

Proposal for a Thesis  
in the Field of Literature and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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# I.

## Critical Essay

### "Description is Destiny: the Imagery that Tells the Tale"

We have yet to invent a way to directly communicate an experience or idea. The artist's task, regardless of medium, is to approximate these things for a viewer, listener, reader. While we generally assume language is one of the more precise ways to communicate, it too is just simile and metaphor appealing to an inner eye, no more direct than any other representation. And so a story becomes another symbol. The author of long form fiction is unique in the impressive amount of time and attention he commands from the reader. He has the opportunity to layer ideas and build to an immersive level of complexity. The through line for this is plot.

As I hone my own mode of storytelling, the books I find myself most drawn to rely heavily on one striking, evocative image around which they build the substance of their story. The image suggests the plot and the writers achieve a depth of meaning and inevitability for the action that follows.

My critical essay will look at the imagery employed in Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and Cesar Airas' *Ghosts*. In my own work, I hope to explore the idea of family—how we relate to our families, what claims and responsibilities we have to each other by virtue of blood - and the way memory, our own or someone else's, creates the person we are at a given moment. And if family is the keeper of its members' histories, what becomes of the person who develops out of their sight? The image of the photo album is an obvious one,

yet I hope to take from that cues for plotting, just as the authors above seem to do from the images of a man descending into a dry well (Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*), the devil materializing in 1930s Moscow (Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*), and ghosts haunting a luxury building's construction site (Aira's *Ghosts*).

In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, Haruki Murakami creates a story to explore the way that so many of our behaviors and thoughts go unexamined or are poorly understood. He embraces the often-surreal way the mind works with an equally surreal plot and a series of striking imagery that capitalize on the mind's talent for pattern recognition.

Central to this is the image of the dry well. It is first introduced as a curiosity on a vacant property in Toru Okada's neighborhood. Murakami cultivates a timelessness and abandonment in his descriptions, that the well was "made in another age," "the wooden cap was an antique" (Murakami 66). Okada reacts with a feeling of "overwhelming numbness." "Maybe when people take their eyes off them, inanimate objects become even more inanimate" (Murakami 65). It is a literal well, but as the story continues and other images accumulate—soldiers leaving a man to die in a well, Okada's eventual descent into the dry well, the impenetrable darkness encountered in the mysterious hotel room--the well becomes the mind, the place where the senses are muffled, the physical body negated and dropped away. Unexamined, it remains a mystery, but insight is possible if someone is willing to make the descent.

That insight, however, takes strange forms. Even as we try to know our minds, understanding is something we need to translate into our own personal symbols, be they language, memories, or associations. And it is not something we can communicate directly. Murakami shows us this crisis of interpretation with the story of Lieutenant

Mamiya, and old army buddy of Mr. Honda, the mystical man that the Okadas had gone to in the early days of their marriage. Upon his death, Honda requests that Mamiya deliver a remembrance to Okada. At this first meeting, Mamiya recalls his most traumatic experience which happened during an expedition into the Outer Mongolian territory. He is left to die in a dry well. The darkness is disorienting, he is in pain from the drop into the well. He survives for days on the condensation formed on the cold stone walls. Yet, for just moments a day, he experiences a transcendent flood to light from the noontime sun. He understands it to be a moment of tremendous, life-altering personal revelation, but in so brief a moment, he never can manage to grasp this insight. He characterizes it as some kind of animal, "some *thing* that possesses life. ...Something began to take shape in the over flowing light, then faded before it could reach a state of fullness. ...What I suffered with most down there in the well was...the hunger of being unable to see what I needed to see, the thirst of being unable to know what I needed to know" (Murakami 208, -09).

Insight is gained by the confluence of existing knowledge and new information. Mamiya gets his flash of light too soon. He doesn't know how to understand it. Murakami immediately illustrates this kind of failure to apprehend important knowledge with Okada's reaction to a letter Mamiya sends in an attempt to clarify his story. Upon reading it, Okada feels that "...fact or truth had little power to persuade me just then. What most moved me in his letter was the sense of frustration that permeated the lieutenant's words: the frustration of never quite being able to depict or explain anything to his full satisfaction" (Murakami 210).

This in turn is echoed by the remembrance Honda has left to Okada. It is an empty box. Okada may come to believe that Honda's intention was to have Mamiya relate this story to him, but in the moment, he is baffled by the gift.

Murakami's plot achieves its coherence from the compounding of these images and scenes. He uses each character as an opportunity to recapitulate the theme of enlightenment gained or lost. His characters are all groping toward knowledge, of themselves and their past or that of others, and through careful curation of these stories, the reader arrives at the back cover with a further, nuanced understanding of the process.

Other readers have picked up another pattern for Murakami's plot: Japanese folk tradition, specifically that of the ascetic shaman. "He is primarily a healer [who comes by his powers through] a severe regime of ascetic practice [culminating in] a journey to the other world" (Fisher 166, -67). The kind of sensory deprivation Okada experiences is a model for this type of journey. "When awake, the human mind needs to be occupied permanently. Elimination of external stimuli forces the mind to concentrate within itself, and brings about intensive discharge of internal imagery. ...[D]reamlike states, trancelike states, mystical states, which comprised encounters with celestial teachers and divine guardians" are a common outcome (Ustinova 267). In light of this, Okada's "experiences seem less like wild invention, and more like a deliberate re-casting of ancient folk tradition" (Fisher 167). As a mode of story telling, recasting myths or fairy tales gives the author another layer from which to pull meaning, another facet carved into the process of self-discovery that Murakami is portraying.

In *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov also plots fantastic elements to viscerally illustrate the confounding, dangerous relationship the people have with the

state in 1930s Moscow. The government is a pervasive, malignant force, ever-present in the people's lives, but its most insidious feature is the secrecy cloaking it from the kind of outrage and open dialogue that could lead to change. Bulgakov externalizes this toxic relationship with the image of the devil literally arriving in Moscow.

Through a culture of fear, suspicion and oppression, Stalin supplants any ideas of a "genuinely private sphere of liberal, self-interested subjectivity" in the citizenry (Vyleta 41). And so, in a society where "the secrecy of privacy is immediately associated with the secrecy of conspiracy," we have people who are "fully aware of the distance between ideological mask and social reality, but nevertheless endorse the mask" (Vyleta 38, 45). Any reference to the state or the secret police is neatly scrubbed of a subject. Questions are asked, "with a narrowing of eyes," rather than by a person narrowing his eyes; a "voice at the desk was now raised" rather than a person raising his voice (Bulgakov 159, - 60). Not only do the secret police unacknowledged, their motives are also inscrutable, since their chief concern is the self-preservation of their political masters. Citizens are unsure of what exactly will incur punishment and so in a supposedly secular society, an almost religious culture of self-censorship, suspicion and superstition thrives. While Bulgakov allows the secret police to remain an unseen force for evil in the lives of the people, the devil is given a bodily presence and a cadre of demonic mischief-makers to boldly wreak havoc in Moscow. Compared to the state, the devil exerts the same capricious control in the service of his own equally selfish aims. The elaborate surveillance carried out by the secret police is mirrored in the devil's ability to read minds. The secret police may cultivate an air of unseen, all-reaching action, but in Bulgakov's Moscow, the devil literally has this power.

Citizens are forced to internalize and leave unacknowledged the state's misdeeds, but in giving the state the devil's face, Bulgakov allows his characters to react openly to the similarly senseless, destructive intrusions perpetrated by the devil. "Hold him! Spray the room with holy water!" Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoy says upon seeing the apparition of one of the devil's servants (Bulgakov 160). Identifying his tormentor empowers Bosoy to take action against him. Bulgakov uses the image of this tangible enemy to illicit the kind of outrage that citizens wouldn't dare express in the face of the state. It is a powerful way to lead the reader to feel the frustrating absurdity of the political situation he was up against.

Bulgakov underscores the heartbreak of enduring life in the Soviet state with his heroine Margarita. When the devil manages to resurrect the manuscript she had previously seen burned her fear is "...that this was all sorcery, that the notebooks would presently disappear from sight, and she would be in her bedroom in the old house, and that on waking up she would have to go and drown herself" (Bulgakov 298). There is liberation in acknowledging the reality of things, experiences. She cannot imagine emerging with her sanity intact if something as momentous as this supernatural intervention is not real. Compare this to what the Master went through when he was arrested after false claims were made against him. His ordeal goes unacknowledged except that after an absence he returned "...in mid-January, at night, in the same coat but with the buttons torn off" (Bulgakov 149). He never gets in touch with Margarita; his experiences hollowed out his courage and left him with a nameless, pervasive fear. "It seemed to me, especially as I was falling asleep, that some very cold and pliant octopus was stealing with its tentacles immediately and directly for my heart" (Bulgakov 141).

As disruptive as his appearance is, the devil does manage to give the characters a respite from the state's denial of the violence, confusion and destruction they have had to internalize or be made crazy. The devil they know is truly is a better choice than the devil they don't. By externalizing the internal conflict in such a spectacularly concrete way, they regain their agency. No longer is the evil an invisible miasma, but there is a recognizable enemy that validates their experiences being victimized by it.

Nearly every paper on the book begins with an acknowledgement of the challenge Bulgakov sets for his readers with the parallel narratives of present-day Moscow and ancient Jerusalem. But the two narratives can also be seen as pulling each other along. Each ups the ante for the other and gives Bulgakov the opportunity to comment on both societies. "Yeshua's generation fails to recognize his revelation of the moral truth, but succeeding generations continue the search for this truth" and yet in the present-day, the "Soviet system...claims to be the new way of life and the answer to mankind's problems" (Bolen 428). The reader's knowledge of the story of Jesus plays against the story of the devil in Moscow: "Pilate has Yeshua executed to prevent the spread of his ideas, but these ideas continue to spread after his death. The authorities prevent the Master from publishing his manuscript, but the manuscript itself does not perish and the story will presumably become known to the public" (Bolen 434).

In Cesar Aira's *Ghosts*, we encounter a compounding of imagery that is the hallmark of his brand of surrealistic deadpan, "*la fuga hacia adelante* or the escape forward. ...Airra claims that he writes just a few pages every day after having carefully thought through the direction the story will take. And once written, he never revises any elements of the plot." This becomes the key for understanding his mode of plotting.



Rather than a "concise, intricately structured fiction...Aira's writing has an immediacy and élan, focused by a spiraling unity of theme" (Lewis 127).

Taking the ghosts themselves to be the center of this work, his characters' various reactions to them drive the action. The characters, in turn, come to the reader via the image of the building under construction. On a very superficial level, we have the families who have purchased the apartments and the designers they bring in to discuss furnishing and decorating the still-skeletal rooms. Aira shows elaborate, excessive care lavished on all aspects of these characters, from their rooms—a carpet layer checking and rechecking that "all the measurements were right. All of them, from the first to the last. He could have carpeted the ceilings,"—to their children—the builder's wife Elisa feels "vaguely but deeply revolted the way the owners of the apartments took such care not to let their own children approach the edges" of the unfinished stairs and floors, this in contrast to her own children who are allowed free rein (15, 44). These characters don't see the ghosts, or much else beyond than their own "project of happiness" (11).

We leave these dense, calcified characters at the foundations of the building and move on to the workers who are unloading a late delivery of perforated brick. In naming them, Aira indicates their less monolithic character in contrast to the wealthy families who have just left. One worker is "an Argentinian named Anibal Fuentes, or Anibal Soto (curiously, he was known by both names)," another has changed his name from "Higidio" to "Higinio" "because it was less embarrassing" (28, 37). They also can see through the scrim of reality to become aware of the ghosts. One builder, Raul Viñas, even utilizes them in decanting his "ordinary cheap wine...into an exquisite, matured cabernet sauvignon, which not even the captains of industry could afford to drink every day." He

chills the bottles in their bodies where it uncorks and “flow[s] like lymph all through the bodies of the ghosts,” even if the distinction is lost on “an indiscriminating drinker like Viñas ” (30).

At the top of the building is the least substantial part of the unfinished structure, a shack for the caretaker's family. It's the domain of the women and children, two groups with the least permanence, paradoxically, by virtue of their constancy—“the years...rolled on, and the children were the years, springing from the earth like capricious little butterflies, blown about by the breezes, by the days and weeks and months...” (138). Whereas the men layer on identities, the women are replaceable—“We're always the same,” bound by the absolutes of marriage and childbirth (91). And yet they hold the mysteries of the generations: “Women lived in stories...surrounded, smothered, submerged by fascinating stories” (75).

Here the reader encounters Patri, a girl of fifteen, and the only one the ghosts take an active interest in when they invite her to their party. The ghosts are suffused throughout the novel, throughout the building, but it is on the last night of the year in the liminal space between day and night, in the transitory thoughts of an isolated girl, that the Aira's plot spirals back on itself. Patri considers the information available to her, information that is beyond what was just recently her ken in childhood but not yet that of the adults around her—she is frustrated by a “mysterious smile” they all seem to share (137). Aira's contemplative book has followed the awarenesses of the various characters he presents only to lead the reader to the edge of awareness and push him over along with Patri, into the center of the idea of the ghosts. Is this her rejection of the responsibility of adulthood? Did her boredom drive her to it? Aira's plot has circled these ideas and more,

leaving the reader the pleasure of thinking these through at the end of his quiet but provocative book.

## II.

### Description and Brief Discussion of Original Fiction

My own work is about Clare, a woman who starts, then abandons one family, only to leave behind a second family, which is where the reader comes in at the novel's opening. Her children—Evelyn, 33, Henry, 25, and Lola, 23—are thrown together for the first time at Clare's funeral. The three struggle to reconcile the woman they knew with the largely unrecognizable woman emerging from the items Clare has left behind. I hope to build a sort of family album, made of snapshot-sized memories strung together by the present action of the trio of siblings struggling to understand their late mother. The photograph, a still image that has been posed and captured to represent a specific moment in time, connects, for me, to the way that childhood memories can seem staged. They take on mythic proportions and cinematic qualities. They are arranged, shuffled, rearranged, and their order at any given time is how we tell our story to ourselves.

Science confirms that memory is more an act of creation than a reliably static recollection of facts (Lehrer 83). Just as the image degrades and the photo paper frays and splits after too much handling, so too do the memories that are most often called to mind. They are the least reliable, shifting by degrees each time they are remade. Her children, meeting each other for the first time upon Clare's death, are without a shared history. They are free to construct the mythology of their childhoods and of their mother as they see fit. They sift through their memories of childhoods shaped by the same woman in two

very different circumstances and as they dig deeper into what Clare herself left behind, they find a third woman that none of them recognize as their mother.

Henry and Lola are the children of Clare's second marriage. Their father dies when they are fifteen and thirteen. Their mother Clare begins a mental decline that ends in her death a decade later in a group home where her erratic, paranoid behavior could be monitored. Henry and Lola live together in their childhood home, working to support themselves and their mother. In a fit of paranoia Clare names her first daughter Evelyn executor of her will. This is the first communication Evelyn has had concerning her mother since Clare left her almost three decades ago. Evelyn is conflicted, but decides to make the many-hour drive to the funeral on the spur of the moment.

At this point in her life, Evelyn is directionless, in a dead-end job and a dead-end relationship with a local musician, Nat. She is primed for a big change, but doesn't know how to bring it about. Henry is a blustery, self-aggrandizing hothead, but his heart is with his little sister, Lola. Most of his young life has been defined by caring for her. She is headstrong and self-sufficient, and so Henry always feels as if he is failing her since she can take care of herself. Lola is the most like Clare. She is an upbeat girl, but with an unexamined emptiness that has only grown as she has aged. As a child, she was a force of nature, always into everything, running headlong into life because she never imagined she couldn't. As a young adult, she is the most reserved of the three.

The will leaves everything except for the house and the truck to Evelyn. Henry misunderstands and in a fit of anger unbecoming a funeral procession, smashes up the truck he thinks is now Evelyn's. His bad behavior continues until he gets Lola fired from

her bartending job. Grasping at a quick fix, he finagles seats for Lola and himself in Evelyn's beat up Oldsmobile, heading back to her hometown and, so he presumes, more opportunity.

Evelyn takes the meager savings Clare left and they make a road trip of it. They get to know each other and try to decipher who Clare actually was. Along the way, they stop to see Nat play at one of the small, Midwestern towns he is touring. The already rocky relationship between Evelyn and Nat is strained ever further when he tries to sleep with Lola. Henry and Evelyn become allies by default. Henry and Nat fight, bad enough that they need to get out of town. Quick.

It's a cheap Super 8, one room with two double beds, and the lamp light is yellowed with age, making the whole place, Hen, Lo and Evie included, seem out of their right time. For the space of this night they are in the past, not quite so far away as Clare's photos, but suspended from the present, as if they had never lived at all. Which the photos continue to suggest. He doesn't recognize anyone outside of Clare.

Hen's on the floor, leaning against the nightstand between the two beds. It's hard and feels like punishment. He takes a snapshot-quick look at a photo then drops it to the pile collecting between his knees. It's mechanical, that's what Lo hears. She's in one of the beds, eyes closed, all but asleep, but she listens to him going through the photos with metronomic regularity and she says, "What are you even seeing going that fast?"

“Just her. Her hair, the color of her clothes. Didn’t realize she had so many...”

“Clothes?”

“Vacations. Memories—reasons to take all these photos.”

“It’s all before us.” Lo’s voice sounds dreamy, small.

“It’s before all of us” (Hemen).

Intercut with this are flashbacks to Clare’s youth, mostly to the summer before she met and married her second husband. It’s the summer she spent on a motorcycle trip with her father. He is beginning to succumb to age, and it is the first time she realizes she will soon have to rely on herself rather than blindly trusting in his judgment, strength, and ability. He is himself struggling with the fact that, years before, his daughter Clare left her husband and young daughter Evelyn. She offered no explanation and sought no forgiveness. It is an open secret between the two of them that she has been leading a bohemian lifestyle since abandoning what everyone assumed was a stable, loving young family. Clare recalls the decisions that have led her to this as they drive through the middle of the country. When they end up in an accident, Clare is again on her own as her father convalesces yet eventually dies in a hospital far away from home.

The end of the story has yet to be resolved, but the intention is to further push these characters to examine how their families and their past—and the revised versions of both—have shaped their perceptions of self, to see to what extent the children can reveal their mother, and to explore how they adjust (or resist adjusting) themselves to their new realities. In this case, family is a choice they have to make. The photographs, mute

symbols for a period of their mother's life, become the vocabulary they share and the language with which they can understand their past.

### Tentative Schedule

Initial submission of proposal. . . . .	November 15, 2014
Proposal returned for revision. . . . .	December 15, 2014
Second proposal draft submitted. . . . .	January 15, 2015
Second proposal returned for revision . . . . .	February 15, 2015
Submission of proposal for final revisions. . . . .	March 16, 2015
Proposal accepted by research advisor. . . . .	April 17, 2015
Thesis director assigned. . . . .	May 15, 2015
First draft completed. . . . .	November 1, 2015
Thesis director returns first draft. . . . .	December 1, 2015
Revised draft completed. . . . .	January 1, 2016
Thesis director returns revised draft. . . . .	February 1, 2016
Final text submitted to thesis director and research advisor. . . . .	March 1, 2016
Thesis Upload . . . . .	April 15, 2016
Graduation. . . . .	May, 2016



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