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The performative exegesis

Abstract

The doctorate in Creative Writing in Australian universities legitimates itself in the academic context with an exegetical component that seeks to translate creative endeavours into acceptable research-speak in order to be measured, funded and sanctioned. However in many of my doctoral students' work, the exegesis has become fictively playful to such an extent that it is almost indistinguishable from the creative artefact it seeks to legitimate. Conversely, in other works, the creative artefact performs an exegetical function. Using epigraphs from interviews with JM Coetzee as prompts, this paper explores various student works in which the boundaries between artefact and exegesis have become blurred.

Keywords: exegesis, artefact, performative

The Critical Exegesis

I tend to resist invitations to interpret my own fiction. If there were a better, clearer, shorter way of saying what the fiction says, then why not scrap the fiction? (Coetzee in Coetzee & Sevry 1986: 1)

For all Australian Creative Writing doctorates, the requirement that the creative artefact be accompanied by an exegesis is accepted as a necessary justification of the research undertaken in the creative work. Every student who undertakes a higher degree in Creative Writing is schooled in this defence of their work, taking on the burden of proof to legitimate their creative output in the language of the academy, usually in the discourse normally associated with quantitative research methodology-finding a research 'gap', articulating a research 'question', investigating a research 'problem', contributing to 'new knowledge'. So too with artist academics in Australia who wish to legitimate their creative outputs as research: The governmental body responsible for measuring research outputs, Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) has outlined ways in which this can be quantified:

1. Research Background

- Field
- Context
- Research Question

2. Research Contribution

- Innovation
- New Knowledge

3. Research Significance

- Evidence of Excellence (Australian Research Council 2015)

In their exegeses, Creative Writing students schooled in literary or cultural studies often resort to the discourses associated with literary criticism, literary theory and narratology in order to interpret, explain, and deconstruct their artefact. In some cases, candidates apologise for, or excuse its metaphorical opaqueness. Scholars including Krauth and Kroll have viewed the exegesis as the space in which to resurrect this Barthesian dead author. For example, Kroll in 'The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer' suggests that 'the exegesis is ... a protest that demands that the author once more be heard' (Kroll 2004); similarly, Krauth explains the exegesis in 'The Preface as Exegesis' as 'the Author wanting another chance, wanting to rise from the Barthesian Death, wanting a resurrection out of the main text in order to explain...' (Krauth 2002). But should we not be suspicious of artists who are interpreters of their own works, who have to justify or explain them in a discourse that suggests that the creative work cannot speak for itself or is inadequate in some way to communicate its 'truth'?

The paracritical exegesis

All autobiography is storytelling, all storytelling is autobiography. (Coetzee 1992: 391)

Ihab Hassan argues that literary criticism is always personal and therefore needs to be articulated in subjective language. He calls this 'paracriticism', an autobiographic discourse that takes into account the contextual nature of critical assertions, the voice of the narrator and the fictive nature of the 'I'. In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, Hassan rejects the literary critic's illusion of objectivity in favour of the subject's 'voice': 'In these essays I write neither as a critic nor scholar – nor yet impersonate poet, novelist or playwright – but try to find my voice in the singular forms that speculation sometimes requires' (Hassan 1971: xi). Hassan further claims that 'criticism should learn about playful discontinuity and become itself less than the sum of its parts ... search for a new liveliness, a new capaciousness, a new potency in criticism (25).

Why should the exegesis in a doctorate of creative arts use the language of expository or discursive prose when it has at its disposal the myriad voices and techniques of the very discourse it is attempting to justify? I have argued elsewhere that 'the creative language of fiction will give our research a performative, 'embedded', 'three dimensional' quality that conventional discourse often lacks' (Williams 2012). Why not apply this equally to the exegetical component of a creative dissertation?

The eisegesis

Elizabeth, Lady C, claims to be writing at the limits of language. Would it not
be insulting to her
if I were diligently to follow after her, explaining what she means
but is not smart enough to say? (Coetzee 2003)

Critical discourse seeks to claim truth about or knowledge of, or to speak on top of creative discourse. We should be suspicious of exegeses that claim to

have such privileged knowledge of the artefact they are describing. Andrew Cowan, in 'Blind spots: what creative writing doesn't know', points out the limits of the author's cognitive knowledge:

Our attempts to write about what we know are so often undertaken in the hope that we might know more than we know we know, and that this knowledge will only become evident after the work has left us. The problem, always, is how to live with the uncertainty that this engenders, and how to resist reaching after the formulations and consolations of other discourses. (Cowan 2011)

Yet in our exegeses, we claim authority of a certain knowledge over our creative artefact. Creative Writing doctoral students can mistake the meaning of their work for its intended meaning. If an exegesis explains or interprets a text, reader-writers of these texts are in danger of *eisegesis* 'the interpretation of a text [as of the Bible] by reading into it one's own ideas' (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2016).

I will not cite them here, but many of my doctoral students write eiseges rather than exeges, in a discourse that presupposes superiority in its attempt to justify creative works using criteria and pre-conceived theoretical notions other than what arise from the artefact itself. The exegesis may claim to know things about the artefact that it does not know, and conversely, may miss what the artefact does by misdirection.

Tess Brady points out in 'A Question of Genre: de-mystifying the exegesis' that often an exegesis (or eisegesis) 'functions as a kind of insurance policy against a poorly received creative product' or a 'ticket to satisfy the gatekeepers admitting entrance to the academy's conservative research club' (Brady 2000). An exegesis can hide a multitude of sins. How do we guard against this eisegetical imposition onto our work?

The performative exegesis

Storytelling [is] another, an other mode of discourse. (Coetzee in Cornwall 2007: 22)

Performative research has been well established as a recognised and 'respectable' form of academic discourse (for example, see Haseman 2006), so I will not explicate it here. Rather I will demonstrate how five recent /in progress University of the Sunshine Coast Honours, Masters and Doctoral exeges 'perform' creatively, and how they prioritise the discourse of tentative, playful, creative endeavour over explanatory, traditional research discourse.

Jo-Ann Sparrow's Darling Adopted Daughter: Exegesis as doppelganger text

For her Doctorate of Creative Arts (Creative Writing), Sparrow writes a memoir that gives voice to her pre-adoptive self. But having deconstructed her voice and allowed her doppelganger 'other' to speak in her artefact, she struggles to find the appropriate 'voice' in her exegesis:

In the early days of my degree, when I was trying to hone my research questions and articulate my purpose in academic speak, I had a dream (or nightmare) where my supervisor was perched over my shoulder, guiding me on what to write, while

my monitor kept shrinking until I couldn't read anything. The dream sums up how I feel about academic writing and why a traditional exegesis didn't work for me.

My first attempts at writing the exegesis were very academic. I read those of other students and attempted to copy their style, voice and layout – It didn't work for me. I played with outlaw text and parallel text [Krauth 2011] but everything I tried felt clunky, unnatural and awkward. I could barely bash out a page, let alone 30,000 words. (Sparrow 2015)

My advice was to use an autobiographical, paracritical storytelling voice and to be honest about situating herself subjectively in her research:

When I was completely bogged and going nowhere with the exegesis, I decided to stop trying to copy the style of others and to start just telling my story – the story of how I wrote the memoir. I wrote it just as if I were speaking to a friend or talking to a group of people. (Sparrow 2015)

As she was more comfortable telling stories rather than explaining them, Sparrow's exegesis became then an autobiographical confession, using narrative techniques more associated with creative non-fiction than with academic discourse. Her exegesis became a meta-narrative quest to find the answer to her research question: 'how can writing a memoir heal the primal wound of my adoption?' Here is the beginning of her exegesis which poses the question in narrative terms, using setting, characterisation, dialogue and voice in order to 'perform' her research, rather than simply document it:

A few months ago, I sat at a table in a post adoption support organisation, with my adoptive parents, and broke a forty-two-year silence about my adoption experience. One week earlier, I'd given them my almost completed memoir to read, with strict instructions to not speak with me about it, until we reached the security of a neutral room in the presence of an adoption counsellor.

My parents were deliberately seated across the table from me, to avoid any uncomfortable physical contact. Dad's arms were folded tightly across his chest and his head was turned slightly away from me, as if exposing his face fully would turn him to stone. His bottom lip quivered when he asked me, 'So how do we fix this?'

"Fix what?" I said, shadowing with disappointment. Had I offended them so greatly in the memoir that he felt our relationships were broken?

"This," he said, indicating the dog-eared manuscript sitting between us like a concrete wall, with a jerk of his finger. (Sparrow 2014: 198)

Sparrow's exegesis ends in a denouement where the conflict that has been set up by her research question (her initial or arising conflict) is resolved, though not in the way she expects it. The surprising twist in her exegetical 'mystery' story is that the primal wound is healed by writing about it, or more accurately by writing around it, not by using the artefact to heal her wounds:

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place. The sympathetic ear I'd required all along wasn't that of my parents, it had been my own.

“We don't. There is no putting back what was taken. There is only understanding, learning how to be okay with that and moving on.” (*Darling Adopted Daughter*)

The memoir *Darling Adopted Daughter* is ... a memorial to the thing that was lost – to the metaphor of the Adoption Wound. As a memoir is aptly defined, it is ‘written to be remembered’. *Darling Adopted Daughter* is the realisation of a dream I had as a little girl of one day holding something of myself that couldn't be taken, erased, hidden or forgotten. It was something I had struggled to understand and never wanted to forget. It is hardened scar tissue I actively stitched. (2014: 261)

Sparrow's exegesis is a mystery tale, a quest narrative, a voyage of discovery written to understand what she was doing in her artefact through fictive means. She realises that she has been stitching around the wound, embroidering an articulation of the inability to heal or enter that wound. But in so doing she addresses all the criteria necessary for a successful exegesis: methodology, literature review, new knowledge, innovation, research significance. For example, she makes her ‘literature review’ epistolary, and includes emails from her supervisors:

Following up your earlier email on Foer and the fact that he used visuals, you could substitute the visual text with a secondary voice by telling your primary memoir in the first person with your “other” who suffers the ‘primal wound’ telling a secondary memoir – albeit enclosed in the first memoir (womb-like, dare I say?) – in the third person, as if she was your doppelganger or “dark other”. This is an innovation which was demonstrated by Stephen King in his novel *The Dark Half* which was about an unborn co-joined twin existing only in the writer's brain. Nice idea for you I reckon. It would work big time as an innovative memoir. (Crew 2012, used with permission)

A horror novel ... really? I read *The Dark Half* (King 2001) trying to keep an open mind as to how a horror novel could influence my adoption memoir. I have to admit I was dubious for a while. In *The Dark Half* King's protagonist, author Thad Beaumont, who has been successfully writing crime fiction under the pseudonym of George Stark for years, is about to be outed by a blackmailer. He chooses instead to take control and out himself in a *People* magazine article, the act of which animates his alter ego/unborn twin and brings Stark to life. I chewed on the idea for a few months ... it wasn't the craziest idea I'd ever heard. The idea seemed so “left of field” that I figured I'd explore and discard it quickly. I didn't. One weekend of experimentation later and the idea grew wings ... even then however, I couldn't have foreseen how this one, tiny, supervisor-planted seed would sprout and become the framework for the entire memoir. (Sparrow 2015)

Such confessional narrative is exegetical in the etymological sense of the word in that it leads her and the reader out of the wound she cannot articulate:

Like Coetzee's Friday in *Foe*, I needed to descend into the hole or heart of my story, which was the adoption wound, and find a way to give voice to it; art being the means by which I would discover the words. How could I find language that could circle the hole around the silence? And how could I hope to transform the pain held inside that hole if I could not articulate it? (2014: 234)

Sparrow's exegesis parallels her artefact in its articulation of fictive truth and performs her research creatively.

Shelley Davidow's Writing the Immigrant: Exegesis as counterpoint

Shelley Davidow writes two texts for her doctorate, one the artefact, the story of her family's immigration journey across the world, and the other her exegesis, presenting both as co-existing strands of a narrative:

Writing the Immigrant [the exegesis] is ... its own non-fictional narrative, mapping a journey in much the same way as *The Immigrant* [the artefact] maps a journey, neither supplement, nor critical evaluation of the text. It does not provide a theoretical rationale, but rather, is revelatory in essence and seeks to uncover the invisible story that joins *The Immigrant* to its reader... As such, it is a memoir of its own... (Davidow 2015: 248)

But further, the exegesis connects to the artefact in what the author calls counterpoint: the two pieces of the doctorate dialogue with each other in a symbiotic way that integrates them rather than placing them as first and second order documents. In an email to her supervisor, Davidow explains this relationship in terms of a musical analogy:

'In music, counterpoint is the relationship between voices that are interdependent harmonically (polyphony) yet independent in rhythm and contour.' While the artefact *The Immigrant* (now published as *Whisperings in the Blood* UQP 2016) [Davidow 2016b] is structurally and thematically based on the idea of the musical fugue, the exegesis is the narrative that allows for a counterpoint, a relationship "between voices" which, like music, is interdependent even as each section maintains its autonomy. (Davidow 2016a)

Davidow's exegetical journey of self-discovery is that of an author writing a memoir, using narrative techniques such as dialogue, characterisation, a narrative arc, and making use of the epistolary (graphics, photos, scanned letters and diary entries). Here is the beginning of her exegesis:

In June, 2012, came a revelation.

"Shell..." my dad said on the phone. "With regard to your research for your book. I have this box of letters...all the letters my mom kept, written to her from about early 1930s till she died."

"What? I don't believe it."

"Yup. I have. And in that collection is every single letter my dad wrote to her, including his marriage proposal."

"Where was it?"

"Just hiding in all my stuff. I just dug it up. In there are all

the letters from Uncle Mike (her brother) after she left the States to come and live in South Africa. If you're interested in having them, I'd like you to. I can't read them anyway ... it's all too close to home."

"Dad, I would love them."

....

Journal entry, November 18th 2012

I finally opened and read TONS of letters from 1936 onwards. AMAZING. I'm sitting on the floor, the rain is pouring down outside and around me is a time warp and the ghosts of relatives and family all around. There are echoes of struggle and war, dating and dancing in New York and Chicago in the 1930's...engagements and travel plans, marriage in a foreign country; loneliness, the birth of my dad, a lost baby, malaria and tick-bite fever, my grandfather Phil's death at age 54; my gran's scrawl documenting our family tree and hundreds of letters from Uncle Mike (Meyer), his initial distrust of his sister's plan to go to Africa; his letter to Phil accepting the idea that she could go; his first thoughts about following her there after college. Because I found some of the letters in chronological order and some very haphazardly thrown together, births, deaths, morning love-notes from Phil to 'Bert' are all spread out in a panorama of time around me – generations and lives unfolding with bizarre rapidity as I read at the speed of light, scanning for information. When I finally found Phil's letters to Bert my heart was really pounding. I could feel a strange energy around the envelopes, the notes, his writing. Perhaps that energy was her fierce treasuring of the letters ... the incredible possibility that was in them before she went to Africa when she was just newly out of the orphan home... (Davidow 2015: 259)

The exegesis documents the unfolding story of her family's immigration journeys in what Krauth calls the parallel text, one which 'produce[s] its own story and runs as a distinctive parallel narrative ... a back-story, a subtext' (Krauth 2011).

If the exegesis speaks 'between voices', or in Sparrow's case, 'articulates the silence', then both candidates are acknowledging that the role of the exegesis is not so much to explain but rather to enrich, deepen or embroider the artefact. The exegesis is not first or second order knowledge about the artefact but a legitimisation, and extension, of creative discourse as performative research.

Sara Hutchinson's 'Let's Talk about Sex': Exegesis as epistolary address

Sara Hutchinson's doctorate in Creative Writing endeavours to 'update' *Forever*, Judy Blume's 1970s novel / sex manual for teens. Her thesis, *A 21st*

Century Forever: Learning about sexuality through young adult fiction, explores how a contemporary young adult novel can be written that depicts explicit sexuality without overt didacticism.

The writing of the exegesis, however, presented immediate problems for this student. If the artefact addresses young adult readers and takes pains not to patronise them, then why should the exegesis ‘speak over their heads’ to an adult, academic reader? Why not address the same readership in her exegesis? Hutchinson asks the radical but obvious question: who is the exegesis written for? If it is a foreword such as Nabokov’s foreword in *Lolita* (as Krauth suggests in ‘The Preface as Exegesis’ 2002) then it is written for the reader of the artefact. And if the artefact is written to a young adult readership, then Hutchinson writes her exegesis literally as a foreword to the novel, telling her young adult readership how she came to write the novel, the exemplars that inspired her, the research she did, and the problems of didacticism, appropriation and condescension she encountered in writing it:

When I began exploring how I was going to write my exegesis and what its components would be, it became clear quite quickly that due to the graphic sexual nature of my novel I would need to explain not only how I had written sexuality for young adult readers but also why I felt that was necessary. The idea of a preface seemed an obvious starting point as it allowed me to explain to the reader/examiner my reasoning and research. After a discussion with Nigel Krauth at a talk at the university, I decided to explore including a real preface in the young adult novel itself that would address the intended young adult reader and the gatekeepers, focusing on a discussion of the importance of the sexual content and the creation of the teenage voice. As I was addressing a range of ages, I found myself becoming more and more creative in my discourse. I needed to keep the attention of a younger reader and yet also include a variety of academic literary terminology and discussion. (Hutchinson 2016)

Here then is the beginning her exegesis, addressing the young adult reader, in a voice appropriate and consistent with her artefact:

Dear Reader

This is a bit strange, isn’t it? Me addressing you before the story has even begun... Because I want to share with you what I have learned throughout the process of both writing this novel and researching the use of graphic sex scenes in young adult fiction and how authors attempt to engage their readers. Because I think that you will find it enlightening, amusing and thought provoking. Because I would like you to interact with this book on many levels. And so, I invite you to explore the world of storytelling. (Hutchinson 2015)

At Hutchinson’s confirmation, the independent reviewer objected to her preface. He was concerned that all the requirements of an exegesis could not be met by using a voice that by necessity subtracted all specialised language. Hutchinson acknowledged this problem and came up with a solution which she later explained in an email to her supervisor:

[I]t would be difficult to address a fourteen year old in the same way as the examiner... I needed to find a way to include all of the doctoral requirements of research methodology, literature

review and analysis that would satisfy those sections as well as the ... academic language that would be expected at this level of study. As, essentially, my exegesis and novel are about relationships, I began to tease out how I could relate to the examiner while keeping true to my original intent. I was able to address the reader in the preface with 'Dear Reader', so why not include a separate personal letter solely for the examiner. This not only solved my readership issues but also ensured that the complexity of relationships explored in my thesis was maintained. (Hutchinson 2016)

If the reader of the exegesis is an examiner, why not speak to this person directly? Hutchinson thus addresses sections of her exegesis in epistolary form to the actual examiner. In this way, the discourse can be contextualised as a personal communication and not an abstract exercise in a disembodied critical discourse. In addition, she can employ narrative methods of discourse other than exposition in order to demonstrate her research while addressing the requirements in the discourse necessary to communicate the complexity of her research methodology, theoretical assumptions and literature review:

Dear Examiner

This project explores relationships between characters, between author and characters, reader and author, reader and characters, and importantly in this instance, candidate and examiner. In this letter to you, I hope to clarify my research agenda, my research questions, my methodology, my literature review. Although we do not know each other, I hope that you will be like the unknown recipient of Charlie's letters in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and will be a confidant with whom I can share both my triumphs and failures. (Hutchinson 2015)

The third part of Hutchinson's exegesis is a conversation between the author and her imagined teen self. She argues that the idea of an adult writing 'for' young people is fraught with the danger of condescension, appropriation and didacticism. By engaging in a Socratic dialogue with her younger self, she finds a way in which to mirror the internal dialogue she experienced in writing the novel and finding the voice of her narrator:

MY VOICE: She burst through the door.

TEEN VOICE: I fling things open.

MY VOICE: She couldn't fling the door.

TEEN VOICE: I don't burst through.

MY VOICE: She rushed out the door.

TEEN VOICE: I can rush, that'd work.

MY VOICE: 'She' rushed into the garden.

TEEN VOICE: Why 'she' not 'I'?

MY VOICE: 'She' worked better in this part.

TEEN VOICE: Why 'I' in the other, then?

MY VOICE: 'She' provided a contrast to 'I'.

TEEN VOICE: I'm pretty important. I can tell the whole story, can't I?

MY VOICE: All 'I' wouldn't work. It's too restrictive.

TEEN VOICE: 'She' is restrictive too. You're still presenting ideas and information based on one person's perspective.

MY VOICE: Yes, but when you use restricted third person engaging narration it 'presents a fuller and more sophisticated explanation of events and feelings than the character would be capable of, without explaining more than the character

knows.’[1]

[1] ‘The Value of Singularity in First- and Restricted Third-Person Engaging Narration’, Wylie, 2003, 117

(Hutchinson 2015: 27)

Hutchinson’s exegetical triptych contextualises her artefact in terms of its various readers (examiner, young adult, her own teen self) and addresses them directly. In addition, her narrative strategies enliven the discourse and perform the research as creatively as her artefact.

Stacey Winch’s The Writing Project: Exegesis as writing manual

Stacey Winch’s Master of Creative Arts explores her quest to overcome serious writer’s block and to write about a traumatic event of domestic abuse. She does this by systematically engaging with a variety of styles, both fiction and nonfiction – flash fiction, young adult, historical record, personal essay and poetry – resulting in a collection of works that explores the specific theme of domestic violence in a multifaceted way. In her research proposal, she outlines her exegetical intentions, which are similar to those of Hutchinson’s:

It is intended that the exegesis be written for a general audience, who are invited to share my journey, described by Macrorie (as cited in Huber 2011, p.111), as the “story of the hunt”... I hope to speak directly to the reader, encouraging their thoughts, creating a desire in them to share a seat with me on my journey. (Winch 2015: 2)

As is revealed later, the exegesis is a writing textbook, a manual for writers to learn from: not a legitimisation of her creative output in the language of the academy for an examiner, but an enactment of writing praxis. Further, Winch claims that because her exegesis is the ‘textbook’, and the artefact a training ground for her writing efforts, the exegesis is itself an artefact:

A fictocritical approach is used to document the writing praxis in the exegesis, which itself is a creative artefact. The creative work invites readers to share in my journey and to begin a creative project of their own. (Winch 2016: np)

In her initial research proposal, Winch explains that her exegesis is not an appendage or rationalisation of the artefact, but an integral part of the whole:

In *The Writing Project* the individually completed artefacts and the final compilation of these into the thematic mosaic are, however, not as important as the *process* of the creation of these pieces. It is the exegesis, containing both the discussion [of this process] and examples of the creative work, which becomes the desired final product, the research and the practice bound together as one.

It is integral to *The Writing Project* that the exegesis itself is also a creative piece. In this way, the exegesis takes a fictocritical approach ... and ... allows me to step aside from the standard ... approach of producing the separate exegesis, and create a critical, interpretative text that, as Nettelbeck (1998, p.4) suggests, “can be used to do something other than explication ... rather than (the exegesis) being the filter through which the ‘primary’ text is read, both become part of a single device”. (Winch 2015: 5)

Winch is at pains to point out that her exegesis enacts her methodology performatively, and as such creatively engages with her reader in the same way as (or even more than) her creative artefact does. The exegesis has been contextualised, and its voice grounded in autobiographic paracriticism.

A further crucial point Winch makes is that the ‘author’ of her exegesis is a constructed fictive device:

Accordingly, *The Writing Project*’s book relies on use of the first person to communicate directly with the reader, inviting the reader into the conversation. However, it is important to acknowledge that the narrator is, all the same, a literary device, and that the narrator’s voice is not necessarily the voice of the author’s “everyday speaking voice” (Silverman, n.d., para. 1). (Winch 2015: 7)

The exegeses in these four student dissertations have become not just parallel texts, but parallel artefacts. The exegesis, as Krauth suggests, is no longer a ‘critical journal, a reflective account of processes undertaken while creating the accompanying work’, but rather ‘is itself an artefact, a system of parallel texts. It’s an exegesis not just concerned with its novel, it’s self-consciously about writing itself’ (2011).

But how does one then read such an exegesis? Does one need, as Hutchinson’s confirmation reviewer suggests, a further exegetical element in order to explain the exegesis? And if this becomes too ‘creative’, does one need a further exegesis, and so on *ad infinitum*? The exegesis is no longer a foreword, or preface, or after-the-fact explanation, but part of the creative mechanism of the thesis, an integrated performance of its methodology, legitimating creative discourse as a mode of intellectual inquiry.

DD Johnson’s The Deconstruction of Professor Thrub: The disguised exegetical narrator

Once it is established that the exegesis may use fictive devices such as the voice of a narrator, who is no longer a disembodied voice speaking from nowhere to no one, then it becomes necessary to unravel the assumption that the narrator of the exegesis is the author herself. In fiction, it is always naïve to assume that the narrator is the author. There is always an assumed wry distance between character, narrator and author. So if the exegetical voice of the author is constructed, how can the exegesis be read? And who is speaking? Krauth suggests that:

Most readings confuse the voice of the Preface with that of the Author. But ... the prefacing voice is more likely to be the voice of the author in a range of disguises – as critic pre-empting the critics, as reader pre-empting the reading, as apologist or teacher – and sometimes also as the actual writer, the mechanist and maker. (Krauth 2002)

Krauth himself uses the foreword of *Lolita* as a case in point for the author stepping onto the stage and explaining the ‘first little throb’ that caused his creation (Nabokov 2000). However, Nabokov’s ‘exegesis’ also contains a parody of an exegesis, a fictional foreword by a fictional John Ray Jr PhD with sanctimonious moral interpretations of the text which astute readers are not meant to take seriously:

Lolita should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and

vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (Nabokov 2000)

In another of his disguises, Nabokov the ‘Author’ apologises too in his Afterword that there is a danger that his words will also be seen as a construction of another character:

After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one – may strike me, in fact – as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book. (Nabokov 1959: 73)

The voice of the author in the exegesis in a similar way needs to be bracketed, placed between quotation marks, just as s/he is in a creative text. We cannot ever again speak exegetical truth unmediated.

A case in point is *The Deconstruction of Professor Thrub*, a Creative Writing PhD dissertation for the University of Gloucestershire (UK) in which the exegesis is a metafictional story of a (fictional) PhD student trying in vain to get his evasive (fictional) supervisor to help him complete his (real) PhD. The supervisor avoids his student at all costs, and the degree is achieved in spite of their adversarial relationship, which exegetically deconstructs the way the artefact is written in an innovative way, acknowledging (amongst other things) the fictive nature of all academic discourse, the fictive nature of the exegetical narrator, and the context in which exegetical work is produced. The exegesis begins (as Hutchinson’s does) with a direct address to the examiners of the doctoral work:

Examiners, let me say it at the outset: I am grateful to my supervisor. An unexceptional sentiment from a PhD candidate, perhaps, but one I could not have imagined expressing two years ago. You see, Professor Thrub was no ordinary supervisor. He routinely ignored my messages, possibly deleting them unread. To arrange a tutorial, it was necessary to accost him in his office (even this was not without difficulties: on one occasion I caught Thrub hiding behind his filing cabinet), and it was not unusual for him to make suicidal gestures during our meetings. At my RD1 meeting, during which Thrub twice called me a cunt, he made a bonfire out of our research degree supervision forms... Nevertheless, this project would not have been possible without Thrub’s unorthodox guidance. (Johnson 2013: 9)

Johnson writes a parody of an exegesis for his doctoral dissertation, and uses fictive devices in order to expose the false assumption that the exegetical narrator is the author of his doctorate. He deconstructs the relationship between supervisor and doctoral student thereby severing the traditional connection of exegesis to artefact and inviting his reader to consider the playful possibilities of exegetical work.

Deborah De Groot’s ‘Liminality’: The exegetical artefact or fictocritical thesis

Finally I examine a dissertation by a University of the Sunshine Coast student whose writing plays with the exegetical in the novel, and provides a model where the creative artefact performs the function of the exegesis, thereby questioning the necessity for a separate exegesis at all. Deborah De Groot’s Honours thesis is a fictocritical exploration of liminality. Rather than separating

exegesis and artefact, she uses fictocritical discourse in both to create two narratives, her voice the voice of a fictitious Honours student researching liminality:

[The Exegesis] attempts to combine literary analysis with creative text; [the Artefact] attempts to combine research with fictional narrative. This Honours submission is, therefore, an attempt to combine critical literary analysis with creative expression. (De Groot 2013: 8)

The exegesis begins with an imaginary conversation between candidate and supervisor:

KNOCK, KNOCK

“Are you talking about liminality?” my supervisor asked.

He sat, unruffled; an erudite man in a clean white shirt.

Liminality.

I’d never even heard the word.

This exegesis is defined by the writing of Jeri Kroll (1999: n.p.)

[Kroll 1999] in that it discusses ... origins, possible options, explains why certain paths were followed rather than others.

Truth to tell, my mind was buzzing.

I began a reflective journal hoping to order and document the process. After all, that’s what an Honours student is supposed to do, right? I bought one of those big black-covered spiral-bound things that artists use for sketching. Important. I smothered the pages with scribbles and jottings, darting between ideas. Words and photographs and artwork of dubious quality jostled with cut-out magazine articles. (De Groot 2013: 10)

Here is the beginning of the artefact:

Deborah sat at her too-small desk like a loony, muttering and scribbling and reading tales of truth. She sat with thunder rumbling and grumbling and cracking open the heavens with shards of spastic light. Raising its voice to fever pitch until the rain came teaming down; regardless of the fact that sprinklers were still on, patient and pathetic against a drought they thought would never break. But it had – a dam had burst somewhere in the heavens and words came spewing out like there was no stopping them. No stopping or cropping, and dropping any pretence of being something she’s not. So what was she? Not suited to normality, that’s what. Not suited to that situation at all... She’s on the threshold. She’s over fifty years old, for heaven’s sake. Sitting there like a clown. Balancing – life. She’d been on the threshold before, but never – quite – tipped – over. (De Groot 2013: 36)

De Groot suggests that her exegesis which ‘explores the processes involved in producing the fictocritical artefact’ is ‘a pertinent expression for the research focus due to fictocriticism’s own liminality as a writing form and practice’. Her form matches her content. The problem arises though: why is there the need for two documents when both the exegesis and the artefact fulfill the same function? Surely one text can perform the research both creatively and

exegetically? She agrees. For her doctoral work, she proposes to write one document which is both exegesis and artefact.

The disguised author

No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games hand-book. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. (Coetzee 1988: 4)

Creative writing presents knowledge tentatively, suggestively, and subjectively, metaphorically, through the voice of fictive characters and an evasive author. The exegeses I have discussed in this paper present knowledge in this way. Similarly, the issue of authorship and the authority of a so-called 'author' of an exegesis is a problematic one. An author is not quite the same person as the one who writes about being an author. The student writing an exegesis constructs an authorial persona, or as Krauth suggests, wears the disguise of an author to write her creative work. But to comment on her own work, she may feel fraudulent, as if she is second guessing the real intent of the author, or the meaning and worth of the artefact intended. This person, the exegete, is interpreting, in the same position as the critic, or scriptor: words, culture, language pass through her. She cannot claim to be the author of the work and to have firsthand knowledge of its meaning, only an observation of its construction. An exegesis then, if it is to be an honest response to the artefact, must acknowledge the tentative nature of its author, of its writing, of its truth.

In the short story 'Borges and I', Jorge Luis Borges writes of a twin self who inhabits his body and world, one a writer self and the other the everyday Borges:

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. (Borges 2007: 246)

Borges's story ends cryptically: 'I do not know which of us has written this page.' Similarly, the person writing the artefact and the person writing the exegesis are physically one and the same but perform two different functions and cannot claim complete knowledge of the other's work. The writer of this article (me?) in the same way is autobiographically the author of his creative works, but a slower, more rational version, trying to figure out what the hell he has written in his novels and stories. When he is asked at interviews about his books, he appears to be either evading the question or playing games when he says, for example, 'Gee, I didn't think of that', as if the author is a cleverer version of himself he is trying to understand. To pretend otherwise and present

knowledge in an exegesis in a discourse that simulates knowledge of his other self, is at best self-deceptive, at worst dishonest.

Conclusion: Suggested recommendations for students, supervisors and examiners

In shaping the exegesis, perhaps students should be aware of the fictive nature of the authorial voice used, and should allow for the myriad possibilities of the form of the exegesis, dictated by the nature of the artefact itself. Similarly supervisors should guide candidates in the fictive art of the exegesis, to help them accept that uncertainty is necessary, and that they do not need to fall back on the formulations of discourses not equipped to complement the creative artefact. And finally, when appraising the slippery form of the exegesis, perhaps examiners need to be open to the idea that the exegesis can perform discourses other than literary critical ones, and that the exegesis is not an appendage to the artefact but rather a component of it.

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