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Holes as a Collaborative Project

Graham Allen

Holes started off as something of a poetic exercise. I have written elsewhere about the theoretical context of its inception, and how it was first designed as a poetic contribution to a deconstructive conference celebrating, among other things, the 40th anniversary of Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences."¹ However, as far as my own practice as a poet was concerned there was a far more down-to-earth motivation for embarking on such a project, which was, in short, to practice daily my ability to write a ten-syllable line of poetry. I've always admired modern poets who can keep such a regularity of line without it affecting the vernacular effect of their poetry. I wanted to learn how to do that with ten syllables. More than that, I was interested in developing an ongoing poetic practice which I might then be able to mine for larger more publishable work. The practice of the one ten-syllable line a day was, then, supposed to be a temporary strategy, one which would quickly be replaced by other strategies. Poets should be fans of Brian Eno.

The practice of *Holes*, however, soon grew into something a little more permanent than an evanescent *oblique strategy*. Once it began it didn't appear to want to end. There was something within it that seemed immensely applicable to my own feelings about the way poets should exploit their own lives while never offering up themselves as the literal and direct

¹See Graham Allen and James O'Sullivan (2016), "Collapsing Generation and Reception: *Holes* as Electronic Literary Impermanence," in Helen J. Burgess (ed.), *Hyperbiz: New Media Cultures*, no. 15, doi:10.20415/hyp/015.e01. See also "365 Holes" essay in *Theory & Event* 2009 12 (1), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v012/12.1.allen.html.

subject of confession or simply as subject matter. That is to say, I believe in the Romantic idea of the exercise of personal Imagination and I also take Eliot's (which is really Keats's) dictum about *impersonality*. Shelley once said that didactic poetry was his abhorrence. Contemporary poets' greatest abhorrence should be confessional poetry. No question. That leaves us with a paradox of a kind of experiential poetry which explores and mines but also avoids and transcends the self. One route is clearly a kind of contemporary version of the dramatic monologue. But there need to be other ways which meet the paradox of "self" head on. *Holes*, as it developed, seemed, in its wonderful brevity and rigid occasionalism, and most of all in its exploitation of the linguistic shifter and its refusal to offer clarifying contexts, to offer up something of a solution to the paradox of "self." It had one authorial origin, that is true; but that author was (and still is) frequently at a loss to explain the meaning of a reference or the structure of a set on lines.

Let me pursue this theme, which is in a sense a counterweight to the idea of collaboration, a little further. The vast majority of what gets published as poetry in Ireland, where I live and work, presents itself as confessional. One might talk about the Heaney-inspired dominance of something we might call *autobiographical naturalism*: a poetry that presents the "self" responding, normally in the rhetoric of the immediate present, to a natural or social scene and/or event. What I sometimes describe as "looking out of the window and seeing the hills or the seagulls or the removal van" poetry. There is, of course, much in contemporary Irish poetry which resists this *autobiographical naturalism*, some of it through subtlety and rhetorical intelligence, some of it through various Modernist pathways. The fact remains, that the poetries which embrace rather than resist this style of poetry are frequently depressingly unconscious both of the mythic nature of the autobiographical self and of the possibilities for aesthetic immediacy. Any poet worth their salt surely knows that (i) "I" am a network, an intertextual node (rather than an individual subject), and (ii) the dream of "immediacy" goes back to the Wordsworthian re-evaluation of all poetic values in *The Prelude* and other odes and lyrics. That one can show the reliance of Wordsworth's poetic self on Milton's construction of "self" in *Paradise Lost* only goes to strengthen our understanding of the paradoxical (because intertextual) poetic "self." The myth of immediacy is less frequently discussed, however, and is, I would assert, a stronger pull on serious poetic expression. I am reminded here of the brilliantly succinct title of Geoffrey H. Hartman's early book on Romantic and post-Romantic poetry, *The Unmediated Vision*.² It is relatively easy to accept that one has gained one's voice through long immersion in the literature

²Geoffrey H. Hartman (1954), *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

of the past. If you don't accept that then you are probably not writing anything worthy of the name of poetry. It is easy, then, to admit that one is, as a "self" and a "poetic voice," mediated. How would you know how to write poetry if you were not? The dream that one might draw one's art and one's life into a closer temporal and experiential relation than is normally possible appears, however, to be an aesthetic desire which it is less easy to cast aside.

Anyone who has ever studied Wordsworth, or any other poet for that matter, will have had the experience of registering, as something of a shock, how mediated their poetry actually is. The fact seems commonsensical and hardly worth airing; however, when one experiences the temporal delays, the revisionary and editing processes, the sheer muddy writing and rewriting of the poems which first articulated the modern poetic dream of immediacy, then it still arrives as something of a shock.³ This is perhaps before one begins to factor in the poet's relations with their publishers, the processes involved in publishing, and then the modernizing, textual work required before we re-encounter the poet in the modern scholarly edition. There is more water under the bridge than we like to think about before we read or even Wordsworth's first readers read the words: "Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters! ..."⁴

Holes can be said to have grown on me as a project and a practice, partly because within its brevity of expression there seemed something like an answer to the insistent call of immediacy. Despite this, however, as I found 2007 bleeding into 2008 and then 2009, 2010, and 2011, the fact remained that some of the best poetry I had managed to compose in this period languished, not only unpublished, but as far as I could see unpublishable. As *Holes* grew the question of its publishability intensified. I imagined I might, at year ten, after a decade of work, be in a position to persuade some kind of publisher (some kind publisher) to publish the work. I imagined that serial publication every decade might be achievable.⁵ But such an approach, monumentalizing the lines into something like an achieved, stable work,

³See, for example, *From Goslar to Grasmere. William Wordsworth: Electronic Manuscripts*, <http://collections.wordsworth.org.uk/GtoG/>.

⁴I cite Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798" from Jerome J. McGann (ed.) (1994), *The New Oxford Book of Period Verse*, Oxford and New York: 178–81. This edition anthologizes Romantic poetry in the year of its first publication, thus attempting to give the reader a less mediated experience. Whether that manner of arranging such editions works in the way McGann wished his to work is obviously a debatable question.

⁵This ambition was partly realised when *Holes: Decade I* was published by New Binary Press. See Graham Allen 2017, *Holes: Decade I*, Cork City: New Binary Press.

seemed destined to eradicate all the topicality, all the day-by-day relevance, and a good deal of the basic reference of the lines. The experience of writing and reading *Holes*, in its first six years, became an increasingly peculiar one. Filled with topicality, with references to political and social events, cultural moments of interest, biographical stages of my life, the text grew and grew and the absurdity of its lack of any public readership grew with it. I remember one Professor of Classics, concerned in his own work with the topicality of the texts of Greek drama, on learning of *Holes*, saying to me: "So you write topical poetry, but you don't publish it? You wally!"

I am not a blogger. Nor perhaps was I meant to be. I am interested in digital art and culture made possible by the internet and by electronics and computers and hypertextual systems, but I do not naturally place my practice as a poet in those contexts; I lack the basics skills to do so even if I wanted to. So although what I was doing with *Holes* seemed in many ways to cry out for a blog or some other e-lit format, I did not imagine I was ever going to be able to manage that solution myself. I hardly think I am unique in this mind set. Computers dominate my life, just like they dominate most people's lives. I write, compose, edit, communicate, even think on keyboards and screens. But I stay resolutely, stubbornly, helplessly on the outside of those screens. A digital artist, the author of e-lit, call them what you will, exists, of course, on both sides of the screen. What *Holes* needed, to become something that could exploit digital technology in order to really come into being, was, then, someone else, someone other than me. It was when I talked all this through with my collaborator, James O'Sullivan, who was if I remember looking for a project to demonstrate a number of then still rather unacknowledged facts about e-lit, that we realized that between us we could create something rather unique.

One of the major points that James found was confirmed in *Holes* was that digital literature (e-lit if you prefer) does not (à la George P. Landow et al.) have to be interactive to be classed as such. Certainly, there is a minimum interactivity in the various divisions (About, Responses, Gallery) and the availability of the selection of starting date, but compared to the claims concerning kinds of intense hypertextuality which dominated, until recently, discussions of digital literature, *Holes* is stubbornly static. It is important, therefore, to be clear about what we mean when we describe *Holes* as *born-digital*. Or to put things another way, to describe *Holes*, accurately, as *born-digital*, is to clarify that that often-used phrase refers not to a certain type of interactive, forking, nonnarrative art, but rather to anything, *Holes* included, that could not exist in its essential state, without being presented through a digital (electronic) medium. The essential features of *Holes* are its ongoing creation (day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year), and its conflation, in its digital form, of the activities of creation and reception. *Holes* is born-digital because its outstanding feature is that it is read as it grows, and for this to happen it requires a medium of communication which

transcends the monumentalizing features of codex publication, and allows for the equivalent of weekly replenishment (“Five years and one week have passed ...”). If the lines of *Holes* can be figured as a form of liquid poetry, then they require not a glass to fill but, rather, a flowing stream to join. There is a noteworthy way, therefore, in which digital media are, ironically perhaps, more authentically organic than print books. The Romantic dream of immediacy is bound up, of course, with a figure of organic form which has its most dramatic expression in Coleridge’s Eolian harp, a musical instrument which creates “natural music” by responding, in an unmediated and thus immediate fashion, to the wind.⁶ Coleridge’s figure presents us with a dream of poetry which responds “naturally”/immediately with the world outside the poet. A dream, that is, in which experience and poetic expression are coincident. I am not, for a moment, suggesting that such an immediacy is actually attainable in digital literature, or anywhere else, for that matter. What I am suggesting is that *Holes* finds ways of using its digital platform to radically decrease the temporal gulf between conception and expression, on the one hand, and publication and reception on the other. It brings us closer to that unfulfillable dream which is also, of course, the dream of modern news media and perhaps telecommunications more generally. I am writing these lines, for example, on the morning of November 14, 2015, one day after the terrorist atrocities in Paris on November 13, 2015, and I am able as a poet to know that my response to this event will be published in *Holes* within the next 24 to 48 hours. I can even be certain of this before that response is composed and committed to written form. One of the ironies which emerges here, of course, if we take up this post-Romantic perspective on unmediatedness and immediacy, is that the gains achieved by *Holes* on the temporal level are made on the basis of a collaborative understanding of authorship which cuts across other apparently foundational Romantic principles.

In the basic sense of the word, *Holes* is collaborative. Without that collaboration it wouldn’t publically exist. The mechanics of this collaboration have been described in the essay I have already mentioned (Allen and O’Sullivan, see note 1), but from my own side they consist of a combination of composition, regular delivery (every Sunday), and then trust (that James will code correctly, that he will do so promptly, and that he will more generally attend to the upkeep of the site, including periodic improvements to design, storage, etc.). The collaboration is rather like that of the old relationship between author and publisher, in that James takes control of all aspects of publication, including advertising the work on a number of social platforms and, crucially, the look of the text on the numerous kinds of computer screens it is now read on. If *Holes* is a poetic

⁶See S. T. Coleridge, “The Eolian Harp,” in McGann (ed.) 1994: 119–20.

artifact, then it has two creators, two authors. Always generous and always eager to involve me in decision making, it is nonetheless true that much of the reader's experience of reading, looking at, and interacting with *Holes* is the work of James O'Sullivan.

Much of the emphasis on this collaboration for me lies in the issue of trust I have already raised. Invoking the figure of the Georgian publisher-bookseller like, for example, John Murray II (publisher of Byron, until Byron broke with him), or Joseph Johnson (publisher of Wollstonecraft and other radicals), or Charles Ollier (Shelley's publisher, until a breakdown of trust), is illuminating in many respects. These Georgian figures were in control of every step of the process of publication from commissioning work through to advertising, branding, and rebranding works and authors. The relationship they had with their artists was neither subservient nor impersonally bureaucratic, but surprisingly equal even to the point of debates over content and artistic direction.⁷ The literary marketplace was beginning to open up into something unprecedented, offering a mass audience to those who possessed the wit and the courage (along with the talent) to seize and shape the new medium of the mass-produced and mass-distributed book. Authors we associate with Romantic ideas of originality and solitary creation (Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth) were surprisingly dependent upon the friendship, guidance, and wisdom of their bookseller-publishers.

A similar equality exists in the kind of digital collaboration represented by *Holes* where the relationship is between two poets, one of whom is also the publisher. The seven lines (or "holes" as I tend to call them) are delivered each week from a notebook application on an iPad through a direct email communication. Which is to say, the author figure (Graham Allen) is not involved directly in the overall shape of the text (as it develops), and unless he makes a special point to do so does not check how these seven lines he is sending to his publisher (James) relate to those which have preceded them. It would be interesting, because of this, to ask: who is in fact responsible for the overall shape and design of the text (as it develops)? I have invoked the issue of trust, in the way I have, since the answer to this question is in no way clear. If conventional thinking gives responsibility for the overall text to the author, then with *Holes* this responsibility has to be understood as a shared responsibility between someone who is acting the part of author and someone who is acting the part of publisher but who has taken on numerous functions previously associated with the author. The trust involved is not then principally about content, but rather about a dual custodianship for a text that has long ago escaped the confines of one single creative mind.

⁷For a recent discussion of Byron's crucial, career-defining relationship with his publisher, see Mary O'Connell (2014), *Byron and John Murray: A Poet and His Publisher*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Holes, in this last sense, is not a text, not a poem, and not a book. It is best described as a textual project, an auto-bio-graphy, where each one of those activities (self-reflection and self-expression, living/existing, writing/designing) is done by more than one person, and normally by at least two. It might be best to understand this project in its collaborative dimensions through the issue of mutual interest. Not in the usual semi-military, brinkmanship sense of that phrase, but rather in terms of the required criteria for continuation. If either of the authors of *Holes* (the author-poet and the author-publisher, if you will) decided it was a project that no longer interested them then the project and thus the text itself would finish. In fact without the author-publisher's maintenance of the site on which the text is presented the text would cease to exist, whatever decisions the author-poet wanted to effect. So *Holes* exists and will continue to exist so long as it remains interesting to at least two people. The original and originating number of existence for *Holes* is not the Romantic and post-Romantic "One" but a wholly more dialogic and collaborative "two." If the reader, that "third" party of interest, if such a person exists, were ever able to look through the text as if it were a hole through which one could see then it would be two faces, two lives, two origins that they saw.

Yet, of course, this doubleness is not strictly dependent upon its literal manifestation in two authors, two origins. Doubleness is not to be understood in a crass literalism. If there were only *one* then as we have already said there would still, necessarily, be a minimum of *two*. The poem in various ways, but particularly through a rigorous adherence to the logic of the linguistic shifter seeks to perform this fact again and again. It is worth, perhaps, elaborating on this point. The model for this utilization of the shifter in *Holes* lies in the entries on this subject in Roland Barthes's own auto-bio-graphical text. Barthes remarks on receiving a postcard signed "Jean-Louis" and dated "Monday." As he states the receiver of such a message, "must instantly choose between more than one Jean-Louis and several Mondays."⁸ Barthes finds this tendency of the linguistic shifter to multiple possible referents joyful and even erotic, and a liberating basis for his own auto-bio-graphical writing. He says:

I speak ... but I wrap myself in the mist of an enunciatory situation which is unknown to you; I insert into my discourse certain *leaks of interlocution* (is this not, in fact, what always happens when we utilize that shifter *par excellence*, the pronoun *I*?).

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⁸Roland Barthes (1977), *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, 165–6, London: Macmillan.

The answer to the rhetorical question is, of course, yes, but a yes which we always seem to forget. We forget it, that is, whenever we think that the personal pronoun has an uncomplicated coincidence with the one who is enunciating, and we forget it whenever we speak or write about ourselves as authors. In its use of the shifter, *Holes* attempts to perform this forgetting. Which is to say it attempts to remain self-conscious about processes of inevitable and yet unpredictable forgetting. There are pronouns in *Holes* to which “I” can assign referents and there are pronouns for which “I” have lost the referent or to which “I” can wager a number of competing referents. But things are more complicated even than that. One might take a line like the following, from May 26, 2007: “When the lights are off, who am I to you.”⁹ I have no idea, writing now on November 16, 2015, whether that line was meant to capture something personal to my life or something generic and thus impersonal. Because of that I am not sure what the referent of “you” is but also whether there is any specific referent for “I.” Was the line referring to something personal or did it arrive as a poetic fiction? I have no idea. The context for this line is quite forgotten and irretrievable. The line is, therefore, both autobiographical and yet unrecoverable, and in that sense beyond all possibility of autobiographical writing or understanding. It is the potential expression of a moment of personal affect along with the eradication of the possibility of that affect.

Holes is an auto-bio-graphy which strives to include forgetting (and thus the contingencies of memory) within its own *graphy* and its own *auto*. It presents itself as a text by an author, but it constantly exploits the fact that the idea of a text by an author depends upon quite common and perhaps unavoidable modes of forgetting. Through this process of remembering its reliance on forgetting *Holes* hopes to re-member, to re-member differently. Barthes, if we can return to him, goes further and notes the socio-legal prohibitions which militate or at least would like to militate against the logic of the shifter. Through this he draws this issue back toward the question of the author’s lack of singularity. He ventures, through this use of the shifter, toward a liberation from the socio-legalistic restrictions which normatively revolve around the inscription of a singularity of dating and of naming:

Can we even imagine the freedom and, so to speak, the erotic fluidity of a collectivity which would speak only in pronouns and shifters, each person never saying anything legal whatsoever, and in which the *vagueness of difference* (the only fashion of respecting its subtlety, its infinite repercussion) would be language’s most precious value?

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⁹HolesbyGrahamAllen, May 26, 2007, <http://holesbygrahamallen.org/>.

One is reminded of Michel Foucault's analysis of the history of the name and notion of "the author" as a legal construct.¹⁰ The proper name of the author, Foucault says there, and the study of book history has shown again and again since, is on one sense a legal construct designed to attribute and fix meaning. More generally, we tend to want to restrict meaning-making to individuals, so that we talk (rather absurdly if one thinks about it) of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* or of Shakespeare's plays or of Stanley Kubrick's films, or even of Henry Ford's motor cars and James Dyson's vacuum-cleaner. The proper name occludes the collective and collaborative processes that are involved in the creation of works of art and of technology. So that *Holes* by *Graham Allen*, like any other title bearing a singular proper name, works to erase its own relation to the logic of the shifter. The exploitation and celebration within the work itself of the logic of the shifter, however, hopefully foregrounds such a mode of forgetting and by doing so figuratively at least refers to the *more than one* that lies behind the text on the screen. Through its performance of the shifter, or the logic of the shifter, and through the associated, analogous leading metaphor of the hole (that cannot be successfully looked through), *Holes* is a text and a project which seeks to remember again and again the inevitability of its forgetting of the complex doubles (the various versions of *more than one*) that help to create it.

¹⁰Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 113–38, Oxford: Blackwell.