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Deferring the ‘main’ point: Teaching ‘narrative desire’ as an alternative creative practice

Abstract:

This paper examines the place of twentieth-century literary theory in Creative Writing pedagogy. It suggests that literary theory has become embedded in Creative Writing programs, despite the fact that many theories seem opposed to the concept of the author or to writing practice. It proposes that if we are to use these theories productively, we need to adapt both the theories themselves and our teaching practices.

The paper outlines the ways in which I—in my teaching in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, University of Wollongong—have approached the teaching of two post-structuralist psychoanalytic concepts: Brooks’ notion of ‘narrative desire’ and Barthes’ concept of the ‘dilatatory space’. ‘Narrative Desire’ is a reading practice that values deferral and displacement over fixed structure; to focus on the ‘dilatatory space’ is to value the middle rather than the end of a narrative, to emphasise delays, digressions and deferrals rather than resolutions. I argue that these theories can be productive for writers as well as readers. The paper offers ways to apply the theories to creative practice, using ‘enminding’, an authentic learning approach: to harness what Clayton calls ‘desire as a creative force’ (Clayton 1989, 35).

Biographical note:

Dr Joshua Lobb is a Lecturer in Creative Writing in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, University of Wollongong. Scholarly publications and papers include: ‘I could just walk out of this inconvenient story’: Narrative Possibility in the Fairy Tales of A. S. Byatt’ (UEA, 2009), ‘Degrees of Relation’: Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt’ (ibidem-Verlag, 2009); ‘But if the author is dead, what are we doing here?’: Teaching Critical Theory in a Creative Writing Program’ (AAWP, 2008) and (with Dr Malcolm Ryan) ‘*The Tale of Peter Rabbit: A Case Study in Story-Sense Reasoning*’ (AAAI, 2007). He is the writer of the plays *Wilde Tales* and *Still at Aulis*, and the short story ‘I forgot my programme so I went to get it back’ (Bridport Prize runner-up 2009).

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creative writing—literary theory—pedagogy

Introduction: The incorporation of literary theory into creative writing

Ten or so years ago, Kevin Brophy proposed that Creative Writing programs align themselves more closely to English/Literary Criticism programs. Specifically, he declared that Creative Writing academics have a responsibility to teach 'social-theoretical analyses of literature': in other words, literary theories like post-structuralism, psychoanalytic literary criticism, postmodernism, and theories of marginality (1998, 216; 203). Creative Writing is a rapidly-changing discipline: there can be no doubt that theories of this kind have indeed been incorporated into our discourse. Even a cursory glance at the subject descriptions of Australian Creative Writing programs reveals that we teach modules on deconstruction, Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism (Swinburne University's 'The Writerly Self', Flinders University's 'Introduction to the Creative Arts', UOW's 'Structuralism to the Postmodern', 2009), and statements like 'issues central to the subject include...the theorisation of text and textuality within...post-structuralist formation' and 'you will explore recent debates in theories of narrative...and learn to use narrative theory'(UTS subject 'Text and Context'; Curtin Graduate Diploma in Communication and Cultural Studies, 2009). It seems that literary theory has, as Peter Barry puts it, 'enter[ed] into the intellectual bloodstream' of our discipline and become 'a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum'(1995, 1).

Nevertheless, I suggest that there is still a tension between Creative Writing as a discipline and literary theory, particularly the ideas promoted by post-structuralism: indeed, these theories actually seem opposed to the concept of the author and to the writing process. Amanda Boulter explains that the theories can be seen to work against 'the literary value of writers' (2004, 136); Paul Dawson goes further, describing them as 'antagonistic' (2005, 192;194). If we are to incorporate twentieth-century literary theories into the discipline, then, we need to find ways to approach—or even adapt—them in order to make them relevant to writing practice. As Barry puts it: 'theory cannot succeed...unless we fashion it into a student-centred syllabus'; if we are to do this in a Creative Writing context, we need to look for theory 'we can use, not something which will use us' (1995, 3;8).

I believe that many of these theories provide opportunities for writers to interrogate their writing process and produce new works. They offer ways of writing that resist 'mainstream' agendas: that allow for the voices of the 'margin' to be heard or even offer an alternative to 'mainstream' writing structures. Theories like feminism, post-colonialism and Marxism have exposed the cultural implications of the writing process, and suggested ways that writers may overcome ideological control; theories like postmodernism and post-structuralism challenge conventional narrative structures by offering new structures (or anti-structures) for writing. I submit that if we are to encourage students to become productive writers we need to allow them to explore other narrative models.

This paper is a continuation of the work I presented at the AAWP conference in 2008. Both papers outline some of the strategies I have attempted to 'use' twentieth-century literary theories in a Creative Writing context; in particular, the approaches I have taken when teaching the more 'antagonistic' theories. My paper last year explored the

ways that Derrida's notion of the aporia—which promotes a space in which 'the very project [of writing]...becomes impossible'—can be manipulated by writers to construct texts with multiple 'possible' meanings (Lobb 2008, 6; Derrida 1993, 12). In order to facilitate a productive engagement with the theory, I promoted two essential shifts in the way literary theory is approached. Firstly, I argued for a pedagogical shift. My approach draws upon the notion of 'authentic learning', where information is 'transformed' through discussion and application to practice (Herrington and Herrington 2006, 6). Secondly, and perhaps more radically, I suggested an intellectual shift. As writers, we do not need to present literary theory in a passive way: we can respond to, challenge and even manipulate the frames post-structuralism has constructed for us, so that it serves writers as well as readers. We can, as Boulter describes it, 'critique the way it has marginalised [the writer's] aesthetic questions' (2004, 140).

This paper outlines the way I have approached the teaching of psychoanalytic literary theory: in particular, Peter Brooks' exploration of 'narrative desire' and Roland Barthes' notion of the 'dilatatory space'. I propose that these theories are productive because they offer ways of thinking about narrative outside conventional writing models. New students tend to look for 'big picture blueprints' for writing, like the conventional Aristotelian arc (Brooke 1989, 407); 'narrative desire' may allow for students to think less about structure and more about other writing strategies. Before I present my teaching plan, I will briefly summarise my pedagogical position. I will define the concept of 'enminding' (Tochon 2000), an 'authentic learning' approach that immerses students within a theoretical discourse. I will then discuss the ways in which I have built upon Brooks' and Barthes' theories to draw out some of the practical applications they may have for writers. From here, I will discuss the application of these concepts in a seminar situation, using a creative text and writing activities as a way of engaging students with the theory.

Approaching literary theory: 'Enminding' as a pedagogical model

The presentation of literary theory in Creative Writing tends to follow the traditional English/Literary Studies model. Granted, some Creative Writing programs opt for a seminar structure, which provides a space for discussions on literary theory and of students' writing may intermingle (see, for example, UniSA, UTS). However, many institutions still use the conventional lecture/tutorial divide (Curtin, Flinders, UNSW). My own institution (UOW) takes the divide even further: 'theory' is taught in a strand separate to 'practical' workshops. The problem here is that literary theories are sometimes presented in an 'abstract and decontextualised' form (Herrington and Oliver 2000, 23). Herrington and Oliver explain: 'when learning and context are separated, knowledge itself is seen by learners as the final product of education rather than a tool to be used dynamically to solve problems' (23). If we are to 'use' literary theory we need to devise teaching approaches that link it directly to the problems faced by writers. As Bridwell-Bowles puts it: education 'represent[s] our visions of culture, and we need new processes and forms if we are to express [new] ways of thinking' (1992, 349).

One such approach is Tochon's 'enminding' activity, a form of 'authentic learning'. As I noted in my previous paper (Lobb 2008), Tochon's concept is adapted from the word 'embodying', but applied to an intellectual engagement with a topic. It requires students to analyse an idea by immersing themselves within it, becoming 'submerged in the mind of the discipline' (Tochon 2000, 336). The aim is to allow students to 'experience' the impulses of the theory: as Middleton puts it, students 'place themselves personally inside the...theory, institution, or set of social relations...that is the topic of inquiry' (2005, 515). A useful analogy here is the process of imaginatively inhabiting a creative text. When one reads, one enters into an intellectual space provided by a writer: one might attempt to experience the problems encountered by the characters or even negotiate several opinions (proffered by the characters) about the meaning of the work. As Fitzsimmons perceives, reading fiction requires 'a conversation between the world of the text and that of its readers' (2006, 162-163). The 'enminding' approach operates in a similar way. Borthwick assesses that, in this context, learning 'comes from the connection between a student's experience and the disciplinary 'mind'' (Borthwick et al. 2007, 16): as critical readers, we navigate the space produced by the theory, interacting and cooperating with its key concepts. The focus here is not on 'controlling' the information through the learning of theoretical 'facts', but on exploring the possibilities of the theory: they are not 'knowing', rather they are 'experiencing' the topic. By allowing for a student to invest in the theory on this level, students may begin to draw more personal connections between theory and their own creative practice. As Felman puts it, the 'enminding' approach is 'interested...in the capacity of [students] to *transform themselves in function of the newness of that information*' (quoted in Summers-Bremmer 2001, 667).

'Using' literary theory: Adapting 'narrative desire' to a creative writing context

As I have noted, several literary theories—at least at first glance—seem to have little to contribute to the process of writing. Brooks' theory of 'narrative desire', for instance, focuses on the reader's desires rather than the writer's. Textual desire occurs because the reader wants to reach the resolution of a narrative: 'the usual structure of desire in the novel', Brooks posits, 'is oriented towards the end' (1984, 49). Unfortunately, no resolution is ever able to fulfil the possible solutions envisaged by the reader: desire is found in what Freud calls 'the difference...between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demande*d and that which is actually *achieved*' (quoted in Brooks 1984, 54-55). Brooks draws attention to Freud's notion of 'unsatisfied epistemophilia': that is, the frustration of our desire to know something completely (Freud 1957, 77; Brooks 1984, 47). As Wright puts it: 'like a graph that approaches zero, but never reaches it, [a resolution]...will never match up' to the desires of the reader (1989, 156).

Barthes' exploration of 'dilatatory space' (1974) also concentrates on the reader, and, as such may seem to have little relevance for writers. Barthes argues that reading is an act exploring a text, searching out the evidence which may reveal or unveil its meaning. He considers two modes of reading to negotiate this exploration. The first is

intent on reaching the resolution: searching for the 'clues' as quickly as possible. Barthes compares this watching a striptease: each garment is revealed in a predictable manner, so that when the reader reaches the point of satisfaction s/he is always disappointed. Barthes states that the striptease becomes 'a reassuring ritual which negates the flesh', which is the desired object (1972, 84). In the same way, the ending of a text negates the desire for the resolution of it. Barthes observes: 'the game is ended...[but] the discourse can do nothing more than fall silent' (1974, 188). The second mode of reading ignores the resolution, and looks for a deferral of satisfaction. Again, Barthes compares this to voyeurism, but of a different kind. He declares: 'Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where garment gaps?*...It is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of appearance-as-disappearance' (1975, 9-10). Clearly, Barthes favours this way of traversing the text: as Brooks, notes, Barthes celebrates 'the middle as detour...as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text' (Brooks 1984, 107-8).

As writers, how might we respond to these theories? I propose that we need to perform what Bourdieu calls an 'epistemological break' and adapt them to serve our purposes (1988, 7). We need to shift the theory away from its emphasis on the reader, and consider the implications for writers. The desire to reach the resolution, after all, is present in the text because we write in structures that encourage this desire (see Brooke 1989 for further discussion). As writers, we could devise writing strategies that resist 'narrative desire' or even foster alternative reading practices. Such an approach would emphasise the potential of desire, rather than its satiation. It may promote creative practices that value delay, deferral and displacement over fixed structure: processes that allow for '[a] pressure *toward* meaning, [but] which is never pinned down or captured' (Brooks 1984, 56). In fact, these impulses are part of the theoretical discussions on 'narrative desire': what Clayton calls 'desire as a creative force' (1989, 35).

Indeed, writers could even 'use' Brooks' redefinition of Freud's notion of forepleasure. Despite his assertion that our 'epistemophilia' can never be satisfied by a fictional text, Freud does concede that reading may give a kind of satisfaction through the process of promising pleasure: what he calls 'bribes' that are 'offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure' (Freud 1972, 42). Brooks argues that the 'bribe' acts as a kind of fetish: a substitute for satisfaction that becomes more pleasurable than the 'real' object of desire. Brooks comments: 'the substitute [pleasure]...comes to be invested with all the curiosity originally directed towards [the desired object]' (1994, 30). Brooks suggests that an investment in forepleasure might dispel the compulsion towards the end point, allowing the writer to explore 'a whole rhetoric of advance toward and retreat from the goal or end, a formal zone of play' (1994, 29). I argue that this statement speaks to writers as well as readers: we could devise narratives that 'advance' and 'retreat': we could promote texts which 'impel...the narrative forward while never quite giving access to that object' (1993, 123).

As writers, we could favour models which focus on what Brooks calls an endlessly-deferred operation of 'delays, feints, enigmas' (1994, 31). We could devise alternative practices: develop texts that follow cyclical or even multiple pathways. We could

experiment with texts that attempt to remain in ‘the textual middle...all the while perversely delaying, returning backwards in order to put off the promised end, and perhaps to assure its greater significance’ (Brooks 1994, 29-30). We could play with digressive narratives: ones which ‘seek to advance towards the discharge of the end, yet all the while perversely delaying...in order to put off the promised end’ (Brooks 1994, 29-30). We could even invent narratives that reject resolution altogether: texts which, as Brooks describes, are ‘smooth surface[s] on which [the satisfaction of] desire cannot take hold’ (1984, 57). In the next section, I will discuss ways in which I explored these possible writing approaches in a Creative Writing lecture, through a series of ‘enminding’ activities.

Applying literary theory: Teaching ‘narrative desire’ in a creative writing context

I constructed my activities with two aims. First, to explore the conventional approaches to ‘narrative desire’: that is, to explore the ‘disappointment’ of conventional narrative for the reader. Second, and more important, to consider the ways the theories could be applied to the act of writing. With this in mind, I constructed a series of ‘scaffolded’ tasks: the first few activities would place students in the position of the reader; the last would ask students to construct writing practices that might subvert the disappointment.

Eluned Summers-Bremmer has pointed out that ‘learning [is] being taken by surprise, which is by no means always pleasant’ (2001, 646). Before the class, students were provided with the ‘locked-door’ thriller, Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’. However, the version given was incomplete: as they turned to last page of the photocopy, students saw that the resolution had been blacked out and replaced with the statement:

The ending of this story has been CENSORED. However, as Dupin says, ‘puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture’ (Poe 1998, 141).

MAKE A HYPOTHESIS: WHO IS THE MURDERER?

In class, we discussed the various possible solutions: one student proposed that the victims were murdered by the witnesses who broke the front door down; another that—since we were in Poe territory—that the room was haunted; another that the narrator himself must have undertaken the murder and was holding back the essential information. This discussion was unstructured, simply ‘exploratory talk’ (Van Boxtel et al 2001, 313): there was ‘no summarizing question or topic for the investigation...students needed to work out exactly what they were required to do’ (Herrington and Oliver 2000, 35). After five or six hypotheses, I divided the class into teams to investigate the murder: to find evidence to prove the conjecture. I wanted students to be invested in the resolution—to want to satisfy their own ‘narrative desires’. The students unearthed many suspicious actions and found motives to explain these. I then exposed the real murderer: everyone was shocked to discover that the murderer does not satisfy their complex imaginings, but is an agentless, motiveless, non-intellectual, non-supernatural orang-utan. There was an obvious

disparity between the multifarious, rich expectations and the singular, disappointing resolution. The emphasis here was on experiencing 'unsatisfied epistemophilia': the disappointment from the majority of the students was palpable. From this position of 'enminding' the problem, I hoped that the students would become more intent on finding a creative solution.

Fortunately, Summers-Bremmer has also pointed out that 'a sense of possibility may often be preceded by a crisis' (2001, 644). Since the 'enminding' approach emphasises exploration over finished product, though, it was not simply a matter of providing students with a writing model. The intention was not to fix on one solution, but to experiment within the topic area. The method used was what Van Boxtel calls 'cumulative talk': 'the accumulation and integration of ideas' (Van Boxtel et al 2001, 313). Theory was introduced, but it was applied directly to the students' experiences: for example, they were given Freud's phrase 'unsatisfied epistemophilia' to explain their frustration with Poe's ending. Students were given the following tasks:

In Pairs:

—identify a narrative text (either studied in the Creative Writing Program or from your own reading) which you think resists 'unsatisfied epistemophilia'.

—extrapolate from this a possible writing model: define its key properties and its narrative structure.

If you're stuck, you may want to re-read Brooks' essay 'Narrative Desire' [provided in the Subject Reader].

The first part of this task required students to 'build on the known' (Biggs 2003, 75): to engage with the theory in a practical, experiential sense. Texts analysed in previous classes include *Tristram Shandy*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Jazz* and *Bad Education*. Students had had personal responses to these texts: I wanted them to incorporate theoretical ideas into their reactions. The second part asked students to extract practical writing approaches from a theoretical text, and thus connect the two.

The models proffered were varied:

- a cyclical text, like Coetzee's *Foe*, which 'violates the usual structure of desire in the novel, which is oriented towards the end' (Brooks 1984, 49)
- a fragmented text, like Moorhouse's *The Americans, Baby*, in which the narrative gaps provide 'points of suspension' where the reader must 'fill in the blanks' (Brooks 1984, 49)
- a digressive text, like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which 'seek[s] to advance towards the discharge of the end, yet all the while perversely delaying...in order to put off the promised end' (Brooks 1994, 29-30)
- an endless text—the Shahrazad model—which is 'generative rather than directive' (Hejinian 2000, 45)

From here, I needed students to manipulate textual properties themselves in order to uncover other narrative possibilities: to apply the theory to writing. In the last task, then, students were asked to rewrite Poe's short story using the model they devised.

The application of the 'enminding' approach its explicit here: the task put the theoretical ideas into practice and implicated the students own work directly. Students had immersed themselves in the theory to the extent that they can 'bring the discipline into their subjective experience' (Borthwick et al. 2007, 14). Note, though, that the class did not operate as a writing workshop: I wanted to avoid questions on how well the students 'controlled' the narrative or how 'successful' their texts were. Students were not being assessed on the quality of the work, but were asked to experiment within the theoretical field and to see what eventuated. Indeed, many of these re-writes did not 'work', in the conventional sense: Poe's plot depended on a resolution so much that an attempt to resist it destroyed the narrative. This discovery led to a productive discussion about the relationship between action and narrative style. The activity, then, produced several outcomes: by immersing themselves in the theories of 'narrative desire', the students not only engaged with the theory as readers, but also as writers: they discovered alternative narrative approaches and came to understand their craft in a more complex way.

Conclusion: The position of literary theory in creative writing

It is not surprising that some writing students—and even writing teachers—resist literary theory. A new writer, insecure of his or her craft, may balk at a subject module named 'The Death of the Author' and its Implications' (part of Swinburne University's 'The Writerly Self' course (2009)). However, this paper has suggested the benefits of exploring theories like this. By adapting literary theories to serve their purposes, students may begin to explore other possible kinds of writing outside the 'mainstream'; through this, students may begin to realise the interrelation between literary theory and writing practice. As Summers-Bremmer declares, literary theory 'has a unique power to renew practice' (2001, 668-669).

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