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A River of paper and ink: conducting an autodidactic practice review

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ABSTRACT

The practice review is recommended for practice-as-research projects, and yet there is relatively little guidance as to how to undertake such a review. One significant exception is the work of Dr. Emily Pott, whose paper, 'The Literature/Practice Review: Use of Creative Practice During the Review Period and Its Potential to Reshape Research Projects,' was published in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* in 2021. The present article applies and expands on Pott's work concerning the practice review, which embraces the tool of recreative practice. In particular, the Harkey extends the practice review into the domain of self-directed learning, advocating an autodidactic practice review. Using her own case as an example, she considers a skill gap in her own development as a researcher, which she remediated by applying and adapting Pott's recreative practice approach. She then explores a simple structure for an autodidactic practice review, and reviews the writing practices of novelist Stephen King and literary phenomenologist Maurice Blanchot. The article concludes with the acknowledgement that each research project makes unique demands, and therefore requires an expansion of the researcher's skills. The autodidactic practice review provides a flexible tool for answering such knowledge gaps pertaining to creative and artistic research practices.

Introduction

The practice-as-research (PaR) methodology offers practitioner-researchers a pathway that can wind and flex with the unique, often subtle demands of artistic research. PaR respects artmaking as a form of legitimate knowledge production (Nelson 2022), providing artist-researchers an academic framework for expressing discoveries that arise in processes, artistic reveries, and reflexive explorations. The methodology further acknowledges that artistic practice is equally as demanding as research, and so, in the case of the doctoral thesis, the 'praxis submission' – a portfolio of paintings, literary

text, or other – is often accompanied by 'an exegesis significantly shorter than the traditional 80,000 word PhD' (Nelson 2022, 31). But for all the benefits of PaR, there are challenges, too. This relatively new methodology exists, in many ways, as a series of unformed possibilities – journeys that we might undertake, but for which no path has been worn smooth. This is true at the level of the university and for the PaR supervisor, and it is especially true for the practitioner-researcher, herself. While any doctoral thesis may be a veritable marathon of self-discovery and skill development, the practice-as-research thesis often requires researchers to blaze new trails.

This article, then, serves as a trail map for one segment of the longer PaR pathway, that of the practice review. It is based on my own experience, and in the very particular context of my own PaR project. For this reason, much of what I share here will need to be adapted to fit the circumstances of each individual researcher. But as someone who benefitted from another writer's map of similar-but-different terrain – the work of Dr. Emily Pott, whose related writings have been published in this journal and elsewhere (2021, 2024) – it is my hope that my own work may be of use to other researchers.

Orientation: the terms 'practice-as-research' and 'practice review'

As with any specialised form of inquiry, PaR introduces newcomers to a handful of terms and concepts whose particular usage may not be familiar. For the sake of clarity, let's pause over the word *practice* and its meanings in this article.

In the context of *practice*-as-research, we can understand 'practice' as an approach which is distinct from theory. When practice becomes a form of research, the central task is performative. Additionally, creative PaR embraces a particular artistic 'practice,' such dance, writing, acting, and so on.

By way of example, my own PaR project studies the experience of fiction writing through the window of phenomenological *practice*, and my research orients from a standpoint of *practice* rather than theory. Surely, there are many theoretical approaches one might use to study writing and phenomenology, but PaR focuses on the applied outworking of the creative practice. Taken in this light, a *practice review* gives PaR researchers the opportunity to explore the practices (not the theories) of other practitioners in the same field. A theatrical actor may undertake a deep study of another performer's practice in order to glean wisdom for her own practice, her own research. In undertaking such reviews, the practitioner-researcher hopes to parse out something essential in the work of others which she can then carry forward in her own explorations.

My use case: phenomenological practice as research

Because the journey of this article was undertaken as a response to a practical research conundrum, I will first offer a short summary of the project that occasioned these difficulties, my doctoral thesis currently underway at the University of Essex in the domain of Psychoanalytic Studies.

My area of inquiry concerns the lived, internal experience of fiction authors as they write. As I am, myself, a novelist, I determined that a PaR format would support my project. What is unique about my PaR approach is that my novel-in-progress is *not* the practice in question, and will not be submitted with my thesis. Rather, I am undertaking a phenomenological study of my writing experience – meaning that my practice is, in fact, phenomenology, while fiction writing provides the context for the phenomena I explore. An extended phenomenological chapter is the evidence of practice which I will inset into my final thesis paper. And, while phenomenological writing is not generally understood to be art, it is certainly creative, and my task under study is an artistic one. In this way, PaR's kinship with artmaking, as well as its flexibility and focus on unconventional means of knowledge-making, are well suited to my project.

The details of my practice review, which follow, arose in response to a difficulty that I encountered early in my project. Though I was familiar with the tasks and terrain of fiction writing, I was untrained in *perceiving the types of experiences* one has during fiction writing. Many intrapsychic phenomena happen on a level more subtle than the application of artistic skills or talents: the ways thought moves, currents of interest or disinterest, the conjoining of disparate ideas into something new. As I worked, I began to suspect that many such 'flows' were happening outside my conscious awareness. The unforeseen result was that my raw log entries, which described my prereflective writing experiences, felt rather thin. Worse still, I did not know how to pinpoint what was missing. What kinds of experiences was I having, that I did not yet know how to attend to? And was there a tool that could assist me in that process?

The practice review as PaR tool

Large research projects like the doctoral thesis may stand or fall on the robustness of the literature review. How, after all, can one find the exploitable research gap, situate one's own work in the wider field, winnow out ignorances, or showcase the depth and breadth of one's expertise without a top-notch literature review?

But the literature review may not be the most appropriate, exclusive pathway for every sort of research. In Robin Nelson's view, the PaR project may be strengthened by an alternative approach he describes as a *practice review*, which can incorporate the strong interdisciplinarity of practice research and enables researchers to 'locate [their] praxis in a lineage' (Nelson 2013, 102–103). Essentially, it is the function of the practice review to allow practitioner-researchers to unearth practices similar to their own, and to orient oneself in relation to them. The practice review makes a study of similar-but-different practices that have come before, treating these practitioners as mentors and their practices as primers. Further, Nelson invites researchers to assemble knowledge in three areas: the 'know-how' of 'techniques and skills' that one brings to a creative or artistic practice, the 'know-what' which 'makes . . . tacit [understandings] more explicit,' and the 'know-that,' a kind of knowledge that enables practitioners to 'generate informed critical reflection' (2022, 43–44). The practice review partakes in these areas of knowing – though they also extend beyond the practice review into practice-research tasks, proper.

The challenge with actually following Nelson's advice, however, is that neither edition of his text provides an example of an actual practice review (Nelson 2013, 2022). Fortunately, Emily Pott picks up the thread in her pair of papers, 'The Literature/Practice Review: Use of Creative Practice During the Review Period and its Potential to Reshape Research Projects' (Pott 2021) and 'Re-imagining Artists' Relationships with the Past: Recreation, Attention, Transformation' (Pott 2024). Taken together, these articles discuss the practice review concept, explore its potentials and provide an adaptable pathway, a form of 'recreative practice' (Pott 2024, 101–103), for practitioners attempting to productively bring such reviews into their own projects.

Pott is the Director of Research at the School of Traditional Arts in London with more than 17 years of supervisory experience working with artist-researchers (Pott 2021, 2024). Though I will address her work more fully in a subsequent section of this article, it is worth noting at the outset that Pott's approach to the practice review especially valuable for its holistic approach and practitioner-friendly orientation. Here she addresses the braiding of practitioners with process, of self with others: 'Through interrogating the approaches of others, and finding similarities and differences in approaches, practitioners begin to understand more about what drives their own process and what is important about their own approach' (Pott 2021, 376). Pott argues that the benefits for research and researchers is manifold. After such 'deep engagement,' researchers experience 'developments in confidence, awareness, project clarity' (379, 383). Further, the practice review fosters 'shifts in knowledge and a deepening of understanding of what is at

play, which may result in shifts in practice' (379). A thoughtfully developed practice review is far more than a consideration of what has gone before. Done deeply and well, the review may reveal new directions for one's own creative journey, informing one's practice in and beyond the research domain.

One Researcher's Practice Review Journey

Intuition, which Nelson calls 'ecological knowing' (2022, 5), is a regular visitor in the creative process. So, perhaps it is not surprising that one of the recurring themes in my own PaR has been the importance of tending to intuitions as they arise. For instance, when I initially read Nelson's account of the practice review, I intuited that this tool would be vital to both my practice and my project. When, as noted above, I later discovered that my pre-reflective research notes felt scanty, I recalled that intuitive nudge.

I decided to undertake a deliberate and extensive practice review. But how? Using what process? Nelson's advice is general: 'See who else is working in the chosen field and what insights their work has produced . . . [S]urvey . . . similar practices to your own' (Nelson 2013, 103). Timothy Jones' assertion that we should ultimately seek 'the kind of review that is most appropriate to [one's] subject' (Jones 2006, 233) is similarly well intentioned, but vague. As with so much about the relatively new methodology of practice-as-research, researchers and supervisors seem required to 'feel their way forward,' even as they try to maintain the meticulous approach that doctoral research requires. Happily, I have excellent support in my supervisory team, and so I have consistently been encouraged to explore and experiment.

In that spirit, I reflected, *Perhaps I should seek out some excellent examples of practice reviews*. From various samples, I hoped to 'jigsaw' together a review method that suited my project. But finding cases to study was not easy. The *PARtake Performance as Research*, exciting in that it offers a section dedicated to practice reviews, pertains exclusively to the performing arts (e.g. Pye 2024). None of its resources opened any vistas for my own journey.

In the end, I never did turn up a practice review of the sort I intend to undertake, one which examines – for instance – phenomenological studies of artmaking. In turning back to Nelson, I finally had to conclude that 'rigour in this aspect [the practice review] of Practice-as-Research lies . . . in *syncretism*' (Nelson 2013, 34, italics added). Syncretism can be understood as the 'the reconciliation or fusion of different systems' (Wikimedia n.d.) which, the case of PaR, suggests the fusion of disciplines or methodologies. To practitioner-researchers attempting a practice review, to proceed syncretically likely means leaving their comfort zones and look for supportive *hybrids*. Thus, I searched for projects which shared, in some way, a syncretic essence with my own.

As my phenomenological project involved the interior experiences of fiction writers, I felt free to syncretise phenomenology and fiction, fiction and non-fiction, in order to fuse a pathway I could walk as I undertook my own unique study. This fusion ultimately included two exemplar practices: 1) excerpts of several phenomenological essays on authorship and writing by Blanchot (1982, 1999) and 2) Stephen King's novels *IT* (King 1986) and *The Dark Half* (King 1989). Despite the fact that the selected texts by King are novels, and Blanchot's are works of literary phenomenology, these authors share a great deal. Both are fiction writers, though I did not address Blanchot's stories in my review. Both have investigated experientially the interior life in authorship. Both writers are uniquely gifted and worthy of study. Taken together, these two models created a sort of 'Venn diagram' of practice which I felt would help orient and deepen my own study.

Deepening with Pott's recreative practice

Once I began dialoguing with King and Blanchot's material, I began to suspect that there was, indeed, a form of practice review best suited my work. Pott's holistic approach to, and objectives for, the practice review, increasingly felt like a 'fit.'

My understanding of Pott's work on the practice review and recreative practice derives, as noted above, from a pair of articles, one about the value of the practice review to foster artistic and research insight, and the other, which engages the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as a means of unpacking the value of recreative practice (Pott 2021, 2024). As a part of the artistic research journey, Pott advocates a 'deep or close engagement with the works of art of other practitioners in order to 'know and critique practical approaches' (Pott 2021, 377). Following this engagement is a second step, a process of deepening, in which practitioner-researchers 'linger over, and dwell with, works of art for a period of time' (379). In my own case, this involved not only selecting certain practitioners over others but also choosing from among the many works of the authors I ultimately chose. Pott's third step became especially important for my project: 'to choose a particular artwork or set of related artworks to transcribe, and often to transcribe repeatedly' (378), a method I will visit in some detail below. Finally, Pott's fourth step involves 'periods of reflection on the part of the practitioner' (379) – which dovetailed almost perfectly with my phenomenological practice, the primary difference being that one might consider phenomenology a sort of *prereflective* reflection (for prereflectivity in phenomenology, see van Manen 2016, 9).

In her 2024 paper, Pott expands on her fourth step, taking up the question of 'recreative practice,' essentially a very particular form of

practice review which 'often inform[s] and reinvigorate[s]' the practice of artist-researchers in unforeseen ways (102). In this recreative practice, as undertaken by her visual arts supervisees, practitioners select a work of art which they then copy in whole or in part, 'rediscovering and recreating past methods ... for contemporary use' (Pott 2024, 102). The intention of this act of duplication is 'a participation in, in order to dialogue with, the work of a past artist and thereby also, tangentially, with its creator' (102). A mentor is essentially lifted out of the domain of the past and invited into the present, creative moment.

The possibilities in this idea struck me powerfully, and I felt certain that my practice review should include a recreative component. But to recreate a work of written phenomenology? *Isn't that just ... well, copying stuff out of one book and into another? And, really, don't people just call that ... note-taking?*

Undaunted (or only slightly daunted) I pressed onward. I chose a few passages of Blanchot and wrote them out, longhand, in my research journal. Certain things began to jump out at me: batches of kindred word choices; fresh windows on the currents of psyche; areas of experience that I had not yet attended to in my own PaR, including rules that I have long observed, apparently unconsciously. Of course, one might argue that I was essentially doing a form of 'close reading' (Merriam-Webster 1995, 806), but I sensed that more was going on here. By coming to recreative practice phenomenologically, I became aware of *embodying* the experiences of Blanchot and King, entering into their practices in a way that seemed, somehow, more than vicarious – which then, in turn, deepened my ability to review and learn from the authors' work. Like Pott's artist-researchers, I was moving *into* another artist's practice, rather than standing on the outside and looking in. I was apprenticing to Blanchot and King, entering into their phenomenologies, transported on a river of paper and ink.

I am not, of course, the first writer to discover the value of duplicating the written texts of other authors. Sometimes known as the keeping of a *commonplace book*, or more simply, *commonplacing*, the practice has been the subject of an extensive study by Jillian M. Hess, *How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information* (2022). Though such commonplace books employ a variety of formats for a wide range of purposes, the basic practice is simple enough: 'the commonplace tradition [is] a daily record of reading,' 'a negotiation between borrowed and original thought' (Hess 2022, 22–23). Hess highlights a cozy account from Virginia Woolf to give us the flavour of commonplacing:

[L]et us take down one of those old note-books which we have all, at one time or another, had a passion for beginning. Most of the pages are blank, it is true, but at the beginning, we shall find a certain number very beautifully covered with a strikingly legible handwriting. Here we have written down the names of great writers in their order of merit; here we have copied out fine passages from the classics. (Woolf 1987, 55–56)

But perhaps Hess's favourite keeper of commonplace books is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who particularly demonstrates the practice's capacity to 'not only "act as a stimulus to thinking in certain ways" but also *mirror particular structures of thought* in its very form' (Hess 2022, 49, italics added). It is with this intention in mind that I entered into a recreative, commonplacing-type practice – to stimulate, if not particular kinds of thinking, then particular kinds of perceiving and experiencing. My goal was not merely to mirror the *words* of my mentor-practitioners but to echo the structures of their perception and their methods of bringing perception to the page. In this way, I hoped to learn better 'how to converse with [these] texts,' as well as to engage in 'an act of collaborative self-making' (35, 66), where the term *self* suggests a broader, less habitual, way of engaging the writing experience.

Pott offers several 'themes, experiences, tensions' which arise from deliberate, recreative practice (2024, 103). I will address each of these briefly here, emphasising the ways they arose in my recreative practice review.

First, as noted, recreative work helps researchers develop an 'attentive practice' which includes 'deliberately slowing down' (Pott 2024, 104). This pair of skills is essential to researchers, and to the phenomenological practitioner-researcher, particularly. Phenomenology demands a special kind of attention, an alternative to the 'taken-for-granted manner' we often use to navigate our days (van Manen 2023, 35). And though it is certainly possible to do a phenomenological exploration of the experience of rushing, it is hard to imagine that actually working at blazing speeds would contribute to truly creative writing, much less to a useful pre-reflective experience of that practice. To *attend*, to *slow down*, these are, arguably, the very beginning of phenomenology – and to so much of research.

Recreative practice also helps artist-researchers enter into a conversation with the artists and artworks under study. Pott calls this *dialogue* and notes how other artists have experienced such dialogues as forms of dance, or even as 'imaginary conversation' (2024, 106). Perhaps precisely because such imaginal conversations arise, recreative practice also results in a sense of 'collaboration' both with 'materials and the artist' (106). In unpacking this theme, Pott touches more than once on images that echo the living processes at work in a creative research practice: in surrendering to painting of an existing painting (or, by extension, the writing of an existing work) one discovers the 'lived identity' of one's materials – in literature, perhaps, of

words and images – not to mention a sense of 'relinquishing painterly will' in which one is not 'fully volitional' (107). In the spirit of finding the 'the kind of review that is most appropriate to [one's] subject' (Jones 2006, 233), the value of developing an awareness of the voice of the *other* in my project felt substantial, especially in relation to the phenomenological and fiction writing processes. But even beyond that, such a spirit of collaboration serves creative PaR, and any kind of research, generally. Academic research and writing, after all, participate in a series of long-standing conversations (Graff and Birkenstein 2010, xvi). Nobody writes, researches, or practices on an island, and to get to know the materials and works of other artist-practitioners is a powerful reminder of just how independent we are *not*.

Following from metaphorical collaborations, recreative practitioners often find that they experience their sources – artworks under study – 'act unconsciously as part of [their] creative process' (Pott 2024, 108). The results are often 'unforced . . . unbidden . . . and unexpected outcomes' (107) – an irresistible boon for the many artist-practitioners who, anecdotally, find their work is at its strongest when they, too, are surprised by it. Additionally, such practitioners find that they experience a deep 'attraction, love, empathy' with the works they study (109), echoing van Manen's sentiment that research practice, at its best, is 'a caring act' and involves 'the undeniable presence of a loving responsibility' (van Manen 2016, 5–6). The result may be a relationship, a sense of co-working where the two practitioners and their works once existed separately.

None of this is to say that recreative practice, or any form of practice review, is without its discomforts. Any method that resembles apprenticing to or 'copying' a master may evoke concerns of undue, and even unwitting, influence by the artist under study, the potential betrayal of one's own originality, not to mention concerns that so much attention to the mechanics of practice may lead to a loss of spontaneity and naturalness (Pott 2024). As filmmaker Erik Knudsen observes, there is a creative danger in becoming too 'conscious of . . . [one's own] instinctive action' (Knudsen 2003, 107) – or in the breakdown of instinctive action entirely. Essentially, the question becomes, *After days or weeks of following another practitioner's footsteps so closely, how will I resume my own gait without tripping over my own feet?* Though each researcher must address these worries in her own way, phenomena such as influence by other practitioners, fears about loss of spontaneity, or anxieties about betraying one's originality are very real, and certainly worthy of further study.

An autodidactic practice review

The longer I worked recreationally with the practices of King and Blanchot, the more I understood my practice review was moving in

a very particular direction. Ultimately, it did not seem necessary to strain over King and Blanchot's texts in an attempt to situate my practice or find my lineage because my thesis will include literature reviews pertaining directly to my areas of inquiry. With those reviews doing the work of demonstrating 'where' my research falls, then, I was freed to carry out what was quickly becoming an *autodidactic* practice review, which eventually enabled me to develop the practical and conceptual skills I needed in order to best serve the practice I undertook as research. For the purposes of my phenomenological study of the interior experience of fiction writers, this meant learning how to perceive more broadly those experiences that arose during my fiction writing sessions. At the start of my project, it was as if my onboard phenomenological-perceptual spectrum had included blues, greens and yellows, but was lacking oranges, reds, indigos, and violets. My autodidactic practice review provided me with an opportunity to develop a more complete palette, as well as making me aware of just how much subtle internal perception is involved in the writing process. Combining recreative practice with both practical and intuitive review, I found I was doing more than revealing the spectra of influential practices which came before mine. I was also discovering how the 'coloring' of my own inner world corresponded to the experiences of Blanchot and King, but also took on its own hues. Finally, I was feeling and experiencing phenomenologically *my own* fiction writing process – which was precisely the skill I lacked, and which has been so critical to my present thesis study.

Given the interior nature of this evolution, we might consider that the autodidactic review displays some overlap with the 'know-how' and 'know what' of Nelson's PaR approach (Nelson 2022, 43–44), especially as pertains to the need to convey tacit knowledge. But an autodidactic practice review also acknowledges that a practitioner may not yet have the skills they need to undertake a project. Tacit understandings certainly play a role, but the expansion of existing skills, as well as development in entirely new domains, may be necessary, as well. Before my recreative practice, I was a wrote fluently, but largely unconsciously. As the technique evolved in an auto-didactic direction, I was able to pinpoint what was missing from my phenomenological observations, and eventually to actively pursue certain 'lessons' which would aid me in cultivating the new perceptual skills. In time, I learned how to observe processes which had always been present, but which required a certain 'lens' for viewing them.

An autodidactic practice review may be of value to any practitioner-researcher engaged in a practice-as-research or arts-based research approach, and who has need of skill development in the areas of methodology or creative performance. Beyond that, the applications of the method

will likely be idiosyncratic to each researcher, and so there will likely remain in every case an aspect of *feeling one's way forward*.

That said, the method need not be complicated, and the overall approach can be summarised in four steps:

To the degree possible, determine what skill or skills need development

In order to understand a practice review as particularly autodidactic, a researcher must begin with an acknowledgement that certain skills are or may be lacking. The challenge, of course, is that we cannot always know what we do not know. For this reason, the review may begin with a desire to develop skills in a particular domain, with the hope that time and attention will help pin down the specifics. In my case, my problem was an inherently phenomenological one. I perceived that that my range of experiencing during fiction writing practice was too limited, but I did not know what *kinds* of experience I was missing. A domain of inquiry, however, was enough to allow me to move forward with a practice review.

Choose practitioner-mentors who have exemplary skills and who, ideally, work in a similar terrain

Once the practice-researcher identifies the skills she lacks or wants to enhance, she can choose practitioner-mentors on that basis. The key question here is, who might model the type of skills she hopes to acquire? The selection of a mentor whose work evokes a sense of significant practical rapport, and/or whose practice feels 'several steps ahead' may be an optimal choice. As I have noted, Maurice Blanchot and Stephen King were existing role models who met my practice needs. However, both King and Blanchot are prolific practitioners, so part of my review process involved engaging with various texts until I found the right ones. Ultimately, I emphasised essays and novels that aligned with my subject of inquiry: fiction writing and inner experience. In that way, my practice review would also serve contribute to my research aims.

Devise exercises for unearthing gaps and developing needed skills

To undertake the autodidactic practice review proper, the practitioner-researcher must devise tasks that will facilitate skill development. For instance, in my case, I imitated Pott's recreative practice review, utilising a commonplacing-type practice. I also did extensive exploratory writing in my research journal, working to pin down the kinds of experiences King and Blanchot demonstrated, but which were absent in my own

practice. One of Blanchot's essays mentions, for example, the experience of *fascination* (e.g. Blanchot 1999, 412–413). Never before had I considered the experience of fascination during writing – what it felt like, how it directed my attention, how it impacted the consciousness of my fictional characters, and so on. Over time, the application of these expanded varieties of experiencing became second nature – and all that was left was to assemble my journey for presentation as part of my thesis.

Write the formal practice review

The tone and format of the written autodidactic practice review may vary. Some researchers may choose to include unedited entries from their research journals, or to provide an image that expresses the accumulation of skills over time. For myself, I had done far more writing that I could include in my thesis, and so focused on maintaining a readable, phenomenological mode, and limited specific accounts to two key areas: a) that information which both supported my skill development and bolstered my thesis inquiry, and b) practices and discoveries which I felt would be particular useful to other researchers devising their own practice reviews.

A sample practice review in miniature

The following section briefly reviews excerpts from King and Blanchot, and considers some of the outcomes of my practice review. While a full practice review would dive deeper and involve more reflection, it is my hope that this short sample gives the reader a sense of my approach.

Blanchot

A key pair of questions with Blanchot's work, or in any practice in review is, *What is his practice, and what is he researching?*

 'To write,' Blanchot tells us, 'is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking' (van Manen 2023, 264). Here, Blanchot sets out the parameters of his project. His practice is to *make himself the echo of what cannot cease speaking.*

 Because phenomenology aims for pre-reflective accounts, Blanchot does not have to define the *what* which never falls silent. There is no need for him to theorise about which psychologies might best explain this phenomenon of speaking and echoing. What matters is experience: *This is what it is like to write*, Blanchot tells us, *and this is how I offer myself to the writing task.* Here, then, is his area of inquiry.

Van Manen implies that Blanchot's project is a mystical one. For him, the experience of reading Blanchot is to be 'constantly brushing against the mysterious veils of the expressivity of existence that surrounds and haunts us' (van Manen 2023, 264). Taking van Manen's reading in tandem with my own, I suggest that Blanchot's research subject is *the encounter with existence as it expresses itself when we meet it on the page, with pen in hand.*

Among Blanchot's phenomenological studies of the writing experience, perhaps one of the most fascinating is his literary encounter with the phenomenon of *inspiration*. Related to it is the call to surrender.

> Inspiration appears little by little in its true light: it is powerful, but on the condition that he who welcomes it [the writer] becomes very weak … It is, they say, magic; it works instantly without time's long approaches, without intermediary. That is to say: one has to waste time, surrender the right to act and the power to produce. The purer the inspiration, the more dispossessed is he who enters the space. (Blanchot 1982, 182)

When the writer encounters or welcomes inspiration, she opens the door to more than the inrush of ideas and images; she becomes weak relative to the power of that inspiration. Feeling used, depleted, or frustratingly idle – as a novelist, I could relate to, and identify in my own experience, all of these.

Blanchot's pedagogy echoes anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's 'inner sense cultivation' (Luhrmann 2020, 58), teaching us how to perceive the presence of inspiration as a *power* that can be perceived as pure and as having a 'true light' (Blanchot 1982, 182) – but which, at the same time, seems to have an almost insidious capacity to compel the writer's cooperation. The author is 'dispossessed' and 'becomes [rather than making herself] very weak' (182). Acted upon by a larger force, the writer is surrendered.

Further, Blanchot is transparent about the presence of creative paradox. Sure, what writer would not welcome the winds of inspiration, that inflowing breath of the divine? And yet, inspiration depletes the author, even demanding that she relinquish 'the power to produce' Blanchot (1982, 182). Not only is this paradoxical – it leaves a poor writer wondering, *How much inaction do you require, Inspiration? Because my rent is $1050 a month, and my landlord becomes* very *active when I don't pay on time*. And yet, few full-time novelists would deny that such tensions of opposites (for 'tension of opposites,' see Jung 1969, para. 426) are a common a part of the writing experience: serving art, serving mammon.

Combining inner sensing with candour and striking language, Blanchot teaches the practitioner-researcher how perceive, and to how to initiate readers, into new forms of lived-experience. In this way, even non-writers may recognise the movements of inspiration in their own inner worlds. Here is the power of artful phenomenological writing: one does not have to be familiar with the phenomenon under study in to find wonder in the

account. Blanchot gives us a phenomenology of writing and of inspiration, yes, but also a phenomenology of what it is like to sense inwardly, to explore the terrain of psyche.

King

Stephen King's pedagogy, meanwhile, uses extensive use of metaphor in order to demonstrate *what it is like to work with personified figures in the literary psyche*—his area of inquiry. In this case, King's fictional character, the author Thad Beaumont, describes his encounters with the dangerously autonomous subpersonality, George Stark.

    What is it like to write with an autonomous subpersonality? King's character Thad Beaumont might muse. *If you really want to know . . .*

    It's like having another person in your head, or like having something foreign growing in your mind. After a spate of serious headaches, a neurosurgeon discovers the remains of an 'absorb[ed]' foetal twin in the tissue of Thad's brain (King 1989, 9). 'The growth clock of the absorbed twin, which should have run down forever at least a month before Mrs. Beaumont gave birth, somehow got wound up [active or growing] again . . . the intracranial pressure was enough to cause the kid's headaches' (10). Here, Thad's biological anomaly serves as a metaphor for his writing experience. In a way, the 'literalism' of the image is almost waggish, as if King is punning with the reader. Dark humour aside, however, Thad conveys some of the uncanny feeling of discovering something autonomous – like a fictional character – in one's own head.

    It's like being a different person, with different preferences and behaviors. Explaining his decision to let go of his Stark pen-name for good, Thad says, 'I decided if I was going to be a father . . . I ought to start *being myself again*, as well' (King 1989, 95, italics added). And, in fact, writing as 'himself' is vastly different than writing as Stark. Thad prefers to type; Stark writes only with pencils (King 1989). Stark, a smoker, is the 'far more prolific writer' (King 1989, 28); meanwhile, the less productive Thad broke the cigarette habit some years before. Thad has not had a drink 'since completing the last Stark novel,' suggesting a habit which may not be precisely his own. (118).

    By way of King's practice, Thad's account reveals two important avenues for inner experiencing. First, a writer may find that certain sensory conditions become desirable when composing fiction (*I only smoke when I write*) or intolerable (*I usually love music, but it's a terrible distraction while I'm writing*). Second, the phenomena of writing can move beyond the mental into the visceral: headaches, the feel of the pencil in hand, the stimulation or relaxation of dragging on a cigarette. Both types of experience suggest new vistas for a phenomenological experiencing of my own writing practice.

What is going on in my body while I write, and what needs do I have during writing that may run counter to preferences at other times?

A triad of practices

For artists and practitioners, a boon of the practice review is the opportunity for a sort of mentorship-at-a-distance, instruction at the feet of the masters. While it is possible to learn one's craft 'by osmosis,' studying the 'greats' in libraries or museums, this can be hit-and-miss sort of education. But with the inclusion of a deliberately established goal and an outlined (if still flexible) method, a practice review introduces a level of rigour to one's autodidactic education. It was in this spirit that I engaged the works of King and Blanchot, asking how these writers 'do what they do,' with an aim towards applying their lessons in my own phenomenological writing practice.

At present, I see my research practice as existing in a triangle with Blanchot and King, each of them forming one of the pointed tips, and my thesis-in-progress forming the third. Inside that triangle is our shared domain, a mélange of images and words, each of us presenting a literary vision of the experience of the writing process. We, all three, emphasise the devices of fiction and myth: metaphor, evocative language, the truth embedded in the 'unbelieved' story.[1] We each embrace the mental phenomena that accompany writing. Within our triangle, there is room for the multiplicity of inner voices who contribute to artistic fiction. And each of us tosses in a bit of a living mystery.

From King, I inherited a larger toolbox: fictionalising and embodiment being among the most important perceptual tools. Now, of course, it is up to me whether I incorporate these lenses, these strategies – or not. A guide, after all, should not be a shackle. But it is hard for me to deny that in watching, and recreating with my own pen, the leaps and bounds of a master at work-and-play, I find myself reflecting on my own approach. If areas of my phenomenological experiencing feel weak, incomplete, or otherwise insufficient, how might I attend to my writing experience with a grittier and more 'corporeal' Kingsian bearing?

Blanchot, too, offers an abundance of lessons. To consider that inspiration arrives almost as a 'syndrome' with a set of sensations and, strangely, barriers to certain kinds of productivity, is an important and surprising revelation.

Perhaps one of the most valuable gifts Blanchot gives PaR practitioner-researchers more generally is that his work underscores *the importance of the availability of a practice-as-research option* for phenomenological researchers. Given time and attention, the genius of Blanchot's work becomes apparent, but it is hard to imagine that his wordy peregrinations

would be acceptable as a form of academic discourse today.[2] For some, the exegetical analysis is precisely the kind of phenomenology they wish to undertake (for exegetical phenomenology, see van Manen 2023, 22). But for those of a more literary bent, phenomenology may become a creative practice, even as it can be undertaken as a research methodology. Phenomenological practice-as-research offers a ground where such researchers can experiment, expanding the boundaries of phenomenological inquiry.

Finally, Blanchot's work serves as an exquisite example of the 'poetizing' and 'voking' language advocated by phenomenologist van Manen (2023, 174–175). The latter term, *voking*, is an unusual one, apparently a neologism. But if any phenomenologist brings the term to life, it is Blanchot, who brings us prose so rich that it *vokes*: evo*vok*ing, pro*vok*ing, in*vok*ing, re*vok*ing (in the sense of re-calling), and con*vok*ing (calling together) (van Manen 2023). He offers us a primer in this sort of soul-stirring, wonder-provoking language: evocative and invocative, issuing call after imagistic call. With his essays as a primer for the use of bold language in the depiction of inner lived experiences, phenomenologists like myself might risk venturing into new terrains of experimental phenomenological prose.

Conclusion

Practice reviewers, I suggest, are seeking a *packet*, some special knowledge to carry forward from mentor-practices into their own work. The nature of this packet, of course, varies from researcher to researcher. One practitioner-researcher might ultimately use her review to 'locate praxis in a lineage, a survey of similar practices [her] own, as well as establishing the domain knowledge' (Nelson 2022, 112). Another might aim to 'understand how their practice draws from, informs and contribute to understanding and change within the personal, professional, and academic spheres' (Pott 2021, 385). These echo the intentions of the literature review, and in some cases *may* be answered by a literature review. But when the practitioner-researcher seeks to hone skills that are very particular to their unique research project, or for which little instruction is available, an autodidactic practice review may be especially useful.

Postgraduate level researchers may come to their thesis feeling like they must have the project 90% 'in the bag.' The admission that they might not have all the skills to get the job done may leave practitioners with an epic case of imposter syndrome. But the truth is that each new research project makes its own demands, requiring fresh skills and the development of our existing talents in new directions.

Such realities, as it is common to say, are *features* of the research life, *not bugs*.

If we need special instruction, if we lack certain abilities, we would do well to remember that 'Educated is what you aim to be coming out, not going in' (Bujold 1999, 7). Not only is an autodidactic practice review a flexible tool for self-directed learning – it also connects us to a pantheon of expert mentors who we admire and would love to emulate, but who we seldom encounter in the classroom.

Notes

1. This phrase is an homage to writer Craig Chalquist's succinct definition of fiction, 'unbelieved poeisis' (Chalquist 2025).
2. I cannot help wondering how much patience traditional viva examiners would have for prose like, 'In the region we are trying to approach, here is submerged in nowhere, but nowhere is nevertheless here, and dead time is a real time in which death is present, in which it arrives but does not stop arriving, as though by arriving it rendered sterile the time that permits it to arrive' (Blanchot 1999, 411). And yet, it *is* phenomenological research.

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