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Exegesis and artefact as a woven work: Problems of examination

Abstract

The idea that the exegesis and the creative work are kept separate in a research degree submission dates back to early non-traditional doctorates in the Australian context. But, while an increasing number of research publications worldwide use fragmented structures and strategies which blend scholarly and non-scholarly approaches, what are the chances of honours, masters and doctoral students succeeding under examination with submissions that weave together exegetical and creative components? This paper examines the expectations universities have for their creative writing research submissions, and the strategies examiners may use in examining exegeses woven into the subject artefact they talk about. Exploring how examiners might read woven works, this paper surveys, especially, reader-response theory as developed by Wolfgang Iser and others.

Keywords: Non-traditional PhDs, HDR examination, reader-response theory, Wolfgang Iser

Introduction: the status of the woven submission

The idea that the exegesis and the creative work are kept separate in a research degree submission in the Australian context has its roots in early doctorates of the 1980s awarded in visual arts and music at the University of Wollongong (see Dawson 2005: 153; Krauth 2011) where artists and musicians traced their processes of composition in documents accompanying the creative component.

Creative work and exegesis were separated then because these pioneer non-traditional creative arts doctorates were indeed submitted in separate modes, or ‘languages’: visual + textual, musical + textual, performance + textual. Professor Edward Cowie’s 1984 Wollongong proposal for these new doctorates stipulated the inclusion of an exegesis to provide “‘evidence of [the student’s] ability to articulate in conventional academic terms the nature of the creative process in action’” (Cowie quoted in Bell 1998: 110). Although Cowie thought that “‘the actual creative work of an Artist constitutes an equivalent to the language of scholarship’” (Cowie quoted in Bell 1998: 110), he did not persist with that claim as sole justification for introduction of these doctorates because the academic politics of the 1980s did not support the notion that creative work alone was research, nor that the languages of visual arts, music or performance were meaningfully equivalent to writing in the English language.

The same uncertainty about how to articulate research in the creative arts persisted through the 1990s and beyond. At the National Symposium on Research in the Performing Arts in May 1997, Peter McCallum said:

We move in a research world in which the thing seen, and particularly the seen word, matters more than the thing heard, and in which touching or moving (unless you are an Olympic athlete, of course) still have little place. Verifiability and accountability are paramount, and scientific modes of discourse are now, more than ever before, the norm. It is a curious world, in which originality is mandatory, but so-called “creative work” is often explicitly excluded. (McCallum quoted in Strand 1998: 39)

The issue was finally resolved – perhaps unsatisfactorily – with the Australian Research Council’s 2012 decision to recognize creative works in all modes as research, provided they are accompanied by an explanatory research statement written in academic prose. This means the Cowie-backed separation of creative work (in any mode or medium) and supporting documentation (in prose) still pertains.

It might be argued that the submission of a painting as exegesis in a visual arts department, or a song as exegesis in a conservatorium, is too controversial a concept for the academy to handle. (Personally, I am fascinated by the challenge of such hybrid ideas.) But in creative writing, where artefact and exegesis *are already modally identical* – i.e. couched in the same ‘language’ in the first place – why must they remain separated? Why might they not be interwoven? There are recognizable *genre* differences in play in this scenario, certainly, but what are genres other than conventional, often limiting *agreements* among art-makers and their audiences? We know that genres change over time according to changing audiences’ expectations. Might the generation-old separated exegesis-artefact genre be ripe for revolution?

Doctoral examination guidelines: conventional, open and radical positions

Guidelines provided to examiners for higher degree submissions in Australia today vary from university to university. The differences between them involve requirements and attitudes that can have a significant effect on the outcome of an examination, especially where the expectations in the examiner’s university differ from those of the candidate’s university.

I will use as examples three universities for whom I have examined in the last 2 years. They take three positions: what I call the conventional position, the open position and the radical position on the relationship between artefact and exegesis.

The conventional position, where the creative product and exegesis are kept separate, is taken by Victoria University. The separateness of the components is hard-wired into the name of the award, i.e. ‘The PhD (By Creative Project and Exegesis Thesis Format)’. The guidelines identify that the submission must have two parts: ‘a) the production of a creative component and b) ... the scholarly exegesis which situates that project’ (Graduate Research Centre 2016). At the outset of the candidature ‘the balance between the Creative and Exegetical Components is negotiated ... between the supervisor and the candidate and approved by the College’ (Graduate Research Centre 2016).

There is little room to manoeuvre here, for candidate, supervisor *or* examiner. However, a hint of flexibility is contained in the suggestion that the exegesis might use ‘a standard academic style’ *or* ‘Might develop a hybrid discourse of analytical/creative research method and expression’ (Graduate Research Centre

2016). Just the same, there is no possibility that creative project and exegesis might be blended in any significant way.

The open position is taken by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Their guidelines are not specific about the relationship of exegesis to creative component. They speak in terms that leave interpretation open to the examiner. For a multimodal submission which includes e.g. traditional exegesis + inventive text + visual elements + multi-locational (website) components, the guidelines read:

The PhD's contribution to knowledge rests on the originality of the approach and/or interpretation of findings... The PhD is expected to show evidence of:

- originality of the research data and/or analysis of the data
- coherence of argument and presentation
- competence in technical and conceptual analysis [and]
- contextual competence

The thesis (meaning the whole submission) should exhibit the same form of disciplined writing as would be accepted for publication in a journal of international standing. (Research Students Centre [2017])

The key words are *originality*, *coherence* and *competence*. Of course, these criteria apply for a thesis in any discipline, but the QUT guidelines leave open the possibility that the examiner will employ their own understanding of how the three are handled in a non-traditional submission. This could be dangerous, however, where an examiner has a traditional approach and is more likely to endorse the standards and structures of conventional work. Just the same, these guidelines do not disqualify a woven or integrated work where exegesis and artefact come together.

The radical position is taken by the University of Canberra. Its guidelines say:

The following principles apply with regard to the PhD thesis incorporating creative production:

...

- (c) the exegesis and creative work may be integrated

[The thesis] will be assessed in examination using the following criteria:

...

- (d) [the submission] demonstrates that the creative and exegetical components are in a symbiotic relationship, in so far as the theory informs practice and vice versa. (Academic Board 2015)

The University of Canberra welcomes the idea that the two components can be woven together and demands of the examiner that the symbiotic relationship between them be interpreted across a range of possible structures.

Archiving above these university-stated requirements for examiners are the Webb, Brien and Burr 2012 *Guide* to examining doctorates in the Creative Arts and its associated 2013 *Report*, published by the AAWP and the Australian government (Webb, Brien & Burr 2013). Neither of these documents addresses the specific case of a woven or integrated submission. The *Guide* does, however, state that 'We're interested in standards, but not in standardisation. As the doctorate is very open-ended and very much dictated by that individual's

creativity, so too is the examination of that doctorate' (Webb, Brien & Burr 2012: 9). Worryingly though, project participants developed a recommendation for 'a standard exegetical model that includes an overarching research question, and a literature and contextual review' (Webb, Brien & Burr 2012: 11). Whether a 'standard exegetical model' can include the variety of conventional, open and radical models above remains to be seen.

I have the feeling that the authors of the *Guide* were seriously at odds with some voices in their focus groups in this matter. I suspect the authors could not say the following, but I am happy to say it: it is alarming to contemplate that there are academics or research students in the creative writing community who consider that 'a standard exegetical model that includes an overarching research question, and a literature and contextual review' is unquestionably a good thing. In my opinion, this is a regressive call for IMRaD-oriented domination of creative writing research [1]. It promotes the notion that we go back to the pre-Cowie era and give up the territory for creative arts research recognition that has been so hard won. It valorises, and seeks to reinstate, a model that has become inflexible and non-adaptable even for science researchers (see e.g. LaPorte et al 2002).

In my view, the ideal model for a creative writing research submission is one that enables and supports the possibility of formal experimentation and freedom of expression. Using this model, the student who leans towards the conventional should be able to succeed as much as the student who wants to test out innovation. Thus, and crucially, the ideal examiner for creative writing doctorates in Australia is flexible in approach and adaptable to a range of requirements. But how does that examiner deal with the individualistic meaning-making undertaken by the candidate who tenders a radically woven artefact + exegesis?

The radical submission: making and interpreting meaning in the woven work

Here I want to focus on how we write and read for the radical position amongst doctoral submissions. The integrated creative writing submission is descriptively styled a *woven, plaited, blended, merged, mixed, collaged, cut-up, fragmented, composite* or *combined* submission. (I could add *montaged, medley-ed, mosaiced, pastiched, disruptive, disconnected, nonlinear, fictocritical* ... and still be talking about it.) This type of submission weaves exegesis and creative work together by a systematic means, in a manner similar to the plaiting of strands, the splicing of strips, or the laying of mosaic pieces.

But how does the examiner read it?

The meaning in a woven or collaged work is based on the *maker's* understanding of the potential meanings created by the juxtaposition of the conjoined elements. Juxtaposition requires the writer's insight into the nature and significance of the pieces brought together, along with awareness of the contribution the conjoining – the contrast and connection – makes to the overall composition. In terms of fashioning a woven/integrated doctoral submission, *originality* might seem easily attained by this method, but collaging of exegesis and artefact requires extraordinary *competence* to achieve *coherence*.

So, why weave components in a research work at all? The point is that collage, as the Cubists, Dadaists and others perceived, brings out structures, thinking and ideas for which there has been no language or perspective previously. Collage – or the bringing of disparate elements together – provides a way for

new discoveries and meanings to emerge from the gaps between old discoveries and meanings. Collage places previously separated modes, genres and statements together, and allows them to strike sparks off one another. But collage is not haphazard; it has an overall picture in mind; it involves aesthetic and intellectual manipulation proceeding towards an overall statement. Today collaging – weaving, plaiting and splicing – is a technique consistent with current notions of media convergence, convergent thinking, and the convergence of knowledges.

To understand how meaning is received from a collaged or woven text – where fragments or strands are placed adjacently – we can consider Wolfgang Iser's theory about 'the blank', which he describes as a 'potential connection' in a text:

the blank ... designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text, the filling of which brings about an interaction of textual patterns ... [and] the need for combination. [The blanks] indicate that the different segments of the text *are* to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so... (Iser 1978: 182-183)

Writers working self-consciously in the mode of collage – in plaiting, splicing or piecing together their storylines and arguments – are aware of, and focus on, the blanks or gaps between the narrative strands they manipulate. The weaving process produces by juxtaposition another narrative or set of narratives – an array of meanings provided by the dynamic in the spaces between the supplied narrative or argument strands – where the reader then contributes, as Iser says, 'the connecting operation' (Iser 1978: 182). The writer attempts to mobilize the reader in particular ways by fashioning the impact between the abutting narrative and/or argument elements. But the connection-making, left to the reader to perform, can lead to problems, as Susan R Suleiman pointed out:

According to Iser ... the reader's activity must be creative: in seeking to fill in the textual gaps – gaps that function on multiple levels, including the semantic level – the reader realizes the work. But ... the question of how much freedom the reader has is ... answered [by Iser] in contradictory ways. Iser's conclusion is that "the literary text makes no objectively real demands on its readers, it opens up a freedom that everyone can interpret in his own way" [Iser 1971: 44]. This conclusion is opposed, however, by the weight of numerous other [of Iser's] statements which suggest that the reader's activity of filling in the gaps is "programmed" by the text itself, so that the kind of pattern the reader creates for the text is foreseen and intended by the author. (Suleiman 1980: 24-5)

A student submitting a woven work invites this uncertainty of examiner reaction. The examiner may take their own creative path and make connections in the work that are not the same connections 'intended by the author'. Or the examiner may hit on precisely the array of meanings the student has sought to mobilise. Perhaps most times, of course, the examiner gets some or most of the intended connections but misses out on others. Supervisors' advice will always be, one hopes, for the student to create 'patterns' for the text that will 'program' a successful reading by the examiner.

This is the crux of the argument about whether Creative Writing should nail down its submission guidelines and find a 'standard exegetical model' (Webb, Brien & Burr 2012: 11) or not. Desire for a standard model is driven by *reader*

requirements – by notions about conventional examiner predilections – and not by writerly motivation to pursue ground-breaking avenues. Ordinary students may prefer a strict sense of certainty about how their submission will be read; ordinary examiners may prefer an orthodox set of parameters for their reading. Neither viewpoint promotes the concepts of innovation and breaking new ground essential for research. In my view, students and supervisors will only subscribe to a standard model if they wish to endorse the ‘standard’ examiner’s expectations generated by the IMRaD structure regardless of whether or not the Creative Writing examiner is capable of responding well with a more experimental reading.

The examiner’s response to a woven work can be accounted for in reader-response theory by how the reader generates the meaning of the text according to their response to its indeterminacy:

As the reader’s wandering viewpoint travels between all [the textual] segments, its constant switching during the time flow of reading intertwines them, thus bringing forth a network of perspectives, within which each perspective opens a view not only of others, but also of the intended imaginary object. Hence no single textual perspective can be equated with this imaginary object, of which it forms only one aspect. The object itself is a product of interconnection, the structuring of which is to a great extent regulated and controlled by blanks ... the blank [which] makes possible the organization of a referential field of interacting textual segments projecting themselves one upon another. (Iser 1980: 113-114)

Iser’s description of the reader involved with fiction correlates with the examiner reading the creatively woven research text because, in its move away from standard academic writing, the woven text operates in modes previously associated with creative writing, as opposed to academic writing. Iser’s ‘imaginary object’ is the reading the student sincerely wants the examiner to take up. But the indeterminacy of arriving at this object may, in the worst case, involve the examiner abdicating from responsibility to seek out the author’s intentions. The examiner may interpret that the student has not mobilized the reader sufficiently because it appears that she ‘cannot finish off the work [she] has started’, and her motivation to “‘bring about an intensified participation which will compel the reader to be that much more aware of the intention of the text’” (Ingarden qtd in Suleiman 1980: 25) has been unsuccessful. In this most negative case, where the examiner has not found the path the student writer has taken and has not applied sufficient agility to get onto the student’s wave-length, the submission may fail. The fact that the student is possibly forging a path not taken by anyone previously – as required by the research imperative that innovation and new-ground breaking will occur – may have been ignored by the examiner.

These are significant issues for students submitting their work. The problems are borne out regularly in research degree examinations where examiners disagree completely. One examiner, it seems, can make all the connections the student intended, while another examiner makes none of them.

H Porter Abbott notes that: ‘Very wide gaps are often a distinguishing feature of modernist and postmodernist texts’. He mentions a narrative where

the gaps are too wide to fill with any degree of confidence...
What makes this narrative so intriguing is the way it invites readings that bridge its many gaps, but never provides

sufficient information to confirm any of these readings. (Abbott 2017: 98)

Abbott refers to the conventional assumption by readers of a ‘deep coherence or wholeness’ in a narrative (2017: 100). This assumption dates back, he says, to ‘an old rule in the history of interpretation’ established over 1600 years ago by Saint Augustine who wrote, with regard to scripture, that ‘meanings found in one part must “be seen to be congruous with” meanings found in other parts’ (2017: 100). Thus, in reading, we try hard to find an interpretation that is “congruous with” all the parts of the narrative’ (2017: 100). But the concept of seeking congruity falters when a work, for example, crosses genre boundaries or, worse still, crosses modal boundaries. Our university discipline conventions are challenged when, as examiners, we must merge our understanding of how academic writing gets done with our appreciation of how creative writing gets done. We are taken even further adrift when we contemplate the merging of the two.

Iser identified the difference between reading expository and creative texts:

an expository text does not require a great deal of ideation on the recipient’s part, because it aims to fulfil its specific intention in relation to a specific, given fact by observing coherence in order to guarantee the intended reception. The blanks in the fictional [or creative] text, however, necessitate a connecting equivalence which will enable the reader to discover what has been called the “Archisem” [in German, *the meaning connector*] which underlies the disconnected segments and, as soon as it has been “found”, links them up into a new unit of meaning. (Iser 1978: 185)

Iser’s thoughts are precisely about the reader picking up on and interpreting the ‘unseen’ junctures which trigger meaning, but his key point is that for expository texts (e.g. exegetical writing in academic prose) the reader has a good chance of understanding the overall coherence of the work because there is an expected patterned structure to the argument. When this ‘programmed’ reading (Suleiman 1980: 24) is disrupted – when the gaps are not conventional according to ‘normal’ academic genre requirements – examiners who are hard-wired into thinking that academic constraints must pertain are less likely to work to find the more creative connectors Iser talks of.

Based on my observations over 20 years as a supervisor involved with Creative Writing thesis examinations, including a significant number of theses that have taken up the model of exegesis and artefact as a woven work, the problem in relation to examination of woven submissions is not so much one of student inability in producing the required doctoral-level outcome, but of examiner inability in appreciating the doctoral-level innovation undertaken. Of course, there are experiments that fail, and it’s a pity that examiners get to see these often-saveable projects which better supervision might have remedied. But there is a long and on-going history of radically-written research works which have not had the exposure they deserve in the discipline, as I will outline briefly here.

Radically-written research publications: history and interpretative trends

In 1924 Walter Benjamin failed in his attempt to gain an academic position by writing a thesis featuring, self-confessedly, ‘the absence of an uninterrupted

purposeful structure [as] its primary characteristic' (Benjamin 1998: 28). He claimed that his woven academic argument-making was based on the idea that:

Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate... (Benjamin 1998: 28)

Then, as history shows, his rejected thesis was published as the now respected *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and his body of woven, scholarly + personal, fragment-structured writings – among them *One-Way Street* (1928) and *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940) (Benjamin 2016, 2002) – are acclaimed as critical academic works, in spite of their experimental form, across a spectrum of disciplines including philosophy, cultural studies and creative writing. Benjamin collaged social, cultural, literary and philosophical critique with creative forms and personal perceptions. He regularly placed the 'I' at the centre of his scholarly analyses and dramatised it by giving it real settings such as Berlin, Naples or Paris (see e.g. Laanemets 2000). Benjamin rejected the notion that by banding together behind a de-personalised 'scientific' way of writing – behind genres based on inflexible writing requirements – an 'objective' account of the world would be achieved.

Benjamin's ideas have been progressively realised in academic writing genres. Writers such as Cixous, Barthes, DuPlessis, Lingis and Taussig have investigated the woven pattern for an academic piece (see e.g. Watkins & Krauth 2016). A recent American book, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (Singer & Walker 2013), contains academic essays which specifically challenge conventional ways of writing academically and does it in the experimental forms they propose. For example, Steve Fellner's 'On Fragmentation' is an essay about nonfiction fragmented narrative structures itself written with a fragmented narrative structure (Fellner 2013); Dinty Moore's 'Positively Negative' investigates spaces on the page in nonfiction works in an article that employs spaces on the page (Moore 2013). Other academics well-known for their radical approaches to academic writing – David Shields and Robin Hemley – also contribute to this volume in blended creative/academic pieces. *Bending Genre* is an academic work that practices what it preaches. It seeks to further Benjamin's legacy by breaking the conventional nexus between scholarly publishing and staid, predictable academic genre forms, and inserts newly conceived, appropriate-to-purpose radical pieces into the discourse. It hands back selection of voice, stance and treatment of subject matter to academic writers willing to experiment. It suggests that writing academically is not about being slave to convention rules, but about forging new ways of expression and seeking mastery over them.

It is not hard to trace the increase in radically-written academic works which interweave scholarly and creative genres. Here in Australia, the fictocritical approach is a prime example: fictocriticism combines fiction, theory and criticism, and includes for example feminism and anthropology, to produce woven works significant in academic fields and also for more general readership. Fictocritical writing starts with the idea of a standard essay, academic article, or book, and blossoms out from there; it proposes that not just the research is significant but, for example, a mapping of the way the research conclusion is arrived at by the researcher herself is also significant (see e.g. Gibbs 2005) and is legitimately included in the writing.

A study pertinent in this context is Marcus Pivato's website *The Nonlinear Essay* (1998). In light of the possibilities inherent in hypertext, Pivato analysed effects of nonlinearity in the academic essay format. He said:

Ultimately, the topology which a particular document will assume will probably be largely determined by the purpose that document is to serve. The connectivity of the text will represent an embedded teleology, either implicit or explicit in its design...

Sometimes, however, the author is trying to build several different arguments simultaneously, each of which occasionally makes reference to the others. In this case, one tends to see a sort of “ladder” topology; several long vertical progressions, woven together by many horizontal cross-links. (Pivato 1998)

Pivato saw the ‘new’ academic text from above. He viewed it topologically, as a kind of map. Through his ladder image, he noted that connections, relations and gradations will be expressed as woven cross-links. He suggested that academic writers are capable of this sort of production, and that academic readers – and examiners – need to be capable also of reading in this way. Pivato’s ideas bring into play concepts related to multimodality and the new literacies generated by the spatial reading of computer and TV screens, as opposed to the purely linear reading of printed texts.

Pivato’s perceptions are key to our understanding of how doctoral examinations should work now, and in the future, and how we as examiners should read them. We should no longer expect to read only simple linear texts, but also complex multimodal texts. We are doing this because the whole nature of reading (and by implication, writing) has changed in the last 30 years. We can no longer interpret doctoral, masters or honours submissions as if they were submitted in the 1980s or 1990s. As examiners, we need to know how to read newly.

Conclusion

An increasing number of research publications worldwide use nonlinear fragmented structures and blended creative/scholarly strategies. But what are the chances of masters, honours and doctoral students succeeding under examination with submissions that weave together exegetical and creative components?

Iser pointed out that the expository text and creative text are essentially different for the reader. But this only holds when we wish, for conventional reasons, to stick within genre boundaries and conventional meaning-making. Readers don’t have to react this way. They can, alternatively, insist that outdated readings no longer pertain. Tasked by the Australian Research Council to break new ground in Writing research, why shouldn’t research students expect that their examiners will recognise the ground-breaking they do? Why shouldn’t they expect that their examiners will seek out the discoveries they make in the spaces between accepted old-school research and newly creative genres?

It may be deduced that creative writing students coming through now will be more likely to want to write in woven forms – e.g. forms that weave media, modes, genres or structures – and that they will expect supervision and examination that is *au fait* with these forms. University study has powerful effects on students, and currently in creative writing studies, there is still the strong impact of traditional notions about how one should write, how one might publish, how one goes about creating a writing career. But expectations are changing. We need to make sure that the literacy models that created

doctoral degree programs in Australian universities are updated to cope with the kinds of submissions likely to come through now.

Notes

[1] The IMRaD acronym refers to the standard science discipline structure for a research article which is divided into Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections. return to text

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