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Keeping interest alive: Emotion and the affects in creative writing

Abstract:

This paper aims to develop a deeper understanding of the process of creative writing, in particular its relationship to cognition and to feeling and emotion. These are areas of exploration that engage with the margins that surround the experience of doing creative writing, but which writers often prefer not to articulate. What do writers ‘mean’ when they describe, when asked, the experiences of creating their texts? This is especially opaque when it comes to the question of why writing has such emotional impact for readers (and writers)—and because feeling may or may not be consciously experienced when writing is done. The paper explores emotion and affect in the writing process. It argues that writing’s impetus, and its outcome, is determined not only by cognitive, conceptual formulations, but also by the determination of affective choices that are inseparable from cognition.

Biographical note:

Dr Marcelle Freiman is the current President of the AAWP. She is a Senior Lecturer in English at Macquarie University where she teaches creative writing, post-colonial and diaspora literatures, and contemporary poetry. She has published several articles in *TEXT*, a book chapter on the theory and pedagogy of creative writing and on post-colonial contexts of creative writing, as well as publications on post-colonial and diaspora writers in Australia, on literature and migration, and on poetry. Her current research engages with the relationships of cognition, learning, creativity and creative writing. Her two books of poetry are *Monkey’s Wedding* (Island Press Co-op, NSW, 1995) and *White Lines (Vertical)* (Hybrid Publishers, Vic. forthcoming February 2010). Her poetry has been published in Australian and international literary journals and anthologies.

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The idea that emotional expression is central to the motivations of writers gained dominance when Romantic era theories of creative composition shifted in the late eighteenth century from rhetorical persuasiveness to the expression of feeling and emotion (Abrams 1958). It has continued to influence literature and perceptions of writing: the confessional poetry of the 1960s, twentieth century autobiographical witness narratives, and the current genre of ‘trauma memoir’ (Miller 2006) are some elements of literature combining to perpetuate an association of writing with a form of personal therapy. Even if writing is ‘cathartic’ and ‘therapeutic’ in some circumstances, to see these effects as fundamental to creative writing is both limiting and unhelpful to a theoretical discussion. In talking about their writing process, writers are far more likely than readers to demonstrate a healthy ambivalence towards this stance. Peter Carey, referring to the writing of *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) emphasises that his main concern is with character and motivation; although he is sometimes not *aware* of ‘the affect on readers emotionally’ and of the ‘amplitude of the emotions the work produces’, he is not unconscious of it either. But, he says, ‘There is no question of working on the emotion, of maximising or minimising it’ (Woolfe and Grenville 1993: 38).

Despite Carey’s assertion that a writer may not consciously care about creating emotional responses (and writers vary on this point, many do care), the experience of narrative pleasure in reader responses as triggered by texts has led cognitive researchers to investigate the mechanism by which the writer may ‘make’ this happen. Keith Oatley and Maja Djikic (2008) emphasise the significance of emotion as constitutive of the modular thinking that ‘expert’ literary writers engage in when they write imaginative literature. They give particular attention in their research to narrative fiction. The connection of emotion and narrative is evident in the two most common story types:

... since earliest narrative writings, emotion has been salient: the sadness of Gilgamesh, the anger of Achilles, the shame of Adam and Eve ... two kinds are most common: the love story and the story of angry conflict. Emotions are central to human life, essential to understanding others and ourselves. They need a lot of thinking about because they are often problematic (2008: 11).

The centrality of emotion in imaginative writing, as researched by others in the field, leads to the hypothesis of an ‘emotion code’, a ‘distinct representation’ central to meaning in imaginative literature, which is the engine of both plot and character within the text as well as in the reader’s emotional response¹. Based on the theory of emotion as having two parts, ‘propositional and non-propositional’², they argue that the ‘emotion code’ is thus able to not only mediate ‘readily between verbal and intuitive aspects as mental models are constructed’—by both writer and reader—but is ‘capable of carrying the personal core of meaning in a story’ (2008: 11). Using the metaphor of the ‘dream’, which they take from Faulkner’s description of the piece being ‘held in mind’ even before the writing occurs, they explain the nature of this simulation³:

... the discourse structure of the text in the language layer must be able to start up and sustain the simulation in the intuitive, model-forming layer: the text’s suggestion structure of style, tropes, and literary sentences must be able to cue in the reader associations and memories that help bring alive the text as a kind of dream (2008:15).

This proposes that success in engaging the reader depends on the writing's capacity to offer up to the reader 'cues to start up and run the simulation-dream of the story world, characters, and events, a simulation in which the reader is emotionally involved' (2008: 15). While readers take up the cues, 'a writer who is reading a draft is trying to improve the cue structure so that the story does come emotionally alive' (2008: 15).

Oatley and Djikic's theory makes a lot of sense for narrative, but the focus on narrative fiction with emotion at its core excludes different types and genres of writing. Writing is a very complex process and both narrative and non-narrative structures may be less causal in creating the surreal variations of 'dream' discourse than suggested here. More importantly, the role of 'emotional cues' in writing and reading could do with further investigation into the relationship between such cognitive cues and the affective language-choices made in creative writing. Much of writing is non-conscious, messy, unstructured and wayward, rather than ordered, stratified or clearly coded. Even before such choices are being made in various writing drafts, feeling is likely to have been contingent in the *very conception* of the writing project, prior to any initial 'expressive' drafting. Experiences of feeling will vary throughout the writing process.

Theories of writing as the expression of feeling date back to Longinus' theory of the sublime, gaining authority with the rise of individualism in the late eighteenth century and the poetic and philosophical works of Wordsworth and Coleridge ⁴. If poetic composition was, as Wordsworth stated in 1798, 'emotion recollected in tranquility' based on a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', today this idea does not entirely gel with a theoretical understanding of creative writing that merges a knowledge of language as a dynamic matrix constitutive of meaning and, paradoxically, as deferral of meaning in terms of poststructuralist theory. But writing by individuals is very much alive: even as mindful 'scriptors' in Barthes sense of the writing function, which foregrounds language as performance within wider discourse over individual 'authorship'—'it is the language which speaks, not the author' (Barthes 1968)—creative writers do use their long- and short-term memories, feelings and imagination, and cognition, in writing. They are human bodies at work with the tools of language, pens, paper, computers, which are intrinsic to the externalisation of writing and its place in the world.

Recent research in neuroscience has come to include what writers have always understood: the extent to which feeling informs thought. Antonio Damasio, in *Descartes' Error* (2006), finds that the emotions are essential for the brain's rational decision making: 'It does not seem sensible to leave emotions and feelings out of an overall concept of mind. Yet respectable scientific accounts of cognition do precisely that, by failing to include emotions and feelings in their treatment of cognitive systems' (2006: 158). He attributes this omission to the perceived elusiveness of these entities traditionally believed to be processed in the 'down-under' areas of the brain, that is, the sub-cortical structures of the brain-core associated with earlier evolutionary human brain development and basic biological functioning differentiated from the neocortical functioning of the brain that 'deliberates with wisdom and subtlety' (2006: 128). Damasio's view is that the brain's 'low' and 'high' functions are not distinctive: the apparatus of rationality and decision, 'the hypothalamus, the

main compartment of the downstairs' is developed, not separately from the subcortex, but 'also *from* it and *with* it' (2006: 128). Thus, '*feelings are just as cognitive as any other perceptual image*, and just as dependent on cerebral-cortex processing as any other image' (2006: 159). What makes them different to other cognitions is that they are about the body:

Feelings let us *mind the body*, attentively, as during an emotional state, or faintly, as during a background state. They let us mind the body 'live,' when they give use perceptual images of the body, or 'by rebroadcast,' when they give use recalled images of the body state appropriate to certain circumstances, in 'as if' feelings. ... By dint of juxtaposition, body images give to other images a *quality* of goodness or badness, of pleasure or pain (2006: 159).

Damasio's emphasis on the bodily impact and source of feelings in our judgment of experience is significant. Feelings pre-date our other experiences, but only become meaningful when we have awareness of them and can define and measure them—that is, when they become thoughts. They are therefore part of our thought-image processing. Because they come first, they constitute '... a frame of reference for what comes after, feelings have a say on how the rest of the brain and cognition go about their business. Their influence is immense' (2006: 160). It is hard to underestimate the significance of feeling and emotion in the process of creative writing. These responses can be conscious and non-conscious: they indicate a range of intensities of feeling from pre-linguistic affective responses to sustained, learned feeling responses in the body that become part of how we experience ourselves in the world. These responses might act as an impetus for writing; they create images in the mind; drive entire projects; inform voice, give life to characters; and as proposed by cognitive theorists, they enable readers to discover and to re-create for themselves, emotional and intellectual experiences in response to their reading.

The term 'emotion' is understood as the conscious awareness and evaluation of feeling, however, this does not explain the feeling, or affective, mechanisms that are *not* conscious and which are part of the writing process, such as anxiety. Peter Carey's earlier comment might illustrate an example of non-conscious effects of emotion in writing. But we might also say that the effect of emotion in the writing relates to affective responses intrinsic to the writing. Affective responses do appear to have a role in associative, non-conscious actions and decisions that constitute the language-use, patterns, effects of sound, rhythm and pacing, and on structural formations of the writing. The concept of affect embraces both the ability to act affectively and to affect others. Brian Massumi explains the use of this and related terms in his translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1988), where *l'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability both to affect and be affected: 'It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution of that body's capacity to act' (Deleuze and Guattari xvi). According to Eric Shouse, emotions, which are social, can be feigned and affect responses, which are prepersonal, are not necessarily under our control. Affect response provides a 'non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential ... affect cannot be fully realised in language, and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness' (Shouse 2008) ⁵. The affects are responses of the body; communicable body expressions such as facial expression,

respiration, tone of voice and posture are able to transmit affect in ways that language cannot—such as we see in the startle and crying responses of very young, pre-linguistic babies to the impingements of their environment. Perhaps with less intensity, the adult may respond to music and to visual art with increased heart-rate and breathing, or other strong feelings. I think there are certain kinds of text in which the language-use is overtly affective—such as in poetry, which evokes a range of proprioceptive responses in the body in response to sound, rhythm, pace and patterning. But this also applies to varieties of imaginative prose writing such as Toni Morrison’s defamiliarising and evocative language-use in *Beloved*, or in erotic prose, or horror or crime fiction, where the writer strives to attain maximum effect, such as by exploiting the uncanny. When the writer makes choices, it is the *affective* response in the word choice and its resonance for the text’s forms and patterns, and for other words around it, that determine the language use. It is not possible to distinguish when language use is *not* affect driven. Affect functions at the level of a text’s *readerliness* (including the reader and the writer as reader) as well as at the level of *writerliness*, of textual ‘play’ and difference.

Affect plays a much greater role in the process of creative writing than we realise, primarily because there is much about creative writing that is non-conscious, and paradoxically, non-linguaged in the first instance. Affective responses occur with no recourse to language—or rather, with no need for explanation or ‘reason’ (Shouse 2008)—but they are expressed in language as a means of ‘cathexis’ or perhaps even ‘catharsis’. This could explain why, when writing provokes so much anxiety, it can also create pleasure, and why writers stay motivated, despite the difficulty of writing, to continue to work at their writing until a sense of satisfaction, even if is partial, is achieved. Silvan Tomkins (1995), in his affect theory, emphasises that the ‘affect mechanism’ as one of the main motivating mechanisms of human action. He delineates the range of a body’s affective responses to its environment in terms of *intensities*, which act as ‘analogue amplifiers’, alerting the person to the impact that experience has upon them and providing motivation for action or evasion. These are correlated responses ‘involving the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalizations that act together to produce an analogue of the particular gradient or intensity of stimulation impinging on the organism’ (Demos 1995: 19). Virginia Demos emphasises in her introduction to Tomkins’ essays that ‘these correlated responses *are* the affect, not an expression of something else’ (1995: 19). The affects may be related to cognitive, partially and fully realised concepts and experiences triggered and experienced as a world that impinges on the organism, *even if* this world is an inner one based on the constructed experiences of imagination and memory.

The rhizomic formations and reiterative affect mechanism of writing are integral for the most part during the process of working with language while writing. Some writers might argue that the initial impulse is an idea in the mind ‘that won’t let go’ that motivates writing: Kate Grenville talks of this motivation as ‘... scratching the itch of something you don’t understand—there’s an inbuilt reason to keep going ... because you need to know something that you can only know by writing it’ (Woolfe and Grenville 1993: 105). In this process, feeling or ‘irritation’ or idea becomes language and this process of ‘putting down words’ would involve repeated affective responses with varying degrees of intensity. Language *itself*

does not equate with affect; rather it may be regarded as an extraordinarily flexible, malleable, symbolic tool for the expression *of* affect. Neither is language ‘representation’ as in a reflective sense (mirror); rather it creates in the sense of *making*, realising, bringing into being affective responses amongst its other meanings.

As in Peter Carey’s observation cited earlier, the motivation for writing does not include emotion, that is, awareness of feeling—‘There’s no question of working on the emotion, of maximising it or minimising it. I’ve just got this thing ... that I’ve got to do—characters that are drawn together just can’t come together.’ He does not deny the ‘amplitude of the emotions the work produces’ (Woolfe and Grenville 1993: 38). His example (and it is but one example) indicates that the so-called ‘cues’ provided for the reader’s emotional responses are not inserted *with awareness* into the writing in a rational, ordered, conscious way. They are likely to be a series of rapid (or slow) choices, and to be situated within the affective mechanism or engaged by affective and cognitive functions. The stages of creation in text which constitute the textual, conceptual and linguistic changes in its making throughout are also affectively determined dispositional choices. The language relays affect and is constructed, in part, by it and together with cognitive choices, patterns of thought, language and structural choices, affect will determine an individual writer’s style.

Having established some of the connections between affect mechanisms and writing process—and the non-conscious and conscious dimensions of the process—and with the assumption that language combines cognition and affect, it is possible to consider what writers experience as varying degrees of emotional *intensity* when writing. Tomkins describes affect as ‘a loosely matched mechanism evolved to play a number of parts in continually changing assemblies of mechanisms. It “works” biologically, psychologically, and socially ... by virtue of three major conjoint characteristics—urgency, abstractness, and generality’ (Tomkins 1995: 52), acting as an ‘analog amplifier’ by ‘increasing the *urgency* of anything with which it is co-assembled’ (1995: 53). This co-assembly occurs in different combinations, for example, whether it is assembled with sexual drive/ libido, or whether it is assembled with more cognitive input by the beauty of poetry or mathematics. Affect ‘amplifies in an *abstract* way, any response, ‘be the response cognitive or motoric’ (1995: 53), for example, with anger or other feelings. It amplifies through *generality* in that it is ‘both space- and time-general. One can be anxious for a moment, an hour, or a lifetime’ (1995: 55).

Two elements of this theory pertain to writing: firstly, the capacity for ‘abstractness’ (and abstraction), and generalisation, relate to the way imaginative scenes are generated by affective experience, and how imagination can have such an immediate quality of feeling and emotion⁶. Secondly, the affective sense of urgency would play a role in the motivation to render thoughts into language. This sense of urgency might be extended to the motivation sustained throughout the drawn-out, difficult process requiring myriad occasions of revision, problem solving, decision making. One explanation for this may be found in affect as both innate and learned response. As an example, Tomkins examines and explains ‘interest’, which he locates as a variation of the affect ‘excitement’, with both interest and excitement, once they go beyond the neonate’s startle reflex, being learned. He proposes that learning is

activated by *both* excitement and interest; using the illustrative example of *reading* to locate the affect ‘interest’, he explains:

Any sudden movement neither sudden enough to startle, nor sudden enough to frighten that was steep enough in its acceleration to produce a correlated acceleration of neural firing could *innately* activate interest or excitement. Interest and excitement are the same affect, differing only in intensity. Consider now how the same neural profile could be produced by learning and ‘meaning’ without the necessity of a homunculus or ‘appraisal’ process. Suppose on reading a book that the novelty of an idea activates information processing at an accelerated rate. This would initially amplify and thus maintain ‘thinking’ by *innately* activating excitement. If this now exciting implication keeps inferential processes alive at the same accelerated rate, the individual will then again be rewarded with a burst of excitement at each new expanding set of conceived possible implications of the original idea. So long as the combination of successive inferences and recruited affects sustains yet another inferential leap, the individual’s interest will remain alive. When he or she runs out of new possibilities, he or she will lose interest (1995: 47).

In keeping interest alive, excitement is repeatedly activated and expanded. And because of the integration of reading in writing, there is an interrelationship of affect mechanism between its reading and writing components (the reading/writing spiral) not only as invoking emotional responses for reader and writer, as suggested by Oatley and Djikic, but in affective motivation in the writing evident in its *writerliness* and its style. When actively engaged in writing, the writer is in a process of relaying thought into language. At such a time the writer, involved with his or her writing, is so embedded in it that the outside world and a sense of time and place may cease to exist, or they may recede in importance even as one participates in them—or the writing work may impact on other activities, being held in mind as an unbounded process of the writer’s life while the work is in progress.

Which brings us to the third element of affect theory that relates to writing—and this is the role affect plays in generating the physical responses of the body in relation to the external world. In a later modification to his theory Tomkins gives further attention to ‘the role of breathing and the vocalization of affects’ in which ‘each affect has as part of its innate program a specific cry or vocalization, subserved by specific patterns of breathing’ (1995: 92). One implication of this theory relates to difference between innate and ‘backed-up affect’. These tend to become confused due to the forces of social control (eg. fear of criticism or punishment). Hence, he says, the suppression of anger or crying results in the backed-up expressions of affect, often linked to muscle tension and breathing. This situation of ‘stress’ responses can be reflected, and replicated, in the way writing creates certain effects. This may occur with both prose and poetry—in language and syntactical patterns, effects of rhythm and pacing; and in formal properties of the writing such as its trajectory, its effect of pace such as halting, slowing, speeding up, or the fragmentation of the pace and rhythms. I would argue that in such instances, affect is dominant: that writing *is* affective expression. What is different to vocalisation, as in Tomkins’ example, is the intimate, one to one supposition of an engagement with a reader: at some point in every writer’s process there occurs the sense of a reader being potentially there. In taking into account the element of

‘social control’, the emphasis turns to the impact of affect amplifications on an ‘other’. It is this sense of the ‘other’ which leads to further responses and I think it is possible to extend this scenario of vocalisation into the writing process, where the potential and actual sense of a social reader (as critic or receiver, as judge or friend) has a role in determining choices.

Several aspects of the affective mechanism correlate with the complex, varying intensities of writing. This is something writers know intuitively and may talk about in the terms of their individual experience: that feeling and emotion *do* play a significant part in writing. The emotional effect on the reader, which, for example, Peter Carey is aware of but says he’s not conscious of creating, is inherent to his writing and in all probability this is because of the motivation and the desire to resolve logistic challenges, to convey what he desires to write with as much effectiveness as possible. Yet this motivation in writing is not approached with intentional clarity nor is it necessarily rational, for when engaged with writing’s rhizomic process, the pathways taken and the choices made are very often not planned for—it is not about setting a goal and then taking a series of planned steps to achieve a desired outcome; rather the whole process is shifting and blurred in its intentions: motivation is not a ‘readily identifiable internal organization resident in any single mechanism but rather a very crude, loose, approximate conceptual net we throw over the human being as he or she lives in her or his social habitat’ (Tomkins 1995: 52).

Endnotes

1. Oatley and Djikic cite Opdahl K. M 2002 *Emotion as Meaning: The literary case for how we imagine*, Leisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, and Sadoski, M & Pavio, A 2001 *Imagery and text: A dual coding theory of reading and writing*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
2. Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987 ‘Towards a cognitive theory of emotions’, *Cognition and Emotion*, 1, 29-50.
3. Interview with Faulkner in Cowley, M 1977. (ed) *Writers at Work: The Paris Review interviews. First Series* (Harmondsworth, Penguin): ‘Sometimes the technique [constructive knowledge] charges in and takes command of the dream before the writer himself can get his hands on it ... the finished work is simply a matter of fitting bricks neatly together’ (1977: 129)
4. See Abrams 1958. Throughout the period there were also objectivist, mimetic approaches to writing. The pragmatic paradigm of rhetorical usefulness, where writing is valued as information, persuasion and social engagement and is focused on the making of writing was an equal forerunner to contemporary creative writing. But my aim here is to retrieve a focus on the element of feeling. Wordsworth quoted from the Introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).
5. Shouse refers to Massumi, B 2002 *Parables for the Virtual*, Durham, Duke U. Press.
6. See also Damasio 2006. Although imagination is experienced vividly and emotionally, and may create sensations of urgency, in terms of the brain’s responses these are not necessarily the same as the experience of actual urgency (2006: 156).

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