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Blank page: the location of creativity

Abstract:

Whether one writes in the field of literary studies or that of creative writing, one begins with the 'blank page'. The field of interest I am calling the 'blank page' has implications for the discipline of creative writing, and can be useful to theorising creativity, writing practice, and pedagogy. One creates out of, or into, the 'blank page'; one's practice is partly determined by how one theorises, however subconsciously, this blank page (how does one start? how blank is the page? how have others figured the blank page?); and one teaches students who have to face literal blank pages. In this paper I will consider how the theorisation of the blank page in literary studies addresses such creative-writing issues. I will then engage D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory on 'the location of play' to consider the implications of conceptualising the blank page as 'the location of writing'. A Winnicottian approach to the blank page, as a space akin to the potential space of play, allows various insights into the process of writing, especially as a process involving paradox.

Biographical note:

David McCooley's first book of poems, *Blister Pack* (Salt), won the Mary Gilmore Award and was short-listed for four other major literary awards. *Graphic*, a chapbook of poems, was recently published by Whitmore Press. His study of Australian autobiography, *Artful Histories*, won a NSW Premier's Award. He is Deputy General Editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, which also won a NSW Premier's Literary Award. He is Associate Professor in Literary Studies and Professional & Creative Writing at Deakin University in Geelong.

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Whether one writes in the field of literary studies or that of creative writing, one begins with the 'blank page', a space one hopes to fill with words. This space is both literal and metaphorical. The literal page—real or virtual—is part of a material technology that writers must master. The metaphorical page represents the predicament of any creative act: the difficulty of something new emerging out of nothingness. This metaphorical page represents the anxiety of beginnings, as well as (in negative form) the deadening weight of precedence, all of those once-blank pages that have been heroically filled.

Not surprisingly, both literary theorists and 'creative' writers often describe the experience of creating something out of the blank page in similar terms. Here are two instances. Derek Attridge writes in *The Singularity of Literature*:

I seem to be composing new sentences out of nothing, or rather out of a largely inchoate swirl of half-formulated thoughts and faint intimations; from time to time the nebulous outlines take shape as phrases or argumentative links, but I keep losing the thread, deleting, going back over my typed words, making one more attempt to say what needs to be said, or even, it sometimes seems, demands to be said. (2004: 17-18)

Less moderate in tone, but otherwise similar, is the following entry in Virginia Woolf's diary (from Boxing Day, 1929) about writing *The Waves*:

I write two pages of arrant nonsense, after straining; I write variations of every sentence; compromises; bad shots; possibilities; till my writing book is like a lunatic's dream. Then I trust to some inspiration on re-reading; and pencil them into some sense. Still I am not satisfied. I think there is something lacking. I sacrifice nothing to seamliness. I press to my centre. I don't care if it all is scratched out. And there is something there. (1953: 151)

Attridge and Woolf both suggest that writers do not simply find words already formed in their subjectivity to fill the blankness of the page. The subject's words are in some way not *of* the subject. This 'decentred' condition has been variously theorised in literary studies, though such theorising has sometimes led to accusations that literary studies is either hostile to authorship ('the death of the author') or originality ('language speaks us').

The blank page is also a problem that has been theorised in literary studies. Such theorisation has occurred in the critical literature on the literary trope of the blank page (such as Susan Gubar's feminist analysis of that trope), beginnings (such as Edward Said's *Beginnings*), and inspiration, that special way of theorising beginnings (such as Timothy Clark's *The Theory of Inspiration*). To this we can add the literature on intertextuality, that condition which shows the blank page is never really blank, but a field swarming with the spectres of other texts, generic horizons, social practices, and so on.

The field of interest I am calling the 'blank page' also has implications for the discipline of creative writing, and can be useful to theorising creativity, writing practice, and pedagogy. One creates out of, or into, the 'blank page'; one's practice is partly determined by how one theorises, however subconsciously, this blank page

(how does one start? how blank is the page? how have others figured the blank page?); and one teaches students who are at times—when given a writing exercise in class, for instance—forced to face a literal blank page. In this paper I will consider how the theorisation of the blank page in literary studies addresses such creative-writing issues. I will engage D.W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory on ‘the location of play’ to consider the implications of conceptualising the blank page as ‘the location of writing’.

In the broadest terms, the blank page operates in literary-studies discourse as a metaphor for conceptualising the ‘space’ of writing. As Robert Pickering writes in ‘Writing and the Page: Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Valéry’, the blank page gained a new literary role and status in the late nineteenth century as ‘the indispensable appurtenance of literary creativity’ (1992: 56). Pickering argues that the period’s interest in form, its revision of ideas about space in visual art, and its attraction to a self-reflexive literary aesthetic all led to a new self-consciousness about the writer’s relationship to the page, so that the latter was ‘no longer held to be in passive subservience to the former, but on the contrary formulating its own problematical autonomy, its own input to, and feedback from, the activity of writing’ (56).

Such developments illustrate that the blank page became a site, perhaps the pre-eminent site, for theorising creative potential itself. As Pickering writes, this potential occurs in part because the blank page allows writers a creative estrangement from their own practice:

a propitious point of departure, and one which is frequently used by writers analysing their own creativity, is to rehabilitate a sense of strangeness before the page and its surface, to retrace the particularities of a given writer’s distance from his own activity, not in the perspective of an unthinking relationship, but precisely in that of seeing things afresh or of viewing them differently. (58)

While the blank page may cause the writer considerable anxiety, its ability to distance the writer from his or her own activity can have immense creative results. As Pickering writes with regard to Valéry, the blank page can be ‘the changing locus for experimentation and potentialization, the theatre for the coursing entities which make it vibrant with a sense of becoming’ (71). As Timothy Clark points out in *The Theory of Inspiration*, this modern conceptualising of the space of composition represents a significant shift in the way in which creativity was viewed, especially in terms of agency and intentionality, since

unlike the muse or the Romantic imagination the merely figurative status of the blank page as a creative agency is obvious—no one credits a piece of paper with “coursing energies” and “becoming”. The emptiness is vibrant as the place of intersection of the writer’s intentionality with multiple possibilities of reading. The empty page is full of a sense of potential because it is really already a crowded page. (1997: 22-23)

The page is already ‘crowded’ because of the nature of literary composition itself. No sooner is a sign written than it is read. Inscription is simultaneously an act of reading, and as such the status of one’s own text, even as it is being written, moves from ‘intention’ to that of ‘interpretation’, with all of the plurality that the latter word implies. As Clark notes, this condition of writing allows for creativity: ‘The act of

inscription not only produces effects which immediately, as their very condition of appearance, escape the intentional grasp of the consciousness that wrote them, it may do so, on some occasions, in ways that are themselves “creative” or surprising in a valuable way’ (19).

The blank page, then, acts as an image for the process of creativity, evoking issues concerning not just innovation, but also the paradoxical ways in which subjectivity, intentionality, and temporality operate in literary composition. As the locus of composition and inspiration, the blank page draws attention repeatedly to the temporal ambiguity of the text (when is ‘now’?), the inherent ventriloquism of enunciation (who is ‘speaking’?), and the interplay between subjectivity and otherness (to which phantasmal audience is this phantasmal ‘I’ speaking?).

This interplay between subjectivity and otherness is particularly complex, and points to a further way of viewing the blank page in literary-studies discourse: as an ambiguous space in which the subjectivity of the writer undergoes change. As writers repeatedly attest, writing involves discovery, pre-eminently expressed in terms of ‘surprise’, through the formation of new expression. Richard Woodhouse, John Keats’s publisher, reported of Keats, for instance, that ‘He has said, that he has often not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expression until after he has composed & written it down—It has then struck him with astonishment—& seemed rather the production of another person than his own’ (Rollins 1948: 129).

This account makes clear the sense of surprise and self-alienation involved in creativity. What is less clear is what is meant by ‘composed & written it down’, with regard to Keats’s thought and expression. It suggests that Keats simply wrote down what had become (after ‘composition’) fully formed in his head. This seems an unlikely scenario. (And, indeed, Woodhouse earlier reports Keats as saying that after composition ‘I...sit down coldly to criticise when in Possession of only one faculty, what I have written, when almost inspired’). Numerous writers—Attridge and Woolf being our examples—attest to the experience of not simply writing what one ‘intends’. This ambiguous sense of agency in literary composition has been theorised in various ways, using terms such as the muse, *furor poeticus* (poetic madness), and the Romantic imagination. Regardless of how this ambiguous agency is troped, transformation (via ‘surprise’) is seen as central to the writing experience. Such transformation suggests that otherness can be paradoxically found ‘within’ the subject through the act of writing.

Otherness can be viewed, then, as a condition of writing itself, with the blank page as the locus for the engagement with (or of) this otherness. If one conceives of otherness as broadly as Attridge does—as that which is ‘outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving’ (18)—then it becomes nothing less than the ground for creativity. How one figures the creation of something new with reference to otherness is important to this discussion of the blank page. Attridge writes that

The coming into being of the wholly new requires some relinquishment of intellectual control, and ‘the other’ is one possible name for that to which control is ceded, whether it is conceived of as ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ the subject. (What happens, in fact, is

that the simple opposition of inside and outside is broken down, as is the sense of an integrated and active subjectivity). (24)

Such otherness means that the blank page is the space where the subject is not merely a self that is known through self-expression. Nor can subjectivity simply be conceived as unproblematically 'interior'. Using terms notably similar to those of Attridge on otherness, Clark describes the blank page as a 'virtual space whose locus is neither in the psyche of the writer nor yet outside it. It is a space of mediation in which what I write, no matter what intention or fantasy it may seem designed to express, is echoed back to me transformed' (22). Clark adds that 'the space of composition' (which can be troped as the blank page) 'skews distinctions of inner and outer, conception and reception. It is a place of unlocatable agencies, with their effects of surprise or disappointment, agencies that skew seeming boundaries between self and other, act and passivity, paralysis and gift' (27).

This way of conceptualising the blank page, as the location of creativity that is marked by paradox, is analogous to D.W. Winnicott's theory of playing (particularly on 'the location of playing') discussed in the essays collected in *Playing and Reality* (1971). The potential space of playing is, I will argue, akin to the potential space of the blank page.

I am not concerned here with Winnicott's theory on the role of play in the dyadic relationship of the baby and mother. Nor am I concerned with how Winnicott presented psychoanalysis as a kind of play, or the general relationship he proposed between playing and psychic health. But the link between play and 'cultural experience' is one that Winnicott himself repeatedly made, as when he writes that 'There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experience' (2005: 69). 'Transitional phenomena' and 'transitional objects' refer to 'the intermediate area of experience' (2), those actions and things, such as babbling, thumb-sucking, and teddy bears, that allow transition from subjective reliance on the mother to objective independence. Such conceptual continuity—from transitional phenomena to cultural experience—is based on Winnicott seeing creativity (contra Freud) as primary and pre-sexual. As Adam Phillips puts it, creativity for Winnicott was based on 'the infant creating out of desire the mother who is ready to be found' (2007: 102). One of Winnicott's most radical aspects, then, as Malcolm Bowie notes, was to see creativity as linking the infantile and primitive with the most sophisticated of cultural practices (2000: 15).

While literary theory has long been attracted to Freud and Lacan, Winnicott has attracted considerably less attention. This is partly because Winnicott is (or seems) both less obviously literary (in style and with regard to his interests) and less obviously 'theoretical'. Winnicott's interests are the empirical and powerfully paradoxical aspects of ordinary human interaction. This is not to say, though, that Winnicott was indifferent to culture and the wider implications of his theories. Indeed, as already noted, when it comes to applying Winnicott's theories outside psychoanalysis, Winnicott himself points the way, as in 'The Location of Cultural Experiences', when he states that 'The place where cultural experience is located is in

the *potential space* between the individual and the environment...The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play' (135).

This 'potential space' linking and separating individual and environment—also termed 'a third area' (138) or 'intermediate zone' (141)—is also, then, the space of playing. In 'Playing: A Theoretical Statement', Winnicott postulates the potential space of playing as a development of transitional phenomena. That is, it is something that is neither the inner world nor external reality, but something mediating the two (55): 'This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world' (69). This space paradoxically links and separates inside and outside, subject and object, much as otherness does for Attridge, and the blank page (or the space of composition) does for Clark. Winnicott insists repeatedly on this paradoxical nature of play, of it involving the interplay of separateness and union, inner and external realities. This intermediate zone is by definition intersubjective and dialogic (even when it does not appear so), since it is a space that connects and separates subjects. It is no anodyne space, allowing for both creative and destructive fantasies. It is, as Bowie writes, 'full of promise and danger' (14).

Winnicott's description of the playing child within this potential space is one that can equally apply to the writer: she or he inhabits an area that 'cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions...Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality' (69). And as with creativity, play is not merely distraction. It is exciting and precarious, the one deriving from the other. As Winnicott states, the excitement of playing 'derives *not* from instinctual arousal but from the precariousness that belongs to the interplay in the child's mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)' (70). Play, like creativity, is precarious and satisfying. It can tolerate anxiety, but it can also be destroyed by it (70).

There is, of course, nothing new about linking playing and creativity. Sigmund Freud, Winnicott's precursor, made the link in 'The Creative Writer and Daydreaming' (1907): 'Now, the creative writer acts no differently from the child at play: he creates a fantasy world, which he takes very seriously; that is to say, he invests large amounts of emotion in it, while marking it off sharply from reality' (Freud 2003: 26). As we have seen, through locating play in a *potential space*, Winnicott's innovation was to place playing in a much more dynamic relationship with reality.

Play as both creative *and* located links Winnicott's theory to the trope of the blank page. The blank page is the location of literary creativity. It is the potential space that mediates the writer's subjectivity and the external world. Theorising in this way is useful to creative writing because it conceptualises writing as something *located*, with the blank page as not merely empty but a potential space of paradoxical interplay that is precarious, satisfying, and allows for a considerable degree of anxiety. Such paradoxical interplay between the subject and the world, between separateness and

union, has implications for creative writers. For instance, as Winnicott suggests in ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’, ‘The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union’ (134).

There is a final Winnicottian issue that promises insights for creative writing. Winnicott repeatedly insists that the paradox of the potential space (the paradox of it both linking and separating) be accepted. Such acceptance can be of use to writers, or teachers and students of writing, since it can stop the writer, or writing student, from too quickly trying to resolve the problems of creativity: anxiety, disappointment, obscurity, and so on. Winnicott believed that, in life and psychoanalysis, time was necessary for individuals to come to discover what they needed (‘growth takes time’, 202). Phillips’ gloss on this stance with regard to the role of interpretation in psychoanalysis can equally apply to the writer’s use of language: ‘It is there to be used, in the way Winnicott described the Transitional Object as being used, not revered, copied, or complied with. And because it is essentially transitional to an unknown destination, it could never be conclusive’ (143). Literary creativity, like play, is communicative and open-ended. Creativity, like play, is not knowing.

Winnicott’s theories, then, do not give a method or explain away the difficulties of creativity. Rather, they allow an understanding of the paradoxical nature of the blank page, and they allow us to see the value in the very difficulty, slowness, and open-endedness of creativity. As Bowie writes, Winnicott is ‘alone among the great psychoanalysts’ in that he seems to ‘understand the working conditions of excitement, uncertainty, and fear in which artists labour and into which their works may precipitate us’ (29).

Coming to the end of this paper (a synonym for page), I wonder whether it appears to its audience to be authored by someone from the discipline of literary studies or that of creative writing. Inasmuch as I can comment on the process of filling in the blank pages, it feels no less creative than writing a poem. And while calling upon psychoanalytic theory as I have done here is consistent with the synthesising, pluralistic nature of literary studies, it is also consistent with the synthesising, pluralistic nature of creative practice. As someone who works in both fields (another spatial metaphor), I feel deeply that the distinction between the disciplines appears primarily administrative, rather than intellectual. The practice of writing is central to each discipline, and writers—first and last—are readers. The differences that follow depend largely upon the pragmatic and political demands made upon each discipline. Theorising the blank page in Winnicottian terms is consistent with the procedures and language of both literary studies and creative writing. It is not so much *how* we’re talking, but *where* we are talking from, which ‘page’ we are on. Some of us are comfortable in talking from, and to, both places at once. This can be both satisfying and precarious.

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