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Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis

When required to couple a creative piece with a critical exegesis, a postgraduate researcher may be tempted to subvert the notion of the exegesis, to rupture it by slipping in subjective writings. Sometimes I write in the dark, by moon- or street-light. This reminds me of writing myself into a new work, into darkness. I think - is it - of Julia Kristeva's 1983 essay, 'Stabat Mater', which attempts to subvert scholarly writing with a personal text written around, into and through the theoretical material necessary for me. An exegesis may appear to frame or direct the reading of the creative piece, to switch on the overhead light. The student may feel trapped in a space between the impulse to create, when I come, and the institution. This paper considers the misgivings surrounding the exegetical requirement, seeking positive approaches to writing my exegesis?

The words *writing in the dark* have multiple meanings for me as a writer of fiction working within a university. They have personal resonances, conjuring up my own environment of inspiration: waking at night, images and ideas flowing on in the dark. I waver between getting up, switching on the light, and writing before the inspiration dissipates, distorted in sleep and dreams, or in lying still and letting the flow spend itself. I have found the latter most fruitful. Recently, my computer screen was faulty, and as I was in a fertile writing period, I resorted to typing with a blank screen, unable to see my text until I printed it. I wrote a segment that I loved, about two people forming a silent connection in front of a cinema screen. This writing into darkness reminds me of writing myself into a new work. It is an atavistic stage of writing, something originating a long time ago, an immersion in story, in imagination, that at first has little connection with marks on paper.

I am writing a novel as the major component of a doctoral thesis. The other component is a mandatory exegesis drawing upon literary theory that must relate in some way to my novel. The exegesis seems distant from the processes of writing I have just described, an anomaly in my personal concept of creative writing. This enforced requirement is one indication of the contentious position of the creative writer within Australian postgraduate research degrees. Here, I will discuss issues and questions relating to the creative-work-plus-exegesis model, and suggest possible directions for the future of such a model.

Writings

Paul Dawson points out that "the text produced in a Creative Writing class is not just a 'first order' practice available for critical scrutiny. It is already a dialogic engagement with theory, with language, with a range of social and cultural discursive formations" (Dawson 72). However, most Australian universities require a creative work such as a novel to be accompanied by an exegesis when submitted as a higher research degree thesis. The postgraduate researcher's creative text is acceptable only if it includes further treatment by its author in a more traditionally acceptable scholarly form.

Psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva considers the creation of literature to be a rupturing of the semiotic world into the symbolic, or the individual into the social or institutional space (Kristeva 1994, 62), and this can be usefully compared to the reception of creative writing in academic institutions.

When I first encountered the exegetical requirement during my honours year, I was attracted to the idea of writing a theoretical piece that had a *writerly* focus. I thought that to rupture my own theoretical text with creative writing would be a way of maintaining my focus as primarily a writer of fiction. I came across Kristeva's 1983 essay, 'Stabat Mater', a scholarly piece about the cult of the Virgin and other maternal discourses, with a personal text written around, into and through the theoretical material. It was noted for its physical presentation, with sections in bold and italics cutting into the text. I have used the essay in writing my abstract for this paper because Kristeva's essay is an overt example of a hybrid text, and I believe it demonstrates a point by Paul Dawson, about creative writing being used to further privilege theoretical writing over the creative (Dawson 72), which I will come to in a moment.

I now find 'Stabat Mater' unsatisfactory as a model, because the personal text is ultimately subordinate to the scholarly. It is clear from Kristeva's other writing, such as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, that the personal writing is the interruption into the perceived dominant mode of writing, and not vice versa. Kristeva claims that the semiotic -

the distinctive, the subjective - can only be voiced from within the symbolic - the social, institutional space. For Kristeva, in literature, "what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic" (Kristeva 1984, 62). This appears to place the semiotic in a powerful position, demonstrated by the associated volcanic imagery: rupture, eruption. But to quote Elizabeth Grosz, "Only men occupy this position because only men can acquire a guaranteed unified and stable position within the symbolic order" (Grosz 164). Kristeva's feminine rupturing can only be allowed in from the inside, and women have no real place there. Feminist theorist, Luce Irigaray, questions why women's writing must be seen as rupturing men's writing, heard only "as an undertone, a murmur, a rupture within discourse" (Grosz 174). And the writer of a literary work might reject the compulsory exegesis because ultimately she does not want to exist as a rupture, or hole, in literary studies.

I do not wish to unproblematically equate the creative with the feminine, but it is interesting to compare this perception of literature as rupture to creative writing in our universities. The writer can submit a creative piece for assessment, but this must be presented in a so-called scholarly framework; it must be accompanied by or include theoretical writing. Yet most of us now see that *all* writing is subjective, and by extension, all writing is fictional, and this makes it difficult for the literary researcher to continue assuming superiority over the literary author in a research situation.

Paul Dawson writes:

> If the breakdown of critical and non-fictional modes as meta-languages, and a rejection of epistemological relationships between these modes and an unquestionable truth, has seen them recognised as also involving 'creativity', this has not evened the intellectual plane between literary criticism and creative writing; it has further promoted the critical subject over the writer of fiction (Dawson 72).

This appears to be well supported, considering that higher degree candidates qualified primarily in literary studies sometimes submit theses that comprise a major creative component. The literary researcher may use creative writing to illustrate theory, such as in 'Stabat Mater', or simply decide to change their focus to creative writing at postgraduate level, despite that researcher having no formal qualification in creative writing or equivalent publication and experience. Conversely, the researcher in literary studies is never *required* to produce a creative piece in addition to the main body of the thesis. The student researching contemporary poetry is not asked to write a set of original poems, for example. Certainly, it may be argued that a creative writer might find writing an exegesis a rewarding experience that will feed into the creative work. Yet the weakness of this argument is revealed when the situation is reversed, and the suggestion made that a literary theorist might also find it fruitful to complete a component of creative writing as part of the thesis. While the suggestion has merit, most candidates at higher research degree levels wish to concentrate upon their chosen area of specialty and not necessarily branch out to related modes of writing that may indeed feed into the major component of the work and yet are equally as likely to be distracting.

An argument in support of the exegetical requirement is that the university is traditionally an institution of thought, philosophy, discourse. But in light of contemporary theory such as the postmodern, this type of suggestion is increasingly difficult to justify. The literary work is itself an engagement with thought, philosophy and discourse.

To make a critical exegesis compulsory for a creative writer is to privilege one kind of writing over another. Writing about *Possession*, novelist A.S. Byatt says: "I tried to find a *narrative shape* which would explore the continuities and discontinuities between the forms of nineteenth and twentieth century thought" [my italics] (Byatt 1991 6). Discourse presented within a *narrative shape* would seem to be no less worthy or reflexive than material presented overtly as theory or criticism. As part of the work on my novel, I have closely studied literary texts, many recommended by my supervisors. I have looked to Michael Ondaatje for inspiration on relationships and memory, to Ann-Marie Macdonald for narrative voice, to Toni Morrison on mothers, daughters, and sisters. Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is an extensive meditation on history, memory, and literature. Its treatment of Herodotus and Kipling weaves into the stories of the characters. The describing of the semi-destroyed books that Hana reads and annotates is as advanced an exploration of literature and reading as any to be found in a theoretical essay or thesis. But whether a novel treats literature, history, society, language, psychology, or utter nonsense, the principle of it being a complex discourse in a particular form remains the same.

Interpretations

So, from the fluid darkness of creative writing, is it necessary to switch on a glaring light in order to write an exegesis? My experiences with honours and postgraduate writing programs have in some ways represented a rude awakening. After completing a Bachelor of Arts with majors in Professional Writing and Literary Studies, I wished to continue developing my writing. The idea of writing a novel under the supervision of a professional author was tempting. Then I discovered the exegetical requirement.

I look to a dictionary and find no satisfaction. Exegesis: "explanation or critical interpretation of a text, especially of the Bible." (*Collins Concise Dictionary*) The definition goes on to the word's origins, from the Greek for *to interpret*

and *to guide*. But my greatest fear of following my novel with an exegesis is that the theory will guide, interpret, or frame the reading of my novel. An author might be expected to see a creative work as successful only if it included everything she wished to address. The reader may then take up the work and read and interpret as they will. But I can imagine my deflation if I were to turn the last page of a novel that had satisfied me, and then find following an exegesis written by the author and intended to guide, interpret, frame my reading of her novel. One of the requirements of the PhD thesis is that it be of publishable quality, a theoretical clause of course. But the creative work coupled with an exegesis has no model that I can think of in published works, other than antiquated texts, and certainly not of the kind where the author herself has written the exegesis.

In the words of Jeanette Winterson:

> It is a strange time; the writer is expected to be able to explain his or her work as though it were a perplexing machine supplied without an instruction manual. The question 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did. (Winterson 1995, 165)

Winterson continues this questioning throughout her essay, 'A Work of My Own'. She makes points, then slips in a one-sentence paragraph: "But I have said these things in *Sexing the Cherry*" (Winterson 1995, 169). "But I have said these things in *Art & Lies*" (Winterson 1995, 173). She emphasises that her choice of form is sometimes the narrative, and feels bewildered at being asked to express, essentially to repeat, her ideas in other forms.

If we recognise that thought appears in numerous guises, including fiction as theory and theory as fiction, then it follows that a mandatory exegesis can be superfluous, and even misleading, as it may falsely indicate a level of authenticity and a relationship to scholarship that is in fact highly contentious. An exegesis following a work of fiction might be read as a further layering of fiction, and if this is the case then it would seem that the purpose of the exegetical requirement is defeated.

Some postgraduate candidates include the compulsory theoretical component in the creative work itself. The acceptance of this practice suggests that only a particular kind of creative work, a kind that overtly addresses literary theory, can validly stand alone as research without exegetical treatment. A work such as Byatt's *Possession* might have been acceptable as a thesis. It explores the cult of the author, playfully comparing the literary researcher to a shonky spiritualist, and the literary archivist to someone obsessed with possessing artefacts as though these might transmit talent via osmosis. The novel engages at a complex level with theory and criticism. Another example could be Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*. However, literary writing of many kinds can and does address literary theory and literature in various ways that do not necessarily include the use of obvious themes and devices as do the works just mentioned.

I believe there is room for a *voluntary* component of theory. It may not be appropriate to follow the creative work with the theoretical component, or to have the two bound together within the same volume, or to call the component an exegesis.

Such a component could hopefully be a creative work in its own right, rather than a static reiteration of what has already been said. The writer could turn to advantage one of the problems with the requirement: the lack of definition or explanation. The definition of the exegesis has never been made clear to me. During my honours year, I asked every academic I came across to explain it to me. The recurring reaction was a turning away, a mumbling, occasionally a frank admission that *nobody really knew*, and to this day I have never been given a clear answer as to the definition, purpose and proposed models for the exegesis. The writer might create her own interpretation: a work which is useful for the writer and for teaching and practicing writing in general.

Directions

I return again to Paul Dawson's paper, which argues that the discipline of Creative Writing developed from within Literary Studies, and disputes "…the assumption that 'Creative Writing' is a practice which exists in the public sphere and has somehow been annexed by the academy" (Dawson 72). These comments are problematised by the existence of programs in Professional Writing, where links to publishing are paramount. Such courses perhaps reflect the increasingly vocational face of universities rather than being entities that have clearly developed from academic disciplines.

Dawson appears to be referring to the creative writing course that is part of, or is based upon, a wider degree in English. In my undergraduate degree, large numbers of mature-age students were enrolled; most of us had applied specifically for courses in Professional Writing. There was an expectation of tuition by professional authors and a primary focus on writing. A major in literary studies was not compulsory, although some argue that it should be, in undergraduate studies, in order to expose students to a wide range of literature. At postgraduate level, the

Professional Writing major appears to be engulfed by Literary Studies, as evidenced by the enforced component of literary theory or criticism. But at this level, a student needs to have the option of reserving every precious word of the thesis for creative writing. The student should be able to specialise, just as a student of history and languages, for example, may choose one area, or combine both, in postgraduate research.

As education becomes more expensive and job and publishing opportunities continue to be scarce, students are making specific demands of what their money is buying. Undertaking a Professional Writing program is no guarantee to publication, but students may approach such a course with different aims from those of a student in a degree of English that encompasses creative writing, and from a student primarily of Literary Studies. Whatever has been the position of creative writing within universities in the past, what matters is the situation now and in the future.

The changing realities of writing and the writing life demand continuing discussion, and this may be incorporated into theses by creative writers.

We move into the realm of theorising writing.

Susan Sontag wrote of Roland Barthes' work: "Writing registers new forms of dramatic stress, of a self-referring kind, writing becomes the record of compulsions and resistances to write. (In a further extension of this view, writing itself becomes the writer's subject)" (Sontag *xv*). Writing about writing itself may be useful for an author. For example, the cult of the author continues to grow, and ideas about the death of the author come under challenge as readings and festivals abound. Recent debates over the moral rights of screenwriters are another example of the growing public voices of authors. Writers are expected to have public relations skills, to be able to present readings and talks. Readers are interested in the life and methods of the writer. Whether or not we agree with the promotion of the author as commodity, the discussion of these and other writing-related issues is important. Writing courses will need to continue addressing these concerns, and some writers may choose to place such discussions in higher degree research.

The following examples of approaches to writing-theory represent starting points or inspirations for writers seeking models for their exegetical higher degree work.

Film-maker and theorist Trinh Minh-ha provides an example of writerly theory in the introductory chapter to *Woman, Native, Other,* interspersing reflections on creative writing with theoretical concepts about Third World women.

A writer's journal might be used as a place for conceiving writing-theory. I wonder about the idea of a thesis that is part creative text and part writer's notebook. A published example is Beverley Farmer's *A Body of Water*, partly the writer's journal, with completed and developing works appearing throughout. It contains no theoretical material in the current scholarly sense. But 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.

The subjective essay is increasingly popular with creative writers, and could be a suitable model for a variation of the exegesis. Fine examples can be found in *Columbus' Blindness*, the volume of winning essays from Island magazine's essay competition. Well-known writers continue to publish essays, many of which discuss writing itself. Ironically, Ben Okri, in an essay entitled 'The Joys of Storytelling III', writes: "The great essays on storytelling are done in stories themselves" (Okri 123). The story on storytelling is as valid a discourse as the essay or thesis on storytelling, and some writers will ultimately find one form more satisfying than another. And if we consider the *history* of storytelling, it appears that what we usually think of as creative forms have been used to analyse cultural production for much longer than so-called scholarly forms.

While reading Robert Dessaix's *Night Letters*, I was entertained by the fictional footnotes supposedly written by an editor and archivist. I was reminded of the World Wide Web, of the use of hot links to connect a net-surfer to different sites according to their interests. This could be a model for someone who wished to write a creative piece and then create footnotes or hot links that led somewhere else, perhaps to other kinds of writing. Interesting reflections can occur within a work that includes so-called scholarly features - footnotes, cross-references, annotations - in fictional forms. Another example is Carmel Bird's novel, *Red Shoes*, produced in both book and multimedia CD formats. The first-person voice of the main narrative also narrates the footnotes or hot links, resulting in a playing on the notion of footnotes as traditionally being a reliable and truthful feature in writing. When creative writing incorporates such features, hierarchies of authenticity between various kinds of writing are immediately destabilised. However, if such devices were used only to make a creative work suitable for assessment, then the work might resemble Kristeva's eruptions from within.

I agree with Paul Dawson that there is space for critical work that does not necessarily relate to the writer's own creative piece (Dawson 77-8). Yet to deliberately place a work that calls itself critical or theoretical alongside a work that calls itself creative can produce provocative dialogues between those works, and this is a point that a creative writer working within a higher degree research model might keep in mind.

Part of my own exegesis involves tracing the genealogies of my novel. I reflect upon the writing of the novel in the context of writing experiences and of other works that have contributed to its development, leading into a wider discussion about the situations of creative writing and writers within academic institutions. While such a treatment may still frame the reading of my creative work to some extent, I am attempting to turn the creative-work-plus-exegesis model upon itself and use my position as a writer working *within* the model to make observations *about* the model and to suggest possible alternatives.

The concept of the exegesis needs to be reshaped until it is more compatible with the creative component of the thesis, and assessment of whether or not a compulsory exegesis can be enforced justifiably should continue. But with imagination, an optional theoretical component can be used powerfully by a creative writer. In reflection of this, I quote Jeanette Winterson: "the most powerful written work often masquerades as autobiography. It offers itself as raw when in fact it is sophisticated. It presents itself as a kind of diary when really it is an oration" ('Semiotics' 105).

Gaylene Perry is currently reading for her PhD at Deakin University.

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