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Uneasy Bedfellows: Assessing the Creative Thesis and its Exegesis

1 Introduction

> I was not sure whether I was speaking as a writer out-of-place in a university or as a writer who had found the right kind of sanctuary in a university...
>
> Kevin Brophy "Some Things About Creative Writing: Three Stories"
> *TEXT*, Vol 1, No 1 (April 1998)

Kevin Brophy, poet and novelist, described these feelings to a gathering of literary studies students at Deakin University. This brand of schizophrenia is common to many author-teachers who try to balance their own views about their work with the demands of academia. I think there is an element of threat in being asked to put down in writing (our speciality) what we require of students as non-negotiable statements, perhaps because as artists we like to leave something for our audience to intuit. Nevertheless, since creative writing is being formalised in coherent programs and assessment methods are under scrutiny, we must mediate the problematic relationship between this new discipline and the academy more effectively.

Honours and postgraduate theses with a creative component are a growing industry in Australian universities. Students write fiction, poetry and drama as well as theorise their practice. Some create picture books and scrutinise the visual and verbal narratives. Students question their own efforts, however, in a manner that varies from literary critics. Whatever "ism" postgraduates favour, they have one thing in common. They are aware during the process of creation of how their understanding of what literature is affects their work. They make conscious decisions based on their critical formulations. Or do they?

The first issue to be canvassed, then, is what is literature? Our understanding of this term affects how students approach their research and how we evaluate the creative product that results. What exact relationship does the critical "dissertation", "exegesis" or "critical annotation" (terms vary) have to the creative work? How much weight should each carry? What exactly does "of publishable quality" mean at the end of the 1990s? This paper will examine, therefore, a range of issues from the point of view of supervisors and assessors of BA Hons, MAs and PhDs. If as writers, academics and teachers, we want our students to embark on their theses with confidence, we should try to bring logic and uniformity, as well as a bit of creative flair, into current assessment practice.

2 Problematising Literature: Avoiding Definitions

> The various practices that constituted the Anglo-American tradition... had, until recently, managed to coexist in a state of fairly 'stable disequilibrium' based on a broad consensus about the author, the nature of the literary work, and the purpose of criticism. Critics might have argued about the inclusion of this or that piece of writing in the canon of literature, but the notion that something called 'literature' existed was never in doubt...
>
> Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 1

Why am I bothering to open this Pandora's Box, you ask? Don't we all know what literature is? I confess that I would rather keep the lid tightly shut, but it has been rattling in my dreams lately. I think there are a number of reasons why we at least have to acknowledge the question and be up-front about our prejudices. First of all, students are preparing creative theses as part of an academic degree and there is also a research component that is subject to academic standards. Second, we have been attempting to justify the teaching of creative writing to our colleagues, who question what we are doing and by extension what our students produce. If someone chooses to write a Mills and Boon romance with accompanying exegesis, the proverbial excrement might hit the mechanical air-agitator.

In the United States, where most keen writing graduates head for Masters of Fine Arts Programs, instead of PhD courses, the research element is not to the fore. Many degrees combine coursework with a creative project, and the student does not have to be concerned with the theoretical. For example at the Texas Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin, a prospective student's submission is screened by a committee composed of virtually

all writer-teachers before MFA entry. The faculty's opinions about what constitutes literature remains hidden. At the end of a three-year program students submit a portfolio of work from a primary as well as a secondary area, with "an accompanying essay of not less than two thousands words which supports the portfolio" (MFA Handbook, 5). In many Australian universities, students enter at the MA or PhD level with a brief proposal that is supported by one or two supervisors. They might not have completed a substantial amount of creative work on the project that will eventually earn them the degree. Their institution's Research Higher Degrees Committee, which approves the project, is not likely to consist of creative writers; in fact, even the supervisors might not be. In other words, we do not have consistency in the standards we apply to admit postgraduate creative candidates around the country.

How will defining literature, or at least attempting to, help? It will bring up the vital issue of value, which is implicated in any assessment process; and our understanding of literary value has altered radically since the beginning of this century. At the outset, I must admit that I am not going to offer a definitive definition of literature. As philosophers have known, it is far easier to define things, like God, by what they are not, rather than by what they are. Traditionally, criticism has been happiest gazing respectfully backwards at our classical and later our English antecedents. By the twentieth century, authors could aspire in the way of T. S. Eliot to achieve greatness by incorporating what the past 'knows' into their work and thus proving themselves worthy of a place in the canon (Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" 23-24). This tactic meant, of course, accepting the dominant Anglo-American culture's unarticulated ideas of taste and discrimination. The elite obviously knew what literature was, as F. R. Leavis stated, because they recognised it in "the pre-eminent few" (Leavis 3). As Peter Hunt puts it, "This evasion...disguises an arbitrary power-based decision about what constitutes worth and value" (Hunt 49).

Nevertheless, some critics and teachers of creative writing still proffer variations on the liberal-humanist line, which as a writer and a teacher I, too, favour. Note William Vesterman's introduction to his anthology entitled *Literature: An Introduction to Critical Reading*: "'Literature' is a word that generally describes language used for imaginative purposes and is even more broadly understood as a term of praise for writing of any purpose that has excited admiration for its imaginative qualities... " (Vesterman 1). But who is doing the admiring and what are they admiring in each poem, story or play? Do we admire the same things in a poem as someone from Taiwan or the Sudan? If standards are not universal, but culturally determined, this variation in standards needs to be acknowledged. Leavis insisted that great writers "are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life" (Leavis 2). The day-to-day possibilities of life might vary from culture to culture or even from gender to gender, although we might agree that underlying human emotions and desires do not.

It is worth digressing to glance at the status of children's literature because it bears directly on the mercurial nature of value. Until the last quarter of this century, critics agreed with Henry James in *The Art of Fiction* that one could hardly take writing for young people seriously, however agreeable or lucrative it might be. In particular he singled out *Treasure Island* as a story that did not deliver the type of realism worthy of serious scrutiny (Letley xiv-xv). Students have recently been presenting children's novels and picture books as subjects of their PhDs, so the intelligentsia has grudgingly accepted children's literature as an area of academic study and so of academy-based creative work. But it was not so long ago that children's literature was considered an oxymoron.

Robert DeMaria and Ellen Hope Meyer suggest something of literature's multiple personalities in *A Contemporary Reader for Creative Writing*. Although they see all genres issuing "from the human imagination" (DeMaria xxiii), they note the differing uses to which they can be put, which will perhaps help us to sort out the dilemma of evaluation:

> We ourselves are sometimes amazed to discover that certain companies are willing to pay
> millions of dollars for the right to publish one of these fictions or to make it into a film.
> Not only are works of the imagination in demand as entertainments, they are highly regarded
> as serious avenues to wisdom and the mystical experience of beauty.

> (DeMaria xxiii)

These remarks also point to the divide between serious and popular literature, another area where judgments fluctuate. "Avenues to wisdom and the mystical experience of beauty" might be claimed as the province of literary fiction or "serious" poetry. Entertainment might be a by-product, but not the sole aim, as it can be for certain popular books. Peter Hunt refers to John Ellis' analysis of how we understand literature in a relative way: "'Literary texts are not defined as those of a certain shape or structure, but as those pieces of language used in a certain way by the community'" (Hunt 43). By extension, I would argue that all literature has a range of dimensions, depending upon context. In other words, it can be used in different ways by different groups; in multiple ways within groups; in the same ways by discrete groups. For example, texts are used to make money for writers, publishers and their offsiders; by teachers and philosophers to illustrate aesthetic and philosophical issues; by religious instructors to point out morals; by individuals to entertain themselves or their families or to lead to enlightenment.

Popular can be understood in a variety of senses, too. Used pejoratively, it suggests inferior work; it can simply mean, however, that literature that is "well-liked by many people" (Strinati 2-3), as Dominic Strinati points out in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. As writer-teachers who prize originality and craft, the popular work we

would worry about would possess a cliché-ridden style or formulaic plot. If we accept that imagination is the basis of creativity, then we want creative product to be substantially from the student's imagination. Does popular literature simply have fewer dimensions than serious literature then? I think that it does, which means it can be used in fewer ways by fewer groups of readers. Even though an exegesis about a Mills and Boon novel might put forward a brilliant argument, the fiction itself would still imitate the Mills and Boon mode. That exegesis would sit better in a cultural studies discipline. What I am saying is not that the Mills and Boon novel shouldn't exist, but that it does not fit easily into a university creative writing program given the skills many of us try to teach.

How we evaluate the literary product is, of course, related to how we define literature, and so is the next crucial topic when we consider creative higher degrees. In order to evaluate, academics and critics compare; that has traditionally been the basis of how we judge. Every time we read a set of essays we consciously or unconsciously set each one against every other one, or the set we read last semester or five years ago. We do have an ideal conception of what an A or a B is, at least in academic work. If we no longer have a canon, an ideal order in mind, then, how do we rank creative work? This is a much more complex issue than assessing projects in undergraduate writing topics with clearly defined requirements, such as exercises, class participation and final project. So I will let this question float answerless above the argument while I turn to more down-to-earth matters. Many degree guidelines do not ask for work to be "literature," they ask for it to be "of publishable quality." Is this criterion any clearer than asking that it be serious or "great" writing?

3 Publishable or Perishable

> "Production of a creative work of publishable quality."
> "A creative work at current arts industry standards."
> "A creative work that demonstrates the application of practical and theoretical processes in a publishable work."
> "A work completed to professional standards."

None of the above descriptions are exact quotations from any university's guidelines, but they summarise most of what I have read that relates to expectations about the creative product. What exactly do they mean? Is the difference between an academic evaluation of a creative work - that is, critics applying whatever theoretical tools they favour to a work produced in-house, instead of out in the public arena - and a commercial evaluation? But would a freelance editor assess a manuscript in the same way as a publisher?

That academics' criteria will vary from publishers' might be obvious, but it is worth pinpointing how. I think that academics would look for the same competent performance regarding expression and structure in a creative work as they would in an essay, plus they would expect some degree of originality in strategy and style. The best formal essays certainly have this. The audience of the formal essay, however, comprises intellectuals. The audience of the university-produced creative work (especially for a higher degree) does not. I refer here to the ultimate audience, not the supervisors or assessors in the first instance. Students and supervisors hope ideally that the creative work will eventually be published and so set free in the public arena. The audience, therefore, is the reading public.

Publishers' criteria have altered in the past fifty years, dictated by financial as well as cultural factors. Once, promising writers were taken on by firms that expected to have long-term relationships with them. Competence and some evidence of an original vision could often get a first novel published. In the past fifteen years in Australia, publishers have been subjected to quite different (mostly accounting) pressures. In many instances publishable means marketable in large numbers. Mark Macleod, until recently of Random House, had his own children's list that writers, critics and editors thought was highly successful. Apparently he wasn't selling enough for Random House's new German owners and he was replaced in mid-1998 (but hired by a competitor soon after).

So how large does a publisher think the potential sales of a book need to be to make it publishable? Are assessors to look for a novel that might sit comfortably on a supermarket shelf next to one of those hilarious and irresistible tabloids such as *Truth*? (I remember one such announcing that the Russians conditioned dwarf astronauts to withstand centrifugal force by training them in clothes dryers.) This type of novel would be commercial as far as certain publishers were concerned, and the author might be signed to a three-book deal. In today's marketplace, another author's novel might be remaindered and so the next not accepted, although the reader's report might hail it as a potential Miles Franklin winner.

Currently, poetry publishing is so precarious that many young writers consider self-publishing. Aside from established older poets (especially those on matriculation syllabi), those who can find publishers now tend to work in schools or can market themselves as personalities. Perhaps in the case of poetry, higher degree assessors could invent their own hypotheticals. If certain publishers were still interested in poetry, if this or that literary magazine still existed, they would be likely to accept this student's poems.

We need to investigate further, then, the terms that crop up in higher degree requirements - "publishable," "to current industry standards," "professional" - for they are not transparent. Professional implies a number of things: that the

person is serious about what they do; that they are competent, if not excellent; and that they follow their occupation not merely for pleasure, but for remuneration. The last can only be proven for a writer, however, when they begin to be published. As I have suggested, "publishable" in itself is a problematic term, because it depends upon the type of publisher and the target audience. What is implied in degree guidelines, but not stated, is publishable as "literary fiction" or "serious poetry" or "quality children's books."

Reviewers and avid readers of newspapers, articles and literary magazines frequently know what is being done in a particular area. That is another way of gleaning the current trends. Perhaps professional editors - especially freelance ones, who are independent - are most qualified to say what is publishable and what industry standards are. In other words, they can rank works in a practical, rather than an ideal sense. This process is more likely to gain students readers in the long run than comparing their novels or poems to canonical literature. In other words, editors understand the difference between what sells for non-literary reasons and what sells (or might not sell) because it is the best of its genre. Literary agents, too, might be a repository of this knowledge, because they assess countless manuscripts and attempt to market those they know will make them money and/or those they truly believe in.

For these reasons utilising at least one assessor who is not an academic and who currently works in the industry might be a good option, as my colleagues, Rick Hosking and Syd Harrex at Flinders University, began doing a number of years ago in an undergraduate topic. Alternatively, if editors or agents could not be used as examiners, they could be asked for a written report that examiners could consult when assessing the industry standard of the work. This option would be especially useful when the other examiners were not well-published writers themselves.

4 Uneasy Bedfellows: How Serious is the Relationship?

> The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes together, sometimes alternately within a poem.
> Like all Siamese twins, they dream of separation.

Margaret Atwood, *Two-Headed Poems*

There are obvious metaphors drawn from human relations that can illuminate the intense connection students have with their theses and that the components have with each other. First I will look at the relationship between the creative product and the research that, like an anxious parent, supports and explains it. Then I will scrutinise how our conceptualisation of this relationship affects how we weight each part and subsequently assess the whole.

At one end of the spectrum, the exegesis might bring to the conscious level what a student has done in a novel or poems. 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. It will cite others working in the field, discussing how the student's approach varies from that of his or her predecessors.

In practice, however, students will produce these components in different ways. One might come to a higher degree program having already written a substantial amount; for example, part of a collection of poems. The research component might allow the student to be more conscious of what he or she has been doing, and allow the writing of new poems in line with a plan. The research, then, will modify the creative work and vice versa throughout the period of study. In fact, the relationship in its most potent form allows writers to play the role of minor gods. During the course of creation they can, at any point, alter the developing body. Whatever the flaws after the birth, they know that they are responsible for them. They have determined the structure and character, not an arbitrary genetic configuration. They can console themselves knowing they can always tinker with the skeleton or flesh out a contour in their search for perfection, suitably guided by superior powers - their supervisors or editors.

We come now to the question of chronology, which complicates assessment. What happens when a student embarks on a higher degree having written most or all of the work or, in fact, having had it published already? Acceptance attests to the "publishable quality," but of course our evaluation of that acceptance is modified by the type of publisher. This scenario - where a student submits work already published - postulates a radically different connection between the creative and critical components. The exegesis functions as a confirmation of the author's beliefs about his or her work; it is not an academic record of the process.

The danger here is that the conceptual framework could be superimposed on the creative component. This depends, however, on the background of the individual, and might be appropriate for someone who has been a professional writer or teacher, intellectualising their processes for years. The fact remains, however, that the product is not the result of academic study; the student has really done half of the work already. I think this scenario merits debate. For the sake of fairness, a solution in this atypical situation might be to stipulate that the exegesis be longer than usual, more in line with a regular academic dissertation.

One practical issue, however, should be mentioned in this case; it concerns the judgments examiners must make. How does an examiner ask for revisions once a work is in print? I think that examiners might be reluctant to ask for changes since books are physical objects; they look finished. How would someone make revisions and then re-submit the book? I have no answer to this question as yet.

The next issue I wish to raise concerns the weighting of the creative product and the exegesis. In my experience, honours degrees give less weight to the creative portion than MAs or PhDs. In some cases the creative product is weighted at 60% and the critical 40%. This seems appropriate at the undergraduate level. Most of the creative work I have read for Honours theses is competent, but not necessarily publishable, except in student magazines or less prestigious journals. It seems unrealistic to expect all nineteen or twenty-year-olds to produce a novel, novella, poetry collection or play that would meet industry standards. Certainly some students could achieve this quality, but if examiners truly adhered to the dictum that the work be publishable as it stands, few students would receive their degrees. On the other hand, most could achieve some mastery of their craft, which can be taught by their instructors and demonstrated in their theses.

In the case of MAs and PhDs, however, the weightings fluctuate, pointing to the aberrant nature of mixed creative/research higher degrees. This indecisiveness has occurred because creative writers, both students and teachers, have slipped in the back door, trying to make a home for themselves given the funding conventions that exist. Students should be able to do creative higher degrees, but new MAs, such as Adelaide University's, are costly. In fact, I have had potential students admit that the only reason they are choosing to do the creative/research degree is that they can obtain funding for it. They really want to write and be edited while doing so.

We need, therefore, to have open debate about a reasonable balance in creative higher degrees. Perhaps the weighting should vary for each stage, acknowledging that by the time a student reaches the PhD level their creative work should be of a high order. Does it seem balanced, however, to have a creative product weighted at 80% and a 100-page dissertation at 20%? Again, in the real world, not all of the fiction or poetry produced at the PhD level will be publishable, in its entirety, in book form.

In addition, we need to debate our assessment criteria for the creative component thoroughly. Do we want in fact to ask for "publishable" work or work that meets "current arts industry standards?" This is not the same as asking for competent expression, some sense of style and a reasonable level of craft. What examiners are saying when they pass a creative thesis without revisions or minor revisions is that they believe that work is ready to face the public, without embarrassment. The more we weight the exegesis, therefore, the clearer we can be about what we expect and the less apprehensive about standards. Although research PhDs are supposed to present an original contribution to knowledge, not many of them will become books and no one expects them to. Students frequently break their dissertations up into articles and disseminate their original ideas that way.

Accordingly, I believe that 70 or 75% for the creative product at the PhD level accommodates the fact that traditional research or scholarship plays a significant role. The exegesis then functions as a kind of insurance policy in the academic context. It also acknowledges the special position of the writer as critic, which has a long history and which certainly does not only include writers who function in an educational milieu.

This exciting higher degree area is changing as I write, however. Already academics who are also creative writers are questioning the DETYA definition of research and that certainly is another way of approaching the creative higher degree dilemma. That debate, however, is outside this paper's scope. My suggestions are meant to offer practical strategies for both students and supervisors who are working together now and for examiners faced with an eclectic collection of submissions.

The exegesis and the creative product have developed within a traditional research higher degree structure, making them uneasy bedfellows. They have been thrown together due to circumstance, rather than choice. Yet they know each other intimately, each affecting the other during what can be a tempestuous relationship. Given that imaginative minds have created them, it isn't surprising that the balance might change over the course of study. For all the intellectual and spiritual wrestling, however, when they are finished, they rest under separate covers. Any writer would want the creative product to be the more successful, yet if the novel or poetry collection succeeds, it might send readers back to the theorisation. The ideal finale to their partnership might be to have them spend the rest of their lives together on a library shelf, each sending readers to the other.

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Notes and debate generated from this article

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Gaylene Perry

Jeri Kroll *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer*

Jeri Kroll *The Role of the Examniner: Scholar, Reviewer, Critic, Judge, Mentor*