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Being in Uncertainties, Mysteries and Doubts

Negative Capability and the Role of the Imagination in the Academy Today

Derek Neale



We publish here the third contribution to NAWE's panel session on this subject at AWP Washington, 2011.ⁱ

When undertaking Creative Writing study in UK universities writers are often burdened with an extra task, one that they are asked to do just because they are situated

within an institution of higher education, or so it would seem. This task is the writing of a commentary about their work. Writers are required not to be certain about what they are doing, but to report confidently about their uncertainties.

These commentaries are required of writing students at undergraduate, MA, MFA and PhD levels. The postgraduate commentaries are more often referred to as 'critical' rather than 'reflective', and it is interesting to pause on those two terms. In so doing, I was reminded of something Malcolm Bradbury wrote in 1993:

For the moment what [academic] criticism plainly lacks is a substantive theory of creativity itself – a concept of the ways in which the instincts, the structures, the modal forms of imaginative expression can take on their purpose and pattern not as textual slippage but as original humane discovery.ⁱⁱ

Bradbury goes on to describe the study of creative writing in the UK as having a suspect reputation amongst academics; writers are commonly thought to engage in an activity rather like 'playing in the sand in primary school'. Bradbury asserted this nearly twenty years ago, but can we really say that the situation and perceptions have changed? Writers are children:

perhaps we will all admit to that; we gain something from being children, it is necessary for us to play. Bradbury's era of teaching was one in which there was, some would say, a purer focus on the writing itself, an era less bothered by the need to explain method and approach. The UEA MA during his reign had no commentary component and he tended not to supervise on the then new Creative and Critical Writing PhD programme. The publication of the volume in which Bradbury's essay appears, *The Agony and the Ego*, was perhaps a sign that things were about to change and that there was a nascent demand for writers' accounts of what they do. That imperative inevitably revealed testimonies of incompatibility between writer and university. Much of the academy's mission in each of its disciplines is based on research and on pinning down human experience, recalling history in empirical fashion in order to further understand the present and possibly even the future. Yet in that same volume of essays Bradbury's then UEA teaching colleague, Rose Tremain, asserts that for the writer 'the factual or experiential has to find its own mysteriousness', as if this is antithetical to the academy's interest in data and evidence. She goes on:

By this I mean that all the research done for a novel – all the studying and reading, all the social fieldwork, all the location visiting ... must be reimagined before it can find a place in the text. It must rise into the orbit of the anarchic, gift-conjuring, unknowing part of the novelist's mind before it can acquire its own truth ... Reimagining implies some measure of forgetting.ⁱⁱⁱ

How is this anarchic, unknowing self revealed in commentaries? The labels we have come to attach to exegeses of the writing process – critical and reflective – now seem to implore us to get out of the sand pit and

grow up, or to wake up: to fully realize the price to be paid for renting a home in the academy. Both terms hold pejorative connotations. The misbehaving child is punished by being told to reflect on their actions. The critical is at once an analytical and a dismembering gaze, rather than one which liberates or is firstly appreciative, engaged and entertained by child-like play.

With both terms there is a tendency to think of the commentary as somehow elevated, the imaginative venture as demoted, diminished, or even criminalized. By playing – by writing stories, plays, poems – we are being naughty, miscreant children. The academic sphere gives a pre-eminence to more rational, theoretical, researched and evidence-based endeavour, over ephemeral and immeasurable acts of imagination and creativity. The academy finds it hard to fathom or assess ‘play’.

In this way writing an exegesis about the creative work can be seen as a doffed cap towards our landlords, an attempted act of deference or even conciliation.

Commentaries appear to follow the rules of academic study: using research and reading in order to form an essay-shaped text. They offer at least phenomenological testimony, which is evidence of sorts. Yet commentaries, reflective or critical or both, struggle to explain the spontaneity and necessary abandon – the ‘negative capability’ – involved in the imaginative adventure of creating, for instance, incidents and characters in a story. How do we write a commentary about these sorts of phenomena other than to state in a literal, banal and uninteresting fashion: ‘I imagined it’, ‘I thought it up’, ‘it came to me’. Keats puts it less abstractly and less dully: ‘I took part in the existence of the sparrow’^{iv}. This seems instantly more satisfying, perhaps because it gives us an image to start playing with, but is it any more illuminating?

Commentaries present a quandary. How can you possibly write about writing and why would you want to? And, given a pervasive unease within the profession about such self-scrutiny, why would you ask your students to do so? Surely this could stop the writer from writing; does it not risk unravelling the work? If a writer has to explain her rhyming couplets or lines of dialogue, why write them in the first place? The sheer scale of exegetic work on Creative Writing courses is alarming. For instance, my colleague and I oversee two Open University undergraduate courses with a current student population of 3,500. Each student produces six or seven assignments, which roughly amounts to 22,000 commentaries written in one year at one university

alone. 22,000 descriptions of the sand pit. What have we done? Just imagine the number of grains of sand that are being scrutinized, analyzed, reflected upon, at this very moment.

It also should be noted that not all commentaries are undertaken after the event. Some reflections have to anticipate, contradictory though that may sound. Writers can be asked to act grown up before jumping in the sand pit, being required to report not only on current projects but also on what is planned. This sort of reflective summary, often written as part of funding applications, progress reports and for dissertation or PhD proposals, might involve repeated pre-conscious synopsis, a summing up of what is yet to be written. In a positive sense such commentary can be seen as planning and preparation: flushing ideas out into the open, so facilitating their initial development. Yet it can also be corrosive. The ideas might be incubating nicely; the brash, premature light of day may fracture their fragile potential.

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Despite all of this apparent negativity – and, you might think, despite my better judgement – I would like to defend the commentary. This defense comes not from any duplicitous allegiance with our landlords, or from any sense of the academic residency being necessarily more suitable than any other home that writers might find. Patronage always comes at a price, yet this particular toll seems to me to tap into something that writers are already doing in any case. When pushed on the matter most admit to an ongoing reflective process, an editorial dialogue with themselves about what they are writing and the various ways in which they might negotiate the piece of work in hand. This amounts to a running self-commentary, informing the way characters develop, the way in which scenes are created, words and phrases are included or cut. Each writer will be different; often there is great overlap and interaction between self-commentary mode and writing mode, though they can require two very different states of mind. This calls to mind John Fowles’ adage about all writers needing to be two people – a wild man and an

academic. Often the division seems more mundane. When reading through a story or scene I frequently note areas that need 'further development', but often cannot undertake that drafting work immediately, knowing that I am not in the right frame of mind. I may be thinking too editorially, I may be too involved in a previous scene or want to get to the next scene; I may be procrastinating or I may just be too tired. I come back to the missing part when I am more able to engage in appropriate fashion: when I can become the sparrow. At the heart of Keats' assertion of negative capability is the necessary subsuming of the writer's will and intention. The writer has to stop consciously doing in order to do. Yet, as we all know, there is an awful lot of will and intent involved in any sort of writing. In reviewing the writing process – in commentaries or interviews – writers often stumble on remnants of their discarded or fragmented aims. This area of how we write – the question of whether stories are made or found – suggests an intriguing paradox which very much relates to the idea of Keatsian 'mystery'; it is one of the reasons writers' interviews and commentaries make such fascinating reading.

Let me give you some examples. First of all fictional: the narrator in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, Bendrix, is a novelist. He offers contradictory testimony – stories can be found:

So much of a novelist's writing takes place in the unconscious: in those depths the last word is written before the first word appears on paper. We remember the details of our story, we do not invent them.^v

And stories are wilfully made – with much graft, according to Bendrix:

Always I find when I begin to write there is one character who obstinately will not come alive. There is nothing psychologically false about him, but he sticks, he has to be pushed around, words have to be found for him.^{vi}

The End of the Affair is a confessional novel about the writing process. It offers a familiar model of fiction passing itself off as life writing, presenting proto-empirical author-testimony as its story.

Similarly, in interview the novelist Andrew Cowan revealed intentional and unintentional ways in which his first novel, *Pig*, was written. The novel is a story which, as you may surmise, involves a pig, and also a grandfather. He says that the act of writing is akin to 'following a glimmer':

Every book is a kind of journey of exploration where you are looking for the words which will give form to the glimmer.^{vii}

This notion of following a sense of the story which is part known and part mystery recurs with different formulations in many other writers' testimonies. Cowan declares that he knew nothing about pigs; he undertook trips to the library in his research and intentionally manipulated recall from his own life experience to create an emotional realism in the novel:

*I drew on my memories of having dogs when I was a child so the pig in *Pig* is really a description of my collie dogs when I was a boy.*

He also declares a more 'found' version of writing, such as with the voice of the grandfather in the novel:

That is my [own] grandfather's voice. And it came to me as if he was speaking directly to me which is a wonderful thing.

This flux between finding and grinding out a story echoes the testimony in *The End of the Affair* when Bendrix returns from mysterious imaginative ventures to an all too familiar, coffee-stained version of writing practice, often detailing a neurosis about his daily quota of words that may be known to many.

The novelist and memoirist Jenny Diski writes of the necessity of playfulness in *Skating to Antarctica* when talking about fictional child-characters based on herself:

The child who often appears in my novels sometimes has experiences I remember, but frequently doesn't. I am not fettered by history, by an absolute sense of telling-the-truth or making-things-up. I'm free to play around with who Jennifer was, might have been, never could have been. Sometimes it seems that I can get closer to her, or an essence of her precisely because of the distance between us.^{viii}

In the tussle between making and finding, the lack of restriction is all important – having the freedom to dream, to play. This is an activity which, as stated earlier, does not sit easily in the academy. In this context, and pondering that 'adult world', it is impossible to ignore what now seems an almost quaint if necessary episode of late twentieth-century critical theory: that involving 'The Death of the Author' and 'What is an Author?'. Theorists such as Barthes and Foucault portrayed writers not as playful but as products of culture along with their writings. Authors were a hindrance to interpretation and at best should be put to one side. Such perceptions of the writer have tended to

reign within Literature departments. For instance, Bradbury, who was an academic critic who taught Literature as well as a novelist and screenwriter, wrote about that time:

It seemed somewhat strange for us to be announcing the Death of the Author in classroom, then going straight back home to be one.^{ix}

What happened to writers of fiction and poetry and drama while Barthes and Foucault were having their day, and since? Did we feel our pulses? Did we reflect not in words but by looking in the mirror to check if we were still there? On the contrary. The critical sidelining of the author has been countered over the years by the burgeoning profile of Creative Writing within English Studies. Authors, writers, have been far from dead; we have been active in the sand pit as per usual, and we have also been actively reflecting. It is increasingly apparent that practical writing studies augments and benefits the academy, not only with popular courses and high student populations, but also by adding an important strand to literary discussion. With the rising profile of writing modules in English departments the commensurate increase in reflective writing about practice has not just come from students. A new focus has developed – not on the author as signifier of the text but on the phenomenology of the writing process. The trend had its antecedents, for instance, in Henry James' essays and prefaces, one of them famously giving rise to the showing and telling debate. Notable other early contributions came with EM Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, Walter Allen's *Writers on Writing* and Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*. A parallel tradition emerged with *The Paris Review Interviews*, and subsequent volumes of conversations with writers such as John Haffenden's *Novelists in Interview*.

Access to writers' versions of the creative process – their vacillations, hesitations and certainties, their craft and theories of form, their versions of technique and art, and their own individual and often eloquent vocabulary – has been amplified by modern, multi-platformed media and the ways in which writers are required to publicize their work. The latter half of the twentieth century and the start of this century has seen an explosion of reflective volumes from writers – Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*; Joyce Carol Oates' *The Faith of a Writer*; Ursula Le Guin's *Steering the Craft*; Graham Swift's *Making an Elephant*; David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction* and *The Practice of Writing*; Orhan Pamuk's *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*; Umberto Eco's *Confessions of a Young Novelist*.

This is merely the start of the list which also includes volumes such as *The Agony and the Ego*, mentioned earlier, as well as books by lesser known writers, many of whom teach creative writing in universities, along with several multi-authored, multi-genred handbooks and coursebooks, catering to the needs of the Creative Writing student population. This surge in practice-based discussion perhaps acts as a riposte to Barthes and Foucault, signalling that the realm of poetics is being re-occupied at least in part by those who write stories, poems, plays.

These various volumes feature both technical theory and writing exercises, though in research assessments within HE they tend to be denigrated as 'just teaching materials', highlighting the ongoing impasse between landlord and tenant. At the same time there has been renewed interest in writers' diaries, journals, drafts and drafting methods which has seen a parallel increase in archival research and wide-ranging revelations about working relationships between writers and editors: not only Raymond Carver, there are others – William Golding and Jane Austen are two disparate examples.

Over recent years I have recorded interviews with a number of writers about their writing process, conversations which have echoed this sense that practice testimonies offer valuable contributions to literary study and to the academic discussions about what Bradbury called 'a substantive theory of creativity'. I have also written – as have many others – an extensive commentary as part of a Creative Writing PhD thesis. My commentary was on the relationship between memory and writing. Various colleagues have reflected in their PhDs on the relationship between rock and roll and fiction, the novel tradition in Scotland, politics and the Indian novel. I could go on, but you can see from these titles and themes that writing a reflection frequently involves looking at context, examining other works; it involves reading widely and contextualizing that reading in relation to your own writing. It does not involve just retelling what you did.

In resting the discussion of poetics back from supposedly objective literary and cultural theory, writers are also contributing to a new diction and genre, one in which self-reflection is not destructive or indulgent, and where becoming the sparrow or playing in the sand pit have a proper and rightful significance. In finding the language to write these reflections we are not indulging in what writers fear most – having to explain, praise, exonerate our own work. A commentary should never be a defense, an explanation or an

interpretation. Commentaries on writing process, as seen in the examples given in this discussion, are not confined to university programmes. But universities inherently should be interested in their subject matter – the phenomenology of craft, of art and of the creative process; equally interested in these things as they are in the history, linguistics and aesthetics of text and form.

Similarly, writers should not be afraid of embracing the academy. It is ours to mould if we wish. This is my other reason for commending the commentary: it is a discourse, I believe, which can act as an important challenge to those who supposedly own the territory, our landlords; a challenge that offers up the suggestion that we may not be tenants after all but co-proprietors. Having finally arrived at this suggestion of affiliation (no, not deference or mere conciliation), I would never go so far as to suggest that we should proceed without doubt, without uncertainty. It would seem that ‘not knowing’ is central to what we do, but we can and should further scrutinize and discuss our uncertainties and how half-glimpsed truths are sought. Keats himself was seen to be ambivalent about negative capability in his own methods, as Douglas Bush wrote:

As artist Keats fluctuates – and is aware of his fluctuations – between belief in the poetic efficacy of a wise passiveness, and belief in the active pursuit of rational knowledge and philosophy.^x

This seems to me to be an accurate account of the dilemma faced by many writers in the academy.

Notes

i Borrowing its title from a NAWA panel at the 2011 AWP conference in Washington DC, this article is based on my presentation on that panel. Fellow panelists were Diana Barsham and Maggie Butt; the panel was chaired by Paul Munden. ‘Negative capability’ has been a much debated term and originates in Keats’ letters – specifically those addressed to Benjamin Bailey and Keats’ brothers George and Tom, in November and December 1817, Rollins, Hyder Edward (ed.) *The Letters of John Keats* CUP (1958) pp183-194.

ii Bradbury, Malcolm ‘Graceful Combinations’ in Boylan, Clare (ed.) *The Agony and the Ego* Penguin (1993) p62

iii Rose Tremain ‘The First Mystery’ in Boylan, Clare (ed.) *The Agony and the Ego* Penguin (1993) p5

iv Letter to Benjamin Bailey November 22 1817 Rollins, Hyder Edward (ed.) *The Letters of John Keats* CUP (1958)

p186.

v Greene G, *The End of the Affair* Penguin 1975 (1st pub 1951) p35

vi Ibid pp185-6

vii Andrew Cowan in interview, in Neale, Derek and Anderson, Linda *Writing Fiction* Routledge (2009) p178.

viii Diski, Jenny *Skating to Antarctica* Granta (1997) p86.

ix Bradbury, Malcolm, Introduction *Class Work* Hodder and Stoughton (1995)

x ‘Keats and his Ideas’ in Abrams, MH (ed.) *English Romantic Poets* OUP (1960)

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