Strange Bedfellows: Theory and the Muse

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Abstract
Creative Writing and theory have long had a problematic relationship, one that is arguably based on mutual neglect and one that is complicated by the alleged death of one of the partners. This chapter therefore seeks to reconsider the significance of theory for Creative Writing research. It aims to remedy the misperception of theory instated by Creative Writing scholars and practitioners, and hence to counter theory’s marginalisation from within Creative Writing circles in the academy. It rekindles the debate about the supposed antagonism between these two fields of study and attempts to re-invigorate the conversation by provoking writers to reconsider their understanding of theory’s usefulness to their practice. It argues for a plurality of theories while pointing out that theories grounded in postructuralist conceptions of language may be more conducive to Creative Writing research as these facilitate a deeper understanding of both product and process. This chapter singles out psychoanalysis as a case-study, for psychoanalysis is only at best a work in progress, and therefore not a ‘theory.’ Thus it makes a case for a theory that does not consolidate our certainties, but rather disrupts these, thereby opening up creative possibilities that can in turn be theorised. A psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity does indeed enable writers to gain insights in their own creative processes. This in turns permits them to scrutinise the very concept of knowledge production in ways that are not envisaged by other models of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis may only be useful in that it suggests that both writing and the subject are constructions in the making, yet by grappling with the theory itself, new teaching methods and methodologies arise.

Key Words: Creative Writing, theory, Practice-led Research, psychoanalysis, pedagogy.

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‘Theory’ may have neglected Creative Writing. But so has Creative Writing neglected ‘Theory.’ Most of all, Creative Writing has overlooked that ‘Theory’ was first a ‘moment’ in the history of literary criticism which designates a sequence of philosophical and cultural developments that evolved from within the university discourse in continental Europe in the mid 1960s, migrated to the United States and re-emerged in many guises right into the present and beyond borders of national, political, ideological and linguistic nature. Though predicted earlier, the early 1990s witnessed the death of ‘Theory,’ which of course complicates its contemporary relationship with Creative Writing. Lyotard, for example, had predicted its death by way of the death of the ‘grand narratives.’ Bourdieu and
Eagleton, later wrote about this opportune death, only to anticipate the richer topos of ‘after theory.’

Creative Writing and theory have long been strange bedfellows. Theory has traditionally encountered some resistance in the discipline of Creative Writing. Dawson contextualises this resistance in an Australian context through analysing the 1990s Literary Studies crisis and explaining it in terms of some spurious division 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 disciplines.’

Although Theory has seemed to be the theory of everything except Creative Writing: theory of language, of meaning, of subjectivity, of the body, of sexuality, of politics, of history, of geopolitics, Creative Writing still 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 presupposes ‘an active engagement with knowledge producing creative results that embody levels of understanding and communication.’ As such, it needs to be documented, articulated, and theorised.

It may well be that in the twofold paradigm of Practice-led Research the emphasis is on data creation rather than data collection. Here, indeed, research and practice are reciprocal. However, one of the key differences between Creative Writing and other fields of inquiry is the emphasis it places on process. Another key difference is the emphasis on what I call ‘processor.’ Thus before even attempting to define what theory, research, knowledge, or methodology might mean for creative writers we need to redefine the object of Creative Writing inquiry as twofold: it entails the creative process and the subject in the process of writing. The process 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, for the purposes of this discussion the processor will refer to the subject writing consciously while being actively aware of unconscious processes.

But what is (or was) Theory? As a general term, Theory originated from the Anglo-American university discourse: it formally emerged in the Anglo-American academy in the 1970s with works by Culler and Eagleton. Theory conjures up the Critical Theory associated with the Frankfurt School and the work of thinkers such as Benjamin and Adorno. It also calls to mind the philosophical and psychoanalytic theories of signification associated with poststructuralism, the so-called ‘French Theory’ that has its roots in the work of linguists such as De Saussure and 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. 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.

The above outline would no doubt be familiar to many Creative Writing students. The real question, however, is to determine 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. Of course, this does not mean that students should not be exposed to theory with or without a capital letter. 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.

From my own experience, the theories that are most 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, imagery, 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 ‘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 writers, 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.

Research itself 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 concern concepts and how these evolve by accretion or hybridisation, for example. It may also be centred on poetics and issues of style and composition. Or it may focus exclusively on meanings of language and subjectivity, or indeed on the *making* of language and subjectivity.

Psychoanalysis is not a theory: it is a continuous work in progress which draws its insights from clinical experience. Therefore, 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 can also 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 that shakes up our certainties about what theory is and one that disrupts our preconceptions about what the self is. In 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. Further, in explaining the unconscious construction of ideology, Lacan shows that language, and therefore discourse, can no longer be seen as neutral and objective.\textsuperscript{18}

As a paradigm, psychoanalysis is conducive to a marriage between Theory and Creative Writing, for here ‘information and imaginative writing are different forms of knowledge, demanding different skills and wholly different attitudes to language.’\textsuperscript{19} 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 Felman puts it:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Drawing on the lessons of psychoanalysis, my teaching is based on a philosophy of ethical desire that effects change through the kind of struggle Felman 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 critique of the discourse of the University as well as on the work of Felman and
Bracher while, at the same time, inscribing itself *within* the discourse of the institution\(^{21}\) in order to mobilise 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.’\(^{22}\) 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.’\(^{23}\) This is because the dynamics of exchange in a Creative Writing context are 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.

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.

Analysing the phenomenon of transference may help teachers understand better the mechanisms and relationships that they engage when promoting verbalisation.\(^{24}\) 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. 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?
2. What is the impact of such identity on my life and work?
3. What are my ideals and values? Where do these come from?
4. What is my scenario of ultimate fulfilment?
5. What conflicts do I identify in myself? In my work? How is language responsible for these?
6. Why do I write?
7. What causes writing block?

Such pedagogy does require constant self-reflection on the part of both student and teacher. However, it is worth it, for the knowledge produced in this way concerns investments in the symbolic dimension of language more than in relationships which are in any case artificial in the teaching context. This self-reflection in turn promotes what I have called a ‘methodology of active consciousness.’ by which 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 do not 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’ that happen mostly unconsciously. However, ‘the real work starts when many mini insights are analysed, reworked, and connected to each other’ consciously. This happens when students are immersed by choice, rather than merely 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 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.

Though emphasising the significance of psychoanalysis for Creative Writing and pedagogy, I would persist against favouring any one kind of theory. As I have shown, there are indeed affinities between Creative Writing and other 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


7. Dawson, Creative Writing and the New Humanities, 161.


15. Sigmund Freud, Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming (SE IX, 1908), 141-154.


23 Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (SE IV-V, 1900), 562.
28 Ibid.

Bibliography


——. *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, 141–154. SE IX, 1908.


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