



DOI: 10.1515/abcsj-2015-0004

Editorial

All the World's a Page: Towards a Definition of 'Writer' in an Age of Opportunity

Human endeavour is usually understood to be 'professional' when it attracts payment. The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, for instance, must surely have sold their wares once they arrived at the fair. Otherwise, rub-a-dub-dub, they would merely have been 'three men' in a tub. But as the nursery rhyme makes clear, they were tradesmen. They had careers. They brought to market meat, muffins, wicks and wax. For this, their produce, they received whatever that market would bear.

But art is a different matter. Proportionally little art has ever made it to market, with painters, singers, and dancers typically allowing the pleasure of creation to be its own reward. And, of course, the world has known (and, sadly, not known) untold numbers of unpaid writers too.

Rather paradoxically, then, 'the artist' has always been famous for toiling in obscurity. But the obvious difference between 'always' and today is that, in modern times, singers, dancers, writers, and artists of all cast and character have, via the Internet, readily available public outlets for their work. While many of those outlets are unpaid – most, actually, are unpaid – they offer unprecedented opportunity for self-promotion along with infinite possibility for readership and audience. YouTube, Vimeo, and innumerable other online platforms host the prodigiously uploaded recordings of performance artists, some of which 'go viral.'

Writers, in the main, have little need for visual content and many host their own blogs. Or they submit work to both paying and non-paying online publications that vary widely in calibre, editorial oversight, and 'traffic' – what would once have been called 'circulation.'

Relative to other forms of contemporary, online self-expression, it is writing that predominates. Fewer people take to the World Wide Web with their a cappella or their dance moves than with their writing. Via ubiquitous social media, we gladly emit our points of view in public and quasi-public ways. Comment feeds alone allow for so much democratic verbal sparring, the Romans would surely have envied us. On any day of the week, The Guardian's website, for instance, is bulging with thoughtful and provocative reader response.

Perhaps more confounding to the notion of 'writer' is that avenues to serious-minded self-publishing have grown wider and more accommodating. Xlibris, Nook, Authoright, IngramSpark, Kindle Direct, and many other hybrid and full-suite commercially driven author support services, including crowd-sourced ones such as MacMillan's Swoon Reads, have up-ended the apple cart that once contained 'published works.' Not only do unestablished writers turn to these companies, but established ones too in the desire to exert greater control over their manuscripts and their profits. The open platform digital library called Scribd, founded in San Francisco as recently as 2013, now boasts more than sixty million documents written and contributed by its user community. Never mind its half a million conventionally published e-books.

Academic writing and publishing have also undergone a broadening effect with more and more peer reviewed journals launching from within institutions so as to bolster research outputs. It is probably only a matter of time before impact factor becomes fully and finally an official threshold for academic career progression. Until then, and perhaps beyond then, academic writing will continue unbounded in online scholarly publications that actively invite contributors, sometimes for a fee. So-called 'predatory open access journals' will likely proliferate without impediment by attracting submissions from un-tenured academics and those keen to see their work appear swiftly and 'internationally.' Meanwhile, millions of these and other researchers will freely and steadily disseminate their own work on densely subscribed scholarly sharing sites such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate.

So, in a writing-saturated world, in which the terms ‘publishing’ and ‘uploading’ can be regarded as nearly synonymous, what sorts of credentials must one possess to call oneself ‘writer’ without fear of contradiction?

The linguist John McWhorter makes some assertions about the widespread, modern day practice of text messaging that offer a useful perspective. In addressing the question of whether texting has compromised the writing skills of young people, McWhorter argues that it has not. He believes that because texting involves ungrammatical shortcuts, loose spellings, and ‘pragmatic-marker’ acronyms such as ‘LOL’ and ‘BTW,’ it does not constitute writing at all. Instead, these rather intimate and casual transmissions are a kind of ‘fingered speech,’ he says, and they represent an emerging complexity to the ways people communicate, not a decline.

If we accept his argument that texting isn’t actually ‘writing,’ we may also reasonably put other forms of on-line, extempore writing, usually called ‘posting,’ into the same category as ‘fingered speech.’ No matter how far and wide our Tweets, Facebook messages, chat room remarks, and Newsfeed comments may travel into the virtual world – constituting a kind of publishing – for the most part, they merely lay bare our transcribed verbal reactions to the online postings of others. Their syntax is generally random and conversational. They are lettered utterances, similar to the ‘fingered speech’ of McWhorter’s texting, but often lengthier.

These transcribed verbal reactions do involve writing in that they are comprised of words spelled out in letters, but they involve very little by way of composition. Composition is distinguished by its deliberate arrangement, its careful formulation. Our lettered utterances generally eschew the ‘pruning’ that goes into composition. A Tweet, one might argue, requires concentration, or, at least, compression, just as haikus and limericks do. Yet while all Tweets are brief, few are memorable.

Real composition, by contrast, requires the definite, calculated arrangement of constituent parts. It is highly conscious. It is reflective, as well, in that we look back on text we have composed and reconstitute it, perhaps many times, before offering it.

In all its vastness, the Internet amasses and makes accessible both writing that is composed, and writing that is not composed – perhaps in equal measure. There is no longer any such thing as a barrier to publication, or, at least, to dissemination.

So the question might be phrased this way: if we carefully arrange words on screen or on page, and if we deliberately offer those words to a limited or unlimited public, and if we do so either for payment or in the hope of payment – are we then writers? Or, is it the case that we become writers only when others recognize us as writers?

*Truman Capote famously declared of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, "it isn't writing at all, it's typing." Kerouac's seemingly disordered stream of consciousness, linked directly to personal experience, but fictive nonetheless, impressed Capote as not composed enough, though Kerouac revised it assiduously, producing, eventually, a 120 foot long 'single scroll' that would become a book that would capture the imagination of millions.¹*

Still, Kerouac could easily have died in obscurity, an over-drinker who wrote between adventures. If events had not taken the turns they did in the 1950s, Kerouac might never have encountered the other 'beat writers' of his generation and found his way to publication. The proverbial koan about the tree falling might well be asked of written work too. If a manuscript lands in the woods and no one is there to read it, does it still signify?

Until recently, the status of 'writer' had a straightforward relationship to publication. In the old world of hard copy, the designation of writer applied primarily to those whose work appeared in magazines and newspapers, and that of 'author' to those who wrote books. Today, the term 'discoverability' is frequent in industry discussions about self-publishing. For writers, self-publishing is a kind of new world, an open frontier where opportunity abounds, but where influence, conversely, is limited. In this new world, much is published but relatively little is read. Books, especially e-books, can be brought to market easily, but may never be noticed or purchased. Publication has occurred, in such instances, but anonymity remains. The role of the author now involves at least as much promotion and

marketing, and, indeed, personal subsidising, as it does writing, and often to no avail in terms of capturing a readership.

In this new marketplace of words, the label 'published writer' no longer seems to have any particular currency. So perhaps a new distinction is required in defining what makes a writer, a distinction that privileges activity over publicity.

In this light, Jack Kerouac was indeed a writer not because he was discovered, but because he toiled over the phrasing of his narratives. The same can be said of Truman Capote. And if Shakespeare's sister Judith had really existed, as Virginia Woolf imagined her, we would surely look back on her as a 'writer' if her "incandescence" had ever reached even a single page.²

Kerouac, Capote, Woolf, and Shakespeare all wrote at points in history when for-profit businesses almost invariably served as the middle men between writers and their marketplaces. (Woolf, of course, was both writer and publisher.) Even the chapbooks of early modern Europe, which were written and circulated within local communities, required printers and often agents, both of whom took profits. In our own times, though, published writers are increasingly difficult to define. Practicing writers, however, can always be identified because they:

Compose. Their work is premeditated and re-meditated.

Respect readers. Their work invites appreciation and interpretation.

Welcome payment, but tend to derive satisfaction from the pleasure of creation.

Practicing writers today may also be – indeed, are likely to be – uploaders, posters, Tweeters, or bloggers. They may be traditionally published or self-published, or they may not be published at all. But they are not finger-speakers, to quote McWhorter. They have not merely lettered their utterances or verbally transcribed their reactions. They have arranged their words, either fictively or non-fictively, in verse or in prose, with desired effects in mind.

Like the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, they may be glad of their earnings, but as Mother Goose wrote of their kinsman Peter, Peter, they love most well when they read and spell.

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Notes:

¹ Kerouac's manuscript has toured widely including its exhibition in The British Library in 2012. See: <http://www.bl.uk/press-releases/2012/october/the-british-library-exhibits-jack-kerouacs-120foot-long-on-the-road-manuscript-scroll-in-london-for>

² In 'A Room of One's Own,' Virginia Woolf imagines that William Shakespeare had a sister named Judith whose literary genius was equal to her brother's, but whose opportunities were not.

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