CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

THE DOMAINS OF THE WRITING PROCESS

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world...
—William Butler Yeats

Introduction: The fiction writer’s body in its environment
Ecologies are studies of organisms in their environment, and the organisms I am
interested in are fiction writers. Their environment ranges widely: the writer’s
ecosystem is potentially the whole world as presented by the culture, but also it
includes the world’s replication — or distortion or augmentation or essentialization
in the writer’s mind. And there are levels or fields of engagement important to
writers stepped from the outer through to the inner world — domains of experience
layered between the two poles of the real and the imagined. The writing process
can be described in terms of moving about — of mobility, portability and itinerancy
— amongst a series of spaces from outside to inside that constitute the writer’s
creative territory.

The behavior of writers in their ecosystem is not well understood. Here is
an example: the general public believes that fiction writers sit in high, narrow
rooms with doors and windows shut, making it all up. This is not even half the
truth. Writers are hunters and gatherers in the real world; what they garner they
store in their heads. Continually they pass between the real world and their stored
world. This process of passing between — this weaving/merging of inner and outer
environments — creates fiction. The fiction writer exists in an ecosystem of mind,
body and world.

Seán Burke, in his introduction to Authorship. From Plato to the Postmodern
(1995), demonstrates how debate about the nature of authorship, as taken up by
philosophers and writers from Plato through to Borges and beyond, has swung
between personalizing or impersonalizing the author, between locating the
‘authority’ of writing either in the mind or in the world.

What distinguishes premodern conceptions of authorship is their
assumption that discourse is primarily an affair of public rather than
private consciousness. The various imitative models... all affirm literature's
connection with the public domain... [while] the inspirational tradition
affirms that discourse is not a private intuition but a public revelation
(Burke 1995: xviii)
Shelley, in 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821, pub. 1840) located the making-point of writing firmly in the mind's domain:

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds ... those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination. Poetry ... creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. (Shelley 2001: 714-5)

For Shelley, 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World' (Shelley 2001: 717): the domain of the mind legislatas upon the domain of the world, the subjective consciousness is the authority for writing about the world.

With Barthes, the pendulum swings back: in 'The Death of the Author' (1968) it is the world itself, through language, that is the making-point of writing.

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations ... but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is [not the author, but] the reader ... that [impersonal] someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (Barthes 1982: 148)

In the debate about authorship, two territories are consistently in focus - the public domain and the mind's domain. Their variously interpreted roles in the making of writing constitute the dynamic of the debate. But an interesting aspect of the dispute is that there is little discussion that focuses on the writing process as experienced by writers. For example, to mention three significant names in the debate, neither Shelley in his 'Defence of Poetry' (1821), nor TS Eliot in his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), nor Borges in pieces like 'Borges and I' (1961) focuses strictly on the processes by which they write. When writers turn their attention to the question of authorship it seems they write more as critics than as writers; they look at writers' work from the outside, not the inside; and only indirectly is their critique of the process itself to be inferred. Famously, Edgar Allan Poe did focus on his writing process in 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846) - but how writers actually write seems forgotten in the debate: Sean Burke did not include Poe in his 1995 collection on authorship.

This lack of focus on process is the reason why, in recent times, the debate is seen by authors as threatening, marginal or irrelevant to their concerns. Writers continue writing passionately while Barthes and others tell them that what they do is not authoring. A writer can live and work without the title 'author', but it is interesting to contemplate why philosophy and criticism have sought to deny the term to makers of poetic and fictional works. Is it because grabs for power in the discipline-wars started with Plato banishing poets from the Republic?

Writers' practices vary, and perhaps the two poles of practice are represented by the following Writer A (whose process occurs significantly in the mind's domain) has an ambition to produce the perfect work of the imagination. Each morning he starts out from his kitchen, armed with the cut lunch and thermos prepared for him by his wife, and walks down the hallway of his house to his studio. There he shuts the door behind him and sets about his day's writing, as if in another world. He does not emerge until dusk.

Writer B, at the other extreme, sees writing as an excuse to get out of the study into the real world - to investigate, to explore, to observe, to indulge, to go feral - not to sit rooted to a chair and desk. In B's view, readers stay in their chairs; writers rove. Because fiction is actually and always about how humans act and experience, how they do and think, B only conceives of writing as searching, discovering, seeing the sights, using the senses. To do that, she launches her body as investigative vehicle out the study door and into the wide, wild world.

For both A and B, writing is a body thing, focused either more or less internally or externally. Writing fiction is writing the body's actions, observations and memories. What the body does or observes, the mind can reconstruct; what the mind can reconstruct, the hand can write. When I write my body's experience, I hope to converge upon, collide with, cross into others' experience.

There is a leap of faith here, and a strong egotism. I have to believe that my bodily experience is the same as, or similar to, others' experience. But there is a safety framework: the context of my culture provides the mold, the outline. I could never pretend that my experience approximates to that of a Chilean Indian - her ecosystem is vastly different from mine. But I can with good confidence believe my experience correlates significantly with that of other middle-class, middle-aged, European-background, English-speaking males in the world - more so with those of my particular nationality, perhaps - but also to a lesser degree with similar males who don't speak English, or with females who, in every way other than gender, share my ecosystem.

To some extent I also believe that as a writer I spend much more time (compared with non-writers / non-artists) focused on my reactions to experience: the awareness of being and responding; the alertness to recording of details; the attentiveness to noting for later reference and use; the attraction to recognizing minutiae of my body's responses ... and therefore, even if my experience is somewhat different to others, I may make up for that with a kind of microscopic attention that the normal reader / experiencer has not had time or inclination for.

I must confess I am more like Writer B than Writer A. Unlike my non-adventuring colleague who spends his time safely in his study down the hallway, I have subjected my body to a less safe cause of writing: I risked AIDS to find out what sexual experiences were like. I compromised relationships to discover how people reacted to emotional situations. I sat talking too long in pubs and walked unhatted in a desert and argued too fiercely with friends and got lost in mountains and stayed out too late and drove too fast and read too long and got too bitten in rainforests and was stressed too often and drank too much and put my body forward as if it were a crash test dummy in a head-on collision experiment studying what happens to humans when they think / act / imagine / regret / win / lose / hope / endure ... at crisis point. Yes, the author's body is the major recording device.
But also I did all this because I simply wanted to know. I had an insatiable appetite to be human — and being a writer offers one of the best ways to be comprehensively human. As a writer, I was a kind of scientist: I observed, hypothesized, and experimented. Not unlike the Nobel Prize-winning physicist in 2005, Barry J. Marshall, who injected himself with a virus so he could document its effects and better understand its progress in the body (Sweet 1997), I took passionate trajectories in what I saw to be grand causes. I set up romantic ideas about the nature of human experience derived from my favorite writers and my individual impressions, and molded them into an hypothesis of bodily experience. And I tested them on myself. I set off and moved through the world, as my environment’s denizen, and also as its ecologist, studying my steps along the way, seeking to see what the world was all about, and at the same time, what the writing process could say about it.

**Writing and creativity**

I mentioned above that writers have been reticent to analyze the creative process as a personal activity 'seen from the inside'. In his 'Philosophy of Composition' (1846) Poe wondered why more writers didn’t scrutinize their creative processes and leave the tracks for others to explore:

> I have often thought how interesting a magazine page 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 (Poe 2001: 743).

Poe surmised that 'the authorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause', and went on to judge the 'authorial vanity' vulnerable to exposure of 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. (Poe 2001: 743)

Poe suggests writers are embarrassed by revealing their creative process just as theatre managers might be embarrassed by allowing access to their backstage; that the writing process seems not a precise regime, but an equivocal, messy business, in spite of the quality products it turns out.

Arthur Koestler, in *The Act of Creation* (1964), identified the general difficulty scientists and artists have in talking about their creativity. He suggests:

> Both sides seem to be leaning over backwards: the artist to rationalize his creative processes, the scientist to irrationalize them, so to speak. But this fact in itself is significant. The scientist feels the urge to confess his indebtedness to unconscious intuitions which guide his theorizing; the

artist values, or over-values, the theoretical discipline which controls his intuition (Koestler 1989: 329-330).

But if writers feel inadequate in talking about their creative processes because those processes seem fuzzy, borderless, and artists too may feel the same, as reported by the cognitive psychologist, Margaret A. Boden:

> Creativity is a puzzle, a paradox, a mystery. Inventors, scientists and artists rarely know how their original ideas arise. They mention intuition, but cannot say how it works. Most psychologists cannot tell us much about it, either. What's more, many people assume that there will never be a scientific theory of creativity: how could science possibly explain fundamental novelties? As if all this were not daunting enough, the apparent unpredictability of creativity seems to outlaw any systematic explanation, whether scientific or historical.

Why does creativity seem so mysterious? To be sure, artists and scientists typically have their creative ideas unexpectedly, with little if any conscious awareness of how they arose...

Boden 1996: 75)

This suggestion — the 'unexpectedness' of creativity — is possibly the least useful to good writers since, in their daily process, they experience the need to be creative regularly, if not constantly. Certainly, much of writing might be seen as technically conventional — the pushing around of characters, actions and ideas — similar to the way much of playing chess might be seen as standard strategy. But in the best writing (as in the best chess) the need for creative maneuvering is a constant. The great writer's process, I think, would be an 'unexpected' all the time, never settling up in terms of investigating new ways to present character psychology, to interpret action, to fashion metaphor and simile, to push language further. The creative writing process involves on-goingness of creative decision-making.

A focus of creativity studies has been the processes leading to the 'Eureka' moment of the "Aha!" experience where the insight presumably occurs when a subconscious connection between ideas fits so well that it is forced to pop out into awareness (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 104). Koestler further analyzes this as the close relatedness between the scientist seeing an analogy where nobody saw it before, and the poet’s discovery of an original metaphor or simile. Both rely on the mediation of unconscious processes to provide the analogy. In the scientist’s Eureka process two previously unrelated frames of reference are made to intersect, but the same descriptive may be applied to the poet’s *eureka* — the discovery of a felicitous poetic comparison (Koestler 1989: 320).

Writers today (like other creative artists) balk at the proposition that their creativity is essentially an unconscious process. The daily grind of creation /
invention / innovation — clearly conscious behavior — that fiction writers recognize they pursue as their practice / process, requires a different perspective and approach for analysis. In his Creativity Theory, history, practice (2005), Rob Pope notes:

It is a commonplace of contemporary popular thinking about creativity that it springs from "unconscious" processes (see Ghiselin 1985 for examples). This is especially so where creativity is associated with stereotypically Romantic notions of "inspiration" or "genius". Psychology has observed the roles previously assumed by religion and myth in providing the dominant discourse for the more mysterious aspects of the creative process. (Pope 2005: 70)

Pope’s excellent discussion of the conscious / unconscious models for writing — a discussion which covers Coleridge, Freud, Jung, Wallas, et al (see Pope 2005: 70–78) — leads him to assert: ‘In fact, many of these models of consciousness work perfectly well without an “unconscious”. Instead, they involve levels or stages of more or less conscious processing’.

All these have a bearing on the kinds of creativity that result from the constant crossing and redrawing of all sorts of boundaries (not just the un / conscious interface). They also show how these may be mapped in terms of overlapping “fields” or traced through systems of “parallel processing” (Pope 2005: 74).

In the act of writing — a process not confined to what happens seated at a desk, but which includes activities carried out over any of the twenty-four hours in a day — a writer is conscious of passing back and forth and across and between several experiential fields. She is also conscious of the fact that mastery in writing requires mastery over the passing between and among each of these ‘overlapping fields’.

The domains of the writing process

I describe here the various overlapping, interlacing, underpinning, interleaving planes of experience, mental and physical, that the writer deals with in his process. The above assemblage of quotations from commentators working in various disciplines suggests the notion of multiplicity in a set of interfacing fields as crucial to the conceptualization of creative process. In this interfacing, the concept of parallel and non-parallel planes — of a system of line-ups and inventive tiltings — recurs.

As a writer interested in delineating the nature of the writing process, I find compelling Deleuze and Guattari’s introduction to their A Thousand Plateaus (1987). They start with imagining a rhizome — a living, centre-less structure reminiscent of a Whitmanesque field of grass — as opposed to a tree. They say the tree, as a centered system of growth, only narrow (and outmodedly) represents process because it distributes its authority hegemonically; grass, on the other hand, seems to have its authority distributed evenly across its whole entity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3f). Deleuze and Guattari see their rhizome — or symbol of how the world’s thinking works

— as being defined by lines: specifically ‘lines of flight’ that combine geometrically to form myriad intersecting plateaus: a sort of zapping, synoptic, unstoppable, interconnected, interlayered system of planes on a universal mental scale. It is the interconnection and intersection of these plateaus, each a series of linked trajectories and moments of thinking or experience, that produces concepts and processes and products in the culture. The symbol points to the wrong-headed way writers have thought about their process, to how they have been asked to enunciate their process in science-model terms not sympathetic to their perspective, and overall, how description of the writing process has suffered from lack of deconstruction.

The fiction writing process can be conceptualized as a series of planes or domains upon which separately the writer works, but which combine in their influence to make product:

- the first domain: the intimate space in the novelist’s head where the project is conceived, managed and monitored;
- the second domain: the private space of the desk where the physical aspects of the writing process are mainly undertaken;
- the third domain: the public space which is the domain of the readership towards which the writing process is projected;
- the fourth domain: which is the investigable real world where (probably) most things come from in terms of material and issues to write about, along with the prompts for how to write about them, but which also fits under (like a mapping) the world of the third domain, the readership; and
- the fifth domain: the imagined space which is the fictional world where the characters reside and play out their lives.

Based on my own experience as a novelist, I would say that the process for writing a novel begins in the first domain — a managerial plane, a sort of entrepreneurial or CEO space in the conscious mind, where visions and ideas for missions occur, where whole strategies for a project develop and gel. ‘I think I’ll write a novel about this…’ the thinking process goes; and then follows up with: ‘In these ways I must push the project to fulfillment…’ This domain takes the most credit for the original initiation and the ultimate success of the project. It might also be the most affected by failure.

The second domain — that of the immediate physical environment for the writing act — is much elaborated upon and even overdramatized in How-to-write books which focus on this territory: the placement of pens on the desk, the view from the window, the color of walls in the room, the provision of music… or silence. But there is real consequence in controlling the equipment and ambiance of the workplace: scientists have their laboratories with access to materials designed to produce best results; writers’ writing-places can be similarly refined. ‘I am always creative in this sort of environment,’ the thinking goes, ‘but not this sort.’ The workplace is a kind of buffer zone, a crossing point, a hub; its smooth operation
promotes mobility between the other domains, between real and imagined worlds.

Regarding the third domain, as writers we know that the reader appends our work. This is a positive understanding: we write towards the maelstrom of the public domain with a view to creating multiple readings, catering to variety in responses, subverting one reading against another. Before the work reaches the public domain, the writer frequently deals with its influence: considers receptiveness, anticipates reactions. In the fashioning of the work, the audience too is fashioned. ‘Unless I write to my readership, I will communicate nothing,’ the thinking goes.

The real world the reader and writer inhabit is the fourth domain. Writers investigate and write from. Fiction writers investigate anything and everything, from the inner world (as in Kafka’s The Metamorphosis) to the broad social panorama (as in Dos Passos’ U.S.A Trilogy). Generally the writer’s project is the cultural/commercial imperative of writing about and back into the world inhabited by the reader, but interpretations of this domain don’t necessarily correlate: the writer’s impressionistic account of the world is a personal construct; it may clash with, lightly collide with, or barely connect with the reader’s impressionistic account. Writers are under some pressure on the one hand to relate to the reader’s understanding of the real world, and on the other, to provide a fresh new vision and interpretation.

The fifth domain is personal to the writer. This is the film set on which the scriptwriter is also director and producer – and to a large extent actor of all the parts – where characters, actions, imagery and messages of the work are totally manipulable. But the imperatives of the other domains impinge on this plane to drive writing in directions relevant to cultural, social and theoretical issues: ‘Sometimes the characters just take over,’ the thinking often goes.

It may be noted that I have particularly not addressed a sixth domain – that of the unconscious. From the fiction writer’s viewpoint, the plane of the unconscious – whatever its products or modus operandi – is a marvellous and unreliable contributor to the writing process. I might have a dream, or something wacky or profound materialise in my mind, or an insightful contribution may occur; but that is not a different sort of element in my process than my seeing something handy or instructive in the real world that I might utilise. The unconscious in the creative process is useful, but overrated; writers deal with the unconscious just as they deal with the real.

It may appear that these domains are exclusive, that as planes they are separated and parallel, and that the writer as nomad (as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari 1987) moves from plane to plane in the process of connecting the multiplicity of thought trajectory needed to write a work of fiction. But the other concept involved – creativity, or the notion of innovative connections – requires that the planes must tilt together, must stop paralleling, must be involved in unique and innovative conjunctions and intersections.

The image I conjure here is the kind of image created by the Dutch artist MC Escher in several of his works, but particularly in his lithograph ‘Relativity’ (1953). In this work Escher depicts the inside of a building with stairways leading variously from one level to another with openings letting onto the outer world. The trouble with the picture is that the planes do not obey the laws of perspective, or of gravity; Escher has tilted and warped and seamlessly confused the planes in the building such that the walkers seem to tread from one dimension to another. In the process, an entire new concept of reality is created, one we immediately recognize as a new view of the world.

The idea of tilting between the planes, such that they intersect (and clash) into each other (whether done consciously or unconsciously) seems to me to be allied to the ‘secret’ of creativity and the nature of the creative writing process. A well-known writerly activity involves the ‘What if’ method. It goes: imagine a normal scene, introduce the tilt of a ‘What if’ vector, and write about it...Voilà, a story!

Michel de Certeau’s brilliant Walking in the City (1988) is an example of the process. By looking at New York from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre, and taking the mental cue from the tilted perspective, he describes a city ‘transformed into a texturology’ which provides insight into a ‘residing rhetoric’, a “way of operating” (of speaking, walking, etc.) (Certeau 1988: 100). Here, an analysis of the writing process, and its relation to a writerly ecology, comes from taking a radically tilted view of the familiar world. Walter Benjamin’s airplane versus walking view similarly creates writerly insight by tilting perspectives together: ‘The power of a country road is diferente when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane...’ (Benjamin 1986: 66).

Each of the domains constitutes a focus of activity in the writing process, but it is in their not paralleling, in their tilting around, tilting into, tilting through each other – variously, unexpectedly, or with the writer’s insistence – that writing discovers new perspectives and ways forward.

I sit at my desk and think: ‘What if these words on the screen turn into an implausibly crowded, or leap from the monitor to my face and smother me?’ I feel, as I think this, the domains tilting.

Notes
1. Csikszentmihalyi uses the concept of the domain in his systems approach to the study of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 313). He considers cultures to be systems of interconnected domains, eg., music, mathematics, religion, etc (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 317). I want to use the idea of the domain differently here – to describe, in fact, the various planes of experience, mental and physical, that the writer deals with in the writing process.

References
Loden, Margaret A (1996) ‘What is creativity’, Dimensions of Creativity, Ed. Margaret A
CREATIVE WRITING: THEORY BEYOND PRACTICE


