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Notes towards a methodology for studying fiction writing praxis

Abstract:

This paper was begun in the naïve hope that its author might discuss and evaluate methodologies for reading interviews and manuscripts by a mainstream writer—Peter Carey—as a way of developing an approach to studying writing process. Recently, there has been interest in the creative writing literature on the subject of writing process and/or writing practice (work by Brophy 1998, Gonsalves and Chan 2008, Krauth 2006, Kroll 2006 and Webb 2006 for example). Therefore, I was intending to write a paper which was practical, and discussed Carey’s interviews and manuscripts of *True History of the Kelly Gang* as way of unveiling some ‘truth’ about Carey’s writing practice. I wished to take steps towards finding a methodology for drawing conclusions about how fiction writers write novels.

This is not to say that this project has been entirely abandoned. However, as the writing of the paper continued, the author’s ability to make conclusive statements about process came into question. This paper, then, is a response to reading Carey’s manuscripts and interviews. Further, it seeks to examine questions about the reliability of statements about writing process by authors, and the extent to which a writing process is knowable.

Biographical Note:

Lucy Neave’s fiction has appeared in Australian and U.S. literary journals, and most recently in *Best Australian Stories 2009* (Black Inc.). She co-edited *Arts of Publication: Scholarly Publishing in Australia and Beyond* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007) and is a lecturer in creative writing at the Australian National University.

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1.

Recent attempts to theorise writing process—how writers conduct research, write and revise their fiction and poetry—include those informed by the psychoanalytic tradition, such as Brophy's *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing* (1998), and those drawing on Continental philosophy, such as chapters in *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice* by Webb (2006) and Krauth (2006). Other work has been informed by psychological literature: Pope's *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (2005) and Boden's *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (2005) are both useful. In this paper, my aim is to look at methodological questions related to researching writing practice. I weigh up questions of how to approach studying a writer's practice, and to what extent an individual writer's process can be understood. The two main means of looking at writing process I discuss are examining manuscripts, and reading or conducting interviews with writers.

In this paper I use Peter Carey's manuscripts and interviews as a case study. Carey's manuscript holdings in the State Library of Victoria are extensive, especially those pertaining to *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and there is no shortage of interviews with Carey in which he discusses his process.

There are obvious problems with reading interviews literally. How does a researcher know that a writer is 'telling the truth' about his/ her writing process? Can a writer articulate a process which is, essentially, a very interior one? To what extent is language sufficient for describing the experience of writing a book? These are some possible issues with relying on interviews with writers or statements by writers about their process, as a way of drawing general or specific conclusions about writing praxis.

In a chapter entitled 'Archival Methods' by Carolyn Steedman, the author sees visiting and reading the archive as a romance: as making up of things from scraps, breathing life into or communing with the dead. Steedman views visiting an archive in as a romance in another sense too: a quest, a search. Steedman cites Bonnie Smith, who has written about nineteenth century historians, viewing the documents they stumble upon as sleeping princesses, waiting for the historian/knight to awaken and release them (Smith, qtd. in Steedman 2005). There are issues with relying on archival research, too. The researcher is not an objective observer of manuscripts. Her passion might inflect her reading of the archive.

2.

I wish now to turn to statements by Carey about his writing process, and to look at these statements alongside manuscripts. An extensive interview with Carey about his writing process appears in Grenville and Woolfe's *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels were Written* (1993). Alongside the interview, draft excerpts of *Oscar and Lucinda* are provided, and some of Grenville and Woolfe's questions stem from observations they have made while looking at drafts. In the interview, Carey talks about how 'he follows

the river of an idea on the typewriter. The river dries up and I can't think of anything else, so maybe I go back and run with it again, to see if this time it goes any further' (p. 35). Fifteen years later, in an interview with Radhika Jones in *The Paris Review Interviews Volume II* Carey says a similar thing, although he uses a different metaphor: 'Every day you're making up the earth you're going to stand on... Often I'll reach a stage, say, a third of the way into the book, where I realize there's something very wrong. Everything starts to feel shallow and false and unsatisfactory. At that stage I'll go back to the beginning.' (pp. 441-442). It appears from these interviews that Carey does not plan his novels, that he writes and plans simultaneously while working on early drafts.

Besides the practical aspects of Carey's process, a more emotional thread runs through much of Carey's discourse about his writing. This is generally about failure and doubt, about the inevitability of a sense of failure and uncertainty while writing. He says in *Making Stories*, 'I worry about everything... The whole business of writing is to live with doubt; to do what you don't know how to do, to place yourself continually in a situation of ignorance and inelegance' (39).

Carey's early draft manuscript of *True History of the Kelly Gang* appears to support what he says in interviews. There are boxes and boxes of manuscripts in the State Library of Victoria, beginning with Carey's early drafts of *True History of the Kelly Gang*, which was originally titled, *Secret History of the Kelly Gang*. It is evident from the collection that Carey wrote and rewrote the early pages of the novel. The earliest version I could find was draft 1#3, which was dated 24 February 1997. The beginning of Draft 1 #3 reads as follows:

I wish to acquaint you with some of the occurrences of the past present and future.

In or around the spring of 1870 the ground was very soft a hawker named Mr. Gould got his wagon bogged between the township of Greta and my mother's house on the eleven mile creek. The ground was that rotten it would bog a duck in places and Ben Gould had abandoned his wagon for fear of losing his horses in the spewy ground they were very poor sort of beasts one of them sway backed the other lame on its rear outside hoof the value of these nags was no more than five shillings from the cat-meat man...(Draft 1 #3 page 1).

Carey's early draft beginning bears some similarities to the opening page of Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie Letter':

DearSir

I wish to acquaint you with some of the occurrences of the present past and future. In or about the spring of 1870 the ground was very soft a hawker named Mr Gould got his waggon bogged between Greta and my mother's house on the eleven mile creek, the ground was that rotten it would bog a duck in places so Mr. Gould had abandon his waggon for fear of loosing his horses in the spewy ground. he was stopping at my Mother's awaiting finer or dryer weather Mr. McCormack and his wife. hawkers also

were camped in Greta the mosquitoes were very bad which they generally are in a wet spring ...

The idea of using Kelly's voice appears to have been important to Carey from the time he began writing the novel. In fact, Carey's beginning reads a little like a writing exercise, an attempt to channel Ned Kelly's voice. Carey has discussed the importance of the 'Jerilderie Letter' as source and inspiration for *True History of the Kelly Gang* in interviews. In a discussion with Robert McCrum, a former editor of Carey's, in the *Observer*, Carey says he first came upon the 56 page letter which Kelly attempted to get printed – the 'Jerilderie Letter'—sometime in the mid-1960s (Carey 2001). He says: 'It is an extraordinary document, the passionate voice of a man who is writing to explain his life, save his life, his reputation...It sometimes sounds nuts, but then its author can write: 'If my lips taught the public that men are made mad by bad treatment, then my life will not have been thrown away...'' Although Carey says the book took 3 years to write, 'it would not be glib to claim that it took 35 years' (Carey 2001).

This claim—that Carey was thinking about the novel for a lengthy period prior to actually writing it—points to the fact that it is not uncommon for writers to think or fret about ideas for long periods before attempting to commit them paper. From the manuscript collection in the State Library of Victoria, it looks as if Carey began the novel in 1997 and it took him approximately two years to complete. If the interview is to be taken literally, it reveals that Carey was thinking about the book long before he began to write it, something that the manuscript alone cannot disclose.

A year later, in draft 4#2, dated 14 February 1999, the opening page of Carey's *Secret History of the Kelly Gang* is completely altered: he has rewritten it again. There are two copies of this beginning in the manuscript collection. One of them has a line drawn through it, and the word 'Objective' written beside it. The beginning of this version of the manuscript reads:

Peel Street, North Melbourne. November 20th, 1880.

Dear Sadlier,

When you have opened these parcels you will readily understand why you should not have done so in sight of your wife and child. Ned Kelly had the contents tucked into his sash, and although his hideous armour protected the magpie's nest of paper from our colt revolvers, it could do nothing to stop the gore flowing from the arm and leg wounds which finally toppled him.

This idea of the type and blood running together, of a kind of blending of writing and flesh, still appears in the published version of *True History of the Kelly Gang*. The published novel is divided into 'parcels', each parcel from a different period in Kelly's life, all of them described as if by a manuscript librarian. Many of the parcels are described as soiled or stained. There is a sense that the parcels bear the physical imprint of Kelly's body and carry traces of Kelly's life and experience, and that the words and the flesh are contiguous. In the published version of the novel, Carey writes of Curnow,

the schoolteacher: ‘...[Curnow] had flattered [Kelly] and out-witted him as successfully as the hero of any fairytale, and now he carried the proof, the trophy, the rank untidy nest of paper beneath his arm. These stained ‘manuscripts’ were disgusting to his touch and his very skin shrank from their conceit and ignorance...’ (p. 390).

Carey’s crossing out of the ‘Sadlier’ letter indicates that he decided to turn away from the idea of introducing the book with a letter, and instead wished to begin with an ‘objective’ voice. The published version of the novel begins and ends with the text structured in columns, so that it appears to have been taken from a newspaper, or another official source. The section at the beginning of the published novel calls itself an ‘Undated, unsigned, handwritten account in the collection of the Melbourne Public Library.’ It includes a fake reference number, ‘V.L. 10453’ (Carey 2000, p.2)

To return to Carey’s early manuscript (Draft 1 #3): it continues to attempt to follow the ‘Jerilderie Letter’ in style throughout. He largely follows the letter’s content for the first five pages. At page 6 of the manuscript, which has Chapter 2#2 and the date 2/24/97 in the footer, the events bear a closer resemblance to the published version of the novel. It begins: ‘My first memory is of my mother breaking eggs into a bowl and crying that Jimmy Quinn my cousin was arrested by the traps and put in the lock-up in Beveridge’.

In the published novel, these lines, with slight variation, appear in the fourth paragraph of page 5, after the ‘objective’ account of Kelly’s capture. Before this paragraph, Carey has added a number of paragraphs. The first one begins: ‘I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write...’ (2000, p.5)

From the fourth paragraph onwards, the events described in the first few pages of Chap 2#2 and the published novel appear close to identical. In the first version, however, there are scantly details, and some of the details have been altered from early draft to final draft. The published version is more detailed, and the details appear more pertinent, more evocative. For example, ‘the roof were leaking above the camp oven each drop hissing as it hit’ (Carey 2000, p.6); and when Ned, his mother and baby Maggie wait outside the sergeant’s office, ‘I remember sitting with my chilblained hands wedged beneath the door I could feel the lovely warmth of the fire on my fingertips’ (Carey 2001, p.6). In the first version, the sergeant has ‘wide dirty fingernails and with these instruments he tore my mother’s cake apart’ (Chap 2#2). In the final version ‘the Englishman’ has a hand which is ‘big soft white...He untied the muslin his fingernails so clean they looked like they were washed in lye and to this day I can see them livid instruments as they broke my mother’s cake apart’ (Carey 2000, p.6).

The policeman breaking the mother’s cake is a metaphor for the Kelly’s disenfranchisement in the face of the law. The metaphorical purpose of the policeman’s actions is clear in manuscript and novel. But the details Carey has added in the process of rewriting make Ned’s family’s poverty more real to the reader, and heighten the cruelty of the police. It seems more realistic that Ned would remark on the spooky cleanness of the policeman’s hands, as opposed to the dirt under his fingernails. The cleanness

contrasts with Ellen and Ned, who the reader senses are always struggling to stay dry and warm. The revision, therefore, involves developing details which are thematically relevant, which heighten the contrast between the empowered and the impoverished.

Carey has a particular name for this process. He calls it cantilevering. Cantilevering involves rewriting and rewriting and rewriting a section until it feels as if it 'works'. Although the changes Carey has made to the first chapter of the novel do not seem as dramatic as the revisions to the prologue, these alterations are aesthetically and thematically significant. Carey says: 'I go back and start again...it becomes more fully imagined. It's like this thin bit of wire that you want to encrust...so maybe that's all it is, just building it up so I can see it, believe it' (Carey 1993 p.39).

3.

It is clear that although interviews are useful for gaining insight into how a writer works, what a writer says in interviews gives only a tiny insight into the construction or composition of a novel. Manuscripts appear to give a much more detailed and interesting picture, but the mass of detail can be overwhelming or hard to interpret, unless the writer has written marginal notes. It seems logical to use interviews to try to interpret manuscripts. A combination of work with manuscripts and reading interviews is the most useful approach to further research into an individual writer's process, and into methodological questions relating to praxis. Despite this, there is no fail safe way to research a writer's process. In an interview with Grenville and Woolfe, Carey says, 'I think that the one false signal that this discussion might give is that the whole journey was more straightforward than it really was...The process is muddier than even this indicates...The confusions and the darkness' (1993, p.41)

Krauth (2006) writes of various domains through which the writing process can be conceptualized. He conceives of the 'first domain' as 'the intimate space in the novelist's head where the project is conceived, managed and monitored' and the 'third domain: the public space which is the domain of the readership towards which the writing process is projected' (p.193). Kroll writes of authors having multiple personality disorder, a result of the requirement that they frequently be teacher-writer-academics. 'Authors specialize in putting on masks, redesigning and updating them' (Kroll 2006, p. 204).

Coetzee casts considerable doubt on his ability to speak honestly or accurately about the writing process in an interview with David Attwell. He says:

Let me talk first about the subjective experience of writing a novel and subjective experience of answering questions about it...The novel becomes less a *thing* than a *place* where one goes every day for several hours a day for years on end. What happens in that place has less and less discernible relation to the daily life one lives or the lives people are living around one. Other forces, another dynamic, take over... whatever the process is that goes on when one writes, one has to have some respect for it... In contrast, as I talk to you today, I have no sense of *going anywhere* for my answers. What I say here is

continuous with the rest of the daily life of a writer-academic like myself. While I hope what I say has some integrity, I see no reason to have any particular respect for it. True or false, it is simply my utterance, continuous with me; whereas what I am writing in a novel either isn't me or is me in a deeper sense than the words I am now speaking are me. ...When I listen to novelists talking about their books, I often have the sense that they are producing for the interviewer a patter that has very little to do with the book they intimately know. I might even call their response alienated, alienated as a more or less baffled, more or less self-protective measure. Coetzee (pp. 205-206)

This long quotation points to one of the insoluble problems with trying to seek answers about how someone writes. The writer self, as is commonly mentioned by writers, is distinct from the public self of the author. This is not to say that no conclusions can be drawn when it comes to finding out about writing process; just that definitive answers are difficult to come by, and that all utterances need to be measured against manuscripts. And yet manuscripts and correspondence can be selected, edited or omitted by the writer or the librarian. In the case of Carey's donated manuscripts and correspondence, certain details have been expunged. Carey's correspondence contains lines which have been cut out with a pair of scissors, gaps in emails and letters. This is entirely understandable; after all, Carey needs to maintain some privacy. But a writer can still (easily) shape public perception of his/her process by selection of manuscripts to be donated to libraries. Reading manuscripts and interviews does not give a direct insight into a writer's brain, as Carey acknowledges in his interview with Grenville and Woolfe.

Of course, writing about a writer's persona, or charging a writer with consciously or semi-consciously trying to formulate a public persona makes me, as academic writer in this context, aware of my own attempts at constructing a persona. Here, I wish to be read as a legitimate scholar of Carey's manuscripts, even though as a scholar of manuscripts I am an exceedingly marginal one. I read Carey's manuscripts and interviews as a particular kind of reader, as a reader who longs to understand the secrets of Carey's method of composition, however impossible that may be. No reading, after all, is entirely objective. Therefore with my own secret reading self, my own reading persona, I read Carey's manuscripts and interviews with a sort of grasping passion. My view is therefore partial and incomplete at best.

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