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Writing, Research and Paradox

When writing my PhD novel I was often struck with the thought that I was recalling not creating what I was writing. Many writers have declared similar notions. This is unsurprising given the writing process. Mine, for instance, involved trawling through notebooks filled with first incarnations of various passages, and then there were unending computer redrafts and edits. It was inevitable that my critical commentary should focus on the relationship between writing and remembering. But I was also struck by other paradoxes – the commentary seemed more of a fiction than the novel; some ostensibly researched elements in the novel were experiential; some elements that appeared as autobiographical to readers were in fact hybrids of research and imagination. Creative writing “research” is not – and never has been – straightforward;

There was a rich and healthy discussion of a wide range of practice research projects at the recent NAWE conference. This was evidenced in the joint HE and PhD networks session which was co-presented by myself and Keith Jarrett, who offered testimony about his own writing and experience on the PhD programme at Birkbeck (his project is about the migration of religion from the Caribbean to London). The discussion was enriched by testimonies from more projects as the audience joined in. This was just one session at a vibrant conference, where presentations invariably flushed out unlikely topics and research angles. The paradoxes proliferated (I sometimes think that research is only possible where there is paradox). We heard of a play based on when Ghandi met Chaplin (in London in 1931), its author trying to decipher the attraction and influence flowing between them. Other topics included: a novelist’s attempts to research and document the Tibetan women’s soccer team (which no longer exists); adult authors creating teen voices in young adult and mainstream novels; the optimism residing in dystopian fiction. These topics all suggest obvious research concerns, the range, complexity and social value of which fit well on university agendas. The investigatory contexts go beyond straightforward craft issues and this is just a sample; there were many more (see the conference programme on the website). Also bear in mind, the conference only offers relatively brief highlights from creative writing’s rich current, national and international, research culture. This is all reassuring as we head towards REF2021 and the UK-wide assessment of university research outputs.

One group that has recently boosted our perceptions of what it is to be both practitioner and researcher is the recently formed Practice Research Advisory Group (PRAG), which is concerned with all practice subjects within Higher Education, including dance, drama, film, design, fine art, music and composition, as well as creative writing. One of its first moves was to dispense with any residual hesitations and convoluted explanations about the difference of our sort of research. The hyphens have been exiled: gone are “practice-based”, “practice-led”, “practice-focused”, to be replaced by the confident and undiluted “practice research”. This asserts without apology that practice *is* research. We may have always known this. Now others do too.

Part of creative writing’s historically precarious research status within the academy is to do with our difference from some of our close discipline allies. PRAG will make us feel less isolated. If English language and literature research can use a variety of methodologies - archives, theoretical investigation and canonical, cultural and historical analysis, for instance - we can too. But we have also asserted – and this new advisory group strengthens the assertion - that our practice in and of itself, in its literary and media outputs and artefacts, and in its creative process - is a true

manifestation of such avenues of research and generation of knowledge. We can now narrate that more confidently and more fruitfully, which in many ways cements our relationship with English studies.

That relationship is something of a paradox in itself. Creative writing exists in tandem with English and yet is different. There are worrying figures about a decline in English university enrolments (down from 51,000 to 39,000 since 2011). The decline is also pronounced at pre-university level, with a drop of 25% since 2013 in English A-Level take up (both statistics quoted in Rustin: 2019). Demographic dips are implicated, along with government education policy. Creative writing's student enrolments, as with all subjects, have suffered since the model shift in government HE tuition funding. But are we suffering as much as English? The picture is unclear. Until recently the HESA creative writing figures were confused because the subject was not clearly named, and many writing degrees remain coupled with English. The figures are hard to thresh. The decline in English language and literature A-level numbers might even be in part attributable to the brief run of the creative writing A-Level, since drawn sadly to an end. The conference drew our attention to a teacher initiative in the South West where 16-18 year olds can now study for a UCAS-recognised fine arts apprenticeship (AFA) in creative writing. This innovation heightens the blurring. The level of alarm about creative writing's sustainability in HE is unclear. Are we English studies or are we their rival and part cause of their demise? This suggests to me a research project: the paradoxical status of creative writing within Higher Education, with particular reference to English Studies. Any takers?

References

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