to speak again. (Farmer, 1990a: 144)

This incident in the writer's life is echoed in her fiction by being included in *Milk* in the story 'Inheritance,' which has a shift of narrative form to a direct address to the narrator's mother. It therefore adopts a tone of accusation on the part of the fictional narrator, in contrast with the confessional mode of Farmer's own voice in the later *A Body of Water*:

You never got lung cancer. Eight years ago after your stroke the doctors made you stop smoking. My father and I weren't mean. We kept quiet.

When I rang from college, my father denied that it was cancer you had. . . .

But it was cancer of the bowel. You survived the colostomy and learned to fasten plastic bags to the new hole cut in your belly. You've had to do it for nearly twenty years. (Farmer, 1983d: 140-41)

The change in narrative voice and tone, while portraying the same biographical information, reveals the altered focus and connotations of the two pieces of writing. The reader can respond to this implicit commentary by a corresponding shift in interpretation.

So the concept of teleology in writing is implicitly being questioned. The notion that fiction shows a progression towards a defined and immutable end position, has given way to the potential formation of a multiplicity of readings and textual constructions. The mixture of genres subverts a monologic, authoritative truth and an authorcentric vision. A metanarrative forms a pattern through an acknowledgement of the writing as fiction, wherein the writer functions as both writer and first reader of the text. Through an overt acknowledgement of the writer functioning as reader by interpreting and representing experiences, an autobiographical level is strengthened. The term 'life writing' has emerged to define that which Gillian Whitlock describes as 'writing which tends to cross and recross the boundaries between biography, autobiography and fiction, writing in which there are multiple alternatives for the implicated 'I' (Whitlock, 1992: 264). Whitlock describes feminist autobiography in this way, citing critics such as Joy Hooton, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow who 'theorise women's subjectivity in terms of relatedness rather than autonomy, multiplicity rather than singularity and process rather than teleology' (Whitlock, 1992: 264). The self created in *A Body of Water* is equally 'mixed, suspended and unresolved' (Whitlock, 1992: 264). The development of this is the author writing the self into the text, so that the body of the text functions as a trope for the writer. *A Body of Water* is a reflection, and extension, of self for the author.

The mixture of genres in *A Body of Water* both contributes to the acknowledgement of fiction as 'imaginary' through a constant foregrounding of narrative form and structure, and reveals the process of writing. The generic mix is a product of tracing the development of fiction from idea through successive drafts to the completed story, which itself comprises the larger fiction. The writer in this manner becomes part of the fiction, through the references to the creation and development of the original concept, and the fictionalisation into a story. In *A Body of Water* Farmer details both the life experience and the later sensory and aesthetic experience which prompts the writing of one of the stories within the text, 'Among Pigeons':

Just on thirty years ago I saw that boy fall. Impossible to forget his whooping sobs, his tears; and his mother's face (which he didn't see). The agony of others, nearly experienced . . . Has he forgotten it, I wonder—has he suppressed the knowledge of it? I won't do it from the point of view of the au pair girl. She won't even be there.

The maimed man who was that boy—he has to tell the story.
(Farmer, 1990a: 78-79)

Here Farmer makes explicit the selectivity involved in the fictionalising process, which is not simply a mimetic process of representation. She juxtaposes this against the detailing of the aesthetic experience which provides the catalyst for the story:

Many beautiful things here: a pair of woven wooden doors, mossy ferns and pines in courtyards, very old fine-papered books in the library, pale stone lining the sandstone of the cloisters like icicles, small-paned windows deep in the ivy leaves, the voices of pigeons in the silence . . . Ivy and pigeons: they creep into the smallest space and are hard to dislodge; they've crept into a story while I've been working on it, huddled over the radiator munching apples—a story about a boy of six whose father has just left home. He lives with his mother. One day a visitor, a man, an enemy, decides to teach him a lesson about what life is like. (Farmer, 1990a: 78)

As the development of the story is portrayed, so the larger fiction of *A Body of Water* is itself created, since the tracing of the creation of 'Among Pigeons' becomes a work of fiction. The generic collage of description, recollection, reportage and imaginative response forms a network to be connected and reinterpreted by the reader, and the main aspect which binds these disparate elements is the writer. Farmer writes herself into the text through the interweaving of fact and fiction, and an acknowledgement of the factual becoming fictional in the process. The 'real' life of the writer, and her experiences, are utilised for fiction which becomes a roman à clef involving 'real' people and events. This blurs the boundaries between fiction and a documentary detailing of actual occurrences. The 'truth' becomes one version of a fictionalising process since, as Farmer makes clear, the act of writing involves reinterpretation on a number of levels.

Farmer's writing is growth or accretion, rather than a forward and ongoing narrative momentum. It therefore produces a network through discerning potential connections. This is most apparent in the progression from the story 'A Drop of Water,' which forms part of the larger work, *A Body of Water*. The story is a development from a different, smaller fiction, as Farmer makes clear: 'The story about the monk is starting to take shape: 'A Drop of Water' is its name—from my haiku about the jewel in the lotus in the gompa window' (Farmer, 1990a: 54). Again, explicit reference is made to the relationship, both in terms of the writer's experience and within the fiction, to the genesis of the series. The details of the writer's stay in the gompa, which provoked the sequence of haiku and story, is itself fictionalised within the larger framework. Farmer makes clear the relationship between experience and fiction, through the fiction itself:

Now that I'm back I think I might put aside work on 'Red Fishes' for a story set at the retreat. The lake, the gompa, above all the lotus window—the physical setting in its silent stillness to be emblematic,

a mandala. The main character will be a monk, a European but not P—a very different man, detached, solemn and remote. He will encounter and be disturbed by an irreverent young couple. The encounter = the story. (Farmer, 1990a: 52)

So a further network is created through the confusion of the boundaries within the fiction, where Farmer as author becomes storyteller, character, and, in the process, text. But the identity of the narrator is never at issue. It is made explicit that the autobiographical element itself constitutes the text through the experiences of the writer, and their relationship to the creation of fiction.

Farmer uses the metaphor of her writing as 'a web' when discussing *A Body of Water*. This work is explicitly in diary form, but it is a journal relating to the development of the fiction, in conjunction with the thoughts of the writer:

. . . they're being published as a whole, the diary entries and the quotations and the readings that led to a particular story's germination and development. Then you get the story. All the threads are there linking it to the other stories and to other experiences. So it doesn't have a narrative line. It's all in the shape of a web. There are poems in it and recurring symbols. People who are interested in the process of stories coming into being might be interested in seeing how these stories came into being for me. (Willbanks, 1992: 85)

Again, this provides an invitation to relate the author subject, the 'me' in the writing, with Farmer. But as John and Dorothy Colmer point out in their introduction to *The Penguin Book of Australian Autobiography*, autobiography is 'both a form of literary striptease and an archaeology of the self' (Colmer, 1987: 1), and as such is simultaneously 'the art of confession, revelation and self-discovery' (Colmer, 1987: 1). The web-like structure of *A Body of Water* applies not simply to the narrative form: it also allows it to incorporate different generic forms, such as those autobiographical elements detailed by Colmer, without being categorised strictly as autobiography, and similarly, without being restricted to one 'self' in the discovery process. The author of a semi-autobiographical text such as *A Body of Water* is not necessarily to be equated with the author-function, but by introducing autobiographical and confessional material the author is creating a space where a range of his or her possible 'selves' can be inscribed by the reader. The idea of the self is a trope for the body of text the reader constructs.

In addition, in *A Body of Water* Farmer interweaves the personal force of words to explore their impact within the individual and fictional framework. The reference to the power of words for the writer is a further means by which the author is written into the text, for the words themselves are evoked as possessing associations for the writer:

So the relation of a work of art to its material, in Gass's thought, is the relation of a fossil to the living creature; of opalised wood to the tree whose place it takes in the cosmos. (Walt Whitman has a

patent on that word. Whenever I use it his voice intones, 'Walt Whitman am I, a Kosmos . . .' (Farmer, 1990a: 167)

The mixture of quotation, reference, image and association reflects the power of words to convey a multitude of connotations. The 'world of the word' is the world constructed by Farmer in the fiction, and she makes explicit that she, in writing the text, in the process writes herself into the text through the personal connotations she includes. Like Walt Whitman, she is the Kosmos of the text.

The power of language and fiction to structure the writer's world is similarly exploited by Farmer in her detailing of its effect on her as writer:

The first time I read 'The Lady of Shalott' (I remember it was in a classroom, idly reading ahead in the Eighth Book, when I was twelve) I recognised myself in her:

Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance . . .

. . . Even at that age, reading the poem, I knew that I lived, and would always live a tangential, vicarious life: the web on her loom (for me) was fiction and disabling daydream. I was in thrall to the mirror between me and the real. (Farmer, 1990a: 219-20)

Here, the power of fiction subverts the boundaries between the writer's 'real' and the writer's represented life. The structure is therefore as disjointed and non-linear as memory and association. Farmer is enslaved, such that experience has continually to be embodied in language. Anderson points out in *Real Opinions* that

. . . while Farmer's volume might appear to juxtapose stories with notebooks, she further exacerbates this relationship by offering, at times, a notebook 'within' a story 'within' a Notebook. The 'story'/notebook' relationship becomes vertiginously Escheresque. At other times the Notebook is characterised by multiple reflection, by adjacency, by collage, by bricolage. Just as the title of Farmer's book is ambiguous—A Body of Water like a bay, or a deliquescent physical entity?—so the relationship between 'stories' and 'journal' is one that privileges neither, awards precedence to neither, but insists on the equivalence between both. (Anderson, 1992: 58)

Farmer manipulates the structure of the text itself, and in such a way as to allow her to 'play' simultaneously with genre. She is presenting and representing the crafting of writing through offering the bricolage of multiple narrative levels, and in the process is creating a metanarrative concerning the creation of fiction. Anderson characterises this process as one which deconstructs boundaries:

East/West; body/soul; emptiness/plenitude. Like the M. C. Escher drawings that Farmer cites, and upon which Helen Daniel based her study of contemporary Australian fiction *Liars* (1988), the self-imposed task and the achievement of *A Body of Water* is to render such dichotomies (at least momentarily) meaningless. In Farmer's quest for form, subject is object, object subject. (Anderson, 1992:

Both reader and writer as reader are drawn into a fiction where the differences between the fictional and the real are as unclear as the frame of the print depicted on the dustcover of the book, which fails to delineate the boundary of the art, as Farmer traces in the included story 'Vase With Red Fishes.'

A Body of Water reverts to the postmodernist issue of state of being, that is the ontological dimension of linguistic utterance and its reflection of and within fiction. The body of text is analogous to the physical body, emphasising the developing and evolving nature of Farmer's writing. She crosses boundaries by writing herself into the fiction, so the author becomes a part of the body of the text. The text itself is a metaphor for the process of reading. This allows Farmer to exploit a potential for unity from disunity through the structure of *A Body of Water* on a number of levels, most explicitly the chronological. Despite a superficially linear narrative structure through the presentation in journal format, the generic variation subverts a simple chronological progression. The structure is most obviously related to the title, *A Body of Water*, and the fiction has an autonomy and growth analogous to a physical body. In Farmer's terms:

This new writing: I want it to be an interweaving of visual images—more open, loose and rich, and free of angst. And if I keep a notebook this time as I go, it will grow side by side with the stories, like the placenta and the baby in a womb. (Farmer, 1990a: 3)

The analogy of the body of work to the placenta is curious, since the 'notebook' itself becomes the body of fiction. The body of the text is like an organic body in terms of achieving a life of its own.

The text, for Farmer, has a legitimacy and authority quite apart from the author, then, despite its growth as a result of the writer's experiences. The author, in writing herself into the text, becomes part of the network which the reader constructs. The author's fictional presence is therefore presented as being epistemological, as much as an ontological, force. The growth of fiction is interwoven with the growth in the writer, the writer's vision of the 'real' world, and attempts to integrate and relate the two through fiction:

Every tentatif I make in the direction of a new story brings me up face to face again with the mirror. The impulse withers. What is ahead lies beyond—that is, behind—the mirror, inaccessible, invisible, unknowable. Walking forward, all I see is myself loom larger, embedded in the vista of all that is behind me.

How thick is the mirror? (is only the glass thick?) Is there anything behind it? Is the past all I am, or at least all I can know of what I am? If my new stories can't reach into the new time, grow from the new self, better to be writing none. (Farmer, 1990a: 166)

Farmer questions her ability to 'grow' beyond the past, by progressing beyond fiction, which is an endless reinterpretation and re-presenting of previous experience. But she still acknowledges the role of the reader through a structure

which foregrounds the connections and associations involved within constructing fiction. The process of creating fiction is emphasised as both a product of the discourse used to convey experience, and the writer's presence as interpretive medium. The analogous act for creating fiction as Farmer presents it is not a search so much as a growth process, an accretion of associations to form a network to be connected by the beholder, so that the body of text, like a body of water, may continually be renewed and renewing, and, like amniotic fluid, sustain and connect other life.

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