Disclosure and the ethics of dialogue in Prose Fiction Workshop

Some reflections from the University of East Anglia

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What do we mean when we think of the process of literary production – »writing«, in simple language – as being *in* dialogue? Firstly, dialogue suggests that there are at least two speakers/listeners. Writing is clearly a form of dialogue on several levels: a dialogue between the writer and his or her self, and also a dialogue with so-called reality. Imaginative writing is also in dialogue *with* itself in that it refers to a corpus of previously published literature. No writing is produced in a vacuum.

In the last few decades, in Anglo-Saxon countries at least, a new chapter in the relationship between writing and dialogue has emerged: that of imaginative writing produced within creative writing programmes, where classes – especially the workshop model (of which more later) put the reader in the room with the writer. Now we can also talk about writing as taking place in dialogue in the sense that in class, there is a real-time exchange between the writer and the readers in the class.

I am the author of thirteen published books. As far as my own working practices go, I view writing as a largely monologic enterprise: publication is what enables and ignites dialogue. I am a writer of the pre-workshop generation, self-taught and educated in several disciplines (one of which is literature); I personally show my work in progress to only one or two people until it goes to my agent and editor.

These days, my *modus operandi* is quite uncommon in the writing culture, at least in the UK. Creative writing programmes, particularly Masters degrees, have profoundly changed the ecology of writing and publishing fiction. They have introduced the expectation of dialogue into the writing process by transporting the reader out of the realm of abstract supposition and depositing him or her in the classroom. This has perhaps permanently altered the subjectivity of writers with regards to their work. The creative writing workshop has had another effect, which is only beginning to be studied: that of fomenting a work-

shop culture in which many issues besides the aesthetics and technical aspects of writing fiction are at stake, either explicitly or implicitly. One of these is freedom of expression.

My aim in this paper is to consider the multivalent nature of the dialogue that is created through pedagogic venues such as seminars where students' work-in-progress is evaluated and discussed (and indeed it now has its own verbal form in English – »workshopped«). It is not within the scope of this paper to conclude whether it is a mainly positive or a negative development for literature. But clearly there are implications for literature and its place in interpreting and communicating the wider culture inherent in this opening up of the writer's mind and the writer's process – formerly more private activities – to others' inspection and judgement. I will look at the workshop as a form of cultural practice as much as one of literary production. What values does this relatively new pursuit espouse, particularly toward freedom of expression? And what is the effect of those values on literary production? But first I will outline the character of the university where I work and the degree programme which I co-direct.

The MA in Prose Fiction at UEA

The Masters in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia is the longest-established graduate degree in creative writing in the United Kingdom. Founded in 1970 by Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson, two scholars who were also novelists, it adopted from the beginning the workshop seminar structure from degree programmes in the United States, in particular the Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa.

In its present incarnation, our MA is a one-year course, which the majority of students follow, although we also allow a part-time mode taught over two years. Each year around thirty students are enrolled; for these 30 places we receive around 300 applications annually – a ratio which we take as evidence of our course's reputation and popularity. The course is sought after in part for its track record in enabling professional success. Around 40 per cent of our graduates go on to be published writers, as opposed to about five per cent of graduates of other Masters programmes in the UK.

The three-hour long seminar Prose Fiction Workshop is the core course on the MA. In the autumn and spring semesters we run three groups with around ten students in the workshop, taught by three different lecturers. In December, after the end of the first semester, the groups are shuffled up and assigned a new lecturer and the course continues in the spring term.

The module is run on the principle of fine art studio practice. In each seminar, three pieces of student fiction in progress are discussed for around 50

minutes. The discussions are intense, questioning, open-ended, and variable. No writing exercises are set. Students' work is annotated by the group, but not corrected. Generally only students' work in progress is discussed. The discussions can be quite free-form and participants look to the tutor to establish a direction for each class. Yet it remains what Andrew Cowan, the director of creative writing at UEA, has called »[An] improvisatory space.«[1]

Most apprentice writers we teach avow that their motivation for undertaking group analysis of their fiction writing is to »get better«. In order to reach their ameliorative goal they are willing to risk vulnerability, scrutiny, and potential criticism, not to mention feelings of inadequacy and failure. The workshop operates as a condensed and accelerated version of the artistic development which used to take place over longer timeframes, in dispersed, even solitary formats, in an artist's career. This fast-track methodology has driven the expectation of publishers that writers and their works emerge fully-formed, with books which are »perfect« and market-ready; there is no room for error. For the ambitious writer in this wider neoliberal economy of the production of literature, an MA course in creative writing has become not only sensible but necessary.

As I and my colleagues who teach on our programme often acknowledge, there are mysterious dimensions to this process of »getting better«, which do not follow from a rote pedagogy of trial, error, correction or the wide reading, comparative analysis, and memory learning that is operative in the pedagogy of other disciplines. Creative Writing Workshop seems to »work« by drawing power from a number of sources.

From the very beginning of its programme lecturers at UEA questioned the nature of the relationship between unconscious and conscious processes in discussing and analysing creative work in progress. In her paper »Rethinking the Unconscious in Creative Writing Pedagogy«, Abi Curtis of the University of Sussex suggests that Malcolm Bradbury, the progenitor of our MA, espoused a Freudian view of the process of writing. According to Curtis, for Bradbury writing was exclusively »a psychological matter« in which the unconscious and the conscious must be »reconciled«. The implication for Bradbury, she argues, is that writing could not be »consciously« taught. It had to be »discovered from within«. The teacher's role »is to help the student to access something that is already there, but hidden from them in some way.«[2]

1 | Cowan, Andrew: »A live event, a life event: The workshop that works«, in: TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses 16 (2012), http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/cowan.htm

2 | Curtis, Abi: »Rethinking the unconscious in creative writing«, in: New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing 6 (2009), pp. 105-116, here p. 9.

It is important to note that creative work-in-progress is not yet consecrated as text, as in a textual artifact that circulates in the wider culture. Discussions in Prose Fiction Workshop are very distinct from literary criticism – i.e. a critique of the (published) end result. Creative writing workshops look at the text as the product of a particular sensibility or vision, whereas literary criticism approaches the text as a product of larger forces: cultural, historical, economic, sociological, psychological and philosophical. In the creative writing workshop, the text does not yet entirely exist. It is a series of suppositions, experiments, gestures and explorations, no matter to what degree its author might believe it is finished work. In Prose Fiction Workshop we are tasked with assessing not only the actuality but also the potentialities and intent of the text: what is this piece of fiction *trying* to be? What is its optimal expression of itself? We are parsing the purpose of seen and unseen dimensions; furthermore we are assessing this within the lacunae of the historical present, a sort of reef poised between the shore of creative intent and the horizon of reception. The text in progress is a conversation between those two points: one of departure, the other of arrival.

As well as its emergent nature, we are presented in this pedagogical model with intellectual uncertainty: there is an unknowable quality to what the text could be, or, to give it the agency and psychic autonomy from the author's consciousness that is a hallmark of sophisticated writing, what it *wants* to be. To an extent, as Andrew Cowan has argued, only the text knows.

In Prose Fiction Workshop the tutor is only one voice in the room. The workshop is polyphonic; many people speak. Group dynamics make it difficult for one person out of a group of twelve to disagree with all the others. But it does happen. This can be a discomfiting experience for everyone involved. I prefer dissent to consensus as it creates an experiential frisson that, while not easy to absorb, can under the right circumstances be illuminating and educative. The question is, to what extent do we consider creative work to be a generator of debate, doubt and uncertainty? Writers vary on this score; we are not all provocateurs trying to reshape the culture with the radicalism of our vision. Yet it is hard to refute that rote consensus can be deadening. Out of our discussions emerges – hopefully – an appreciation of the complexity of writing, rather than a conclusion about what is technically or thematically »right« or »wrong« with a given piece.

Disclosure and dialogue

To what extent do creative students feel they are disclosing something private in workshop? This is a question which haunts this open seminar format. The word disclosure is particular. For example, there is a difference in emotional

heat as much as etymological definition between *disclosure* and *revelation*. Disclosure suggests the opening out of something which has been concealed. It has a tang of legality about it; indeed in its legal context disclosure can be compelled – one may be forced by due process to disclose documents, identity or a line of argument. And so duress, summons, or even subpoena enters the field, and gives the word a coercive ring.

In undertaking a Masters in Creative Writing, students are aware from before the point of application that they will be required to disclose work in progress to others who are initially strangers, and with whom they may have a personally disinterested relationship. They may not have been aware of keeping creative work ›secret‹, and it might be that these days the very idea of writing to and for themselves only may be anathema to students. Their expectation is that the process of disclosure will enact a transformation not only of the work but of the writer's relationship with her text. Toby Litt, a literary novelist and UEA graduate, reflected on the effect of the workshop process at UEA:

> [it gave me] a small audience who weren't (unlike my friends and family) emotionally committed to me as a person. I could hand in a piece of work to the class in the knowledge that they would respond without thinking they had to spend the rest of their week, or maybe even the rest of their lives, dealing with the consequences of being negative.[3]

Litt goes on to analyse his learning process in the workshop by making a distinction which is ultimately about psychological ownership of literature in progress. For Litt it involved a shift in awareness, one he describes as a transition from: *I want to write this* to *this is being written*. The critical distance in perspective on his own work which he gained in Prose Fiction Workshop represents a cognitive, philosophical and aesthetic shift. Litt charts the process, achieved through long-term exposure to the workshop method, in which his agency migrated from himself, the writer, to the text. The work became depersonalised in a way which he experienced as aesthetically freeing.

The purpose of creative writing workshop is not usually directed at ethics: either the ethics of a particular text, or the ethics of being in dialogue with each other as writers. The students' main stated aim is to improve their writing, a slippery concept in principle although something that seems to more or less alchemically happen in practice. Yet in my years of teaching prose fiction workshop I have come to consider the unexamined element of the ethics of our mutual enterprise.

Our programme is unusually culturally diverse, compared with other creative writing MAs in the UK. Each year between one-third and one-half of our

3 | Litt, Toby: »Sensibility«, in: Giles Foden (ed.), Body of Work: 40 Years of Creative Writing at UEA, Norwich: Full Circle Editions 2011, pp. 236-250, here p. 241.

intake of students are from outside the UK and Europe. In recent years students have come from the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Lesotho, Nigeria, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, the US and Canada, to name a few. Within the UK itself there are deep regional and social class divisions and our programme includes writers from a variety of backgrounds. The diversity of opinions and literary references enlivens discussion in the workshop and sharpens debate. Complacency, parochialism, cultural imperialism and the ordinary laziness that entrenches cultural hierarchies are all much less likely to go unobserved when students from different historical, geographical, cultural and ethnic backgrounds are in the room. The dialogue between students is stiffened and made more robust by their awareness that their writing in progress will be read by well-resourced readers who may have little or no prior knowledge of the cultural context in which their writing has been generated or which it reflects. With this in mind, creative writing workshop could be said to provide an unacknowledged laboratory for testing the ethics of the particular brand of dialogue the model of teaching encourages – personally and to an extent politically disinterested, focussed on aesthetics and techniques, purist in a sense and governed by a group ethos.

During the same period when our MA has become internationalised, issues of freedom of expression have become more urgent, powered by global inequality, reactionary politics and nativism in, amongst other countries, Britain and the United States. There have been discussions in the public realm about the limits of imaginative freedom, especially cultural appropriation. Who has the right to speak of, and for, whom? This controversy recently made itself felt beyond literary circles in the wider culture with the keynote speech delivered by American writer Lionel Shriver at the Brisbane literary festival in 2016, and the reaction it provoked, for example from Marlon James and Paul Beatty, whose novels are both recent winners of the Man Booker Prize.

Cultural appropriation and freedom of expression are linked in and by creative writing. Discussions around the rights and responsibilities of writers toward their characters and toward their readers have become more prevalent and charged in Creative Writing Workshop. This is to be expected, as the workshop not only mirrors the wider culture which generates it. The workshop also has its own culture. I will now look at the ways in which the culture of the workshop is drawing together new approaches to dialogue, not only about writing but encompassing the wider social context that generates it.

The Ethics of Dialogue

Ethical philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas is the authority of the contemporary era on the ethics of dialogue. Entering into a dialogue is an innately ethical activity, Lévinas proposes, particularly in education.[4] In Lévinasian thought, the ethical nature of dialogue is confirmed in two ways: in dialogue, the »I« (the self) which is the locus for Western thought must recognise an Other (you) in order to enter into a dialogue. The experiential quarantine of the »I« is therefore superceded; the »I« is expanded through dialogue to include the »you« via recognition of the existence of the Other.

To enter dialogue is not only to recognise the existence of the Other, but to bear responsibility toward her or him. Dialogue is itself a pursuit of understanding; as Lévinasian scholar Hanoch Ben-Pazi writes, it is in fact a pursuit of nothing less than the *whole* of understanding: both subjective and objective truth. According to Lévinas,

> the worthy person, therefore, is one who seeks to understand the world in which he lives, to influence it for the better with what he has to offer, and to translate his ideas into the world of action. Even if the I cannot know and acquire »everything«, it nonetheless has the ability and the tools to achieve a comprehensive conception of reality.[5]

In Lévinasian thought the worthy and reasonable person confronts new challenges to understanding through dialogue, »through assimilation, encountering new concepts and assimilating them within the pattern of their world.«[6] It is important to note that this is not a rights-based discourse. As Ben-Pazi writes,

> [a]ccording to Lévinas, dialogue is not constituted by the language of rights, in which a person with rights encounters another person with rights. It is, rather, facilitated and required by the language of obligations in which the I asks itself about its obligations and its responsibility toward the other.[7]

Lévinas therefore draws attention to the responsibility of the individual on two fronts: to seek understanding outside the confines of the »I« and to enter into dialogue, and to take responsibility for the potential pitfalls of dialogue, which

4 | See Ben-Pazi, Hanoch: »Ethics responsibility dialogue. The meaning of dialogue in Lévinas's philosophy«, in: Journal of Philosophy of Education 4 (2016), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-9752.12160

5 | Ibid.

6 | Ibid.

7 | Ibid.

include the giving and taking of offense. Dialogue therefore has two components: respect and responsibility. Respect means, according to Lévinas, »absolute respect for the alterity of the Other, respect that must not be limited, appropriated or diminished.« Responsibility is defined as »the ethical guarantee of the alterity of the Other present before the I.«[8]

Respect and responsibility are not always easily won; there is a tension between the two. In educational contexts, according to Ben-Pazi, this tension creates a space, an interstitial area which is occupied by the teacher – or more appropriately by the educational dialogue in which the teacher is engaged.

But education and the dialogues it engenders is not a mathematical realm of rights, or not solely – it is also defined by the culture in which it takes place. As I have noted above, the prose fiction workshop model is both situated within a wider culture of discourse about the production of literature, and also has its *own* culture. Within this culture, dialogue takes on particularities which lead us back to the initial motive for discussing creative work in progress through peer review.

The Workshop as Rehearsal

Taking our cue from Roland Barthes, the workshop, like everything else in culture, is mediated by social practice. And as such it is based on »contingent, historical constructions«, in the words of literary theorist Jonathan Culler.[9] We could also refer to the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of the habitus: a field of intermeshed action and meaning in which individuals negotiate their relative positions.[10] It is not my intention to anatomise the workshop; on that subject I recommend work by American professor of Creative Writing Stephanie Vanderslice, who has written extensively on the nature and utility of the creative writing workshop in both the US and the UK. However I can offer a discrete observational snapshot of my students' subjective experience of having their work evaluated by their peers.

In the summer of 2016 I decided to call upon former students as to answer a few standardised questions about their experience of our Workshop class during the autumn semester of the previous year. I chose former students as I did not want informants to feel they were under any obligation to reflect on what was for them a recent experience which they were likely still digesting. It

8 | Ibid.

9 | Culler, Jonathan: Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction, New York: Oxford University Press 2011, p. 44.

10 | See Bourdieu, Pierre: Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977.

was important that their reflections be voluntary. I asked them, now that their MA was over, how did they feel about the experience of disclosing their work in progress to their peers and to tutors? Did they feel that the discussion was a public or a private conversation? What effects did it have on their writing and their sense of themselves as writers?

My respondents all stated that they felt the workshop was a private space rather than a public one. This interpretation was reinforced by our emphasis as tutors on the importance to keep our discussions in workshop private; to not discuss them in any formal way such as in print or on social media. To quote one respondent:

[T]o me, »public« connotes the wider world or anonymous reader. In workshop I very much felt I was tailoring my criticisms to converse appropriately with the person who wrote the piece. I may have spoken differently if I was speaking anonymously, or if I didn't know the writer.

On the issue of whether the workshop constituted a private or public dialogue, one respondent commented:

I saw workshop as a private conversation, as if we had made a subconscious pact between the nine participants (ten including the teacher) that whatever happened in the workshop stayed in the workshop. This may or may not have turned out to be true but for the workshop to function I think it had to at least *feel* that way.

The workshop, therefore, might be a public arena in that people other than the self are present. But in restricting the conversation to a few carefully chosen peers, and through an application by the tutors of a rule that the conversations should not be reported outside the seminar room, a public venue is turned into a private one.

If the propriety of the workshop both requires and is based on the notion that it is *not* a public conversation, then who did these writers understand themselves to be in dialogue with? One of my former students suggested that although the arena of the workshop included others, the conversation remained a personal, private transaction:

Despite having the work aired, I still felt like I was in dialogue with myself about what form the improvement to my work should take, in response to the sorts of things people were saying. However, I think about how to make my feelings and experiences translatable, rather than how to document what they feel like to me, as me.

This response introduces a concept to which I will return later: the notion of the workshop as a rehearsal. The workshop is not a public space, but much as a rehearsal is necessary to stage a production it is a trial run, a preparation,

for an engagement with such an arena. In this vein, one respondent noted of the capacity for the workshop experience to bolster one's identity as a writer: »Workshop can be the very first time one's identity as a writer is confirmed. Before you are published, or even first submit to a literary magazine, you are treated as a writer in workshop, with a goal that is worth pursuing. There's something gratifying about that.« Another respondent echoed this statement: »The workshop helped me to take my work seriously, to acknowledge myself as a writer in a way.« Finally, one respondent admitted feeling an anxiety about how the workshop group would receive the themes and concerns of her work:

I was aware that some of the subjects I was writing about could be potentially contentious, even offensive, to others. I was worried about how other students would respond but ultimately my curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to test the limits of tolerance within the group so I could gauge what was permissible in the wider world. For example, if anyone would publish me, or if I would be considered too challenging, too edgy.

The student added that »The MA made me realise (very quickly) that I'm never going to please everyone and indeed attempting to do so would be detrimental to the writing. I found that quite a liberating idea.«

Rehearsing Dialogue

Intentionality is a word I hear more often in discussions in workshop. Its genesis is in a philosophical discourse on rights and ethics: according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, intentionality is »the power of minds to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs.«[11]

After being temporarily banished by post-structuralism and deconstruction theory, in recent decades postcolonial theory in particular has re-cast the text in the role of the avatar of authors' intentions; the text has regained intentionality as a political artifact. My belief is that we are witnessing a re-politicisation of literature in an age of divisive globalisation, which rightly calls upon literature to shed essentialism and the acceptance of extant hierarchies and lazy hegemonic assumptions and to acknowledge the inequalities and imbalances in the social world. One of the consequences of re-examining the text as a product of its social conditions is the aforementioned debates and controversies about cultural appropriation in fiction.

Texts can go places you cannot possibly anticipate. In the words of my colleague at UEA, literary scholar Anshuman Mondal, texts »time and space

11 | Jacob, Pierre: »Intentionality«, in: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intentionality/

travel.«[12] As a writer you cannot take account of all possible responses of your eventual readers. At the same time, the relational character of language communicates meaning but also encodes and transmits cultural values and hierarchies of power. Today's students are very aware that the workshop itself transmits these values and that social inequalities and power differentials circulate within this private, privileged space.

Universities in the UK are largely a liberal rights community. It is reasonable to assume that anyone who comes onto a creative writing MA is by definition invested in freedom of speech, if not on the basis of personal ethics then because history suggests that creativity flourishes in a context of freedom of expression and withers where it is curtailed.

I have never personally taught a workshop class in which students were gravely offended by the content of one of their peers' submissions. Nor have I ever presided over a discussion about which topics might be considered off-limits to the group, as communicated through submissions of work-in-progress. However, I have observed that questions of race, class and representation are becoming more present within workshop discussions. While these questions might be expressed in writerly discussions of characterisation, representation, knowledge and historical context, effectively these are issues of power. To cite a few examples, we have recently discussed the following, vis-à-vis student's work in progress: is it ever acceptable to write about a character with a different race than yours? How can I know what it is like to be a fifty year-old Pakistani muslim woman? How do I represent the experience of a »monster« – someone who has enacted damage on other people – without seeming to condone oppression? How can I write socially and morally engaged fiction about the political polarisation happening in our country without dictating or preaching to the reader?

As Mondal and other scholars note, there has recently been a shift in power relations around the production of literature, one which questions the credibility of fiction to authentically reflect the hierarchies of the society from which it draws its inspiration. In his writing on the giving and taking of offence, Mondal comments that responsibility for negotiating perceptions of representation and cultural appropriation is shared between readers and writers. The place where responsibility is worked out is the text. The text forms part of what he calls the »horizon of expectations«[13] in which readers and writers alike consider possible responses.

Apprentice writers who undertake to be workshopped are entering this field of affect and ideology, one which, as I have noted, is increasingly charged. In the workshop they stage a rehearsal which has many facets: an aesthetic testing of the waters, a rehearsal for entering the arena of social discourse as a pub-

12 | Personal conversation with A. Mondal.

13 | Mondal, Anshuman: Islam and Controversy. The Politics of Free Speech After Rushdie, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, p. 84.

lished author, and finally, I suggest, a rehearsal of values: what place their work will assume in the cultural conversation.

To return to the Lévinasian notion of dialogue as constituting risks and responsibility, there are risks in disclosure – of being misunderstood, of being criticised, of being ignored. But if, as Lévinas proposes, dialogue is always ethical, then such risk-taking leads to a greater understanding. It is possible that the act of being in dialogue and the ›expanded-I‹, which Lévinas asserts is its creation, promotes the aesthetic transformation sought by students through the workshop. Crucially, it may also allow a critical distance to be measured: between writer and text, reader and writer, text and reader, leading to text and context, even text and history. To return to Toby Litt's assertion, the leap from *I have written this* to *this is being written* is the unanticipated critical benefit for students as they rehearse their work as part of a larger conversation about rights, expression, and the limits of tolerance.

Such goals for the discipline have recently been expressed in official guidelines for the teaching of creative writing in the UK in the form of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Subject Benchmark Statement.[14] This set of pedagogic aims and directives mentions the following goals of the discipline: [that students] »initiate and take responsibility for their own work«; »be sensitive to cultural contexts when working with others«; and »evaluate and reflect on their own practices and assumptions.«

The Framework goes on to outline pedagogical goals of the discipline as including the following:

2.7 The awareness that student writers develop of the processes of their own writing entails close consideration not only of formal but also historical and cultural contexts. Student writers are encouraged to recognise and move beyond received ideas, familiar representations, and stale or clichéd expression.

2.9 Individual perspectives are broadened by exposure to texts that are culturally and stylistically diverse, as well as to texts that might deepen the student writer's awareness of their own local, regional, national, cultural or linguistic identity, experience and idiom.[15]

The formalisation of cultural sensitivity, acknowledgement of cultural relativism and the power relations which govern the production of literature into

14 | Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK Benchmark statement: »UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards Creative Writing« February 2016, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-Creative-Writing-16.pdf

15 | Ibid.

educational guidelines for the discipline signals a growing sophistication of creative writing as a taught subject, and the negotiation inherent in its star pedagogic method of the workshop. One of my student informants offered an anecdotal coda to their observations on the workshop, in response to my question of whether she felt her work »improved« after following the workshop model for two terms:

> Yes, certainly, because no matter how much you work on something you are always going to be blind to gaps in the logic or the ways the characters are appearing – we all see the world in a slanted light, and according to our own rationalisations, which may not necessarily make sense to other people if we present it this way without being aware that we are doing so. We have to indicate to the reader that our choices are conscious, that we know what we're doing, and the world is presented in a particular way for a particular reason. This takes effort and revision and other people's perspectives to indicate to us where we are being presumptuous.

The experience of seeing your creative work interpreted and reflected through other peoples' eyes is then another incarnation of the Lévinasian I/Other notion of dialogue. But the conversation about writing is also overlain with another, related, dialogue of re-interpretation and re-invention of creative work through the reader's eyes.

Conclusion

As Hanoch Ben-Pazi has concluded, »Western thought, maintains Lévinas, is based on the ›I‹ and the worldview it constructs for itself. Ethics are derived from this worldview and determine what is proper and improper ethical behaviour.«[16]

The act of entering into dialogue with an Other frees the »I« from a self-generated notion of truth, but this is a difficult freedom, accomplished only through risk and responsibility. These key concepts of Lévinasian ethics are present in Prose Fiction Workshop, and are part of the understanding of process in the production of literature, given the workshop model's growing presence in literary culture in some countries.

Freedom of speech, or defending the right to imaginative freedom, is not the uppermost concern of the creative writing workshop; the purpose of the workshop is oriented toward aesthetic and technical considerations of fiction writing. Yet in order for these aspects of fiction to be attended to, a rubric of free speech needs to be established by and within the group. Absolutism, intran-

16 | H. Ben-Pazi: Ethics responsibility dialogue.

sigence, favouritism and lack of empathy are the enemies of establishing the discourse of respect and trust necessary for the evaluation of artistic work-in-progress. These principles must also be delicately balanced with the necessary rigour and willingness to critique in order to reach the workshop's goals. But the creative writing workshop is not only a fine art studio practice where aesthetics and techniques are discussed. By employing disclosure, dialogue and an enactment of this »difficult freedom«, the workshop becomes a rehearsal for the »real« life of the literary text, once published, and for its reception in the wider culture.

Literature

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