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'Good to think with': words, knowing and doing

Abstract:

Following the seminal work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropologist Mary Douglas describes commodities as objects that are not only useful, but also have the function of being both 'good for thinking' and potentially creative. She expressly separates the use and function of commodities from language, which for her only has *function*, the 'capacity for poetry'. But drawing on earlier writers, especially the 18th century philosopher Giambattista Vico, I suggest that language too can be both useful and functional, depending on how the words are combined and for what purposes; in addition, I suggest that creative writing, or poetic language, can be both good for thinking and creatively generative – that is, equally capable of producing art and knowledge. This suggests that writing academics might exploit the capacity of poetic language to deliver literary practice and products alongside reportable research practice and products. To do so it is necessary to apply research techniques specific to creative writing. From Vico we can take observation, attention and critical analysis, along with a dose of 'primitive' thought; from Wordsworth we can take the application of 'long and deep thought'. Together, this use of language has the potential to deliver literary products that are capable of intervening in the conventional ways of knowing, perceiving and understanding – capable of generating new thought and new things that are 'good for thinking'.

Biographical note:

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Words, once spoken, are like clouds of breathe on icy mornings: they drift in the air between you and me; they dissipate; they change their shape and with it their import; and then they are gone. Write them down instead: there they are, printed on a page or a screen, but still they flicker before our eyes. Each word is tinted by the presence of the others around it, its meaning inflected and deflected by their meanings. They remain, static, on the page or the screen; but like their spoken fellows, they are only partially accessible; they are always drifting away.

But for all their ephemeral character, words have a remarkable capacity to cause effects. They may slip out of our grasp as soon as we think we have them nailed, but they creep back to infiltrate our thinking, our feeling and our actions. This paper is about words, and phrases, and about what poetic words and phrases might offer the domain of knowledge.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas raises the issue of function versus usefulness when she writes:

If it is said that the essential function of language is its capacity for poetry, we shall assume that the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget the idea of consumer irrationalism. Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking;¹ treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty. (2002: 40-41)

The argument of this paragraph is flawed, not least by the unsubstantiated conditional that opens the passage: '*if* it is said'. But is it, in fact, said; and if so, by whom, and why? Me, I would point the finger at poets – it's the sort of thing they *would* say, the sort of thing I too would say, if I weren't in the process of writing an academic text. The passage uses that shaky conditional to propose that the essential function of language is its capacity for poetry. Here too my poet mind is pleased, but my academic mind bridles, asking, *What does you mean, 'essential'*? Derrida would turn in his grave, surely, at this gesture towards what he calls 'the metaphysics of presence', the belief that behind the surface of representation is the 'truth', the essential nature, of the real world. But I thought it worth glossing over the problems of argument in this citation in order to take up the question(s) at its heart. She separates out usefulness from function; a commodity is useful for eating, clothing or shelter; presumably language is useful for communication, reportage, explication. And the function of commodities is that they are 'good for thinking', a 'medium for the human creative faculty'. In Douglas' account, the function of language is poetry.

I agree, at some level, with this account of function and use, in relation to language. As John Berger writes, 'That a poem may use the same words as a Company Report means no more than the fact that a lighthouse and a prison cell may be built with stones from the same quarry, joined with the same mortar' (Berger 1984: 21-22). The Company Report is useful, one hopes, but it is not designed primarily to be 'good for thinking' – it is first about information. Moreover, the Company Report is unlikely to be, in the first instance at least, 'a medium for the human creative faculty'. Its language has a different use, and its functions are different. But if the language of poetry is not useful, in the commodity/informational sense, what does it have to offer

beyond a sense of song, a moment of affect? Can it be both good for thinking and a creative medium, as Douglas claims is the case for commodities?

The reason this interests me is both practical and personal. I am responsible for presenting my faculty's research outputs to the university management and to the government, so it's very much in my interests to be able to claim that creative work results in knowledge outcomes. Even post-ERA, it is not easy to convince those in authority about the research value of our work. I suspect that the concept of 'good to think with', along with creativity and innovation, may help to ground my claims that creative work forms part of the body of knowledge being generated in universities across the country. But in addition, as a writer I am curious about this thing we do – the manipulation of words and language into images, into shadows on the wall. Can creative practice really comprise research as it is defined in the Frascati Manual – *creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge* (OECD 2002: 30) – or is it more about pleasure, a libidinal charge, or the drifting passages of thought?

The 'problem' of research in and through creative practice is being addressed right across the academic world at present and, as I have discussed elsewhere (Webb & Brien 2008), writing forms a particular case. Its artistic medium is language, the same stuff we use to write company reports; and, when compared with the plastic and performing arts, our practice is relatively silent and static. Most of the literature on practice-led research describes techniques associated with non-linguistic 'seeing' and gestural 'perceiving'. This could leave writing researchers in a bit of a bind: unable to appropriate research techniques easily from the literature on creative practice research, but also, for the most part, unwilling to apply only those research techniques appropriate to literary and cultural studies. Most of us who are writing academics want to do both: to make works that are marked by the creative faculty (that obey the poetic function), and are also good for thinking (and therefore have use value). And, as the literature of the past 2,500 years suggests, it is possible to do so. But it is not a real bind: we do not need to bifurcate our practice between the 'useful' – good for research – and the 'poetic'. From Plato to the present, scholars have given serious consideration to both the function and the usefulness of literature.

I want to step back just a few centuries, to the late neo-Classical/early Enlightenment period, when both the conception of progress as a ruling ideal, and the problem of knowledge emerged. There is an axiom that it was at this point that art was deserted by science, when it became a problem of knowledge rather than a site for its production, and certainly there is evidence of anxiety about the wildness of art in writers of the middle-to-late Enlightenment, when reason ruled, when art needed to be confined, or left to work only as decoration. No longer was the making of literature considered a generator of knowledge; instead, literature became mere data for researchers, 'the zoo of everyday practices' (Certeau 1984: 78), where scholars might observe, through the grid of representation, a simulacrum of human society. But creative practice was not in fact exiled as dramatically as this account suggests: during the Enlightenment period a number of scholars identified, in both the process and the product of writing, examples of thought and knowledge, and hence of writing that is not simply the raw material for scientists. What these scholars suggest is that

the creative mode of language can be a way of 'doing' that is at the same time a way of 'knowing', both functional and useful.

A key author is Giambattista Vico, who insisted on literature's central role in both the health of the state and the individual's getting of wisdom – a perspective that should make him the patron saint of any creative writing department. In a move that seems to anticipate Douglas' assertion of the poetic function of language, Vico described the poetic origins of language.² Early humans 'formed their first languages by singing', he writes (perhaps fancifully; though, as he notes, those who stutter can sing fluently, so perhaps there is something in his thesis: see Vico 1982: 179). He points too to the importance of gestures – the use of the poet's body to render as concrete reality the ideas the poet is attempting to express (Vico 2000: 157). In this he neatly denies my claim, above, that the work of writing is silent and static. For Vico, it is sound and movement, a gestural and performative work that starts with what the poet believes to be the signs of 'real words' (Vico 1948: 75), the language of the world, that the poet brings into the concrete world: words are how we interact with the phenomenal world and, through creating works of what we observe about that world, also create knowledge.

This provides some pointers to how we might conceive of creative writing as having the capacity to generate knowledge, and to find points of accommodation with reason. After all, both artists and scientists use similar techniques – close observation, attention, dissection, analysis, reframing, comparison and discussion – in order to make sense. The same material, language, is used to make both science and poetry; and together those domains can generate knowledge about the world and our place in it. Vico is very clear about this: knowledge for him *is* creation, and vice versa; poetry emerges from ignorance, he claims, because 'ignorance is the mother of wonder; and being ignorant of all things, the first people were amazed by everything. In them, poetry began as literally *divine*' (2000: 144).

His point is that the ancients, knowing nothing, observed the world closely, 'divined' it, created stories about it (all the things of the world being, apparently, 'good for thinking'), and their myths produced frameworks for knowledge. But though he identifies poetic language as the point of emergence of knowledge, it is not, for Vico, the same thing as reason: indeed, 'poetry was born sublime precisely because it lacked rationality' (2000: 149). Poetry/myth kicks off the creative faculty that attempts to make sense of the world; and it is followed by philosophy and science, 'by which civilization was completed' (2000: 204). What this means is that knowledge becomes increasingly abstract, increasingly divorced from the experiential and 'sensible' world. But as knowledge grows, and grows more abstract, more rational, it is inclined to become more sclerotic. It is the task of the poet (by which Vico means any creative writer) to reject the role of cultural decorator, and return to what he terms 'primitive' thinking – observing, experiencing, 'mimicking'; and through this work not only see everything as 'new' but also, in the process of engaging and rewriting it, actually make it new. In the work of an informed and attentive poet, the established ways of thinking and knowing can be interrupted, and new myths, new ways to think and new ways to perceive the world can come into the knowledge domain. Reason and creativity each reach their limit, though at different points in the knowledge cycle,

and must pass the baton to and fro if we are to be able to continue the work of making original contributions to knowledge.

Let me return now to Douglas' statement that the 'function of language is its capacity for poetry'.³ She does not define poetry, but Kenneth Koch does: as 'a language in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning, and also equal to the importance of grammar and syntax' (Koch 1998: 44). Let me add to this Vico's notion that poetry is 'mental language' (Vico 2000: 157), and WH Auden's point, that poetry is not about facts, but rather is inevitably associated with he calls 'telling lies' (Auden 1975: 19), because the focus is on poetic possibilities and not on truth. Put these three definitions together, and we have a picture of a form that is part sound, part image, and all idea. It is a form that is couched in words but those words are focused on the sensory rather than the rational; on the material rather than the abstract. They are not the words we find in argument or explication. They are words as material objects; words as art. Perhaps it is not possible; perhaps the work of poetry is homologous with the work of research, but following Vico and others I think it is reasonable to say that the work of poetry can be analogically connected with knowledge production. This is, I'd suggest, because of how poetry is made: through a combination of observation, attention, creative thought, dissection and analysis – Vico's recipe for science/knowledge.

An example of this can be found in William Carlos Williams' 'This is just to say':

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold (Williams 1934)

This poem satisfies each of the three definitions set out above. Following Koch, it can be seen to have a sense of language that gives equal value to sound and to meaning. The radical line breaks force readers to feel the shape of each word in the mouth, to listen to the sound of the words as they drop onto each short line, rather than reading quickly for the meaning as conventional prose format would require. Following Vico, it can be said to be a kind of 'mental language' – it conjures up images of iceboxes (cold, white, the hard lines of a machine) juxtaposed with plums (round, purple, the softness of flesh); it calls up a relationship, a temporal arrangement, a spatial arrangement, and an ethical stance (breakfast, kitchens, the nicking of fruit destined for another end, the sweet but cowardly apology-at-a-distance, the gentle humour). And finally, following Auden it is easy to suggest that facts are not the issue in this

set of lines, but rather 'lies' – the conceit of a home, a breakfast, a dish of fruit, a perhaps disingenuous apology to provide a way of drawing a picture in words.

This poem is more concerned with the mode and form of the text than with its content and, because it ruptures the relationship between the written form and rational communication, it sparks imagistic, analogical and metaphorical thought processes. Though there is nothing obviously difficult about this poem, this record of a simple human moment, it is in fact staggeringly complex. Consider what happens in the transformation from note to poem through the act of nomination. There is an initial transfer of weight – of gravitas – in the use of the first phrase of the apology as the title of the poem, and the doubling of that title as the opening salvo of the poem – the demand that it be read once as title, then again as line – the absence of full sense if it is not there, the slightly unsettling effect of its apparently unnecessary reiteration if it is. Similarly, the lineation introduces a complexity, in the requirement that the breath be balanced to pace out the space of each short line, in the hesitation at the end of each breath as the enjambment forces a hesitation, and then a throwing over of the voice (the leg) to the next line. It takes the terribly banal, and turns it into art, into something that pushes the mind into a new relationship with time, space and sound. William Wordsworth wrote, famously:

Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. (Wordsworth 2008: 16)

We do not have to know what Williams' poem – or any poem – means; meaning is not what is at stake here, or rather, literality is not at stake. But thought is at stake, and so is feeling, sound and image: those spasms of language that deflect established ways of knowing and thus act as springboards into ways of thinking – that provide things to think with.

Of course poetry is not alone in having this generative property. As Derrida indicates, any text is a matter of 'play' – the free play of presence and absence (Derrida 2001). But poetry does particularly exploit the potential of complexity because it does not rely on the productive arc of prose fiction, or the tractor wheels of argument or explication. It hovers, just beyond thought, and demands that its writers and its readers step beyond the obvious and into possibility, into analogical space. In generating thought, in bumping up against the edges of the known, it forces the writer or the reader to review, reframe, and reread an apparently familiar situation.

In doing so, it also exploits the properties of the mind which, as science writers Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen point out, leads 'a dual existence' (1997: 189), being both a factory for electrical and chemical processes, and an interpretative site where the material of experience is converted into mental maps. The brain/mind is a creative generator, and because of this the maps it generates need not reiterate the established paths, but can offer alternative routes. The authorised signs and stories that represent the world to us are designed to keep us on track – within the borders of the approved map. But landscape artists discuss what they call *desire lines*, those tracks that do not follow authorised paths. Nature writer Robert Finch (2005) describes these as the 'unknown paths' that cause us to lose ourselves, and our way, and yet may take us to

'a new and unexpected clearing, a magical place unanticipated in our daily thoughts or even our dreams'; take us, in short, somewhere new. The desire lines generated by the mind in the creative work of observing, attending to, dissecting, analyzing, imitating and making can deliver precisely this outcome. Some of those lines of thought will leave us lost, or bring us back to the established system of roads and paths. Others will take us somewhere genuinely new, genuinely unthought, genuinely a point from which to begin building knowledge afresh.

If (to return at the end to Mary Douglas' dodgy conditional) we start with the premise that cognition generally involves the creative shaping of our conceptions of the world, then we can acknowledge the role that the making of creative words can have in driving the cognitive process. Like jumper leads kickstarting a battery, creative processes force open fresh pathways for thought and practice. If they do not always deliver original knowledge, they are always capable of providing things that are good to think with – things that can be put to the work of generating research.

Endnotes

1. She takes the phrase 'good for thinking' from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963: 89), who uses it to make sense of human/cultural practices, including eating and shelter.
2. I should note that I am consciously reading Vico 'awry' – drawing analogies between his thinking and 20th-21st century thinking, although a great gulf divides these periods. This essay should not be read as an authoritative account of Vico's work, but as a rendering of elements of it that provides me with material that is 'good to think with'.
3. Though I would qualify this to read 'a function of language is its capacity for poetry'.

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