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‘No additional information required’: Creative writing as research writing

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Abstract

The question of whether artistic practice might be construed as a research practice is one that has been pursued extensively since the 1990s. Much in the discourse remains open to contention, though a degree of consensus has emerged on certain key themes: that art is indeed productive of knowledge, that this knowledge is to be understood experientially and non-conceptually, but that it must be framed in a form consistent with established academic procedures. Jen Webb’s several contributions to this discourse provide a valuable context for considering whether it may be possible to overcome the conceptual and practical separation between art and the academy. Using Webb’s work as a frame, this article engages with the debate about the knowledge status of art through a consideration of its contradictions, and suggests that a pragmatic solution is to be found in the operations of the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF), which now accepts the research credentials of creative writing as being self-evident.

Keywords: knowledge, research, creative writing, REF, ERA

i. scare quotes

In her 2010 presentation to the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference [1], Jen Webb asks, ‘Can creative practice really comprise research as it is defined in the Frascati Manual ... or is it more about pleasure, a libidinal charge, or the drifting passages of thought?’ (2010: 3). The question is of course rhetorical, and though I’ve no doubt that Webb believes creative practice is indeed about pleasure, libidinal charge and the drifting passages of thought, it seems clear from this paper and her other important contributions to the discussion of writing and research that she also accepts – however reluctantly – that these virtues may be supplementary (and even incidental) to the requirements of academia, where there persists an enduring scepticism about the research claims of creative work.

This scepticism is in large part licenced by the terms of the Frascati Manual – an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) publication intended to standardise procedures for the measurement of research and experimental development – and particularly by the 2002 edition, which offers as its core definition of research:

[C]reative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. (OECD 2002: 30)

This is the edition to which Webb refers, and while the Manual cautions that its definitions were ‘originally developed for manufacturing industry and research in the natural sciences and engineering’ (OECD 2002: 19), they have nonetheless been adopted by numerous governments and their agencies internationally and applied to the assessment of research in the arts, despite the fact that the Manual makes just one reference to such research in all of its 254 pages, and then only to discount it as an acceptable field of enquiry in crudely emphatic scare quotes: ‘excluding artistic “research” of any kind’ (2002: 67).

The Manual’s current edition is less dismissive, and defines research slightly differently:

[C]reative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge. (OECD 2015: 44)

The revision is subtle, though arguably more hospitable to work in the humanities since it doesn’t carry quite the same implication that research should result in a utilitarian outcome, an application, a thing. Instead, it might result in a new use for knowledge, which might mean the production of more knowledge. But if this parsing of the definitions is somewhat hopeful, the 2015 edition does provide some more explicit encouragement in its recognition of three categories of research and development (R&D) in relation to ‘artistic creation’, albeit that one of these – the important one – comes under a caveat.

Indebted presumably (and belatedly) to Christopher Frayling’s seminal paper ‘Research in art and design’ (1993), these categories are: ‘research for the arts’, which includes the development of ‘goods and services to meet the expressive needs of artists and performers’; ‘research on the arts’, which includes the scholarly fields of ‘musicology, art history, theatre studies, media studies, literature, etc’; and ‘artistic expression’, which appears alongside the proviso that it is ‘normally’ to be excluded from consideration since ‘artistic performances’ (the Manual mentions no other type of artistic output) ‘fail the novelty test of R&D as they are looking for a new expression, rather than for new knowledge’ (OECD 2015: 64-65).

Despite this tendentious (and privileging) distinction between ‘new expression’ and ‘new knowledge’, the Manual concedes that universities do in fact award doctorates on the basis of artistic research, and therefore recommends that ‘an “institutional” approach’ is taken and that such practice is recognised as ‘potential R&D’ (OECD 2015: 65). Such pragmatism may be art’s alibi, and the challenge that Webb identifies is to establish the research credentials of creative practice within the frame of the Frascati definition, given that the alternative would be a ‘bifurcation of practice’ (Webb 2012: 3) requiring the writer-academic to submit one kind of writing (rational, propositional) for the purposes of the academic audit and another (imaginative, poetic) for the delight of everyday readers. Her project, in short, is to overcome the conceptual and practical separation between art and the academy by arguing for work that is answerable to both sides of these ‘apparent antinomies’ (Webb 2012: 14).

In one sense, however, it may be that the exclusionary quotation marks of the 2002 edition are entirely appropriate, though not in the way intended by the Manual's authors. From the perspective of the creative practitioner, it may be that 'research as it is defined in the Frascati Manual' is a fundamentally unhelpful concept whose relevance emerges solely in relation to the regulatory discourses of the academy. It may be, in fact, that the now-established discourse of practice-led research has so far proven inadequate to the actual practice of most creative writers, whose answerability to the academic criterion of research is historically recent, discursively contingent, and – however subtle or strenuous the arguments – constrained to various forms of institutional compliance or self-contradiction.

This, clearly, is to frame the issue contentiously, and perhaps the plight of the creative practitioner could not be otherwise so long as the policy and regulatory environment requires the observance of protocols informed by the Frascati Manual. Such is the force of these protocols that even the most radical claims for the research status of artistic practice – those that embrace the notion of a 'paradigm shift' in our understanding of what constitutes knowledge (see for instance Barrett 2014; Borgdorff 2012; Haseman 2007; and Webb 2015) – tend ultimately to concede to a separation between the practice itself and its supplementary articulation for the purposes of the academic audit.

Yet it would appear that something almost as profound as a paradigm shift has occurred in the UK academy, at least in relation to creative writing. In what might be described as a 'protocol shift', the UK's equivalent to the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), the Research Excellence Framework (REF), now recognises the research status of creative writing as being self-evident (REF2021 2019b: 93) – a move that not only relieves the burden on creative writers of having to explicate the 'knowledge content' of their work in a secondary and potentially distorting discourse, but points up the contingency of the protocols currently enforced by the Australian Research Council (ARC) upon writers in the Australian context. This shift is enabled both by the application of a less restrictive definition of research than that derived from the Frascati Manual, and by situating creative writing within a distinctly *literary* tradition and assessing it alongside literary studies rather than the other, non-linguistic, 'creative arts'.

ii. agnostic thinking

Webb's concern to negotiate the 'apparent antinomies' (2012: 14) of art and the academy is not unique to creative writing of course, and may be traced to what Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler term 'the hasty academicization of the creative practice community' (2011: 87) following the incorporation of the art schools, polytechnics and their equivalents into the university sector in Australia, Scandinavia and the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. These structural changes, and the subsequent requirement that creative practitioners submit to research assessment procedures in a competitive funding environment, inaugurated a sector-wide engagement with the issue of art and knowledge, though it's noticeable that creative writing is often overlooked in this broader discussion, with the obvious implication, as Jon Cook observes, that writing is viewed primarily as 'a means of presenting the results of research' rather than as a research method in its own right (2013: 203).

Linda Candy's much-cited paper 'Practice based research: a guide' (2006) may be typical in this regard, in that written work is excluded from her list of the artefacts or outcomes that might result from practice-based research (3). And while Candy does include writers among the range of practitioners who may be said to carry out such research, she draws a distinction between 'the practice-based PhD' and 'the purely written PhD' (4), making the familiar assumption that the creative work will be non-textual and so require a written supplement to elucidate its knowledge claims.

Webb's engagement with this wider discourse is interesting in part for mitigating the discrepancy of writing's frequent exclusion, though such is the force of Frascati and the established conventions that she too must assume the insufficiency of creative writing *per se*, at least in relation to 'the imperatives and values of the world of research practice' (Webb 2015: 18). While attempting to negotiate a position that allows for the tacit, embodied or contingent knowledge produced by artistic practice, including creative writing, she must nevertheless concede to a regulatory context that necessitates a *post hoc* objectification of the research process and its findings. This is exemplified in an early paper co-authored with Donna Lee Brien (2008) and a more recent paper co-authored with Paul Hetherington (2016).

In "Agnostic" thinking: creative writing as practice-led research', Webb and Brien address the 'fraught situation' that requires artist-academics to 'operate under opposing imperatives', attempting to produce work that accords with the logic of two separate domains – the aesthetic ('art for art's sake') and the academic ('knowledge production') – with the danger of fulfilling neither requirement particularly well (Webb & Brien 2008: 1). One solution to this dilemma, they suggest, is to collapse creative practice and research into a single domain. But while this would bring clear benefits in terms of professional status and material reward, it might also result in a 'diminution of artistic freedom and innovation' since the single domain they envisage is one governed by the existing protocols of academic research, whereby practice becomes 'an object for scholarly dissection rather than for creation' (2008: 2). A better solution, they propose, would be the production of work 'that satisfies both aesthetic and scholarly imperatives; that marries research and creative practice' – a move made possible by an emergent critique of the 'relatively restricted' paradigm of knowledge currently prevalent in the academy (2008: 2).

Creative practice, they argue, has always produced knowledge. However, this is knowledge that has tended to be identified subsequently and hermeneutically: it's the knowledge produced by scholars in response to the artwork. Referencing Heidegger, they press instead for a phenomenological approach that situates knowledge as historically contingent and experiential. In this alternative paradigm, artist-academics would locate their knowledge claims in their own 'sensations, affects and reactions' (Webb & Brien 2008: 5) and in the heuristic methodology – 'based on rules of thumb, educated guesses or trial and error' (7) – that is customarily associated with artistic practice. This would be a paradigm premised on a Keatsian tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty – on a willingness 'to linger at the point of interpretation' (3) – and would thereby constitute a form of 'agnostic research' since it would not depend on a 'theological' model of

knowledge predicated on a singular, objective truth awaiting discovery and interpretation (3).

Somewhat surprisingly, Webb and Brien then invoke Susan Sontag's essay 'Against interpretation' – specifically her concluding clarion call, 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' (Sontag 1997: 14) – in order to retain a role for interpretation in their schema, since interpretation is understood to lie at the heart of creative practice. Artists, they say, customarily 'look at the world, and reflect on it, respond to it and frame it' (Webb & Brien 2008: 5) as an integral part of the dynamic process of meaning-making in relation to their medium. In this way, artist-academics may be viewed as exemplary self-interpreters, turning the principle of hermeneutics upon themselves – though not perhaps to ask quite the same questions of the artwork as might be asked by an 'external critic or commentator' (8). The type of questions Webb and Brien suggest as more appropriate are the 'questions about process' (9) that typify the 'exegeses, prefaces or companion essays' (10) that complement the creative component of creative writing doctorates.

In order for creative work to convince as 'knowledge work' within the academy – crucially, 'the sort of knowledge that counts as research in OECD terms' (Webb & Brien 2008: 7) – the reflexive, experiential, uncertain process that lies at the heart of Webb and Brien's alternative paradigm must still be externalised. The artwork itself will not suffice; an erotics, it seems, is not enough.

In a recent return to this theme, Webb and her co-author Paul Hetherington make a renewed call for a reconceptualisation of the established paradigm for recognising research in the academy (2016: 1), and in the 2015 ERA definition of research – which incorporates the terms of the 2002 Frascati definition – they do find some scope for creative works to be scheduled as research, though only 'in principle' (Webb & Hetherington 2016: 2). In practice, they suggest, much remains unresolved since creative work has different objectives and is productive of different kinds of knowledge than those allowed by the 'privileged definition' (2) of the Frascati Manual.

The work of art, they acknowledge, is properly oriented 'toward the aesthetic domain rather than the economic or the scholarly' (Webb & Hetherington 2016: 4), yet it remains 'the responsibility of those employed within the academy to add knowledge through research' (4). This responsibility (whether ethical or merely contractual remains unclear) is inescapable, and they exhibit some impatience with the special pleading of artist-academics who fail to recognise their obligations to the academic context and insist instead on 'an identity and orientation directed not toward the university but toward the world of art' (4). This often has as its corollary a plea for creative work to be assessed as 'research equivalent' (4), a designation they view as reinforcing the separation of 'artist-academics from the "legitimate" research community' (4). Much of their argument proceeds in fact from the premise that creative practitioners in the academy consistently fall on the wrong side of status distinctions. In the two-tier 'post-Humboldtian, managerial university' (9) they are viewed more as teachers than researchers, distinctly lacking in relation to the academic 'master signifier' (10) of research, and as a consequence discriminated against in relation to the 'distribution of the various forms of capital' (10).

Webb and Hetherington's call is then to 'interrogate and interrupt the dominant discourse' (11) of this master signifier, and they suggest two rather modest means by which this might be effected: one, by stressing the extent to which the approved procedures of the sciences are themselves a form of practice – contingent, reflexive, uncertain – a form of 'knowing-by-doing' (11); and two, by identifying more clearly 'when the making of art is research, and when it is just [sic] the making of art' (11).

In order to demonstrate how the latter intervention might work – how creative works 'done for art and not for knowledge' might nevertheless be 'understood as knowledge statements' (12) – Webb and Hetherington present two poems, one by each of them, to which they append a short supporting statement that explicates the research content of the poems. From here they proceed to an admission that such a statement is inadequate to the poems – 'even though it is true enough' – since it 'justifies two lyric poems in a mode of writing that is antithetical to what they are' (14). The poems, they say, possess qualities 'that no conventional research statement could hope to capture' (14). The protocols of the academy require such a statement, however – a requirement that may be ascribed to the intellectual inheritance of Plato's *Republic*, which is so famously sceptical of the knowledge claims of poetry. 'This,' they suggest, 'is why poets are often uncertain about the word "research"' (15), given that 'the academy has made research sound like something in which creative artists are not involved' (16).

Their route out of this impasse – a manoeuvre as surprising as Webb and Brien's recruitment of Sontag's 'Against interpretation' to argue in favour of interpretation – is after all to advocate for the value and efficacy of the supplementary research statement. Irrespective of whether such a statement is 'antithetical' to the nature of poetry (or any other art form), it can still be used to 'articulate why particular artworks might constitute research' and thus 'enable creative works to operate, and be understood, across two domains: research, and art' (16). Meanwhile, within the institutional domain, such statements can also be used to enable universities to identify which works of art 'make a research contribution' (16) and which do not – and, presumably, which artist-academics make a research contribution, and which do not.

This may seem less like an interrogation of 'the dominant discourse' of the 'master signifier' and more like a capitulation to what Julian Meyrick, in the same volume, calls the 'coercive edge' of research assessment criteria in a context where 'career preferment and institutional prestige are at stake' (Meyrick 2016: 144). However, it is consistent with a tendency in the wider discourse of practice-led research for the *sui generis* knowledge claims of creative practice to founder at the point at which those claims need be evidenced under the rubric of the academic audit. For all the promise contained in Webb and Hetherington's call for artist-academics 'to deconstruct the current research paradigm ... and think more laterally about what constitutes new knowledge' (2016: 1), the framing authority of the Frascati definition appears to foreclose the possibility of such lateral thought having any practical effect. The call for a reconceptualisation is curtailed, the authority of the academy reasserted, because the knowledge claims of creative work cannot be accepted as self-evident. For both philosophical and pragmatic reasons, it

seems, these claims must be validated in the form of an institutionally compatible and compliant supplement: the research report, the supporting statement.

iii. fish out of water

In paraphrasing these arguments I am mindful of their particular relevance to the Australian context, and the extent to which the call for a reconceptualisation of the prevailing research paradigm may be seen to anticipate the terms of the UK's equivalent to ERA, the Research Excellence Framework. I am mindful too of the extent to which the wider discourse of practice-led research has, in the words of Scott Brook, achieved a 'practical consensus', a degree of discursive entrenchment that appears to foreclose the possibility of 'critical clarification and renewal' (2012: 1). The naturalisation of the concept, and the normalisation of the practices it authorises, serves to disguise the extent to which the field is comprised of divergent approaches, each differently determined. In response to this, Brook's introduction to the *TEXT* special issue *Beyond practice-led research* presents a magisterial summing-up of the 'four broad grounds for critique' (2012: 3, original emphasis) within which it may be possible to map the positions of the contributors to the disciplinary discourse.

At the risk of oversimplification, Brook's summary of the four types of critique might be further summarised as follows. First, there is the 'aesthetic critique', which promotes practice-led research as both equivalent to conventional research and as a refusal of conventional research, since it 'inherits the Romantic account of aesthetics as a critique of knowledge' (Brook 2012: 3), elevating the practical and experiential over the rational and propositional. From this perspective, 'the purpose of art is not to produce or communicate knowledge, but to produce and transform experience' (3), although in certain forms the critique may also assert the sufficiency of the alternative, non-discursive understanding of the meaning of 'knowledge'. Second, there is the 'academic critique', which 'insists on the domain specificity of university research and its protocols' and recognises an artwork as research only insofar as it submits to established 'legitimizing practices', including the principle of peer assessment (4). In its least generous form, this critique allows for the presence of artists in the academy only insofar as they are confined to 'ancillary spaces for the *teaching* of professional practice' (4, original emphasis). Third, there is the 'bureaucratic critique' (5), which accommodates the unresolved intellectual debate about the knowledge status of art, but meanwhile assumes the existence of artistic research as an institutional activity for the purpose of other institutional activities: the academic audit, the allocation of funding, the training and examination of doctoral candidates, and so on. Viewed positively, such administrative pragmatism may offer a surer guarantee of a place for artists in the academy than any theoretical argument is yet able to do (5). And fourth, there is the 'educational critique', which identifies a systemic asymmetry in the allocation of status and reward in the academy, elevating research while denigrating teaching, a situation exacerbated by the tendency of artists themselves to disavow their professional identities as teachers (6).

While the positions taken up by Jen Webb and her co-authors are considerably more nuanced and complex than my account here can allow, they each rest on an assertion of the unique knowledge claims of artistic practice that align with Brook's 'aesthetic

critique' (2012: 3), yet each appear also to embrace the contradictory force of an 'academic critique' (4) that may be hostile or at least unreceptive to those claims. So while 'art-making evinces "know-how" rather than "know-that"' (Brook 2012: 4), it must nevertheless objectify its findings in terms of 'know-that' if it's to be accepted as research within the academy. This particular antinomy – which may be described as a systemic misalignment of art and academia – is one that Webb addresses in her own contribution to *Beyond practice-led research*, where she presents a Bourdieusian account of art and research as belonging to different fields of practice.

In 'The logic of practice? Art, the academy, and fish out of water', Webb (2012) notes a gradual move among institutional gatekeepers to acknowledge the legitimacy of creative work as research – 'at least for some purposes' (4) – and finds in the results of the 2010 ERA exercise little to suggest a qualitative distinction between creative writing outputs and those in cognate scholarly fields. And yet still creative practitioners are deemed not to be fully competent players in 'the game of research evaluation' (Webb 2012: 5) and continue to feel that their work is 'neither understood nor valued' within the academy (9).

Webb's analysis of this situation proceeds from the observation that while the fields of art and the academy both enjoy cultural and symbolic (though not often financial) capital, each aligns with a different 'habitus', in Pierre Bourdieu's terms – a set of acquired attitudes or dispositions that practitioners will adhere to more or less unthinkingly, much like 'fish in water'. An individual cannot be a fish in two bodies of water at once, however:

The fields operate according to different rules; they use different tools, discourses and methods; their rewards are different, as are their audiences; and they must satisfy different gatekeepers. (Webb 2012: 8)

Since the structural reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, artists of all stripes may have entered the field of academic research, but they remain 'misfits' because their habitus continues to be more closely adjusted to the field of art. Nonetheless, in order to participate fully in the academic field, they must produce research outputs 'recognized as such according to academic conventions' (Webb 2012: 9) – a code-switching requirement that diminishes their credibility as artists without gaining them full credibility as academics. Webb's route out of this particular impasse, which she calls the 'double bind of field and habitus' (10), begins from an understanding of these two forces as 'constituted in moments of practice' (10) – that is, as contingent, historical, relational – and by that token open to change.

In her consideration of the concept of practice, Webb finds a close correspondence between Michael Polanyi's 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi & Prosch 1975: 31), Donald Schön's 'knowing-in-action' (Schön 1987: 28) and Bourdieu's 'practical sense' or 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 81). In each case, practice rests on a subconscious facility that is the 'outcome of thorough training' (Webb 2012: 11), of being steeped in the field. It can thus be understood as 'internalised, historicised knowledge', taken for granted, its origins forgotten (11). Bourdieu describes the naturalisation of the habitus in similar terms – as 'history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such' (Bourdieu 1977: 78) – and Webb offers by way of illustration the example, firstly, of an academic so

‘deeply immersed in the language, practices, values, systems and structures of the university setting’ that she ‘does not need to think about them, or consciously adjust the self to them’, and secondly a creative practitioner so ‘fully invested in the world of creative practice, and ... the logic of arts grants, writers centre meetings, art policy and the creative community’ that she too hardly needs think about them ‘consciously or objectively’ (Webb 2012: 12).

While this may overstate the extent to which the average academic is fully at ease in the metrics-driven culture of the contemporary university, and certainly *does* overstate the extent to which most creative practitioners are immersed in ‘the logic of arts grants, writers centre meetings, art policy’ and so on, it does lead to an interesting consideration of how creative practitioners, and indeed conventional academics, might adapt to changed or challenging circumstances by adopting ‘a more reflexive position’ – that is, a more self-conscious and self-questioning position – in order to ‘think beyond the frameworks of the familiar’ and bring about a ‘reformation of both writing and the academy’ (Webb 2012: 12):

If members of a field are propelled into a reflexive attitude because of a sense of disequilibrium and hence discomfort, the initial outcome is likely to be even more disequilibrium and discomfort. It is not easy to interrogate the things one has always taken for granted; it is not easy to generate or embrace major change. Reflexivity requires a willingness to drop all the truisms of the field, and consider them again, from a point of view that is outside the logic of that field in order to defamiliarise and thereby reconceptualise the field. (Webb 2012: 13)

As fish ‘who are at least partially out of water’, artist-academics may be particularly well-suited to query not only the assumptions of the academy but the nature of their own practice. Forced into an awareness of the contingency and constructedness of the academic field, unable to take it for granted, to absorb it into a habitus, they are able to adopt a position of questioning its assumptions, becoming in the process ‘a new kind of academic who is simultaneously a new kind of artist, making a new kind of object in a reconceptualised field’ (Webb 2012: 14).

Webb is careful not to anticipate the form that such newness might take, gesturing merely towards the possibility of methodological refinements, changed attitudes towards practice, and a greater clarity about ‘the difference between professional, aesthetic and research practice’ (Webb 2012: 14). Even so, she discovers one model for her new kind of artist-academic in the example of a somewhat miscellaneous canon of writer-critics: T.S. Eliot, Maurice Blanchot, Italo Calvino and George Steiner. These ‘double-mode practitioners’ are, she claims, ‘fully literary in their art practice, and fully “academic” in their scholarly practice’, and are most of all reflexive in their self-reflection since ‘they write about what they do, which is literary production, and so they remain in equilibrium, able to engage from one position, but across two fronts of operation’ (Webb 2012: 13).

This is consistent with Webb and Brien’s assertion in “‘Agnostic” thinking’ that it ‘makes sense’ for writer-academics to supplement the publication of their creative works with a contextualising ‘companion piece that frames, interprets and establishes the

epistemological foundations of that work' (2008: 11). However, it doesn't appear to greatly advance the cause of a reconceptualised field since the primary dictum of Brook's 'academic critique' (2012: 4) – that creative practitioners should submit to 'the domain specificity of university research and its protocols' (Brook 2012: 4) – remains undisturbed. And given the ubiquity of an *a posteriori* knowledge report in the field of creative writing, a 'double-mode' (Webb 2012: 13) or creative-critical practice may not quite fulfill the criteria for institutional renewal. Rather, this formula tends once again to reinstate the division between 'creative writing' and 'research writing' that informs so much of the disciplinary discourse, and which is exemplified by Webb's guidebook *Researching creative writing* (2015), where the word 'literary' is used 'to distinguish writing undertaken to result in a creative artefact – novel, poem, short story, script – from writing undertaken to result in a research artefact – essay, journal article, review, report' (Webb 2015: fn.21).

Ultimately, the notion of a reconceptualised field is difficult to sustain if the underlying premise remains that a poem, say, cannot be a 'research artefact' (Webb 2015: fn.21), or if it continues to be assumed that the double-mode practitioner can only produce research on the second of their 'two fronts of operation' (Webb 2012: 13); that is, by writing 'about what they do' (2012: 13). Besides reintroducing the 'bifurcation of practice' (Webb 2012: 3) that Webb is otherwise keen to avoid, carries with it the risk of losing or revoking what is most valuable (and irreducible) about the work of art. A practice that describes a practice (writing about writing) may be one example of reflexivity, but the writing of literary works is often already intensely and sufficiently reflexive, a dualled activity that combines creative and critical modes of thinking – as most famously expressed in Eliot's description of the labour of composition, the 'frightful toil' of 'sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing' (Eliot 1932: 30).

There is, however, another way in which writer-academics may be propelled into a reflexive position, and this is in relation to the regulatory frameworks of the academy. In common with academics in every other subject area, writers in universities engage in a range of different 'practices' – pedagogical, pastoral, managerial, etc – and are subject to several more, including those concerning the regulation of research. This especially may be felt as constraining or coercive and may induce a sense of disequilibrium and discomfort that promotes resistance or reinvention. But while the individual creative practitioner will have considerably less agency to effect change at the disciplinary or governmental level, it is here perhaps that a reformation of the academy may be achieved without this entailing a deformation of the writer's creative practice. Certainly, the intractability of the issues and the continuing lack of consensus about the status of practice-led research suggests that a solution is not to be found in asserting either that art is productive of knowledge (albeit non-propositional knowledge) or that artistic practice should demonstrate its research credentials in a form that somehow 'translates' what is *sui generis* about art into propositional terms. The answer may not lie in either the 'aesthetic critique' (Brooks 2012: 3) or the 'academic critique' (4), but in the pragmatism of the 'bureaucratic critique' (5), since this appears most readily to acknowledge the contingency and constructedness of the academic field – including such apparently durable concepts as 'research' and 'knowledge' – and may go furthest in ensuring that the

writer-academic can remain ‘fully literary in their writing practice’ (Webb 2012: 13) yet fully compliant in their academic practice.

iv. self-evident

If, for Jen Webb, it ‘seems self-evident that creative writing is not the same as research writing’ (2015: 110), this is clearly not because these terms designate activities that belong immutably to different fields of practice, but because the fields of literary production and higher education as they are currently constituted – especially in Australia – depend upon their separation. While the fields may claim some features in common, they are defined by what differentiates them, which can be expressed in terms of certain familiar binaries, each predicated on a restricted understanding of the ‘master signifier’ of research. That understanding is codified in the Frascati Manual, assumed to be exemplified in the scientific method, and is taken to eventuate in ‘knowledge’: a set of verifiable claims about the nature of reality. And while art may claim to be productive of other kinds of knowledge, for the purposes of the academy, such knowledge requires translation into propositional terms if ‘creative writing’ is to qualify as ‘research writing’. The penalty for failing to do so is discrimination in relation to the circulation of capital within the profession.

As Webb et al make clear (2002: 68), the Bourdieusian metaphor of the field should not be taken to imply a stable, rigidly demarcated ground on which the players move according to a set of fixed and inviolable rules. There may well be rules, and apparently established parameters, but a field is more dynamic than static. It is ‘a *field of forces*’ but also ‘a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve this field of forces’ (Bourdieu 1983: 312, original emphasis), and the struggle is not solely for capital, but to determine the terms upon which the field is to be organised and the capital distributed. The rules are negotiable; the parameters are subject to change, and it’s to be expected that a discipline should display some inconsistency in its present formation, and a degree of transformation over time. The field of higher education is far from uniform or stable.

The disparities and developments are significant, as may be illustrated, for example, by tracking the professional standing of creative writers in the Australian academy since the Dawkins reforms of 1988, which led *inter alia* to the establishment of the Australian Research Council and the creation of the ‘unified’ university sector that incorporated technical, vocational and arts education. The discourse of practice-led research proceeds from these changes – and their equivalents elsewhere – and has contributed to the eventual (though still qualified) recognition of creative writing as a research practice, inaugurated in Australia in 2010 with the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, albeit that creative works were categorised as ‘non-traditional’ and required to be accompanied by a ‘justifying rationale’ (Krauth et al 2010: 1). But while Paul Magee is surely right to view research assessment procedures as ‘effectively a punitive mechanism for non-compliance as well’ (Magee 2012: 2), and is possibly right in decrying the outcomes as ‘such a waste product of dismally conformist gestures’ (6), the ERA can also be seen as a genuine advance on other, more exclusionary arrangements. For instance, until 2016, the terms of the annual Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) exercise denied creative writers in the Australian academy any opportunity to conform or

comply and thereby gain a foothold in the competition for research dollars and other forms of institutional capital.

Crucially, the historical and geographical contingency of the field may be illustrated by noting the increasingly divergent procedures of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). First established as the 'Research Selectivity Exercise' in 1986, then renamed the 'Research Assessment Exercise' in 1989, and known as the REF since its 2014 iteration, this regulatory solution to the management of academic research will for the forthcoming round in 2021 accept the research credentials of creative writing as being self-evident. In other words, it will accept that creative writing is indeed 'the same as research writing', a hugely consequential development that can, in part, be explained by the independence of the REF from the terms of the Frascati Manual.

In truth, the intellectual and policy environment in the UK is somewhat contradictory. Among the major funding bodies, neither The Leverhulme Trust nor The British Academy troubles to define 'research', though the term and its cognates are ubiquitous on their websites, and indeed in the titles of the schemes they support, while the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) offers this tautology in place of clarification: 'the AHRC's definition of research is as follows: research activities should primarily be concerned with research processes, rather than outputs' (2019). And while the AHRC does allow for the incorporation of creative practice into these processes, and welcomes the production of creative outputs, these only become eligible for funding if, in the all-too-familiar manoeuvre, they are 'accompanied by some form of documentation of the research process' and 'some form of textual analysis' of the outcome (AHRC 2019).

Governmental bodies such as Research England – formerly the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – do meanwhile operate according to the definition of research set out in the Frascati Manual. Yet the REF – which is administered by Research England – operates according to a definition that departs considerably, and helpfully, from the Frascati formula: 'For the purposes of the REF, research is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared' (REF2021 2019a: 92). This core definition applies to all outputs, regardless of discipline. It's as inclusive of creative writing as it is of climate science, and in one of its supplementary clauses is particularly sympathetic to artistic practice in making provision for 'the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights' (REF2021 2019a: 92). Should a work pass this 'threshold test of legitimacy' (Birch 2014) it is then judged against the key REF criteria of 'originality, significance and rigour' by a process of expert peer review and assigned to one of four levels, from 'nationally recognised' to 'world-leading' (REF2021 2019a: 86).

The precursor to the REF, the Research Assessment Exercise, operated according to the same definition and first accepted the submission of research outputs in the arts in 2001, with the suggestion – primarily for non-text outputs – that these should be accompanied by a 300-word supporting statement 'to assist the assessment process in instances where it is difficult to identify the precise nature of the research output' (RAE 2001a). Such statements were not mandatory, though it appears that most 'units of assessment' included them as a form of insurance against the uncertainties of 'self-evidence'. For Creative

Writing, specifically, the guidance required that each submission ‘should be accompanied by a brief statement highlighting its research content and significance’ (RAE 2001b), though as Jon Cook reports, ‘some universities chose not to return the work of lectures in creative writing in the 2001 RAE, perhaps because it was felt to be too risky, given... the tantalisingly vague nature of the definition of creative research (Cook 2013: 202).

While the guidance on framing such descriptive and contextualising information was minimal in 2001, and remained minimal for RAE 2008 and REF2014, for the forthcoming REF it is much fuller (REF2021 2019b: 49). Crucially, however, it now only pertains to non-text submissions. For creative writing, the research content will be assumed to be evident ‘without the need for additional information’ (REF2021 2019b: 49). Under ‘Authored books’ the guidance states:

It is anticipated that the research will normally be evident within the submitted ‘book’ and that no additional information is required.
Novels and poetry collections should be submitted in this category. (REF2021 2019b: 93)

And for ‘Chapter in book’:

It is anticipated that the research will normally be evident within the submitted chapter and that no additional information is required.
Short stories and individual poems should be submitted in this category or under journal article. (REF2021 2019b: 93) [2]

This development, and its intellectual justification, were anticipated and explained in an internal guidance document circulated in 2014 by Dinah Birch, Professor of Literature at the University of Liverpool, who chaired ‘Sub-panel 29: English Literature and Language’ at REF2014 and will assume the Chair of Main Panel D (Arts and Humanities) at REF2021. This is the panel to which creative writing outputs are submitted. The importance of her views on the research status of creative writing is therefore considerable, and worth introducing here into the public domain. [3]

In ‘Notes on the assessment of creative writing’, Professor Birch (2014) makes explicit the REF panel’s acceptance of such outputs as bona fide instances of research without the need for any supporting statement. This is to propose a clear distinction between creative writing and other practice-based research. Unlike non-text outputs, she states, ‘we would expect the research imperatives to be evident to an expert assessor within the text itself’, to which she adds that ‘previous research assessment exercises have not demonstrated the value of the submission of additional information’ (Birch 2014).

The benchmarks for the REF require that a submission in any discipline should share new insights, should result from a process of investigation, and should demonstrate originality, rigour and significance. All of this, Birch suggests, can be assumed to be self-evident in a work of creative writing. And while the process of investigation necessarily precedes the submission of the work, no documentation of the process is required since it will be ‘embodied’ in the work and will be identifiable ‘in the way in which the writer has

manipulated language, form, or genre in order to communicate the “new insights” that he or she wishes to share’ (Birch 2014). The process, in other words, is ‘inextricable’ from the writing, not something to be conceived or described separately. Indeed, the process ‘is that piece of writing’ (Birch 2014, emphasis in original).

Birch is clear that the REF panel is not concerned to assess the research that has gone into a project, and is not seeking to judge the accuracy or originality of the propositional knowledge it contains, so that (for instance) *The Merchant of Venice* ‘would not be assessed in terms of the accuracy and depth of Shakespeare’s research into mercantile practices in Venice. Nor would *The Winter’s Tale* be downgraded for setting a scene on the seacoast of Bohemia, or for its misleading representation of 16th-century approaches to the husbandry of sheep’ (Birch 2014). Rather, these works ‘would be assessed in terms of the new insights generated by Shakespeare’s exploration of ideas, in conjunction with the dramatic forms and poetic language that express and develop these ideas’ (Birch 2014).

This acknowledgement of the importance of form and language aligns of course with the priorities of any serious writer, and is reflected in Birch’s gloss on the criterion of ‘rigour’ in relation to creative writing. Rigour, she writes, is to be found in ‘the level of discipline and skill, and command of literary resources and tradition’ with which the new insights are shared (Birch 2014). Rigour, indeed, ‘is what defines every aspect of the texture of its language and form (rhythm, vocabulary, syntax, intertextuality, informed reference to previous literature, narrative structure, noteworthy contribution to developments within a literary field, genre, or sub-genre, etc, etc)’ (Birch 2014).

The informed reader – at home in the field of the literary, a fish in the waters of that tradition – will recognise such rigour, and will be able to assess the originality and significance of a work in the extent to which it exceeds the ‘predictable and formulaic’ both formally and thematically and thereby allows us to ‘think in new ways’ (Birch 2014). This isn’t, however, to insist that research quality in creative writing is to be found solely in the expressive or formal aspect. It might also be evidenced in terms of content, and Birch gives several examples, including ‘Hilary Mantel’s imaginative engagement with Tudor history in *Wolf Hall*; and/or questions of psychological and political agency in *Wolf Hall*’ (Birch 2014). Or it might be found in the exploration, questioning or extension of genre or generic conventions, for instance in ‘Virginia Woolf’s refinement of “stream of consciousness” fiction’ (Birch 2014). The categories of content, form and genre are neither separate nor mutually exclusive, as may be exemplified by Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, which extends ‘the limits of contemporary thinking about cloning and creativity through formal experimentation with narrative structure’ (Birch 2014). None of this is to exclude formally conservative writing, which might ‘skilfully exploit the traditional resources of an established genre in order to generate and share powerfully original ideas’ (Birch 2014).

The importance of these views is that they allow for the writing of literary works as integral to the professional practice of the writer-researcher in the academy. There need be no bifurcation of practice, because ‘creative writing’ is taken to be identical with (not analogous to, or equivalent to) ‘research writing’. In this modest internal memo, Birch offers a cogent intellectual justification for the scheduling of literary works as research

outputs, a justification that might stand as a key contribution to the ongoing consideration of creative writing in relation to the discourse of practice-led research. In doing so, she is aided by a definition of research that implicitly recognises the overextension of the philosophically contentious category of ‘knowledge’ as a plausible outcome for all forms of academic enquiry. The pursuit of ‘new insights’ (REF2021 2019a: 92) avoids the necessity for every academic pursuit to be a received, scientific conception of research that may be fundamentally inhospitable to an authentic artistic practice.

In one sense, however, the cogency of Birch’s argument may be less important than what the disparity between the REF and ERA requirements reveals about the contingency of the academic field. While the nature of the literary practice licenced by the REF now diverges from that licenced by ERA, neither depends on any lasting settlement of the art and knowledge debate. Either process may be viewed as provisional; either may be taken as illustrative of Brook’s ‘bureaucratic critique’ (2012: 5). Inarguably, however, the requirements of the REF are more beneficial to the status of writers in the academy, as well as being more protective of the integrity of their literary practice. And this suggests that a more promising consideration than whether ‘creative practice can really comprise research as it is defined in the Frascati Manual’ (Webb 2010: 3) is whether creative practice might be far better accommodated within a less restrictive or unsympathetic paradigm.

Notes

[1] The title of Webb’s paper is “‘Good to think with’: words, knowing and doing’ (2010). This and her many other contributions to the ‘meta-discourse’ of creative writing are themselves particularly ‘good to think with’, and though I depart from her particularly on the question of writing and research, my own position would be greatly impoverished without having her words to think with.

[2] Scriptwriting is not mentioned in the REF2021 guidance, though ‘dramaturgical works’ are included under ‘Other’, with the recommendation that they be accompanied by a supporting statement (REF 2019b: 97).

[3] Professor Birch gave permission for me to quote from this document in an email correspondence of April 2017.

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