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Making strange with bold moves - what next for student, supervisor and examiner?
Or, No Blueprint: Assessing the (creative) exegesis

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Abstract:
*In this paper I examine creative practice - the act of 'practical consciousness' that can 'take many forms' (Williams 1977; cited Pope 2005: 11) - when plied by the honours or postgraduate student writing an exegesis to accompany a creative artefact. The exegesis can be seen as a '*re…creation*' (Pope 2005: 84), a potentially disturbing, unnerving performance culminating in a something re-fashioned, re-made, or newly made, and perhaps madly different. I find students are seeking to take their work (perhaps fictocritical, fictoautobiographical, autopoetic, autoethnographic) into shapes and forms that* re…create *or make the 'next work' (Williams' term).*
I ask 'How do we encourage such work? How do we prepare students for such bold moves as readers and writers?' The focus in this paper first will be on teaching processes and curriculum design that see reading as creative, and writing as both critical and creative, in which innovation through intervention in a text and 'making strange' prompts 'practices of making, connecting and risking' (Saunders 1987, cited Pope 2005: 81). However, when the work has the mark of autopoiesis - self-creation, self-discovery - as central to the exegetical work, then as a postgraduate supervisor I ask, 'How does one supervise, read and assess such work?' This then is the second area of exploration in the paper.
For student and supervisor the writing of the exegesis is a journey as much to do with content as with subjectivities, with working with disciplinary knowledge as with self and life experience, and with presenting the known (what the student has read and absorbed) alongside the newly discovered (and perhaps riskily presented). The possibilities for the exegesis as creative practice are many. How such work is supported and received is worthy of continued discussion.

This paper is a tentative exploration of (a) ways of engaging students in melding the creative and the critical, and (b) helping them control the process and avoid pitfalls of excess in experimentation, by (c) revealing to them criteria

by which their work might be evaluated by critical reader/assessor. A consequence of the latter might be a shared understanding by examiners and supervisors of criteria implicitly and explicitly applied in examination of creative/critical exegeses. I do not intend to rehearse at length the many discussions of what is it to write hybrid/experimental/fictocritical work, as the work of Dawson, Gibbs, Ryan, Brewster, Kerr and Nettelbeck in this area are well known. However, I shall deal with this briefly because it sets the scene and leads to consideration of some of the work emerging from my own students and from those I have examined from other institutions.

Thus I can deal with what I have called the ways in which students, as they experiment, as they write, 'make strange' their topic and indeed their own ways of thinking and responding. What I see in their work is the mark of autopoiesis - the process of self-creation and self-discovery (often writ large) - particularly in the honours creative thesis, but still determinedly in evidence in some postgraduate exegeses. The point is, of course, that for student and supervisor the writing of the exegesis is a journey as much to do with content as with subjectivities, with working with disciplinary knowledge as with self and life experience, and with presenting the known (what the student has read and absorbed) alongside the newly discovered (and perhaps riskily presented).

Creative practice, that is the act of 'practical consciousness' (Williams 1977: 212), when plied by the honours or postgraduate student writing an exegesis to accompany a creative artefact, is quite likely to generate 'many forms'. The exegesis can be seen as a '*re…creation*' (Pope 2005: 84), a potentially disturbing, unnerving performance culminating in a something re-fashioned, re-made, or newly made and perhaps madly different. Students are seeking to take their work (perhaps fictocritical, fictoautobiographical, autopoetic, autoethnographic) into shapes and forms that *re…create* or make the 'next work' (Williams' term).

Indeed Pope suggests that creativity as a concept needs to be re-written and thus we can see how fictocritical/experimental work might be part of that process in practice:

> Creativity as a concept constantly demands to be reinterpreted and re-written (counter-signed, re-invented, re-visioned, remembered, … and thereby itself re…created in terms current at the time. (Pope 2005: 89)

So I consider how students have fashioned their exegetical papers; for example a fiction (to accompany a novel) in fantasy genre but one in which is embedded a complex discussion of meaning-making, symbolism, semiotics, discourse theory, critical theory and a wide-ranging incursion into cultural theory and critique. Or a meditation on self and place, imbued with discussion of literary theory, postcolonial critique and the construction of self in fiction and autobiography; or a collage of image and texts of several genres, which reveals the construction of a memoir in word and form so that the content, text and format are explicated and understood as a whole.

I do not intend to go back over ground much tilled in the pages of *TEXT* (including the special issue of 2004) that deal specifically with the nature of the exegesis. Still, there Milich and Schilo suggest that there are three models of exegesis evident in creative thesis work; the context model, the commentary model and the research question model (Milich and Schilo 2004). However, these models do not deal with those exegetical works which, in the writing discipline, take off in mad new ways as creative artefacts in their own right. These papers may in fact work, as do conventional exegeses, from a research

question, and provide contextual and theoretical commentary, at the same time as the author/researcher plays with the very text as 'creative practice' - beyond the postmodern moment, perhaps - finding ways of revealing their authority as a writer and thinker in ways which are quite challenging for the supervisor. The exegeses that I described briefly earlier do not fit neatly into standard models. Rather the potential of the fictocritical performance allows the postgraduate student the freedom to engage in what Pope describes as '*re…creation*' because as Anna Gibbs notes:

> Fictocriticism is a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the courses of engagement with what is researched. (Gibbs 2005)

If there is a challenge for the supervisor then there is surely a challenge for the examiner. And as a supervisor I worry that an examiner might have expectations of the exegesis, which is more conventional or at least as conventional as the Milich and Schilo models still seem to be. So there is a case for further discussion of criteria by which exegeses might be examined, and certainly for the development of a shared understanding by examiners and supervisors of how to read such work.

As a step towards this I aim to link several different ways of thinking about writing and research, and draw on the criteria applied by scholars outside the field of literary studies or creative writing for ways of evaluating the new and surprising in student work. Again, I do not intend to track back over the many discussions and debates about assessing the creative exegesis, which have graced the pages of *TEXT* in particular (eg, Kroll, Brophy, Krauth, Dibble and Van Loon).

I am interested in the process of developing in students the skills of writing to link the creative and the critical, and to take risks with their text, so that their understanding of theory can be revealed alongside their creative work. The undergraduate and honours program in Writing (Professional and Creative Communication) at the University of South Australia (UniSA) has evolved to enable students gradually to build their capacity for creative work as 'practical consciousness' and of 'tekhne' at work; thus the linking of the craft and art of writing with the capacity for making something of ideas and issues in order to produce a coherent and meaningful text.

We think of this rhetorical and scholarly process as truly as the 'arts of discourse' and as a creative process for the everyday. In a recent paper, Christine Owen makes a similar point as she acknowledges the creative and critical aspects of academic and creative writing, when she notes that 'For many students, writers and academics, there is no inherent conflict between being a good academic researcher capable of writing research papers, and a good writer producing a range of creative works' (Owen 2006).

By the time they reach honours and then postgraduate study at UniSA, students have been on a trajectory that encourages both the conventional in academic writing but also the explosively different. The stepping stones include: rhetorical and stylistic awareness and analysis; being the ethnographer of situation (participant observation in real contexts; but also being the ethnographer of texts; reflecting on one's own process as a writer and reader; playing with texts through 'textual intervention' (Pope 1995) as a means of reading into and writing out of texts, in order to critique and also to create something new; the close observation of the texts of others (unpacking style); reading the practitioners of the observer's art turned to fiction/nonfiction (eg,

Dickens, Orwell, Didion); playing around with critical approaches but performing this via presentations that mix media - visuals, voice, print - in a poster presentation; discovering ways of arguing that depend not solely on the conventions of academic discourse, or at least which subvert or dislodge them. So, for example, they might observe how researchers such as Cushman (1996) and Lather (1996) have written research for professional and public audiences. Here is Cushman describing her approach to an academic article published in *College Composition and Communication*:

> This paper is a multivoiced, self reflexive look at our roles as rhetoricians. I hope to turn our work as scholars inside out, upside down, back upon itself. … to capture the range of reactions I've had to the theories and practices of critical pedagogues and cultural studies theorists. (Cushman 1996: 8)

She continues that the text she produces should be seen as a hall of mirrors in which she notes, 'I use narrative voice to tell the story of possibility' and 'The footnotes with various markers are the next set of mirrors and reveal more background for my argument'.

The footnotes, endnotes and appendices continue this subversion of academic conventions. The footnotes themselves contain her 'self-critical voice' in which she critiques academic discourse. She uses numbered endnotes to expound on the ideas of 'useful theorists' and to use her 'academic voice' so that she can 'work within the system'. Finally Cushman uses appendices 'to point to trends', and also to pen asides which she describes as 'written out of anger' and in 'personal voice'. This voice is 'the best translation of my street-tough, face-breaking, fight-licking voice …' (Cushman 1996).

Lather's text, an article in *Harvard Educational Review*, explains how she constructed a research report as a book with a very specific research aim: 'The form of the book cancels the distance between subject and object, reader and writer and written about' (Kumar 1987, in Lather 1996: 533). She continues:

> *Troubling Angels* is a hypertextual pastiche that is a 'warping of comfort texts' aimed at opening up possibilities for displaying complexities. A reader must move across the varied registers of the text's ebbs and flows of different subject positions, as well as shifts among meditations, facts, personal reminiscences, reporting, quotations, and epiphanies that cannot be frozen 'but must constantly be recaptured, re-earned'. (Kumar 1987 cited in Lather 1996: 533)

Armed with a reading of such academic papers, writing students begin to take immensely playful approaches to their texts: mixing media, blurring genres, juggling formats, intervening at word and sentence level, inventing neologisms to capture something to bridge the critical/creative divide and stretching the possibilities of citation through vigorous use of conventional scholarly apparatus - footnotes, endnotes, annotation and so on. Curbing excess is something a supervisor has to do even when this exercise in poeisis seems to touch on sensitive personal nerves and emerging scholarly identity.

It is not sufficient to produce a text which plays around for the sake of playing around - and we know that some students are only too pleased to do this. They need to move beyond the mad moment as a writer and think ahead to the reader and indeed the examiner.

For the PhD student the vital point - the creative artefact notwithstanding - is that the text of the exegesis must read well as a whole. In Peter Elbow's words,

the text needs to be organised in such a way that it 'binds time':

> So the key question for writers is this: where does the energy come from that binds written words together so as to pull us along from one part to the next and to make us feel that all the parts are held together into a magnetic or centripetal whole. (Elbow 2006: 625)

'Whole texts need larger global pieces of energy', he says:

> It's not enough if paragraphs or sections hold together and pull us through from one to another; we also need a sense of the whole as whole … This energy comes from the same forces that hold music together: sequences of expectation and eventual satisfaction - larger melodic or harmonic rhythms or examples of what I am calling the music of form. (Elbow 2006: 627)

Calling for what he terms 'dynamic writing', Elbow suggests five organisational features that depend on time - narrative; dynamic outlines; perplexity - the puzzle that prompts the writing; language that enacts thinking (thinking in progress) rather than language that records past thinking; and voice. In brief these features are:

> Narrative
> Dynamic outlines - the stepping-stones of sentences
> Perplexity - the story of thinking - or the itch that starts the process
> Words that record and words that enact
> Voice - the illusion of audibility, the implied persona. (Elbow 2006: 645)

As an examiner of creative works including the exegesis, and as a supervisor, I find it useful to consider Elbow's discussion of these five features; effectively criteria for evaluating 'dynamic writing'. However I also wish to throw into the melting pot several other ways of thinking about the creative exegesis, and particularly the exegesis as fictocritical performance.

First, I take the criteria implied in an assessor's report of an honours student's thesis written as an exercise in fictocriticism. Juliet's aims for the thesis included:

> … acquiring and developing the skills to write … across a broad range of fields [and] … understanding myself as a writer of both academic and of personal/ creative writing. (Giles 2005: 1)

She combined chapters for a creative fiction - an exercise in 'chicklit' - into which she integrated discussion of issues of theory with poetry, and she included a final self-reflective and critically reflective essay on her process and progress.

She seemed, in fact, to fulfil the criteria implied in Paul Dawson's definition of fictocriticism:

> Writing identified as fictocritical tends to shift between fragmentary modes of experimentation, from essayistic to poetic to theoretical, employing autobiographical elements and story-telling techniques, and is often supported by the scholarly

> apparatus of quotation, referencing, and footnoting. (Dawson 2005: 167)

Her work can also be read as a demonstration of the writing of the self as Gibb's describes such fictocritical writing:

> This is a way of writing suited to speculative thinking, and to modes or research in which the researcher is implicated in what is investigated.
> It is a risky approach which must be offset by a commitment to attention, openness, and reflexivity about question of the politics of *poesis* on the part of the writer. (Gibbs 2005)

How might such a thesis be reviewed or examined? A reading of the examiner's report suggests the implicit criteria considered in the assessment:

- creative writing
- exploration of theoretical territories and critical analysis of these
- integration of the creative and the critical/theoretical into a coherent
- hybrid text
- effective argument sustained throughout the hybrid text
- intellectual risk
- self-reflexive exploration of progress and process.

Let's hold both Elbow's and the examiner's criteria for a while to explore another relevant territory.

UniSA undergraduates in the writing program are introduced early on to the notion of ethnography, in particular to understanding themselves as writers/researchers who are the ethnographers of their own situation. It provides a way of introducing them to qualitative research and to the issues involved in research writing. As honours and postgraduate students they encounter this in greater depth as they pursue qualitative research and/or creative writing projects, often blending the two as they work perhaps on auto/biography, oral histories or other non-fiction projects, or organizational or communication research.

Their role as researchers and writers, as self-reflexive text and knowledge maker, is central to how they construct their thesis/creative artefact/research report/exegesis. So we introduce them to the debates about representation (the so-called crisis of representation) in the social sciences and particularly anthropological and ethnographic research, beginning in the 1980s but still very much alive in the research literature today.

One such example is from Laurel Richardson, a champion of the significance of the personal, the reflexive and the experimental in writing social science research (1994 and 2005). In the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994) she proclaims:

> … 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: 561)

She writes of 'experimental representations' as an 'emergent and transgressive phenomenon', with the accompanying problems of subjectivity/authority/authorship/reflexivity and representational form (1994: 520). The Cushman and Lather articles are just two of many examples from that period of debate and experimentation in the representation of research findings. We in the writing discipline would not find this surprising. However, what has happened in the social sciences over the past twenty years, I suggest, has something to say to us as we stake a claim for the creative thesis and its accompanying exegesis as research.

Here is Richardson again in the 2005 edition of the *Handbook*, now writing of ways of reading what she terms Creative Analytic Ethnography:

> Any dinosaurian beliefs that 'creative' and 'analytical' are contradictory and incompatible modes are standing in the path of a meteor: they are doomed for extinction.
> Witness the evolution, proliferation, and diversity of new ethnographic 'species' - autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama, reader's theater, writing stories, aphorisms, layered texts, conversations, epistles, polyvocal texts, comedy, satire, allegory, visual texts, hypertexts, museum displays, choreographed findings, and performance pieces …
> (Richardson 2005: 962)

She suggests the following criteria, drawn from the perspectives of science and the creative arts, for reviewing such research writing, noting that 'mere novelty does not suffice'. An article or report of research should demonstrate the following (see Richardson and St Pierre, 2005: 964, my gloss in brackets):

> 1. *Substantive contribution* (including here credibility of the account and its contribution as a piece of social scientific research)
> 2. *Aesthetic merit* (the shape of the piece, its success as a creative artefact, its capacity to prompt analytic and interpretive response)
> 3. *Reflexivity* (the author as self-aware producer of the text and responsible researcher/writer)
> 4. *Impact* (the impact on the reader in suggesting new directions for thought or research)

The element that (inevitably) emerges strongly in almost all of the fictocritical exegetical work I supervise and have examined is the autobiographical/autoethnographic. This is something beyond the self-reflexivity of the researcher/scholar/writer, which is of course a key element in social science research practice and writing (as Richardson's comments and the third criterion suggest). Willard-Traub summarises this rhetorical move:

> Over the last decade the academy has witnessed a proliferation of autobiographically inflected scholarship across diverse disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences but also in the natural sciences. Increasingly, infields ranging from English studies to anthropology to law to medicine, approaches to writing that incorporate autobiography and personal narrative are being used by scholars not simply as a means for

> mediating on lived experience, but also as methods of scholarly analysis and argumentation. (Willard-Traub 2006: 424)

As she notes, such texts are 'helping to reshape the relationship between scholars and their readers' and 'helping to reshape the purposes of scholarly writing more broadly'. We might add that this implies that reviewers of scholarly accounts need to establish, as Richardson suggests, appropriate criteria for reading such work.

If further evidence of such reshaping is needed, I turn to a recent volume of the journal *Reflective Practice*. This journal is an example of the reflexive and experimental turn in social science research and is devoted, according to the journal's brief, to 'recent initiatives; reports of works in progress, proposals for collaborative research, theoretical positions; knowledge reported in poetic, diagrammatic and narrative form, illuminated by line drawings and photography; provocative problem and question posing thought pieces; reflective dialogues; creative reflective conversations'. It is of interest then to see how the editor describes the qualities he looks for in reflective writing.

The editor, Tony Ghaye, interprets and elaborates on what are described as seven da Vincian principles. (He has adapted these from Michael Gelb's 1998 book, *How to think like Leonardo da Vinci*.)

- Curiosità - an 'insatiably curious approach'
- Dimonstrazione - assertions, ideas, beliefs - tested
- Sensazione - telling the story/account creatively; engaging the reader
- Sfumato - embracing paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty
- Arte/Scienza - producing the balanced paper
- Corporalita - placing the self on the page with grace and poise
- Connessione - tying everything together (Gelb 1998: 3; Ghaye 2006: 1-7)

This offers food for thought for supervisors and examiners, particularly when students 'push the formal possibilities of academic prose to the extreme' as Paul Magee (Magee 2006) says, citing as examples authors such as Certeau, Deleuze, Derrida, Adorno, Barthes and Blanchot. To which we might add critic Walter Benjamin and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.

If we return then to what happens when students engage in fictocritical and/or other related experimental writing as part of their thesis or exegesis, we must conclude that it is an evolving form and that it behoves us to be prepared to accept the shock of the new and to recognise it for what is on offer. Barbara Bolt notes we need to recognise that:

> In the "work" of art, we do not consciously seek the "new" but rather are open to what emerges in the interaction with the materials of practice. (Bolt 2004)

She explains:

> By definition the 'new' cannot be pre-conceived. In the face of the seemingly limitless possibilities, practice cannot know or preconceive its outcome. Rather, the new emerges through process as a shudder of an idea, which is then realized in and through language. This languaging is the task of the exegesis. (Bolt 2004)

Tellingly she offers a way of considering work, which is very much about *re… creation*:

> The task of the exegesis to produce movement in thought itself. Such movement cannot be gained through contemplative knowledge, but rather must take the form of concrete understanding. This concrete understanding, as I have shown, arises in our dealings with ideas, tools and materials of practice. It is those shocks that constitute the shock of the new. This constitutes the possibility of creative arts research. (Bolt 2004)

Writing students draw on their lived experience as they engage in mimetic activity and in their writing of qualitative research. The exegesis is of course a 'cultural production' inscribed by identity, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, life experience; all those things, which mixed with their ruminations on theory and theorists become the matter with which they as writers play, giving form to the 'practical consciousness' - the creative practice of which Williams spoke or as *re…creation*. They take the opportunity to 'personalise the theory and make it over in their own voice', as Ann Brewster says (Brewster 1996: 31).

How then do we read and assess such work, which is marked as much by autopoesis as it is by the trappings of scholarship? A shared understanding of criteria, often implicitly understood and applied, would seem to be useful. To conclude this excursion into different criteria for reviewing research writing, and as a way toward assessing fictocritical or experimental writing in the creative exegesis I have attempted to chart the criteria suggested by these authors out of the disciplines of social science, literary studies and writing.

Criteria for analysing the fictocritical exegesis

Ghaye/Gelb	Richardson	Examiners' criteria	Elbow
Curiosita	Substantive contribution	Intellectual risk	Perplexity
Dimonstrazione		Effective argument sustained throughout	
Sensazione	Aesthetic merit	Creative writing	Narrative
Sfumato	Impact		Dynamic outlines
Arte/Scienza		Integration of creative/ theoretical/ critical	Words that enact present thinking
Corporalita	Reflexivity	Self-reflexivity on process and product	Voice
Connessione		Exploration-theoretical issues and critical analysis	

This is an admittedly imperfect charting of complex concepts and ways of thinking of research texts as creative and creative texts as research. However, drawing on the criteria offered by different disciplines might enable us to explore our practices as supervisors and examiners in new ways.

I shall leave the discussion here with two quotes, which seem to me to speak to the heart of the matter:

> A gold mine is worth nothing unless the owner has the machinery for extracting ore, and each subject must be considered first in itself and next in relation to the novelist's [researcher's] power of extracting from it what it contains. (Edith Wharton cited in Hodgins1993: 23)

And from Annie Dillard:

> We judge a work on its integrity. Often we examine a work's integrity … by asking what it makes for itself and what it attempts to borrow from the world.
> An honest work generates its own power. (Dillard 1982: 56)

Readers, supervisors and examiners need to have some way of indicating what makes a piece of writing powerful and effective within the discipline of writing. Thus it seems to be worth undertaking a close examination of how scholars in a range of disciplines, now engaged in writing differently, read and evaluate the research writing in their fields.

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