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

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This talk

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

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

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

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

• Our identity as academics, our ‘academic identity’
• How many of us, when asked what we do, would respond with ‘I am a writer’?
Conditions of academics’ writing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

• (1) It comes out of deep thinking
• With (2) a will to communicate to a particular (set of) audience(s)
• (1) without (2) is ‘scholasticism’ (Bourdieu)
• (2) without (1) is frivolity, triviality and (probably) ideology.

• ie, a questioning but also
• an abiding concern for the reader
• And so has a transparency
• (If the reader cannot understand, whose fault is that?)
On the responsibilities of the (academic) writer
(with Habermas’ winged chariot drawing near)

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

- Academic professionalism
- The wordcount
- The topic
- The structure
- The ‘agenda’
- And on time, please.
Adjectives of academics’ writing

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

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


