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Introduction: Creative Writing as a Reflexive Practice

My list of requirements for creativity begins with *motivation* and *courage*... My second requirement is *extensive experience* and *apprenticeship*... the next requirement [is] *insight into the workings of the self and into the workings of other minds*... Being able to know how your own mind works and how other minds work is an underlying prerequisite for creating great art.

Antonio Damasio, 'Some Notes on Brain, Imagination and Creativity', 2001, p. 64.

It is commonly said that in order to be able to drive a car well we have to stop thinking about it. If we focus too much on the vehicle and how we're operating it – how the gears work or which pedal to press when – we're likely to end up in a ditch. The process has to become automatic. Somehow, and sooner rather than later, we have to reach the stage in which we're no longer consciously concerned about where we put our feet or how to manoeuvre a narrow gap. To drive smoothly and efficiently, we have to lose our self-consciousness and become one with the car. Writing, at its best, is like that too. If we focus too hard on what we want to say and how we want to say it, the page or the screen may remain stubbornly blank, or words may appear but refuse to come alive or convey what we want them to. Only when we stop trying and become absorbed in the work – when we *lose ourselves* in the writing – does the process begin in earnest.

T.S. Eliot thought of this 'loss' of self in the writing process as an 'escape from personality'. The writer, he believed, needs to be a vehicle, 'a finely perfected medium' through which feelings and emotions can 'enter into new combinations'; those feelings and emotions, however, not reflecting the writer's needs for self-expression but being the ones appropriate for the work of art (Eliot, 1953, pp. 26, 30). And some of the most influential thinkers on the relationship

between creative writers and their writing, as we will see later, regard writing as a 'self-less' process.

But if we think about this carefully for a moment the idea that creative writing is a process of moving away from our own self seems insufficient to describe what is often an intensely personal experience: especially when we are drawing on our memories or trying to capture in words a particularly strong or painful experience. For many established writers writing isn't possible without a deep connection with the self. 'Writers who are not self-obsessed and wriggling through what they hope are their own labyrinthine psyches are very likely not writers at all', says novelist Jenni Diski (Diski, 1998, p. 45). And poet Ted Hughes, talking about Sylvia Plath's poetry, says: 'It's my suspicion that no poem can be a poem that is not a statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in us' (Heaney, 1988, p. 161).

So we seem to have a contradiction: creative writing is deeply personal, deeply connected with the writer's self, but it also involves moving away from the self and becoming impersonal. How are we to understand this? The first thing to say is that impersonality doesn't need to imply an *escape* from the self. As David Lodge suggests, Eliot's 'cultivation of the idea of "impersonality" was in part a manoeuvre designed to conceal the very personal sources of his own poetry from inquisitive critics' (Lodge, 2002, p. 97). What Eliot calls impersonality is more usefully understood as *adopting a different stance towards the personal*. It involves relinquishing, even if only temporarily, the deep personal connection we have with our material; it requires a kind of internal distancing, allowing a space to open up between ourselves and our material, so that it can develop a life of its own in our imagination. This also makes it possible for us to bring our already-incorporated knowledge of the craft of writing to bear on this material, so that it can be transformed into art. Understanding Eliot's impersonality in this way means that there is, in fact, no contradiction between the personal and the impersonal in the writing process, for in order to develop as writers we need to be able both to plumb our own depths for the material for our writing and to set that material free so that it can be transformed into art; in other words we need to be able both to access and objectify our material.

But how can we do both of these things at the same time? This is a question that lies at the core of this book. Being able simultaneously to access and objectify our deeply felt material isn't easy; nor is it

something that we just learn how to do once and for all and then it ceases to be a problem. In any writing process there is always going to be a tension between our own personal needs and the need of the writing to have a life of its own. Seamus Heaney is aware of this tension when he says that ‘the poet need[s] to get beyond ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography’ (Heaney, 1988, p. 148). Many of us start to write out of autobiographical material: ourselves and our own experiences, things that preoccupy or perplex us. And that is perfectly legitimate; it is easier to start from the known than the unknown. But the danger of using autobiographical material is that, precisely because we know it so well, we may not be able to distance ourselves sufficiently from it to allow it to develop into art.

This is what Heaney suggests is the case with some of Sylvia Plath’s poems, such as her famous ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’. In his view these poems are less successful than others because they are ‘slighted in favour of the intense personal need of the poet’. A poem such as ‘Edge’, written in the last weeks before she died, does not fall into that category; it has achieved ‘objectivity, a perfected economy of line, a swift surehanded marking of the time and space which had been in waiting for this poem’. It is ‘a thing sufficient within itself’ (Heaney, 1988, pp. 164–65, 168). But in the writing of ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’, he implies, Plath has not been able to let go of the material sufficiently to allow it to become an object in its own right, separate from its author. Whether or not we agree with this rereading of Plath’s late work, we might say that there can be too much closeness between the writer and her writing; and that it is possible to access deeply felt material without being able to objectify it sufficiently.

Conversely, the consequences of *not* accessing our felt material for our writing can be just as troublesome as failing to objectify it. It’s not unusual to encounter people in creative writing classes – people who have in fact been writing for a long time – who have developed the craft of writing to a high degree but who have a sense that something is missing from the finished product, that the writing is ‘dead’ on the page. Their inability – or their unwillingness – to access their own deep personal material has prevented them from imbuing the writing with *felt* life.

What we are talking about here, then, is the need for *reflexivity*. Reflexivity is an important concept with a wide currency in contemporary thought, and it will help us to clarify it if, following Donna Qualley, we compare it with the closely related term ‘reflection’.

When we reflect on something, we think about things that are in the main readily available to us. We 'take thought', as the saying goes, with its implication that those thoughts are there waiting to be taken. Reflection does not necessitate a change in the person reflecting (although the results of our reflections may lead to change), nor does it necessarily involve an engagement with another person (although we may reflect *with* others). Essentially, reflection is an individual activity that takes place independently of others (Qualley, 1997, p. 11).

Reflexivity is a different process and potentially a deeper one. At its heart is a particular kind of 'engagement with an "other"' (p. 11), whether another person or oneself as 'other'. Where reflection could be said to involve taking something into oneself – a topic, an event, a relationship – for the purpose of contemplation or examination, reflexivity involves putting something out in order that something new might come into being. It involves creating an internal space, distancing ourselves from ourselves, as it were, so that we are both 'inside' and 'outside' ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of 'self as other' whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self.

In research in the social sciences, in anthropology for example, reflexivity is used to denote the ideal stance of researchers in relation to people they are working with, their so-called research 'subjects'. Contemporary anthropologists, instead of assuming that they are neutral observers, will be aware of the way they themselves influence the research process, and their reflections on their role will become an integral part of the written report. This approach involves suspending assumptions they've absorbed from their own culture and engaging with people from other cultures as far as possible on their own terms (Aull, 1999). Thus reflexivity involves not *getting rid* of the self, but *doubling* the self: distancing ourselves from ourselves to a greater or lesser extent, so that we have a sense of standing outside ourselves and observing what we are doing and thinking.

That there is a necessary reflexivity or doubling of self in the creative process has been recognised by a wide range of thinkers. For Sigmund Freud, the creative artist is blessed with 'a certain flexibility in the repressions' (Freud, 1949, p. 314), by which he means a greater ability than other people to suspend the potential criticism of his 'ego-self' and to listen to the unconscious. This, together with his highly developed techniques of writing, enables the creative writer to

transform his (sexual) fantasies into art and to allow others to enjoy them without shame (Freud, 1908). Object-relations theorist Marion Milner also identifies a reflexive mechanism in the creative process, but sees it as universal rather than at work only in exceptional individuals. She posits two different ‘modes of attention’ in this process: the chaotic creative mode – what she thinks of as ‘attending with the imaginative body’, because of the accompanying sense of extension in space – which facilitates close contact with the inner life; and the more reasoned and orderly critical mode, which involves distancing and which facilitates the shaping or editing of the creative material. In Milner’s view, the creative process involves not *expelling* the self but learning to switch back and forth smoothly between these two modes of attention or different senses of self, developing a ‘dialogue relation’ between them (Milner, 1971, p. 73).

How, then, can we learn both to access and objectify our personal material in order to develop reflexivity in our writing process? Many good and useful books are available now as guides. Some, such as Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones* (1986) and Dorothea Brande’s *Becoming a Writer* (1934), offer excellent suggestions for how to access our deep feelings and emotions for writing. Others, such as Peter Sansom’s *Writing Poems* (1994) and Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction: a guide to narrative craft* (2002) offer helpful suggestions for developing the craft of writing and thus being able to work on the material we have accessed. We can strengthen our ability to objectify our material by sharing our writing with other people on a regular basis, whether with individuals or in writing groups, and receiving critical feedback on it. This can help us to develop a more external view of our writing and learn how to become our own reader. These are important and useful ways of developing reflexivity for writing. The approach we adopt in this book is rather different, but – we suggest – complementary.

Underlying our approach is the assumption that engaging in creative writing is itself a reflexive practice. Some recent and contemporary analysts of the writing process, whom we will be discussing later, point out that writing, indeed all language, is intrinsically reflexive; that the moment we speak or commit words to the page we are doubling ourselves. For Jacques Derrida, there is an unbridgeable gap or *différence* between ourselves and our words (Derrida, 1976) and therefore the use of words in speech or writing always involves a doubling of the self, or ‘being two-to-speak’ (Derrida, 1992, p. 153; in

Royle, 2003, p. 127). Roland Barthes suggests a similar idea: the ‘person’ who speaks in the narrative is not identical with the ‘real life’ person who does the writing; so there are always at least two ‘selves’ in the writing process (Barthes, 1966, p. 261). Mikhail Bakhtin, whose term ‘dialogic’ carries a meaning similar to ‘reflexive’, suggests that creative writing is considerably more dialogic than everyday speech or writing. By this he means that creative writing – and he is talking about fiction rather than poetry – contains a high degree of ‘double-voicing’. This is observable in literary styles such as irony and parody, where it is possible to ‘hear’ more than one point of view in the single voice of the narrator, but it is particularly noticeable in the ‘free indirect style’, used, for example, by Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf, which combines elements of first and third person in a single narrative voice (Bakhtin, 1981).

If creative writing is intrinsically double-voiced, as these thinkers suggest, then engaging in it offers us the opportunity of, as it were, practising reflexivity within the text, of experiencing the doubleness which reflexivity involves. But *understanding* how that reflexivity operates can, we suggest, be even more helpful to us in our development as writers. Standing back from the creative process and observing the reflexivity going on within it gives us, in other words, a second degree of reflexivity, not simply a doubling of the self but a tripling. This book, itself ‘double-voiced’, works with that second degree of reflexivity in two ways: not only looking at theoretical understandings of what the writing process involves, but providing an opportunity to enter into a creative relationship with contemporary theory through writing exercises.

The benefits of this approach are several. Reflecting on the writing process from different points of view can put us in touch with unexpected material for our writing. Moreover, understanding our own personal connection with the writing process can deepen and enrich our writing. Understanding ourselves in relation to the writing process can help us to develop a strong ‘writing identity’, a term we discuss in Chapters 2 and 3; and increasing our understanding of reflexivity in writing through a study of relevant theory can help us to work creatively with difficulties in accessing and objectifying personal material.

There is a further dimension to this approach, though it’s not the main focus of this particular book. Exploring the relationship between ourselves and our writing process can lead to a changed sense of self.

This might happen through the writing process, through the closer connection with the inner life brought about as a result of thinking about topics such as voice and authorship, or through finding that the writing we have produced revealed things about ourselves of which we were not fully aware. For Donald Winnicott, as for many other psychoanalytic thinkers, the creative process is intrinsically self-developmental. Because both creativity and self-development, he suggests, take place in the 'potential space' between the person and the outside world – the 'intermediate area of experience' between inner and outer reality – in the creation of artwork the creative artist opens up the possibility of being transformed (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 13, 95–103).

Some literary critics also highlight the developmental or transformative potential of creative writing. For Bakhtin, the intrinsic 'heteroglossia' or 'multi-voicedness' of the novel allows the novelist to give space on the page to the many different voices of the self and to enter into a relationship with them on equal terms (Bakhtin, 1984). For Julia Kristeva, poetic language, because of its connection with the 'semiotic' – the pre-linguistic realm which manifests itself primarily through rhythm, sound and bodily feelings – has the potential for disrupting our tendency to become fixed in the 'symbolic', the realm of symbols, grammar and syntax (Kristeva, 1984b). In both these accounts, creative writing can help us to develop a more fluid and flexible relationship with ourselves, to become what Bakhtin calls 'polyphonic', able to give all the different voices of the self equal space; or what Kristeva calls a 'subject-in-process', whose identity isn't fixed but constantly developed and developing through experience (see Hunt, 2000, 2004a, 2004b; Sampson, 1998, 2004; and Hunt and Sampson, 1998).

To sum up, then, there is a creative tension, within the writing process, between action and reflection; between processes we understand and those of which we are less conscious. Yet, to return to our opening analogy of driving a car, once we've mastered the controls and have gained a degree of confidence in ourselves as drivers, the lessons we've learned should become part of the unconscious 'toolkit' in the background of our writing process.

Any discussion of creative writing as a reflexive practice must inevitably begin with a consideration of the concept of self. Thus the opening chapter sets out our thinking on this topic and provides a framework for the remaining chapters, which can be read in any

order. These chapters unpack aspects of selfhood, both on and off the page, although our focus remains the many ways to think about selves engaged in the writing process. In the first three chapters – ‘Voice’, ‘Authorship’, ‘Creativity’ – we look at *writing process* as the envelope in which certain versions of ourselves may be at work. Next – in ‘The Reader’ and ‘Characters and Selves’ – we see how *selves on the page* are staged through writing. Three further chapters, ‘Embodied Selves’, ‘Geography and Culture’ and ‘Memory and History’ examine how *the located self* limits, and creates opportunities within, what we write. We return to questions about the identity of the self who writes in our final chapter, which rethinks the problems of *essentialism* for writing identity. Our thinking in each chapter ends with exercises that can be used for extending and deepening thinking and writing practice, either alone or in a group context.

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