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Writing fiction in a second language: when practice leads research and research leads practice

Abstract:

My research concerns international mobility and cross-cultural exchanges, and the concomitant rise of the translingual writer, and asks how the practice of writing fiction in a second language influences the creative process and the language used.

This paper outlines how I have approached this investigation of the creative process from three angles – my method and motives – and illuminates its basis in my own experience as a writer of fiction in a second language and as a creative writing student and teacher. These experiences, coupled with and informed by research, assisted me in approaching and interpreting the relevant data in ways that might be lost to someone who stands outside this experience that is simultaneously so limiting and liberating. The paper will demonstrate how, in this research, the practice has led the research and the research has led the practice, as proposed by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009) in the model the ‘Iterative Cyclic Web.’

Biographical note:

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When I'm in Australia I speak, think, dream, and write in English, but my shopping lists are for some reason always written in my first language Norwegian. Although I have tried to understand it, I still don't know why, but this idea that someone could find my shopping list if I lost it and then try to interpret it sparked the idea for one of my short stories. I will start with an extract from this story. If some of the words I use seem foreign, don't worry, they are meant to:

Magpies on Seven Corners

Tamponger

1 kg poteter

1 fedd hvitløk

1 lammelår

1 bunt fersk rosmarin

1 pk servietter

3 -4 sjalottløk

6 gulerøtter

Sopp

Sukkererter

2 flasker rødvin

2 flasker hvitvin

Vodka

Gin

5pk smertestillende

'What does it mean?' Chad looked from the round and neat blue words on the list he had found outside their door to Doug. Doug was running his index finger under every word as if to make sure he got the real meaning.

'Does this look like English to you?'

'No.'

'Then why do you think I would understand it?'

'Well, you did take German in high school.'

'So did you dude, we skipped those classes together remember. Besides I don't think this is German.' Doug leaned over the list and looked closer at the circles with lines through them, he wondered what they would sound like when spoken out loud.

Chad had pushed aside the pieces of hose and matchsticks they used when smoking, and sat down on the windowsill, no longer interested in the list. 'Hey there's a dude hanging from a rope across the road.'

'What! Is he dead?'

'No man, he's washing windows. Actually he's talking to someone on his phone.'

'That's not interesting.'

‘Maybe not, but you’re on to something. That would be the best way to kill yourself, just make a noose, put it around your neck and bungy off a fourteen floor building. That rush will be the last thing you feel.’

‘You’re sick. I want to understand this list, Chad. There’s something going on here, there has to be a reason why we found it. Come on, I need your help. I get that there’s alcohol involved, but what does the rest mean? Who do you think it belongs to?’

‘I don’t know, and I don’t care, it looks like a shopping list. That’s less interesting than the window cleaner.’

‘You can tell a lot about a person from their shopping list. I saw a show once; I think it was on Discovery, where they said a shopping list is like a fingerprint of someone’s personality. It’s not only what people put on their list but it’s what order they put it in, what kind of paper they use, what type of pen and so on. I bet we could even find out if it’s a man or a woman just from the items on this list.’

‘Duh, that list might not be in English or German but it’s quite clear it’s a chick’s list.’

‘Why? Are you pretending to know everything again?’

‘Look at the first word, it’s pretty international, looks a lot like tampons to me.’

Gerda Lerner (1997), in her essay ‘Living in Translation’ from *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*, explains how she came to the English language from German after fleeing Austria just before World War II. She talks about the sense of loss she feels in not being able to use her mother tongue, and says: ‘I envy those who live in the power of their own language, who were not deprived of the immediacy by which creativity finds its form’ (Lerner 1997: 49). My PhD thesis constitutes a response to the questions evoked from Lerner’s statement about how closely related the creative process is to language, and in this paper I will discuss how I approached the research, the exploration of these questions, my method and my motive.

I first became interested in this topic when I did my undergraduate degree in the States and studied Creative Writing for the first time. To my surprise I found that I preferred writing in English, my second language, to Norwegian, my first language. Since then I have continued to write in my second language while living eight years at home (in Norway) and eight years in countries where English is the primary language (the US and Australia). This experience and reflections – around my situation, the creative process, and the feeling of writing between two languages – that often materialise in my creative writing, is what led me to, and shaped, my research on how writing fiction in a second language influences the creative process. In my thesis I present my own short stories – written in my second language English – together with reflections on the writing of these stories, and analyse interviews with writers who write and publish in their second language.

My own interest and experience in writing fiction in a second language, parallels an increase in international mobility and cross-cultural exchanges and the concomitant presence of translingual writers, writers who, according to Steven Kellman ‘write in more

than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one' (Kellman 2000: ix). Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Ha Jin, Andre Brink, Gerda Lerner, Eva Hoffman, Milan Kundera, and Ayn Rand are examples of translingual writers.

Within higher education today, and in particular in institutions that offer research degrees with the option of including a creative arts component – such as a novel, visual art, or musical scores – as part of a thesis, and where academics are also practising artists, there is an ongoing discussion related to where the creative component or the creative practice fits in with other research. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009), both creative practitioners and researchers, shed light on this discussion in the book *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. They maintain that both practices can inform each other. Practice-led research is where the creative practice generates the research, and research-led practice is where the research fuels the practice. They also propose a model of creative and research processes that they call the 'Iterative Cyclic Web' (Smith & Dean, 2009: 19). The model, 'accommodates practice-led research and research-led practice, creative work and basic research. The structure of the model combines a cycle and several sub-cycles with a web created by many points of entry and transition within the cycle' (Smith & Dean, 2009: 19). Similarities are, as they point out, many with the Deleuzian rhizome (Smith & Dean, 2009: 21). As the circular form of the model indicates there is no one correct path and you can move in any direction back and forth as you like; you can shift between practice-led research and research-led practice, and the repetition or 'iteration' of a process can propel you forward in the same direction or lead you in the opposite direction or in new directions (Smith & Dean, 2009: 19-21).

My research and the presentation of it have developed very much in line with what Smith and Dean (2009) propose in the 'Iterative Cyclic Web' model. When working on a project like this, one might ask what came first, the practice or the research, and do they push or pull at each other, but I think the answer is that even though practice *or* research might have sparked the original idea, practice *and* research are in fact walking hand in hand trying to get to know each other by simultaneously making room and staking claim. In this case, there is no doubt that the project was initiated by creative practice – by me writing fiction in my second language. The practice led to – or at least inspired – the research question of how writing in a second language influences the creative process. However, since the birth of that idea, my research has continually informed my writing in the same way my writing has continually informed my research. This is also reflected in the presentation of the research, and it is structured accordingly with analytical, reflective, and creative writing presented not as separate entities with a part one, two, and three, but together in a format where practice leads towards the research and the research leads to the practice.

An example of practice leading research in my project is when I was working on the opening scene in the short story 'Static'. I describe a form of cold and an environment I have only experienced 'in' the Norwegian language and I was struggling to find the words in English that would evoke a believable image, then I realised I had to ask my interviewees if the language they wrote in influenced what they wrote, and if so how. Similarly, when researching the notion of existing between languages that many writers

who write in their second language is occupied with, I started thinking about language in relation to location and how I sometimes felt that I didn't belong to Norwegian or English, and was this a form of dislocation? Then I realised there is no one word for dislocation in Norwegian, and subsequently these thoughts were incorporated into the short story that I read from earlier, 'Magpies on Seven Corners'. Here is another sample:

This is my location, I am located right here in my living room on Seven Corners in Minneapolis, sitting on a chair covered in grey felt, leaning over a beige desk with old coffee spills. Am I mislocated here, or maybe dislocated? In Norwegian dislocated is four words: *gått ut av ledd*. But that's only when you refer to a joint, like a knee or a shoulder. A person can't be dislocated in Norwegian; you can in English.

I feel different, new, but it's hard to navigate, like I have a pile of hot coals in front of me and I don't know how to get past them. But, if I manage to get through, I'll be happy, still dislocated, but happy. Not happy like they are in the movies, normal happy, but I want to be angry too. I don't shout enough.

Brophy (2007) says that writing the creative part of a thesis differs from writing for example a novel or a collection of poetry on its own because the creative part of a thesis 'must be developed around a question that arises from a deeply informed position as both creative writer and passionate scholar. The creative work must be one way of tackling a problem or question' (Brophy, 2007: 14). The writing of short stories in my second language was undertaken with this in mind, it provided me with one angle – but not the only angle – from which to approach the question of how writing fiction in a second language influences the creative process.

Paul Dawson (2006) refers to a rich tradition of empirical investigation in relation to the craft of writing, as well as of asking questions of writers about their writing process. 'In fact the interview format, to a certain extent, is another contemporary mode of prefatorial criticism' (Dawson, 2006: 25). Dawson uses as an example the American literary journal, *The Paris Review*, that started interviewing well-established writers about their craft in 1953, and then from 1958 published the interviews in the series of books *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. These texts, as records of interviews are a valuable archive of writers' reflections on their work and its processes. According to Kvale and Brinkman, 'the interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009: 1 - 2). These statements provided me with a second angle to approach my research question from and assured me that interviewing writers for this project was a valid approach. I had specific questions related to the creative/writing process and language that I wanted answered, and I felt it necessary to pose these questions directly to practicing and published fiction and poetry writers who wrote in a language other than what they considered their mother tongue, and who resided either in Australia or Norway.

The final angle from which I approached this research was through reflection. According to Marcelle Freiman 'creative writing is a conceptual activity for all who do it, and it includes choices, decisions and reflection' (Freiman, 2008: 5). While I do not wish to make myself the focus of my research, I do hope that, by sharing my own reflections on

residing between languages and writing fiction in my second language, I can provide an angle of which to view this research that will assist in understanding the research findings. This method is what some call reflection while others classify it as autoethnography or reflexive ethnography. According to Frederick Steier reflection is an important part of research, 'and researchers [should be] included in, rather than outside, the body of their own research' (Steier, 1991: 1). Ellis and Bochner who champion the practice of autoethnography write:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739).

In my research this is apparent throughout because I am doing/practicing what I am researching and I am not looking to remove myself from the equation. However, my reflections have been given their own space and each short story is introduced through a section where practice meets research and where I express my thoughts on the process of developing each story, and utilize theoretical research to explain the reflections. Reflection, however personal, should always be coupled with theory in the process of interpretation, because reflective research as defined by Alvesson and Sköldberg

... has two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection. ... Interpretation comes to the forefront of the research work. This calls for the utmost awareness of the theoretical assumptions, the importance of language and pre-understanding, all of which constitute major determinants of the interpretation. The second element, reflection, turns attention 'inwards' towards the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the central importance, as well as the problematic nature of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context' (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009: 9).

In resolving to approach my research from these three angles my intention as I investigate the influence of writing fiction in a second language on the creative process, is that this approach have assisted me in interpreting the relevant data in ways that might be lost to someone who stands outside this experience that is simultaneously so limiting and liberating. And, my aim is to display what Brophy describes as

... a willingness to work from a question or problem (a flash of intuition) at both creative and scholarly-critical tasks that in their different ways approach this question and in most instances will create a new and strange structure that works for each individual PhD thesis, bringing it together finally as a whole' (Brophy, 2007: 14).

I conclude this paper by returning to the shopping list:

'I think I found out what language that list you keep obsessing about is. There's this dude in my chemistry class who's Norwegian, and when I wrote down some of the words I could

remember, he said it was either Norwegian or Danish. So I brought home two dictionaries, one Danish/English and one Norwegian/English, from the library.’

‘You went to the library?’

‘Get over it. Anyway, they’re on the couch if you want to find out.’ Chad didn’t want to admit that he was curious too, so he sat on the window sill and pretended to look at people walking in and out of Cafe Havana while he waited for Doug to figure out what language it was and what the words meant. Doug was quiet for about ten minutes before he put both hands up in the air, and shouted ‘Norwegian!’ Then he leant over the note and the dictionary again for a very long time, making little notes with a chewed up pencil that should have been thrown out. Chad had almost fallen asleep with his left cheek pressed against the window when Doug stood up and walked across the room.

‘This woman is making herself a final meal, like they do on death row.’

‘Really, how do you know?’

‘I’ve read the list now, and it’s not pretty. Believe me, those items spell out ‘sad, lonely, end of the road, there is nothing else to do but to end this’.’ Doug showed the translated list to Chad.

‘That’s so sad man. But lamb? If I was gonna top myself I’d have my mum make a complete Thanksgiving dinner and I’d eat the whole dish of sweet potatoes and marshmallows myself. Lamb is so pedestrian.’

‘So pedestrian? What’s wrong with you?’

‘I don’t know. I’m hungry.’ They both stopped and looked at each other before they started to walk towards the door.

‘Do you smell that?’ Doug said.

‘Yes. I love that smell, I love it when she bakes bread.’

‘Bread! She bakes her own bread. She is the only one in this building who doesn’t order take out. It’s her list. It’s Miss Tasty’s list.’

Chad would never admit it to Doug, but he thought Miss Tasty was hot. How could someone so hot want to kill themselves, it just didn’t make any sense. Doug said it was because she was lonely, and from Norway. There were a lot of suicides in Scandinavia.

‘Forget about it Doug, I think you’re wrong, she doesn’t seem suicidal.’

‘Have you ever met someone suicidal before? I’m telling you that shopping list is a cry for help.’

‘How so?’ Chad looked at his friend and wondered if he should take the drugs away from him or recommend more.

‘Well these are clearly ingredients to her last meal, she’s roasting lamb and a lot of it. She’s planning to eat like never before. You’ve seen her, she doesn’t eat that much. And that many painkillers combined with vodka and gin but no tonic water, there’s only one

explanation.’ Doug handed the list to Chad.

‘Are you sure you translated all the words correctly? Actually, I don’t care, I’m going over there.’

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