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***'Precisely this fragment of the past ... precisely this present':
An interventionist pathway towards the theorised exegesis***

Abstract

Current debates about the exegesis component of Higher Research Degrees in creative writing tend to rely on binaries that pit creative against critical, professional against academic, and even writing against reading. This paper proposes that the theorised exegesis can act as a means of reconciling these binaries, by demonstrating how fundamental the concept of intervention is both in developing a pedagogy aimed at a transmission of culture that is meaningful to students, and in understanding and demystifying our notions of creativity such that it becomes a more accessible and 'demotic' process. Walter Benjamin believed that meaningful practice in the arts and the academy derived from the ability to position 'precisely this fragment of the past ... with regard to precisely this present'. The key to his project to 'brush history against the grain' - such that the 'contemporary' reader 'acquires a high opinion of his [sic] own powers' - is a 'materialist pedagogy' which will "'shake off" those cultural treasures that are "piled up on humanity's back" - "so as to get its hands on them"' (Buck-Morss 1989). This 'hands on' method is the informing principle behind Rob Pope's concept of textual intervention (1995), which requires that students be able to 'read' (critically interpret) the existing 'texts' of our culture in order to 'write' (create). Intervention is thus central to any program which promotes agency - at the personal and public levels - as a means towards innovation and change.

Contributions to the ongoing debate about the form taken by the exegesis component of the creative thesis within Research Higher Degrees - exemplified in the articles making up *TEXT Special Issue* No 3 devoted to that topic [note 1] - have tended to be premised on a set of 'either/or' fallacies. Around a core tenet positing a binary opposition between 'research' and 'professional practice' (Fletcher and Mann 2004), [note 2] scholarship is pitted against creativity, the academy against the public domain, theory against practice. The purpose of this

paper, however, is to weave together certain ideas and concepts into a coherent theoretical platform on which to base a pedagogy of exegesis writing, while at the same time revealing binaries such as these to be false dilemmas. Therefore, far from treating theory as a kind of red herring imposed on creative writing RHD students who find themselves supervised by 'academics with English Literature or Cultural Studies backgrounds' but who lack 'a publishing history as creative writers' (Bourke and Neilsen 2004), this discussion aims to promote the synthesising potential of the critical theory already to hand to supervisors such as myself who fit this definition.

In particular, it takes issue with the assertion that when creative writing students deploy the critical devices of cultural studies or literary theory, 'What is always lost in this treatment of their own work as object is the *writing*, what replaces writing is the act of *reading*' (Bourke and Neilsen 2004; original emphasis). This too is a somewhat fatuous dichotomy; as though reflection on practice either so objectifies the artefact into product that all signs of process dissipate, or that self-analysis necessarily 'collapses into narcissism and endless auto-reflexivity', characteristics all too prevalent in the personal journals writing students are also often compelled to maintain by their supervisors (Bourke and Neilsen 2004). On the contrary, the strategic application of theory, particularly in its explication of the notions and creativity and praxis, can turn the exegesis from the sort of navel-gazing exercise described above into a considered reflection by students (and their supervisors) on the social, historical and cultural circumstances of the writing process, and of the place and role of the writer within those contexts.

The supervisor with a background in literary or cultural studies can unfold vast stretches of daunting critical territory to the student of writing, which invariably involves finding a version of Bourke and Neilsen's 'best fit' from among this critical repertoire to the research in hand (2004) [note 3]. Even so, both supervisor and student could be forgiven for feeling like the tourist who, stopping to ask a local for directions, is met with, 'Well, if I was you, I wouldn't try to get there from here.' Fortunately there is one set of theoretical markers by which a meaningful pathway from 'here' to 'there' might be plotted for the writing student. It is guided, if not exactly predetermined, by the concept of creation as intervention; that is, that the process of arriving 'there' - somewhere and with something new, interesting or unusual - starts with where we are and what we have 'here'. The guides themselves are also knowledgeable, trustworthy and well established: people such as George Orwell, Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin and Rob Pope, whose ideas not only help to negotiate the trail, but also hold out the promise of discovery and transformation, both for writers and for the world in which they write.

Even so, as with most important journeys whether metaphorical or actual, this one involves negotiating some tricky passages. Almost immediately a significant contradiction threatens to throw the writer-researcher off track. Contradictions are themselves the stuff of creativity, of course, forming as they do the building blocks of that branch of dialectics where thesis and antithesis give rise to synthesis. So perhaps it isn't surprising to find that contradictory attitudes to creativity are raised and worked through in the writings of two scions of left-wing ideology, George Orwell and Raymond Williams.

In 1944 Orwell took GK Chesterton to task for asserting that 'There are no new ideas':

the claim that 'there is nothing new under the sun' is one of the stock arguments of intelligent reactionaries. Catholic apologists, in particular, use it almost automatically. Everything

that you can say or think has been said and thought before.
 Every political theory from Liberalism to Trotskyism can be
 shown to be a development of some heresy in the early Church.
 (Orwell 1970: 120-21)

But, says Orwell, 'there *are* new ideas', notably in connection with the kind of revolutionary and emancipatory politics aiming at 'a world of free and equal human beings' (1970: 121). However, a little more intellectual wrestling sees Orwell concede that Marx's dictum, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also', has its origins in Christ's teachings in the Gospel. The newness comes with Marx's inference 'that laws, religions and moral codes are all a superstructure built over existing property relations' (Orwell 1970: 121). It took a Marx to give 'force' to Christ's implied message, leading Orwell to conclude that 'Ideas may not change, but emphasis shifts constantly' (1970: 121); the writer-researcher, in turn, is left to infer that within the old is the germ of the new, and that the new contains the kernel of the old.

Williams' entry under 'Creative' in his classic *Keywords* (originally published 1976) distinguishes between pre- and post-Renaissance humanist uses of 'create': the earlier refers to the divine act of creation such that, according to Augustine, *creatura non potest creare* ('the creature cannot itself create'); the later confers a creative imagination upon the human subject, typically the poet (Williams 1981: 82). Williams goes on to decry the descent of the term from its 'high and serious claim' (1981: 84) associated with 'originality and innovation' (1981: 83), to 'a cant word'

so conventional ... that it is applied to practices for which ...
 nobody would think of making such claims. Thus any imitative
 or stereotyped literary work can be called, by convention,
 creative writing, and advertising copywriters officially describe
 themselves as creative. (Williams 1981: 84; original emphasis)

Williams' cautionary words are enough to give pause to anyone working in the field of creative writing, and perhaps even to raise a few hackles as well.

Rob Pope, in his recent and comprehensive treatment of the subject, defends Williams' definition as 'an illuminating exception to the chronicle of avoidance and vilification to which [creativity] has been subjected in theoretical circles', and notes his interest in 'what it could potentially mean' (Pope 2005: 11). This notion of creativity's potential arises out of 'Williams' commitment to a radically open and ongoing (re)construction of an explicitly creative consciousness' (2005: 11), which is most comprehensively explored in his *Marxism and Literature* (1977) with the term 'creative practice':

a grappling deep within the self and within one's relations with
 others: an attempt to wrest from the complexities and
 contradictions we have internalised (he uses Gramsci's term
 'hegemony') something that helps us live to better purpose.
 (Pope 2005: 11)

Orwell had linked new ideas - or, more accurately, new ways of looking at earlier ideas - to new and potentially liberating social formations: 'The idea that an advanced civilization need not rest on slavery is a relatively new idea, for instance' (1970: 121). In turn, Williams' visionary notion of creative practice - with 'its emphasis on human capacity' in all its 'magnitude and complexity' (Williams 1981: 83-84) - launches it beyond the solipsistic inner-world of the artist-as-creator to some point further than we already know:

For creativity and social self-creation are both known and unknown events, and it is still from grasping the known that the unknown - the next step, the next work - is conceived. (cited Pope 2005: 11)

Williams posits a utopian social and self-refashioning function for creativity, where the new and unknown arises out of our existing artefacts, beliefs and customs.

Another Marxist thinker, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, called the known 'history', and advocated the dissolution of the artist, intellectual and technician into the person of the 'historical materialist':

The contemporary who, in reading a work of history, recognizes with what a long hand the misery that befalls him [her] has been in preparation - and showing this must lie close to the historian's heart - thereby acquires a high opinion of his [her] own powers. A history that teaches people in this manner does not make them melancholy, but provides them with weapons. (Notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, cited Buck-Morss 1991: 287; editor's interpolations)

Having acquired these weapons, and remaining 'in control of his [sic] powers', the historical materialist becomes 'man enough to blast open the continuum of history' ('Thesis on the Philosophy of History XVI', Benjamin 1999: 254).

However, the historical materialist needs an intellectual context in which to operate this newfound arsenal. Again, just as Orwell conceded that 'newness' manifested itself in social formations arising out of philosophical re-orientations of earlier thought, so Julian Roberts, in surveying the intellectual background of Benjamin's work, picks up on the same contradiction:

The dictum that "there's nothing new under the sun" is obviously false if applied to the organisational and technological development of human labour. It is, however, true of philosophy, or rather of systematic philosophies, the grand theologies of self-consciousness. (1982: 77)

Benjamin was aware that in order to further the aims of a truly revolutionary politics, it would be necessary to borrow from 'the theoretical resources which only seemed available in the storerooms of the bourgeoisie' (Roberts 1982: 76). The dilemma was how to do so without getting caught up in the melancholy cycle 'of the conservative way culture is transmitted' (Buck-Morss 1991: 289), where:

Culture appears reified. Its history then becomes nothing but the residue of memorabilia that have been unearthed without ever entering into human consciousness through any authentic, that is, political experience. (cited Buck-Morss 1991: 289)

For Benjamin, the basis for this political experience lay in a 'materialist education' with 'access to praxis', providing 'the strength to "shake off" those cultural treasures that are "piled up on humanity's back" - "so as to get its hands on them"' (cited Buck-Morss 1991: 289).

Historical materialism demands a cautious attitude to the artefacts of the past (which Benjamin usually terms 'documents') and offers a *modus operandi* for dealing with them. In a famous excerpt from the seventh of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', he warns:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. (Benjamin 1999: 248)

For example, under a Western education system Shakespeare's work is passed on from generation to generation as an important cultural artefact. There is usually little awareness by either those transmitting or those receiving this artefact of the role it plays in their own lives or in society as a whole, other than a vague sense that it is somehow 'great' and that exposure to it is 'good for you'. The historical materialist is aware of the extent to which Shakespeare has been used for oppressive purposes as well as the usual salubrious ones espoused by conventional humanism: as nationalistic propaganda, for snob value, for commercial purposes, as a platform for imperialism, racism, sexism, and so forth.

The historical materialist, imbued with a sense of *Jetztzeit* ('nowness'), 'grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one' (Thesis XVIII 1999: 255). He/she establishes 'the tradition of new beginnings' that sees meaningful practice in the arts and the academy involve the ability to position 'precisely this fragment of the past ... with regard to precisely this present' (cited Buck-Morss 1991: 290). The act of creating/doing momentarily freezes the seemingly endless flow of time in either direction - as memory of what has gone before and as expectation of what is to come. It is the catalyst that brings the past into contact with the present and opens up fresh possibilities for the future:

The dialectical opposition between the historian's melancholic contemplations and the unceasing flux of becoming is only resolved at the flashpoint of 'now', the present moment in which the intellectual project itself becomes a deed. (Roberts 1982: 152)

The 'shaking off' advocated by Benjamin does not entail jettisoning 'documents' of the past such as Shakespeare's work altogether, rejecting it simply because it is valued within a bourgeois system for its cultural capital. It means interrupting the cycle of their mindless transmission and reception by taking the time and effort to drop such an artefact at our feet, as it were, and have a good rummage around to see what it really consists of and what makes it work. It means daring to take a measure of control by intervening in the process of transferring the artefact, and instead becoming creative with it.

However thin the philosophical repertoire available to the early Marxist critic may have been, the Leninist 'theory of political agency' provided Benjamin with the concept of interventionism, which he managed to turn into 'a brilliant analytical instrument' for deconstructing 'bourgeois cultural theory' (Roberts 1982: 99). Based on the Marxist dialectic 'that all limits in nature and in history are simultaneously determinate and mutable', Lenin's theory sought ways 'in which rational intervention could best be effected' (Roberts 1982: 93), at the same time providing a counter to laissez-faire economism on the one hand and the desperation of terrorism on the other. Economism and terrorism are both products of a 'sceptical traditionalism' that subscribes to either the inevitability of change or the futility of trying to effect it by rational means (Roberts 1982: 93). In Benjamin's quest 'to emphasise the realm of practical material intervention as the integration of theory and practice' (Roberts 1982: 157), he

adopted the term *Technik* to bracket 'both the human relations of production ("technique") and the means of production ("technology")' (Roberts 1982: 158). *Technik* thus embodies praxis, in that for Benjamin it 'covered the conditions of intellectual practice set by technology on the one hand and social organisation on the other' (1982: 156-57).

These terms - intervention and *Technik* - bring the writer-researcher closer to the particular present and to the endpoint of the journey. The former term is the basis of Rob Pope's *Textual Intervention* (1995); the latter has close affinities with the classical notion of *technê*. Intervention is Pope's hands-on strategy for interpreting existing texts, and by extension for creating new ones; he describes his work as 'a *handbook* of critical and creative practices' that 'involves criticism, creativity, the exercise of power and the activity of change' (Pope 1995: xvi, 1; original italics). Clearly it follows in a direct philosophical and ideological line of succession from the ideas of Benjamin, Orwell and Williams, not least because of its advocacy of agency over passive reception, and its interrogation of the subject positions we are placed in by the 'documents' (to use Benjamin's doubly-apt term for the writer-researcher) of the past.

In his most recent work, dealing with no less a topic than creativity itself, Pope develops the notion of intervening; or, perhaps more accurately, he expands upon the notion of inventing, such that the two are enfolded as 'in(ter)ventive', in order to:

express the fact that *inventions* (things such as the wheel, telescope or microchip, but also ideas such as democracy, scientific truth, progress) always represent *interventions* in an existing state of affairs. They introduce some change into life. (Pope 2005: 62; original italics)

He points out that invention 'had an early sense almost diametrically opposed to its currently dominant sense', that is, 'finding or discovering what already exists' rather than 'making or bringing into being what never before existed' (2005: 63). He goes on to make similar assertions about the term 'to discover', and that 'someone's "discovery of the new" may turn out to be someone else's "re-invention of the old"' (2005: 63) - a point worth emphasising to any creative writing student intent on claiming in their exegesis that they've hit upon something new in their work!

Even so, there is the sense in much thought and writing, Pope demonstrates, that 'invention' itself occupies a lower rung than 'creativity' on the hierarchy of human activity. In discussing George Steiner's *Grammars of Creation* (2001) he quotes Steiner's anecdote of French modernist painters Duchamp, Brancusi and Léger visiting an aeronautics exhibition in 1912. Duchamp is enthralled by a propeller, declaring that 'Art can no longer rival, let alone excel the *technê* of the engineer. *Invention is identified as the primary mode of creation in the modern world*' (Pope 2005: 31; original italics). This identification of invention with *technê* recalls Benjamin's *Technik*, and underlines the 'artisanal' approach to textual intervention advocated by Pope in his earlier work:

There is therefore no "mystique" or "secret" to the approach: it is one which may properly be called artisanal. That is, the approach is neither self-consciously "artistic" or "creative" ... nor one which is self-effacingly "scientific" ... Approaching texts as an "artisan", as a "crafts/wo/man", means that you treat them with respect - but also the no-nonsense directness and systematicness [sic] - that a skilled engineer or dressmaker

approaches their materials and the immediate task in hand.
(Pope 1995: 3)

While the term *technê* is often glossed as 'craft' to distinguish it from *epistêmê* (commonly translated as 'knowledge') - the term with which it is usually twinned and occasionally compared disparagingly in philosophical discussions - the two are by no means simple binary opposites. As the lengthy entry under the two terms in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003) demonstrates, even classical authors were guilty of using them interchangeably at times. This is because *technê* occupies a problematic 'middle ground' in that it is more about 'how to apply knowledge', and therefore is not only inextricably linked in a complex relationship with *epistêmê* rather than merely contradicting it; it has close affinities with the Marxist notion of praxis. It is even more significant from the point of view of the creative-critical nexus and its application to the exegesis that, according to Plato's account of Socrates' discussion of the topic, *technê* is both goal-oriented, and also assumes a capacity to 'give an account of the application of knowledge:

Fully developed, this knowledge is knowing how to accomplish a goal on the basis of an understanding of the goal; the understanding can be articulated in an account. The account informs and guides the skilled practice. (*Stanford Encyclopedia* 2003)

Here then is a notion of creative-critical practice in which both the product or outcome and the understanding or explanation of how it is or might be achieved are interdependent. Each informs the other in such a way that our ideal writer-researchers are capable of basing their exegeses on much more than the empirical experience of writing:

As Aristotle says, the master craftsman (*technitês*) is wiser than the person of experience because he knows the cause, the reasons that things are to be done. The mere artisan (*cheirotechnês*) acts without this knowledge (981a30-b5). (*Stanford Encyclopedia* 2003) [note 4]

In their own discussion of the 'artist' versus the 'artisan' - both of which have the Latin *artes* or 'skills' at their root - Peach and Burton articulate just what it is that all writing students should be aware of:

In the Romantic stereotype [i.e. the myth of the 'isolated writer'] ... there is a further myth which is unhelpful for would-be writers: that writers can work directly from their own experience and immediate sensations without reference to a cultural past or a series of conventions. Creativity is an act which involves a complex interaction between the inner world (the private, conscious, unconscious and imaginative) and the outer world (the social, cultural and historical). (Peach and Burton 1995: 15)

There are many interesting and instructive side trips the writer-researcher might be encouraged to explore, given the particular expertise of the supervisor and the scope of the exegesis. Michael Taussig for one, picking up on what Benjamin called 'the mimetic faculty', points us towards 'that silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made up' which is 'where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially created, and occasionally creative beings' (Taussig 1993: xvii). He provides a number of fascinating perspectives on how the whole of humanity uses the expressive

tools of culture - writing, painting, sculpture, and so on - 'to create second nature ... to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other' (1993: xiii). For students contemplating the relationship between their writing and its origins and sources, Taussig offers the compelling notion that:

The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power. (1993: xiii)

Benjamin himself holds out the promise of other tantalising excursions, not the least of which follows from his interrogation of the artefact and its 'aura' and 'authenticity' in modern (and still eminently applicable to postmodern) society in his influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin 1999: 211-44).

And so it might go, to paraphrase Kurt Vonnegut; but enough of the point has been made, hopefully, to show that even the rough theoretical and ideological trail marked out here can lead our RHD students towards an understanding of what they are doing as 'writers in the world', and to reflect meaningfully and comment eloquently on that role and function. Along the way, such artificial and ultimately unhelpful - for the writer-researcher - binaries as academy/'real-world', theory/practice, critical/creative, and even one as fundamental as reading/writing, are dissolved and transformed instead into the dialectics on which a more dynamic approach to creative writing research might be based. This in turn will promote ever more daring forays into the still contested and improperly charted world of the creative-critical exegesis, and will inspire us further in our efforts to understand and define our rapidly emerging discipline.

Endnotes

1. *TEXT Special Issue* No 3 (April 2004), <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss3> (accessed 26 April 2007) return to text
2. Recognising, of course, that the 'creative work plus exegesis' model, in whatever form, has itself been placed into a binary with 'creative work as always already research', in the broader debate as to whether or not RHD students 'should be required to write an exegesis in order to "validate" their Creative Writing as research' (Bourke and Neilsen 2004). return to text
3. This is admittedly a redeployment of 'best fit', which Bourke and Neilsen actually use to describe the general relationship of literary theory and cultural studies to creative writing research (2004). return to text
4. As an aside, but still pertinent in developing the academic role of our writer-researcher, 'Aristotle goes on to say that in general the sign of knowing or not knowing is being able to teach' (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2003). return to text

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