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**Not-so-strange bedfellows: The fiction/nonfiction nexus as a site for creative intervention**

Abstract:

In the field of capital-L Literature, fiction, typically the novel, enjoys a privileged standing in relation to its supposed opposite, nonfiction. Postmodernist scepticism about the concept of historical truth seems further to undermine nonfiction's somewhat precarious cultural position if not its very ontology. This paper discusses the complex interplay between the realms of fiction and nonfiction that informs all 'creative' writing. There is a particular literary perspective that nonfiction can with some justification make a special claim to, and that is ethnography, the chief goal of which is describing and interpreting the life of social groups. This can be turned into a powerful creative tool for student writers, chiefly through 1) identifying and analysing the works of 'canonical' authors whose work may be seen to straddle the fiction/nonfiction divide; 2) working with ethnographic ways of knowing, including gaining an appreciation of the ethnographic qualities of fictional and nonfictional texts and of the literary techniques of nonfiction; and 3) creating works which use the world around them as subject matter, but which employ overtly fictional modes of representation. Students therefore can become more comfortable working in both realms, less intimidated by the need for 'inspiration', and finally, capable of attaining ethnography's other goals – to which fiction also aspires – of contributing to our knowledge of 'the kinds of life-worlds people create' and helping readers 'imagine and create better worlds' (Egan-Robertson and Willett 1998: 5).

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Having students employ existing literary artefacts – novels, short stories, poems and playscripts – as models or sources for their own writing is, I suspect, standard procedure in creative writing programs around the world. This paper, however, is an attempt to address that strategy from a different perspective, one which suggests a role for nonfiction in our pedagogies. It proposes that in fact there is a rich interplay between the realms of fiction and nonfiction that informs all 'creative' writing, and that investigating more closely the nexus between the two not only serves to broaden our students' creative repertoire, but opens up a range of critical issues about the status and function of nonfiction writing in relation to its more privileged fictional counterpart.

There is little doubt that most of us, consciously or unconsciously, associate capital-L Literature with fiction. As Rob Pope says, drawing on the cultural studies of Raymond Williams and others, (L)iterature [1] has become 'narrowed and elevated to its current dominant sense of "imaginative writing reckoned to be of value"' (Pope 2005: 277). In turn, 'imaginative' is often associated with a 'stereotypically Romantic image of the genius' (2005: 76), whose sole creative requirements, apart from a restless and troubled mind, are something called inspiration and perhaps an artificial stimulant or two. We need look no further than our attitudes towards 'canonical' authors for evidence of this privileging of the fictional over the factual. Take George Orwell for example; while his nonfiction works are justly celebrated in literary circles, the ways his writing is promoted both in school curricula and the mainstream media ensure that his 'most popular works' remain 'his political satires *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949)' (Drabble 1985: 722). My point, however, is not that he and other iconic figures of (L)iterature *also* produced nonfiction; rather, it is that for them the craft of writing involved proficiency in both fiction and nonfiction, and that historically the two occupied common creative territory.

In his own analysis of Orwell's work, Williams helps us get to the heart of the matter. While Orwell's writing 'can be conventionally divided into the "documentary" and "factual" on the one hand, and the "fictional" and "imaginative" on the other', Williams maintains that this division is secondary to the 'key problem', which 'is the relation between "fact" and "fiction"', which in turn 'is part of the whole crisis of "being a writer"' (1971: 41). He continues:

> Literature used not to be divided in these external ways. The rigid distinction between 'documentary' and 'imaginative' writing is a product of the nineteenth century, and most widely distributed in our own time. Its basis is a naïve definition of the 'real world', and then a naïve separation of it from the observation and imagination of men [sic]. (1971: 41)

However, even though postmodern theory has come some way towards reconciling the 'effective dualism of "the world" and "the mind"' that Williams berates (1971: 41), (L)iterature's resilience as cultural and market capital means that '[t]erms like "fiction" and "nonfiction", "documentary" and "imaginative", continue to obscure many of the actual problems of writing' (1971: 42). For Williams there are more pressing issues facing writers and critics than classifying whether a work is fiction or nonfiction; instead he identifies a particular 'key problem' as one of 'observation',

and the extent to which writers observe from 'inside' or 'outside' or both (1971: 43-51). He sees in Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* an author who 'is neither "inside" nor "outside"; he is simply drifting *with* others – exceptionally close to them but within the fact that they are drifting' (Williams 1971: 43). As such, Orwell doesn't simply identify with those he reveals as victims of society; what happens to him in these works happens every day to thousands of others, and through this immersion in their situation he 'reaches for the idea of an extended or even common humanity' (1971: 43).

The term 'immersion' here is my choice, not Williams', but if he had used it, he may have arrived at another term, that of the participant observer, and from there to a particular perspective which I believe exemplifies that 'unity of Orwell's "documentary" and "imaginative" writing' which for Williams 'is the very first thing to notice' (1971: 42). That perspective is ethnography, which in its broadest sense involves 'the close study of culture as lived by particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times' (Van Maanen 1995: 23). Lisa Wedeen observes that, despite differences about 'what the practice [of ethnography] entails', 'most' ethnographers 'concur' that it 'involves immersion in the place and lives of people under study' (2010: 257). Of special significance for teachers and scholars of creative writing, however, is that ethnography is not only 'a research style', but also 'the written product of that research activity' (Atkinson 1990: 3). And as will become evident, it is in the problematisation of that written product that ethnography and fiction find common methodological ground.

We commonly regard ethnography as located squarely within the domain of nonfiction; nevertheless, I believe that it can be turned into a powerful tool for developing our students as creative writers generally. This, I propose, involves a three-part strategy: 1) identifying and analysing the works of 'canonical' authors whose work may be seen to straddle the fiction/nonfiction divide; 2) working with ethnographic ways of knowing, including gaining an appreciation of the ethnographic qualities of fictional and nonfictional texts and of the literary techniques of nonfiction; and 3) creating works which use the world around them as subject matter, but which employ overtly fictional modes of representation.

Part one of this strategy requires engaging with the literary canon in a particular way, directing attention towards authors whose 'general continuum of writing practices' (Pope 2002: 60) suggests an 'artisanal' quality which Clifford says is 'tied to the worldly work of writing', and which characterises the 'making of ethnography' (quoted in Atkinson 1990: 26). Orwell has already been singled out; others might include Daniel Defoe and Charles Dickens, whose lives as working writers included journalism and pamphleteering as readily identifiable forms of nonfiction, but whose prodigious outputs often involved melding fact and fiction into rather less easily classifiable works. Think of Defoe's *Journal of the plague year* (1722), for example, with its documentary detail mediated through a fictional narrator with a distinctly eschatological view of events. Even Dickens' apparently straightforward novelistic *oeuvre* can, as we will see, be treated to an ethnographic analysis both in content and style, which leads us to part two of the strategy.

Part two sees the nexus between fiction and nonfiction thrown into sharper focus. So, for instance, picking up again with the work of Orwell, an analysis of *Down and out in Paris and London* (1933) reveals that the diary entries covering years of forays into the East End of London, to Paris, and back to regional England, in the guise of a tramp and itinerant worker, were shaped into a work of 'literary re-invention' (Stansky and Abrahams 1974: 220). Yet few readers even today would deny the impact of the work as an exposé of poverty and misery in the midst of wealth and indifference. In order to create that impact, Orwell reworked his raw data, consisting of incidents he had experienced or heard about 'between the winter of 1928 and the summer of 1931', but which were 'chosen and rearranged to take their place in the simple picaresque structure of the book which covers a period of four consecutive months' (1974: 242). Not only is the timeframe of Orwell's research period collapsed into a more coherent 'unity', but characters and events are added whenever convenient to 'the plot'; for example,

> unlike the ordinary *plongeur* who has nowhere to turn, he writes to his hitherto unmentioned friend 'B.' in London, asking him to find a job for him … 'B.' replies promptly, like the *deus ex machina* or plot device he so transparently is … (Stansky and Abrahams 1974: 242-3)

While all of this artifice may seem at odds with ethnographic writing, associated as is the latter with social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, Orwell's methods are completely congruent with – indeed, they may be said to anticipate – the advice which over the last few decades has been given to writers in non-(L)iterary fields of all kinds. Drawing on Bakhtin's 'theoretical observations', Dan Rose observes

> that the novel has invaded the scientific monograph and transformed it, not through the use of fiction particularly, but through the descriptive setting of the scene, the narration of the local peoples' own stories, the use of dialogue, the privileging of the objects of enquiry along with the subject or the author who writes, and the notation by the author of emotions, subjective reactions, and involvement in ongoing activities. (1993: 217)

This is because ethnography has undergone not so much an identity crisis as a methodological one. Its ontology remains valid even if, in the words of one of its significant apologists, it has undergone 'an intense epistemological trial by fire' (Van Maanen 1995: 2); that is, the debate 'is not whether or not the work should go on but how best to go on with such work' (1995:4). Epistemologically (and in concert with assaults on other disciplines, history being the usual target), ethnography has been taken to task for 'its unwarranted claims of objectivity' and its 'scientific posturing associated with modernism or essentialism' (1995: 2). Ontologically, as Van Maanen reminds us, ethnography remains essentially 'a storytelling institution' with a good deal of 'documentary status', because 'someone actually goes "out there," draws close to people and events, and then writes about what was learned *in situ*' (1995: 3).

Here we find ourselves back to Williams' 'key problem' of 'being a writer' (1971: 41), part of which entails the 'relationship of the writer to his [sic] world' (1971: 46). In this respect, ethnography has suffered from its own version of the philosophical issues faced by the classic realist novel. Just as Henry James, in promoting the novel as 'an impersonal form', would have '"the artist refined out of existence", observing,

recording' (Williams 1971: 46-7), so classic 'ethnographic realism' demanded 'the swallowing up and disappearance of the author' under 'a thick spray of objectivity' (Van Maanen 1995: 7). Of course, as Williams notes, 'in practice it is impossible to observe anything without being in some relationship to it' (1971: 47), a realisation which among ethnographers has resulted in 'the spread of a methodological self-consciousness and a concern for reflexivity' (Van Maanen 1995: 8).

This shift in emphasis of the ethnographer's role from the observer part of the job description towards that of the participant has pushed writers 'beyond traditional ethnographic interests and frameworks when constructing the text' and – notably in the process 'in which the culture of the writer's own group is textualized' (Van Maanen 1995: 9) – 'into the rather novel but altogether useful role of making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar (1995: 20). Consequently, ethnography's well-established goal of contributing to our knowledge of 'the kinds of life-worlds people create' (Egan-Robertson and Willett 1998: 5) is now often applied as much to 'us' as it is to 'other'. Furthermore, this new-found capacity for defamiliarisation locates ethnography even more closely within the bounds of (L)iterature, whose texts, according to Formalist theorists at least, 'always in some way challenge and change … all that is dulled by familiarity and habit' (Pope 2002: 88). [2] Already it is evident what potential an ethnographic approach holds for those of our creative writing students in search of subject matter of suitable relevance and significance to their own lives. But the added benefit comes when the increased self-consciousness of method is accompanied by a corresponding awareness of the poststructuralist insistence on ethnography as the 'same act of narrativization' we associate with literary fiction (Juschka 2003: 91).

Over the last two decades, therefore – certainly at least since Paul Atkinson's important foray into the literary 'turn' in ethnography (1990)[3] – much of the meta-literature has been concerned with the ways 'ethnographers create scenes on a page through highly selective and partial descriptions of observed and reevoked details', and how this process is 'enhanced or blurred by their descriptive writing skills' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 67). As a consequence, students of creative writing setting off on the ethnographic path will be forgiven if they feel that they have stumbled back into the domain of fiction itself. For they will almost certainly discover all manner of advice and tutelage directed at ethnographers in writing up their fieldnotes using any number of literary devices, including 'presenting characters as fully social beings through descriptions of dress, speech, gestures, and facial expressions, which allow the reader to infer traits' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 79) – a key skill for any fiction writer working in the classic realist mode to cultivate! Sources such as these also promote 'organizational strategies' involving the ability to compose 'coherent units' in the form of 'sketches', 'episodes' and 'fieldnote tales' (1995: 84-99), all of which, again, are derived from (in effect if not in exact nomenclature), and eminently applicable to, the writing of fiction.

This is not to equate fiction and nonfiction completely; the two still can have quite distinct aesthetic and social functions, among other characteristics. However, I think the ethnographic method helps us reconceptualise fiction less as the binary opposite of nonfiction and more as the product of the dialectic between the imaginative and the

documentary. Or to use another frame of reference, fiction is not so much a fixed cultural point as something which operates along the mimetic continuum which Michael Taussig locates 'between the real and really made-up' (Taussig 1993: 19).[4] Some of the notion of a dialectic is also already implicit in Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about novels, which he maintains 'have always tended to be radically *hybrid* in their origins and richly *heteroglossic* in the "varied voices" that they draw together' (Pope 2005: 218). David Shields is more explicit about what this 'mixed form' actually comprises:

> A great deal of realistic documentary, some history, some topographical writing, some barely disguised autobiography have always been a part of the novel, from Defoe through Flaubert and Dickens. (2010: 67)

Taking a cue from this, part three of my proposed ethnographic pedagogy can be illustrated using the opening passages of *Bleak House* (1853), where Dickens is usually commended for creating a metaphor out of the fog of London. Here, the actual physical phenomenon becomes an expression of the 'psychological paralysis' (Hawes 2008: 228) suffered by all those caught up in Chancery's snare; in Dickens' world legal argument is no longer 'just "like a fog" anymore – it actually *is* a fog' (2008: 218). Metaphor is recognised as the literary device *par excellence* for 'making strange'; at its most effective it involves 'creative risk-taking with the less conventional or usage-enshrined associative possibilities of the language' (Carter 1997: 145). Standard critical analysis would therefore regard *the law* as the tenor – that is, the overall 'topic' – of this particular metaphor, while *fog* is relegated to the role of vehicle for the symbolic depiction of the law as a creeping, suffocating miasma.

But might it not be more useful to our students, struggling with the hauntingly pervasive influence of those twin 'Romantic' demons, genius and inspiration,[5] to see Dickens less as 'novelist' and more as ethnographer of his own situation? In this scenario, Dickens' objectification of his own society turns London itself into the tenor of one over-arching metaphor for what ails that society, with both the fog and the law as the vehicles for expressing ills which are simultaneously material and cultural in form. Certainly the extent of his topographical detail in describing the pervasiveness of the fog leaves us in no doubt as to how real a threat it is to the physical and moral well-being of mid-nineteenth-century Londoners. It is no abstract concept, unlike the law which, although it actually ruins the lives of characters in the novel, is in origin a cultural construct. Dickens, of course, is able to push the metaphor to its riskiest, such that while both the fog and the law serve to turn London into a strange, 'other' world, they each set the other off as phenomena in their own right. The final coming together of the two within the law courts of Lincoln's Inn gives birth, as it were, to the action of the novel.

However one may wish to develop such an analysis, the key point is that for our students, many of the problems encountered in coming to terms with the often vague and idealistic – but consistently culturally privileged – realm of the fictional might find resolution in the solidly materialist nonfictional process of immersion in and close attention to the world around them. Ethnography initially provides an entry

point into creativity, but inherent in its methodology and practice is the unification advocated by Williams (1971: 42) of two modes of writing, the documentary – the observation and recording of data – and the imaginative – reconstructing and representing that data to make readers see it anew, as if through a fresh pair of eyes.

Speaking about his own attitude to writing, Brian Castro notes the 'terrible power the terms fiction and non-fiction exercise over us', and observes that 'the idea of fact and fiction is not a disposable division for a child. There is only belief and disbelief' (Castro 2003).[6] While I hesitate to regard our students as 'children', I believe that they are more likely to benefit from a similar ingenuousness and openness on our part as teachers in writing programs. As we have already seen, for Williams the adult world of (L)iterature suffers from its own form of naïveté in maintaining the separation of fiction and nonfiction. Not only should we no longer insist on the distinction, we must learn to promote both the documentary and the imaginative as the complementary creative strategies that our best writers have always deployed in helping readers 'imagine and create better worlds' (Egan-Robertson and Willett 1998: 5).

## Endnotes

1. This parenthesised construction is my own, and as clumsy and/or trendy as it may at first appear, I find it a convenient shorthand way of rendering problematic the culturally constructed phenomenon which the plain 'capital-L' or 'small-l' versions don't convey.

2. While it may appear that I am positing an apologia for the Formalist project of identifying what makes (L)iterature a thing-in-itself, it is evident even from the small sample already dealt with that the features and devices generally associated with fiction may be employed within most domains of nonfiction as well. Thus, whether or not we agree with Formalism's opponents in asserting that 'There is no such thing as a "literary language"' (Simpson 1997: 7), nonfiction writing can be said to exhibit varying degrees of 'literariness', which further subverts fiction's culturally privileged position.

3. And arguably even earlier, with works such as Clifford and Marcus (1986).

4. This notion of dialectic was prompted by Adam Roberts' premise that science fiction literature is a product of 'the dialectic between materialism and mysticism' (Roberts 2006: 305). Curiously, despite Raymond Williams' Marxist allegiances, he makes no use of dialectics in his analysis of Orwell's writing.

5. See Pope (2005: 101-6) for a detailed discussion of the concept and etymology of 'genius' and how, *pace* postmodern theory, in popular culture at least it remains 'alive and well' (2005: 105).

6. My thanks to University of South Australia Writing student Chloe Dutschke for drawing my attention to Brian Castro's comments.

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