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**'They don't flinch': Creative Writing/critical theory, pedagogy/students**

Abstract:

In *Creative Writing and the new humanities*, Paul Dawson declared that 'Creative Writing needs to answer the critique of authorship and of the category of literature offered by Theory' and that central to discussion is the question 'how do writing programmes negotiate the insights of contemporary theory, and the critique of literature which these offer?' (2005, 161). In the late 1990s, the rhetoric of Creative Writing academics certainly reflected this challenge. Jen Webb proposed that 'one of the skills writing students need is an understanding of the politics of identity and representation' (2000); Kevin Brophy agreed, declaring that Creative Writing academics have a responsibility to teach 'social-theoretical analyses of literature' (1998, 203). Articles in *TEXT* focused on notions such as the perceived tension between Creative Writing and Theory (Bourke & Neilsen 2004; Dibble & Van Loon 2000; Krauth 2000) and the interaction between Creative Writing and Literary Studies (Freiman 2001; Woods 2002). Dawson's book summarised many of these discussions, and described the ways in which 'Theory' manifested in the Creative Writing workshop: models and approaches undertaken by teachers.

A decade or so on and the discipline has changed considerably; indeed, so has the academy in general. We are now operating in what Leitch calls a forum of 'postmodern interdiscipline[s]' (Leitch 2003), or even in a space of 'post-theory'. Theory is now embedded in our research, but our emphasis has shifted: it has become only one component of the debates in the discipline, such as practice-led research (Smith & Dean 2009) and ERA recognition (Brien, Krauth & Webb 2010). Indeed, it could even be argued that there is a new generation of Creative Writing academics for whom 'the embedded presence of Theory' as Dawson puts it, is now simply 'taken for granted' (Dawson 2008). More importantly, it seems that there is a change in the way that Creative Writing students respond to Theory in the workshop. For students, there is perhaps a feeling of indifference towards Theory – or, even, something more violent: Dominique Hecq's *Theory* presents a student voice crying 'Next time I hear Barthes I'll puke' (2011). In the light of these new contexts, I propose that there needs to be a re-evaluation of the function of Theory in the workshop.

Biographical note:

Dr Joshua Lobb is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at University of Wollongong. Scholarly publications and papers include: ‘‘I could just walk out of this inconvenient story’’: narrative possibility in the fairy tales of AS Byatt’ (UEA, 2009), ‘Degrees of relation’: Iris Murdoch and AS Byatt’ (ibidem-Verlag, 2009); ‘Deferring the “main” point: teaching ‘narrative desire’ as an alternative creative practice’(AAWP, 2009); ‘‘But if the author is dead, what are we doing here?’’: teaching critical theory in a creative writing program’ (AAWP, 2008) and (with Dr Malcolm Ryan) ‘*The tale of Peter Rabbit: a case study in story-sense reasoning*’(AAAI, 2007) . He is the writer of the plays *Wilde tales* and *Still at Aulis*, and the short story ‘I forgot my programme so I went to get it back’, which was included in *The Bridport anthology 2009* and *Best Australian stories 2010*.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Critical theory – Pedagogy – Research – Students

## **Introduction: Creative Writing and critical theory**

This paper is part of a larger research project investigating the use of critical theory in Australian Creative Writing programs. Let me clarify what I mean by 'theory'. My focus is not on what we might call 'writing theory'. There is no doubt that Writing has always been engaged in theoretical examinations of form and process: what Dibble calls '*techne*', the 'knowledge of how to apply [ideas] in some practical way' (2000). Rather, I am interested in 'literary theory': the specific historical response to textual production from critics, the results of what Eagleton calls 'an extraordinary decade and a half, from about 1965 to 1980' (2003, 24-5). Dawson identifies – and capitalises – this Theory as 'an umbrella term for a mode of anti-humanist, anti-foundationalist and counter-intuitive textual enquiry' (2005, 122). The umbrella covers post-structuralism, psychoanalytic criticism, postmodernism, and theories of marginality: Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism.

As Dawson demonstrates, Theory has had a profound influence on the structure of Creative Writing in Australia: 'Creative Writing and "Theory" developed in Australian Universities at the same time', and, as such, the discourses are inexorably linked (2005, 169; see also Taylor 2006, 225). However, in the 1990s/early 2000s, there was much discussion around the continuing use of Theory in our discipline, culminating in two significant texts for Australian Creative Writing: Dawson's *Creative Writing and the new humanities* (2005) and Krauth & Brady's *Creative Writing: theory beyond practice* (2006). Both texts grappled with key questions about the role of Theory in Writing's future. Andrew Taylor, in his chapter in *Theory beyond practice*, articulates these questions: 'what value [do] these 'theories' have for students of Creative Writing?...what theory or 'theories' should be taught, or [should students be] expected to know? Should they be expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of them and if not, which ones should they know and which are dispensable?' (2006, 228). These questions, of course, were posed as part of a larger discussion about the relevance of theory in the humanities. As Valentine Cunningham puts it: 'what do we...do in the wake – the huge wake – of theory?' (2002, 1).

Many scholars in Writing have presented convincing arguments that challenge – or even repudiate – Theory as a useful presence in Writing programs. Dawson records the view that there is an 'antagonistic' relationship between Literary Theory and Writing (2005, 192). Stephen Muecke playfully presents the two positions in his work, *No road (bitumen all the way)*:

the Theory Wars were raging [:] writers and academics were slugging it out. Writers, untroubled by the Death of the Author, continued to cash their royalty cheques and complain that the poststructuralists didn't believe in reality. Unfazed, the theorists re-invented the fragmentary texts, multiple speaking positions and the fluid subject. (Muecke 1997, 24)

There are significant tensions between theory and practice, and indeed between art and criticism, Literary Studies and Writing (see Krauth 2000; Freiman 2001). Theory seems to favour the product rather than the process of writing: as Bourke & Neilsen explain, 'what is always lost [in Theoretical application to writing] is the *writing*, [and] what replaces writing is the act of *reading*' (2004). In fact, Theory can be seen

to encourage a gap between writing and reading, and the theorising of writing practice. Barbara Christian points out that, in the past, 'the critic was usually also a writer of poetry, plays, or novels. But today, as a new generation of professionals develops, she or he is increasingly an academic' (Christian 1986, 68). In order for Theory to be productive, Christian proffers, 'it ought to have some relationship to practice' (70).

While these challenges are compelling, I believe that there are ways in which Theory can interact productively with Writing practice. Consequently, my project is to document our discipline's *positive* responses to Theory. The project uses two methodologies: analysis of scholarly writing on the topic (in *TEXT* and elsewhere) and, more importantly, qualitative research: interviews with Writing teachers. The evidence gathered through the interviews is not comprehensive; indeed, I must stress that I have selected interviewees because of their active interest in productive Writing/Theory intersections. Based on the evidence gathered, I argue that theory can be a valuable resource for Creative Writing teaching because it expands the possibilities of writing for students. However, in order to use Theory productively, we need to understand the state of Theory in 2012, as well as current students' and teachers' relationship with it. The first section of the paper will define Theory in its current manifestation, and will uncover why current theoretical impulses are productive for Creative Writing. I will then discuss the kinds of students currently engaged in the discipline, and their interaction with theory. The final section will describe four approaches to theory used by teachers in a Creative Writing context, and will demonstrate the ways in which they extend students' writing.

### **Theory in 2012: from Theory to 'theories'**

In 2012 it's easy to dismiss literary theory. Theory has been accused of being 'incomprehensible' and 'jargon-filled' (Eagleton 2003, 76; Isenberg 2007); 'binding' and 'colonizing' (Cunningham 2002, 139; 19; Robins 2010); and – worst of all – 'monolithic'. Cunningham declares: 'Theory invites you to profess a single kind of interest in reading, to shut out...other readings' (124). In a writing context, the need to reject Theory appears urgent. Theory, it seems, is antithetical to writing practice: Miles exposes 'an irreducible tension between the manoeuvres of contemporary theory and the practice of teaching writing' (1992, 36). Taylor notes a wariness by writers towards the 'programmatic role for Theory, in which it becomes a set of instructions that...will constrain them to write in a certain way' (2006, 229). Andrew Cowan declares, baldly, that novelists think 'Theory isn't going to help them as novelists' (2012, 7).

Fortunately, capital-T Theory no longer holds court in academia: indeed, Birns places Theory in 'the age that was past' (2010, 11). Hecq notes the new theoretical mode: 'theory in the twenty-first century has lost the capital T of 'high theory'. It is now multifarious' (2012, 6). In fact, Theory has been pluralised into 'theories': what Hall calls 'contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges' (1992, 286). This shifting paradigm has affected the organising structures of the university: Leitch points out the

way we have moved from discrete disciplines into 'postmodern interdisciplines', which 'challenge the [notion of an] autonomous discipline' (2004, ix).

The interviews undertaken in my project reveal the ways in which this theoretical shift can extend or invigorate Writing practice. Stephen Muecke, for instance, talks about the way in which 'theories' are a 'useful tool' because they are 'portable': they do not limit writers to one perspective (2012, 4). Kroll suggests that theoretical plurality can actually hone a writer's vision. She states:

Writers can mix theories as you know – Postcolonial, Feminist, et al – most of my students exploit a range of theories in their exegeses. This mix also suggests a range of methodologies. That doesn't mean, however, that they are really 'bower birds' (to use the figure that Tess Brady talked about in a paper quite a while ago now). You're not going to have writers offering sixteen different points of view arbitrarily selected. I always ask postgrads (and myself) to focus on what the project is and what 'theories' or 'methodologies' will help them to achieve their goals most effectively. Theory is fundamentally a framework that helps us to be clear about our assumptions. (2012, 2-3)

More interestingly, Hazel Smith and Francesca Rendle-Short explain that 'postmodern interdisciplines' broaden the discipline itself. Smith talks of the way this mode supports a stronger research culture. 'In the Writing and Society Research Centre at UWS,' she says, 'there is a conversation between...Creative Writing and Literary Studies...It's about synergies, and that's very much where I'm at, the synergy between those different areas' (2012, 4). Rendle-Short is similarly excited by the possibilities for Writing research. She states: 'other areas within the Academy are really interested in what Creative Writing is doing...non-Humanities-type subjects are interested in what Creative Writing can do, because of what it can provide them' (2012, 1).

In fact, it can be seen that writing has always operated in this way. Brewster describes writers as 'beachcombers', 'entangled with things incidentally' (2009, 126); Ghosh and Muecke see writing as 'the intersection of codes, structuring as it does the potentialities of human imagination into the real relations of objects, giving them special values' (2004, 14). Writing research draws upon a range of disciplines, even from beyond the Humanities (Acheson 2010, 51; Kroll & Harper 2012, 9; Hecq 2012, 1). Kroll elaborates: Writing research is 'a complex ecosystem, where theory, methodology, case studies and creative work interact to produce something new – and that 'something' can take multiple forms' (2013, 143-44).

However, this shift from Theory to 'theories' warrants a change in the way theories are taught. Rendle-Short continues: 'something I tell my students...[is that] theory can be used for anything...It's so open and we have so much freedom' (4). Before I analyse these pedagogical changes, it is necessary to identify the student participants in Creative Writing programs. For 'theories' to work productively in a Writing context, we need to understand how students currently interact with them.

### **Creative Writing in 2012: students and teachers**

In the interviews, the most surprising discussion centred on the change in students' engagement with 'theories'. Writing in 2000, Brian Dibble noticed that students tended to reject Theory because it conflicted with their school training in reading and writing. He reasoned that 'whether or not they know it, they are wishing that we would instead concern ourselves with...Leavis, or Wimsatt and Beardsley, or some such' (2000). Certainly these students still exist, particularly in Masters coursework degrees (Andrew 2012, 4). However, students just graduated from high school have had a different education, at a distance from New Criticism. Paul Skrebels claims that:

I think the people handling curriculum now have got similar university theoretical backgrounds which are starting to inform the curriculum very carefully and indirectly in a way, but in a sense is making students more sensitive to the cultural and other implications of textual features...the students seem to me to be a little more able to say: 'this text is structured in such a way therefore the implication is...' whereas once upon a time they weren't able to do that. (2012, 3)

It is often the case that they are unable to situate specific theories or that they have an incomplete/misinformed understanding of them (Skrebels & Woods 2012, 3; Pont 2012, 4-5), but it is clear that students' approaches to texts are no longer Leavisite. Woods comments: 'they actually interrogate a text differently. They're not necessarily going to do the sort of close reading that we were certainly trained in, you know where you would literally take the line and you can unpack it and seek the meaning in the text' (2012, 6). When students are faced with a theory, Woods observes: 'they don't flinch. It might be new to them but when...we talk about things like that they go, "oh yeah I can see that"' (4). More importantly, students' responses seem to have shifted from Theory to 'theories': Tony Macris recounts his students' reading of theory as 'this paradigm, that paradigm, yet another paradigm': tools to be used and abandoned when necessary (2012, 6).

The development of the internet has also contributed to this shift in students' engagement with theories. We probably still have, as Woods claims, students who 'when they think "book"...still think hardcopy' (2012, 4). But the nature of research in Writing has changed significantly. Smith posits that the internet is

making access to theory easier because you can immediately get the information that you need about a particular theoretical idea...there were always books that you could get which were about basic theoretical [ideas]...but now probably people read those books less and look at guides to theory on the internet, or use a combination of Internet and book...it's a changing culture. (2012, 9)

Muecke notes that this new site for research is a 'heterogeneous environment of switching amongst different media', and this allows for students to become 'sensitive to different sorts of political positioning' (2012, 4).

The interviews have exposed how this shift in students' interactions with theory can be productive for Creative Writing because it extends the possibilities for writing and research. Muecke points out that students' thoughts may now be 'fragmented', which means that 'you're [not] getting the thorough study of a particular Theory that you

used to get'; however, '[with] information being so freely available...the good student can find out all about it and read a lot' (2012, 6). This means that discussion in the classroom can be expanded beyond it. More directly, Hecq describes how the new generation has extended her pedagogical approach – and even the discipline. She recounts: '[one] student in particular brought in Quantum Physics which was not my forte, and he was reconciling this with Jungian thought, and it was his responsibility to bring the project to the point where we could actually find a good frame of reference to talk about his poetic practice' (2012,1). In the next section, I will discuss the ways in which Writing teachers have created/adapted approaches to theory in order to further advance the discipline.

### **Creative Writing/Theory in 2012: pedagogical approaches**

In 2005 Dawson identified three main approaches to theory in writing classrooms. The *political* and *avant-garde* models invoke theory to challenge practice: the *political* uses theory to encourage students to learn 'how values come to be inscribed in texts, and...how to deal with the space between ethics and art' (Webb 2000); the *avant-garde* aims, via theory, to 'challenge assumptions about lyric poetry, literary realism and linear narrative' (Dawson 2005, 165). The *integration* model is less directed, focusing on a more general dialogue between writing and reading 'via a practical engagement with poststructuralist theory' (161). In my research, I have discovered four main approaches operating in 2012, which build on or contest these: *provoking*, *tacit*, *conversational* and *hybrid*. These models depend on the fluidity of 'theories': they borrow from many theories and incorporate them into Writing, rather than acceding to the demands of Theory. In this section I will demonstrate how these approaches can enrich Creative Writing.

The *provoking* approach develops from Dawson's *political* and *avant-garde* models, using theory to challenge students' conventional assumptions about writing. Pont proposes that theory can provide valuable stimuli for writing:

I might engage with viewing a sunset...I might also have that kind of engagement when I'm presented with the spectacle of an idea...I'm impacted in the same way and I may be equally moved by the 'sunset' or by the idea. (2012, 1)

Kalinda Ashton offers this approach to her students, inviting them 'to think about things...not just in the pure realm of philosophy but give them textual practices' (2012, 1). Dawson states that this approach is limited to theory which is 'more respectful of the notion of creativity and...which is animated by a more urgent social program' (2012, 14). Nevertheless, the interviewees have provoked their students in a range of inventive ways, including using: Freud's uncanny to uncover students' unconscious creativity; Kristeva to explore focalisation; postcolonialism to extend family narratives; Cixous' *Écriture féminine* 'to set...off ideas often about, obviously about gender, sexuality, bodies' (Hecq 2012, 6; Ashton 2012a, 2; Andrew 2012, 2; Brewster 2012, 9). In these direct applications to writing, theoretical ideas can be activated in students' writing, having a positive effect on the ways in which students represent character, structure narrative, or produce dialogue: what Macris calls 'setting up [for] writers possibilities...that theory can enrich their creative practice'

(2012, 9; 3). Of course, there are problems with 'provoking' with theory. The nature of Writing degrees is that they are often crammed with curriculum, meaning that students don't learn the complete ramifications of a theoretical position – what Cunningham calls 'Theory tourism' (2002, 28). Pont notes that 'provoking' with theory can 'go very awry' because writing students tend to focus on writing style rather than the detail of theory, which could lead to 'getting your voice colonised by the prose of the theorist' (2012, 2). Moreover, students may balk at the idea of 'external inspiration', preferring to draw from their own creativity. As Aritha van Herk puts it: 'if you say this is an opportunity to 'apply', I think that puts them off. It's better to build from within' (2012, 5).

The *tacit* approach takes up van Herk's suggestion. Muecke perceives that Writing students are not philosophers, so we should avoid workshops becoming Philosophy classes (2012, 3). Instead, a common practice is to use theories as an underlying rather than an explicit presence in the classroom. The interviewees speak of theory appearing as 'subterranean', 'incidental', 'slipped in' and, most importantly, 'embedded' presences (Brewster 2012, 7; Pont 2012, 7; Ashton 2012, 3; Skrebels & Woods 2012, 8). Muecke, for instance, designs courses which are content- rather than theory-driven, placing the theory/writing interaction in a 'real-world context' like writing about place or the body (2012, 3; 10). In these subjects,

the theory would be brought in as necessary...[In] a course called 'Writing Bodies'...I was doing this vitalistic ecological-type framework and I'm pushing the idea of reproduction. So the concept of reproduction I took obviously from its biological sense through to its cultural sense. I said 'We're all in the business of reproducing some kind of culture'. (7; 10)

Muecke says: 'if you ask whose theory it is, then it's broadly Latour's', but he does not mention the theorist specifically (10). This approach allows teachers to draw on the range of 'theories' while still holding Writing as the central concern. Skrebels expounds:

we've structured our program around rather broader concepts that contain theory without necessarily specifying that this is Barthes, Foucauldian, Derridean, etc...They are there and we can apply all of those people and those ideas and 'theories' to what we do, but it seems to me that pillars on which the program is perched are bigger things, more embracing concepts like...the concept of creativity itself. (2012, 5)

The vital message of the theories is understood, but they do not overwhelm the student or the writing: As Pont says, students 'experience' theory, rather than observe it. Hecq explains further:

for theory as a body of knowledge to be useful, practitioners need to engage with it at a deeper level. An ideal model would be based on a dialectic between practice and theory that would engage students at an unconscious level, but also make them actively conscious of such dialectic. (2013, 6)

In this way, 'theories' can be used productively in a Writing context, even while students are unaware of them. Of course, the danger here is that students may not be able to make the transition from the undergraduate classroom into postgraduate

studies – where theoretical placement of writing plays a more prominent role and students must be able to articulate their knowledge of specific theoretical ideas.

The *conversational* approach engages with theory in a more visible way. It is an extension of Dawson's *integration* model – a dialogue between writing and reading through post-structuralist thought – but it is much more open than that: it allows for many theories to interact with Writing, not just the monolith of post-structuralism. The *conversational* approach is an informal incorporation of theory in Writing: theory is named but only as one topic among many. Andrew remarks that, in his workshops,

What I like to do is say 'this makes me think of [this] Theory' and try to set up a kind of Bakhtinian dialogue to show the ways in which they can engage with the Theory they think they've left behind. I say: 'Your practice-led research takes me to another place – which will allow you to place your writing in a better place.' To write your exegesis is about situating in a scholarly context. Inevitably we do find students have gone on a journey that has involved Theoretical 'digressions' which have an impact on students' work. (2012, 2)

The interviewees recalled several conversations that linked theory with reading: for instance, postmodernist theories were linked to Rupert Brooke's poetry (Skrebels & Woods 2012, 12); Deleuze and Guattari were described through the film *Avatar* (Macris, 3; 8). This conversation is then broadened to discuss students' own writing. Using theories as part of the conversation can give students a vocabulary for discussing their work. Skrebels & Woods observe that theory gives them 'an opening then to talk about a text' and to be 'reflective on their own work and on other people's' (2012, 7). Woods says: 'with a student who is struggling with say, point of view[:]...you would say, 'you know, the tradition of the novel is that it allows for many voices, it's heteroglossic, Bakhtin says such and such and so on'. There are ways of using that' (15). Ashton details how theories of marginality expanded her students' awareness of the ethical implications of their writing:

I ask questions during the workshoping process about ethics and politics: what is the effect of having no women characters in this piece? How do you feel about being in the consciousness of such a misogynistic character? Is it a problem that this story exoticises and romanticises Asia through Western eyes? What are the politics and risks of representing Indigenous Australian characters if the author is non-Indigenous? What is the purpose of this story? What should writing do? What should reading do?' (2012a, 1)

Or as Dawson states, you can 'draw upon whatever kind of intellectual or theoretical or critical or thematic thought you think are relevant to develop the ideas [of a piece]...so it's not simply...some boring fucking story about some dude that breaks up with his girlfriend' (2012, 8). In the *conversational* approach, then, students are encouraged to be 'creative and critical at the same time' (Skrebels & Woods 2012, 12).

Finally, the *hybrid* approach further encourages interactions between theory and Writing in order to extend students' conception of writing. Several teachers blur the distinction between the 'creative' and the 'theoretical' so that both can be 'synthesised' in a work in equal terms (Skrebels & Woods 2012, 15). This has been

achieved through tasks where students may present critical or creative outputs, or even to form a fictocritical response to a topic (Hecq 2012, 4). Muecke explains that his courses have 'an explicit flowing together of those two streams...[we read] both kind of straight Creative Writing and theoretical pieces in the one course, and with explicit instructions to try to bring them together' (2012, 2). Muecke proposes that this allows for the insights of 'theories' to be integrated into writing without overwhelming it: 'it's not an instrumental use of Theory...it's a kind of organic use of Theory' (1). This is perhaps the biggest benefit for Writing: the ways this provides our students with a more complex understanding of writing. Indeed, this seems to be a significant area of interest for our current students. Woods notes: 'they want to work fictocritically...I do a lecture to the Honours seminar group on fictocritical work...and as soon as they hear that lecture they are all going, "oh, can I really do that?"' (2012, 8). Students are stimulated by the way fictocriticism 'tells a story and makes an argument at the same time' (Muecke 2008, 113) because the students of 2012, who are reading *and writing* on the internet, are already thinking in multiple forms. It is this engagement with theory – and with students' interests – which can nourish Writing practice.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to suggest that theory should always be central to writing or, indeed, reading. As Skrebels tells his students: 'the theory is there: [but] *you* wag it, you're the dog, don't let the Theory wag you...it's a tool, use it, but don't let it dominate you' (2012, 7). Nevertheless, the interviews have shown that theory is productive for Writing as long as we understand the state of theory and students in 2012. Theories can illuminate practice but theories need to be used in flexible and directed ways to allow for this. As Rendle-Short says: 'just Theory for Theory's sake, [I'm] not interested. But Theory as it relates to direct practice and investigations and propositions, yes: love it' (2012, 4). We must remember writing is the centre of Writing, but, in a teaching and learning context, why not use all the pedagogical instruments available?

## Endnote

All statements from the interviews included in the paper have been approved by the interviewees.

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