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A Question of Genre: de-mystifying the exegesis

In this paper I wish to draw together two on-oing debates which are being played out, at least in part, in *TEXT.* These debates concern the nature of research for the discipline of Creative Writing and those dealing with problems associated with awarding and assessing research higher degrees - MAs, MA(Hons), MPhils and PhDs. In particular I wish to suggest that the combination of these two debates sheds considerable light on the nature and role of the research higher degree's exegesis which accompanies the creative product.

The nature of research

For the purpose of this paper I will step aside from the various calls for our work to be recognised in the Australian University system as research, either as research in its own right, or via some kind of equivalence factor. These arguments, while vitally important in the way in which Creative Writing places itself into the academy, are well rehearsed elsewhere.

Let me instead begin with John O'Toole's (1998) separation of traditional research into Logos - the passing on of the laws through the word of the masters, and Logic - the process of systematically establishing and validating fixed objective truths about natural laws. Logos and logic traditionally lie at the core of the academy. They are embedded deep within its historical consciousness and form the backbone to how the academy defines itself and its function.

O'Toole (1998) points out that the academy so constructed found it difficult to accommodate the disciplines of art practice within its provenance, because art practice disciplines do not define their research in these ways. This conflict generated an uneasiness within the confines of the academy simply because arts practice disciplines, the creative and performing arts, form one of the largest single subject groupings, 5% of the total Australian tertiary pool. The academy has opened its doors to the Trojan Horse and has found itself swamped with a discipline which does not pay homage to the traditional gods of Logos and Logic.

Faced with such a challenge the academy is resisting and in a sequence of moves has eliminated the creative component from the research quantum, (it only existed there in a marginalised way, somewhat like a hobby farm) and then more recently, reduced significantly the quantum importance of any form of publication, creative or traditionally academic. In regards to the vexing question of research the academy is facing something of a revolution and it is doing so at the very time the creative disciplines have been forced upon it. There is little to celebrate in any invasion and the academy is facing something of an internal breakdown and identity crisis. But it is an identity crisis which could benefit our discipline.

This uneasy relationship between the creative and the traditional academic discourse has generated several papers attempting to tease out the problematic.

Brophy (1998:229) talks of the tension between the playful and the laboured, between the critical-theoretical writing and the creative writing.

Dawson (1999) addresses the aim, the end of a research practice, in order to separate out creative writing, commenting that while fiction writers carry out something they call research, the research is put to fictive rather than scholarly ends. He goes on to point out the special relationship, via language, that creative writing has with research. To quote him, "An essay about a painting can never be a painting. Yet it has been argued on many occasions that an essay about literature or even literary theory can be literature."

In Andrew Taylor's charming paper (1999) he refers to the singleness, the anti-complexity of the University system and thus expectations of disciplines. He names this singularity The Machine and recognises that creative writing via its very plurality and diversity challenges The Machine's hegemony. While the pluralities of creative writing challenge this on several levels, (the lack of vocational orientation is one), there is no more challenging area than in the domain of research.

He cites the OED definition of research which incorporates the notion of a creative work but which places that work within the domain of a systematic basis. He rightly points out that "what appears systematic to a writer might look wayward, perhaps even haphazard, to some scientists."

O'Toole also comments that the notion of research for artists is problematic.

Let me explore this haphazardness and refer to it as the bowerbird technique.

The writer and the bowerbird

I was recently awarded a PhD for a novel and exegesis. Writing a novel for the degree required that I kept a bibliography of my reading. This bibliography makes interesting reading in itself because it illustrates the unusualness of the novelist's research. Unlike my colleagues in other more traditional disciplines I needed to acquire a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines. I needed to function a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours.

To work with this metaphor, I needed to pick out the dark blue pieces of ecclesiastical history, the azure lines of cartography, the sapphire decorations of medieval manuscripts and the Nile blue theories of archaeology. I needed to be able to write on a range of issues and yet I knew I was not an authority in any of them.

This bowerbird researching requires its own skill. The skill to locate quickly, sort through, and accurately select all the blue pieces. It is also the skill of knowing where to look, where to find the blue pieces in the first place. It may sound easy but to be able to accurately and quickly isolate the turquoise from the aquamarine at one end of the spectrum and the indigo from the purple at the other, requires nerve, a great eye and a lot of know-how. With so much information to gather, the writer needs to be able to work quickly, to know the questions to ask and to be able to isolate the essence.

For example, I did not need to become an archaeologist in order to make use of the Ingstad (1970) research on a Newfoundland dig. I had to know where to find the article, and then I had to take time to read it, navigating my way through the discipline's jargon. But the real time was spent thinking *about* archaeology. Once I had comprehended the article and its issues I needed to work out which particular aspect of it could represent the whole in a way that could be told in a novel. I chose the hunt and discovery of the anvil stone because it was a single incident which could be retold in a dramatic manner. I also chose the importance of the design of the Norse houses, because this reinforced a thematic concern

pertaining to the cultural and historical nature of perception. These were my blue bits. And in selecting them I rejected several other excavation sites and a list of artefacts that were discovered at the dig.

In addition, I was combining in my *process* both the creative and the academic. I was writing a novel and I was writing a PhD. The academic became the creative; the creative became the academic. My desk was covered with the trappings of the academy, with filing cards, photocopies, Manila folders marked 'bibliography', 'Vinland references', 'maps, other' and so on. My desk was also covered with the trappings of the novelist, with photographs and pictures, yellow stick-ons, a feather, a smooth black pebble, a list of characters, a bent and twisted paperclip, red, blue, black pens, marked-up manuscripts. But I could not maintain the division as one slid into the other and the academic and the creative processes blurred. Before long my card index file also contained details on my characters, details of the fiction, and notes on chapters. The Manila folders began to be labelled, 'chapter 4 - extra'; the paperclip was bent back into shape and held together notes on the Inanna myth.

And in my working I did not separate the two, carrying out academic work on one day and creative work on another. The two parts became each other, mixing together in swirls of colour. I would read an article on 17th century watches and think of my character Meridian holding a small watch in her hand, feeling the warmth and weight of four hundred years of women's touch. In Chapter 9 when the two main characters are in a rose garden I knew I wanted a line from a Middle Eastern poem. I didn't know what poem or what line. I left my desk and went to the library, borrowing all the books on Middle Eastern verse the library held. Back to my desk I hunted for a line that used roses. There were quite a few. I sat around with some of my colleagues discussing the poems until Hafiz's, 'The red rose is open and the nightingale is drunk' stood out from the rest (Kritzeck, 1964). The line became a corridor catch phrase and was written up on the staff noticeboard rubbing shoulders with sober notices of conferences and research opportunities.

Like marbling on paper. Into a bed of water oil paints are applied, raw colours, one after another. By running a comb through the water the oil paints are swirled together to form a marble pattern. There are blues and reds and purples where the colours have combined. There are dark shades and lighter hues folding into each other. Paper is applied and takes up the colour so that the whole, the marbling on the page is the thing we remember, not the tubes of paint containing the separate raw colours.

So too with creative writing. The academic and the creative slid into one another, nestled side by side so that one fed on the other, one became the other.

Writing research

Aquilla and Pallotta-Chiarolli (1997) wrote an early paper on the relationship between research and fiction and saw narrative as "'an integral tool in the presentation of experimental research." They were interested in the way in which the narrative writing of the research findings displays a truth not found in the documentation or the academic writing generated from the same research. Like Eva Sallis (1999) they come to this question of accuracy and different truths by addressing the problems of writing cross-culturally.

Sallis develops the idea of researched fiction - a genre which expresses the outcomes of research in the narrative mode. She argues that "To make living and to make real for the reader are concepts alien to academic prose."

In my forthcoming novel, *Fragments of a Map*, Meridian considers the limitations of traditional academic discourse:

> It was a well rounded, if not conservative paper, and while academically I was pleased with it, nevertheless it left me feeling as if I had cheated myself and my readers. There

> was so much more about the map and my investigations which I did not include. My paper avoided the human, muddy aspects of discovery. (Chapter 15)

Sallis recognises the academy's uneasiness but does not lament the difficulty. Rather she refers to it positively and sees the uncomfort as a sympton of a shift in the academy's traditional boundaries. Once we adopt Sallis' positive approach our relationship with the academy changes dramatically. Instead of seeing the academy as stifling the creative and performing arts, as undervaluing our work, as reducing our citizenship of the convocation, we can begin to see how the creative arts are at the cutting edge of the new, opening up enormous opportunities for those restricted by the traditional academic discourse.

Sallis is quick to point out the obvious - but often overlooked - nature and function of academic discourse. To quote her:

> Academic prose is not monolithic, not an imperative, not truth-telling: it is, like any musical instrument, one tuned and specialised way of articulating, one exclusive artform; and in some instances it is disturbing and awkward, ringing false notes or trying to play notes outside of its range.

In many ways this recognition of the benefits and limitations of the academic discourse are well rehearsed in science's more adventurous thinkers. I am remembering here the work of Paul Davies, Oliver Saks and Allan Snyder. Their eclectic and often wild, or should I say here, haphazard or bowerbird approach, builds nests that have the more traditional researchers in awe.

Building our discipline's city on the boundaries is not comfortable. Taking risks is not comfortable, new ideas are not comfortable. Sallis (1999) argues against comfort, pointing out that this is not the domain of the writer and suggests that rather than the academy being the enemy of researched fiction, is it, perhaps ironically, its home. It is only via the promotion of this genre through creative writing departments and their research degrees that the genre will be nurtured and encouraged.

The creative degree

This positive view of research fiction supports the creative component of the research higher degree.

Jeri Kroll (1999) notes that the accompanying instructions for examiners of creative research higher degrees speak of the need for the submission to be of publishable standard and questions this. But Paul Dawson (1999) points out that publishable quality does not mean that the work will be taken up by a mainstream publisher. Rightly he claims that publishable means the creative component "can sustain the same sort of critical scrutiny deployed in the study of exemplary text, that it can contribute to knowledge in the same fashion."

Kroll (1999) returns to literature and to the notion, although unfixed, of a canon. She inserts values here claiming that the creative degree needs to adhere to some agreed, but not defined, notion of valued literature. She cites Mills and Boons as a genre not appropriate for the creative degree "even though an exegesis about a Mills and Boon novel might put forward a brilliant argument." Such an exegesis, she points out, would sit better in the discipline of cultural studies.

Her problem is in evaluating the creative product and she rightly notices that we do so in relationship to how we evaluate literature. She asks, "If we no longer have a canon, an ideal

order in mind, then, how do we rank creative work?"

Her difficulty of course is in evoking the requirements of literature and privileging it over innovation, or the development of knowledge. I part with her here and have no difficulty with a creative component to a research degree adopting any genre, providing in that adoption it does not enslave itself to well worked-out conventions. What is important here is not an attempt at joining, or imitating the canon, but rather in the case of a student working in a genre such as romance, that she or he significantly challenge and develop the genre. I am reminded of Jenny Pausacker's comments on her development as a romance writer:

> On the other hand when I launched out as a serious romance writer, I sat down and read through a huge stack of American teenage romances and then tried to see how far I could go in breaking the rules while still remaining classifiable as a romance writer. Along the way I tested out a Koorie hero, a lesbian subplot, a male narrator, a heroine with severe depression and - most controversial of the lot - a heroine who didn't lose weight and got the guy.
> (Pausacker 1995: 54)

I do not wish to comment on the quality of Pausacker's titles and their appropriateness for a higher degree. I am however pointing out that a writer, even in the much-maligned romance genre, sees the need to research and develop her genre. Such a work has the opportunity of being presented as a suitable creative component to a writing higher degree. A creative work need not, I argue, be a contender for, or an imitator of the canon to expect this opportunity.

Such a creative work would of course be accompanied by an appropriate exegesis.

The exegesis and creative product

What then would be such an appropriate accompanying exegesis?

Kroll (1999) points out that the exegesis functions as a confirmation of the author's beliefs about the creative work. Specifically:

> It discusses origins, possible options, explains why certain paths were followed rather than others. It might set the work in a contemporary context, comparing it to that of other writers. The exegesis might explain the creative product's weaknesses, referring to the student's developmental stage. At the conceptual end the exegesis might offer a coherent theoretical appraisal, proving how the student has incorporated theory into practice.

But why would a student want to set out any or all of these beliefs if not to reinforce what the reader might have missed in a reading of their creative product? The exegesis here functions as a kind of insurance policy against a poorly received creative product.

Dawson (1999) and Kroll (1999) both notice that the exegesis can provide a kind of safety zone This nervousness leads to the generation of an exegesis which is really a mini dissertation. Here the exegesis is usually steeped in literary theory and illustrates that the candidate is well versed in the language of the literary criticism and analyses. The exegesis in this instance functions as a ticket to satisfy the gatekeepers admitting entrance to the academy's conservative research club.

Gaylene Perry (1998) recognises how too often the exegesis is seen to be distant from the process of writing, so much so, that a dualism is set up between the scholarly and the creative texts. In some cases separate supervisors are arranged for the creative and exegetical works - a writing academic supervising the one and a literary studies academic supervising the other.

Such an exegesis's function is to play safe, to comfort insecurity, to reassure those who doubt the discipline's *bona fides*. But as writers we understand that timidity is not the key to substantial work and consequently will not be surprised when such documents fade into the dark recesses of the library.

Perry rightly recognises another significant problem with such an exegesis. If the student is to offer a literary criticism of their own creative product this criticism can direct the reading of the product. Perry comments: "My greatest fear of following my novel with an exegesis is that the theory will guide, interpret, or frame the reading of my novel." Quite rightly she sees that the creative work needs to stand alone and allow a multitude of readings. If the creative product is to find publication such an exegesis could be seen by the writer as almost dangerous, as a document which needs to be suppressed. Here the exegesis would be read by a small number of examiners and then locked in the library vaults. Hardly a useful document or process for the discipline.

Dawson (1999) recognises that the exegesis is written for a very small audience of examiners and suggests that the purpose of the exegesis is to assist the examination process and demonstrate that the creative work is a result of investigative research, and provide statements about the work against which the success of the work is to be measured. They are, as often as not, addenda to the creative work fulfilling the traditional criteria for research. He stresses that the exegesis offers a critical explanation setting up the interpretative framework for the examiner.

Not only does this interpretation of the exegesis stem from a conservative notion of research, and from a position of seeking membership in what is perceived as an intolerant academy, Taylor's Machine, but it also sets up a practice where our research higher degree students are required to write a document specifically designed for an audience of three or four examiners. The waste to our young discipline generated from this view of the exegesis is costly.

Kroll recognises the uneasy relationship between this form of the exegesis and its creative product. (I use Kroll's phrases here.) Developing from a need to reassure the research component of higher degrees, the exegesis sits uneasily with the creative product, intimate yet wrestling in a tempestuous relationship. She calls them uneasy bedfellows and points out, "For all the intellectual and spiritual wrestling, however, when they are finished, they rest under separate covers."

Perry, acting upon her fears, suggests a journal rather than an exegesis as a more honest and useful document. "A writer's journal could be compatible with the aims of the creative work, and would contribute to writing-theory by providing original reflections on writing and the writer's self." Rightly she points us towards Okri (1997:123). "The great essays on storytelling are done in stories themselves."

Perry is close here to answers which generate an exegesis pleasurable to write, pleasurable to read, and of use to the discipline. But in order to develop these answers we need to look carefully at the relationship between the exegesis and the creative product. It is interesting that Kroll and others use relationship words such as 'bedfellows', 'intimate', 'tempestuous relations', 'separate covers', etc when talking about the exegesis.

Yet I suggest, the only aspect of the relationship that we all agree on is that the exegesis *accompanies*. And here I think we have a key.

If we take the exegesis as the accompanying document to a creative work, the needs to *explain or direct* the reading, or *illustrate* skills in literary analyses, fade from essential components into possible components. But to develop this further we need to embrace Sallis' clarity when she rightly illustrates that the same research can be written in a creative genre and in an academic genre. The genre chosen changes and modifies the findings of the research so that what is finally presented will possess a uniqueness and clear identity. The creative product will differ from the academic product. A dozen eggs can be turned into all kinds of different dishes; for Sallis, research about the Arab culture was turned into two distinct products - her novel *Hiam* and a scholarly text on the *Arabian Nights*.

I am not arguing here for a dualism, for a scholarly text and a creative text. I am asking that we recognise the importance of research fiction, and that both the creative work and the exegesis can stem from exactly the same research, the same concerns, and yet one is not the other. In my own case when I came to write my exegesis there simply were some aspects of the novel, both generic and particular, which I wanted to further investigate. There were thoughts about the silencing of women and about sadness which I wanted to look at in a different way. I had worked that territory in the novel and then wanted to work it again in the exegesis. There were ideas to do with research and with process which I wanted to explore by going back over earlier notes and drafts, by referring to what could be described as my writer's journal.

Interestingly, what I did not do is offer a critique of my own work, I did not illustrate skill with literary criticism and analyses and I did not explain my novel or illustrate how I incorporated theory into practice. Indeed the only aspect of my exegesis which talks about the relationship of theory and practice illustrates, in that instance, their incompatibility.

I took this approach as I wanted to write a lively readable document, a document which would exist in its own right, a document which might be useful or informative to the discipline. I also took this approach because I was not apologetic about my creative product. The novel stands with the authority of a work which has something to say - a piece of fiction, research - as we know it must have been.

I embraced and developed a model which celebrates the creative, privileging its discourse. The model turns its back on the safety of description and definition. Like the creative product it is not safe, not comfortable, not predictable. And while it might engage with aspects of literature surveys, research methodology and findings, it does so in an open-ended manner, picking and choosing and embracing incompleteness.

I concluded my exegesis in a section entitled '*The novelist protects herself*'.

> In writing and editing this exegesis I have struggled with selection, with what to include and what to leave unsaid. And, as I claimed at the very beginning, it is not possible to unpack all the concerns and processes of my novel into this space. To do that would be to make an ugly and awkward clone of the novel.
>
> Two factors directed my selection process. Firstly, I was concerned with the difficult issue of autobiography. To what extent is the creative work autobiographical? This is a question I do not wish to address.
>
> In producing a public creative work I need to call on a very large number of my skills and resources; some of which will be private, and others will live more comfortably in the public domain. And unlike my colleagues in other disciplines I do not have the safety glass of objectivity to hide behind. When the work is reviewed, criticised, lauded or torn apart I need to be able

to remove myself as a human being from that activity. I need to step back from the work so that I am no longer attached to it, sever the umbilical cord and let it make its own way in the world.

For these reasons I do not wish to reveal, perhaps even to myself, the level of autobiography contained within the text.

Secondly, my selection of topics to discuss in this exegesis was also governed by the emotional connection I still felt for ideas expressed in the novel. Some are still too immediate for me to want to address in any kind of analytical manner.

Besides, I enjoy the incompleteness, the thought that a completely different companion document might have been written at another time or by another writer. I enjoy the thought that the process or business of the novel cannot be documented in this space. All that I can offer here is a hastily drawn *mappa mundi,* one without decoration and without provenance; but one with a well worked interest in the oceans of fiction, the islands of history, and the old navigation myths. Perhaps in its own right a fascinating piece of vellum.

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We are still surrounded by a large number of colleagues from other disciplines who are unaware of the nature of our work and who think, for example, that a novel can be written in the summer break. That this belief is so prolific is an indication that we have not taken the trouble to deconstruct our research and process and to publicise that deconstruction.

We quite urgently need to encourage our research higher degree students to write a model of the exegesis which will be read by many more than the handful of examiners, a model which will seek out monographic publication and which will debate aspects of our work.

No doubt we have felt self conscious here, bunkered down by the perceived attitude of the academy to our research work. Let me urge you all to put this nervousness aside and to talk openly in the cloisters of the academy about aspects of our research and creative product. There are more people listening than ever before. And some of those listening are very influential thinkers who are keen to engage with our haphazard, bowerbird methodologies.

To remain silent now is to do our discipline a great disservice

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