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The writer walking the dog: creative writing practice and everyday life

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Abstract

Creative writing happens in and alongside the writer's everyday life, but little attention has been paid to the relationship between the two and the contribution made by everyday activities in enabling and shaping creative practice. The work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold supports the argument that creative writing research must consider the bodily lived experience of the writer in order fully to understand and develop creative practice. Dog-walking is one activity which shapes my own creative practice, both by its influence on my social and cultural identity and by providing a time and space for specific acts instrumental to the writing process to occur. The complex socio-cultural context of rural dog-walking may be examined both through critical reflection and creative work. The use of dog-walking for reflection and unconscious creative thought is considered in relation to Romantic models of writing and walking through landscape. While dog-walking is a specific activity with its own peculiarities, the study provides a case study for creative writers to use in developing their own practice in relation to other everyday activities from running and swimming to shopping, gardening and washing up.

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Keywords

walking, dog-walking, creative writing, everyday life, practice, Wordsworth, Romantic, Ingold

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has published critically on contemporary poetry. His research interests in pastoral and landscape is currently reflected in ‘The writer walking the dog: creative writing practice and everyday life’, a project which is supported by an AHRC Early Career Fellowship grant, and which is the subject of this article. He also has research interests in flash fiction, graphic elements in poetry, and videopoetics. Tony.williams@northumbria.ac.uk

1

This article considers how everyday activities such as dog-walking might enable or shape creative writing practice. Understandably studies of creative writing practice, both inside and outside the academy, have tended to focus on matters of technique: how texts work, and how we can construct them effectively. But as creative writing consolidates as a discipline, increasing attention is being paid to wider questions of what happens when we write, and how we might better control what happens in order to write better. Writing is not just a matter of technique, the particular forms and processes we use to arrange word on the page or screen. It is also a human activity, situated in and forming part of the writer’s everyday life. To understand writing better might not be simply a matter of developing technique, but also of examining how, where and when writing happens in and alongside the writer’s ‘non-creative’ life. In this article I examine one location of my creative writing practice, the daily dog walk. I offer a detailed analysis of the relation between dog-walking and writing, in the spirit of a case study which may help other writers to consider how their writing relates to the activities of their everyday lives, whether this is dog-walking, washing up, shopping, swimming, and so on. (The research forms part of ‘The writer walking the dog: creative writing practice and everyday life’, a wider project supported by an AHRC Early Careers Fellowship in 2013.)

I focus on dog-walking largely because it forms a significant part of my own daily routine, but the analysis yields insights applicable to a range of everyday activities. Moreover, I am not alone in finding walking an aid to creative thought: Ron Kellogg’s study of science and engineering academics concluded that “walking and coffee were the two most frequent accompaniments to writing” (quoted in Sharples 119).

I begin by tracing recent attention to the “human-centred nature of creative writing” (Harper xi), and then relating this discussion to recent developments in landscape theory. I then trace accounts of urban walking as a rich social practice; I argue that rural walking is similarly complex, and that the identity performed through everyday activities such as dog-

walking influences what and how the writer writes. Lastly I consider some of the ways in which dog-walking might be instrumental in creative writing practice – how, if at all, does it contribute directly to creative processes?

2

Several researchers have acknowledged that creative writing takes place inside the frame of everyday life, that “the daily working conditions of the creative writer” are one significant factor shaping writing (Harper 97-8) and that “the environment surrounding a writer” may “actively condition the way we write, by supporting... some activities and restricting others” (Sharples 56). Increasing attention is being paid to the physical conditions in which creative writers operate, for example the work of Angharad Saunders on literary geography and Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra on inspiration and spaces.

When it does focus on the physical life of the writer, creative writing research has often looked at the physical site where writing is recorded: the desk. Derek Attridge, in a study of Joyce’s “physical situation” (47) of writing, cites Derrida’s claim that “the things that matter come to him most often when he is walking” (48), and acknowledges that “it is quite possible that Joyce [...] had his most creative moments when upright” (49); and yet he goes on to discuss not walking but the writing activities that occurred while Joyce was sitting. It’s true that the greater and most central part of many writers’ practice may take place at the desk, but we must not conflate ‘writing’ as a complex practice with ‘writing’ as the physical act of enscription or typing. Writers don’t cease to be writers, or to engage in the activities constitutive of writing practice, when they put down their pens and leave the study.

Nigel Krauth’s discussion of ‘Four writers and their settings’, is similarly interested in “the actual place where the writer settles and sits” (Krauth ‘Four Writers’ n.pag.). But he locates this discussion by relating the idea of sitting to that of walking, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau and Rebecca Solnit. The idea that walking and thinking/writing are closely related provides, he says, “a theory about the close-to-home and the everyday, about the meanings we make out of the local, the intimately known, the vistas contained in our ordinary vision, the relationship between the thinking we normally do and the places we normally move through” (Krauth ‘Four Writers’ n.pag.). It is this relationship which this article considers. Although technical matters will rightly remain the focus of much creative writing research and pedagogy, writers would do well to look beyond the page to understand how the activities and conditions of their daily lives support or restrict their practice, and how that relationship, once understood, can be recalibrated.

The recognition of creative writing as a human activity that must be contextualised in the writer's everyday life and in the environment she moves through has an analogue outside the discipline in the non-representational turn of landscape theory in the fields of geography and anthropology. Borrowing from that body of work, and in particular from the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold, provides another way of expressing and understanding the imperative to examine the writer's everyday life.

Ingold criticises “a dualism of cultural mind and physical nature” (Wylie 155). For him this leads to “a sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space” (*Perception* 189). The Cartesian “building perspective” leads to the assumption that “bodily praxis, action and performance” are “secondary” (Wylie 156) to and separate from the detached activities of the mind. In creative writing terms we can point to the lack of attention which researchers have given to the writing body: the discipline habitually gives the impression that writing occurs either in the mind or on a page almost entirely abstracted from its surroundings.

Ingold suggests instead a Heideggerian “dwelling perspective” which posits a being-in-the-world as the primary mode of human being, and refuses to separate subject and object, agent and world, mental and physical. Ingold views the human being as

a being immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world. This ontology of dwelling, I contend, provides us with a better way of coming to grips with the nature of human existence than does the alternative, Western ontology whose point of departure is that of a mind detached from the world (*Perception* 42)

Rhetorically at least this provides strong impetus at least to consider how writing's locatedness in the space and time of everyday life might help to shape – and in fact to constitute – the act of writing. According to the non-representational theory which has grown partly out of Ingold's work, “the act of representing (speaking, painting, writing) is understood... to be *in* and *of* the world of embodied practice and performance, rather than taking place outside of that world, or being anterior to, and determinative of, that world” (Wylie 164).

Borrowing from other disciplines must proceed cautiously. In this case, it is important to note that there is a tacit context involved in landscape theorists' accounts of the relation of

person to landscape: geographers and anthropologists are also writing *about* landscape and human inhabitation of landscape. For Ingold the conceptualisation of the writer as dwelling in the world is not merely descriptive but also imperative: “the human imagination gets to work” through “attentive involvement in landscape” (*Perception* 207). Clearly the dwelling perspective is not simply a means of theorising how humans relate to the world; it also prompts researchers in certain fields to proceed in certain ways. But this imperative cannot be translated straightforwardly into creative writing. For a Romantic poet it might be a truism. But for, say, a thriller writer, or a historical novelist, “attentive involvement in landscape” might be a distraction. The other term for creative writing – imaginative writing – emphasises that writers don’t always write about what they see, hear and feel, but about other, absent things. What landscape theory teaches creative writing is not a technique, but an understanding that in conceptualising what we do we must not elide the physical and bodily dimension of the doing.

3

One of the ways in which everyday activities might influence writing is – rather indirectly and nebulously – by shaping the identities we perform, our self-image, and hence the writing we produce (Kroll). I have begun to explore such questions, and the historical antecedents of the walker-writer, through a series of poems (Williams), in particular addressing the legacy of Wordsworth and, via the traditions of De Certeau, Flânerie, Modernism and Psychogeography, the socio-political meaning and context of rural walking. A detailed critical analysis of the cultural geography of rural dog-walking would also be useful, but here is not the place for it. Rather than focus on a topic whose relation to writing practice remains nebulous (*how* does a writer’s identity-as-walker feed into their writing practice?), I want to attend to practice more directly by asking how far everyday life – in this case, a daily dog walk – can be instrumental in shaping, enabling or impeding the acts and processes of creative practice. Are there specific processes or acts associated with creative writing which a daily dog walk enables or promotes?

Before I start to answer that question in relation to my own practice, I want to sketch the circumstances of my daily dog walk. I live on the edge of Alnwick, a small market town in rural Northumberland, UK. I have two dogs, which, as dog owners know, must be walked every day, usually several times. The main walk of the day takes place any time between 10am and 4pm. On a writing day, I work at my desk until, at some point and for a variety of reasons, I decide it is time to take the dogs out. Reasons for the decision may be obscure (I

‘just decide’), related to the kind of external factors which shape everyday life, such as the weather, other time commitments, the dogs’ behaviour; or they may be related to my practice (I feel ‘stuck’ and decide I need a break, or, on the contrary, I decide it’s a good time to pause since I feel confident about what I’ll do next). I have three habitual routes which I follow most days, with minor variations, each lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. Decisions about route are made on the hoof and in response to a range of factors: how much time I have; which fields the sheep are in; whether the season is such that nettles and brambles, or thick mud, will have made certain paths impassable; even my relationship with the dogs, which may ‘express a preference’ for certain paths by their movement and body language. During the walk I continually switch my attention between: the environment around me; the dogs and their behaviour; other humans and animals we encounter; thoughts about my creative work; and thoughts about other areas of my life.

The most obvious way in which writing and walking might coincide is if a writer wrote while walking – actually composed text. Wordsworth wrote in this way (Solnit 114); but in my own practice this happens rarely, perhaps because my interactions with my dogs prevents the kind of sustained attention necessary to compose and remember large amounts of text.

I also don’t walk with the express, or even a secondary, purpose of seeking ‘inspiration’. For Romantic writers, the purposive search for inspiration formed a deliberate part of their writing practice. Nigel Krauth argues that “Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’ ... was not an accident of wandering. The writer walked as a professional activity, with the aim of producing culturally significant writing” (‘Four Writers’). Robin Jarvis describes Romantic walkers as “intent on clearing an autonomous space for themselves, in which the self could be reduced, physically and intellectually, nearer to its essentials” (40). Romantic engagement with landscape was typically purposeful, and made use precisely of culture/nature oppositions. Both the landscape and the ‘essential’ self were stripped bare of culture. At the same time, this practice entails the same “attentive involvement in landscape” which Ingold praises (*Perception* 207).

In Ingold’s terms, the trope of the Romantic writer–walker moving through landscape in order to clear the mind and induce inspiration reproduces the Cartesian separation of individual and world, culture and nature. But equally, the Romantic model of inspiration does rely on the idea of attention, observation, bodily openness: by being-there, by dwelling in the landscape, the Romantic poet is inspired, is able to imagine truths about the world. That chimes with the bodily turn in geography and anthropology. In this sense, the non-

representational approach while freeing discussions of landscape from one historical limitation, Cartesian dualism, may re-entrench another, “the individualistic and universalising subject” (Nash 660). Although creative writers may well benefit from locating their practice as bodily activity in the everyday world, they should guard against the idolisation of their own individual bodily experience as a specially privileged mode of enquiry.

Moreover, the Romantic model does not represent my own walking/writing practice accurately. Romantic walkers achieved insight via the picturesque, the deliberate act of looking at and for the sublime. Tim Edensor traces a line of argument which insists on walking as a re-focusing on the walker’s body, which in turn leads to enhanced perception (whether this just means ‘enhanced’ in the sense of sharpened, or enhanced in a mystical Romantic sense). But, first, in terms of purpose, my walks must be something like 70% animal husbandry, 20% leisure activity and 10% writerly process; the writing benefits accrue mainly accidentally. Second, as I have suggested above, the self-in-landscape is as complex a figure as the self-in-city. The countryside and the country walker are just as cluttered as urban counterparts. Third, the everydayness of dog walking prevents it being or providing a special experience. Though walking in the countryside is as Edensor says “widely proclaimed as a natural activity which frees the individual and the body from quotidian routine and physical confinement” (82–3), the liberating effect is clearly mitigated when the walking itself forms part of that quotidian routine. I habitually walk the same routes, and may not notice much of the landscape I move through at all.

In fact my dog walking practice is characterised by absent or fluctuating attention, and this lies at the heart of the three specific effects, two positive and one negative, walking has on my creative practice.

The negative effect is simply that, when I stand up and move away from my desk to walk the dogs, I cease to work directly at my writing. The dogs are persistent visitors from Porlock. This interruption is not special to dog-walking – any everyday activity is likely to impinge on writing by curtailing it. Of course there isn’t much that can be done to prevent this, except managing our lives so that we have enough time for writing. And the negative effect of stopping work is mitigated in two ways. First, the everyday activities we stop work to engage in are the things which enrich our lives and identities and feed in indirectly to our writing practice. Second, although writers may struggle against procrastination and distraction, taking a break may sometimes actually help the writing process.

The two positive effects I identify of my dog-walking on creative writing practice both concern the quality and direction of my attention. The first relates precisely to the idea

of a break in consciousness: by stopping thinking about writing, I enable new creative thoughts to happen.

Walking serves as a productive site of accidental advances. I don't think continually about writing when I walk; sometimes I think about the gas bill, or even pay attention to the landscape I'm walking through, and a phrase or solution or idea comes to me 'out of the blue.' When dog-walking takes me away from the desk, or another writer goes swimming or shopping, the break in creative consciousness may itself be beneficial. By thinking about something else, we set up conditions in which creative thoughts can arise. For example, working on a novel generates, as it progresses, a set of deferred minor decisions about plot and tone: Is it convincing that this character runs her own business? Isn't having three childless women lopsided, and which one of them should I make have children in order to resolve this? Am I happy having four female protagonists and only one male? Isn't this character simply too rich? Deferring the decisions seems necessary, because they depend on other factors which I cannot easily bring to mind (the novel is too big a text to hold everything in the mind at once). But I find that solutions come to me unbidden as I walk the dogs: No, it isn't convincing: give her a job. Yes, it's lopsided, so one of the strands needs extensive rewriting. I'm happy. Yes, she's too rich; tone it down. Sometimes the answers come to problems I had not known were problems. One day I was walking down the lane towards the sewage works and realised that my male protagonist's affair should have occurred in the past, not during the course of the novel; previously I'd been thinking about mole catchers.

The phenomenon of unconscious creativity is not limited to creative writing; it is also true of 'normal' work. The human geographer Jennie Middleton has shown not only that people who walk to work can use this time to think through work problems, but also that, as one respondent put it, "It's amazing how I suddenly start conceiving ideas about work whilst walking along, even without realising it" (Middleton 1946). Similarly Arnold H Modell argues that the creative imagination of scientists can be both involuntary and unconscious (27); Modell quotes a famous account of Poincaré realising "without anything in my former thoughts seeming to have paved the way for it, that the transformations I had used to find the Fuchsian functions were identical with those of non-Euclidean geometry" (Poincaré quoted in Modell 28-9). The phenomenon is also described by cognitive linguists (Lakoff and Johnson), by neuroscientists (Dietrich), as well as by writers themselves (Sharples). Significantly, Dietrich argues that creative thoughts which occur unconsciously may be different from, and possibly riskier than, those produced consciously. In other words, by not thinking about

writing I may be able to produce creative work which I could not have produced otherwise. If that is so, then interrupting work, or ceasing to think about work while carrying out some other mundane activity, may be an essential tool in the writer's practice.

As I have noted above, it is problematic to draw evidence from a range of disciplines. Neuroscientists' 'creativity' is a long way from our 'creative practice'; and creativity may differ radically across different fields of endeavour (Baer). But by drawing in evidence however tentatively from other disciplines I hope to underwrite and refine the rather subjective reflection on my own practice that forms the centre of my argument. Moreover the attempt to relate insights about creative practice to other practices and activities helps to dismantle the Romantic view of the writer as dealing in special powers and processes, and to support the view that "creativity is not a power held by a few gifted individuals, but is an everyday activity" (Sharples 36).

If dog-walking provides an activity in which I sometimes cease to think about writing, it as often provides a space in which thinking about writing *can* occur. The second major value I identify in dog-walking and certain other everyday activities is the opportunity to 'mull over' creative work. Rather than composing text in a Wordsworthian way, I address creative problems either by reflecting on what I have written, or by generating ideas (plot, images, conceits, scenes) in an initially non-verbal way (though perhaps a phrase or two will stick); only later, back at the desk, do I work textually in detail and at length. Separation from the desk – so that I can't immediately put thoughts into action by the act of *writing* – is an important part of this process. Working on a novel involves a constant imperative to write, to make material progress, but while immersed in individual chapters at the desk it is extremely difficult to think clearly about the project as a whole: stepping away from the work to walk the dogs provides me with the daily discipline of non-writing reflection time, where local problems can be seen in terms of the global structure. For example, in a novel with five alternating protagonists, this reflection allows me to reflect on how the plot, style and tone of each strand coheres with that of the others.

Dog-walking makes such thinking possible because it is an activity in which I can think about a creative problem rather than paying attention to my physical surroundings. My body is busy in an easy and mundane task, leaving my mind free to think about something other than what is before the senses. The circumstance of the dog-walking serve to enable this: unlike the Romantic model unlike many leisure walkers I am not seeking new walking routes (the navigation of which would demand attention) nor seeking special visual or inspirational experience through walking. Precisely lacking is Ingold's "attentive

involvement in landscape” (*Perception* 207). On the contrary, the regularly repeated route and the routine nature of the activity serve to suppress that kind of attention. Although I do notice individual plants, animals, views, weather patterns, smells and so on while walking, the effect of repeating the same walks many times over is to suppress any sense of the picturesque. These sensory experiences are not special or inspirational, but mundane and even not consciously noticed. Ingold himself notes (‘Mind-Walking’ 196–7) that the pedestrian often can’t remember visual experiences.

While dog walking I often don’t notice the landscape at all: it becomes a blank space created by walking which is habitual in the sense of occurring daily as a chore and in the sense of reiterating the same routes over and over, and thus an invisible space in which thinking can occur, not thinking about the landscape I’m moving through but about other, absent subjects. The cognitive scientists Schooler, Smallwood et al describe a phenomenon of ‘perceptual de-coupling’. When attention is decoupled from sensory input, “information unrelated to the current situation [is able] to form the centrepiece of conscious thought” (319). In other words, the mind is able to think about something other than the body’s immediate environment. This capability is necessary for creative writing: prose fiction could even be defined in terms of the ability to imagine what is not present.

In fact it is as difficult to imagine a walker who passed through a landscape in a state of total attention as it is to imagine one who notices absolutely nothing: we all attend to a greater or lesser degree, and our attention fluctuates. This has been noticed by cognitive scientists (Schooler and Smallwood et al) writers (Smith) and anthropologists: Paul Harrison’s description of the ‘twisting and criss-crossing of interiority and exteriority’ (2007) seems to me a precise description of the way my consciousness behaves while walking in relation to immediate surroundings and creative work.

The phenomenon of the mind and body working in this disjunct way is itself bodily. The injunction to understand writing in its bodily context does not privilege Romantic immersion in sensory experience, but it does assert that we will come to understand our writing practice better if we consider how it is enabled and shaped by the bodily experiences of our everyday life. The reduction of landscape to a blank space, a vacuum, is what Ingold criticises as a product of Western misconceptions; but I experience it as a real and valuable element of my walking experience. This doesn’t invalidate Ingold’s insight, but reminds us to apply it in the right way. The dwelling perspective shows that in considering writing as a human practice, we do need to conceptualise it as a bodily, temporal, worldly activity. Not only dog-walking, but also running, washing up, painting and decorating, shelling peas,

swimming, and so on, may create conditions where the body is busy but the mind is largely idle, enabling creative thought to take place.

4

Ingold's appropriation of Heideggerian 'dwelling' for thinking about how we occupy and inscribe landscape is extremely useful for creative writing. But whereas for geographers and anthropologists the dwelt-in environment forms part of the objects of study, for creative writers this may not be so. Some of us are sometimes landscape poets, but the value of Ingold's work is not to help us theorise landscape writing. Rather, it forces us to confront the bodily, 'dwelt' experience of writing, to recognise that writing is a human activity which happens in space and time, our everyday environment. In order to understand how writing happens and how we can make it happen more effectively, we need to understand its everyday human context. But my analysis of dog-walking and its contribution to my own creative practice shows that while the 'dwelling perspective' might value sensory attention to the landscape, the creative writer might also value inattention, habit and routine, not immersion in landscape as an object of study but complex and changing relations to a range of environments, including the desk, in routines which promote effective practice. Reflection on draft work, a crucial creative activity, is enabled precisely by everyday activities which promote inattention and mind wandering.

Krauth's useful exploration of 'The Domains of the Writing Process' enumerates a number of domains in or on which a writer works, from the writer's own intimate imaginative space and the imagined space of the fictional world, to the public space into which work is published and the 'real world' which contains it and which provides raw 'material' for the writer. The 'real' writing space for Krauth is the "private space of the desk where the physical aspects of the writing process are mainly undertaken" ('Domains' 193). However he also concedes that "in the act of writing [is 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" ('Domains' 192). I would like to suggest a development of his schema to account for the fact that writing does not take place in a neatly circumscribed domain of the desk which is distinct from the real world, but in a localised and variable subset of the real world, defined by the everyday life of the individual. The domains overlap, and we understand writing better if we know when and how. In particular, however much everyday life may seem to be an odd and alien world to the writer deep in an imaginative project, in fact it is where we always are and

work, and we will imagine more effectively if we learn to harness the productive possibilities of everyday activities.

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