

Are writers really there when they're writing about their writing? and can we theorise about what they say and do?

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Abstract

There have been repeated calls for Creative Writers in Universities to end their suspicion of Theory. But most Literary Theories were invented by academic readers for academic readers and have little or nothing to say about composition. If we examined more closely the writing process and what writers say about it, might it give us an evidential basis for theories more appropriate to CW pedagogy?

An analysis of some writers' statements with these questions in mind...

At the 2007 conference of the UK National Association of Writers in Education, Graeme Harper suggested that the discipline was 'under-theorised'¹. The fact that this statement was made by a leading creative writing (CW) academic who was not immediately hooted off the stage, suggests a sea-change in attitudes. Hitherto, criticism of the lack of theory in UK creative writing courses has come from literary academics, and it used to be met with hostility from creative writers. Further evidence of something going on is provided by two recently published books. *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* by Paul Dawson, and *The author is not dead, merely somewhere else*, by Michelene Wandor. Both are writers. Both teach creative writing in Universities (the former in Australia, the latter in the UK) and both call for creative writing tutors to end their hostility to 'theory'.

On the face of it, these calls seem perfectly reasonable. Theoretical positions are implicit in all pragmatic or empirical observations. Failing to acknowledge them does not make those implications disappear. So, the question for me, as a writer and teacher of writing, is not *whether* 'theory'? But *what* theory'? And alarm bells only ring when I realise that the call by Dawson, Wandor and others² for CW to embrace 'literary theory,' can only refer to reader-

¹ Graham Harper, plenary session NAWA conference Nov 2007.

² Dawson: 'if, like the rest of the new humanities, CW is to go beyond theory, it must become more than a pre-professional training ground for artists dedicated to their craft... for which theory is an antagonistic discourse'

and-text theories. This seems to be inevitable because such theories overwhelmed all others in 20th century literature departments, and continue to do so.³

Reader-and-text theories began to be formulated almost as soon as literature became a University subject. This movement reached an apotheosis with the 'New Criticism' of the 1940's and 50's, and its successor, Poststructuralism, from the mid 60's to the early 90's. As more and more Creative Writing teachers call for Creative writing to engage with literary theory, it's important to note here that nearly all this theory was, in political terms, a sustained attempt by academic readers to usurp the role of writer

It's easy to see why both theories were attractive to literary critics. The 'New Critics' argued that a writer's intentions in composition were irrelevant to the evaluation of his work and thus left literary value in the hands of critical readers. Poststructuralists went further, arguing that authors were not the cause of their own texts and that reading is in fact writing, leaving meaning *itself* in the control of the reader. Thus, it's equally easy to see why writers were hostile. At the height of the Poststructuralist boom in the 1980s, writers persistently claimed that they wrote their own works, stubbornly asserted that these works were based, at least in part, on personal experience of a real, observable world, and continued to talk about things like craft and inspiration as if they really existed; all this when literary theorists had persuaded themselves that experience, the self that experiences it, and the world itself was

(Dawson, 194); Wandor: 'any CW study is seriously incomplete unless it also consists of a study ...of literary criticism and literary theory' (Wandor 2008, 230); see also the pages of *New Writing: The International Journal for the practice and theory of Creative writing*, which provide numerous examples of this genre including: Hazel Smith's, 'because critical theory is an important part of literary studies, it is extremely appropriate for it to be integrated into the teaching of creative writing ' (P25); and Amanda Boulter's: 'by tackling the legacy of Literary theory we may both criticise the way it has marginalised aesthetic questions and learn from its interrogation of texts and contexts' (P 140)

³ Sean Burke: 'what the New Critics called "objective meaning," the Poststructuralists "textuality" and Knapp and Michael's "intention" – for all their differences in ethos - serve the common purpose of emptying out the author problematic. Consequently from the era of Elliot onwards, the dominant critical methodology in the Anglo American tradition has turned away from the problems posed by authorship, or has turned toward them only occasionally, and only by way of the most drastically impoverished descriptions. No attempts to consolidate, revise or redefine anti-authorial theory have been made, nor has any decisive and broadly based interest been shown in the project of authorial renewal' (Burke 1998, 187)

just so much text,⁴ so it's not surprising either that theorists didn't take seriously what writers said.

The differences between the two camps were not just about literature and writing. By obvious implication, they were differences about the nature of reality, morality, history, aesthetics, society, experience and identity. And these differences massively influenced the divergent ways in which all these things were taught and understood in Universities. If writers can still be heard talking about truth, when politicians, CEO's, spin-doctors, businessmen, and journalists increasingly talk of 'narratives' – they are dramatising a difference first defined in the academy. Not that things haven't changed...

Sometime in the 1990's the theory-boom crashed, and literary academics began groping for the doors. At exactly the same time, increasing numbers of writers began to teach on University CW courses. Literary theorists started to look again at authorship and issues of authorial control, or "agency," and some writers began to think theoretically about their writing practice.

Despite this, the theories or ideologies that defined the original differences continue to shape the way people think and work. They operate rather like Richard Dawkins' "memes": deeply embedded, self-perpetuating, notions fiercely resisting all attempts to remove them from their academic hosts, even when reason, evidence or serious internal inconsistencies suggest that they really ought to go.

For example, a teacher of CW in a UK university can still claim, in an international journal that, 'writing comes ...from darkness ...writers deal in darkness...some darkness must remain dark...⁵' for all the world as if modernism never happened; for all the world, come to that, as if The Renaissance had never happened. And Literary theorists, busily demolishing their own Poststructuralist legacy, still argue about authorship with other theorists rather than consider anything that actual authors might have to say on the subject.⁶

⁴ For example, Jacques Derrida: 'in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone" ...there has never been anything but writing...what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence,' quoted in Burke (1995, 119).

⁵ May, 37

⁶ See Earnshaw for a discussion of this and Sean Burke's otherwise excellent *Death and Return of the Author* as an early example of it. Another is Isobel Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p.1.

And now, when writers like Paul Dawson and Michelene Wandor urge writing teachers and students to engage with literary theory, they exhibit a tendency, shared with literary academics, to mean Poststructuralism and its various avatars; as if theory as a whole had suddenly sprung fully formed from the breasts of Roland Barthes and co in 1966;⁷ and as if engagement with such theories might offer a solution to problematic areas in University Creative Writing now. Which is an odd idea, because it was the increasingly problematic nature of these theories in literary studies that helped bring to an end the short-lived Empire of Theory and ushered in its succession by the so-called period of, 'Post Theory,' the name of which alone testifies to the irrational hold the original theories still have. The term 'Post-theory' implies that *all* theory suddenly stopped just because Post-Structuralism had self-imploded into Post-Modernism,⁸ and because Post-modernism had, in turn, began to look less like the Revolution and more like a philosophical spin-doctor for the marketing strategies of globalised capitalism:⁹ the key Post-modern idea that signs and representations determine 'reality' or, indeed, are reality, provides intellectual credibility for advertising campaigns that equate 'identity', 'values', 'morality' and even 'revolution' with the empty (but very purchasable) signifiers of 'life-style', image and brand¹⁰.

Paul Dawson's aims are different of course. He wants Creative writers in Universities to engage with theory in order to join the rest of the 'new humanities' in going 'beyond' it.¹¹

⁷ For example Wandor P 179 contrasting The Intentional Fallacy of Wimsatt and Beardsley with 'theory,' when, if the former isn't a theory, I don't know what is.

⁸ The Death of Post-structuralism (PS) had many causes. Here are some. Its 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was easily turned back on itself so that the deconstructors were in turn deconstructed. Its association with political radicalism was a left-over from the Marxism of 1968, never had any real justification within PS itself and this gradually became apparent. For example: when PS feminists like Julie Kristeva suggested that femaleness had no objective biological existence and could be a quality shared with the male oppressor, some of her political sisters were quick to point to the problem: 'I want to ask how... the very project of female emancipation would be thinkable without... enhancing the agency, autonomy and selfhood of women' (Seyla Benkidd, quoted in Burke, 1998, 202). The relentless 'anti-humanism' of PS seemed to undermine the very idea of human rights in an age boasting the genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda; and the 1987 Paul de Mann case didn't help. The Yale academic had famously suggested that all history was merely text, but was then discovered, after his death, to have written 170 articles for a collaborationist newspaper in Nazi-occupied Belgium, some of which were openly anti-Semitic. In the furore that followed no-one seriously suggested that De Mann was absolved of all responsibility because he was merely the grammatical subject of his own 'polyphonic discourses' (Lehman 131-140 and Burke 1998, 1-7). Despite all this the notion endures that Post-structuralism and Post-Modernism somehow support political radicalism.

⁹ See Hawkes p 1-14

¹¹ Dawson, 194

The problem here is that most Writers never engaged with this kind of ‘theory’ in the first place; so how can we be expected to ‘go beyond’ something that was never in our way? And what might be the point in engaging at this late stage with theories that literary academics are steadily eroding or abandoning? It would be like jumping into a sinking boat, then saving yourself by jumping back out later on. Some literary academics, still convinced that Post-modernism is progressive rather than reactionary, collect and combine philosophically incompatible theories in their work, like children putting sweeties in a bag at the pick and mix section of Woolworths¹². Others, perhaps in reaction to this, frantically pump air into the very theories that Poststructuralism punctured. Thus we now have the Neo-Leavisites, The New Aestheticism, The New Humanism and last, but not least, the New Formalism¹³. And so, remarkable though it may seem, the most reactionary Creative Writing teachers – long condemned by literary theorists for the cardinal sin of ‘formalism’ - have now caught up with the very latest development in literary theory, simply by standing still.

Micheline Wandor is seeking a root-and-branch revolution in CW pedagogy. As part of this she wants university writing students to ‘study literature as a body of historical work along with literary criticism and theory’¹⁴ I couldn’t agree more with the first part of that sentence – writers clearly need to study the work of other writers - but I part company with her on the second. The primary task of a writing student is, obviously, *writing*. Critical reading, to be sure, is part of writing in both research and revision but it’s not the same kind of critical reading that a literature student or literary critic does. This is because it has a different purpose. The text writers read most of all is their own text, which isn’t finished yet. They read it over and over again as they revise: constantly changing it in the hope of making it better. And when we read, *as writers*, the finished works of other writers, we read them as de facto instruction manuals for technique, style, structure and thematic possibility. When Literary academics and their students read works of fiction, these works are neither their own, nor is it their task to physically change them but rather to describe, analyse and re-interpret¹⁵; and they don’t look to Novels, poems or plays for tips on how to write better essays or papers.

¹² See Pope, 2005, almost throughout, as an example of this.

¹³ See Day for the ‘New Leavisism’, Petts for the ‘New Aestheticism’, Aviram for the ‘New Formalism’,

¹⁴ Wandor, 221

¹⁵ I use the term ‘interpretation’ in order to avoid the more fashionable term ‘reading’ which can be used to metaphorically conflate the very different activities of writing and reading.

There is, of course, an overlap between literary-critical-reading and reading-for-writing, but it's important not to confute the differences. Writing students and literature students need to deploy reading *very* differently. By way of example: in his edition of Chekhov's plays the critic Richard Gilman suggests that 'Three Sisters' abandoned, 'the usual linear development of a play' and instead 'worked toward the filling in of a dramatic field'¹⁶ whereas any script writer might note that that Chekhov gives the *illusion* of this by telling his highly melodramatic and entirely linear stories either off-stage or 'on the cut.' (i.e. between acts). This observation might be useful to a student script writer wanting to learn how to portraying the dullness of ordinary life whilst not actually being dull. Gilman's 'reading', by contrast, is interesting but has nothing useful to offer to a creative writer because, as a literary reader, he looks for effects rather than causes.

If it's difficult to see how studying the reading methods of literary criticism is going to help writing students, it's even harder to see what possible use might be the study of Reader-and-text theory that has nothing to say about composition. Even Marxist theorists (who see writing, correctly, as productive work) aren't interested in the actual production process of writers, no doubt because it can seem dangerously individualistic.

So, if CW is 'under-theorised' I think we have to do better than reach for ill-fitting off-the-peg formulations that don't describe the main thing that we do.

I now want to look at some statements by writers about their writing to see if they might be any help in this matter and, in passing, to see if they cast any light on serious problematics in the kinds of theory with which Paul Dawson, Michelene Wandor, and others would like us to engage.

*Don't Ask Me What I Mean*¹⁷, contains statements made by British, Irish and Commonwealth poets between 1953 and 2003. Writing about their work was a condition of being recommended by the Poetry Book Society. There were 500 selections and recommendations in 50 years and so the 200 or so in this book represents a significant sample of what successful poets had to say about their writing, when they were forced to say something.

¹⁶ Gilman, ix.

¹⁷ All unattributed references in the text are to *Don't ask me what I mean*

I've categorised what they wrote and I want to begin with a category I've called 'the involuntary'. I made a note every time these poets said they didn't know what they were doing when writing, or when they claimed to be writing under the influence of something beyond their conscious control.

Numerous poets were unequivocal on the subject of their ignorance. Harry Guest is representative: "I don't know why or how I write poetry, and suspect that if I knew I wouldn't be able to anymore." (p327) Others were just as firm about their lack of agency. For example, George Barker: "I've never been able to believe that poets invented, or made up or created poems." (p11) Even sceptics like Philip Larkin concur: "Today, mystery means either ignorance or hokum. Yet writing a poem is still not an act of the will. The distinction between subjects is not an act of the will. Whatever makes a poem successful is not an act of the will" (p143)

Shelley would have been perfectly comfortable with these statements but, equally, so would a lot of 20c literary theorists because they're perfectly compatible with their theories. If a writer claims not to know what he is doing when he or she writes, it's perfectly reasonable for a theorist to look for other forces at work. A Marxist can find economics, class and history pulling the strings; a psychoanalyst might detect repression or sublimation; a Poststructuralist would explain that these writers are self-evidently the passive grammatical subjects of superannuated romantic discourse.

The problem is that writers were saying this kind of thing long before Schiller, Kant, Shelley, Marx, or Adam Smith were born. We might consider what Socrates had to say, at least according to Plato, in the 4th century BC: "poets utter all those fine poems of theirs not through skill, but when inspired and possessed"¹⁸.

So, if this kind of thinking is determined by historical discourse, the time-line is very long and capitalism would not seem to be its necessary condition; which is a problematic for both Poststructuralist and Marxist theory.

There are other correspondences between these poetical statements and seminal critical theories. When, in 1953, Kingsley Amis writes, "who am I to say what [my poems] are like

¹⁸ Murray, 5.

or what they mean? That is the reader's job," he echoes the 'Intentional Fallacy' of Wimsatt and Beardsley, and anticipates Reader-reception theory. (p2)

When Maura Dooley describes her poems beginning, "to assemble themselves." (p57) – and Geoffrey Hill says: "by some process I can't fathom, common words are moved or move themselves, into clusters of meaning" (p117) – they no doubt bring posthumous assent from Foucault, Derrida and Barthes, who thought that 'to write is...to reach that point where only language acts, "performs" not "me"'¹⁹. Given these correspondences (and there are others) it begins to seem a little odd that writers and literary theorists have not always seen eye to eye.

But I haven't, of course, given the complete picture.

A considerable number of poets did write about conscious intention and craft. But this group was less than half the size of the first one. In this smaller group, statements of intention crop up all the time: "I tried," "I was working towards," "this line is intended to" - and there is even a very rare instance, in this book, of a poet intending in advance to mean something in particular: "I meant to write about time," says Carol Anne Duffy.

Some mention making notes. A handful admit to planning, extensive revision and even the use of dictionary and thesaurus. Ted Hughes offers an evocative memory of Sylvia Plath writing her earlier poems: composing very slowly and 'consulting her thesaurus and dictionary for almost every word, putting a slow, strong ring of ink around each word that attracted her' (p219)

Now, two groups of poets differing about the relative importance of craft and inspiration may be worth noting, but it's hardly surprising. What is interesting is that some poets turn up in one category making statements about the completely involuntary nature of their writing process, and then appear in another making equally strong statements about their conscious craft.

George Barker is one, and he writes: "a man does not invent poems, they discover him." And again (echoing John Clare): "when I came [to Rome] I ... had simply to get up in the morning and collect the verses." But later he writes: "In the versification of these poems I have *tried* to avoid the... thumping mechanics of much formal metre... This...represents *an effort* to

¹⁹ Leitch 2001, 1467

enter the regions of rhythm that exist in between classical prosody and common prose ... This kind of verse *I have tried* and *am trying* to construct” (*my emphases*) (p11)

The last statement was made in a Poetry Book Society Bulletin some 14 years after the earlier ones, so it’s possible that George just changed his mind. But R.S Thomas is only one of several other poets who exhibit similar contradictions, or confusion, in one and the same article.

“I have always sympathised with Keats’s remark that if poetry does not come as easily as leaves to a tree, it were better that it did not come at all. I believe that the majority of my more successful poems have come easily... and yet... can one achieve difficulty easily? Yeats’s variorum sheets are a heartening reminder that good poems can emerge from much hard work and many alterations....” (p285)

Barker and Thomas display an unresolved tension between notions of an unconscious or unwilled creation and a willed and wholly conscious one and this is not, on the face of it, useful evidence for consistent theory.

But the same tension is explored in a third major category of statements, by poets who are clear that their writing is the result of both conscious and unconscious processes. These poets often locate the points of interaction between the two, and sometimes try to describe the mechanics. Their statements not only suggest solutions to some seriously problematic areas of literary theory, but also help to explain why some of their colleagues get a bit confused. They also help us put to rest (again) that zombie of an argument about ‘perspiration’ versus ‘inspiration’.

These poets, of course, differ between themselves about the relative strength of conscious and unconscious processes in composition. Some give will-power, craft and intention a very weak role, as with James Reeves:

“ It is as if [my poems]... had a life of their own which they are determined to live in their own way. Yet they are invariably affected, if only indirectly, by one’s ideas of what a good poem should be”

Whereas others, like Louis MacNeice, emphasise perspiration:

“once a poem has chosen its form, I naturally work... hard to hold it to it” (P166)

Seamus Heaney attempts to describe the precise interaction between inspiration and will-power:

“in the writing of any poem, there’s usually a line being cast from ... your understanding towards intuition and images down there in the memory pool...if you’re lucky, you feel life moving at the other end of the line; the remembered thing starts off a chain reaction of words and associations, and... what you need is the whole of your acquired knowledge... your cultural memory and literary awareness. You need them to come to your aid and throw a shape that will match and make sense of your excitement” (P102)

Here, Heaney notes several related elements in composition: “Intuition”, “chance” “the memory pool” “ understanding” and suggests an interaction that sparks the engine, setting in motion: “a chain reaction of words and associations.” This volatile linguistic / synaptic / semantic force is then contained and steered consciously by “knowledge..cultural memory and literary awareness.”

Descriptions of this inter-active process of composition are provided at various levels of increasing magnification by other poets in this category; each of course stressing slightly different elements of the mix. Here’s just one:

Ruth Padel writes: “one of the most important things behind this book was a breaking of form. I felt I’d been imprisoned in 3-liner poems.” A friend suggested trying something different “...so I did the most un-natural feeling things I could: capital letters at the beginning of lines, indentations, complex internal rhymes” and then, “I began to find that my mind was racing into formal patterns ahead of me”. (p211)

These descriptions avoid the contradictions and implausibilities of the hard-line involuntarists because they offer a version of composition that allows for voluntary and involuntary processes working together.

So, why do so many poets in this sample cling fast to inspiration as the only, or primary, element of composition? It could be, of course, that it just *is*, for them. But the contradictions suggest strongly that it *isn't*, entirely, actually. And we've already seen that "inspirationalist" discourse predates romanticism by 2000 years at least. So we can safely say that it's not the exclusive fault of Shelley and friends either.

Happily, there are other more plausible explanations.

When poets in this selection write of being inspired, they are often referring to two particular stages of composition, "Inception" and "flow."²⁰ That is to say, moments (often close to the very beginning) when an interesting idea seems to appear from nowhere, and stages, usually somewhere in the middle, when ideas come so thick and fast that the conscious mind has to run very fast to keep control.

For example: Sylvia Plath, for whom, "the birth of her first child seemed to start the process. All at once she could compose at top speed" (P221).

When compared to the more conscious stages of composition (the cutting, the revision...the spell-checking), the flow of inspiration is obviously more exciting. Many of the poets say they simply can't remember what was going on when they wrote their poems (try to remember your own process in detail a year later). So it's not surprising that what they do remember is the exciting bits.

Now, as already noted, poets who prioritize inspiration, are expressing ideas entirely compatible with literary theories that see writers as the passive subject of The Unconscious, Material Conditions, Culture, History, or Text. Conversely, poets who stress intention, and/or testify to the interaction of conscious agency with inspiration, would seem to challenge such theories.

For example: theories that proclaim the absolute primacy of the reader in the creation of meaning. Here's the American critic, Stanley E. Fish:

²⁰ "Inception" is self-evident. Detailed discussion of the term flow as used by Creativity theorists can be found in Csikszentmihalyi.

“I write when reading..” The Wasteland is only “different because I have decided that..[it].. will be”²¹.

And Roland Barthes again:

“the reader...holds together in a single field all the traces by which a text is constituted, the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”²²,

Now, when Fish and Barthes stress the pre-eminence of the reader –assuming in its entirety the role of writer – they ignore the role of reading in the writing process itself. As I’ve noted already, the writer *is* a reader (although, as I have argued, not the same kind of reader as the literary academic) . And Helen Dunmore shows precisely how. She was at a crucial moment in the composition of a collection of poems. After writing for several months she “began to see” how 20 poems were beginning to fit together, because she:

“found... echoes of rhythms and verbal correspondences and many other formal connections between one poem and another..and although I still had to write and rewrite many times, I knew I was working towards this structure and not at random...” (P67).

She describes herself re-reading, then discovering and interpreting a meaning in the middle of a draft, and then changing it in draft after draft, “working towards this structure and not at random.”

Now, let’s assume the classic Poststructuralist position and ‘deconstruct’ it from within: if the author is dead, and it is therefore the reader who writes, then it surely follows from this that if the writer is a reader he must still be ‘alive,’ or at least as alive as the-reader-as-writer, and just as much if not more in charge of creating the meanings in his own writing?

Helen Dunmore’s statement points to another serious flaw in ‘text and reader’ theories – be they New Critical or Poststructuralist: they’re incomplete because they fetishise the finished

²¹ Leitch 2001, 2085

²² *Ibid*, 1470

text, and 'privilege' published works above all other versions. They *seem* to work if we allow that there is such a thing as a finished text from which the writer can be easily detached. But they don't work for play scripts - which are always only ever a stage in the endlessly unfinished production processes of drama; and they don't work either for poems or novels that are revised and republished by authors in their life-time. For example, Wordsworth's many, very different, versions of *The Prelude*. How do we get from one to another without assuming the agency of a writer? The same question can, of, course be asked of every draft a student, or professional writer produces.

Derrida had an idea that, "the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system."²³ In this, text itself is the controlling force in the creation of meaning - the writer becoming its subject and, in effect, its creation. This turns the writer into a kind of virtual bandstand, on which are played discordant, polyphonic discourses from many periods of textual history. The problem with this highly influential proposition is obvious: Text doesn't have motive energies of its own. It can't move. It can't think. It can't do anything without massive assistance. So it's difficult to see how the polyphonic discourses get played on the bandstand for readers to "hear" them.

With this in mind, it's worth paying further attention to Maura Dooley. After she submitted her collection, the editor pointed out a sexual innuendo in the suggested title: "Kissing a Bone." ...and wondered whether it was deliberate. At first Maura said it wasn't intended at all and then, she bethinks herself and writes: "Dimly. I knew it dimly..." And gamely decides that she is quite happy for the title to contain that meaning.

There are a couple of things to note here. One is obvious: words are symbolic. We could spend a happy half hour right now, listing all the possible associations of the word "rose" Indeed, we could no doubt pass a profitable minute doing the same with, "bone".

No writer can consciously imagine, even less prescribe, all the possible significations of all the words in a single poem, through all their semantic and syntactic interactions, let alone in a collection of poems, or a novel. Which is just one of the reasons why readers find meanings, associations and combinations that the writer did not intend, or know about.

²³ Burke, 1995, 120

Another is this. When in “flow” the writer’s “memory pool” can throw up so many images and ideas so quickly that the writer can’t consciously grasp or shape them all. Many of these unconsciously expressed ideas may be consciously apprehended later, as with Michael Longley here, who:

“by serendipity or sub-conscious design... was leafing through the Ulster scotch dictionary” and found that the dialect from his region of Northern Ireland was “making available” to him “the terror and comedy of [a] scene out of Greek Epic” (P153)

And as soon as he noticed that, he incorporated the idea in a poem he had already started writing, and consciously developed it. But as with Dooley other ideas and other possible interpretations will have remained hidden from him on the page, waiting for readers to discover them.

And so, to return to a question that has surely got to be at the heart of our understanding of what creative writing is, what useful research into it might be, and how it should be theorised and taught.

How do we get meaning and value from culture and history onto the page and into the reader’s or audience’s head? If we pay attention to reader-and-text theorists there can be no answer, because they effectively remove composition from the process. And this is surely an insuperable obstacle to the co-option of their theories into CW courses? Listen to writers and the beginning of an answer is forthcoming: it gets there in composition, through the agency and efforts of the poet, novelist and script writer. As we have seen, S/he puts some of it there quite deliberately. S/he puts some more of it there in symbiotic inter-action between unconscious inception and conscious formulation. And s/he puts some of it there quite unconsciously. This still leaves an interesting proportion that seems to be extracted entirely by the reader from the associations of language itself, without any assistance from the writer, one way or another. It is this that provides evidence for at least some of the propositions of Poststructuralism and other linguistic determinisms.

In conclusion: 20th century reader-and-text theories fail to account for the writing process and so they fail to account for how history, culture, and all the rest gets into text. These failures

make them unfit for the purpose of theorising Creative Writing. If we want theories that do fit, I fear we may have to invent our own.

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