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Academics' writing – a thing of beauty, a joy to behold

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EATAW conference, Royal Holloway, 19-21 June 2017

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Education Studies

This talk

- Not about ‘academic writing’ but about academics’ writing
- What considerations enter into it?
- (Especially in the humanities and social sciences)
- What is its character?
- Issues of audience/ responsibility/ accessibility
- Of thought and writing
- Of care and concern towards writing
- Could it/ should it be ‘better’?
- What might that mean?

The critics

- Stephen Pinker (USA) '*The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing*'
- Michael Billig (UK) – '*Learn How to Write Badly*'
- Bad writing; obscure writing – esp in social sciences
 - eg:
 - Sentences that are strings of jargon words
 - Conjoined sentences and paragraphs with no apparent link
 - Little in the way of a thesis
 - Belief that technicality is rigour – but the opposite is often the case (Pinker)
 - Lack of precision (Orwell)
 - Hiding behind other authors
 - Abusing scientific concepts (Sokal and Bricmont; & Sokal's hoax)
 - Limited vocabulary – limited range of words from the language
 - Scare quote marks sprinkled like confetti
 - Impenetrability/ Inaccessibility.

My approach here

- Not a critique as such
- Nor even to explore the writing experiments now in hand
- But to try to understand some of the conditions of writing by academics
 - For only then might thinking about writing as such become part of the culture of academic life
- But also somewhat autobiographical.

Initial considerations

- Academics are paid to write but seldom reflect on it/ talk about it/ write about it
- An invisible practice
 - Not dwelt on; not talked about ... (not in my experience ...)
 - ‘The death of the author’? (‘The Death and Resurrection of the Author’ - Irwin)
 - And even the death of the book (but ‘This is not the end of the book,’ Eco and Carriere)
- How can we expect our (PhD) students to write well if we do not dwell on it?
 - NB: plagiarism
- But crucial to our professionalism
 - The challenges on those academics who are being asked to ‘write for publication’, if writing does not bring with it satisfactions

Academic identity

- Our identity as academics, our 'academic identity'
- How many of us, when asked what we do, would respond with 'I am a writer'?

Conditions of academics' writing

- Publish or perish
 - Writing has become labour
 - The busyness of academic life
 - Gaming the system
 - Assumption that the audience understands
 - After all, a very small audience
 - Writing is simply a medium/ a vehicle, and warrants no interest in itself
 - And is a matter of 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter)
 - Academics are not really taught to write as such
 - A belittling matter - 'Of course, academics can write!'
 - The social sciences, humanities and the professional areas are influenced
- 7 by norms of expression in / write in the shadow of the hard sciences.

Writing well

- What is it to write well?
- Does it matter?
- Of course, there will be differences as to what is to count by ‘writing well’
- But that is much to the point
- Those different ideas as to what it might be to write well are seldom brought out in polite academic company
- Have we even articulated to ourselves what it is to write well?
 - What of ‘style’?
 - Of writing as a conversation with the reader?
- Distinguish academic writing as (a) making the simple complex and (b) making the complex simple. *The first is easy; the second is difficult.*
- Dare we try to give the reader pleasure?

Why does all this matter?

- Academic readers may misunderstand
 - We are duped too easily – by single words, stock phrases ..
- But more especially:
- The humanities and social sciences are somewhat in the dock for their incomprehensibility
- They have the potential to reach out to (world)wide audiences
- And we are now enjoined to have ‘impact’
- Our writing has to reach out, and have effects in the world
 - Not least in a ‘post-truth’ era
- But/ and the humanities and social sciences have particular potential in
 - 9 helping to develop the public sphere.

Multiple texts, multiple audiences

- Books, journals, blogs, articles, reports
- Academic, professional, lay audiences
- But 'lay' audiences vary
- Across communities, politics, professions
- Each text is its own genre
- BUT many texts will have multiple audiences
- - and it is a globalised world ...
- Can a single text be crafted that reaches out to multiple audiences, and across the world?

Crafting a text

- The very concept of crafting a text
 - The crafting of a paragraph
 - Its appositeness here (the concept of ‘craft’ (cf ‘*The Craftsman*’, Sennett))
 - Polishing, nuancing, shaping ...
 - The impressionist painter, the sculptor, the playwright ...
 - Story-telling
 - Argument, argumentation, thesis
 - The poverty of abstracts
 - ‘*The readability of scientific abstracts is steadily decreasing.*’ (Report from Sweden – 707,000 abstracts over 130+ years (THE, 6 April 17, p11)).
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- The poverty of writing – a limited array of words from the language.
 - Words are jewels.

Writing matters

Writing as:

- Enclosure: a withdrawing into oneself
- And then into openness
- An engagement with oneself
- A putting aside
 - cf hiding behind others; inauthenticity/ secondhandedness
- Solitude – listening to oneself
- All the while hearing the voices of others
 - ‘The conversations of mankind’ (Oakeshott)
- Austerity/ Monasticism
- ¹² Finding oneself/ becoming oneself/ developing one’s own voice.

Writing challenges

- Newman spoke of the ‘bodily pain’ that writing caused him
- Dare we admit this? I do.
 - Writing as struggle. (Hamilton and Pitt)
 - ‘Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of painful illness.’ (Orwell, p10)
- How could it be otherwise?
- Exposure – no action replay
- Multiple tasks
- Multiple audiences
- The crafting of a paragraph
- 13 • What is a paragraph? (Do we care?)

Thinking and writing

- Heidegger – ‘*What is Called Thinking?*’
- ‘In universities especially, the danger is still very great that we misunderstand what we hear of thinking.’ (p13)
- Do we think about thinking?
- On not ‘writing up one’s research’.
- The thinking comes through the writing and the writing is part of and perhaps the most important part of the research.

What is academic writing?

- What is academic writing?
- Writing by academics
- Three *interlinked* matters:
- Communication?
- Audience(s)?
- The text itself.
- NB: even an academic paper may be read by multiple audiences.

What is good academic writing?

- (1) It comes out of deep thinking
 - With (2) a will to communicate to a particular (set of) audience(s)
 - (1) without (2) is 'scholasticism' (Bourdieu)
 - (2) without (1) is frivolity, triviality and (probably) ideology.
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- ie, a questioning but also
 - an abiding concern for the reader
 - And so has a transparency
 - (If the reader cannot understand, whose fault is that?)

On the responsibilities of the (academic) writer

(with Habermas' winged chariot drawing near)

- Sincerity
- Truthfulness
- Appropriateness
- Concern – for the topic
 - And for the reader
- Aspiration – to inform, to educate, to transform ...
- Courage – to speak out.

By the way

- Academic professionalism
- The wordcount
- The topic
- The structure
- The 'agenda'
- And on time, please.

Adjectives of academics' writing

- Sound
- Scholarly
- Accessible
- Synoptic
- Rigorous
- Authentic
- Brave
- Eloquent
- Elegant
- Wise
- Stylish
- Poetic
- (Wit)

Conclusions

- How can we write well if we do not think and talk about writing?
- How can we give others satisfaction in/ through our writing if we get no satisfaction from our own writing?
- This is now a profoundly important matter
- For the sake of academic work and its perception in the world
(esp in the humanities, social sciences and professional areas)
- But also to enable the academic world to give to the world all that it has to offer
- And so help to develop the public sphere
- Can we, therefore, start a conversation about academics' writing?



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