



On Metis

Or, What the Fox and Octopus taught me
about Practice Research

Simon Perril

ABSTRACT

The author aims to re-evaluate aspects of creative writing practice that sit “awkwardly” within the context of more analytical discourses in the Humanities. How can making be a form of knowing? He engages with the ideas of Calvino, Canetti, Carson, and Lessing to help identify what the unique “qualities” of writing as a method of thinking and knowing might be, before arguing for the validity of an ancient notion of “metis”. The central thesis is that what is at stake in “multimodality” is more than just technical adaptability, but the opportunity to conceptualise the kinds of versatility central to creative writing practice as a viable research methodology. The article suggests the multimodality of a writing practice might be predicated upon viewing creative practice as a vehicle of thought, a different way of knowing the world, rather than simply being the outcome of thinking done in advance.

Towards an Understanding of Making as Knowing

Creative writing is at an exciting stage in its ongoing development, and notions of “multimodality” provide an opportunity for thinking about the uniqueness of a practice discipline that so often sits, awkwardly, within a Humanities context. I declare from the outset that I approach this article as a teacher-practitioner, with over twenty years of University teaching experience, and many years of poetry publishing behind me. In the last few years particularly, I have come to an understanding that my poetry practice (both the research that informs it, and its medium as a distinct way of thinking and engaging) has led my critical writing (largely on contemporary vanguard poetry) and fed my creative writing teaching in surprising ways. Had I not spent a decade inside the writing of a trilogy of poetry collections examining the roots of lyric poetry in the fragments of Archilochus, I would not have discovered the ancient Greek notion of “metis”. This discovery has filtered into my teaching, becoming emblematic of the kinds of intelligence, and cunning, that characterise creative pursuit. Josie Barnard concludes her monograph on multimodality observing that “In a world in which multimodality is an everyday reality, creative flexibility has gained new importance” (Barnard 2019: 125). The notion of metis I pursue will take us further inside this “creative flexibility”. This formulation will also add to work by others, such as Palmeri (2012), who point to the multimodality of the human mind where “images, words, and kinaesthetic sensations mingle” (Barnard 2019: 72).

The awkwardness that interests me has much to do with the values and methodologies of creative writing feeling out of kilter with the analytical discourses of academic scholarship. We make things, in a climate in which other subjects analyse things. It is an awkwardness particularly highlighted in the research context of postgraduate studies, where our writers have to negotiate somewhat monolithic notions of “knowledge”, and what it might mean (for a PhD) to make an original contribution to it. Within this article, I want to argue for the validity of an ancient notion of intelligence, and different form of knowing, that seems closer to the methodology and experience of practice. My claim is that what is at stake in “multimodality” is more than just technical adaptability, but the opportunity to conceptualise the kinds of versatility central to creative practice. But before I arrive at this concept of “metis”, let us look a little closer at the nature of the awkwardness we face.

An Encounter with Awkwardness

There is an ancient heritage to the awkwardness I have described, that takes the form of an “Ancient Quarrel” between poetry and philosophy set up by Plato. The quarrel establishes a binary opposition between the supposed actuality, rationality and logic of Philosophy and the supposed unreliability of poetry as an intuitive and “mimetic” discourse. (I postpone tackling the issue of mimesis just yet but promise to step on that land-mine in due course). Robin Nelson notes that this influential opposition has resulted in a “binary rift between theory and practice in the Western Intellectual tradition since Plato” (Nelson 2013: 49). Poststructuralism has made us acutely aware of the hierarchical violence in all binary oppositions, and it barely needs stating that, at least within a Humanities context, theory carries the most “weight” (I use this figurative term advisedly, as we shall see). Webb and Brien playfully suggest that “[Plato’s] work has generated a mass of volumes on the question of whether, and what, art can contribute to knowledge ... where creative practitioners seem obliged to take sides, and to commit to either the madness of art or the cool thinking of philosophy” (Webb and Brien 2011: 190). This idea of taking sides is worth teasing at a little longer, as it takes us into territory that creative writing as a taught practice research discipline must tackle, and perhaps ultimately challenge: the reluctance writing students often feel towards “explaining” or “theorising” their practice. My MA module “Practising Ideas, Articulating Practice” is dedicated to both examining the reasons for this reluctance, and exploring the permission that more formally playful models of writing might grant writers in a bid to encourage them to rethink “reflection” as belonging to the energies of their creative work, rather than what might be caricatured as the taxidermy of interpretation. I open the module with a discussion of the following Tom Raworth poem:

University Days

This poem has been removed for further study

(Raworth 2003: 136)

It is obviously a playful piece, but that is exactly why it holds significance. Raworth was a UK poet who felt extreme reluctance to offer any explanation of his work, despite spending much of his time amongst North American poets who have made a singular contribution to poetics. In Raworth’s piece the

artefact, the poem, has been substituted for a display box, museum style, that no longer houses the object in question. The title gives us an academic context, and the visual element of the piece gives us a box that does not display, but states the object's removal, and the purpose of that removal. There are two questions to consider: what does "removal" mean? And why is "further study" a motive for it? These are questions I ask my students, and often the responses take us into familiar territory that re-enacts the tyranny of theory over practice, what they perceive as the killing of creative acts through analysis. We tease a little more over just what is being "killed" and through what means; as these ideas are important if we are to understand student reluctance to see the analytical as being anything other than separate from the primary act of creative writing. But the question I really want to ask is "what is the poem removed from?" Raworth's museum display case (in my reading) suggests that the poem has been removed from its own environment, because "study" takes place elsewhere. A museum gathers – contentiously, of course – different artefacts from different histories and cultures and relocates them in a new context. Often, for protection, the new habitat is the rarefied air of the display cabinet. One answer to the question of what the poem has been removed from, might be its natural state of being: its own living moment amidst the oxygen-rich page as an open field (a dominant trope in the New American Poetry of the 50s and 60s that Raworth's work was very aware of). What Raworth's poem does, is consolidate a sense that at the very least the action of a poem must stop for study to occur. And this is where the poem taps into relevant anxieties for students that the reflective apparatus of a commentary is not just alien to, but fatal to, the creative life of writing. Note how carefully Raworth's poem stresses that the removal is for *further* study; the adverb reinforcing the isolation of the box that contains it, and the perceived distance between *doing* and accounting for that action. If I have laboured this interpretation it is to demarcate two forms of the distance between practice and theory: the temporal, and the spatial. Raworth's poem has been removed from the time of its writing and placed in an alien space of interpretation (or been replaced by that space, even). For the multimodality of a writing practice to be more than just a call for an ability to move across different technological forms and platforms, it is necessary to think of the multi-temporality of writing: the unique labour that goes into creating, and revising, what the reader must experience as a live, present, unfolding moment. The

distance that Raworth's poem playfully articulates is necessary to attend to if we are to begin to articulate an answer to the unique epistemological quandary of creative writing practice research: how can making be an act of knowing? And does "knowing" what we have made really damage what we have done? I want to claim that awkwardness can also be anticipatory, and a part of the experience of practice; just as Barnard uses Turchi's sense of artistic creation as a "voyage into the unknown" that can "recalibrate trepidation as excitement" (Barnard 2019: 124).

The Glimpse

Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" caused a polemical stir when published in the 1960s and is still useful for creative writing for several reasons. The title might align it with Raworth's poem in terms of suspicions over the dominance of the analytical in accounts of the "creative"; but both pieces tease away at an important value that creative writing must privilege if it is to account for its uniqueness: the experiential realm. Sontag drives a wedge between the earliest "*experience* of art" (that she claims must have been ritualistic in purpose, "incantatory and magical") and the impulse to justify its value through theorising it (Sontag 2009: 3). She sees the latter impulse as ushering in an unhelpful separation (and fetishization) of content as the primary element, over that of form now regarded as simply an accessory. Even though she sees the Greek theory of mimesis – the vision of art's value being in its representation of reality – as the problematic origins of such separation, she does stress that the separation occurs however wide our sense of mimesis has become since ancient Greece: "Whether we conceive of the work of art on the model of a picture (art as picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first" (Sontag 2009: 4). Noticing this is significant for creative writing in a research context, as one of the challenges of practice research is to precisely articulate a creative project in terms of the "research questions" it is asking. In so many respects this model of PhD formulation grates against the practice of writing students. The articulation of such questions demarcates one of the levels of "removal" for further study that Raworth's poem deplores. And yet I want to argue that the necessary articulation of practice involves re-approaching how we practise ideas in writing; and thinking through the unique processes by which creative writing digests ideas into experience. There is much in Sontag that we do not need – the "high art" bias, the digs at the American novel – but much

that still serves us well in the different context of understanding creative writing as practice research. The essay is framed by an epigraph from Abstract Expressionist painter Willem De Kooning: “Content is the glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash” (Sontag 2009: 2). This repays consideration for a couple of reasons: a glimpse is both a temporary and temporal sighting, and an encounter is an unexpected experience. These two realms, the temporal, and the experiential, are crucial aspects of creative writing practice I will return to. And they are exactly the qualities of practice research that risk being removed by further study if notions of further study (or the discourse and structures they are couched in) are not nimble enough to address them. Webb and Brien articulate some of the concerns:

The problem ... is that the research orientations of creative writing and the Humanities disciplines have little in common. As Paul Carter points out, what the makers of artworks do is productively reflect on the creative thinking that created their works, integrating this usually unarticulated knowledge with the craft “wisdom” of the artist to retrieve the “intellectual work that usually goes missing in translation” during the process of making works of art

(Webb and Brien 2011: 87).

This notion of “unarticulated” knowledge is certainly suggestive, and elements of my thoughts on the temporal and experiential realms can be subsumed under just such a banner, just as the “missing in translation” idea certainly chimes with Raworth’s “removal”, and Sontag’s howl against interpretation. Yet where I would quibble with Webb, Brien, and Carter’s account of the problem, is that they assume a separation between the thinking and the creative work, the former being described as the “creative thinking that created their works.” I want to argue that the multimodality of a writing practice might be predicated upon viewing creative practice as a vehicle of thought, a different way of knowing the world, rather than simply being the outcome of thinking done in advance. Furthering practice research means exploring what kinds of thought-vehicles novels, poems, and scripts are; and how inseparable the choice of form might be for the criticality of an individual project to emerge. Sontag maintains that “interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted”, and she is at her most

useful for creative writing when she concludes her polemic by saying “the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*” (Sontag 2009: 14). Creative writing needs to restore to prominence its unique status as a sensory experience that is simultaneously an act of thinking. Indeed, Barnard introduces the importance of “self-trust” as being a central aspect of the multimodal writer involved in “something” emerging. She quotes Brande’s phrase “flashes of insight” – an idea that sits easily amongst Sontag and De Kooning’s notion of the “glimpse” (Barnard 2019: 76). But Barnard is quick to avoid the mystifications of “inspiration” and “gut instinct”, and instead reaches for Melrose’s conception of “expert intuition”. The advantage of Melrose’s term lies in the forward-facing rhythm of making. As she puts it “Melrose says expert intuition allows ‘something’ (in the making) to ‘feel right’, on the basis of which ‘new possibilities’ can be acted upon” (Barnard 2019: 77). Notions of “expert intuition” certainly draw in the sensory and the somatic as being important dimensions of practice.

Epistemological Erotics

The final statement in Sontag’s essay, left as a single line solely occupying the tenth section, contains the enigmatic formulation “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (Sontag 2009: 14). By “erotics” she doubtless makes a call for the recognition of the sensory dimensions of art, and emphasises that such dimensions make it foremost an *experience* rather than an explanation. It is Anne Carson, in her marvellous study *Eros The Bittersweet*, who provides a necessary link between acknowledging the experiential nature of creative practice, and the degree to which making can be figured as a form of knowing. Her title refers to her argument that Eros, the divinity of desire, consistently appears in the poetry, drama, and philosophy of Antiquity as causing an emotional paradox: the “bittersweet” coexistence of love and hate within erotic experience. The tropes she teases from sources as varied as Sappho, Archilochus, Sophokles and Plato, involve moments where “boundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded “(10); where “all human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies” (p.11). Her virtuoso reading of Sappho’s Fragment 31 discusses desire as a tripartite structure, a triangular phenomenon:

For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure (Carson 2009: 16-17).

What attracts in this account of erotics, is its sense of eros as action and motion, and that the “third component”, the obstacle between lover and beloved, is a paradoxical force that simultaneously “connects and separates”, and thereby renders the triangle “three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship”. I will return to notions of transformation later. For the moment I want to pursue Carson’s ideas on how the activity of desire might relate to knowledge. Just after the above quotation, Carson concludes: “Eros is a verb”, and this realisation drives her to go on later to explain “its action is to reach, and the reach of desire involves every lover in an activity of the imagination” (Carson 2009: 63). It is also an activity that Carson associates with “subterfuge”. Eros promotes what she later describes as a perceptual “stereoscopy” - wherein the actual and the possible co-exist. This co-existence, “to know both, keeping the difference visible”, is what she figures as “the subterfuge called eros” (Carson 2009: 69). Subterfuge is so central to creative writing, and is one reason why the experiential values of poems, scripts, novels need reasserting if we are to learn to articulate how making can be a form of knowing. The deception of art is a reason for Plato banishing poets from the Republic: it is a perceptual deception, as an audience is somatically and psychologically possessed by the experience generated by encountering creative practice. For Plato, the danger is that it is not a real experience, though it persuades us it *feels* like one. One of the challenges in creative writing pedagogy is to get student writers to understand that their job as writers is to deliver an experience to the reader; and

that the reader has the burden of explication. The humanities culture of interpretation does often tempt them into stepping into their work to explain it to the reader from inside a story or poem. In so doing, they break the spell they are casting. The digital realm of New Media has re-equipped us with the concept of “immersion”: in fact, this is not a novelty of gaming or hypertext, or other online forms that court interaction. Put simply, it is a core aspect of the uniqueness of creative writing: the writer’s work is to generate a simulation of situation, to create an immersive experience through craft. I say this nakedly here, as realising this fundamental point will help articulate how making can be figured as an act of knowing the world differently.

Carson’s discussion of eros is most relevant to creative writing as practice research because she explores “some resemblance between the way Eros acts in the mind of a lover and the way knowing acts in the mind of a thinker” (Carson 2009: 70). Again, what motivates her interest in this resemblance is somatic and immersive: how “falling in love and coming to know, make me feel genuinely alive” (Carson 2009: 70), and “have at their core the same delight, that of reaching, and entail the same pain, that of falling short or being deficient” (71). Edges are especially important in Carson’s book, and it is precisely her sense that knowledge is, like Eros, a verb, that makes her account of it of such relevance more broadly to creative writing as practice research. Within the academy, the linearity of “learning outcomes” and the strictures of making “an original contribution to knowledge” threaten to ossify the *process* of knowing into knowledge as reductive noun, an assessable commodity. It is refreshing to read an account of knowing that makes it simultaneously an encounter with adventure, and limits:

Stationed at the edge of itself, or of its present knowledge, the thinking mind launches a suit for understanding into the unknown. So too the wooer stands at the edge of his value as a person and asserts a claim across the boundaries of another. Both mind and wooer reach out from what is known and actual to something different, possibly better, desired. Something else. Think about what that feels like (Carson 2009: 71).

Carson may have in mind a legal “suit”, a petition.

But my gloss on the thinking mind launching a suit connects to something I regard as an essential ingredient in articulating practice research: the form – poem, script, novel – we choose as writers for a given project is a space suit that enables us to breathe in the new environment of a project we don't yet fully understand. In fact, I would want to view the form even more as a vehicle in which we venture out from the edge of the known. This seems in keeping with observations Carson makes towards the end of her book, when the space that both conjoins and separates is more fully realised:

In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. To reach across it is tricky ... the same subterfuge which we have called an "erotic ruse" in novels and poems now appear to constitute the very structure of human thinking. When the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens and a necessary fiction transpires (Carson 2009:171).

Notions of the necessary fictions that generate an erotic space of provisional and adventurous knowing, necessitate returning to what is unique to creative writing as a practice research discipline. Part of this erotic charge of opening a sensory space of risk, is captured in Barnard's formulation of "trespass". For her, the thrill of multimodality is the push it gives the writer: "you feel you are trespassing, this tends to come with a sense of trepidation which serves to keep the senses alert. If you feel that you are outside your area of expertise, this can enable a fresh perspective". It has the transgressive element "that we are in places where we shouldn't be. We can easily feel ill-equipped and/or under-qualified." Multimodality relates to how "writing has always been a mix of premeditated searching and undisciplined, perhaps only partly conscious rambling, over fences, through gaps in walls". Awkwardness is re-purposed as adventure as she quotes Turchi's vision of "assertive action in the face of uncertain assumptions, often involving false starts, missteps, and surprises" (Barnard 2019: 124).

On Lightness

At the outset I remarked that there is an awkwardness – felt as a clash of values – in figuring creative writing as a practice research discipline

within a Humanities context. Part of the issue is that notions of scholastic weight that often determine the perceived depth and quality of academic work, and seem shorthand for an "original contribution to knowledge", seem out of step with creative writing practice and craft priorities. The research done for, *and by*, creative projects is done differently, and displayed differently. Thinking about Calvino's last work will help establish how and why. At the end of his life, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino planned to give a series of lectures devoted to "certain values, qualities, or peculiarities" he regarded as "things that only literature can give us" (Calvino 2016: 1). So, his concerns were to articulate some of the unique values of a writing practice. The results were eventually published as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, even though only five ended up being written. What is particularly rich in these *Memos*, is a sense that for Calvino this was never just going to be about craft, it was always inextricably bound to a commitment to writing as an act of thinking, stories and poems as vehicles of thought, practice as a way of knowing the world differently. The first of these creative idiosyncrasies is the quality, and value, of "lightness". For Calvino, this quality is a necessary response to a threat: that the pressure to directly engage with the circumstances of one's socio-historical moment, one's time, might somehow paralyze a writer. He explains:

when I began my career, the categorical imperative of every young writer was to represent his own time. Full of good intentions, I tried to identify myself with the ruthless energies propelling the events of our century, both collective and individual. I tried to find some harmony between the adventurous, picaresque inner rhythm that prompted me to write and the frantic spectacle of the world, sometimes dramatic, sometimes grotesque. Soon I became aware that between the facts of life that should have been my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross. Maybe I was only then becoming aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world – qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them (Calvino 2016: 4).

Calvino's observations have much to offer debates

within creative writing practice research. In the above lines we step on from Sontag's suspicions over the dominance of notions of "content" that freeze accounts of creative endeavour into interpretation. Instead, the issue concerns how writing might hold its content, engage with the world, but hold this content and comment evasively. Evasion is not the same as avoidance, it is a creative strategy that has more in common with the sense of the profound subterfuge that Carson identifies as the motor for desire; and is a further step towards the concept of metis we will come to in due course. Calvino steps into myth to further his account of lightness. If the "frantic spectacle of the world" can overwhelm, it needs approaching indirectly; as Perseus despatches the Gorgon through stealth:

The myth [of Perseus and the Gorgon] is telling us something, something implicit in the images that can't be explained in any other way ... Perseus's strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden (Calvino 2016: 4).

The myth communicates through images, and Calvino's relevance is his insistence that the content "can't be explained in any other way": the primary quality in writing is its necessary digestion of ideas into image, situation, experience. Perseus accepts the challenge of engaging with reality, but carries it differently. The myth becomes Calvino's "allegory on the poet's relationship to the world, a lesson to follow when writing", because "to cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror" (Calvino 2016: 4). The allegory is just as significant within a practice research context: our writing students need to digest the "weight" of their research materials into the "lightness" of practice. Calvino speaks of how lightness is both a tactic for engagement with the potentially petrifying weight and complexity of the modern world, but simultaneously a craft challenge. He recounts his emerging sense that across forty years of creative work he has increasingly "tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories

and from language" (Calvino 2016: 3). So much of the craft our writing students need to understand involves trusting what they *don't* need to say, for writing is movement, and approaching their materials too directly, and too fully, weighs down fiction, poetry, scripts with inertia. But there is one further quality to lightness to attend to. Calvino makes much of a particular act of Perseus: after decapitating the Gorgon, he places it face down in a soft bed of leaves and plants. Calvino says:

I think that the lightness, of which Perseus is the hero, could not be better represented than by this gesture of refreshing courtesy toward a being so monstrous and terrifying yet at the same time somehow fragile and perishable (Calvino 2016: 6).

There is so much to learn from, here, about the ethics of writing. Our bid to engage with the multiple horrors of the modern world, the weight of living, can curdle our practice into diatribe and didacticism. The lightness Calvino proposes is grounded in humility, a "refreshing courtesy" towards the monstrous. If writing is a thinking practice, a valid method of knowing, it needs to be thoughtful in its approach to even the darkest of materials, to understand as well as condemn the capacity for inhumanity:

Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification (Calvino 2016: 7).

Lessing, Lies, and Laocoön: On Vehicles and Temporality

Perseus doesn't fly unaided. The result of the slaying of the Gorgon is the birth of Pegasus generated from Medusa's blood. The mythical winged horse reminds us that lightness as a quality is in service of a vision of writing as a vehicle of thought, a way of knowing, that *moves*. Raworth's poem wittily captures a sense of what so often gets removed from accounts of writing: its uniqueness as a temporal realm. In a document central to German Romanticism, Gottfried Lessing wrote a long discourse upon why

writing differs from painting. He starts with an assertion of writing and painting's common interests in deception: "Both ... present to us appearance as reality, absent things as present; both deceive, and the deceit of either is pleasing" (Lessing 2003: 25). Now is the moment to fully step on the landmine of mimesis. Practice is an *activity*, not a *theory*. Articulating practice means "capturing" properties unique to writing and its processes. The influential idea of mimesis tackles the degree to which the function of art [let us use the term broadly first] is to imitate or model nature. Already the ground underfoot starts to get tricky, as to imitate something suggests generating a copy of that thing, as Albright summarises: "in a mimetic theory of art, the work is only a copy, a contingency, not a freestanding exultant thing: it must always lean for support on the entity in the world of experience on which it is modelled" (Albright 1999: 85). But an imitation that relies upon an external model of something, is one thing: a work that models how we *experience* the model, that is to say a work that replicates the sensory processes of coming to know the model, is something else again. Lessing's Nineteenth century article remains revelatory for creative writing because in its attention to this "something else" it forces us to come to terms with how writing might be figured as constituting an experience for the reader, rather than merely replicating one.

Lessing's focus is the mutual interest in, but different tackling of, the figure of Laocoön. The Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons are strangled to death by serpents because of Laocoön's resistance to the guile of the Trojan Horse. Lessing is fascinated by how the treatment of this incident in book two of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and its rendering in Classical sculpture, differ. Lessing's essay does more than provide a nuanced study of the difference between verbal and visual representation; it offers a discussion of the craft of "capturing" emotion in writing. Lessing is arguing with art historian Winckelmann: both agree that the pain captured in the sculpture is not as violent as that rendered in the writing – but not on why that is the case. Lessing's point is that art and writing are acting under different limitations. As he explains: "... the artist is obliged to set bounds to expression and never to choose for it the supreme moment of an action ... the material limits of Art confine her imitative effort to one single moment" (Lessing 2003: 36). The difference, put simply, is that visual art is spatial: it captures a moment, and consequently the artist must make a decision as to

which moment it freezes to render the emotional content most effectively. Does the visual artist's powerful sculpture render Laocoön's pain as a scream or as a sigh? Lessing gives the question much thought, and suggests that it involves making careful decisions not just as to which moment to select, but to think through how that stage of moment chosen will need to factor in the viewer's contribution to it:

Now that alone is significant and fruitful which gives free play to the imagination. The more we see, the more must we be able to add by thinking. The more we add thereto by thinking, so much the more can we believe ourselves to see. In the whole gamut of an emotion, however, there is no moment less advantageous than its topmost note. Beyond it there is nothing further, and to show us the uttermost is to tie the wings of fancy and compel her, as she cannot rise above the sensuous impression, to busy herself with weaker pictures below it, the visible fullness of expression acting as a frontier which she dares not transgress. When, therefore, Laocoön sighs, the imagination can hear him shriek; but if he shrieks, then she cannot mount a step higher from this representation, nor again, descend a step lower without seeing him in a more tolerable and consequently more uninteresting condition. She hears him only grown, or she sees him already dead (Lessing 2003: 37).

Even though Lessing has yet to reach his conclusions on writing, there is much in the lines above relevant to creative writing as a taught discipline. Lessing does what writing students often fail to do enough: factor in the audience as contributing to the experience they are also partaking of. His point is that the audience are active, and will add to the work. If the artist captures Laocoön sighing, the imaginations of the audience will amplify this to a scream. But Lessing's point about writing is that it is not bound by the single moment: it unfolds in time: "nothing requires the poet to concentrate his picture on one single moment. He takes up each of his actions, as he likes, from its very origin and conducts it through all possible modifications to its final close" (Lessing 2003: 39). Writers can take much from the realisation that emotion is visible to the reader's imagination, and not just visible on the page. And yet creative

writing can take most from his conviction that “succession in time is the sphere of the poet [writer], as space is that of the painter” (Lessing 2003: 92). A painter shows us “fully arisen, what in the poet [writer] we see arising” (Lessing 2003: 82). The emphasis is on the primacy of temporal process in writing, succession and sequentiality:

Yet all bodies exist not in space alone, but also in time. They continue, and may appear differently at every moment and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and combinations is the effect of one preceding and can be the cause of one following, and accordingly be likewise the central point of an action (Lessing 2003: 81).

Lessing’s essay gives us the temporal impetus of creative writing; that a poem, story, script is tasked with choreographing that most delicate of temporal quandaries: the unfolding experience of a moment itself in motion. Writing simulates what it feels like to inhabit a situation: it both holds this moment, and yet lets it develop in time. This cunning deception, this temporal sleight of hand, is captured in *metis*.

Keepers of Metamorphosis

An essential part of a multimodal writing practice must be to recognise and work with the movement *across*: to account for, and celebrate, that as creative writers we are liminal, on the edge of different disciplines we need to research for a project to work, somehow choreographing the synaptic energies of emerging ideas; always caught between the impetus to plan and structure, and the play of improvisation. Dianne Donnelly reminds us that “Knowledge then, in creative writing, can be tacit, emergent, empirical, experiential, aesthetic and sensory – and certainly this list is not inclusive” (Donnelly 2013: 123). In 1976, Elias Canetti gave a speech in Munich called “The Writer’s Profession” that holds much of interest concerning the knowledge writing exercises, the means through which it does so, and the corollary doubts that are an essential component of the practice of being a writer. As he pithily states the matter – even if problematically occupying the generic pronoun – “no man today can be a writer, a *Dichter*, if he does not seriously doubt his right to be one” (Canetti 1987: 158). At the centre of this speech about the responsibilities of the writer, is his

discovery of an anonymous jotting a week before the outbreak of WWII, that says: “But everything is over. If I were really a writer, I would have to be able to prevent the war” (Canetti 1987: 159). Canetti teases over differing responses to this statement; from its potentially monomaniacal presumption of the power of writing (akin to the “bombast of those whose sentences deliberately brought the war”), to “the very opposite of blustering, namely an admission of complete failure” (Canetti 1987: 159). What it means to have a responsibility to, and for, words is a concern that underpins both these poles; and was doubtless a concern sharpened by the experience of WWII, as a German-language author, born in Bulgaria, who moved to England after the Anschluss to avoid Nazi persecution. Wrestling further with a sense of what it means to earn the title *Dichter* (Writer, Poet), and to arrive at a sense of from what the writer’s profession should be constituted, takes Canetti into suggestive realms. There is doubtless a focus upon “mankind’s literary heritage” that in some ways seems problematic and dated. But the argument that emerges from his speech does take us into an essential aspect of the multimodality of a writing practice: the importance of the experience of, and positive attitude towards, change. The writer, for Canetti, should be “the keeper of metamorphoses” (Canetti 1987: 161); both in the sense of upholding its heritage, and making it their own. I am less interested in arguments about tradition than I am in getting to the specific qualities that Canetti – like Calvino’s “quality” of “lightness” – finds unique to writing practice. If his examples are predictable – Ovid’s mythological paeon to change, *The Odyssey*’s focus upon the “adventurous” transformations of its hero, the exploits in the epic of Gilgamesh – the conclusions he draws from them, are less so. He offers himself as witness to “an almost incredible process” whereby the Mesopotamian epic that is 4000 years old, and was only discovered one hundred years before Canetti is writing, “has so decisively determined my life” (162). He dwells less on the concrete details of this impact, but instead unfolds a vision of the significance of being a keeper of metamorphoses. What emerges touches upon the ethical dimensions of “thoughtfulness” we met in Calvino, and is a further example of a different way of knowing unique to writing. In the process of admitting that his choice of term “metamorphosis” is demanding, he claims he prefers it to “empathy” even whilst it is a comparable imaginative process, a “never ending practice”. He describes it as where he sees the essence of the real profession of the

Dichter, in the “compelling experience of all sorts of human beings, all, but particularly those who are paid the least attention” (Canetti 1987: 164). This latter qualification is significant: the writer’s profession is one of changing into, and exploring, the experience of others; with a responsibility towards making sure such acts of metamorphosis are acts of coming to know, and articulate, the conditions of the marginalised. For Canetti, metamorphosis is an empathetic practice born of “passion”, and explicitly figured as a kind of knowledge:

Since he opens himself up to the most disparate people at once, understanding them in an ancient, pre-scholarly way, namely through metamorphosis, since he is thereby in a constant internal motion, which he cannot weaken or terminate (for he does not gather people, he does not put them side by side in an orderly fashion, he merely encounters them and absorbs them alive), since he receives violent pushes from people, it is quite possible that the sudden turn to a new branch of knowledge is also determined by such encounters (Canetti 1987: 165).

There are issues here that would require a further article to explore properly, concerning the ethics of appropriating the experience of others. It is the subject of a nuanced article interviewing eleven novelists that appeared in the *Guardian* in 2016 (Forna et al, 2016). Canvassed on the issue of cultural appropriation, the responses offer rich insight around the age-old creative writing adage of whether authors should be restricted to write “what they know”. Hari Kunzru’s response explicitly aligns with Canetti’s when he argues that “trespassing into otherness is a foundation of the novelist’s work”; and goes as far as to assert that “attempting to think one’s way into other subjectivities, other experiences, is an act of ethical urgency”. Aminatta Forna explains – in ways that reinforce my focus upon creative writing as an act of thinking - how she advises her students “Don’t write what you know, but what you want to understand” (Forna et al, 2016). The *Guardian* article is underpinned by tempering the justifiable transgression of the writer’s imaginative knowing of others with two important elements: humility and research. The strapline for the article is “should there be boundaries on what a novelist should write about?” It is this explicit focus upon boundaries, and implicit question of knowledge that makes

Canetti’s speech so relevant for practice research and multimodality. The emerging idea here is of creative writing as a branch of knowledge that is based upon understanding human experience from within, in its constant motions, through *inhabiting* its human circumstances. Canetti regards the “gift” of metamorphosis as “doomed to atrophy”, in need of preservation. Notions of “gift” are easily misconstrued as evidence of a Romantic cult of genius, so it is worth stressing that Canetti’s sense of metamorphosis is driven by a need to “keep the accesses between people open” (Canetti 1987: 163). As such, it speaks more to the multimodality of “moving across”. A writer:

should be able to become anybody and everybody, even the smallest, the most naïve, the most powerless person. His desire for experiencing others from the inside should never be determined by the goals of which our normal, virtually official life consists: that desire has to be totally free of any aim at success or prestige, it has to be passion in itself, the passion of metamorphosis (Canetti 1987: 163).

Experiencing from the “inside” is something unique for practice research to articulate as a value. To reduce notions of knowledge simply to outcomes-observable-at-a-scholarly-distance, is to lose sight of the experiential dimensions of both the making and receiving of art. And the promise of multimodality lies in its suggestion that a writing practice is itself a vehicle for thinking, and knowing, the world differently. Notice that Canetti’s lines above are keen to separate a sense of the writer’s “profession” from the “goals of which our normal, virtually official life consists”, and that this includes “any aim at success or prestige”. Multimodality has an important part to play in establishing, and helping students articulate, the practical employability skills they are habitually using; but it must reach further and allow for the values of a writing practice that will always be more than just monetary. Canetti figures this less in terms of quasi-religious vocation, and more as “an inexplicable hunger”, “nourished by compassion”, and “worthless if it is proclaimed as an indefinite and universal feeling”. Metamorphosis can only be specific, must “remain sensorily divided into all its individual phenomenal forms” (Canetti 1987: 167). But if this is the case, then creative writing practice research needs that most paradoxical

entity: a concept that accounts for the concreteness and individuality of practice, its uniquely temporal nature, its experiential qualities, and yet be pragmatic enough in its conception of knowledge to value the provisional and the contingent. This is where, and why, we finally reach metis.

On Metis

In 1978, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant published a book that had taken them a decade, and opens with an admission that encompasses much of the experience of a PhD in creative writing:

as long as the enquiry is in progress one is pushed in one direction after another so that it is not possible to see clearly the way it is taking you or where it is leading ... Each time we thought we were on the point of coming to an end the frontiers of the domain which we were attempting to explore receded before us (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 1).

And after this decade, they could neither confess to having exhausted their topic, nor adequately anchor it as a contribution to a specific discipline, nor articulate how it was achieved through a specific methodology. Its heterogeneity has the radical specificity that Canetti associates with metamorphosis, as it seeks out:

a single attitude of mind, a single image relating to how the Greeks represented a particular kind of intelligence at grips with objects which must be dominated by cunning if success is to be won in the most diverse fields of action. We have been obliged to find different methods of approach, to collate different viewpoints and perspectives, to suit the different cases considered (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 1).

The book is titled *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, and it gives a name to this topic, metis. The authors regard metis as a “mental category” rather than a “concept”, claiming that their study is not so much a history of ideas but an account of the presence of this category everywhere in Greek culture and society, even when it is never theoretically defined. Metis is the name of a female deity, but also a particular type of intelligence that Detienne and Vernant refer to as “an informed

prudence” (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 11):

Metis is a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact or rigorous logic (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 3-4).

Metis is so poignant a category because it enables us to preserve exactly the awkwardness we have noted in trying to account for the idiosyncrasies of creative writing as practice research by articulating such elements as specific qualities. The list contained in the quote above manages to encompass skills that we might want multimodality to contain as “transferable” – vigilance, resourcefulness, opportunism – as well as capturing the mind-set needed for wielding them. But metis also relates to multimodality as Barnard defines it as the ability to “feel and then remain at home” in a digital world that is “a shifting mix of words, images and sounds” (Barnard 2019: 121).

Multimodality should be akin to the kinds of intelligence that Detienne and Vernant suggest metis is uniquely capable of negotiating:

In order to dominate a changing situation, full of contrasts, it must become even more supple, even more shifting, more polymorphic than the flow of time; it must adapt itself constantly to events as they succeed each other and be pliable enough to accommodate the unexpected so as to implement the plan in mind more successfully (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 20).

This acknowledgement of flux and the need for creative strategies to engage with it, returns us to some of the values creative writing practice research needs to celebrate as aspects of its heterogeneous methodologies: Raworth and Sontag’s suspicions over the primacy given to interpretation, Canetti’s

devotion to metamorphosis, Calvino's dedication to lightness, and Carson's formulation of eros as a form of knowing replete with subterfuge. As Detienne and Vernant have it:

[Metis's] field of application is the world of movement, of multiplicity, and of ambiguity. It bears upon all fluid situations which are constantly changing and which at every moment combine contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other ...

Victory over a shifting reality whose continuous metamorphoses make it almost impossible to grasp, can only be won through an even greater power of transformation (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 20).

Metis holds something for us that multimodality certainly needs to contain: a reminder of the sheer craftiness of craft. Metis reminds us that craft is not just a set of isolated skills, but the moving parts of writing as a method of thinking the world differently: a mental, speculative agility that can keep pace with ideas as they unfold, mutate, transform, through the creative environment of a poem, story, script as a "live" situation. And Detienne and Vernant point to two creatures who the Greeks regarded as embodiments of metis: the fox and the octopus. The fox retains its ancient association with cunning even now, but the ancients were particularly impressed by the extent of its repertoire of trickery. The fox plays dead to catch prey, an act of simulation that mimics the writer's setting-in-motion of situations to catch an idea. Foxes build lairs underground in which they hatch their plots, safe within a complex of multiple tunnels and exit strategies. They are artful, elusive, creatures capable of reversing their tracks to outwit their hunters. Detienne and Vernant see its capacity to double-back as being metis's masterstroke: "The fox, being the embodiment of cunning, can only behave as befits the nature of an intelligence full of wiles. If it turns back on itself it is because it is, itself as it were, metis, the power of reversal" (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 37). The folklore and fables surrounding the fox add the all-important element of mental guile to the wiles: the ability to use words to outwit an opponent. Aesop's fable of the fox and leopard has the latter's taunt of owning an unmatched smart coat returned with vulpine wit: "your coat may be smart, but my wits are smarter still." The Greek puns further as the word for smart

is *poikilos*, a prized ancient concept of perceptual disturbance that celebrates all manner of shimmer and iridescence from the gleam of bronze armour in sunlight to the throat of the Wryneck, and the scales of the snake. The fox's smartness is in having a mottled mind.

It is significant that metis's other animal embodiment is the octopus, whose type of intelligence can also be found relevant in the realms of speech and action inhabited by figures in the ancient world as diverse as the sophist and the politician. The octopus gives us the polymorphous nature of creative writing practice, its restless reach:

While the fox is as supple and as slim as a lasso, the octopus reaches out in all directions through its countless, flexible and undulating limbs. To the Greeks, the octopus is a knot made up of a thousand arms, a living, interlacing, network (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 37).

And yet the octopus is also another figure for the play of writing, its subterfuge, its transformations. It can "merge with the stone to which it clings", can "take the shape of the bodies to which it clings perfectly", but it can also "imitate the colour of the creatures and things which it approaches" (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 38), in ways that take us back to Canetti. The finest trick of cephalopods takes us even closer to writing: the ability to cover its tracks by secreting ink. Metis allows creative writing to celebrate all manner of "sleights of hand ... resourceful ploys and its stratagems", methodologies that are "usually thrust into the shadows, erased from the realm of true knowledge" (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 4).

To conclude, attending to the category of metis offers the discipline of creative writing the confidence to fight for its unique contribution to both research culture and employability, whilst also providing notions of multimodality with a vital underpinning. That underpinning is an expansion of notions of craft, or a re-pinning of them, to the craftiness of writing as a valid method of thinking and knowing the world differently. It may chafe against a pedagogical culture steeped in the linearity and measurement of learning outcomes, but metis allows us to reclaim a vision of making as knowing. Along the way, it becomes beholden upon each of us to think through why the specific form, or genre, or

sub-genre, we choose to work in is the right specific vehicle for the journey we undertake. If writing is an experiential practising of ideas, we should be having more fun and confidence as a discipline in articulating the idiosyncrasies of our practice.

References

- Albright, D. (1999) "Untwisting the Serpent. Recasting Laocoön for Modernist Comparative Arts" in W. Bernhart, S. Scher, W. Wolf (eds.) *Word and Music Studies: Defining the Field*. Proceedings of the First International Conference on Word and Music Studies at Graz, 1997. Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Barnard, J. (2019) *The Multimodal Writer: Creative Writing across Genres and Media*. London: Bloomsbury/Red Globe.
- Canetti, E. (1987) *The Conscience of Words & Earwitness*. TJ. Neugroschel (trans.) London: Picador.
- Carson, A. (2009) *Eros the Bittersweet*. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive.
- Calvino, I. (2016) *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. G. Brock (trans.) London: Penguin.
- Donnelly, D. (2013), "Creative Writing Knowledge" In D. Donnelly, G. Harper (eds.) *Key Issues in Creative Writing*. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- Fornal, A. (2016) with Hensher, P. Kennedy, A. L. Kunzru, H. Shamsie, K. et al. "Whose life is it anyway? Novelists have their say on cultural appropriation" in *The Guardian* October 1st . <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/01/novelists-cultural-appropriation-literature-lionel-shriver>
- Lessing, G. (1766), "Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry" in, J. M. Bernstein (ed.) (2003) *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Melrose, S. (2006) 'Bodies without bodies' in S. Broadhurst & J. Machon (eds), *Performance and technology: Practices of virtual embodiment and interactivity* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–17.
- Nelson, R. (2013) *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Palmeri, J. (2012) *Remixing Composition: A History Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press.
- Perril, S. (2013) *Archilochus on the Moon*. Bristol: Shearsman Books.
- Perril, S. (2015) *Beneath: a Nekyiad*. Bristol: Shearsman Books.
- Perril, S. (2020) *The Slip*. Bristol: Shearsman Books.
- Raworth, T. (2003) *Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.
- Sontag, S. (2009) *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. London: Penguin.
- Detienne, M., Vernant, J-P. (1991) *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Webb, J., and Lee Brien, D. (2011), "Addressing the 'Ancient Quarrel': Creative Writing as Research" In Briggs, M., Karlson, H. eds. (2011) *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. London: Routledge.

About the Author

Simon Perril's poetry publications include *The Slip* (Shearsman 2020) *In the Final Year of My 40s* (Shearsman 2018), *Beneath* (Shearsman 2015) *Archilochus on the Moon* (Shearsman 2013), *Newton's Splinter* (Open House 2012), *Nitrate* (Salt 2010), *A Clutch of Odes* (Oystercatcher 2009), and *Hearing is Itself Suddenly a Kind of Singing* (Salt 2004). He has also published in Magazines such as P.N. Review, Jacket, Poetry Wales, Shearsman, Tears in the Fence and Angel Exhaust. As a critic he has written widely on contemporary poetry, editing the books *The Salt Companion to John James*, and *Tending the Vortex: The Works of Brian Catling* and contributed many books chapters for CUP, Palgrave, Blackwells and others. He is Professor of Poetic Practice at De Montfort University, Leicester.