Towards a Theory without Credentials

Dominique Hecq

Abstract

This paper reassesses the significance of theory for Creative Writing research. In this vein, it aims to redress the misperception of theory installed by Creative Writing practitioners, and by the same token to redress theory’s marginalisation within Creative Writing circles. It positions itself within the debate about the alleged antagonism, continuity, or complementarity, between these two fields and attempts to reorient the critical conversation and provoke writers to rethink their understanding of theory’s usefulness to their practice. It argues against favouritism towards any one theory, for there are special affinities between Creative Writing and certain theories, particularly those grounded in poststructuralist theories of language. This may be due to the fact that creative writers read and research differently from theorists and critics. One key difference between them is the status of affect and the body, and therefore of the unconscious, in relation to thought.

By focusing on psychoanalysis, I argue here for a privileging of a ‘theory without credentials’, one that would disrupt our certainties and thus open up creative possibilities that can in turn be theorised. A psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity sheds light on the creative process and on the very concept of knowledge production in ways that are not envisaged by other models of subjectivity. Conversely, an examination of writing and research processes can help illuminate and expand on psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis is useful in that it suggests that both writing and the subject are constructions in the making. This has direct pedagogical implications: by grappling with the theory itself, new teaching methods and methodologies arise.

Key Words
Creative Writing, Theory, Practice-Led Research, Research, Psychoanalysis

As a ‘moment’ in the history of literary criticism, ‘Theory’ designates a sequence of philosophical and cultural developments that evolved from within the university discourse in continental Europe in the mid 1960s and which have continued into the present beyond academic borders. Thus ‘Theory’ refers to that period of ‘high theory’ of the 1960s and 1970s which saw society as the undesirable product of the Enlightenment. The early nineties seemingly witnessed the death of Theory. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, predicted the death of the ‘grand narratives’, while Pierre Bourdieu, Valentine Cunningham and Terry
Towards a Theory without Credentials

Eagleton wrote about this opportune death, anticipating the richer topos of ‘after theory’. Michael Payne and John Schad, however, considered this state of affairs with some scepticism in their life.after.theory. More recently, critics have welcomed this passing, deploiring its ‘damaging effects’ on university teaching or aesthetics. Others have continued to advocate its uses in specific fields of expertise.

I am struck by the irony of opening a paper on the possible affinities between Creative Writing and theory by proclaiming the death of Theory, no less because theory has traditionally encountered some resistance in the discipline of Creative Writing. In Australia, Paul Dawson contextualises this resistance in his analysis of the 1990s Literary Studies crisis and explains it in terms of some artificial divide between theory and practice. This resistance has persisted in the ongoing debate concerning whether Creative Writing needs to concern itself with theory. The debate is now enlivened by Creative Writing’s need to define what research means by comparison and contrast with the so-called ‘hard sciences’.

I agree that ‘Creative Writing needs to answer the critique of authorship and of the category of literature offered by Theory, rather than simply rejecting this critique as unhelpful or deleterious to literary culture’, for writing entails ‘an active engagement with knowledge producing creative results that embody levels of understanding and communication’ requiring to be articulated.

It may well be that in Practice-led Research or Research-led Practice, two activities that are often complementary, the emphasis is on data creation rather than data collection, where research and practice are reciprocal. However, as Camilla Nelson highlights, one of the key differences between Creative Writing and other fields of inquiry is ‘the premium it places on process’. Another key difference is the emphasis on ‘processor’. Thus before even attempting to define what theory, research, knowledge, or methodology might mean for creative writers, I’d like to suggest that the object of Creative Writing inquiry is primarily twofold, namely the creative process and the subject in the process of writing. This includes activities such as thinking, researching, planning, writing drafts, consciously revising, consciously manipulating the unconscious and being unconsciously driven by it. What interests me in this process, though, is firstly how one accesses the unconscious and secondly how one ‘consciously’ manipulates it. Though I understand that it becomes more complex when the processor is a collective (as is the case in collaborations), for the purposes of this discussion the processor will refer to the subject writing.

As a general term, theory originates from the Anglo-American university discourse, for it formally emerged in the Anglo-American academy in the 1970s with works by Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton. Theory conjures up the Critical Theory associated with the Frankfurt School and the work of thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. It also calls to mind the philosophical and psychoanalytic theories of signification associated with structuralism and
poststructuralism, the so-called ‘French Theory’ that has its roots in the work of linguists such as Ferdinand De Saussure and Emile Benvéniste as well as the Prague School. French Theory thus usually refers to the work of Barthes, Cixous, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Kristeva, Lacan, Lyotard as well as Deleuze and Guattari, and the relevant philosophical traditions they support. To a certain extent, the case of feminist, postcolonial, lesbian or gay theories, race studies as well as multicultural and class theories is distinct, for these are underpinned by forms of Marxism and the intellectual traditions of the Frankfurt School and poststructuralism.

Today, however, cultural theory has in many ways replaced structuralism and poststructuralism as the main discourse to which many turn for cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, multicultural and geohistorical engagements. Even in Australia, the work of cultural theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau is popular in the area of Literary Studies, including Creative Writing.

The above outline would no doubt be familiar to many postgraduate Creative Writing students. But the real question is how useful an overview of theory is to them, especially as the conditions that produced the heyday of ‘high theory’ have faded away. In the twenty-first century theory is indeed multifarious. Moreover, it often has a thematic or political focus on matters of identity, ethnicity, transculturation, globalisation and, increasingly, sustainability. This does not mean, however, that students should not be exposed to Critical Theory or French Theory. But mere exposure is inadequate. For theory as a body of knowledge to be useful, practitioners need to engage with it at a deeper level. An ideal model would be based on a dialectic between practice and theory that would engage students at an unconscious level, but also make them actively conscious of such dialectic. This would, for example, entail reading, critiquing and responding creatively to theory as well as analysing these creative responses to theory. This, however, presupposes the recognition of, and emphasis on, the reality of the unconscious. Freud and other psychoanalysts have indeed considered the unconscious to play a significant role in creativity. I personally believe that creative writers are particularly sensitive to their own unconscious processes, and further, that unconscious processes themselves play a crucial role in artistic creation.

From my own experience, the theories that are most highly useful to creative writers are those grounded in poststructuralist theories of language, for these enable students to re-evaluate their ideas about subjectivity, identity, the creative process and communication as well as to re-assess their own writing styles and further develop their craft and formulate their own poetics. Theories grounded in poststructuralist theories of language do alert us to the fact that writing is a making, a construction using language, visual images, sound, silence and rhythm, and that the subject itself is a complex construction. Perhaps we need to think more broadly about the meaning of theory and refuse to equate one theory, or set of theories,
with the act of theorising itself. For surely theory is not only, as The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary would have it: ‘a systematic statement of rules or principles to be followed.’ Rather, theory signifies a mode of thought that stems from the particular and reaches out to the generalisable while transferring knowledge from the unknown to the known.

However, for Creative Writing, there is a difference between theory that triggers or produces creative work and theory that informs creative work. In certain contexts theory can function as a painting 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’ with something in the unconscious by immersion in theory. All readers, including creative writers, construct meaning out of their own conscious and unconscious interests. As readers of theory, we bring to it not only our own understanding but also our unconscious experience which inevitably shapes and determines how we interpret and in turn make use of it. This may be why theories grounded in theories of language are so appealing to creative writers. However, although we are all subject to our own unconscious agendas, it is important to recognise and understand that creative writers read, and therefore think, and research differently. One key difference between critics and creative writers, is indeed the status of affect and the body, and therefore of the unconscious, in relation to thought. An example is that the creative writer caught in the act of active reading is always on the lookout for writing material even though she might not be aware of this. Reading crystallises elements around a question, an obsession, or an affect (a mood, or pre-emotion)—all of which produce effects for both writer and reader, of course.

Research itself, I contend, proceeds from this 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 thus produced in three steps: inductive, deductive, and retroactive. In other words, new knowledge is produced ‘out of sync’ from a dialectical process between consciousness and the unconscious. This new knowledge may very well concern concepts and how they evolve by accretion or hybridisation, for example. But as an important study by Paul Magee suggests, it may just as easily be centred on poetics and issues of style and composition. It may also focus exclusively on meanings of language and subjectivity, or indeed on the making of language and subjectivity.

Psychoanalysis is not a theory. Rather, it is a continuous work in progress which draws its insights from the clinic. So, what is called ‘psychoanalytic theory’ is radically different from both Theory and other theories because it makes the unconscious its organising concept. The unconscious, however, is largely inaccessible to us. We can only catch glimpses of it in dreams, slips of the tongue.
or pen, in jokes and in symptoms. We also can access it through self-examination or examination of ‘process’. Although psychoanalytic theory provides the basis for the therapeutic practice of psychoanalysis out of which it emerged, it also provides a structural theory for the construction of subjectivity. As such, it is a ‘theory without credentials’, one that shakes up our certainties about what theory is and one that disrupts our preconceptions about what the self is. By doing so, it opens up creative possibilities that can be theorised. By focusing on unconscious processes, psychoanalytic theory has made it possible to analyse the unconscious as well as conscious meanings which contribute to the complexity of our identities and the world in which we live, as well as to the question of the very meaning and status of consciousness and language. Lacan’s conceptualisation of the unconscious as the driving force of language is particularly relevant to writers as it demonstrates that language has an integral role in the construction of consciousness and culture: to put it simply, an unconscious sense of lack of being is transformed into unconscious desire—desire being here the motive for the subject’s relation to the world. Further, in explaining the unconscious construction of ideology, Lacan shows that language, and therefore discourse, can no longer be seen as neutral and objective.

But how to teach theory? In order to answer my question I’ll resort to ‘Pierre Ménard, Author of the Quixote’, the story of a writer who scrupulously reproduces Cervantes’ Don Quixote word for word and for whom the text thus reproduced constitutes a new work. By appending his signature to Cervantes’ text, Ménard produces a new text. Reproduced in another context, one signifier has a different meaning. The same text thus becomes another text. This story may be allegorical of the act of teaching in the ‘hard’ disciplines that uphold the discourse of the university whereby knowledge means passing on information. Teaching theory to creative writers, however, is a different tale altogether because ‘information and imaginative writing are different forms of knowledge, demanding different skills and wholly different attitudes to language’. Indeed, for many creative writers, the text is itself a research statement and the knowledge it gestures towards is often beyond words. This knowledge is in fact intimately related to the truth of the subject, namely the truth of the subject’s relation to the world as mediated through language. To be useful, theory should enable creative writers to articulate this previously unknowable knowledge. It should also enable them to deviate from what might be called a familiar poetics in order to approach new forms of knowledge, or new ways of knowing the world. In order to achieve this, however, they need to be taught a relation to language that empowers them. For this to occur teachers need to relinquish the position of master. As Shoshana Felman puts is:
Psychoanalysis as teaching, and teaching as psychoanalysis, radically subvert the demarcation-line, the clear-cut opposition between the analyst and the analysand, between the teacher and the student (or the learner)—showing that what counts, in both cases, is precisely the transition, the struggle-filled passage from one position to the other.  

Drawing on the lessons of psychoanalysis, my teaching is based on a philosophy of ethical desire, that is, a desire for radical difference that effects change through some kind of struggle Felman here invokes. This philosophy discards Freudian models of a simple repressed subjectivity in favour of the Lacanian subject, to allow for an examination of multiple aspects of subjectivity (Symbolic, Imaginary, Real)—all of which struggle for expression in any extended discourse. This is only possible because Lacan refutes the idea that our identity can ever be coherent and authentic. For Lacan, the subject is indeed an imperfect structure comprising three orders. The Symbolic is a universal characteristic of humanity: a group can be said to be human only if it is subordinated to a symbolic structure which is itself articulated in language. In the Symbolic, for example, I am the set of facts written in my passport. The Imaginary invokes a set of similarities, that is, a set of projections, identifications and rivalries which govern intersubjective relationships. In the Imaginary, I am the person who looks in the mirror and hates to see that I look like my mother. The Real is that which is beyond symbolisation: it is the realm of death and madness that remains hidden from us in the unconscious and is therefore beyond words. In the Real, I speak gibberish or not at all. To be more specific, my philosophy draws on Lacan’s famous critique of the discourse of the University as well as the work of Shoshana Felman and Mark Bracher while, at the same time, inscribing itself within the discourse of the institution. By doing so, my own practice mobilises the power of the student-teacher relationship as a pedagogical tool.

Out of my own experience grappling with theory and pedagogy has emerged a form of knowledge which I have called ‘interactive narrative pedagogy’. At its core, it is a philosophy of teaching that takes into account the nature of the relationship between teacher and student, i.e., what Freud defined as ‘transference’. This is because the dynamics of exchange in a Creative Writing context is based on narrative interactions that are themselves predicated upon an intricate transferential process: transference between two subjects as well as transference to the work and to the institution. All of these presuppose an understanding of knowledge embodied in behaviours and practices that cannot evade the reality of the unconscious, which is the truth that leaves its trace when we write. All discourses are constructed out of unconscious as well as social or conscious interests. In their gaps and incoherences, they reveal what their creators may have unconsciously disowned or repressed. Thus all writers are ‘in
transference’. Their writing is invested with unconscious desire before and in the process of writing, and their writing bears the mark of this desire. Some of us may in fact actively seek this truth. Students writing under the supervision of an academic, however, are also ‘in transference’ with regard to their teacher and to the institution they have chosen. Students, for instance, often feel the need to please the teacher while teachers often feel the need to inject knowledge or wisdom in their students.

Far from claiming to offer a pedagogical paradigm that fits all, I believe that analysing the phenomenon of transference may help teachers understand better the mechanisms and relationships that they engage when promoting verbalisation. However, because in this context the teacher / student relationship, like the analyst / analysand relationship is, of itself, artificial, an analysis of transference starts with the teacher’s self-knowledge. Mark Bracher’s chapter ‘Self Analysis for teachers’ is a must for any teacher interested in using a psychoanalytic pedagogy as it offers practical ways in which teachers can chart their own systems of knowledge. Whilst the reflective practice encouraged here does not replace the knowledge an analysis would yield, it nonetheless offers pragmatic strategies for gauging ethical desire, that is, a desire for radical difference that fosters personal and writerly change. After asking herself, the teacher would help students ask themselves the same questions:

1. What are the formative elements of my systems of knowledge and belief? What is the impact of such identity on my life and work?
2. What are my master signifiers—my ideals and values? Where do these come from?
3. What is my scenario of ultimate fulfillment?
4. What conflicts do I identify in myself? In my work? How is language responsible for these? What causes ‘writing block’?
5. Why do I write?

Although such pedagogy requires constant self-reflection on the part of both student and teacher, it is well worth it, for the knowledge produced in this way concerns investments in the symbolic dimension of language more than in relationships, since these are highlighted as being artificial in the teaching context. It therefore has enduring personal and, arguably, social benefits.

This self-reflection in turn promotes what I have called a ‘methodology of active consciousness’. By ‘active consciousness’, I mean the process of bringing to consciousness what previously lay beneath its surface, namely something pre-conscious or unconscious. The term ‘methodology of active consciousness’ highlights the active participation in the reflexive method of inquiry which is particular to Creative Writing research, at least for those of us who describe themselves as ‘explorers’ rather than ‘planners’. The ‘explorers’ overtly use a ‘problem finding style’ which means that they don’t know what they are doing
until they have done it. They start a work with only a question mark, an image, a phrase or even a mere rhythm rather than a plan, and the work emerges from the improvisational act of writing and revising—or not. I write ‘overtly’, because the so-called ‘planners’ often diverge from their plan as they write and solve problems. What is common to all writers, though, is that ‘there is never a single insight; instead, there are hundreds and thousands of small mini-insights’\textsuperscript{34} that happen mostly unconsciously. However, ‘the real work starts when many mini insights are analysed, reworked, and connected to each other’ consciously.\textsuperscript{35} This happens when students are \textit{immersed} by choice, rather than merely \textit{exposed}, to theory through the teacher’s agency, and then encouraged to analyse their own processes. This may also, as suggested earlier, affect them at a deeper level, and effect changes in the way they perceive themselves and the world, or changes in behaviour and style.

The above insights into Creative Writing research make a case for a ‘theory without credentials’, one that disrupts our certainties and thus opens up creative possibilities that can in turn be theorised. These in turn show how process, though addressed here in terms of unconscious material brought about consciously and manipulated as such, still needs to be further pursued. I have shown that a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity can indeed shed light on the creative process and on the very concept of knowledge production while highlighting that an analysis of writing processes can help illuminate, and further, lead to some psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity. I have also shown that unlikely marriages between theories are not only possible, but desirable.

Despite my insistence on the significance of psychoanalysis for Creative Writing and pedagogy, I would persist against favouring any one kind of theory. As I have revealed, there are indeed affinities between Creative Writing and various kinds of theories. For instance, many of the methodologies and practices that underpin the work of twentieth-century modernists still echo into postmodern works, including the work of Creative Writing students. This wide-spread phenomenon can be linked to poststructuralist theories of language. It is nonetheless important to avoid letting any one kind of theory stand in for the act of theorisation itself or for the plurality of theoretical approaches, each one of which has vital and distinctive contributions to make to understanding the interplay between Creative Writing, theory and knowledge production.

Notes

29 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. (SE IV-V, 1900), 562.


35 Ibid.

**Bibliography**


Freud, Sigmund. *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*. SE IX, 1908, 141-54.


