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Dealing with the Creative/Critical Divide; these men as readers simply cannot know what it is to write

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the contested or dual role of the creative writing researcher within the academic environment. By examining the opinions of creative writers with regard to critical theorists, and the reverse, the case will be made that an unnecessary binary is forced on creative researchers. This binary, making the writer choose whether to focus on creative or critical output, cannot be productive for the writer in academia and so a third option will be proposed, a means by which to confront the continual oscillation between these two poles. A methodology is suggested, and explored, which engages with both the creative and critical aspects of this specific form of research in an equal and cyclical manner. In order to explore the application of this methodology, the author's own research into a project exploring current literary theory acts as a case study, ultimately leading to a metamodern understanding of this desire to occupy both roles, despite the seeming impossibility of such.

Keywords:

Academic Writing, Creativity, Critical Theory, Criticism, Experimentation, Writing

I want to focus in this paper on a particular anxiety that has been hounding my work as a Creative Writing researcher, and one which I feel reveals a schism that writers are still struggling to come to terms with. In my research I have often been confronted with the dual nature of the creative researcher in academia. Often this means choosing one particular side of a divide in deciding to focus on either the creative aspects or the critical research without intersection. I believe, however, that this particular binary is more damaging to both practices and only furthers the stigma attached to both academics and creatives with regards to the other. Malcolm Bradbury, in his essay 'Graceful Combinations', encapsulates this issue:

In Britain, creative writing has often had a suspect reputation amongst academics, and is sometimes thought of as rather like playing in the sand in primary school, perhaps good in encouraging self-expression, but adding little in the way of knowledge, experience or, of course, theory. (1993: 62)

In contrast, Stephen King, in his autobiography-cum-advice book *On Writing*, states that 'a good deal of literary criticism serves only to reinforce a caste system which is as old as the intellectual snobbery it nurtured' (2000: 161). What both these writers highlight is an outward mistrust, or at least division, which makes itself apparent in opinions of academics and writers towards one another. Academics see creative writing as an irrelevant developmental discipline, as described by Bradbury, while creatives see academics and literary theory as snobbish or elitist, as described by King. Though written about the state of writing in 1993 and 2000 respectively, some of the opinions expressed by these writers can still be felt today and indeed, in the conduct of my PhD in creative writing I have had to deal with similar sentiments. There seems to be disunion in the role of Creative Writing within the academy; whether theory

matters to creative writers or if creative writing matters to the development of theory. Other writers have felt the effects of this divide and have commented upon it, or have even taken a stance in terms of a solution. What has become increasingly apparent about these writers, though, is that each, in attempting to attain some form of resolution, falls quite heavily on one side of the divide or the other.

On one side of the rift, we have writers such as China Miéville, Mark Z. Danielewski and Vladimir Nabokov, whose writing seems to suggest the importance of literary theory: Miéville, in *Embassytown*, creates a text experimenting with ideas of signifier/signified; Danielewski's *House of Leaves* works as a commentary on academic practice and textual production; and Vladimir Nabokov similarly creates a text presented primarily through academic criticism in *Pale Fire*. Meanwhile B.S. Johnson's narrator, in *The Unfortunates* (2009), writes with a decidedly more negative agenda about academic critics, claiming that 'these men as readers simply cannot know what it is to write.' Agreeing with Johnson, Susanna Clarke, in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, pastiches academics as magicians who have 'never cast the smallest spell' (2005: 3). DBC Pierre in *Ludmilla's Broken English* (2006) also critiques literary criticism via scattered references to postmodern thought as inapplicable to contemporary reality. What seems clear is that neither theorists nor creative writers are able to agree on the relationship between the critical and the creative. There is a clear polar opinion presented here, between regarding criticism and theory as something entirely positive or wholly negative, causing writers to take a stance in order to come to terms with the divide; on the one hand, some writers choose to include theoretical material in their creative work, while others represent theory in a negative or satirical light. It is this side of the particular divide that I want to focus on; the role of

creativity within academia and how to engage positively with the role of creative writing and research.

Personally, the general feeling from other writers, and my own experiences within the academy, is that writers are still considered outside the tradition of 'proper' academia, but the prevalence of postgraduate courses in creative writing suggests that we are somehow 'allowed' into the field. The question naturally arises of where each writer fits on this creative/critical divide. How much should we tend towards working as creative or academic writers? Should literary criticism be derided, as Johnson, Clarke, and Pierre do within their novels, or embraced much like the works of Miéville, Danielewski and Nabokov? I myself have been torn between these disparate poles, between the need to comment academically on my research and the need to write. This is exacerbated, or perhaps exemplified, by the standard practice of the dual supervisor method within the PhD; I have a separate creative and critical supervisor, both of whom make separate demands about the focus of my research. These anxieties over where to focus are particularly well articulated by Scott Lynch (author of the Gentleman Bastard series). In an online interview, Lynch states that:

It's fairly common for writers to be afflicted with two simultaneous yet contradictory delusions, the burning certainty that we're unique geniuses and the constant fear that we're witless frauds who are speeding towards epic failure. (Alpin 2011)

This is especially true when considering the role of creative writers in academia. There is the fear that the opinions of creative writing and its separation from criticism and academia are well founded, that we are seen as - or even actually are - the 'witless fraud,' the cuckoo in the critical nest, sitting idly playing in Bradbury's aforementioned sandpit.¹ As a creative

and critic, I have found myself torn between these poles, occupying a constantly shifting ground between or else held endlessly teetering on the boundary between, unsure of where or how to focus my efforts. It has been a very both–neither experience of whether to continue with work on the critical or the novel component of the thesis.

Detouring backwards slightly, I realise that half of the novel examples given earlier were metafictional, that is, novels which comment on their own production, which flaunt their artificiality and play with atypical conventions to highlight or question them. The reason behind this choice was not merely that this is my main area of research, but that I find *poioumenon*ⁱⁱ particularly useful when considering this divide. It is useful to examine novels which point to their own construction and which flaunt their influences, academic or otherwise, and overtly dramatize this divide. Whilst reading a collection of works by Kurt Vonnegut, an author famous for employing metafictional devices, I stumbled upon a particularly pertinent comment that became increasingly significant:

“It’s very simple. There are two sorts of artists, one not being in the least superior to the other. But one responds to the history of his or her art so far, and the other responds to life itself.” (2007: 135)

This seems to perfectly epitomise the perceptions of the divide. It describes the tear between academically commenting on the history of the literature, critically assessing it, and creatively writing literature that reflected life itself. If one were to align with a purely academic perspective, the work would be all history. If one were to align oneself purely with creativity, the work would only be a response to the pressures of life. But we, creatives in academia, are not purely either. We occupy a hybrid ground, struggling with this strange binary, because academic

creative writing *isn't* the same as any other degree (just look at the forms of the thesis) and it shouldn't be. We have different freedoms, different responses to the same stimuli, different methods for analysis. So, if we occupy this hybrid ground of both creative and critical thought, then why should we be compelled to choose a single side on which to fall?

Why should creatives not choose both sides? Instead, why not choose to comment on both the history of the art and life itself simultaneously, to contribute to theory from within our sandpits? As academics and writers we are placed in a perfect position to find and occupy this middle ground, a position that does not favour one method or the other, but which perfectly comments on both. This is a third stance, one that is not for or against, nor snapping between these two poles, but instead commenting equally on both history and life, both criticism and creativity. Would this be a tenable stance, however, and what would it mean in practice? As a PhD researcher in creative writing should I strive to be this academic creative? (And even then, should that be 'creative academic'?)ⁱⁱⁱ Personally I believe it is not only tenable, but achievable. I propose this as one way to deal with the creative/critical divide, with the schism of opinions within the craft. I suggest that we strive to become writers who comment equally on literary tradition and its relation to life itself, as we are in the prime position to do. Though this may seem as though it can be taken for granted, the emphasis should be placed on the idea of equality, on the maintenance of that middle ground where equal credence is given to both parties; it is not a disadvantage to be a child of these two worlds, but an advantage to be able to observe and comment on both.

How, then, to achieve this? In what way could we attain this hybrid third option of not constantly moving uncertainly back and forth, but calmly accepting our position and the opportunities it grants. 'Through criticism,' Keith Hopper (2009:

3) writes, ‘we can discover cultural ideology, and the way that literature’s slice-of-life slices into our own lives.’ So, too, agrees Malcom Bradbury (1993: 63), who writes that ‘the good writer is the good reader, and needs some contact with the literary tradition and the current debates of criticism.’ In combination, Hopper and Bradbury suggest that criticism should be a point of contact which informs us of the cultural ideology that surrounds the slices of life that slip from text into reality. What is needed, in light of this, is a circuitous model of thought. Dominique Hecq provides us with an interesting starting point for this model:

[...] for creative writing, there is a difference between theory that triggers and produces creative work and theory that informs creative work. In certain contexts theory can function as a painting can to inspire creativity, but that is not the same thing as having theory that becomes integrated with the work or that functions in a way so as to produce new knowledge. In order to inform the creative work and produce new knowledge, theory needs to resonate with the emotions as well as the intellect. In other words it needs to ‘hook up’ in something in the unconscious by immersion in theory. (2013: 181)

Though I believe this a wonderful explanation of the process, I want to suggest that one way in which to deal with the creative/critical divide is to think of the creative academic(/academic creative) as one who is triggered by theory to produce something which informs the critical theory itself. This is not a separation of these processes, but an amalgamation of them. For example, a painting, to borrow Hecq’s image, which would inspire the creation of a painting which would inform the creation of further paintings. It is this circular process, the theory which inspires the work, which furthers the

theory, which inspires the work, which furthers the theory- ad infinitum(/nauseam). This is the opportunity uniquely afforded to the creative academic. The suggestion here is not that the objective should be to continue with the aim of writing a postmodern, or even post-postmodern, novel - far from it. As Robert Olen Butler writes:

Please get out of the habit of saying that you've got an idea for a short story. Art does not come from ideas. Art does not come from the mind. Art comes from the place where you dream. Art comes from your unconscious; it comes from the white-hot centre of you. (2005: 13)

To some extent, I agree with this statement. As creative academics we should not move forward with the idea to write the theory as a story. The aim should be to create texts informed by the theory which aim to expand upon the theory, not a thinly veiled theoretical diatribe. I disagree that 'art does not come from the mind', but I do believe, to some extent, that there is cogency in the idea that art comes from 'the place where you dream.' Think, for example, of the idea of inspiration. It is a romanticised, though not entirely inaccurate, picture that is often painted of the writer struck by divine inspiration seemingly from the ether, inspired by some midnight muse that demands they scramble for the handy notepad in order to quickly write down those ideas that arise apparently at random. Or, in a slightly less melodramatic way, as Hecq continues:

Research itself, I contend, proceeds from [a] crystallisation as thoughts are articulated more consciously according to what might be called a methodology of active consciousness whereby knowledge emerges from the unknown to the known [...] new knowledge is produced 'out of sync' from a

dialectical process between consciousness and the unconscious. (2013: 181)

Hecq suggests that new knowledge comes from this dialectical process, which I agree with completely. I believe, however, that this is not just a process that can be concerned with furthering new knowledge, but that it can be applied to creation, then to theory, then to more creation, and so on. What I want to suggest is a filling of Butler's dreamspace with thoughts of theory and criticism, and with those grand ideas about cultural theory and artistic representation. To make the terminologies I have presented collide somewhat, I suggest that we are in a position to fill this unconscious dreamspace, that 'white-hot centre' of ourselves, with ideas triggered by theory, and to allow our unconscious to absorb it, comprehend it and—eventually—allow those ideas to come out through our fingers into a self-contained work which will serve to further inform said theory. I am not suggesting that we become just a funnel for discourse, or just tellers of lively stories, but instead the product of these two spheres, commenting on both to inform the commentary of both. I am suggesting that there is a pool of critical and literary theory available for creative academics, a resource built upon and sustained by those who drink from it. (Perhaps this will dip into melodrama again, but a sustainable image is one of a pool of tears, from which each writer drinks and replenishes with their own in a loop of continuous development and adaptation.) This is certainly how I deal with the creative schism and how I believe we can cement ourselves as creatives and academics without the strain of being pulled to one binary option; the representation of theory, once absorbed and commented on, need not be positive, after all, so long as it continues the dialogue of the topic. This may sound achievable in theory, so to speak, but how can this realistically be applied?

Here I am forced to present myself as a viable example and so, in exploring my own work, I can demonstrate how this circular model of thought could be applied. In my original research proposal I had intended to write an entirely empty, nihilistic postmodern metafiction. The project was a culmination of every technique that I had, to that point, examined, read, or thought about, and was intended to be a nothing novel that concerned only itself, its own production and which circled endlessly in upon itself. This was clearly not a well-conceived idea, the reason for which harkens back to what I was suggesting earlier: that the creative product should not be a thinly veiled manifesto for the theory. I was exploring various metafictional novels as the critical ‘portion’ of the research and, as I was writing, I realised that some of the ideas for the novel didn’t align with those expressed in my reading and research. I realised that some of the more realistic sections of the novel weren’t so nihilistic, or linked so heavily with the perceived ideas and aims of postmodern metafiction. My writing led me to research more into contemporary developments in cultural theory which in turn led me to Timotheus Vermuelen and Robin van den Akker’s notion of metamodernism. This ‘structure of feeling’ describes a movement in contemporary culture and the arts which wishes to disengage from the emptiness of the postmodern and explore post-ironic forms.^{iv}

Simultaneous with my research into the metamodern my project began to change. I realised that certain ideas were perfectly unsustainable, particularly ideas that relied too heavily on postmodern techniques, but also moments of seemingly uninspired inspiration began to occur, those that I spoke of earlier. The nihilistic aim of the novel, the emptiness originally aimed for in the first concept, soon seemed too far removed from what I perceive as the current climate of ideological exploration. Rather than a depthlessness, as suggested by postmodernism, I decided that I wanted the piece to address, or

at the very least explore, what Vermeulen terms the new 'depthiness'(Vermeulen 2015). The most obvious changes occurred in the planned embedded genre fragments. A western section suddenly seemed ludicrously out of place, and instead an entire Gothic genre section appeared in draft that commented more on past transgressions that were hoped to have been forgotten, but which emerge regardless to disrupt the present, reflecting a metamodern desire for movement. A dystopian section also began to shift in content until it became a failed utopia, then a collapsing utopia and now is currently oscillating between dystopia and utopia, unsure of where it belongs.

The Gothic does seem an interesting mode to explore the metamodern impulse, especially focussing on the concept of a past (postmodernism) that refuses to stay dead, and Vermuelen and van den Akker have written about the resurgence of Utopian narratives and their exploration in further works (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015b). These changes seemed wholly necessary to me and though chronologically they arrived after the research into the metamodern, I had never set out to apply the strategies of the theory explicitly to the work. Instead, I allowed the theory to inform the work and, in doing so, perhaps the work may inform the theory too. The process I am attempting to depict is one in which writing about life informed me of a change, and subsequent research into theory, which led to writing, which may inform the theory, which may inform further writing and thus the loop is formed and closed. What I am attempting to describe is that this process is one of constantly drafting and re-drafting, a loop without end, feeding from itself, but one which will never stagnate: thus it resembles an ouroboros. This means allowing life to influence writing, which in turn influences research, which influences writing. Again, this is a circular, re-drafting, ever-replenishing process. By way of further example, the image of this circular loop stems from my own research, in which I am attempting to

define a new form of fiction and can only describe it as 'ouroboric.' The image of the ouroboros thus sits in the levels of my subconscious occasionally informing my writing, and subsequently seemed germane to the process I have attempted to describe. Even as I have explored the main issue of this article, the theoretical work which I am researching has leached into the paper with the idea of the metamodern yearning for unobtainable utopias: though I have suggested a means of dealing with the conflict, it is by no means the only way. Nor has it been attained or proved, but the desire for a resolution, for a utopian balance stems from the metamodern. As Vermeulen and van den Akker argue:

[...] harmony is not the dominant sensibility of present culture. Indeed, we would very much press the point that in its stead, the prevalent sentiment is one of irreconcilability; of the awareness that one position is irreconcilable with another in spite of one's need to occupy them both at once. (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015a)

This sounds wonderfully close to the initial problem. Though the creative/critical schism cannot seemingly be resolved, it is the attempt that matters despite itself. To reiterate, there is a vast pool of critical knowledge available, a great raging maelstrom of secondary criticism and literary theory waiting for writers such as us to dip into, to draw great dregs from and let them filter into our work which, in turn, will replenish that pool, adding to it in preparation for the next writer. Not every writer need draw from the pool to write great works, and not all of the great works within the pool come from creative writers, but we creative academics are in the perfect position to comment on both. This is how I propose dealing with the creative critical schism: not by shunning it, or writing thinly veiled fictionalised versions, but allowing the work to enter this hybrid state, to

write to comment to write to comment. It may be an imperfect attempt, but it is an attempt nonetheless.

To finish, I want to return to the initial statement from Malcom Bradbury. I started with a quote in which he suggests that creative writing was thought of as playing in the sand in primary school, an image I have returned to repeatedly. Bradbury immediately follows this, however, with the following:

I have a different view, after twenty years of interest in the subject. [...] in a period when criticism has often placed itself apart from writers and their creative practice, the work under way in serious writing programmes – and in some cases it has been work of considerable importance – is a manifest example of the deep endeavour behind the writing process, a plain reminder that a work is a product of a living human agent, and not simply a text or a sign. (1993: 62–3)

It is important to remember that we are those human agents, pulling theory into practice, practising to further the theory. We should think of our position as that of a central ouroboros spinning end on end, theory to fiction to theory to fiction. Not snapping between the two, but circling, giving equal focus and credence to both the history of our art and to life itself.

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ⁱ There is the fear of seeming narcissistic in using your own work as the locus for research. Instead of focusing on canonical works, for example, one posits one's own work as particularly pertinent as a piece of writing for analysis.

ⁱⁱ As coined by Fowler. Defined as a genre akin to metafiction in which 'the central strand of the action purports to be the work's own composition, although it is really 'about' something else [...] often the writing is a metaphor for constructing a world. [...] The poioumenon is calculated to offer opportunities to explore the boundaries of fiction and reality – the limits of narrative truth.' (Fowler 1987, 370)

ⁱⁱⁱ I rather feel that choosing between the terms 'academic creative' and 'creative academic' might indicate a preference, thus defeating the point of attempting to maintain a middle ground. I will continue to use 'creative academic' for the remainder of the essay, purely for the sake of cadence.

^{iv} For a far more detailed explanation of the metamodern see Notes on Metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) And the follow up Misunderstandings and Clarifications (2015)