

Articles

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Managing hysteria

Managing hysteria: Exploring the writer's voice through verbatim work

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Abstract

Verbatim work places a premium on the invisibility of the artist. This is in tension to Neo-Romantic conceptions of the ‘writer’s voice’, often characterized as the expression of the sovereign individual. Such a tension raises the question of to what extent an expression of self is desirable and what we can learn about artistic voice in verbatim work. This article discusses such questions through the lens of a commission to creatively respond to the National Archive’s material on mental health. This resulted in a piece of ‘contrapuntal radio’ that dramatized the voices of militant suffragettes (c. 1907–14). By consideration of the process of production, the article will argue that often, considerations of *self-expression* (where the artist is a unique voice transmitting their individuality), threatens a more productive *self-expression*, where an artist is a disinterested expresser of human feeling.

Keywords

voice

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Introduction

In his guide, *A Short Story Writer’s Companion* (2001) Ian Bailey offers prospective writers the view that ‘each of us has a voice, as individual as Faulkner’s or Morrison’s, Jewitt’s or Abbey’s’ (Bailey 2001: 104). He continues: ‘[t]he struggle of becoming a

writer is the work that goes in to figuring out how to render our very own particular and unmistakable way of looking into words' (Bailey 2001: 105–06). Such opinions about the nature of voice are common within creative writing (CW) literature and are mirrored elsewhere. Alvarez for example goes as far as to claim that, 'for a writer, voice is a problem that never lets you go [...] a writer doesn't properly begin until he has a voice of his own' (Alvarez 2006: 9). Additionally, many CW handbooks and guides give space to the concept of voice and its importance (Anderson 2005; Earnshaw 2007; Morley 2007; Neale 2009). Claims such as these are frequently directed towards students as well as experienced writers and reveal important things about contemporary conceptions of creativity and the artist.

It is though important to acknowledge that the concept of 'voice', like the concept of 'genius' or even 'artist' occurs within particular historical and social contexts. If, for example, we consider that early-modern attitudes to the recycling of plots and even speeches from other works would constitute 'plagiarism'^[1] today, or that a Medieval poet would consider the idea that artists being 'creative' as heretical,^[2] we have prisms with which to view the historical specificity of our own conceptions of such terms.

This article seeks to explore the concept of 'voice' and challenge some of its underlying assumptions. The first section argues that the concept of the writer's 'voice' is essentially a neo-Romantic construct but was made possible by changes to the concept Romantic genius in the nineteenth century. I argue there is a tension in the conception of voice in terms of it being something simultaneously democratic (insofar as we all have a 'voice') and as something that raises the importance of the individual artist, separating them from everyone else.

Against a contemporary backdrop of received artistic wisdom concerning the importance of voice, the next section discusses verbatim work. Verbatim work provides an interesting counterpoint, to the perceived value in having and displaying one's unique artistic voice, as verbatim work tends to place a premium on the *invisibility* of the artist where voice emphasizes *visibility*. I argue that part of the reason for this is that verbatim work has characteristically different ends than work that seeks to articulate voice.

By taking verbatim work as an antagonistic counterpart to voice, in its third section the article will consider the author's own experience of verbatim work by discussing a recent commission by the National Archives to creatively respond to their material on mental health. This result was 'hysteria' (Jordan-Baker 2016), a piece of 'contrapuntal radio' (Gould 1967 that dramatized the voices of militant suffragettes before First World War (c. 1907–14). This culminated in a small multiform exhibition entitled *In Our Minds*, which has toured university campuses and conferences, and was featured at the National Archives itself.

The article finishes by arguing that verbatim work offers a different and potentially more fruitful concept of the artist that avoids some of the problems of voice, opening the way for a less restrictive view of the artist and their possible avenues of work.

Romanticism and the 'voice'

In the above quotations of Bailey and Alvarez and as is clear that voice is an important concept within CW. The idea however has its origins within the Romantic era, a cultural period that still has a powerful influence on education, the arts and culture today (see Willinsky 1990; Simpson 1993; Dawson 2004; Glover 2012). In order to establish an

understanding of voice as an idea with a history and particular set of beliefs about the artist, I want to begin by offering some quotes to show how readily the opinions and emphases of the Romantics lay the groundwork for the more modern concept of the writer's voice. Take for example Shelley, who famously claimed that:

A Poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

(Shelley 1998: 347)

In this well-known characterization the artist appears as the apotheosis of individuality, separated from others in 'solitude' and making 'sweet sounds' only for itself. This breakdown of the characteristic renaissance relationship between artist and patron is also reflected in how the poet reacts to the public, which is distant and tangential, the public being 'entranced' by the 'unseen' artist. Additionally, and crucially, this image has the artist producing work automatically, for the song comes from the bird without forethought. The a-rational production of art is mirrored by its reception, as the besotted public are without recourse to reflection or rational explanation, 'know[ing] not whence of why' they are so affected. Such claims within Romantic writings are hardly unique and indeed almost tropic, as we can see with Keats:

But it is easier to think what poetry should be, than to write it – And this leads me to another axiom – That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.

(Keats 2016: 77)

Like Shelley, Keats emphasizes the individuality of the artist and the automatic nature of artistic production. It is within this conception of a unique self being articulated by artistic production that one sees similarities with the concept of 'voice'. There are,

however, tensions. Clear here is the sense that the poet is not only a unique individual, but is to be distinguished from the proverbial crowd; many hold an abstract ideal of what poetry should be but few obtain that ideal. This leaves poets as heroes or viragos, something emphatically confirmed in the claim that '[p]oets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' (Shelley 1998: 366).

As I suggested in my introduction, this elitist notion which is in tension with the democratic character of modern understandings of voice. However, the notion that the artist and their work is something highly individual, ideally automatic and expressive of self is clear. As one commentator sums up the view of the Romantic artist:

The early nineteenth-century Romantic visual artist was a person who promised a whole new world of in a visual language independent of tradition. Artists, through their individual consciousness, were believed to be able to create a natural symbolism that grew out of their contact with Nature and would release the significance hidden within Nature herself.

(Korzenick in Willinsky (ed.) 1990: 147)

Similarly, the art critic Laura Cummings puts it this way, arguing that in the Romantic period,

[a]rtists no longer strive to please patrons, to educate and entertain according to some notion of public service. They now have a higher calling, a vocation which raises them up to see and understand what the rest of us can only grope towards. They are prophets, shamans, seers.

(2009: 182)

Of course, the views of the Romantics were not confined to the aesthetic realm, as they also had a powerful influence on education. This is important, because the focus on individual genius translated into proto-progressive pedagogies and was given a more

democratic spirit within the context of mass education. For example, nineteenth-century pedagogues such as Francis Parker claimed that '[e]very child has the artist element born in him' (Parker 1884: 22), a common enough claim (Mearns 1929) and something that is at once democratic but reflects the a-rational and individualist tendencies of Romanticism. Korenack for example notes that nineteenth-century pedagogues such as Parker,

tapped a concept originally invented and reinvented to account for the exceptional childhood experience of individual artistic geniuses, and generalized it to apply to *all children in schools*. His institutionalization of the image of the artist was a major alteration of the myth.

(Korenack in Willinsky (ed.) 1990: 156)

Here and as is the case more broadly within the progressivist movement, the elitist concept of the artistic genius has been modified to be made relevant to the public education system and democratic values. This is not the only plausible reason for the alteration, as Glover suggests that the concept of individual genius also serves to guarantee things such as intellectual copyright, claiming that, 'authorship is an economic category, but the idea of genius is vital to it, as it simultaneously advances and obscures these economic interests. Under such a scheme, Romantic conceptions of authorship become functionalist rather than essentialist' (2012: 296). While not the main focus on my analysis, this economic aspect is also alluded to in CW publications, Brodie for example stating that '[e]veryone is looking for that original voice' (2007: 416).

Indeed, this cocktail of democratic sentiment coupled with a belief in individual genius is echoed in modern statements such as 'each of us has a voice, as individual as Faulkner's or Morrison's, Jewitt's or Abbey's' (Bailey 2001: 104) or Carver's opinion

that voice is '[w]riter's particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes' (Carver 1985: 46). Herbert claims that '[m]any prospective poets consider themselves to be searching for their voice, which is seen as a recognisable combination of tone and subject. Together with the primacy of inspiration and the successful first draft, voice is felt to be another trait of the "proper" writer' (2005: 192) and likewise: '[s]tudents are often encouraged to "find their voice", which tends to mean a writing style that is unique to them' (Earnshaw 2007: 464). Indeed, Dawson makes a direct connection between CW and Romanticism, claiming that the study of CW 'can facilitate the therapeutic discovery of a Neo-Romantic expressive voice' (2005: 177).

Suitably adjusted so as not to offend our democratic values and anti-elitist prejudices, the hallmarks of Romanticism are clear in modern conceptions of voice. In such cases, voice appears at once something highly accessible to the writer, but also something that expresses a sovereign individuality and genius. While there may be differences of emphasis in explanations of voice, the overriding commonality of claims within CW literature is striking, no less so because it contains a tension that becomes clear once we consider the historical transformation the notions of individual genius or self-expression have undergone. The tension is this: if a writer's voice is something universal or available to all then it is unclear how it can reflect genius, a 'particular and unmistakable signature'. That is, if everyone is 'special' (in the sense of exemplary), then we risk misusing the meaning of 'special', or at the very least diluting its meaning with conflation and qualification.

As I hope I have already outlined, despite the modern emphasis and valorization of 'voice', it is by no means an inevitable possession of every writer, nor does it

necessarily explain what writers do and how they do it. Indeed, other options of authorship and creative practice are available, and the next section considers verbatim work as a contrastive method, which can be of assistance in considering concepts of voice and authorship.

The writer's voice and verbatim work

Such a tension within the concept of voice raises the question of to what extent an expression of self is desirable or inevitable in CW. A useful way of furthering this is to consider verbatim as a counterpart to voice, as it stands in opposition to widely held notions about artistic expression and the transmission of personality through that expression.

The ideas underpinning verbatim work are hard to reconcile with the contemporary emphasis on developing a voice and articulating a unique authorial self through one's work. This is because verbatim work characteristically emphasizes personalities and concerns other than the articulation of a 'distinctive and unmistakable' self. For example, Hammond and Stewart claim that for verbatim theatre 'we approach a play not just as a play but also as an accurate source of information' (Hammond and Stewart 2011: 10). This can be further seen when Holdsworth describes the verbatim work of American writer Anna Deavere Smith's *On the Road: A Search for American Character* in the following way: 'her aesthetic relies on her ability to research, collate, edit and theatrically interpret a diverse range of voices. The intricacies and individualities of the voice are incredibly important to Smith' (Holdsworth 2010: 51). Noteworthy here is the marked emphasis away from a conception of artistic endeavour as an expression of the writer's self and towards an, albeit mediated, representation of non-authorial

individuals. Also, unlike a *sui generis* eruption of work, which constitutes Romantic genius par excellence, Smith's methods are decidedly craftspersonly, the emphasis falling on collection and organization of materials. In this light then, verbatim work appears incommensurable with the writer's voice.

As an ideal type compared to other kinds of work, verbatim work is closer to the reality of speech and cadence and is closer to material and historical fact than other work. The testimonial and documentary aspects the sources of verbatim work and the central narrative building blocks, suggest a hierarchy where the writer is less a unique creator and more of a convenor of materials into a meaningful form. We might see verbatim work as the limit case in discussions of voice because verbatim work appears to be an example of widely recognized artistic endeavour that does not promote the personality, opinions or genius of the artist. If verbatim work is such a limit case, then this raises the question of what role the artist does have in the creation of the work and if indeed there is a special place for the artist that would make her distinct from, say, the article, ink or bits of computer hardware that are part of the material cause of the endeavour. There is unlikely to be no single answer to this, but we can understand these questions better by considering MacIntyre's conception of life narrative:

It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told-except in the case of fiction.

([1985] 2007:1981: 211)

This statement is interesting when applied to verbatim work, as unlike fiction, in verbatim work stories are in some sense lived before they are told, albeit also being

crafted into a form the artist chooses. Indeed, if verbatim work is to be ‘work’ worth the name, then something should distinguish it from a catalogue or archive of material. If MacIntyre is correct about the pervasiveness of narratives in our lives, then verbatim work presents a kind of bridge between life narratives and fictional ones. More significantly, this bridge supports MacIntyre’s point that narrative is an essential and pervasive aspect of our lives, for verbatim work shows how the lived life is a narrative, which can be considered a narrative in an artistic and fictional sense also.

In a number of ways then, there is good reason to see verbatim work as distinct from and a challenge to ideas of voice. To put these discussions onto a more practical footing, I will now explore these issues further by outlining my own experience of developing a verbatim work as part of a commission from the National Archives.

Managing hysteria

These ideas bring me to an account of a project with which I was involved and through which I came to reflect upon the notion of the writer’s voice. In 2016, I was commissioned by the National Archives to produce a work in response to their mental health documentation. The overall project was to form an exhibition entitled *In Their Minds*, which contained a number of artistic responses to the same brief in a variety of media. Part of the aim was not only to display how archival collections can inspire work, but in the context of the exhibition itself, to create a dialogue about issues surrounding mental health.

The project began with an introduction to the archives and a tour of some of the documentation and objects that dealt with mental health. Due to their polyphony and political significance, I became interested in the declassified Home Office files on

militant suffragettes, c. 1907–14. By ‘polyphonic’ here I mean that the documents and files constituted a documentary smorgasbord: Letters, official reports, newspaper cuttings, notes and pro-forma that in their various ways told stories of militant action, imprisonment, hunger strike, forced feeding, pleas for clemency and mental breakdown. This is one extract from a letter by militant suffragette prisoner Hilda Birkett, dated the 6 August 1914, to the Home Office:

After a great deal of thought and consideration, I have made up my mind that, in future I shall do no more militant work. [...] I have been in prison since April 28th nineteen twelve and have been forcibly fed during the whole time – 292 times so far, but it is not because of this that I am petitioning, it is because I wish to lead a peaceful life in the future.

This reflects a woman who has suffered at the hands of the authorities and who, despite her convictions, is at the edge of her fortitude. Even more importantly, this letter suggests that Hilda’s mental distress and even illness is something that has been given to her, rather than something she came to prison with. This idea, evidenced elsewhere in the HO files, was an interesting concept to explore, for mental health issues are often something people are described as *having*, not something that is *given*. What kinds of action though led to people like Hilda Birkett ending up in prison? This quote from a suffragette declaration gives a characteristic insight:

I, Bertha Ryland, attack this work of art deliberately, against the Government’s criminal injustice in denying women the vote and also against the Government’s brutal injustice in imprisoning, forcibly feeding and drugging suffragist militants.

We see here not only the kind of direct action taken by the militants, but also the fact they were deeply aware of the plight of fellow suffragettes, imprisoned and force fed. Overall, the source materials were evocative, well-organized (thanks to meticulous civil servants)

and multi-voiced. This led me to the conclusion that it was both a challenge and a necessity for the work to have a direct and unambiguous relationship to the archive materials: Necessary because of the spirit of the brief itself and the ethical responsibility to see the resources not simply as raw source material, but as materials already embedded in a web of history and narrative.

This too was the challenge as to a significant extent the work was already there in the materials. This led to a high degree of restriction in terms of the materials, though this is arguably little different from the constriction placed on the stage dramatist or the sonneteer, insofar as those restrictions will often require creative problem-solving and may generate, during the processes of grappling with the restriction, novel and unexpected ideas or meanings. In terms of the concept of voice then, the question did not arise; I considered my task to be research and to combine and expose the narratives I saw in an aesthetically unified and compelling way. The task was undoubtedly creative, but my motivations were neither self-expression nor a desire to impress my writerly hallmarks on the work. Indeed, I consider that such ideas may have been detrimental to the work.

The result was an audio work *Hysteria*, which was so-called because it is a term that was used continually by civil servants, nurses, wardens and doctors in the HO files to apply to the militant suffragettes. However, the term is also heavily gendered, which is reflected in its etymology:

hysteria (n.) nervous disease, 1801, coined in medical Latin as an abstract noun from Greek *hysteria* 'womb', from PIE **udtero-*, variant of **udero-* 'abdomen, womb, stomach' (see uterus). Originally defined as a neurotic condition peculiar to women and thought to

be caused by a dysfunction of the uterus. With abstract noun ending -ia. General sense of 'unhealthy emotion or excitement' is by 1839 (online).

The term then singled out the gender of the militants and was dehumanizing to the extent that denied rational agency from their actions, the suggestion being that the actions were due to a gendered madness rather than as a legitimate and/or rational response to a political state of affairs. Even if a more neutral clinical sense was attached to 'hysteria' it by 1914, its pervasive use with regard to female prisoners and patients throughout a variety of documentation was striking was remarkable.

In bringing these characters and stories together, I was influenced by the technique of 'contrapuntal radio' developed by Canadian musician and national eccentric Glenn Gould in his verbatim works collectively known as *The Solitude Trilogy* (1967–77). These works utilize a contrapuntal style in the presentation of speaking voices, with voices overlapping and often obscuring one another. Counterpoint is defined as '[t]he placing of two or more parts or voices against each other in such a way that they have both harmonic coherence and a degree of independence' (Staines 2010: 627). By applying a musical term to the presentation of speech, to an unaccustomed listener such work can appear disorientating or even chaotic, used as we are in documentary radio and drama to following clear speech. The presentation of different 'lines' of speech though enact a highly formalized sense of dialogue and ideological conflict, quite different from standard dramatic dialogue, interruptions or stichomythia. In this context then, counterpoint is not just a musical idea, it is more generally a formal technique, which dramatics elements though aural conflicts, leading to the possibility of a kind of dialogical balance.

In 'hysteria' the voices from the HO files not only contrasted in terms of their content, but such contrast is dramatized by the contrapuntal style of presentation. This seemed an appropriate heuristic with which to approach my project, as the overlapping and aurally conflicting voices gave a sense of dramatic tension and opposition, which itself is an analogue for the multiple and opposed perspectives surrounding the suffragette movement and the militancy within it.

As with the work of any verbatim artist, my development of 'hysteria' involved the initial collection and selection of materials from a vast range of relevant documentation. As archivists, compilers and historians stress, any selection or ordering of material implies the exclusion of other material, either in terms of importance (X is more relevant than Y), or in terms of basic inclusion (X is present while Z is absent). The material, its order and the formal qualities involved in its presentation are not transparent, but mediated. In the case of verbatim work, the mediation involved in selection and manner of presentation is plausibly relevant to what makes verbatim work art, as Max Stafford-Clark describes it, '[w]hat they then do with it is as up to the writer as it ever was' (Hammond and Steward 2011: 74). It is important to note though that the methods of the verbatim artist are often initially similar to those of the historian or archivist, whose work is not generally considered art.

The distinction between art/non-art is not the question here, what is important is that methodologically as well as in terms of the characteristic objectives of verbatim work, concerns of self-expression and the reflection of individual authorial voice have a radically different emphasis from the accounts of poetry and prose forwarded by those who promote the concept of the writer's voice.

Conclusion

The proposition of a Neo-Romantic self and the expectation that writers develop a unique 'voice' with which to express that self is something verbatim work methodologically and formally is unconcerned with, something that is reflected in my own experience.

This lack of concern with the projection of the artistic *self* (autobiographical, autoethnographic, authorial) is counterbalanced in verbatim work by a concern to represent other *selves*. That is, verbatim work shows many of the hallmarks of artistic endeavour (selection of materials, consideration of patterns, development of theme and subject matter, narrative structuring and characterization, etc.), but it is outside the ideological matrix of artistic production as self-expression. For this reason, consideration of verbatim work can challenge assumptions about the importance and inevitability of the writer's voice as a platform or focal point of artistic production. Though verbatim work might ostensibly seem to demote the writer or artist from an efficient to a material cause, this is need not be so, for the verbatim artist deals with many of the considerations that non-verbatim artists deal with. As Herbert concedes, '[p]oetry is not always about self-expression in the sense that the "I" who speaks in the poem is always the "I" of the poet. Sometimes giving voice to others can be the most effective way we can find of expressing what we want to say' (Anderson 2005: 198).

At its most extreme, the insistence on developing voice runs the risk of narrowing conceptions of the artist, as well as creating a climate where artwork not concerned with reflecting self is somehow less 'artistic' than the *sui generis* outpourings of Neo-Romantic selves. Secondly, there remain tensions within the very concept of voice, as it is not clear if every writer has a voice as unique as highly regarded canonical writers. Even if this is

the case, it is still not clear if every voice deserves equal hearing or we should value all voices equally. The Romantic insistence on the rarity and priest-like status of the artist, which makes art and artistic expression so important gives the concept of 'voice' much of its appeal, but it does not easily sit with the apparent universality of this 'rarity'. It remains for the proponents of voice not only to recognize the historical and philosophical debt owed to the Romantics, but to address some of the inherent tensions. It is also against a backdrop of such problems, that verbatim work can be seen to be fruitful and even liberating methodology for the writer.

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Notes

[1.] For example, see Craig, H. (20012, *Shakespeare, Computers, and the Mystery of
Authorship*,

[2.] See Dawson (2005), *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*.

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