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Negotiating with the self: how creative writing can teach teaching literary studies students to be better readers

Abstract:

Creative writing students need to become better readers in order to become better thinkers, and thereby to become better writers, posits Andrew Melrose. He argues that the separation of creative writing from literary studies disables this cycle, and the cost to creative writing has been critical reading, and critical *and creative* writing in its turn. In this paper I argue that the separation has similar (but different) consequences for literary studies students. Creative writing has much to offer in teaching literary studies students a creative approach to close reading, a skill that many students pay insufficient attention to in their rush to the political. This paper explores the potential of this approach through a consideration of the relationship between narrative voice, authorial identity and authorial agency, drawing on the work of Adriana Cavarero, and in reference to Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead.*

Biographical note:

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Literary studies students, in my experience, rarely interrogate their own practices of reading. Rather, the intersections they create between theory and text tend to be outward looking, invigorated by political concerns such as race and ethnicity, gender and identity. In class I find literary studies students very willing to engage in politicised debate, but when asked to point to evidence in the text for their claims, they are sometimes bemused. Too often their arguments gesture towards the text, rather than engaging in a critical interrogation. It seems that, while in creative writing programs theoretical approaches to reading and writing have waxed, in literary studies such approaches have waned, giving way to apparently more urgent political issues.

If literary studies students rarely visit their own practices of reading, they are even less likely to critique their practices of writing. And yet, reading and writing are inextricably enmeshed. Most particularly in the practice of writing, posits Marcelle Freiman (2005). In writing, Freiman argues, reading and writing engage in a close dialogue that differs depending on the kind of writing going forward. For Freiman, when writing an academic paper the 'reading' is concerned with 'logic, causality, argument, explication and analysis' (7). When writing poetry, the process is more complex: 'reading and writing occur simultaneously', as the 'playful and spontaneous' and the 'plurality of meanings' mix with the desire to 'convey my meaning', all the while aware of 'the world and of language and other texts' (7-8). For Freiman, then, the process of writing *creatively* taps into the most diverse dialogue between reading and writing, developing readers who read more freely—with more 'pleasure and play'—and thereby have more potential to engage 'more closely and confidently' as readers of texts at large (15).

Close reading and politicised literary theories can work together in a similar synergistic manner. However, close reading has been traditionally aligned with New Criticism and its de-contextualising impulse. Such decontextualisation is antithetical to later politicised literary theories of many persuasions; such approaches lack Edward Said's 'worldliness'. Indeed, calls to reinvigorate close reading can still echo divisive views (Prose 2006). And yet, it is mistaken to consider close reading and politicised theory as dichotomised (DuBois 2007). It is more helpful to consider them as different foci in the ongoing project of reading. For example, Sheldon Wolin uses the terms 'criticism' and 'crisis' to relate to a spectrum of involvement, to reflect a relation of 'distance' or 'intervention' with the political (cited in Giroux 2004: 339). Such a spectrum allows not only movement, but also the potential to rest in a place at neither pole. Instead of choosing a prescribed dichotomised position, it is more an issue of a self-conscious awareness of one's reading position. Reading, no matter how close, necessarily occurs within some context or other. John Frow calls reading a 'mid-level' concept between the text and the social, having neither only the 'specificity of the concept of the text' nor the 'generality of the concepts of literature or the social' (Frow 2010: 248). For Frow it is only in the act of reading that the text and the social are 'interpretively constituted'.

Of course post-structuralism has provided a link between critical/textual reading and social formations, particularly in linguistic criticism after Saussure. And indeed theories of reading and writing have been produced, most famously, by Barthes,

Foucault and Derrida: 'those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere' (Barthes 1974: 16).

However, these theories seem less popular than they once were with literary studies students. It seems now that literary studies students, particularly at the undergraduate level, need help reconnecting with the text. One way to do this is through creative writing.

The notion that creative writers make better literary critics is not new, and has a long history particularly in the US (Myers 1996), but it has suffered through the disciplinary separation of creative writing and literary studies (Lim 2003). Indeed, Andrew Melrose describes a developmental cycle operating between reading, thinking, writing, and back to reading, which is disabled by such a disciplinary separation (2007). Creative writing as a discipline has been working to break down this separation, as this conference attests. Literary studies, on the other hand, has done little. And yet, even the most cursory glance makes evident the potential synergies. Creative writing, necessarily, is concerned with the production of texts at the 'nuts and bolts' level. In recent years, creative writing has also benefitted from the intervention of theory on a number of levels. Theory has been brought to bear not only on the production of texts, but also on politicised pedagogies surrounding this production (Dawson 2005, 2008; Blythe and Sweet 2008). Literary studies students could benefit from these experiences, not only in the synergies of the meeting of 'nuts and bolts' approaches and politicised theory, but in the general enhancement of a *creative* reading through the dialogue of reading and writing in the creative writing process (Freiman 2005).

In order to explore the potential benefits of such exposure this paper will now turn, by way of example, to a consideration of the complex interrelation of narrative voice, authorial identity and authorial agency.

One of the most common difficulties for literary studies students, in my experience, is coming to grips with the distinction between the author and the narrative voice, particularly the first person narrative voice. In my classes at least, many students continually mistake the narrator for the author. Even though they correct themselves, or are corrected by others, they clearly have a tendency, under certain conditions, to correlate the narrator with the author.

This tendency is explored by Susan S. Lanser who argues that, while the reader might recognise that the 'I' of a narrative voice is a textual construct, there are other forces at play:

> our reading of textual voice does not simply follow the rules of discourse; it adheres to another logic that is not only formal and structural but pragmatic and contextual, "staining" the divide between fiction and the real (2005: 217).

Lanser argues that there are certain conditions under which readers have a tendency to 'attach' a particular voice with 'the (presumptive) author'; that some features predominate in the reader's perception while others tend to fall into the background. One of the strongest conditions of attachment Lanser delineates is social identity. This encompasses 'all (perceived) social similarities between a narrator and an author: of

name, gender, race, age, biographical background beliefs and values, or occupation as writer' (212). When such similarities occur, Lanser contends, the tendency to attach is strong enough to overcome even the explicit use of different names for narrator and author. Another of the strongest criteria for attachment is non-narrativity. This occurs when the narrator indulges in extra-narrative discourse, commentary or interpretation – anything more than simply relating the narrative. Further, Lanser notes that the degree of attachment does not need to be consistent throughout the text. There may be a 'doubling' effect, where the narrating character is conflated with the author at some points in the texts, and not at others (216). Therefore, if certain conditions prevail, the reader constructs an authorial identity based upon narrative identity and narrative voice, contextualised within the reader's understanding of the socio-historical context of the author's life.

Despite the intervention of theory, this kind of response is temptingly easy to make, especially if the reader has no knowledge, either experiential or theoretical, of the actual processes of creative production. The reader, no matter how experienced or critical, is always at some point vulnerable to the operation of the text in a way that the writer cannot be. Margaret Atwood, in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, has considered the relationship between the text, the author and the reader at length. For Atwood the writer's relation with the text is very different from that of the reader with the text. Moreover, Atwood argues that the reader is prone to fall into mistaking these relationships.

Atwood proposes that writing a story has potential for the writer that it never has for the reader. It might be an opportunity to recapture one's past, to 'get a glimpse' or imagine a lost one returned. Atwood cites Borges who posits that the entire *Divine Comedy* was a way to for Dante to try for a glimpse of the lost Beatrice: 'to imagine that he was with her' (154). Such imagining is quite different from the 'reality': 'The reality, for him, was that first life and then death had taken Beatrice from him' (Borges in Atwood 2002: 154). The story might also be a way for the author to revisit possibilities, not necessarily to explain or defend, rather to show how it was, or could have been. In other words, for the writer the text is a process of trying out ideas and possibilities. For the reader, on the other hand, the text and the story within it pre-exist the self. Even in texts that play with openness of content or form – even those that exist in virtual space and can change – for the reader the text nevertheless presents some kind of pre-existing reality that is approached. In the more traditional case of books on shelves there is a concreteness, a physical reality, to this given. Atwood's argument is that, while for the writer the text is a space of imagining, for the reader, the story in the text, the characters, settings, and narrative voice, are 'very real' (154).

This sense of pre-existing reality is often stronger to the reader than the sense that the relationship between themselves and the text is a delicate and ongoing process of negotiation. And yet, for Atwood this process of negotiation is the only thing that can grant a text life:

> In what does this aliveness or deadness consist? The biological definition would be that living things grow and change, and can have offspring, whereas dead things are inert. In what way can a text grow and change and have offspring? Only through its

> interaction with a reader, no matter how far away that reader may be from the writer in time and space. … Books must travel from reader to reader in order to stay alive (2002: 126, 132).

The text is alive as it flows from reader to reader, through the reader, but also apart from the reader. For Atwood the text has a heart or a soul, it 'expresses its own emotions and thoughts' (120). Of course the text is not really human, but it has a 'human element' constituted by its voices (131). As long as these voices speak to readers the text remains alive. The life of the text is therefore dependent upon the reader, who reads the text and hears the voices.

This life, however, is a textual effect, an illusion created by the author and within which the reader actively participates. Atwood argues that the reader has a tendency to discount their own input into this process, pushing the emphasis back towards the writer. In the extreme case the reader can even mistake the life of the book for the life of the writer. Such a mistake brings the reader and the writer 'too close for comfort': 'such a reader wants to abolish the middle term, and to get hold of the text by getting hold of the writer, in the flesh' (119). For Atwood, such reader is a 'Demon Reader', aligned with the deranged nurse in Stephen King's horror story *Misery*, who entraps her incapacitated writer-hero until he writes a romance just for her, and then she will 'bump him off' (119). Mistaking the life in the book for that of the author, the nurse plans to take full possession of the writer, first containing him within the house, and then within the crypt of his final work. The life of the book is not the life of the author, just as the book is not the author. An authorial identity might be extracted from the text, but this is an identity after-the-fact, so to speak.

Atwood makes a further distinction between the writer, the one who writes, and the flesh-and-blood person:

> By *two*, I mean the person who exists when no writing is going forward – the one who walks the dog, eats bran for regularity, takes the car in to be washed, and so forth – and that other, more shadowy and altogether more equivocal personage who shares the same body, and who, when no one is looking, takes it over and uses it to commit the actual writing (2002: 30).

For Atwood, the one who writes, evidenced by the written product, also to be found in interviews and on the fly-leaves of books, is 'certainly not me' (31). 'All writers are doubles,' claims Atwood, 'for the simple reason that you can never actually meet the author of the book you have just read' (32). This is of course not a new phenomenon, and Atwood offers a series of comments by authors as evidence of its ubiquity: from Charles Dickens, to E. L. Doctorow, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and others (33-7). In a recent explorative study, Ben-Shir reports that authors often do experience this sense of an identity somehow split, or at least in contestation. The distinction Ben-Shir finds is between the contained, controlled, self-constructed 'narrated self' and the resistant, adventurous, more 'essential' self (Ben-Shir, 2007: 190). For Atwood, the writing self is spectral, not material; it is 'not flesh and blood, not a real human being' (39). The narrative identity that can be extracted from the text is, therefore, the identity of this spectral double.

And yet, the book, the life within it, and the authorial identity that can be extracted from it, are all evidence that an author exists, somewhere, materially. This author, who straddles the narrative production *and* the material flesh-and-blood, can be understood as Adriana Cavarero's narratable self (Cavarero 2000). For Cavarero the narratable self is not only the one who narrates, but is also the one who has the capacity to narrate, before and after the narration. The narratable self is both the cause that brings narrative into being, and the evidence of the existent, that part of the self that exists elsewhere, materially, before, after, and *apart from* the narration. From Cavarero's perspective, while the narration and the material self might be separate, it is the narratable self, the place where materiality and discourse merge, that is constitutive of the self. It is through the narratable self that (narrative) identity is reconnected with materiality.

Atwood, too, once having established the separateness of the spectral author and the material self, brings them back together in an inextricable interdependency. 'They alternate. They are attached head to head. Each empties his or her vital substance into the other. Neither can exist alone' (47). So for Atwood, the material self and the spectral author are, simultaneously and cyclically, attached and separate, but also vitally intermixed. There is a point at which one cannot be distinguished from the other. This is the place where discourse and materiality merge.

This merging is evident when the spectral double operates as both an immaterial self, and at the same time as the vehicle of authorial agency and desire. Atwood herself occupies such a space when she intervenes, as a first person narrator, into the discourse of criticism; for example in the text at hand: *Negotiating with the Dead*. This text is the collection of a series of lectures given by Atwood, in the flesh, as it were. Somewhat problematically, as a published work it has become a volume of essays in the first person. Is this particular first person Atwood in-the-flesh, or has the narrator become the spectral double? Is a gambit in the game of authorial identity construction? In this text Atwood devotes one whole chapter out of seven to developing the idea of the spectral double, the sense that the author is 'not me' (31), thus aligning the speaking voice with the material self: 'The author is the name on the books. I'm the other one' (32). At the same time, however, these claims are embedded within a narrative of her historical self, a past self reflected upon by the (spectral?) narrator.

The agency of the author is therefore both greater than and less than that which the reader perceives. The text is a product of the author, but it clearly is not the same as the author. Moreover, the author who writes is not the same as the author who eats and sleeps, who lives materially. The text, and indeed the author (as the one who writes), can operate as a buffer, a distancing device between the reader and the material self. And yet, authorial identity as inscribed in the text is also a product of authorial agency: readers read according to predictable patterns that the author can recognise and use to create particular effects, whether they follow the rules of discourse, indulge in postmodern play, or encourage reader attachment. Despite these nuances, finally, inescapably, the writer's work creates an oeuvre that stands in for a life narrative.

My point then is that the relationship between reader and text, between author and text, and therefore between author and reader, is replete with conflicting tensions and ambiguities. This relationship is further complicated by the complex relationship between authors and themselves. The reader whose focus is only on one side of the equation is unlikely to be aware of these tensions and ambiguities, regardless of their capacity to read critically. Atwood, as author, narrator, spectral and material self, engages us, plays with us and then laughs at us, telling us we can never know her. Atwood's playful and disruptive relation with her text has qualities that echo Freiman's creative dialogue between reading and writing, a notion which taps into the *plaisir* and *jouissance* of Barthes' readerly and writerly texts. An engagement with Atwood's text would, therefore, be enhanced by the reader participating in such creative processes as Freiman's creative dialogue. More generally, to enter such a creative space would not only enliven the notion of close reading, but it would bring the disciplines of creative writing and literary studies closer together, in a movement which must be productive of further, unanticipated synergies to the benefit to both disciplines.

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