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Writing - a methodology for the new millennium

Abstract
A metaphor and a description, working together, can illuminate different aspects of the same face. The hybrid form of a creative PhD or Masters - combining the theoretical and the creative, the description and the metaphor - can create a symbiotic structure of analysis and exposition that is greater than the sum of its two parts.
This paper argues an economic imperative for the skills employed in creative practice, particularly in meeting the challenges of our newly convergent world.

> The only time I know that something is true
> is the moment I discover it in the act of writing.
> (Jean Malaquais, quoted 1991)

> Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count;
> everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.
> (Albert Einstein, n.d.)

On the dustjacket of the Italian version of Eco's *Name of The Rose* the publisher appeared to have gone to some lengths to explain why the country's leading semiotician and contemporary philosopher had written a novel:

> If he had wanted to advance a thesis, he would have written an essay (like so many others that he has written). If he has written a novel, it is because he has discovered, upon reaching maturity, that those things about which we cannot theorize, we must narrate. (Bondanella 1997: 95)

Later Eco admitted that he authored those words. He expressed a similar idea at the end of his 1979 essay, `Language, Power and Force' (Eco 1995) with his suggestion - following Foucault - that this universe is better grasped by fiction than theory. Eco writes a theoretical text to try to reach 'a coherent conclusion', whereas in a work of fiction, while perhaps starting from the same 'disconnected lump of experiences', he does not try to reach a conclusion. Rather he plays with the ideas, staging what he calls 'a play of contradictions':

> The task of a creative text is to display the contradictory plurality of its conclusions, setting the readers free to choose - or to decide that there is no possible choice. In this sense a creative text is always an Open Work. (Eco et al 1992: 140)

His point is not that the two modes of writing are entirely separate, rather that they perform different functions, each with their own strengths and aptitudes.

He does not regard one as more creative or illuminating than the other. And in this he joins a long tradition of writers - from Galileo to Borges - who have used both techniques to communicate their ideas. As Rocco Capozzi says:

> we have tried to come to terms with the complex and even ambivalent relationships between philosophy and literature. But, in my estimation, this is not a problem for Umberto Eco who has often praised Galileo's prose, in which rhetoric, science, and literature are not in conflict but complement one another. The abundance of philosophical and semiotic discussions in Eco novels indicates that for the author these disciplines can complement each other as they elucidate complicated thoughts and at the same time contextualize cultural issues. (Capozzi 2002: 181-82)

As a syncretic whole they form a hybrid genre that, according to Paul Dawson, acts as a demarcation of 'a metaphorical (postmodern) space between theoretical and literary genres' (Dawson 2005: 169).

Eco's defensive explanation on the Italian dustjacket - and his article - addresses that ongoing tension between praxis and theory, their respective positions, where they might overlap and, most particularly, it explores the validity of the creative form. I propose that the hybrid form of a creative PhD or Masters - combining the theoretical and the creative - can create a symbiotic structure of analysis and exposition that is greater than the sum of its two parts. It is 20 years since the *Strand Report* and the recognition of creative arts based subjects within the academy in Australia. Currently this form of scholarship is gaining respect in both literary faculties and less directly related disciplines. The radical changes of the new convergent world (discussed in Thomas Friedman's 2005 *The Earth Is Flat*) demonstrate a need for the skills of creative practice. Friedman and others mount a compelling case that creativity, imagination and curiosity will be the drivers of future prosperity and success. This gives a new economic imperative to creative practice, placing it at the forefront of media and business, as well as academia, as Australia embraces the challenges of the future.

When I began my Masters thesis I had a fair understanding of the differences in style and approach of creative and theoretical writing. Working on the two together, as part of a unified whole, I developed a new appreciation of their similitude: that is, the similar dynamics that drive both. Both forms of research start with an idea and, from there, the writer/scholar discovers and selects information they consider relevant, finding the threads or connections. Both involve the search for a narrative 'truth' running through a body of information, and in isolating this truth the author is required to be bold, taking lateral leaps of thought. This is the method of all writing. Work in scientific disciplines is not presented as a series of disparate or unrelated phenomena; rather, it is presented with the intention that the researcher offer a seamless narrative, teasing out nuances of meaning, trying to make sense of a larger (or smaller) picture. Both involve building a factual framework within which creativity - that spark that drives knowledge and wisdom forward - can flourish.

Michel de Certeau argues that truth is an effect of practice and that the techniques employed in fiction writing - that of imagining different scenarios and possibilities, thinking laterally, asking a series of 'what ifs' - are also part of the traditional disciplines such as historiography and science. He says that every piece of writing, whether scientific or speculative, is a representation of reality and not reality itself (de Certeau 1986: 201). The challenge faced by practitioners of both modes is the same - the struggle to express ideas. All

academic research seeks to understand, to better explicate the variety of human experience, to contribute something new to our accumulated knowledge. Language - ambiguous and multivalent, burdened by the unstable gap between sign, signifier and signified - is often inadequate for such a task, which is why both writers and scientists so often reach for the metaphor. A rich metaphor can communicate an elusive idea or complicated concept more effectively than a detailed description. Medicine uses war imagery to explain treatment for cancer. Commerce has appropriated medical terminology with the phrase 'viral marketing'. Al Gore coined the term 'information highway' in the 1980s to describe the capabilities of laying fibre across America (Hundt 2006: 73), and web users now describe the internet as a superhighway. A metaphor and a description working together, like the pairing of connected creative and theoretical works, can present different aspects of the same face, pointing to the same idea, but from different angles.

Writing can, and should be, a rigorous and exacting intellectual process requiring constant critical appraisal, editing, re-working, testing, more editing, reflection, editing again, reworking, more editing, more reflection, more critical appraisal and so on. In arts-based practices, the process is as important as the outcome. It is not just about 'output'. In this it is similar to the most rigorous of scientific and mathematical research. They too show their workings, the equations or methods that were used to achieve their outcomes (in some disciplines a 'failed' experiment often would be considered as valuable for its contribution to knowledge as a supposedly 'successful' outcome). Writing a novel or poem, as TS Eliot said, is indeed labour-intensive work:

> Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing; this frightful toil is as much critical as creative...we do not assume that because works have been composed without apparent critical labour, no critical labour has been done. (Eliot 1964: 18-19)

The methodology involved in producing my creative work, a metaphysical conspiracy thriller, required both writing as a creative and labour-intensive process of reflection, contemplation and understanding, as well as research of a writerly nature rather than of a strictly academic nature. That is, it required a broad or 'working' knowledge across a variety of subjects and disciplines, rather than a deeper, more 'specialist' knowledge within one specific field. This needed to be arrived at very quickly and in vastly different areas.

As part of a broader analysis of paranoia the novel is set in the postmodern world of paranoia, typical of the conspiracy thriller genre produced by writers like Umberto Eco, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, among others. *The Mythologisation of Melchizedek* revolves around an embittered war journalist who discovers a high-level global conspiracy to install a mystical leader intended to straddle all Abrahamic religions and unite the world under one God. (Melchizedek is a peculiarly enigmatic figure, mentioned three times in the bible as being superior to Abraham, the progenitor of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. His myth has been appropriated by mainstream religions, cults, fraudsters, from the second century to now.) The conspiracy involves expanding the existing Melchizedek myth within the spheres of history, modern media and academia.

First, it involved a mammoth task of research across a variety of disciplines - theology, history, viral marketing in New York, subliminal advertising, the life and philosophy of Indian philosopher Krishnamurti, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, the

spiritism of both Australia's second Prime Minister Alfred Deakin and Canadian wartime Prime Minister William Lyons Mackenzie King, British architecture in northern India at the turn of the century, the streetscapes of Shimla, the former summer capital of India, the dye used in the Hindu festival of *Holi Holi*, the emotional devastation of war correspondents, the hellish effects of cluster bombs, the day-to-day activities of a particular street in a suburb of East Berlin, the local bylaws of a suburb in the country town of Bendigo in Victoria, the sound of a particular Indian military helicopter as it lands and the ignition point of dry onion skins.[1]

As expressed by Malaquais, writing is one way of working out what we think. It helps tease out the various contradictions inherent within any debate. Two parallel debates currently engaging our society are the God debate, with aggressive atheistic polemical texts including Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* entering the bestseller lists; and the debate over religious freedom and an elusive but much-touted religious 'tolerance'. To join this debate and demonstrate the constructed nature of religion and historical myths as part of an exploration of paranoia, I wanted to play with history, show how easily it could be reconstructed - i.e., tinkering with existing myths and adding them to historical documents. Research showed that Alfred Deakin was a spiritualist conducting séances with various long-dead muses. His personal diaries, which list his spiritual muses, are held at the National Archives in Canberra. I visited the Archives, spent hours in the official reading room, held his hand-written diaries in my hand, inhaled their dust, laboured over his near-illegible spidery script and then talked to the National Manuscript Librarian about the security and protocol protecting these pieces of Australian history. He walked me around the labyrinthine back rooms, explaining the sophisticated storage system in general and, more specifically, the recent history of those diaries in the library archives. We watched patrons in the reading room working unmonitored and undisturbed, studying and taking notes on similar historical documents. Together, we worked out how within the existing library system those diaries *could* be fraudulently doctored, which formed the basis of a chapter of the finished novel.

While Deakin's political life has been well documented, his spiritism has not. The Manuscript Librarian said I was only the second person to ask to see his personal diaries. The first was Ballarat academic, Al Gabay, whose area of interest is spiritualism in Australia in the early 1900s. Apart from Gabay, only Deakin's family and this Manuscript Librarian, who had a personal fascination for the former Prime Minister, knew the contents of the diaries. I corresponded with Dr Gabay and it transpired that much as he would love to decipher the near-illegible handwriting and publish them he didn't have time, but enthused by my interest he wondered aloud about the possibility of one of his postgraduate students pursuing such an endeavour. This provided a path for my fictitious characters to embed something into Deakin's diary ready for a doctoral student to come along and discover it, sending the 'updated' myth of Melchizedek out into the world. This is contextual research, building the walls within which the fictitious world can function. Those walls need to be as rigorously constructed as any scientific or theoretical framework.

When, because of distance, it wasn't possible to conduct first-hand research, the worldwide web provided a window on subcultures and undercurrents in countries on the other side of the world. This provided a different - and surprisingly detailed - perspective from traditional forms of research.

One example is where the narrative required two precocious teenage boys, guilty of cyber-fraud, to be taken to a private place to spend their days hacking

into the world's computers. This was based on the true story of two German boys who unleashed the Sasser Worm virus into cyberspace in April 2004, then disappeared from public sight. Where would that fictitious office be? What would it look like, smell like, sound like?

The web revealed life in modern Berlin since the wall had come down, the sociography and architecture of its suburbs, including the edgy/arty low-rent suburb of Friedrichshain, east of the city centre. After extensive research on news sites, tourist sites, travel blogs, personal blogs, graffiti sites, a local photo competition and church newsletters, I was able to place those boys sitting in a particular window of an existing apartment building in Friedrichshain. I knew what graffiti they would see on the opposite wall, and that if they looked east out of the window they would see people walking from the train station to the twice-daily Alcoholic Anonymous meetings held at the nearby church. Visitors could park their cars on just one side of the street but being boys of that age, they would ride bikes, which they would store in the downstairs stone-flagged foyer. I knew their hairstyles, brands of tee shirt, favourite rock bands, bars and so on.

To write that scene of just a few hundred words I learned about modern Berlin and its urban youth culture in general and, in detail, the public habits of people living or interacting in one particular street during weekday business hours. This is vital to create nuance, mood and understanding of the broadest kind, which must be in place before anything fictitious can be created. This is the factual framework for creativity to flourish, and its constructed walls should be as sturdy as the walls of so-called reality - be it society, history or 'truth' - which are equally constructed but perhaps less questioned. Those walls must be built with scientific - or mathematical - precision. Such wideranging web research also gives a modern cyber-age perspective to Ernest Hemingway's iceberg theory. As he wrote in *Death in the Afternoon*:

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (Hemingway 1932: 197)

The similarities to research of a scholarly nature are obvious. The starting point for any academic work is to read deeply on and around the topic. The iceberg theory is true for any type of writing (although perhaps for academic writing more than one eighth is on show).

But to address the challenges of characterisation and plot, authors need more than a factual understanding. Knowledge is merely the starting point, the foundation installed before imagination, insight and creativity can inspire a leap of wisdom. Creative practice, certainly the writing of narrative fiction, often requires abstract contemplation. This is perhaps one of its greatest, albeit least recognised, strengths. It calls for a different, less quantifiable, method of learning, a broad conceptualisation. Rather than being detail-specific, it can cross disciplines and is, by nature, wideranging. Lateral. But that is not to say it lacks depth. On the contrary, often it requires a depth of understanding that moves beyond the intellectual. It creates the space for a scientist, philosopher, inventor, artist or fiction writer to make those leaps of wisdom that facilitate originality, creation, discovery and invention.

Writing *The Mythologisation of Melchizedek* required numerous leaps of wisdom. The character of mystical, guru-like Michael is based on Indian

philosopher Krishnamurti, who led an extraordinary life (1895-1986) being groomed for the role of world leader by the early Theosophists. When Krishnamurti came of age he refused the mantle, divested himself of his following and spent the rest of his life conducting dialogues of his own realisations on the nature of reality, which were renowned for their sublime clarity. His style was to lead his audience along a flowing, logical, often startling discourse. How could the vastness of his ideas be expressed within the world of the novel?

Some of his pithier quotes made their way into a character's mouth. For example:

> When you call yourself an Indian or a Muslim or a Christian or a European, or anything else, you are being violent. Do you see why it is violent? Because you are separating yourself from the rest of mankind. When you separate yourself by belief, by nationality, by tradition, it breeds violence. So a man who is seeking to understand violence does not belong to any country, to any religion, to any political party or partial system; he is concerned with the total understanding of mankind. (Krishnamurti 1983: 51-52)

> "Nationalities divide us. Religions divide us," pronounced Michael in a quiet, but authoritative voice. "We want to feel that we belong or that we are special or important, and that makes us divide into groups. And that, my friends, is where the violence begins. As soon as you draw a border around a group of individuals, in any name, it starts. You're saying we belong and you don't. Nationalities, religions, ideologies. They all share the same basic violent structure. Separating men by belief or nationality or tradition, creates conflict." (Avieson, unpublished: Chapter 21)

But quoting directly wasn't enough. Good writing requires more than exposition. To create a character with subtleties and depth, Krishnamurti's philosophies needed to come alive in the person of Michael.

After being immersed in Krishnamurti's dialogues, I left them alone to percolate somewhere in that quiet space where words don't penetrate. A few days later I found myself wondering why pity was undesirable. What was the mechanism in our reaction to someone's plight that moved it away from being instinctive and compassionate, to superior and patronising? *Pity? Compassion?* What had they to do with anything? While I can't point to a page in any of Krishnamurti's books that directly discusses pity, that line of thought was undoubtedly inspired by his dialogues.

Those musings became the events of Chapter 2, where Michael *experiences* poverty in a way that (hopefully) demonstrates the difference between compassion and pity. The learning and understanding happened somewhere in my subconscious and, as a result, that challenge of characterisation was met. In terms of communicating a philosophical difference between pity and compassion, a fictitious scene could be equally as powerful as mounting a theoretical argument. Two complementary ways of presenting different aspects of the same face. It is why Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989) could so sharply and skilfully illuminate paranoid thinking.

The processes involved in creative practice also illustrated one of the challenges of trying to fit creative practice into a scholarly framework, where

sources must be credited. While the scene is undoubtedly inspired by the influence of Krishnamurti's ideas, what reference or footnote could be added? How do you reference ideas? Or, more specifically, how do you reference the fuel for ideas? Paul Dawson understands this quandary:

> The problem here, of course, is that research is not presented in the same way as scientific discoveries, or even the scholarly literary review. It is not verifiable by reference to sources because the material is put to fictive rather than scholarly ends. It is not an appeal to fact, but a selective aesthetic deployment of fact. (Dawson 1999)

In an article in *TEXT*, Webb and Brien recognize the value of the highly specialised skills involved in creative practice:

> The work of producing a novel, body of poems, creative nonfiction essay or script, drives writers to find things out, and to explore issues related to practice, poetics or the tradition of their form. While not necessarily conducted in the systematic manner associated with "academic research", this work has contributed enormously to the production, building and development of knowledge about human beings, human society and the world we inhabit. (Webb & Brien 2006)

Writing a novel begins as an open-ended task, perhaps with a melange of half-formed ideas that may or may not be related. Part of the process of creating a world, true to its own rules and operating within its own walls, is to continually ask of the characters - and the plot - the question 'what if?' It is a process of creating new problems and then solving them - using the same skills of imagination that propel a scientist or mathematician to breakthroughs in their fields. McWilliam wrote:

> While highly individual motivation for creativity defies neuro-scientific explanation, at least in the short to medium term, there is some consensus around the view that creativity works as both a way of thinking associated with intuition, inspiration, imagination, ingenuity and insight, and a novel and appropriate response to an open-ended task. (McWilliam 2007)

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2006), who coined the term 'flow' to describe that zone of focus when people are completely engaged with the task at hand, has argued that creativity is no longer a luxury for the few, but a necessity for all. This view is gaining currency as the business and media worlds grapple with the challenges of new media and it is where the skills of creative practice are presenting new opportunities. Recent works make the link between creativity and economic productivity, most notably Richard Florida's 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* (2005) and Daniel Pink's *A Whole New Mind* (2006). Pink argues that we are moving from the information age where knowledge among its workers is prized, to a conceptual age where workers with high concept attitudes are the most valued. Friedman believes that in the new convergent world a combination of passion and curiosity will provide the competitive edge. He recommends a new pedagogy, elevating imagination above other attributes. As he told The Sydney Institute in a speech in May 2007:

> imagination matters most of all. We always think of economic competition as between countries and countries or between

> companies and companies. The most important competition is between you and your imagination. Therefore the country that's going to win is the country that empowers more of its people to imagine and act on imagination. (Friedman 2007: 11)

Imagination and creativity are quite clearly neither new nor exclusive to writers and artists but facilitate originality in every field and endeavour. But with creativity becoming a sought-after 'technique' that perhaps can be isolated, investigated, encouraged, taught and learned, so as to provide a competitive edge, the status of the processes employed by creative practitioners is certainly changing. And it is in this new convergent world that creative writing and writing as a legitimate form of scholarly research are finding a new place. Regarding writing as research practice, Webb and Brien say:

> We [the writing community] already concentrate on how creative ideas can be generated and developed; we already understand the processes of thought that lead to innovation; we have a substantial toolbox of research attitudes, approaches and methods from which to draw - everything from Lacanian psychoanalysis and cognitive practice to quantitative social research to archival and textual analysis. When it comes to shaping a research identity in the current Australian economy, research that focuses on creativity and innovation is clearly where we fit, where we can contribute, and where we can demonstrate our capacity. Such projects would also allow us to develop and build disciplinary connections and networks with researchers working in cognate or, possibly, quite distinct areas: ethnography, philosophy, economics, neuroscience, education and human geography come quickly to mind, and there will be many others. (Webb & Brien 2006)

These interdisciplinary connections may be the way of the future. Some scholars from different fields are investigating the benefits of creative writing to see how it might enhance their disciplines, thereby enriching their own processes of acquiring and communicating information. Laurel Richardson sees advantages in the processes involved in writing and has embraced them in her own field of sociology:

> writing is a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic… writing is not just a mopping up exercise at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing" - a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (Richardson 1994: 516)

She sees a creative approach as a possible solution for a lack of public interest in her field, describing situations where 'our topics often are riveting and our research carefully executed, [but] our books are underread' (Richardson 1994: 517). Her solution to this problem is the re-writing of traditional papers in more imaginative ways, as she concludes that 'when research is staged as imaginative renderings, they allow the field-worker to exaggerate, swagger, entertain, make a point without tedious documentation, relive the experience, and say what might be unsayable in other circumstances' (Richardson 1994: 521).

Nearly 30 years ago Gary Zukav tried to bridge the gap between scientists and laypeople about the wonders of quantum physics in his 1979 book *The*

Dancing Wu Li Masters. He explained the difference between scientists and technicians:

> In short, scientists discover and technicians apply. However, it is no longer evident whether scientists really discover new things or whether they *create* them. Many people believe that "discovery" is actually an act of creation. If this is so, then the distinction between scientists, poets, painters and writers is not clear. In fact, it is possible that scientists, poets, painters and writers are all members of the same family of people whose gift it is by nature to take those things which we call commonplace and to *re-present* them to us in such ways that our self-imposed limitations are expanded. Those people in whom this gift is especially pronounced, we call geniuses.
>
> The fact is that most "scientists" are technicians. They are not interested in the essentially new. Their field of vision is relatively narrow; their energies are directed toward applying what is already known. Because their noses often are buried in the bark of a particular tree, it is difficult to speak meaningfully to them of forests. (Zukav 1991: 36-37)

Zukav sees the creativity that is inherent in all fields of discovery and also, like Richardson, sees creativity as a possible bridge to the more impenetrable theoretical worlds of specific experts. This dialectic of creativity and theory is neither new nor likely to be resolved, and so the argument will continue, pointing out differences and similarities as well as locating areas where they overlap or complement one another. In terms of exploring both styles of thinking and scholarship, performing analyses and extending our knowledge about them, there is much work to be done. However the argument itself has, to a degree, been sidelined as events have overtaken it. The world has changed. The challenges of our increasingly convergent globalised world, with its unpredictable pace of acceleration, means creativity has become an economic imperative and one we undervalue at our peril.

Endnotes

1. I present this list with a nod to Eco. The list is one of his favorite devices, designed to reduce all knowledge to an equal status of mere information. return to text

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of self with reference to postmodernism and Buddhist philosophy', as well as a novel, The Mythologization of Melchizedek.

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