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Introduction: Critical and creative reflections on process

Principal Editor: Derek Neale

The rich interdisciplinary approach in contributors' writing about writing has been noted before, but this issue's array of critical and creative reflections is dazzling, not least in its range of genres. Two essays (Kendal and Manwaring) explore via literary archives the creative process of notable fantasy practitioners (Tolkien and Holdstock respectively). A poet (Caldwell) focuses on the effect of predecessor and place, Ted Hughes and his Yorkshire landscapes, on her own work. A collaborative psychology-writing study (Habens) seeks to find the effects on well-being of Campbell's 'Hero's Journey', and there is an essay focused on novelists' voice and rhythm (Robertson), linking theories from Derrida and Saussure to the writer's own practice. A novel-in-progress about the consequences of the Spanish civil war (Simpson) focuses on image, utilising Benjamin's concept of 'denkbilder'. Also in relation to conflict, there is a forensic examination of links between comics, the war in Bosnia and autobiographical events and writing (Mahmutovic and Durneen), and a historical novelist's testimony (Iceton) about the use of facts when writing about the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Postcolonial narratives are critically compared (Pinnock) in the analysis of Caryl Phillips' adaptation of Schama's *Rough Crossings*. There is an examination of the relationship between young adult readers and dystopian fiction (Ezzi), and another essay (Gilbert) explores how troublesome early-life autobiographical narratives can inform aesthetic literacy and later-life writing. A novelist (Bell) explores recent influential, theoretically and autobiographically-informed writers such as Kraus, Nelson, Levy and Laing, and the eclecticism is crowned by Andrew Cowan's guest article, a seminal reflection on Creative Writing's rise and history. It is not the story that some might expect; Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson are seen as messengers not inventors. Yet the re-designated role of writer in the academy and critical examinations of the creative process have become crucial aspects of our contemporary writing culture, as clearly displayed in this issue.

Angles of Reflection

Cowan's history comes at a time when Creative Writing is better established and perhaps a little more secure in its relationships with other academic disciplines. It is still a newcomer but has more acknowledged and reciprocally beneficial dealings with both English language and literature, as evidenced in the co-convened 'English: Shared Futures' UK conference in 2017 and the fact that Cowan's essay was first published in a book entitled *Futures for English Studies* (Hewings et al 2016). It is a sign of maturity when a subject can reflect without any of its fledgling insecurities, expressing not shouting its strengths, but also talking openly about its frailties. Cowan's essay appositely notes two impulses behind the origins of the subject, dating back to the nineteenth century: encouraging critics to read more contemporary writing and encouraging would-be writers to read more of their predecessors. These still seem to be prominent on modern English and Creative Writing agendas.

As Ronald Carter (2011) suggests, the rise of Creative Writing has been one of the biggest developments in the study of literature and language over recent decades. It offers a practice-based approach to the study of writing, a factor which is its self-defining and distinguishing

feature. By comparison with much English literature and language study – which engages mostly in retrospective analysis and theoretical consideration of historical, and sometimes contemporary, literary artefacts and language usage – the academic discipline of Creative Writing primarily involves participation in the act of writing and the production of writing. As we know, Creative Writing is often assessed via literary or media outputs but also through reflective commentaries about the process of writing. These can indeed deploy literary and linguistic methodologies. As practitioners we are used to holding up the mirror to what we produce, to the inherent contexts of its making and how we do it. Despite the subject's common though not exclusive association with English Studies, in many ways the subject bears greater similarity to the disciplines of art, design, dance, musical composition and performance than either English literature or language, in that experience of the creative process is the central focus. Yet the currencies of those latter two disciplines – literary artefacts and language – are also prime tools in Creative Writing's active study, its 'canvas, colour and back catalogue' if you like. We require predecessors and to read them, and we need language.

Creative Writing, as with some of the above mentioned disciplines, potentially offers a non-theoretical understanding of creativity. It reveals to practitioners, and to others via practitioner-commentaries, the perspective of the writer and the phenomenology of writing, the participatory perspective. Of course, the reader also participates in the production of literature, as catalogued by Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1977). But this mode of participation – writing, making, producing tangible and original formations of words and text – is a distinct perspective on artistic activity. It is a perspective that appreciates the many contexts involved in the 'creative process' – what has become an overarching term for the many phases of transition from blank page or screen to 'possible idea', through early drafting, pausing, stalling, researching, imagining and re-imagining, to further and final drafts and reception. This process tallies in many respects with several psychological models of creativity, which are based not only on major art practices but also on scientific and technological thought. These models (for instance, see Arieti 1976) typically have five or six phases, including stages such as 'initial conception', 'research' and 'incubation'. The Creative Writing version of the process might read as follows:

- Identification: the sifting and combination of inarticulate ideas and images;
- Early drafting;
- Research: factual, imaginative and linguistic (asking 'what if' questions about the original ideas, contexts, images and language usage, as well as place, people, book, archive and internet research);
- Planning: including a first grasp of structure, shape and ending, and the ongoing development of these elements;
- Incubation: an ill-defined period than can be as brief as a night, or run for months or even years; it comes after the early phases, when an idea further gestates;
- Re-imagining and re-imagining: further drafting and redrafting where the work tangibly advances through various versions towards its readership or performance;
- Editing (though editing isn't limited to this chronological position in the process – it can be, and is, undertaken throughout; in fact re-imagining could be perceived as editing).

As you can see from these latter parentheses, these stages of the process have been laid out in a precarious order, in what looks like a formula for creativity, but the actual experience of the writer is frequently at odds with any such apparent straightforward procedure. Often the process won't happen in accord with an easy chronology such as that charted above, although the elements are common to many writers.

The creative process in this way presents a rich research opportunity. Each one of the above phases warrants further investigation, unpacking and dismantling, to enable us to more fully understand the active elements within the process. This is an invitation for future contributors to *Writing in Practice* and it is a fair summation of what many articles in past issues, this issue included, have focused on. The process is vast and disparate; tangled, complex and paradoxical – certain aspects defy articulated and explicit description, or at least demand new modes of description. The bullet-pointed schedule above, for instance, omits key factors which are simultaneously known and not known by the writer. Ignorance and naiveté are important parts of the process. Within Creative Writing teaching and learning, there is a common focus on the known elements, the craft and technical aspects necessary for the writing of the various forms. As novelist Rachel Cusk says:

A well-written text is like a clock: [...] but if you take its back off you find a mechanism that can be dismantled and readily understood. The writer-teacher can explain that mechanism ... (Cusk 2013)

We might be able to identify the technical elements but the creative process, as seen in many of the research and practice discussions published in this journal, is not reducible to an easily transferable sequence of ‘how to’ assemble or re-assemble instructions. The writing process, because of its infinite variety of form and source, is not entirely synonymous with a predictable and fixable mechanism. Hence the persistent controversy about whether Creative Writing can be taught, which is explicit in Cowan’s survey. The techniques and mechanisms of literary production can be taught, as Cusk suggests, yet the creative process in its entirety, in all its shades, contradictory acts, hesitations and evasions, is more elusive and tends to require multiple angles of reflection, resisting definition by just one perspective. It can be explored, examined, investigated and even elicit practitioner testimony, but the process per se cannot be instructed, even while it contains elements that can be taught, elements with which we are all familiar: prompts for generating ideas, developing the ability to read as a writer, and pragmatic elements such as using a notebook and editing at various levels – that of the sentence, line, paragraph, scene, stanza and chapter. These aspects can be taught, or at least explained, encouraged and facilitated, along with technical skills based on precedent and example, such as point of view, line breaks, diction and characterization.

Yet the process will vary between writers and even within a writer’s different acts of creativity. The contention here is that, while there may be some commonality, there are, and necessarily will be, less tangible and more idiosyncratic aspects to the creative process, aspects that defy expectation, prediction and history. As previously suggested, some elements are deeply paradoxical, simultaneously known and unknown to the writer; such knowledge is inchoate and inarticulate. This inchoate knowledge and its lack of explicit definition is essential to the process, and has been discussed in various theoretical contexts concerning the epistemology of artistic activity (see for instance, Borgdorff 2011), and sometimes labelled as ‘tacit knowledge’ or ‘unattended knowledge’, whereby the writer has to necessarily suspend strands of (explicit) knowledge and knowing in order to pursue a particular artistic endeavour (Polanyi 1983: 10ff).

Images come before language

This introduction can only point to brief instances in writer testimonies of such tacit and inchoate knowledge (what we might term writer-knowledge), while being fully aware that the reader of this issue of *Writing in Practice* will be able to identify vivid evidence of such writer-knowledge in the various articles. Both illustrations focus on ‘images’ and my first

comes from Jane Draycott, talking in reflective commentary about two of her poems in tandem: 'De Somniis' and 'Why some people like to keep chickens' (Draycott 2013: 35ff.). The settings in these poems seem slightly odd; tantalisingly recognisable yet still unfamiliar. There is a common image to both poems – a stairway; one poem looks to a character at the top of the stairs, the other imagines a returning character climbing the stairs. Stairways could be portals or gateways to other worlds. They are rich poetic symbols that serve as everyday representations but also have the potential to connote more. The use of symbol, connotation and, to a certain extent, ambiguity, appear to be part of the artifice, and typical poetic features. In Draycott's reflections on her creative process she reveals that she had a recurring dream of a staircase, but only later realized that it was a real staircase, one she never used when living as a 19-year-old in a ground-floor flat. The image of a staircase influenced the two poems, which were written six months apart, but she says this is not a simple depiction of experience:

The poetic imagination [...] isn't interested so much in what things are really like as what they suggest. ... I knew on both occasions that there was a way to go till I could start – I had to wait. (Draycott, 2013: 37)

This would seem to match our incubation phase, or at least reveals the longer term ambition of the writer for the poems. Draycott, in stating that the poetic isn't literal or straightforwardly representational, goes on to suggest that poetry is composed in this fashion, from initiating images and encounters that aren't at the time fully recognized as biography but as something richer, and that it is necessary to develop these, to pause and to add to them (to complicate), otherwise a poem remains as what she terms 'a 2-D poem at most' (2013: 38). She also reveals that she only realized in retrospect that it was the same stair image in both poems. She had evidently known what she was doing but at the same time not known something fundamental about it. This is her version of part of the creative process, not detailing how she arrived at the formal or technical elements concerning language (textual features such as form, rhyme, alliteration and metre) – none of the 'clock's mechanisms' – but focusing on the origins of the creative idea, and the part of the tacit writer-knowledge: what the writer simultaneously knows and doesn't know.

Draycott's testimony suggests that before linguistic considerations come into play – whether they be textual features or narrative choices – the initial part of her creative process is often an encounter with one or more images. This can, of course, be the case with other writers, other forms, not just poetry. These encounters with images might occur in dreams or in everyday life, and often relate to past experience. Now to my second illustration, one that I've referred to before in different contexts (see Neale 2012), but it is worthy of repetition. In her reflective essay, 'The first mystery' (1993), the novelist Rose Tremain describes being presented with an image, a scene, and feeling compelled to investigate further. She describes the image occurring in a 'waking dream', saying that it becomes the 'first mystery' of a novel. A middle-aged man who is tired and careworn, standing by a stone wall in French countryside, sees a bird circling. Realizing it is an eagle as it comes to land in front of him, the man's melancholy is joyfully transformed. Tremain does not elaborate on any possible biographical context for the image, but goes on to assert that the writer's task is to 'rightly' interpret such images, to give narrative context and meaning to the mysterious and random 'traffic' of image creation (ibid.: 3). In this way language is always a tool of translation, transforming such images into something communicable. As she declares in her essay, in the eventual novel, *The Swimming Pool Season* (Tremain 1985), the image of man and eagle remain, though the encounter is no longer identical with the story's moment of recovery and transcendence (that coming in a later scene set in a Byzantine cathedral).

It should be noted, of course, that a literal image is not the single, formulaic prerequisite in a writer's creative process; 'image' in this sense can be interpreted broadly. It can be a visual image, but it can also be, for example, a smell or the sense of a character's voice; it can take on many other forms. It is probably aligned with the very first phase of the creative process, 'identification'. Also, it should be noted that the genesis of an idea will not always come in the form of a literal sleep-time dream (as with Draycott). Tremain talks, as other writers do, of 'waking dreams' and the writer's need for daydreaming – for contemplating without apparent aim, full cognisance or rational purpose. Virginia Woolf had a wonderful term for it – 'scrolloping'.

Uncertainty and the necessity of not knowing

Writers create for a variety of reasons. It is often a necessity to write in relation to their own identity. As Cusk says, in talking of student writers:

Very often a desire to write is a desire to live more honestly through language; the student feels the need to assert a 'true' self through the language system, perhaps for the reason that this same system, so intrinsic to every social and personal network, has given rise to a 'false' self. (Cusk 2013)

According to Cusk's convincing argument about the function of language in relation to identity, the way in which we use language is inherently confused and often paradoxical; it is a function which engages both in truth-seeking and falsifying. Yet the overriding allure of language, and subsequently the desire and need to write, arises from the fact that it is all but impossible to attain an idea of self by any other means. And this is true no matter the genre chosen by the writer: fantasy or creative non-fiction, poetry or science fiction.

Sigmund Freud, in attempting to cast light on those first images or creative ignitions, suggested that:

A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience [...] The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory. (Freud 1959 [1908]: 151)

The creative process makes use of experience (elements of the past and present) almost as a method of reconciliation between contrary eras and realities, between conscious and subconscious knowledge. This is apparent in Tremain's and Draycott's testimonies. A pre- or non-linguistic form of consciousness is prominent in this stage of the process, as is the necessity for some considerable level of uncertainty. The act of writing is connected with both the writers' experience, though straightforward representational writing is not their destination. The writer might not be able to write if they are too sure or definite about where they are going. Hence the American novelist E. L. Doctorow's suggestion that writing is 'like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights' (Doctorow 1986, p.29). This finds an echo in several places, notably in Cowan who has in the past described the writing process as a 'glimmer' that the writer follows (Anderson and Neale 2009: 178). This half-knowing is commonly alluded to; Tremain insists on its importance and calls it 'not knowing', even when undertaking research for historical fiction:

The factual or experiential has to find its own mysteriousness. ... 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.

(Tremain 1993: 5)

Again the chronology of procedure within the creative process seems askew. The uncertainty (tacit knowledge or writer-knowledge as it has been termed earlier in this discussion) pertains especially in the early stages of the creative process (identification), but by these descriptions it is not confined to that stage. Here uncertainty is required after the research stage and during the re-imagining stage. Uncertainty is a state of mind and an attitude to the work which is necessary throughout. It could be seen to suggest the notion of writing as a mysterious art (Tremain freely uses the words 'mystery' and 'mysterious'), and that creativity or this facet of it is too spiritual or ethereal to examine. This aspect of the process is certainly enigmatic and paradoxical – the knowing writer necessarily not knowing what they are doing – but this is hardly evidence of a spiritual dimension. My suggestion is that by examining and reflecting on the creative process we will be unravelling but not destroying the mystery.

The author is dead but what of the writer?

The overemphasis in previous eras on mystery and the unknowable part of creativity – and the common association between these terms and ideas of genius – has now shifted, partly I would contend because of the rise of Creative Writing. Creativity in this context has been reframed more as a process. In this respect, literary icons such as Shakespeare, the Brontës and Dickens can be seen as creative writers in that they created their works via a process; they developed an initial idea, the idea incubated for a while, they produced drafts, they undertook an editorial procedure, and so forth. Our knowledge of their creative process may be variable, but their output was a product of such a process nonetheless. Some writers from the canon, such as Virginia Woolf with her diaries, illuminate the process. But recent and ongoing revelations about collaborations between editors and writers – Carver, Golding, Austen, to name but three – also reveal elements of various writers' creative process.

The rise in Creative Writing in universities, as catalogued by Cowan, and the accompanying rise in writers working in the academy, can be seen as ironic, contemporaneous as it was initially (during the latter quarter of the twentieth century) with prominent theoretical propositions that suggested the author was no longer necessary for the interpretation of texts. Cowan pinpoints this and Bradbury's critical and creative unease (Bradbury 1995). Essays such as Roland Barthes' 'The death of the author' (1977) and Michel Foucault's 'What is an author?' (1977) offered what were generally perceived as more objective contexts in which to evaluate texts in relation to authorship. As Foucault states:

The task of criticism is not to re-establish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author's thought and experience through his works ... criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work ... (ibid.: 118)

Foucault went on to discuss criticism's ongoing domination by the 'sovereignty of the author' (ibid.: 126) and described critics' perceptions of the author's profundity and creativity, intentions and inspiration, as products of the critics' own undiluted subjectivity. Barthes also lambasted reading texts through the author, arguing:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. (Barthes 1977: 147)

These observations gave precedence in interpretation to the text itself and the role of the reader over that of the author and notions of a work's genesis (and genius), and possibly

inspiration too. They also suggested to some that perspectives about the work and the creative process emanating from the writer might not be of any great value. This posed problems for those involved in both critical interpretation and the production of writing; hence Bradbury's problem. The suggestion that the writer be ignored as the creative provenance behind the text is intriguing. Yet it has a tendency to sound idealistic and theoretical, and has since sometimes been disclaimed as metaphor – as seen in Cowan's essay. In the twenty-first century any hardened or long-lasting opposition between creative writers and those who engage in critical interpretation proved spurious, partly because of new transformative approaches to interpretation that suggested creative-critical participatory interventions in, and rewritings of, texts (see Pope 1995), but mostly because of the sheer productivity and inexorable ascent of Creative Writing.

There arose an unlikely fit between theory and practice because such observations as those of Barthes and Foucault have handily matched a facet of practice-based teaching and research: neither critical theorists nor Creative Writing academics hold much tolerance for the notion of literary genius. As suggested earlier, one of the resounding effects of the 'death of the author' discussion was to dispel the inspiration myths that surround the act of writing and what might be termed the historical 'cult of the author', which promulgated the notion of author as genius or mysterious progenitor of texts, their inscrutable talent and distinctive biographies lending them almost divine legitimacy. In this way 'inspiration' as an un-interrogated term no longer held sway. In the post-Barthes, workshop era, writing has come to be seen as more a question of endeavour, routine and assiduous editorial attention, with more emphasis on creativity as a process, on technical and practical consideration of the drafting regime, on the rich cultural and generic contexts surrounding the writing, and on the faltering, inelegant bravery of first drafts (where the inchoate first surfaces into the tangible). By disbelieving or at least interrogating genius and inspiration, we have found, and continue to find, infinite new ways of investigating and talking about the writing process.

In the commercial world of publishing there is a resilient fascination with authors, especially the bestselling variety. However, within Creative Writing study and research there is an ongoing focus on the phenomenology of practice, with emphasis 'on creativity as a dynamic process as well as on creativity as a completed product' (Carter 2011: 340). And with this focus there has been a common, if not exclusive, shift in terminology towards the term 'writer' and away from 'author' (and its connotations of unquestioned authority). It is worth noting that in comparison to the term 'author', a 'writer' is more likely to be perceived as 'working' at their practice, rather than being 'inspired'. Inspiration is still a term of great relevance to the creative process but like many aspects of that process it is a term that is and should be scrutinized and investigated; we should be able to glimpse the genesis within the creative process, as well as the igniting images; we should hear testimonies, investigations, analyses and examinations that divest inspiration of its mystique, while retaining its very real and necessary mystery for the writer. This is a considerable challenge. Research into the creative process requires the reflections from many mirrors, and I am delighted to commend the versions of that process examined in this vibrant issue of *Writing in Practice*, adding their distinct perspectives to the essential investigations that lie ahead.

Note

Some parts of this introduction adapt and further develop thoughts from a chapter in an OU teaching book (Neale 2016)

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