

Introduction

When the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk first read the American novelist William Faulkner's *Paris Review* interview, he felt as if he had chanced upon a sacred text. Reading such interviews offered Pamuk relief from the isolation of his own writing table, confined by 'the smell of paper and pen in a lonely room' (2007: viii). It also put him in dialogue with a confederacy of writers from whom he could glean insights, encouragement and more. An avid reader of the literary interview, Pamuk suspects he came to write in longhand on graph paper not only because it suits his way of working but also because, as he had learned from interviews, it was the writing method of both Thomas Mann and Jean Paul Sartre. Yet for Pamuk writer interviews are not just catalogued fetishes and bugbears, they engage with what he calls fragile moments, and the ways in which writers overcome difficulty and adversity, the sort of writing talk that illuminates craft, vocation and superstition, adding intellectual and spiritual quest, unravelling and hand-dirtying any lingering myths of unsullied genius and inspiration. In that way interviews are a vital source of artistic and cultural knowledge. Such talk reveals the creative process to involve intellectual rigour, hard work and determination, a fierceness of spirit that could in other spheres be described as dogged or combative. Interviews with writers tend to alter, complicate, enhance and contradict prior connotations of the creative act. The interviews collected in this volume are no different. They illuminate authors' reading, of books and performance, those works that inform the writing. This is reading that constitutes a writer's research but also their artistic and cultural sensibility, layered strata that eventually surface directly, or more often peripherally and subliminally, in the production of particular works. In this way interviews offer idiosyncratic dialogues about both making and finding stories, about precedent and where stories might originate – from life, history and literature – and about tentative knowing and confident uncertainty and how these paradoxes are central to what it is to write.

Writing practice is a way of knowing the world, just as reading is. The production of knowledge in this context is threefold – it is to be found in the literary or media artefact itself (the novel, life writing, play or film), in reader or audience reception of such artefacts, and in the creative process, the journey involved in producing such work. This volume and these interviews will have this latter focus: how knowledge is produced via the creative process. The interviews necessarily touch on writers' oeuvres and particular works; they refer to the writers' lives on occasion, and pause on the perceptions of reader and audience. But the volume's main gaze inevitably and repeatedly reverts to the creative process, its bits and pieces and its heterogeneity – it is after all a combination of multiple processes and many contradictory states of mind and types of provenance: cognisance and ignorance, naivety and intention, serendipity and research. Are stories made or are they found? These interviews investigate different responses to that double question.

Like Pamuk, I too have been a keen reader of such testimonies. Commonalities and variations have always proved equally intriguing. Practitioner interviews as a genre have inspired and informed my approach to writing and served many purposes – picking me up when at my most desolate and disconsolate, offering insight into the delegation of attention, for instance, allowing me to see how others approach editing or the necessity and legitimacy of indolence, distractedness at key moments in the process, not to mention the essential tolerance for inarticulacy in any first draft. They act as reminders that humility is a necessity, that each new project is starting afresh. They are also important in respect of hope, promise and the generation of ideas; they testify to how certain projects sprout from inauspicious seeds. Story development in these testimonies is given an idiosyncratic dramatic logic. The writers talk of specific projects but also general, professional approaches. They often illuminate starting points and the links between their works and the so-

called real world, the world in which the writers live but also the cultural moments and spaces that combine with life experiences, research, circumstance and imaginative play and adventure.

Why does a person start, and continue to feel compelled, to write? It is an isolating impulse, as James Baldwin's essay 'The Creative Process' attests, the artist must cultivate 'the state of being alone' (1998, p. 669) and this is not by any means a rural idyll. My fascination perhaps, like Pamuk's, is drawn towards a possible confederacy of experience, a flagged relief from the isolation. But this interest in others' writing processes is also to do with the many colours and shades of process – the research, the imaginative searching and the craft. Despite reiterative questions, each interview leaves the distinctive and influential impression of a unique voice talking of incomparable work. And many of these testimonies reveal key collaborations as much as isolation. A first encounter with a writer or one of their works can obtain statutory significance in your life story. When you first read certain texts, they can cause, or be part of, a substantial change in the way you see the world and yourself. Richard Holmes reveals such effect in *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1995) with the rapture and young obsession with which he identifies and follows his subject, Robert Louis Stevenson, intent on tracing Stevenson's journey in *Travels with a Donkey* (Stevenson 1992) – detailed with such vividness in Holmes' interview. In an odd parallel, as a young man I was hitching, walking and camping, with Kerouac in mind, not in France as was Holmes but along the west coast of Scotland, when I encountered a very unusual village post office, one that stocked literary journals. One journal, with a pink cover as I recall, contained an interview with Kurt Vonnegut (who I had not then read) and another a brief exchange with Ian McEwan about his then recent collection of short stories. This encounter with writers in conversation was for me a turning point. I thought of McEwan for some time as Scottish, because of his name and the location of this first encounter. Much later I learned – in another interview – that McEwan's father's estrangement from Scotland may have influenced the themes and types of location in his son's early fiction (O'Reilly 2010). I was inspired to learn of McEwan's route to publication, of Creative Writing being studied at university: this early encounter was a key moment where I too felt as if I'd stumbled on something sacred in my emerging will to write. It has led in a long and roundabout way to each of these interviews and, eventually, to this selection.

On these writers

The early and most persistent technical queries posed in my own writing practice were of the basic and familiar variety. What is this, a fiction or a drama, or am I writing about myself? How much narrator should there be? Where is the narrator positioned in time and space? How is she or he possible? How can I inject dialogue and get away from the narrator? I learned early on, as many do, that dialogue, for all media and genres, is a way of making a character breathe, a way of revealing inner thoughts or, more likely, a tangible way to conceal and mask those thoughts, giving characters a consciousness, a public front and a cognitive ability, a mode of operating in the world, where they can express and hide their fears, along with their hopes. In this way, the apparently basic questions about craft led to metaphysical, psychological, social, political and spiritual queries. One query persisted: the relationship between writing and remembering, thinking of how parts of life become fictions and become narrated, and how the process of writing resembles the process of living, a complex and nuanced relationship between invention and memory. These perennial questions are addressed from time to time in these interviews, but in far more generous and contextualised ways than could have been expected.

The range of genres on view span stage and radio plays, films, life writing, short stories and novels. Privileging a character with dialogue in a story or play instantly enlivens them, giving the impression of a sentient being. These interviews cast light on how such voices are both discovered and made, then presented as authentic, in all their mystery and mundanity. It is fascinating to hear the variety in attitude to character and dialogue. Alan Ayckbourn famously writes the dialogue near the very end of the creative process, once all other aspects of a play are in place – and sometimes perilously close to dress rehearsals. He takes characters to the shower with him, on walks, inquiring of them who they are and how they might speak. This all takes time. For Andrew Cowan dialogue is difficult and functions as a kind of punctuation in the storytelling, yet one character's voice came to him as if it were a personal memory. Richard Holmes is beset by a biographer's apprehension about dialogue, yet he persists in establishing scenes with dialogue as a form of creative research, aiding memory. Tanika Gupta exudes a joy in listening, especially to teenage voices, as part of her dialogue research, while acknowledging the positive influence of Indian storytelling. Helen Blakeman reveals how necessary stylisation of dialect is, even though you might think you already know how a way of speaking works and sounds. David Edgar reveals the joy of hearing his created voices for the first time from the mouths of actors, and how enlightening that can be in terms of the editing process. Bryony Lavery renders her dialogue in poetic fashion, in occluded and staggered lines which offer actors the intended rhythm of delivery. In selecting and reviewing these interviews it is apparent, merely by being set side by side, how the writers' voices readily talk to one another. It is like sitting in a writers' pub, exchanging and comparing notes and stories about storytelling. Difference arrives out of similarity, variation and distinctiveness arise from my repeated, often basic and blunt questions.

Dialogue, of course, is not the only aspect of writing that is addressed. Toby Litt expounds on the irresponsibility of the short story form, and the fruitful juxtaposition of the everyday with the surreal. Iain Banks reveals that he doesn't hear the voices of his characters and sometimes knows little about them other than what he reveals on the page. Banks was a prolific writer, producing up to 5,000 words a day, whereas for others it is more agonising. One is reminded of writers such as Paul Auster (considering a day's work of 100 words a success) when hearing of the protracted and reiterative methods of Andrew Cowan. For Sarah Butler reiteration and redrafting are also important, but with an added orientation: place and character are symbiotically linked to the storytelling. Jenny Diski highlights the important triadic relationship between memory, writing and journey, and how central this is to identity. Journey is also prominent in Holmes, and family relationships and memory feature in the interview with Hanif Kureishi, where the semi-cognisant route to storytelling is echoed with mention of Doctorow's metaphor for the writing process – the road at night. Despite the darkness and poor visibility, the route is navigated via faith as much as any clear-sighted self-knowledge or map of directions. So many of these interviews reveal serendipity and the necessity of detours, as well as the fortitude of the writer, the only consistent piece of writer's know-how at times being to somehow carry on when you don't know what you might be doing.

Kareem Mortimer reveals how a personal response to a news image can provoke a universal story, and how the strict confinement of a film set can prompt narrative methods. Sally Wainwright tells how the personal passion for a subject can colour and enhance the necessary research, and how historical idiom needs to speak to the present as well as of the past. This is also evident in Jane Rogers' interview, where historical idiom, untold stories, translation and adaptation are key terms. Here we learn what it might be like to have work directed by Danny Boyle, your characters interpreted by actors such as Cathy Burke and David Tennent. Willy Russell relishes the malleability of the theatre, how it can transform in a moment from field to room, and what he calls the liberating constraints of the stage. Patricia Duncker suggests that writing's essential companion is reading, but

also that the act of writing, finding a language and register through multiple drafting, is key to clarifying and shaping her subject. Michèle Roberts talks of the relationship between personal identity and the urge to write, but purposefully unpacks and slows down her own proficiency in writing narratives. Louis de Bernières elaborates on the strengths and limitations of magic realism and reveals that his novels are structured in accord with imaginary geometric shapes.

The above are highlights, offering enticements and an idea of the variety contained in the interviews. They are not in any way comprehensive as tag lines or summaries. Each conversation is rich, rewarding and wide-ranging. The interviews were mostly recorded or filmed with the involvement of a producer, either from the BBC or an independent production company. The exceptions were as follows: I recorded one interview myself; one was an Open University video production; one interview was a very long- distance phone call; one interview was not recorded but conducted via email – updating a previously recorded interview – and one interview was a return interview with the same writer at a later date. These last two emphasise the fact that the creative process is not static, it evolves and changes with the writer. These interviews capture the writers' views on their process at a moment in their writing careers. Their views might well change, these conversations can only hope to reflect views held at that moment.

All interviewees were given copies of my scripted questions prior to interview, even if we never kept entirely to those questions. The questions were meagre prompts for the generous, rich and wide-ranging contributions that followed. The conversations always gave rise to interrupting thoughts, further questions, and fruitful detours. In many cases I was the sole interviewer, the exceptions being several of the early interviews where I was one of two interviewers whereby the producer voiced my scripted questions for recording and production reasons and I then joined in as the interview and recorded conversation evolved. For the sake of economy and clarity these anomalies are not reflected in these transcripts; a single interviewer is indicated throughout. Many edited audio tracks from the interviews were used as part of Open University Creative Writing teaching materials, often with a specific technical and thematic focus. This collection is the first time the full versions of the interviews have been presented in this way, in a research context which allows testimonies to be compared and furthering explorations of, and discussions about, the creative process. One intriguing aspect apparent in the selection – an aspect which is on occasions seen in single interviews (see the Jenny Diski and Jane Rogers interviews, for instance), is the dialogue arising between different genres – fiction, drama and life writing. The interviews were undertaken between 2003 and 2019. Two of the interviews were commissioned for this collection. No critical weighting can be inferred by the varying lengths of interview, choice of contributors or any omissions. There were many logistical considerations about genre and what the immediate pedagogic or research purpose might be for each interview. There are very well-established writers included, alongside relative newcomers. The combination of ambitious suggestion and luck with availability contributed to this list of interviewees and selection of interviews; the success of the conversations was entirely due to the wisdom and generosity of all those interviewed.

The virtue of interview

The interview has developed a modern pedigree and integrity as a form, a mode of both research and presentation, with high practitioners such as Tony Parker and Svetlana Alexievich achieving a distinctive form and style which is simultaneously literary and ethnographic. While their methods are distinct from one another, each typically subordinates and silences the voice of the interviewer. There may be occasional, often parenthesised, asides and punctuation points, but the questions are

largely erased. There is often only a residual indication of dialogue, the occasional suggestion of an implied addressee or bracketed description of physical action or facial expression. The emphasis falls in poignant and humane fashion on the individual voice of the interviewee. For instance, see the first chapter of Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (2005) where the only indications of an interview taking place are the occasional bracketed 'silence' and one or two references to 'you' from the interviewee. In Tony Parker's *In No Man's Land* (1972) there are no signs of exchange or interviewer's questions, though attention is paid to material detail, painting the scene and describing the appearance of characters.

The interviews selected here do not aspire to that level of stylisation. There is no, or very little, scene-setting or indication of pace, pause or climax. The questions are explicit, sometimes repetitive and often persistent. These are conversations about writing as work. The dialogues resemble the *Paris Review* interviews in their focus. They are not edited-down versions of several hours of recordings, but lightly edited versions of single meetings. They offer a type of interrogation about method and approach, rather than about lives lived. Yet, their one link to more literary interviews is the fact that they still humbly aspire to allow individual voices to respond, to be heard, and for the continuity, idiom and timbre of those voices in themselves to offer personality and meaning, to supplement the semantics of authors' explanations and testimony.

Interviews with writers have been considered to constitute a type of biography or autobiography (see Neale 2011 and Maunsell 2016). The British Library *Authors' Lives* project is a form of ethnographic biography and oral history, with compilations of up to 30 hours of recorded interviews with each writer. This is a Boswellian project, connected to the *National Life Stories* project and its preoccupation with professions and work. In an attempt to disseminate a flavour of these interviews the project issued a CD set, *The Writing Life: the Author Speaks* (O'Reilly 2010); tracks extracted from the interviews are divided into sections with several writers talking in vox pops style on specific topics such as childhood, genre, research, characters, place, structure and the link between reading and writing. This format resembles the way in which some of the interviews in *Writing Talk* were originally edited into brief excerpt audio tracks for teaching purposes. This collection differs significantly from that thematic method. The way in which the collection is structured and the way in which the interviews are presented in full, allows the reader to learn of practice and method, but there is no advance sifting into themes. The prior focus is on individual writers, their creative process and investigating how such testimonies might reveal new strands of knowledge and avenues of interest. The interviews were recorded at moments in time that were not necessarily related to interviewees' new publications but were often focused on approaches to specific genres or technical challenges. For instance, the interview with Jane Rogers had an inevitable focus on adaptation, seeing how a novel could become a television drama or a radio play, considering Rogers' work as both novelist and scriptwriter. With equal inevitability any prior focus was often usurped and enriched by broader issues and other details that evolved during discussion. In a world in which authors are expected to promote and talk about their work at every opportunity, writers might be expected to 'perform themselves' in such interviews. However, these interviews were never in any way rehearsed or superficial. They were always engaging, thought-filled and thought-provoking. Pausing on such voices, reading carefully, listening and not reducing such conversations to sound bites, highlights and mottos, allows us to identify complication, contradiction and nuance, essential aspects that might otherwise be missed or edited out.

The conversations are not intended to have a biographical slant. Insights into the life history of interviewees are incidental. There is no longitudinal method, revisiting subjects over a period, as might be the case with the British Library interviews or the effect of a project such as the *Literary*

Conversations book series (published by Mississippi University Press), which compiles interviews from various sources. The interviews in *Writing Talk* are snapshot interviews (though one, with Patricia Duncker, was undertaken to update an earlier interview, and a reprise interview with Andrew Cowan is also included). Jorge Luis Borges said of being interviewed: '[The] dialogue for me is not a form of polemics, of monologue or magisterial dogmatism, but of shared investigation' (Burgin 1969, vii). He expressed himself in interview, 'confessed' himself, more accurately than when writing 'in solitude with excess care and vigilance'. It is in this spirit that the interviews were undertaken. The virtues of, and interest in, dialogue have a well-documented provenance dating back to Plato's exchanges with Socrates, while the writer interview has become more of a literary genre in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, as indicated by Maunsell (2016). This is exemplified in numerous collections of interviews, including the *Paris Review* volumes, Walter Allen's *Writer's on Writing* (1958) and several subsequent collections such as those edited by Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (1981), John Haffenden (1985), Susheila Nasta (2004), Barbara Baker (2007), Philip Tew, Fiona Tolan and Leigh Wilson (2008), Christopher Bigsby (2001-2017) and Graeme Harper (2012). Two notable examples of writers who appear to consciously use interviews as parallel outputs to their fiction are J.G. Ballard, who was a prolific interviewee (see *Extreme Metaphors* ed. Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara 2012) and Elena Ferrante, particularly in *Frantumaglia* (2016) in which she curates her own interviews, mixed with correspondence and other fragments. As Ferrante's editor, Simona Olivito says, 'In the interviews Elena speaks of the importance that the point of view of others, the written dialogue with journalists from so many countries, has had in nurturing her own reflections on writing.' (Ferrante 2016, p. 229). In that same volume there is inevitable discussion about Ferrante's anonymity, her use of a *nom de plume*, and the debate about how important a named author-writer might be. In her reflections Ferrante often declines from giving expected or straightforward answers; while proceeding to unpack hackneyed phrases about the writing process, she unearths underlying practical realities, as well as suggesting why and how such phrases are overused. For instance, in response to a question about the space between experience and writing she says: 'I think that "putting distance" between experience and story is something of a cliché. The problem, for the writer, is often the opposite: to bridge the distance, to feel physically the impact of the material to be narrated' (2016, p.233). This aptly displays the way in which interviews can interrogate and scrutinise the terminology, assumptions and currency of common modes of discussion about writing practice.

On the creative process

Malcolm Bradbury, an instigator of the UK's first Creative Writing MA programme at the University of East Anglia, suggested academics from other disciplines regarded writers as 'playing in the sand in primary school' (1993 p. 65). Yet Bradbury fully understood how, despite academic prejudices, play is central to artistic activity and an essential intellectual pursuit which is both naïve and sophisticated, both free and rigorous, in the way it engages in literary production. Play is apparent and prominent – and serious – in all the interviews selected in this volume, from Ayckbourn's marbles in his pocket, to Diski playing with the use of her own name, Jennifer, and Lavery's insistence that play is entirely the purpose of what she does as a writer. Play is seen as a creative route to knowledge and the essential artistic feature. Bradbury bemoaned how literary and cultural criticism appeared to lack 'a substantive theory of creativity' (1993 p.62), a conceptual approach to imaginative expression, and lacked the investigative tools and language to examine how the creative process might operate as original 'humane discovery'. Testimonies from writers about their practice, such as those collected here, offer a valuable non-theoretical and participatory understanding of

creativity. They reveal the perspective of the writer and offer insights into the phenomenology of the writing act. This mode of participation – writing, making, producing tangible and original formations of text and performance – offers a distinct perspective on artistic endeavour. Far from being a lower order intellectual activity, consigned to the sandpit, commentators such as Borgdorff (2010 p. 46) acknowledge that acts of writing, composing and painting are primary modes of research *in* the Arts (whereas critical, historical and theoretical approaches are modes of research *on* the Arts). Interviews with artists about practice offer a perspective and practice-research approach 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 editing and final drafts and reception. This process tallies in many respects with several psychological models of creativity, which are based not only on artistic practices but also on scientific and technological thought and development. These models (for instance, see Arieti 1976, pp.15-16) typically have five or six phases, including stages such as ‘initial conception’, ‘research’ and ‘incubation’. A writer’s 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 the latter parentheses, these stages of the process have been laid out in a precarious order, in what looks like a formula for creativity, whereas the actual experience of the writer is frequently at odds with any such apparent straightforward linear procedure. Often the process will not happen in accord with an easy chronology such as that charted above, although the elements are common to many writers, if often containing unnamed or uncatalogued idiosyncrasies that either do not fit easily under any heading or fit under too many.

The creative process presents several possible locations and routes for fruitful inquiry. Each of the above phases feature in general in these interviews. Yet the process can be disparate, tangled, complex and paradoxical; certain aspects defy articulation, definition and explicit description, or at least demand new modes of description. For instance, the bullet-pointed schedule omits the fact that key aspects might be simultaneously known and not known by the writer. Ignorance and naiveté are important parts of the process, as are intention and purpose. There can be 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: ... if you take its back off you find a mechanism that can be dismantled and readily understood' (Cusk 2013).

We might be able to identify the technical elements, yet the creative process, as apparent in these interviews, is not reducible to an easily transferable sequence of assembly or re-assembly instructions. In his Nobel Prize lecture Harold Pinter (2005) talked of his creative process by saying 'most of the plays are engendered by a line, a word or an image'. He declares that the word or line often leads him to the image. His process is further revealed by looking at his draft work, not undertaken on graph paper (as with Pamuk) but in his favoured yellow legal pads, where you can also see his habit of naming characters as A, B and C in early drafts. (Wilcox 2019). Some writers share this early draft tactic (see O'Reilly 2010) but many do not, as you will see from the range of methods on show here. The writing process, because of its infinite variety of form and source, is not synonymous with a predictable and fixed mechanism. It arises from and within separate individuals and with several different contextual perspectives – psychological, literary, cultural, personal and social. The techniques and mechanisms of craft and literary production can be clearly identified, as Cusk suggests, yet the creative process in its entirety, in its nooks and crannies, in all its shaded areas, illuminated moments, contradictory acts, hesitations and evasions, is more complex and tends to require multiple angles of reflection, resisting definition by just one perspective. It can be explored and investigated, it can elicit discussion and be illuminated by practitioner testimony, but the process per se cannot be pinned down or instructed, even while it contains elements that can be taught, elements with which we are all familiar. These include prompts for generating ideas, developing the ability to read as a writer, technical aspects of dramatic scenes 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, diction, idiom, setting and characterization.

Uncertainty and the necessity of not knowing

The writing process will vary between writers and even within a writer's different acts of creativity. That much is abundantly evident in this collection. While there may be commonality, there will always be less tangible and more idiosyncratic aspects to the writing process, aspects that defy expectation, prediction and history; this makes the process infinitely variable and of interest. Inchoate knowledge within the process, elements that are simultaneously known and not known to the writer, are commonly voiced in these discussions and would seem essential to the process. Such elements have 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 suspend strands of (explicit) knowledge, certainty and what they consciously do know, in order to pursue a particular artistic &ramatiz (Polanyi 1983: 10ff). This is resonant of Keats' 'negative capability' and his emphasis on the poet's need to be 'in uncertainty, mysteries and doubts' (Keats 1958 pp. 183-194). The many acts of empathy and vicarious thinking and feeling that the creation of a story entails also tallies with Keats' notion of taking 'part in the existence of the sparrow'. Recognition of the need not to know exactly what you are doing is well established, but at the same time it is an aspect that tends to raise the suspicions of literary scholars, who might be intent on more conventional research routes, wanting to pin down words, contexts, intentions and meaning rather than liberate them in the way the writer often wishes and needs to do.

Interviews can offer insights and descriptions of the spontaneity and necessary abandon – the negative capability – involved in the imaginative adventure of creating incidents and characters,

settings and dialogue in a story. They can potentially eavesdrop on conversations in which writers are already engaged; when pushed on the matter, most admit to an ongoing reflective and editorial dialogue with themselves about the various ways in which they might develop a piece of work, a running dialogue, informing the way characters develop, the way in which scenes are created, the type of language and voice included or cut. When editorially reading through a story or scene I frequently encounter areas that need 'further development' but note that I cannot undertake the necessary drafting work immediately, knowing that I am not in the right frame of mind to work on that particular section. There are many possible reasons. I may be procrastinating. I may be thinking too editorially to write new material. I may be too involved in a previous scene or want to get to the next scene. I may be too tired. I come back to the section when I am more able to engage in appropriate fashion: when I can become the sparrow, in Keatsian terms. At the heart of Keats' assertion of negative capability – written in letters, which are a form of dialogue related to the interview – is the necessary subsuming of the writer's will and intention, as if the project in hand takes over command of the dramatist. By 'being in mysteries, uncertainty and doubt', the writer stops consciously and purposefully doing – in order to do. Strategies and tactics of disengagement are needed in order to engage in the different kinds of writing that make up the creative act.

Access to writers' versions of the creative process has been amplified by modern, multi-platformed media and the ways in which writers are required to publicise their work. Psychological hurdles and prevarications are perhaps unlikely to feature in publicity interviews but often do so in more sustained interrogations. They do here, with a mundane aspect such as procrastination, for instance – a common, significant and little explored feature of the process – referred to interestingly, as if conflict obstacles are a psychologically necessary part of the process and not a negative or ridiculed form of anti-creative resistance. How and why writers procrastinate might be a likely source of interdisciplinary research in pursuit of theories of creativity. Besides the painful pausing we learn of other vacillations, hesitations, certainties and uncertainties, of writers' craft and theories of form, their versions of technique and art, and their individual vocabulary and eloquent individual voices in talking of these matters. There is much will and determination involved in any sort of writing, and that fortitude and intent on continuing no matter what, with a confident uncertainty, is echoed throughout, revealing intentional and unintentional ways in which writing is produced. This notion of following a sense of the story which is part known and part mystery recurs with different formulations. The flux between finding and grinding out a story is echoed in Graham Greene's novel *The End of the Affair* (1975), where Maurice Bendrix, the story's novelist-narrator, details a familiar, coffee-stained version of writing practice, with in an inbuilt neurosis about the daily quota of words to be written. Greene's novel is a confessional, less in relation to the adulterous love affair at the centre of the story or religious guilt, which is a prominent thematic strand in the novel, but more in relation to the creative process of a writer. Bendrix offers typically contradictory testimony about the writing process being a question of mysteriously finding the story, submitting to that finding, against the story being a question of manufacture, hard work and routine. That juxtaposition is ubiquitous in these interviews.

Uncertainty can result in various attitudes to planning and the early conception of stories, as revealed in discussions where there are several instances of tacit and inchoate knowledge (what we might term writer-knowledge). Planning as a stage in the writing process proves to be a slippery term, embraced by some who use charts or post-it notes pinned in accord with scene and chronology. Others are less clear and put more trust in the act of writing as a path to knowledge, holding faith that the activity and its mode of thinking will induce a way to learn of, and find, their subject, story and structure. Automatic writing and morning pages are used by several writers. This type of writing, along with first draft writing, finds prominence in part because at the very least it

means the writer has produced something to work with, sequences of words, text which can be used or discarded with degrees of residue, refined, augmented, abandoned to be barely remembered, or edited – and there is unanimous agreement about the recurring centrality of editing within the process. Counter to the need to edit is the need to write without fear, without inhibition and without knowing the eventual direction. The key is not to edit too early. This kind of writing also appears to sate these writers' primal urges to write at all costs, to fulfil their identity in some way by forging stories and offering words. This may also reveal a psychological leaning towards the way of thinking that the act of writing induces. The links to hypergraphia, a compulsion to write which isn't always necessarily creative in nature, have been chronicled by Alice Flaherty (2005) along with attempts to connect such compulsions of mind with brain location theories, states of mind and brain activity. Similarly, Mary Watkins has identified and investigated 'imaginal dialogues' and the relationship between writers and the psychological motif of imagined characters, in terms of literary creations and brain and mind function. Both Flaherty and Watkins offer more psychological than literary avenues of investigation, further enriching and widening Bradbury's wished-for theory of creativity.

Image before word

Pinter is not alone in saying that his works might begin with an image. In her 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' and how it becomes the 'first mystery' in the process of writing a novel, *The Swimming Pool Season* (Tremain 1985). A middle-aged man, tired and careworn, stands by a stone wall in French countryside, sees an eagle circling. It lands in front of the man and his melancholy is joyfully transformed. Tremain asserts that the writer's task is to 'rightly' interpret such images, to give narrative context and meaning to the random 'traffic' of image creation (ibid.: 3). This is a familiar testimony – for instance, William Faulkner's primary image of the young girl in a tree being the foundation for his novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1995) and E.L. Doctorow's scene of gangsters in a private railway carriage being the founding image of his novel *Loon Lake* (1980). There are echoes of such testimonies in these interviews. Yet it should be noted that an image is not therefore a 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 a smell, the sense of a character's voice, a line or a word, as Pinter testifies, and with Pinter it should be remembered that with him the word or line more often preceded and engendered the image. As an initiating stage it is aligned with the first phase of the creative process, 'identification'. 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. All such descriptions and terms describe the apparent postponement of intention and purpose, or at least its suspension beneath consciousness, in a form of 'tuning in' so that the write might be able to identify a worthy prompt.

Writers create stories for a variety of reasons, but the intent is often not entirely conscious. The act of writing can relate integrally to a writer's identity, as seen in Michèle Roberts' interview. Rachel Cusk says, 'often a desire to write is a desire to live more honestly through language ... 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). Our use of language is inherently to do with identity, but this isn't straightforward and is in itself often paradoxical; language 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. This applies no matter the genre chosen by the writer, and not just true of memoirists and biographers.

Sigmund Freud, in attempting to cast light on those first images or creative ignitions and how and why writers identify and pursue them, suggested that a present day experience awakens in the writer a memory, and the resultant work '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 testimony. A pre- or non-linguistic form of consciousness is prominent in this early stage of the process, as is the necessity for some considerable level of uncertainty. The act of writing connects both the writers' experiences, 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, echoed in Hanif Kureishi's interview, that writing is 'like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights' (Doctorow 1986, p.29). This finds other iterations in the interviews, notably in Cowan who describes the story-finding impulse to be like following a 'glimmer'. Tremain insists on the importance of this sort of half-knowledge, calling it 'not knowing', and describing it as necessary 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 we have termed it) pertains especially in the early stages of the creative process (identification), but by these descriptions it is not confined to that stage. Uncertainty may be required after the research stage and during the re-imagining stage. Uncertainty is a state of mind and trust in the work which is necessary throughout. It suggests the notion of writing as a mysterious art (Tremain freely uses the words 'mystery' and 'mysterious' in her essay), an aspect of the process that is certainly enigmatic and paradoxical – the knowing writer necessarily not knowing what they are doing. By revealing and pausing on this aspect of the process, as these interviews do, writers are unpicking but not destroying the mystery.

The author is dead but what of the writer?

T.S. Eliot suggested the status of a poem is 'somewhere between the writer and the reader' (Eliot 1933). The poem's meaning is not simply the result of the writer's expression or their experience of writing, nor is its status and meaning merely defined by the reader. Critical interpretation is complex. The same applies for genres other than poetry. In his *Novelists in Interview* John Haffenden asked his interviewees 'to turn their critical minds upon their novels' (1985 xvi) with his intention as interviewer 'to ask the novelists how they interpret the intentions and meanings of their individual works' (ibid viii). He does this knowing that the writer will not be best placed to comment accurately. One of his interviewees, Ian McEwan, suggests that a finished work is littered with rapidly forgotten alternative intentions, but 'you imbue it with [concerted] intention' after completion (ibid xi). Haffenden persists because interrogating the artistic process holds value. This indicates the method behind the interviews in this collection. There is no explicit or implicit search for critical meaning or interpretation in relation to the works discussed. Intention is scrutinised but not treated as if it is

stable and continuous throughout the writing process. More so, these interviews rely on what Eliot asserted was the necessity of a critical as well as a creative mind in the act of writing (ibid). It can be assumed that all the writers in this collection are critically aware in the sense that Eliot suggests. The impetus behind the interviews also relies on something similar to William Empson's hunch that it is worth an inquiry, that the writer 'may mean more than he knows ... no reason for not asking' (Haffenden x). In this way these interviews are not intent on trying to pin down the meaning of texts but more focused on picking at the process of generating those texts.

The overemphasis in previous eras on mystery and the unknowable part of creativity – and the common association between these terms and inspiration, genesis and ideas of genius – has now shifted, in part because of the rise of writing studies in universities. Creativity in this context has been reframed more as process. In this respect, canonical writers are seen as creative writers in that they produced their works via a process; they developed an initial idea, the idea incubated for a while, they produced drafts, they undertook editorial procedures, 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, such as Virginia Woolf with her diaries, illuminate the process. Recent and ongoing research about collaborations between editors and writers also reveal elements of various writers' creative process. To name three recent instances, there has been discussion and research about Raymond Carver, William Golding, Jane Austen, and their relationships with publishers and editors. A good deal might be unearthed from archival and draft research, but the biographers' methods, using dialogue and interview with those around the writer, can illuminate the creative process in ways that archive research might not. For instance, Douglas Unger, Carver's brother-in-law and friend, reveals Carver stole freely, sometimes painfully, from real life – salmon falling from the beak of a passing eagle, an incident that occurs in one of Carver's stories, happened to a friend of them both. Ed in the story 'What we talk about when we talk about love' (Carver 2009), in trying to kill himself with rat poison only to survive and find that the effect of the poison had turned his teeth into loosened fangs, was something experienced by Unger's own schizophrenic mother. Unger also comments on Carver's working relationship with his editor Gordon Lish and the controversial level of collaboration involved in the writing of Carver's stories. According to Unger, Carver 'was always on the horn, that's what he called it. Long distance, calling Lish. That's how they thrashed things out. Without those transcripts, those phone calls, no one's going to say what went on' (Neale 2011b). This puts a new and perhaps prosaic slant on the creative process, suggesting further folds of complexity in the editing of the stories, aspects that might not be detected in the drafts alone. It also serves as a reminder of the benefits and authenticity of testimony.

Carver taught Creative Writing and the rise of writers working in the academy is significant, though it can be seen as ironic, contemporaneous as it was initially (during the latter half of the twentieth century) with prominent theoretical propositions that suggested the author was no longer necessary for the interpretation of texts. W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley's essay, 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) insists that intention and critical interpretation were only to be detected in the work and not from what the author might say. Essays such as Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1977) and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?' (1977) developed similar lines of thought, offering what were generally perceived as more objective contexts in which to evaluate texts in relation to authorship. 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 ... (Foucault, 1977, p. 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 was also critical of 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. The inevitable suggestion arose for some that perspectives about the work emanating from the writer might be of less value. This posed problems for those involved in both critical interpretation and the production of writing, such as Bradbury who joked about 'announcing the Death of the Author in the classroom, then going straight back home to be one' (1995 p. viii). However, in the twenty-first century any hardened or long-lasting opposition between 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) and partly because of the continued ascent of writing studies. There arose an unlikely fit between theory and practice because observations such as those of Barthes and Foucault have handily matched a facet of practice-based teaching and research: both critical theorists and Creative Writing academics are sceptical about the notion of unexamined literary genius. One of the resounding effects of the 'death of the author' discussion was to unravel 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 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 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 surfaces towards the tangible). This has provided new ways of investigating and talking about the writing process.

Practice testimonies offer valuable contributions to such literature study and to the academic discussions about Bradbury's wished-for theory of creativity. By engaging in dialogue about the writing process writers are resting the discussion of poetics back from literary and cultural theory, and contributing to a new diction and genre, one in which reflection on creative practice has critical value, and where becoming the sparrow or playing in the sand pit have a proper and rightful significance. In finding the language to discuss writing practice it is not a question of writers being asked to partake in what they fear most – having to explain, interpret, praise or exonerate their own work. Interviews should not attempt that – and it is hoped that the interviews collected here do not – because invariably they will meet with resistance and most probably falter and fail. 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). 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, fighting against the ravages of uncertainty that can affect confidence and vision, rather than being 'inspired'. Inspiration is still very much a term of relevance to the creative process but like many aspects of that process it is a term that is now scrutinised and investigated; we should be able to glimpse the factors that contribute to

the genesis within the creative process, the igniting images, words and lines. 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 collection of interviews with writers, each interviewee adding a distinctive and valuable perspectives to the essential investigations that lie ahead.

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