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Writing/Reading: Renegotiating criticism

Criticism, reading and writing

In discussions on creative writing pedagogy the terms 'reading' and 'criticism' are often used as if reading, writing and criticism are discrete, formal, functions. Students must read, they must 'read as writers', they are expected to learn from their reading of texts and apply this critical and analytical knowledge to their writing. In an earlier essay published in *TEXT* I have argued that the function of criticism in creative writing is what connects it to the teaching of literature because 'criticism is an acknowledged part of the creative process itself' (Freiman 2001). I pointed out that T.S. Eliot went so far as to use this observation to insist, as he endeavours to establish the place of the creative writer as a critic in the essay 'The Function of Criticism', that 'creative artists make superior critics'. Responding to Matthew Arnold's assertion that criticism is clearly distinguishable from creative art, Eliot writes:

> Matthew Arnold distinguishes far too bluntly, it seems to me, between
> the two activities: he overlooks the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself. 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. I maintain even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism… (Eliot 1932: 23)

What do we mean when we talk about criticism in relation to creative writing? In the discussions of the way criticism is applied to teaching creative writing, the precise nature of this activity of criticism has not been opened up to examination. Criticism appears to imply the application of critical skills to writing and to infer that critical discipline is learned from the reading of literature. The tools of critical reading are expected to be applied to the making of literature as well as its consumption. Criticism in these cases is 'close' reading and analysis, the tools of New Critical practice, yet as Paul Dawson points out, the assumptions of a critical practice and reading position in advice to 'read as a writer' in the creative writing workshop remains effectively hidden (Dawson 2003). Dawson also maintains that according to this approach of 'reading as a writer' there is a formal division between writing composition and reading:

> My argument is that what enables the writing workshop to function is not so much a theory of writing, but a theory of reading. How a work is composed by the student is not as important as how it can be read in terms of the critical approach of Creative Writing. (Dawson 2003)

But what is this critical approach? Reading is never free of discourse, it is never innocent: the text and its reading is always, in Edward Said's terms, 'worldly' (in, and of the world) (note 1), and as Said points out, 'criticism cannot assume its province is merely the text, not even the great literary text' (note 2). Criticism and reading are part of a wider discourse; they are as 'worldly' as the text being criticised.

Similarly, Eliot's attempt to bring together creative writing and criticism is part of a discourse that underpins the New Criticism. His 'critical labour' emphasises obvious features of literary criticism of the kind invoked in 'reading as a writer': it would incorporate a knowledge of literature (exemplary texts) and the 'very highly developed sense of fact' (Eliot 1932: 31), which I take to mean literary and other knowledge, combined with the tools of criticism gleaned from this knowledge: 'Comparison and analysis…are the chief tools of the critic' (Eliot: 32-3). But Eliot also insists - somewhat undermining his own argument that the critical process is involved in writing - that the work of art is 'autotelic' (about itself), whereas criticism is '*about* something else' (Eliot 30). Despite the strength of his argument that 'the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour' and that 'the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism', Eliot is in effect unable to overcome making the distinction between the creative and critical discourses. While asserting that there are no better critics than creative writers - who still have critical activity left over from their writing that is best used in criticism - Eliot is not really talking about creative writing, but about criticism, analytical literary criticism.

Bringing literary criticism into the creative writing workshop is problematic. For example, David Lodge points out that 'it is a peculiar feature of criticism, and especially of literary criticism, that the licence to criticize does not carry with it an obligation to explain how the fault complained of might have been avoided or how it might be repaired' (Lodge 1996: 176). Lodge says that the reason is obvious: because when you start rewriting someone else's work you 'take it away from them and make it your own' (Lodge: 176). Says Lodge, 'Even the most sophisticated literary criticism only scratches the surface of the mysterious process of creativity' (Lodge: 178).

The critical labour of writing, the sifting and composing, is not clearly articulated by Eliot, and he concludes that *reading* is applied to texts *other* than those creative texts written by the writer-critic. It doesn't apply to one's own writing, in spite of his having discussed the function of criticism in creative writing. But we need to recognise Eliot's effort here to be both critic and poet - for he did know about writing poetry - and his difficulty as he attempts to bring the creative writing process into line with criticism as a reading practice. Eliot's essay on criticism brings into focus the complex process of writing - the 'something to do with reading and making choices' that occurs when we write. If Eliot is uncomfortable with taking creative writing off its pedestal, de-privileging its status, despite his defence of criticism in writing in 'The Function of Criticism', he also wanted to bring criticism and writing together in practical terms, as inherent to 'the work of creation itself' (Eliot: 30). Within the writing of a text processes occur that include critical choices. Allowing these to function involves reading the text in process.

It is obvious that literary knowledge, the knowledge of other texts, is important to writers and student writers - it teaches the appreciation of language and form and provides examples of practice as well as pleasure (note 3). It also positions the writer in a discursive context. As one workbook advises: 'How you write… is always an expression - a consequence - of what you have learned from reading. When you write, you are involving yourself in an enormous conversation with everyone else who has done likewise' (note 4) (Friel 2000: 26). But I am not convinced that this kind of 'reading as a writer' is equivalent or even limited to critical analysis, certainly not necessarily New Critical analysis. Such reading of other texts would be informed by the writer's knowledge of any number of critical discourses. In this sense it is part of the discipline(s) of English. Yet in writing, reading occurs that is not the same as 'reading as a writer' - a backwards-and-forwards movement of construction and reconstruction; a dynamic conversation that occurs unseen and with great rapidity in a conceptual space somewhere between the remembered reading of other exemplary texts and the writing of new ones.

Writers have noted this closeness between reading and writing, rather less anxiously than Eliot's essay does. Friedrich Nietzsche points to the practice of making choices and using judgement in order to convey the idea or story in writing. In *Human, All Too Human: A book for free spirits* (Nietzsche 1878), in the section '155 Belief in Inspiration', Nietzsche argues against those Romantic flashes of genius favoured by believers in divine inspiration as a source of creativity: 'the imagination of a good artist or thinker is productive continually, of good, mediocre and bad things, but his power of judgement, sharpened and practiced to the highest degree, rejects, selects, knots together…' (Nietzsche: 83) (note 5). Eliot's 'labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing' echoes this observation, but Nietzsche's emphasis on 'the power of judgement' suggests a more rational process at work in writing. For both writers, writing involves choices, judgement and construction, elements of a critical discourse perhaps, but equally this might apply to linguistic or syntactic choices or connotative, hermeneutic and other cultural decisions based on a number of different discursive intersections operating as the 'author function' (Foucault 1969) (note 6).

Writing for Eliot and Nietzsche has an earnest intensity with its emphasis on work, which is in sharp contrast with a more playful poststructuralist approach, where writing involves the process of 'play' and learning through a series of experimental moves. In the essay 'What is an Author?' Foucault says that writing freed from the necessity of 'expression' is transformed

> …into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier. Moreover, it implies an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates. Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. Thus, the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears. (Foucault 1969: 1623)

Here writing is an open process, an active assembling of words and meanings; the shaky determination where meaning is also simultaneously endlessly deferred. This is what we do when we write and when we read. The imprecation to 'read as writers' is in fact a recognition of the relationship between reading and writing in writing practice, which the earlier distinctions

between critical discourse and writing have effectively separated. Introducing 'criticism' and its assumptions into the equation of reading and writing complicates how 'reading as a writer' is understood. This is the nexus that Eliot is trapped in when, in trying to connect creative writing with criticism, he is forced, in the end, to distinguish criticism as a discourse in its own right, and leave creative writing, as 'autoletic', *also* on its (separate) pedestal of authorial privilege. In breaking the boundaries between criticism and writing, post-structuralism allows writers to describe what they have always known - that reading and writing are intrinsically connected and inseparable.

That the writer 'reads' the text *in writing it* has a corollary in that the reader 'writes' the text as he reads it. In Roland Barthes' terms, this constitutes the *readerliness* and the *writerliness* of text - both functions occur in all texts, but to tease it out, we can understand the *readerly* function of writing and the *writerly* function of reading are part of one performative and constitutive 'spiral' (note 7). However, in Barthes' terms, some texts are, for the reader, more *readerly (lisible)*, in that they have more capacity to control the reader and disallow play and exploration, which are the qualities of the more open *writerly (scriptable)* text. Terence Hawkes points out: 'In that sort of writing…the signifiers have free play; no automatic reference to signifieds is encouraged or required' (Hawkes 1983: 114). In his discussion of Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) Hawkes explains further:

> Where *readerly* texts (usually classics) are static, virtually "read themselves" and thus perpetuate an "established" view of reality and an "establishment" scheme of values, frozen in time, yet serving still as an out-of-date model for our world, *writerly* texts require us to look at the nature of language itself, not *through* it at a preordained "real world". They thus involve us in the dangerous, exhilarating activity of creating our worlds *now*, together with the author, as we go along. (Hawkes: 114).

The perception that reading is a reconstruction in the imagination of the reader is not a new idea. It has been explored and studied since philosophers questioned laws of perception and comprehension - such as Epicurus, Euclid, Aristotle and the Islamic philosopher al-Haytham, who, before 1038 first identified the gradation of conscious action from 'seeing' to 'deciphering' or 'reading'. This early history is outlined by Alberto Manguel in *A History of Reading* (Manguel 1996) in which the section 'Acts of Reading' is prefaced by an epigraph from Italo Calvino: 'Reading means approaching something that is just coming into being' (note 8).

The relationship between reading, understanding and the construction of consciousness has been extensively studied in philology and in hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophy, which Manguel does not discuss. Rather he focuses on the processes that make up reading as they have been studied by cognitive psychology and neurological linguistics, and which, from their studies, are not comprehensively understood. But it is agreed that reading is 'making meaning', that it is reconstructive and generative. Manguel quotes Merlin C. Wittrock, who says that readers 'create images and verbal transformations... Most impressively, they generate meaning as they read by constructing relations between their knowledge, their memories of experience, and the written sentence, paragraphs and passages' (note 9) (Manguel: 39). For Manguel, 'Reading, then, is not an automatic process of capturing a text the way photosensitive paper captures light, but a bewildering, labyrinthine, common and yet personal process of reconstruction' (Manguel: 39). Clearly, there is an approximation between the *generative* process of reading and Barthes' *readerly* and *writerly* functions, though the psycholanalytic view shies away from

considering reading as an 'idiosyncratic, anarchic phenomenon' (Manguel: 39) (note 10). There is a tension in reading between freedom and the need for control.

The process of writing/reading

Given this connection between writing and reading, is there a difference between a creative writer reading his or her own writing and reading as criticism? In *A Writer's Diary*, in an entry for Easter Sunday, 20 April 1919, Virginia Woolf records reading from her own diaries, which are written spontaneously, without thought of an audience. One can hear the voice of the critic and that of the writer, and diarist: she is reading critically and creatively, recording her thinking about how she might use the diaries for a publishable work, and about the dangers and advantages of spontaneous writing:

> I confess that the rough and random style of it, often so ungrammatical, and crying for a word altered, afflicted me somewhat. I am trying to tell whichever self it is that reads this hereafter that I can write very much better; and take no time over this; and forbid her to let the eye of man behold it. And now I may add my little complement to the effect that it has a slapdash and vigour and sometimes hits an unexpected bull's-eye. But what is more to the point is my belief that the habit of writing thus for my own eye is only good practice. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and stumbles. Going at such a pace as I do I must make the most direct and instant shots at my object, and thus have to lay hands on words, choose them and shoot them with no more pause than is needed to put my pen in the ink...
> The main requisite, I think on re-reading my old volumes, is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, and found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time. But looseness quickly becomes slovenly. A little effort is needed to face a character or an incident which needs to be recorded. Nor can one let the pen write without guidance; for fear of becoming slack and untidy like Vernon Lee. Her ligaments are too loose for my taste. (Woolf 1953: 22-3)

For the writer, separating the creative writer from the critic is not a simple matter, though Woolf is (partly) conscious of this. What she notices is that the writing 'happens' in ways the writer is not conscious of at the time and that it might inspire unexpected results, although one must guard against being too 'loose'. The kinds of choices made are rapid, 'to lay hands on words, choose them and shoot them' with almost no pause. There is an awareness of the value of writing without thought of audience, that is, one's readers. In reading her own writing, Woolf becomes aware of this quality which she had not noticed before. This process of writing includes reading, and rewriting, 'choosing' and 'shooting' with the occasional 'unexpected bull's-eye'. The joyful playfulness of this description, no doubt because it is in the diaries and not the essays, is more playful, and indeed joyous, than the earnest work and judgement of Nietzsche and Eliot. But in reading Woolf, though the text provides some insight into what we do when we write, the writer, in writing *about* writing from her position, is perhaps not as conscious as *this* reader (myself) of the generative process of her comments.

Let me therefore turn to my own process of reading and writing to explore this further. When I write an academic paper, my 'reading' has much to do with logic, causality, argument, explication and analysis. I am very concerned with making links between the parts. Writing discursive, narrative prose, I must make sure my sentences work, that both the micro- and macro-structures of the text form a structural whole that says what I want to say (which I may not know properly until I am finished writing). In my work of writing poetry, however, the process is a little different: first the initial 'splatter' of composition, the effort to get down and idea, feeling, series of half-understood notions or concepts. In this initial process, imagery, rhythm and music play a part, the sound or the poem, the line endings, which are quite arbitrary. The text, handwritten, falls down the page, with little attention paid to margins, sentences, repetition, though perhaps with a stronger function of sound, rhythm and pace. I write in free verse, though this may become more structured in later rewriting. Having 'got it down', even during this initial process, 'reading' comes into play very quickly, and with the reading, the effort to construct the desired meaning in words and sounds, the function of 'making sense'. The 'first rush' initial draft is likely to be read through even before it is finished, and changes effected, yet there will be many more re-readings and choices, judgements, additions and substitutions and other changes made.

These choices are to do with the *readerliness* of the text, the function of reading that comes into its making and its meaning-making, and this includes an element of control and construction. The poem has some kind of narrative or sequential structure, yet this and its parts, images, figures and sounds also seem to have come from 'somewhere else', to be non-rational yet creative of *form* in some way. At the same time, the choices and judgements made in composing depend on a myriad of connotative codes and choices, adhering to something like Barthes' codes of displacement and signification, such as contextual, cultural, symbolic and syntactical codes, all of which have to do with the discursive functions of the text and its production (note 11).

The first draft is, I think, more *writerly*, in that it is playful and spontaneous and seems to occur 'outside time and space' - there is a sense of being taken into a different world or state of consciousness when one writes like this. At this stage the text is more open to possibility, to a plurality of meanings. Yet also the *readerliness* is there from the start, with the *writerliness* - it is inherently woven into the texture of the process, the reading and writing occur simultaneously, though at various stages more of one than the other part of the process of the writing/rewriting will dominate. The writing moves between the functions in a way that makes them impossible to separate (note 12). There is something about writing, and 'creative' writing (though it is getting harder to make the distinction between 'creative writing' and 'writing'), that is non-logical, spontaneous and rule-free. When the reading-function comes into it, which we have seen occurs very early on in the writing, awareness of meaning is alerted. It is as if we move from Lacan's ('Real' and) 'Imaginary' to the 'Symbolic' (note 13) in the instantaneity and immediacy of writing - we move towards, what is for us, more 'coherence' (which is determined by the nature of the text and its reading). Thus we make sense when we write - 'reading' is inherent in my writing, and furthermore, this reading dialogues, even at its micro-structural level, with the context or 'worldliness' of my text.

I utter, and want to be understood, therefore my writing must make meaning. I endeavour to convey my meaning and this process involves desire. The desire is to be read and understood (which might involve the desire for acceptance, but rather, I believe, it involves the desire to be heard). In this process my choices will involve many intersections based on my knowledge of the world and of language and other texts. Much of this will not be done with full conscious

awareness; yet at different stages of the writing, different elements of my 'languaged' consciousness will come into play. That the writing process is not all conscious is obviously not a new idea: for example Levinas, in the 'The Servant and her Master', where he writes on 'inspiration' and that aspect of art that is beyond causality, says that 'Artistic activity makes the artist aware that he is not the author of his works' (Levinas 1989: 151). Preceding, and in fact influencing Derrida's idea that alterity is always part of creativity, Levinas also suggests that this alterity is at the heart of all activity, not rarefied to art.

By examining the process of writing we see that complex functions are at work in the making of text, that not all these functions can be known, that we have tended to settle on this as a 'mysterious' or 'inspired' function, but that it might be more usefully framed as a function of discursive intersections. Furthermore, the non-conscious elements may be not only the non-rational and rule-free elements, but also the incapacity of the writing mind to incorporate all that is happening as consciousness, or conscious awareness, simultaneously. This does not mean that what occurs sub-consciously, or even unconsciously, is not part of the choices of code - rather it means that what rises to the surface differs in the different re-readings and re-writings we do as we create a text. Nothing is outside the text's 'worldliness', it is only a case of what is available to our awareness at each moment (note 14).

I must acknowledge that the choices and judgements, the displacements and decisions, the word, structural and syntactical choices I make when I write have to do with pre-cursors and intertextual comparisons, and that I am not aware of this for the most part. How much of my writing choices are engaged with trying to find a 'voice' of my own that is 'different' to others? Is this possibility an illusion? As a writer of poetry I have more freedom to do this than as a writer of academic prose or criticism. Yet the tension I feel as I write academic prose is the tug towards more freedom and play. Like Jane Tompkins in her essay 'Me and My Shadow' (Tompkins 1987), I too am aware that in writing academic prose I am 'fitting' my writing into a discussion the rules of which I must adhere to if I am to be heard (published). In functioning as a 'critic' I have had to write a great deal of academic prose, commentary on other writers and theorists, and to construct arguments, and like Jane Tompkins, I must exclude from this discourse much of my feeling and sensory experience of the world. I now find myself wanting to ask the still unanswered question - what is the difference between critical reading and the reading-in-writing that I explore in this paper?

Ways of reading

For my doctoral research I found myself reading the works of one writer, J.M. Coetzee, very closely and attentively indeed. I was seduced by his language, as well as his vision of a world that related strongly to my own troubled upbringing in South Africa under apartheid. I was fascinated by the way he writes about power. I was, in fact, doing a particular kind of reading, relating his work, through a reading of his allegories, to ethical concepts and issues of power that were close to my own heart, my own desire. As with all reading, I was trying to understand more about the world and my own position in it. My reading was both open and directed to a certain end. Yet at the same time I was required to articulate my findings in academic prose, as a dialogue with other critics and writers, and as a narrative and an argument to defend my own reading position on Coetzee's work. How does this relate to the *readerly* and *writerly* functions of both reading and writing? Clearly, academic discourse is, if not challenged, (and I was not challenging it at that time), a controlled discourse and one to which I needed to subscribe. My thesis was pure research,

it did not include a creative writing component. Its aim was to be *readerly*, that is, a controlled text, but reading Coetzee's work was *writerly* in the extreme.

Let me relate my experience in *reading* Coetzee's writing. My desire was to read and understand, through his language, a number of discursive fields through which I could filter and construct my argument. Therefore, although I was aware of other possible readings, the need to research an aspect of the texts led me to find the materials I needed in the primary and secondary material to create the narrative, the critical commentary I was writing. However, there came a point, I think it was on reading *Age of Iron* (1990), although it was probably also there in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), when I found myself facing a nakedness of language, a humanity and a creative 'essence' (and I hesitate to use that word, but that is what it felt like), which was so utterly vulnerable and compelling, that I knew I would never want to intrude upon it by appropriating it into my critical discourse. It had to remain undescribed and un-analysed. Indeed, in some way, it was outside the language and discourse, a connotation perhaps, yet so powerful that I was suddenly painfully aware of the limits of my research project. Coetzee's writing was so much more than my controlled project could acknowledge or even take in. I was writing criticism. There was something 'sacred' in the fiction, in the art, and my project was in danger of intruding upon it.

I got past this by focusing once again on my arguments and constructions, feeling humbled in the face of the creative text. Its alterity had floored me and taught me that there are many kinds of readings. As a creative writer, I had come face to face with creative art - and my critical discourse had, but also did not have, that much to do with it. I was at the extreme of the polarity between the writer and the critic, which is evident in the quote from Virginia Woolf. As Woolf criticises Vernon Lee, she is a critic, and she applies some of this criticism, although perhaps less harshly to her own writing. Is there a difference in the reading we do in writing our own writing and the reading we do in reading the writing of others? (How much of the critic should come into our reading of writing, or our own and our students' writing, and is it possible to control this function? Is criticism useful in the creative writing workshop, or should we apply ourselves to a different kind of reading?)

What did I see or sense in Coetzee's writing to which I didn't want to apply my academic reasoning? Roland Barthes says that there are no rules for reading. In the essay 'On Reading' (1976) he writes:

> …there is no *structural* obligation to close my reading: I can just as well extend the limits of the readable to infinity, decide that *everything* is finally readable (unreadable as that seems), but also, conversely, I can decide that in the depths of every text, however readable its conception, there is, there remains a certain measure of the unreadable. Our knowing *how to read* can be determined, verified at its inaugural stage, but it very quickly becomes a knowledge without basis, without rules, without degrees and without end. (Barthes 1986: 35)

If reading is as open as this, the conflict I experienced in my response to Coetzee was less about criticism than about reading. The closeness of reading and writing meant that the kind of reading I was doing at the moment of that insight was a moment, or perhaps more than a moment, of that rule-free slippage from one mode of reading into another, from the critic into the *writerly*. I came up against the rules and limits of critical reading, conscious suddenly that there was *so much more* to the text. This is the kind of tension that the writer critic is likely to experience, what Woolf demonstrates as she

negotiates between criticism and judgement in her own writing - its possibilities as published text versus its spontaneity of the first drafting - and perhaps some of the discomfort I felt in reading with such attentiveness the creative writing texts of my favourite writer. The trouble with both reading and writing are that they are so free and we struggle to bring them into shape and control because of their 'worldliness'. This is an unresolvable tension or paradox at the heart of our writing endeavours.

Criticism is reading, yet reading, being free is also more potentially subversive than criticism allows. Reading in a creative writing workshop is far from an innocent, 'position-free' activity. Asking the question whether there is more than one kind of reading is an essential one if we are to apply this to our teaching processes, as reading and articulating our reading is so much a part of what we do as teachers. We are, in fact, critics of a kind, but should we not be more *readers* than *critics*? What is the position of our criticism/reading? What is its function in teaching? How can we apply it to our teaching without applying an excess of control to our students' writing?

Do we apply a different 'standard' to the reading of student work and our work as academic critics? How aware are we of what we do as readers in our teaching? In order to begin to answer these questions, let us return once again to Barthes, who does not make any distinction between different kinds of reading. For Barthes, reading is an open and desire-driven process which is implicitly pleasurable and potentially subversive: 'In the field of reading…there is not only no pertinence of *levels*, there is no possibility of describing levels of reading because there is no possibility of closing the list of these levels' (Barthes 1986: 35). He says that although reading needs structure and respects it, it also '*perverts* structure' (Barthes: 36). So reading is a dialectical tension between desire and control. In the *writerly* function of reading, when we read we also construct meaning; we make choices about how we do this, based on grammatical and other textual structures, and references to familiar codes - we constantly 'make' the reading into something we can relate to our understanding, including our understanding of our role as teachers. According to Barthes, this desire to make meaning applies equally to writing - 'reading is the conductor of the Desire to write…; not that we necessarily wanted to write *like* the author we enjoy reading; what we desire is only the desire the *scriptor* has in writing, or again: we desire the desire the author had for the reader when he was writing, we desire the *love-me* which is in all writing...' (Barthes 1986: 40-41).

This kind of reading does not exclude criticism, and may be a part of its project, but for Barthes, reading and writing are not separable. Applying this to the workshop, reading of student work (by all participants) is constitutive of the writing but it is almost certainly differently coded to the *readerly* and *writerly* reading of the writing process of the individual writer. But the writer may also be composing in a more *readerly* way, much as I do in writing structured prose. In a discussion of reading (as criticism) in 'Writing Reading' (1970), Barthes explores reading and composition. He points out that composition is more deductive and logical, whereas reading is deductive and associative:

> Though certain authors have themselves notified us that we are free to read their text as we choose and that they are not really interested in our choice (Valery), we still find it hard to perceive how the logic of reading differs from the rules of composition. These, inherited from rhetoric, are still taken as referring to a deductive, i.e., rational model: as in the case of the syllogism, it is a matter of compelling the reader to a meaning or an issue: composition *channels*; reading, on the

> contrary (that text we write in ourselves when we read), *disperses*, disseminates; or at least, dealing with a story (like that of the sculptor Sarrasine), we see clearly that a certain constraint of our progress (of "suspense") constantly struggles within us against the text's explosive force, its digressive energy: with the logic of reason (which makes the story readable) mingles a logic of the symbol. This latter logic is not deductive but associative: it associates with the material text (with each of its sentences) *other* ideas, *other* images, *other* significations... (Barthes 1986: 30-31)

Composition works with the rules of language and narrative, and tries to control the reading, which in turn is open and cannot be controlled. So there is a *dialectical tension* between the controlling text and the 'subversive' reading, which Barthes goes on to say, is also a 'game played according to certain rules...from that vast cultural space through which our person (whether author or reader) is only one passage' (Barthes: 31).

It is, of course, no surprise that for Barthes the distinction between reading and criticism is seen as a false one, for he maintains that the connection between criticism and writing is much closer than formalist criticism allows. In his essay, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb' (1966), he had pointed out that this connection had been split when rhetoric was threatened by rationalism and later 'ruined' by positivism - 'by then there was no longer any common zone of reflection between literature and language: literature no longer considered itself as language, except in the work of a few precursor writers' - whom he lists as Mallarmé and then a bit later as Proust and Joyce - concurrent with the development of linguistics, which 'includes within itself *poetics*, or the order of effects linked to the message and not to its referent' (Barthes 1986: 11).

> Hence, there exists today a new perspective of reflection - common, I insist, to literature and to linguistics, to the creator and the critic, whose tasks, hitherto absolutely self-contained, are beginning to communicate, perhaps even to converge, at least on the level of the writer, whose action can increasingly be defined as a critique of language. (Barthes: 11-12)

Because 'writing is a system of signs', he calls this '*semio-criticism*'. Its object is constituted not by 'simple accidents of form', as criticism does in stylistics, but 'by the very relations between the *scriptor* and language' (Barthes: 12). The relationship between criticism and writing, then, is as close as Eliot had dared momentarily to name it, yet his view of criticism and writing prevented a criticism in which the study of language as a dynamic process in its social context determines its reading. For Eliot, criticism, even as he applies it to choices made in writing, was deeply attached to the study of literature and the literary tradition.

Writing/reading/teaching

Barthes opens up and exposes the intrinsic relation between reading and writing - when we read we want to write, and by extension the desire of writing is integrated with the desire of reading. While there are no differences in 'levels' of reading, the process can be broken down, according to Barthes, into different kinds of desire (*plaisir* and *jouissance*) - differences which take the reader into the discursive codes of the text and its context. To take this into the writing classroom, then, what forms of desire and control are at work in our reading?

Clearly, the pedagogical relationship is likely to orientate us far more towards control, especially as we apply our skills as critical (analytical) readers to the writing produced by students and teach these skills to use in their own reading. Yet we operate within the split between reading and criticism when we apply 'criticism' (what kind of criticism?) to their writing, especially because we cannot escape our own discourses and particular critical positions, whatever they may be (even as we change them).

The shift in our understanding of writing provided by post-structuralism is a revolution that we in the discipline of creative writing cannot ignore. Meaning in language is not fixed - its dependence on the functions of language and on the reader must allow for the possibilities of deferral in meaning and deconstruction of its discourse. Reading in Barthes' and Derrida's terms is to disallow and resist clarity but also to understand that language operates as a system. This understanding may, at first glance, complicate what we do as teachers of writing, for it allows for openness and freedom, and the possibility of plural readings for any written and read text. This appears to deconstruct the authority of the reader or critic or teacher. Yet to move to a new model of pedagogy is to shift the power structures of teacher/learner, and as I have discussed elsewhere, this is most likely to occur in the creative writing workshop as in any other teaching situation (Freiman 2001). As Dawson says, we need to change what we do within the workshop if we are not to go on repeating the formalist New Critical models of reading prevalent in the discipline of creative writing.

Poststructuralist approaches to language, reading and writing provide us with a different language of critical discourse. This kind of alertness to language as discourse, in its macro-structures of narrative and genre and in its micro-structures, allows us to acknowledge the traces, to be wary of fixity and certainty. Again, this creates a tension with the 'controlling' factor in composition - and when we write we engage with *both* composing and reading, which is the energy and tension in our writing. If we simply want the clarity without the alterity and possibility of deferral, our writing fixes into stolidness and cliché, and even a sense of constriction, while also limiting the reader's response and imagination. We can shift our position as readers from 'critic' to reader, and with the loosening of control, more confidently allow the playfulness most of us use intuitively in our teaching to take its place in our discipline and discourse.

The *readerly* and *writerly* functions of text connect reading and writing more closely than criticism connects with writing, as it sets itself apart from writing, or takes over. To encourage an awareness of the *readerly/writerly* functions can instil confidence in the process of the individual writer - it gives them power over their own work. Other people's reading is useful, as it provides an audience, and things become clearer, which writers often can't perceive for themselves, but if we pitch the 'reading' (not criticism) back into the writer's own court, this could be empowering for the individual. It is also worth saying that there are always aspects of the reading of writing over which the writer has no command, so that 'mis-readings' will always occur (Derrida, De Man). This knowledge alone reassures, once again giving back ownership to the writer, for it is only when we allow ourselves to trust other readings in addition to our own that we can 'give away' our texts to our readers. Knowing that we can't control the reading allows us to write as skilfully and playfully as possible to present our meanings. To understand that reading is generative assists writers in 'letting go' of their writing.

Yet I am also becoming increasingly concerned about the removal of power from students when work is workshopped too early in writing workshops.

Should we be finding ways of teaching *about* writing to empower students and develop their critical *and* reading/writing faculties, so that the writing can follow its own path and not become over-reliant on feedback from others? I've experienced this at times in my teaching, where the student becomes over-dependent on feedback from others and does not sufficiently rework and make the effort, mainly because of a loss of confidence in her capacity to read her *own* writing. To re-focus on this reading function as integral to the writing process would go some way in demystifying the gap between the writer and the reader of the workshop text. I have come to observe that the writing done in workshops can be *too* collaborative. How many writers actually work in this collaborative way?

I have argued elsewhere that learning writing through dialogue is a very effective way of learning to write (Freiman 2002), and this remains the case, as working in a community promotes learning. But we should acknowledge that this is *part*, not all, of the writing process, which as I have discussed in this essay, is a very complex process. When we teach writing, we engage with the part of the process of writing that is *learning*. David Lodge maintains that 'no course can teach you how to produce a text other people will willingly give up their time - and perhaps their money - to read…' (Lodge 1996: 176). This is a depressing statement, devoid of the Barthesian pleasure and play, and the desire to make meaning that the act of writing implies. It focuses only on the reader; a particular type of reader. Yet the practice of writing, the desire, pleasure and art, pitches students back onto their own resources. Our role and task is to augment those resources, to help students to learn to write better, to experience writing, to take risks and be playful in their writing, to be better readers of their own and other writing, to develop awareness about their writing, to improve their writing during the course they do with us - and then to take those skills into their writing (and reading) life.

While it is important to consider a wider audience, my experience is that fellow students can take great pleasure in reading each other's work, and the reading of one's own work has its pleasures as well. It is my contention that students who do creative writing courses become readers with more highly developed skills, who attend to, and engage with, language more closely and confidently, than those who do not study writing. In this I am agreeing with T.S. Eliot that creative artists (or rather, writers) make better 'critics' - substituting 'reader' for 'critic' - but I am also advocating that the shift of 'critic' to 'reader' should be a conscious one, with all the freedom and playfulness that bringing our varied reading positions into the classroom entails. The focus on reading is especially relevant to the place of writing courses in English and Cultural Studies Departments: teaching writing is also about teaching reading. Rather than claiming to teach students to write 'publishable' writing (after all, published by whom?), we are teaching them about writing/reading and how language functions in its 'worldly' contexts.

Notes

1 Freiman, 2003. Return to article

2 From Michael Wood, 'On Edward Said', *London Review of Books*, 23 October 2003: 3. Reference from Said not found. Return to article

3 See Terri-ann White, 'The Joy of the Writing Class', *TEXT* Vol 2 No1 April 1998. Return to article

4 Friel uses the observations of novelist John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1984. Return to article

5 Thanks to Dr Gareth Beal for alerting me to this source during his doctoral research, and also for drawing me back to Barthes' relevance for creative writing. Return to article

6 '…the author function is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy' (Foucault, 1969: 1631). Return to article

7 Unpublished PhD thesis, 1979, ANU, Bill Ashcroft, *Horizonal Criticism: Language, Consciousness and the Literary Text.* This text develops the idea of the 'hermeneutic spiral', which extends the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle' of F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), founder of the modern hermeneutic movement which prefigures the work of poststructuralist criticism. Return to article

8 Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Picador, 1981. Return to article

9. Merlin C. Wittrock, 'Reading Comprehension', in *Neuropsychological and Cognitive Processes in Reading* (Oxford, 1981), cited in Manguel, 1997: 39. Return to article

10 Wittrock in Manguel. Such a free, open approach to writing is also satirised by Jorge Luis Borges, yet, as André Maurois points out, the relationship cannot be ignored. In the Preface to Borges' *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, written by Maurois, he points to the relation between Borges' own reading and writing, and how Borges focuses on absurdities and paradoxes. In particular, he notes Borges' fictional story about a twentieth-century writer Pierre Menard, whose (absurd because absolutely identical) '*word* for *word*' rewriting of Cervantes *Don Quixote*, is described by Maurois as follows: 'This he [Borges] triumphantly demonstrates, for this subject, apparently absurd, in fact expresses a real idea: the Quixote we read is not that of Cervantes, any more than Madame Bovary is that of Flaubert. *Each twentieth-century reader involuntarily rewrites in his own way the masterpieces of past centuries'* [my italics] (Maurois 1970: 11-12). Return to article

11 Barthes' codes are functions of determining, modifying and generating meaning; in *S/Z* (1970) he distinguishes them as: the hermeneutic code, the code of semes or signifiers, the symbolic code, the porairetic code (of actions) and the cultural code. Return to article

12 Which Barthes later demonstrated in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), where the distinctions of readerly/writerly are recast into a reflection of plaisir and jouissance, pleasure and sexual pleasure. Return to article

13 Leitch (ed), 'Jacques Lacan', *The Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*, 2001: 1278-84. Return to article

14 This is why encouraging students to learn to re-write is so important. We might also alert students to the complex possibilities at work in writing in order to provide the understanding necessary to promote attentiveness to their textual constructions. The element of play and freedom in writing as well as desire to make meaning gives both seriousness and lightness to the project of teaching writing. Return to article

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 1 April 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/

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