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## *The Preface as Exegesis*

### Introduction (1): About Prefacing

A preface provides a way into understanding a book: by stating its subject and scope, by commenting on techniques employed or themes addressed, or by focussing on a central or contentious issue. Prefacing involves an explicatory introduction to a reading of a work.

Some writers are more prone to prefacing than others. In the last century, three great exponents of the preface have been Graham Greene, Vladimir Nabokov and John Barth. Greene's prefaces are usually succinct, genuinely concerned with aspects of the writing process, and sometimes wryly humorous. Here is a short list of his concerns:

- in the preface to *The Third Man* (a novel written as the scenario for a film) Greene analyses his process of writing for films, making points about the difficulties he has in writing scripts directly in dialogue and his need to write a prose version first; he also examines aspects of co-authorship between himself as writer and the director Carol Reed;
- the preface to *The Quiet American* is in the form of a letter addressed to two friends (R  n   and Phuong) with whom Greene regularly stayed in Saigon, reassuring them that they are not characters in the novel (even though their apartment and Phuong's name are used in the book); more generally this short preface is about the rearrangements of place and history - the manipulating of raw materials - that are part of the fiction writer's process;
- the preface to *The Comedians* is also in the form of a letter, this time to a publisher, A.S. Frere; this preface analyses the role of the first-person narrator and its regular confusion with the writer's own voice, in a context of generally examining characterisation in a work of fiction;
- the Introduction to *In Search of a Character: Two African Journals* is interesting because it prefaces two works that are in themselves about the writing process; here Greene points out how the two journals were the genesis points for the novels *A Burnt-Out Case* and *The Heart of the Matter*; the following excerpt sounds very much like student exegeses I have read:

I went to the Belgian Congo in January 1959 with a novel already beginning to form in my head by way of a situation - a stranger who turns up in a remote leper-colony. I am not as a rule a note-taker...but on this occasion I was bound to take notes so as to establish an authentic medical background. Even making notes day by day in the form of a journal I made mistakes which had to be corrected at a later stage by my friend Dr Lechat. As a journal had been forced on me I took advantage of the opportunity to talk aloud to myself, to record scraps of imaginary dialogue and incidents, some of which found their way into my novel, some of which were discarded. Anyway for better or worse this was how the novel started, though it was four months after my return from the Congo before I set to work. (Greene 'Introduction' 1971: 7)

## Introduction (2): About Exegeses

Students are generally mystified by, or fearful of, the exegesis. In her *TEXT* article 'Writing in the Dark: Exorcising the Exegesis', Gaylene Perry (a PhD student at the time) wrote:

...the creative work coupled with an exegesis has no model that I can think of in published works, other than antiquated texts, and certainly not of the kind where the author herself has written the exegesis.  
(Perry 1998)

There are, in fact, a myriad number of these 'exegeses'. They are called Prefaces, Introductions, Forewords, Afterwords, etc, etc. And they don't only appear attached to the works they focus on and introduce: exegetical activity occurs also dislocated from the original work. Some of these exegetical writings are more comprehensively explanatory of the work they comment on than others. But the practice of a writer attaching to a fiction text a commentary co-text in a non-fiction form is well established.

Still, the mystified concern of students regarding the appropriateness of the exegetical exercise is echoed by Jeannette Winterson:

It is a strange time; the writer is expected to be able to explain his or her work as though it were a perplexing machine supplied without an instruction manual. The question 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did. (Winterson 1995: 165)

I will come back to Winterson and the idea of saying things twice, but for the moment some investigation of the term 'exegesis' is required.

### The Term 'Exegesis'

For recent definitions I have referred to two versions of the Oxford dictionary. *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2nd edition, 1996 thinks an exegesis is a 'critical explanation of a text, especially of Scripture'. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 5th edition, 1964 said it was an 'exposition, especially of Scripture'. 'Exposition' or 'critical explanation'? In either case, in these definitions we are concerned with the Bible as the prime focus. In the last 40 years the meaning of 'exegesis' has not changed much. What is especially constant is the idea of there being a *canonical* text that the exegesis supports: i.e. a *canonical* text that *needs* explanations, a text so important to the culture that the culture demands it must have interpretative texts (commentaries, treatises, etc.) that cement the work's place firmly in the culture's reading.

I don't need to tease out the ironies here. As canonically-inclined institutions, universities are entirely happy with the idea of the exegesis. It speaks their language. In its current definitions, the exegesis confirms the notion of the canonical as central to the culture and is therefore attractive to the concerns of universities. The promotion of the exegesis as a significant part of the creative PhD has been, I think, the key reason why the creative PhD has been allowed into Australian universities.

But the Oxford dictionary has already subverted the idea. The fact that even the Bible, the central Book in western culture, needs exegeses to explain it over and over and relate it back into the culture - otherwise we'll all be left in the dark, or the Bible will be left behind - is highly significant here. The shortcomings of The Scriptures in making themselves available always to the ordinary reading public - or even to intellectuals - is

a given in the culture. Our central Book is mainly a mystery to us, and this idea of Scriptural shortcoming in meaningfulness has formed a cultural basis for how we think texts work. About serious literature of every kind, not just the Bible, there pertains the same syndrome: if you *can* understand it, it's trash; if you *can't*, it's culturally important.

Creative writers write into this maelstrom, this quicksand, this dingo trap. For example, novelists today wait in fear - immediately following the publication of their novels - for the critics either to cut the work adrift, or else, iron things out. Critics now tell the culture, via the mass media, whether or not a work is linked to central issues - i.e. is valuable to the culture - or is merely tangential. Writers *and readers* see the process of Criticism as the way of exegetical explanation between books and the culture. In the real world, as things currently stand, the writing of the exegeses for novels, plays, and collections of poems, has been mainly given to the critics. But although Criticism has possessively set itself up as the exegetical site in the culture, it is, in fact, a weak site. Reviewing is more about taste and fashion, economics and entertainment, celebrity and sensationalism, than it is about the meanings and workings of the creative piece under consideration. And English Departments in universities, who once made their living out of providing the exegetical function - explaining creative writing to the culture - now are more acutely concerned with theory/philosophy, which itself needs exegeses.

With the Bible there is a cultural excuse for this sort of ongoing explaining. Those who did the writing and translating for the Bible's original culture as readership are no longer around to explain it to the current readership. Today their texts need exegeses. Writing that stays current in a culture needs more and more exegetical support as the culture develops.

Writers who produce serious texts in today's culture are called on - to give interviews on radio and TV, to write supplementary articles, to appear at festivals, at Writers Week gatherings, at conferences, at local group meetings and in workshops - to provide exposition of the relationship between their writing and the culture they share with their readership. This is the exegetical process in action today. Every time a writer is asked to provide a paper, give an informal talk, or contribute an article to a journal in the current Australian or international contexts *and in so doing talk about their own work*, they are asked to perform an exegetical function.

The idea of exegesis is not a recent imposition of universities upon creative writing; it is a long-term and also current feature of our overall culture. For almost two thousand years (as long as the word 'exegesis' can be backtracked in its significance) people have asked for explanations that linked written works produced in the culture to main concerns of the culture. Partly this has been a low culture plea to high culture. Partly it has been an element of ongoing high culture debate over contentious issues. 'Tell me further what you mean - analyse and dissect and orientate - so that I can more fully understand and believe you,' the culture has asked of texts on the one hand. But also it has said: 'Tell me further what you mean, so that I can better argue with you.' These are, I think, the two arms of the nature of exegesis.

### **Writers and the Exegetical**

As indicated above, the operation of the exegetical is part of the professional writer's life in on-going western society. In publishing their creative work with prefacing introductions, or by writing separate works specifically concerned with their own previously published or up-coming material, writers at least since Shakespeare and Milton have stepped beyond the position of dislocated creator, of otherwise-silenced author. In other words, they have provided their audiences with helpfully interpretative commentaries (see Shakespeare's Chorus in *Henry V* and Milton's 'Argument' throughout *Paradise Lost*). The creative writer is not separate from the culture such that

she has only one voice to speak with. The creative writer is a legitimate expositor of her works; and she shares this with others. The notion that the writer is somehow disqualified in the exegetical role derives from the unreconstructed idea of the exegetical as described above - where the canonical or becoming canonical must have 'other' commentary (which becomes itself canonical). Plenty of writers have dared to disregard the unproductive notion that only others can explain their work, and have taken on the multiple role of - what is it? - writer who is also self-critic and self-reader.

I might here reiterate forcefully that prefaces are not always titled 'Preface'. Sometimes the writer's provision of a way into understanding the book is called an 'Introduction' or 'Author's Note' or 'Foreword', etc. Or, as Graham Greene often did, the prefacing is done in the form of a 'Letter to...' somebody. (This mix of the personal and the public is significant in the context of the exegetical.) Occasionally the function of the preface is fulfilled (ironically perhaps) by an 'Afterword', the seeming antithesis of a *pre*-face - a post-face, if you like. And sometimes, as in *Henry V*, the preface - as supplied at the start by the Chorus beginning 'O! for a muse of fire...' - continues periodically throughout the piece, the exegetical being interwoven into the main drama almost like a sub-plot.

No matter what it is called, this prefacing or exegetical activity is a framing device positioned between the world created in the fiction (or play or poem) and the world the reader inhabits. It is aimed at creating a link between the creative work, its milieu of production, and the broader field into which it is projected. It is not fictocritical; it involves a narrative voice obviously different from that employed in the creative text. While it comments on the mechanisms of the main text, it is itself an associated site and therefore a mechanism of the main text too. It is *a part* of the main work, but *apart* from it. As is the case with the academic higher degree exegesis.

Universities are asking higher degree creative writers to express not only what their research is doing (the creative product) but also what they think the culture thinks about what they are doing (the researched exegesis). I cannot see a problem with this. If the creative product tests the writer's primary perceptions on the culture, and the exegesis tests the writer's secondary perceptions on cultural knowledge overall (including how he came by it and how he uses it), then we have a scenario for progressive critique in the culture. The creative product pushes the culture forward; the exegesis provides an analysis of the reasons why, from the writer's point of view.

Most readings confuse the voice of the Preface with that of the Author. But, as I suggested above, the prefacing voice is more likely to be the voice of the author in a range of disguises - as critic pre-empting the critics, as reader pre-empting the reading, as apologist or teacher - and sometimes also as the actual writer, the mechanist and maker. To some extent, the Preface is an acknowledgment of Barthes' 'Death of the Author' because it is a site conscious of the Reading of the main text - it acknowledges that the reader has the power to make the work have meaning, and it acts to intervene. Prefacing might be seen as the Author wanting another chance, wanting to rise from the Barthesian Death, wanting a resurrection out of the main text in order to explain...in other words, wanting a pre-emptive strike against possible death-dealing others/critics/readers!

In this context, the PhD writer's exegesis is a positive concept - it provides the opportunity for a pre-emptive strike by the writer against the examiners. In the real-world context today, as opposed to decades ago, Australian publishers do not encourage the exegetical. The preface is 'out' as far as current major Australian publishing goes. I suspect this is so because mainstream publishers perceive that a preface makes the work an even bigger target for sharp-shooting critics. On the other hand, writers' festivals and journal publications - basically, the non-reviewed areas of writerly output - fully encourage writers to comment on their writing. This is sadly ironic: mainstream publishing considers creative writers good enough as the producers of new works for

insertion into the culture, but not good enough as expositors of the texts and processes they are vitally involved with. While the mainstream publishing industry may think Australian writers bad at the exegetical, Australian universities, by stepping in to give them much-needed practice, might be seen as greatly furthering the creative writers' cause. The University here can be seen to support the old concept of the writer as both maker and interpreter of her/his work.

I would now like to look at two examples of creative writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who have in their writing shown a particular concern for the exegetical - that is, a concern to cement a link between their creative work and what they knew of the culture and readership they wrote into. Vladimir Nabokov used forewords (and afterwords) - that is, non-novelistic, 'authorial' writing attached to novels - on a regular basis as the means to creating a link *for the reader* between his work and the culture. In these exegeses Nabokov's writing was entertainingly wry, and highly perceptive of ways of reading (including exposure of the vulnerabilities of the literary criticism of his time). Prior to this, Edgar Allan Poe provided possibly the best-known example of *unattached* exegetical writing from the last 150 years. His essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' was an exegesis for his poem 'The Raven' (written four years earlier).

### **Nabokov's Forewording and Afterwording**

Nabokov was an academic as well as a writer. He graduated from Cambridge and became Professor of Russian and European Literature at Cornell University, New York. He was, in his lifetime, a significant novelist in several home cultures - Russia, the United States, Europe, and eventually the world. His experience equipped him with distinct advantages regarding the exegetical. He knew about his own works, and he knew about the differences of reading between individuals, between sub-cultures, and between cultures overall. His prefaces anatomise the function of the exegetical - its plying of the territory between the writer, the work, the reader and the culture.

Nabokov's Forewords are delightfully instructive. In them, a lot of legitimate-seeming prefacing activity goes on: about how and where works were written; about devices used and themes pursued; about problems experienced in translation from Russian into English; about comparisons between readership cultures - Europe *versus* America; and so on.

But for the publication of *Lolita* in America the Foreword was written by 'John Ray, Jr, PhD' (Nabokov 'Foreword' 1961). Dr Ray was the editor selected by the executor of the 'Humbert Humbert' estate ('H.H.' was, of course, a pseudonym) to deal with the *Lolita* manuscript and see it to publication. Dr Ray, who had been awarded the Poling Prize for his work 'Do the senses make Sense?' provided a preface that dealt with matters such as: protection of real persons on whom characters in the manuscript were based; problems of censorship with reference to other cases in American literature; and an analysis of the psycho-pathology of the central character including quotation from expert opinion and statistics relevant to the area. Of course, Dr John Ray, Jr did not exist, and the reader only has to turn to the afterword to find this confession:

After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray... who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one - may strike me, in fact - as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book. A few points, however, have to be discussed; and the autobiographic device may induce mimic and model to blend.

Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as 'What is the author's purpose?' or still worse 'What is the guy trying to say?'

Now, I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination - which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another. (Nabokov '[Afterword]' 1961: 328)

The afterword continues for eight pages. Ostensibly it is a discussion of the differences between pornography and didactic fiction, with *Lolita* argued as an example of the latter - and is valuable as such. But Nabokov also parodies the prefacing process here, and analyses its usefulness and dangers. As with all Nabokov's exegetical writing, he spends time talking about what he calls 'the nerves of the novel...the secret points, the subliminal coordinates by means of which the book is plotted' (Nabokov '[Afterword]' 1961: 334). With *Lolita* he makes a point of saying he realises 'very clearly' that aspects of the mechanism 'will be skimmed over or not noticed' (334) by certain readers. This idea of pre-empting the faulty or superficial reading, and of pointing to particular readings, is typical of prefaces and also of student exegeses.

Nabokov is aware of the ironies of needing to say things twice - of directing and preventing readings. In his forewords and afterwords he fools around with readers and critics so much because, as a creative writer, he can't believe the extent of the gap that exists between his work and the culture, nor the extent he knows he must work at to bridge that gap. Nevertheless, Nabokov revelled in the exegetical. The site of the exegesis - at the intersection of authorship and readership, of learning and criticism, of new ideas and established culture - made it for him an irresistible field of play. In the Foreword to *The Defence* he writes:

My story was difficult to compose, but I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin's life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow's sanity. In this connection, I would like to spare the time and effort of hack reviewers - and, generally, persons who move their lips when reading and cannot be expected to tackle a dialogueless novel when so much can be gleaned from its foreword - by drawing their attention to...  
(Nabokov 'Foreword' 1967: 7-8)

...and here he gives a catalogue of the iterated chess-related images employed in the novel along with an analysis of his intentions for their useful interpretation.

This is an interesting paragraph because it demonstrates the writer's internal conflict at the exegetical site. In its first sentence the paragraph shows the writer beginning excitedly and generously to explain the difficulties in origin and growth of a major strategy in the composition of his work. In the next sentence, the writer swings radically and begins an attack on readers he does not want, i.e. those who won't appreciate the classy literary manoeuvres he claims he makes in the novel. Nabokov plays mercilessly with notions of educated readership and critique here, but behind it all lurks the generic author's fear of antipathetic readings by those with power - power to assess and cursorily dismiss the work; those with power to negate the value and intentions of the work. Much like some postgraduate students, Nabokov here demonstrates irritability with the exegetical site. It's as if the need to say things twice can indeed be an imposition on the writer.

The Introduction to *Bend Sinister* (from which I quote at some length following) provides an indication of how committedly exegetical Nabokov was in his prefaces:

There exist few things more tedious than a discussion of general ideas inflicted by author or reader upon a work of fiction. The purpose of this foreword is not to show that *Bend Sinister* belongs or does not belong to 'serious literature' (which is a euphemism for the hollow profundity and the ever-welcome commonplace)...

The story in *Bend Sinister* is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state. My characters are not 'types,' not carriers of this or that 'idea'...

The main theme of *Bend Sinister*... is the beating of Krug's loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to - and it is for the sake of the pages about David and his father that the book was written and should be read...

The plot starts to breed in the bright broth of a rain puddle. The puddle is observed by Krug from a window of the hospital where his wife is dying. The oblong pool, shaped like a cell that is about to divide, reappears subthematically throughout the novel, as an ink blot in Chapter Four, an inkstain in Chapter Five, spilled milk in Chapter Eleven, the infusoria-like image of ciliated thought in Chapter Twelve, the footprint of a phosphorescent islander in Chapter Eighteen, and the imprint a soul leaves in the intimate texture of space in the closing paragraph. The puddle thus kindled and rekindled in Krug's mind remains linked up with the image of his wife not only because he had contemplated the inset sunset from her death-bedside, but also because this little puddle vaguely evokes in him my link with him: a rent in his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty...

It may be asked if it is really worth an author's while to devise and distribute these delicate markers whose very nature requires that they be not too conspicuous. Who will bother to notice... that 'the child is bold' in the allusion to immigration (Chapter Eighteen) is a stock phrase used to test a would-be American citizen's reading ability; ... that the 'other rivermaid's father' (Chapter Seven) is James Joyce... and that the last word of the book is not a misprint (as assumed in the past by at least one proof-reader)? Most people will not even mind having missed all of this... (Nabokov 'Introduction' 1974: 6-11)

Nabokov was here concerned to shift the focus of discussion of his novel away from closed-shop critical and academic literary territory and into the general cultural landscape. But he was also motivated by personal concern to protect his work. His embracing of the exegetical was a highly-aware response to later twentieth-century western culture's growing enthusiasm to anatomise the relationship between supposedly fictional worlds and supposedly real worlds. Nabokov identified, emphasised and elaborated the territory of the preface as a key exegetical site. He also began a critique of its powers to connect with readership, and its vulnerabilities. The apparent desperation felt in some of his prefacing is reflected in current PhD student concerns. In recent decades the writer doesn't only have to justify himself/herself to the culture in the primary text, but also in the exegetical activity associated with it.

I should not fail to mention that Nabokov's 'novel' *Pale Fire* is entirely a parody of the 'scholarly exegesis' - as Page Stegner noted in his Introduction to *The Portable Nabokov* (Nabokov 1971: xxii). *Pale Fire* consists of a 999-line poem in heroic

couplets followed by a 200-page Commentary with Index. It looks like a PhD submission. It masquerades as a creative product with exegesis attached ('written' by two different characters, yet also written by a single author). But overall, it becomes a novel. *Pale Fire* proposes that the exegesis can be contained within the notion of the creative work itself - that it is an integral part of the main fiction.

### Unattached Exegeses: the Case of Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition'

Exegetical writing by well-known authors has been published uncoupled or detached from the creative products they refer to. In essays, interviews, lectures and books about their writing, writers have published extensively exegetically.

One of the most interesting exegeses, from the point of view of teachers of creative writing, is Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition'. Published in 1846, it was a long and detailed account of the writing of his poem 'The Raven' (1842). It was a pioneer in the genre of self-critique:

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be, written by any author who would - that is to say, who could - detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say - but, perhaps, the authorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers - poets in especial - prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy - an ecstatic intuition - and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought - at the true purposes seized only at the last moment - at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view - at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable - at the cautious selections and rejections - at the painful erasures and interpolations - in a word, at the wheels and pinions - the tackle for scene-shifting - the step-ladders and demon-traps - the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*.

I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell, are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner. (Poe 743)

It goes on. It is a classic piece of exegetical writing. In meticulous detail, it follows the thread of the process from 'initial consideration' to 'the very last line of the very last stanza' of the creation of 'The Raven' (Poe 750). Here Poe attempted to demystify writing processes in hope of gaining greater relevance for literary creation in a culture changing from obsession with the transcendental towards concern for the practical. Essentially Poe wanted to explain why and how the writer works, in order to allow the possibility of equality between the positions of culture and writing, i.e. of reader and writer.

In his 1926 discussion of 'The Philosophy of Composition', the American critic Joseph Wood Krutch credited Poe with having a profound effect on the development of American literature, not only through his creative work, but in a major way through his role as a widely-read 'fearless and caustic' critic.



Before the first of his critiques appeared in the [*Southern Literary Messenger*] Poe had already begun to produce a new kind of literature, and this fact made it inevitable that, granted the gift of exposition which was his to so striking a degree, he should become a remarkable example of that sort of critic whose function is not primarily judicial. Neither intellectual detachment nor catholicity of taste could be expected of him, but because he had, even when he was least conscious of the fact, his own practice to defend, he was bound to write with passion; and because of his powers of rationalization he could not but formulate with remarkable clarity the principles which he drew from a consideration of his own works. (Krutch 22)

Writing at the time of the development of the first schools of creative writing in America, Krutch identified the kind of writer and critic Poe was, and it correlates significantly with a generic description of the exegesis-bound research student in Australia today. Krutch describes Poe as: a passionate writer - possibly involved in a new kind of writing - with his 'own practice to defend', who seeks a way of making clear 'the principles' underlying the work produced; and out of this seeking comes not simply an exposition of the writing of the particular work, but also the potential for advances in the culture's criticism/reading in general.

The creations of [Poe's] imagination satisfy perfectly his critical theories because the critical theories were made to fit the works; but there are many worse ways than this inductive one for arriving at generalizations which are...illuminating. (Krutch 22)

On the road towards major debates of the later twentieth century, Krutch considered aspects of writerly intention, and how these intersected with writerly self-critique. Poe's aim, Krutch claimed, in 'The Philosophy of Composition' exegesis was to inform the readership about his own work, but also, to challenge the supposed predominance of the critical industry which mainly approaches the cultural explaining exercise without knowledge of the writer's intentions.

Most published creative works are read in our culture (including by the critical industry) without exegetical support. The idea of supplementary commentary to a printed work of fiction (even as in the case of an appended CD, etc) still seems alien in spite of technological advances. The convention that new creative works must survive alone (without authorial gloss) ensures that the culture - used to propping up the canon via exegesis - retains the right to decide, through Criticism, about that work's value. Readerships supposedly benefit from the fact that an author's commentary is thought to compromise the independence of the reader's input/experience; and critics don't relish the idea of the writer doing a comprehensive self-critical job before the advanced copy of the book arrives in their hands. New creative writers probably don't realise how fully constrained they are by these processes. Considering Poe's pioneering American work, it is ironic to observe today that the most prestigious degrees for creative writing readily available in the United States are Masters of Fine Arts (MFAs) where no exegesis is required. In the US, MFAs suffer the same critical fate as normally-published works: examiner/critics assess them, point-blank. In Australia, higher degree candidates have the opportunity to 'detail...the processes' as Poe strove to do. This introduces a sensible mechanism for candidates to defend their work in the current cultural context, but it does require that the candidates be able to read their own work as well as they can write it.

Krutch also raised another idea relevant to our current accepted understanding of how the process from writer to reader must proceed. Today it is not fashionable for critics to talk about the writer's life, psychology, predilections, bizarre obsessions, weaknesses, partnerships, love of little things, famous fallings down, etc. However, Poe had no late

twentieth-century hang-ups. In writing his exegesis, he included among his literary concerns a comprehensive view of his living concerns:

That legend of himself which he fashioned in a manner so marvellously inclusive that it employs as material everything from the events of his daily life to the products of his imagination is finally completed by his interpretation. His criticism inscribes a curve within which everything else is included; it unifies all the various aspects of his life and work... (Krutch 30)

Krutch was (in 1926) free enough of a multitude of influences (which we in 2002 are prey to) to suggest that Criticism should usefully include the view of the writer upon her own work and life. Recent theories balk at this. Even so, today Australian academia seeks to track the relationship between writer and product, via the exegesis, perhaps especially because of how it has been variously and intermittently ignored or questioned over the last 150 years. In requiring an exegesis attached to a creative product, and in their overall conservatism, the universities are seeking reinstatement of a mode of expression that has been stifled particularly in the last half century.

It is an irony, I think, that journalism in the twentieth century has been obsessed with objectivity and personal non-involvement when the real idea of 'journalism' - the keeping of a daily written record - is validly concerned with the personal, subjective, impressionistic account. Creative writers too are clearly involved in the journalistic. The daily is the business of novelists and poets and dramatists. Their account of 'the daily' is conceivably the best on hand in the culture, because it is not influenced by the workaday exigencies of employment for a newspaper or some other media device. The daily is perhaps most significantly a detailing of the progress of the non-ephemeral, the enduring, the very slow changing - those aspects that truly define the movement and constant reorientation of the culture. Poe was a journalist: he worked for and managed newspapers. I think his pioneering ideas about the creative writer's exegetical impulse - the need to explain mechanisms - were based in an understanding of this deeply journalistic. The writer's journal (sometimes now presented as an exegesis in postgraduate submissions) is not an irrelevancy or an easy task; it is a demanding and complex mode of writing. Properly conceived and constructed, it traces a daily writerly practice in terms of the subterranean flow of the culture. This is especially not an easy task for postgraduate students, who are normally writers at the beginning of their careers. To be aware of culture is probably the hardest thing to do within the culture. But universities ask this too of exegesis writers.

Poe's exegesis was written 150 years ago, but the coyness of the creative writer still exists: there is still a reluctance to reveal the 'mechanism' (or 'behind the scenes... properties') (Poe 742, 743) of the writer's work - either because writers are embarrassed by it, or because they don't bother to analyse it. Universities are now insisting - on behalf of the culture - that the writer knuckle down to the task Poe outlined. Creative writing contributes hugely to understanding the shape, direction and concerns of the culture; the culture requires to know the processes by which it is being so successfully analysed.

In 'The Philosophy of Composition' Poe was infatuated with the linear - 'Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen' (742) - and not surprisingly his exegesis is concerned to point out the linearity both of his poem's narrative and of his *modus operandi*. The linear was the cultural imperative of the mid-nineteenth century, and Poe's exegesis shows it. Indeed, any exegesis should reveal the cultural imperatives of the time (while also challenging them, where necessary). But the key and surprising thing in 'The Philosophy of Composition' is that this piece of writing is about discovering 'the mechanism', as Poe terms it, *of other pieces* of writing. His

investigating the 'mode' of construction of 'The Raven' was derived out of his desire to critique and understand other works. 'The Philosophy of Composition' begins:

Charles Dickens, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of 'Barnaby Rudge,' says - 'By the way, are you aware that [William] Godwin wrote his [novel] "Caleb Williams" backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done' (742).

Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition' is about revealing 'mechanisms' and discovering 'modes' of creative writing in general - and like Nabokov's concern for 'the nerves' of the work, it can be described as writing by writers in pursuit of the act of writing. Poe helps us significantly to define the exegetical. It is deep-level commentary on individual process aware of deep-level cultural process.

### **On the writer not deigning to say things twice: Winterson and Barth**

...if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did. (Winterson 165)

Jeannette Winterson, in the article 'A Work of My Own' in *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, refers to the idea that the exegetical should be regarded as anathema to the creative writer's purpose and need. Her suggestion that the writer might want to state the issues of a work in only one way seems elitist and isolationist. It denies the existence of different genres, different generations, different audiences and readerships. It cuts itself off from the expanding contexts that provide the ripple effect outwards from a single creative work.

The irony of Winterson having to say in non-novel form that she won't say anything in non-novel form is observable, and in 'A Work of My Own' she acknowledges the fact: 'But I have said these things in *Sexing the Cherry*,' (Winterson 169) she protests. 'But I have said these things in *Art & Lies*,' (173) she protests again. It seems she takes on a battle with the exegetical while already knowing she has lost it. In a subtly perceptive way, she plays out the drama between writer and exegesis and the whole culture calling.

To talk about my own work is difficult. If I must talk about it at all I would rather come at it sideways, through the work of writers I admire, through broader ideas about poetry and fiction and their place in the world. (Winterson 165)

On the other hand, John Barth has revelled in the opportunity to say things twice, and has extended this to saying things even three or four times. When his early novels (including *The Floating Opera* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*) - mainly published in the 1950s and 1960s - were republished in new format in the 1980s, he wrote new forewords for them. In 1995, he republished these forewords in a collection together, with a further foreword for them titled 'Four Forewords'. Talking about the process of talking about one's own/previous works, he said:

As I am, for better or worse, the sort of wayfarer who keeps a mindful eye on his backtrail not only through a story in progress but from book to book as well - "deciding where to go by determining where I am by reviewing where I've been," says somebody somewhere in those books - I addressed that work of retrospection [i.e. the writing of four new forewords] with some curiosity, along with a skipperly interest in dead-reckoning my position. To paraphrase E.M. Forster,

how could I tell what I think about what I've said until I saw what I said about it? (Barth 254)

Barth uses hiking and sailing terms to develop the concept of the exegetical. The 'ambivalent experience of surveying my backtrail,' he says, involves the maxim that '[t]o plot a fix, your careful navigator takes multiple bearings' (Barth x, 256). The exegetical is a process of attempting not to get lost - seeing and re-seeing what has been written. And that process is valuable not only for the works themselves (and therefore for their readers) but also for the writer:

In the process of so saying, seeing and re-seeing (I see now), I worked out [my first] novels' genesis and my own... Narcissism? I call it narrative navigation. (Barth 254)

Exegetical writing orientates the writer, the written and the read. No writer can imagine that saying it once will say it for all time for all readers, or even for one reader in the immediate present. Barth indicates that writers must reread and rewrite concerning their own works in order to keep in touch with them, and in order to keep them in touch with others/their context. There is always correspondence to be entered into. Especially now in the twenty-first century, the position of the writer in the culture is not oracular: it is interactive.

Winterson knows this. It's a pity that her irony is so compellingly misleading for research higher degree students:

It is a strange time; the writer is expected to be able to explain his or her work as though it were a perplexing machine supplied without an instruction manual. (Winterson 165)

Works of fiction and poetry are, indeed, 'perplexing machines'. Why shouldn't they be? They are devoted to examining, critiquing and progressing culture at deep levels. While artworks operate at deep levels there will be the need for 'instruction manuals' - for exegeses.

## Conclusion

The delights in explaining again about a creative work can be equal to the delights of actually writing it - a point Winterson only subtly admits to, but which Poe initiated, Greene embraced, Nabokov extemporised upon, and Barth is making a career out of. Exegetic activity provides opportunity for postgraduate writers to 'speak twice' about the literary nerves of their work, about the creative mechanisms driving it, and about the personal and cultural orientations that inform and frame and guide it. Current student exegetical activity reinvigorates the territory of the preface - a significant territory of information, perspective and debate.

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