

# *On Flying, Writing Poetry and Doing Educational Research*

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**ABSTRACT** *This article is written in a personal capacity; it is based on a presentation entitled 'If the child is father to the man, can the researcher be mother to the poet?' given as part of the ECER symposium, 'Telling stories: truth and fiction in educational research' hosted by David Bridges, at the European Conference on Educational Research, University of Edinburgh, 23 September 2000. It is meant as a stimulus to discussion about the relationship between poetry as a species of 'creative' writing, and research writing—how and why they might be complementarities as well as opposites. Rather than attempting a theoretical paper, the author uses excerpts from her own poetry—and those of the prize-winning poet, Jane Draycott, with whom she recently co-authored a book, and whose ideas have contributed to this article—to explore these ideas.*

## **How Saint Christina Sang**

*'Then she stopped spinning and sang.  
No-one could imitate the sounds that came from deep in her chest  
nor make sense of the syllables; no breath came out of her nose or mouth,  
but it was like angels singing'*

*Thomas de Chantimpré*

think of it like a Mongolian trance-chant  
sung on the bottomless in-breath  
like a journey along the silk road  
being rolled back past the dust-heaps  
and broken walls of frontier towns, back  
past the one remaining window made  
of a slice of lapis lazuli and the still wind-chimes  
back into the rib-cage, the swaddle, the chrysalis  
  
or find in your mind an Inuit song  
sung by one by two by sister-twins  
like the ice-night and the eery not-sun lights

hologramming on the sky's retina  
 breathing down each other's wind-pipes  
 the in-out of the ice-sheet across the eyelids  
 the sound-harpoon in the blank ice-pool  
 see, she does not cloud the mirror

This is a poem in a book (Draycott & Saunders, 1998) which I co-wrote recently with Jane Draycott, based on the life of a twelfth-century mystic, Christina the Astonishing, to whose life story and the responses it provoked in us I shall soon return.

I have long been intrigued by the possible connections and discontinuities between the two intellectual passions of my life, poetry and educational research. I should add that I am an amateur in the field of the philosophy of educational research and associated epistemological studies: my research has mostly been in what has come to be known as the school effectiveness and school improvement industry (see, for example, Saunders, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001; Saunders *et al.*, 1996; Saunders & Stradling, 1996; Rudd *et al.*, 2000). I was moved to think a little more seriously about the relationship between poetry and research, however, by something in an article David Bridges wrote for the *British Educational Research Journal* a year or two ago (Bridges, 1999a). Quite on the spur of the moment, I wrote him a letter in which I suggested that poetry seeks to:

present rather than argue;  
 offer insights rather than build theory;  
 add to the sense of the world's variety rather than negotiate and refine a consensus;  
 play (with ideas) rather than work towards a closure;  
 'make new' rather than seek to replicate or systematically build on what has gone before;  
 proceed by association and image rather than evidence and logical consequence;  
 engage, surprise, attract, shock, delight, connect the unconnected, stir the memory and fertilise the unconscious;  
 communicate something ultimately unsayable (the paradox of poetry) because uniquely arising from the poet's personal vision and interpretation.

Of course, this is not a definition intended to encompass all poetry but an attempt to foreground certain characteristics of a lot of (twentieth-century) poetry. The questions I went on to pose were:

in what circumstances could or should these be the aims of educational research?  
 for what set of reasons, connected with the nature of educational research, is it legitimate to seek to engage directly with the reader rather than, say, present an argument which can be debated and subjected to falsification?  
 what do writers who write in what might be called a poetic mode hope to gain for educational research, which presumably they believe is not possible through propositional discourse?

This article tries to stimulate that debate by exploring out loud, using personal examples and individual poems, some of the differences between my practice of poetry and my practice of educational research. (It is therefore not a conventional research paper of the kind I am more used to writing, and I have tried to indicate that there is a body of scholarly literature which throws further light on some of the issues I have inexpertly raised, without attempting to deploy that literature here.) In thinking about what these

differences might be, I have discovered that much of what seemed at first sight to be unique to poetry could equally well apply to research—and *vice versa*.

To begin with, poetry is not at all the same as prose fiction or narrative (although some educational researchers group all three as a particular type of account); indeed, poetry is often implicitly counterposed to other forms of verbal expression in the belief that its essence is to be personal, lyrical, confessional, spontaneous, authentic—an expression of innocence, almost, of the ‘undivided self’, the result of some hard-to-grasp process which some call inspiration. It does not take a moment to realise that this notion—a legacy from Romanticism—would exclude large swathes of what appears in most poetry anthologies. I experimented with strict metre and verse form in a narrative poem I wrote 10 or so years ago after completing an evaluation of a training initiative designed to address the so-called skills mismatch in the Enterprise Zone of London Dockland. I finished writing the end-of-project report (Saunders, 1989) with a strong sense of having thoughts and experiences ‘left over’ which needed a different—less ostensibly neutral, more personal and perhaps playfully engaged—form of expression. A satire, *The Rape of the Dock*—modelled stylistically (in intention if not execution) on Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*—was what I ended up with. These are the opening lines:

### Prelude

O Muse! relate (for you can tell alone,  
 Merchants have short memories, Ministers none)  
 Relate, who most, who least accrues Respect;  
 Whose Fortunes doubly, whose are triply deck’d;  
 What forms Corruption, what Ambition took,  
 How Innocence doz’d, & Truth forbore to look,  
 ’Till dimm’d was Honesty, Honour, Right and Wrong—  
 O sing, & stir the Nation with thy Song!

The point about poetry is its relationship with the detail of language, the fact that its meaning and significance are in the language rather than conveyed through it. I needed a form which would allow me to play out an argument and a narrative as well as a conceit and an extended series of images: Pope’s metre is capable of providing an exhilarating pace and, thanks to a Latinate sentence construction, grammatical compression; this combination makes room for side-plots and extended similes without seeming to slow the tempo or losing the shape of the narrative as a whole. The satirical mode also gave me an aesthetic framework within which to express a sense of politico-social indignation without (I hoped) sounding self-righteous. It was satisfying to do and to perform some extracts from, I think because its purpose was essentially to give extended vent to that *saeva indignatio*.

With *Christina*, the issue of a framework or containment was more pressing ethically and aesthetically, and we came to realise we needed something quite subtle to provide it. For the moment, I am calling this something ‘resistance’, because of our felt need to counterbalance the untrammelled and unconditional flow of poetic ideas and images. It certainly has something to do with principles of truthfulness, fidelity and/or validity; what it feels like is testing the poetry up against other entities and meanings. For *Christina* these were:

each poem’s place and meaning against the other poems as they came into being;  
 Christina’s life story as told by Thomas de Chantimpré, a thirteenth-century religious  
 historian and hagiographer in the Dominican order;

Jane's and my different understandings of Christina, our sometimes contrasting reactions to her;  
 our research into the religious beliefs and practices of her time;  
 our visit to Christina's birthplace in eastern Belgium and the stories we heard from some of the citizens of Sint-Truiden;  
 the drawings and paintings done in response to some of the poems by Peter Hay, the artist and publisher for the book;  
 the critical commentary of our editor, the poet Philip Gross.

Perhaps one can think of this process as akin to 'triangulation' in empirical research: what can we invite the data, as it were, to confront us with that will cast doubt in a constructive way on our (implicit) theory-building?

I am rushing on a bit too quickly, perhaps. I should say that the preliminary basic 'data' we had were these: Christina was born in 1150 in the village of Brusthem, on the outskirts of Sint-Truiden, a market town in the eastern region of Belgium. She came by the epithet 'Mirabilis'—Astonishing—both because of the remarkable events or miracles surrounding her life and her own extraordinary behaviour. As soon as I read about her, I was immediately drawn to the idea of some kind of poetic project about her; and I also knew almost from the outset that I wanted to work with another poet on it. Some readers may remember *New Portuguese Letters* (The Three Marias, 1975), which took the alleged love letters of a seventeenth-century nun as a foundation for the exchange of poems, stories and letters between three feminist writers: this was not exactly a model for *Christina the Astonishing*, but it was at least subliminally influential in terms of the process of exchange, trust and intimacy it represented. (Working in research teams may have something of the same lived quality, but I have found it hard to weave that sense into the written outcomes of research without sounding overly self-reflexive and even self-indulgent.)

What both *Christina* and *New Portuguese Letters* have in common is, perhaps, the 'almost talismanic power of the real ... which leads us to place special store on the narrative which features and rests upon identifiable real material' (Bridges, 1999b, p. 7). Christina came from a farming family; she was essentially a peasant girl. But already by her teens she had acquired a reputation—and not altogether a positive one—for her extreme religious devotion and capacity for mystical experience. We were captivated initially by the wildness in her, I think.

So we had some 'factual data' with which to work. But what did these facts mean, and which facts would we choose to shape our poems? One the one hand, we were persuaded by the notion that 'in history-writing there are no facts ... [which are] not preceded by a meaning' (Garber, 2000, citing Nietzsche). On the other, were we being sufficiently attentive to 'the distinction between narratives which are based on and feature real data and those that either rest on the fictitious or consciously obscure the distinction' (Bridges, 1999b, p. 8)?

One way of addressing this might be to use the notion of the balance between 'the necessary' and 'the gratuitous' which I picked up from Wood (2000). To apply this idea to poetry, one could say that a poem's *gratuitousness* resides in how much it surprises us, moves us, invites our imagination to take wing. Its *necessity* lies in its capacity to convince us that the poem in question is the only form this thought or feeling could have had, and indeed, that the thought or feeling itself, expressed in this way, is of paramount importance to our sense of the world. With Christina, the challenge for our poetic

enterprise was to find some ‘necessity’ in amongst all the apparent ‘gratuitousness’. For the thing about Christina—several things, actually—are that, according to her biographer, who got his information from an eye witness, Cardinal Jacques de Vitry: she died three times; she flew; her own body was the site of supernatural happenings. (Had she be born a century or two later, she would probably have been burnt at the stake for witchcraft.) In other words, you might say that Christina presented us with an extreme kind of challenge, not only to twentieth-century notions of validity and trustworthiness, but also (if that were not enough) to the poetic sense of the necessary.

Here is Thomas de Chantimpré on Christina’s resurrection and flight:

Cumque pro depositione eius Missarum oblatio fieret subito commotum corpus exsurrexit in feretro, statimque instar avis evecta templi trabes ascendit. Fugientibus ergo cunctis qui aderant, sola soror aetate major cum timore remansit usque post Missam immobilis perseverans, a presbytero ecclesiae sacramento constricta, est coacta descendere: horrebat enim, ut quidam autumant, subtilitas eius spiritus odorem corporum humanorum.

(While the sacrifice of the Mass was being offered at her funeral, suddenly the body shivered and stood up from the bier, and straightway rising into the air like a bird she flew up to the rafters of the building. All the company present took flight and only her elder sister remained, trembling, until Mass was over, whereupon the other was constrained by the priest with the Blessed Sacrament to descend to earth again. It was the subtlety of her spiritual substance, so some conjecture, which felt a loathing for the odour proceeding from the bodies of men.)

And here is Jane’s poem, written in the persona of Christina:

### **The Levitation of St Christina**

I rise on a wing and a prayer. In the aisles Father Thomas  
is singing his heart out O Lamb of God all shaven and shorn  
and loud enough to wake the dead. Have mercy upon us.

Up here in the gods where anything goes I am Lucifer, born  
like a swan from a box, striking the light and standing well clear  
of the tears, of the tar and the feathers, and of the coffin’s yawn  
that takest away Father Thomas’ face, that waning moon in the filthy air,  
that gaping wound in the side of the world. And the O in his mouth  
is the sins, is enough to make the angels weep. Receive our prayer.

Out of the hive of the yet to be born, I’m the queen bee, behemoth  
in the candle’s flame, shifting my shape in the smoke dance,  
the dance of death, whose sting is a needle fixed on celestial north.

I leap, and my shadow’s a shroud-span over the mountains, an icy stroke  
down the cheek of the earth. I have only to touch the hills and they shall  
smoke.

This was one of the first poems in the sequence to be written and I think it is a Plath-like evocation of the drama-queen character that Jane saw in the young Christina, behind the deadpan Latin account. We would send each other drafts of poems, my halting translations of the smudged mediaeval Latin account which Jane had photocopied from the Bodleian Library text, and sat around our kitchen tables amongst children’s

homework and unwashed dishes, puzzling over who and what Christina was. I recall it was soon after the writing of this poem that we realised that, in effect, we were posing a research-type question, for ourselves and our audience. The book opens with these two epigraphs:

there is little in the recorded history of Christina of Brusthem to make us think she was other than a pathological case. (Butler's *Lives of the Saints*)

She was one of the strongest women in the middle ages. Now we would say she was an emancipated woman. (Polly Vanmarsenille, Custodian, Church of the Holy Virgin, Sint-Truiden, in interview)

We realised that we could easily counterpose these two statements and append the instruction 'Discuss!' Was Christina 'a pathological case' or 'an emancipated woman' or both or neither? Well, we knew that we could not hope to understand Christina simply from the viewpoint of the twentieth century. I began to feel a need to acquaint myself with mediaeval cosmology and epistemology, partly in order to try to understand what it would be like—and what else would have to be true—to believe in the literal truth of the possibility that people could fly, for example. The challenge we were experiencing has been expressed by Phillips (2000) in a psychoanalytic context in this tactful way:

Instead of asking, as one might, of a translated text, is it accurate, have we got it right, did these events that we have reconstructed really happen to create the present predicament, we should be asking what kind of life would believing this make possible? ... One would be interested in the possible consequences of the translation; one would be referring forward, not back ... In other words, when we set out to translate a person—to translate a text that doesn't exist—we have to make it up as we go along. But we have to make it up together.

I am disposed to think that this approach may offer a more helpful, more possible, way forward than trying directly to solve the problem of '“reality” claims' posed by Bridges (1999b).

The epistemological and psychological world which Christina inhabited was shaped, of course, by religion, its individual demands and social consequences as well as its theology (see, for example, Thurston, 1922; Thurston & Attwater, 1956; Tomizza, 1991). We realised we could not avoid trying to situate Christina's story in some kind of contemporary religious context; so we started looking, for example, at how mediaeval Christianity had represented the relationship between the soul and the body. I had recourse to many books and articles (Lerner, 1983; Vanderauwera, 1984; Bynum, 1987; Shinnars, 1997) to help our understanding of some of this complexity. In Helen Waddell's mediaeval Latin lyrics (1938), I found this:

aesuries te, Christe deus, sitis atque videndi  
iam modo carnales me vetat esse dapes.  
da modo te vesci, te potum haurire salutis;  
unicus ignote tu cybus esto vie.  
et quem longa fames errantem ambesit in orbe,  
nunc satia vultu, patris imago, tuo.

(Bishop Radbod of Utrecht, tenth century)

which I translated as:

hunger, Christ god, and thirst for sight of you have stopped me eating fleshly

food give yourself to be devoured and drunk, salvation's drink, you be the only  
meal for the unknown way

and when long fasting has famished the world wanderer gorge him, likeness of  
our father, on your gaze

Verses and sermons of this kind, according to scholars like Bynum (1987), and Vandereycken and van Deth (1994), give a clear message that food, eating, consumption and being consumed was more than a weak metaphor in mediaeval religious thought: the central image of the Mass was written through not only by the seasonal, familial and institutional rituals of feasting and fasting but also by the ever-present possibility of famine. The social—and psychological—significance of food (Warner, 1996) was more intense than for economies like ours that create and rely on a continuing surplus.

Moreover, as we read on, we discovered that there were many women living through the extraordinary upheavals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe who were transgressive in similar ways to Christina (Murk-Jansen, 1998). They had a passion for the divine and what we might think of as a special talent for suffering—but they were not nuns, not part of an established order (as Hildegard of Bingen, for example, was). The image of self as food, the conflict between devouring and denial, was central to this disenfranchised form of female religious activity. The meticulous and insightful scholarship of Bynum (1987) was particularly influential in helping us to understand what Christina might have been experiencing and doing; she points out, for example, that 'Christina the Astonishing came from a family so poor that she had nothing to give up except food and drink'.

It became movingly clear to us that all the extraordinary exploits and the wild behaviour—Thomas not only has Christina starving herself and then feeding herself from her own breast milk, but also flinging herself into the mill race but not drowning, thrusting herself into the bread ovens without damaging her skin, subjecting herself to all manner of bodily torments and psychotropic stimuli—can be 'read' as what young women with no economic, social or religious power were impelled to do to express themselves as spiritual beings in their time. Their own bodies were the site of their spiritual endeavour and exploration, often *in extremis*: and it is suggestive of a different sensibility from that of later female mystics that they took the suffering Christ as their model rather than the (to us) more obvious symbol, the female and virgin Mary.

We were also given the grace of other, more immediate ways of gaining insight. Thomas talks at one point about Christina spinning round and round on the spot without stopping; he makes it sound weird and obsessive, a form of head-banging. Some time after reading his account, I happened to attend a performance given by Sheikh Hamza Chakour and the Al-Kindi troupe of Sufis, the so-called whirling dervishes—and I suddenly felt I knew what Christina had been doing. They turn, slowly at first then picking up speed, for half an hour or more, on the spot, to the accompaniment of *duf* and *kanoon* or *oudh*; one arm or hand pointing heavenwards, the other earthwards, eyes closed or contemplative: the human frame a conduit, as it were, between heaven and the created world. When they come to rest after their prolonged revolving, they are completely centered and still. Far from being pathological, it is an intensely spiritual experience to watch. What I saw led me in due course to write a poem which I hope celebrates rather than pathologises what Christina was up to:

*What goes around**The natural condition of our existence is to revolve**(Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi)*

I  
 am  
 the  
 greatE  
 the electron  
 and the ecstasy  
 I am  $MC^2$  meaning  
 mistress of ceremonies  
 I'm a spinning top, a prayer- or  
 potter's wheel, I'm the RotoGyrator  
 at the fair your Catherine can't get enough of  
 tomorrow's anticyclone over the Irish Sea  
 I invented the roulette the boomerang  
 the spindle for pricking fingers  
 see how the butter thickens  
 and how I chase my tail  
 without getting dizzy  
 the still centre  
 my favourite  
 show  
 am  
 I

Incidentally, the allusion to the Orient which this poem (and one or two others) makes is not altogether far-fetched—Christina's contemporaries were, after all, engaged in one of the Crusades and Thomas tells us that Christina foretold the imminent fall of Muslim-held Jerusalem. But one of the poetic freedoms we have chosen is to subvert the anti-Islamic convention evident in Thomas's account.

There were many other 'resistances' which offered themselves, often in unlooked-for circumstances, and these gave us far more opportunities than we might deliberately have sought, to test out our fantasies and suppositions against some other perception or idea or image. Indeed, the role of serendipity in this project was inescapable, and for me directly analogous to the 'free association' that occurs in the process of writing poetry. By extension, it made me confront the importance of the unexpected, the serendipitous, in the mainstream research with which I have been professionally involved—but about which I think not much is said, perhaps because it seems to undermine the idea of predetermined method.

The main instance of this intervention of luck or happenstance was the visit Jane and I (accompanied by partners) made, about halfway through the project, to Sint-Truiden, where Christina is still spoken of with reverence by local people and where we were given a mayoral welcome for our project, including the services of a guide who took us round all the main sites and got us into the locked crypt where the riches that accrued to the sale of Christina's relics are stored—she became well known in her old age for her temporal as well as spiritual sagacity and gained an international reputation for giving advice to leaders of nations. We saw the site (still extant) of her first funeral

service, and the various marble, oil on canvas and stained glass representations of her, usually depicted with angel-like wings and a demure expression. But in addition to these arranged encounters, we stumbled across people and places quite by chance who gave us crucial insights into Christina's life—or rather, the palimpsest it became for others' beliefs and experiences.

We came home and mulled at great length over what we had seen and heard—the whole project took on a new, more vivid colour from this visit, which in my mind was part pilgrimage, part empirical fieldwork. We went on to write another series of poems, and refined or cut out other material, in a process which was collaborative to the extent that it is hard to remember who had which idea first.

Here is one of those later poems, written by Jane:

### Relic

Who could stab a finger at the chest  
of her childhood and say, that was the day  
it arrived in the village, the stuff with X-ray eyes,  
settling itself in the easy chair of her flesh,  
sacred sternum, solar plexus, her future, her stars.

Worth more than gold or gems, this radiation,  
spirit of the knee-cap and the finger-bone  
swung like an ammeter or steeple vane in the lap  
of the wind, only one place to go from here,  
walking on water, dancing through fire, the next step.

The King of Portugal has her finger. Wing-tip, grounded.  
Shrine to the immortal possibilities of vertebrates.  
Inside the trunk or chest the bones glow in the dark,  
not wanted on voyage. The patellae of penitence,  
the ulna and radius of flight, these are her only children.

Because of the range of 'resistances' we sought or encountered, what we ended up making was not a book solely of poems. We wanted to 'show our workings', and so the end-product of the project, the published book, contains sayings of mediaeval clerics, quotations from historians, translations of contemporary poetry from the manuscript of Benediktbeuern (see References) and excerpts from Thomas de Chantimpré's life of Christina, as well as our own changing and hesitant responses to Christina the woman, whose own words we could never read. She was illiterate, and so suffered the quintessential female paradox of having her story written entirely by another, male consciousness/conscience.

This constraint might be responsible for a major *lacuna* in her story: of the time between her wild youth and her sage old age, Thomas says little or nothing. What happened to her, what experiences did she have, to change her in particular ways? Thomas says only that she spent time 'in the wilderness' after apprenticing herself to an anchoress. We did not wish to fill that gap with imaginings that were too explicit and might destroy the integrity of her life story.

Again, I am minded of something Phillips (2000) recently wrote:

what would the consequences be if we started believing that ... the text to be translated is akin to the mother's body, when the translator gets to work? ... The text cannot answer back but the language ... can seem resistant to translation ... But clearly the translator can't assume—or can't afford to

assume—that the language of the text is, as it were, deliberately or unconsciously thwarting him ...

Eventually Jane wrote six short poems which both leave that space unsullied by our projections and yet manage to hint delicately at what might be transforming experiences of the female soul. Here is one of them:

Alone in night's wide bed, I spill over  
 into the dawn and the private life of birds.  
 The day heats up. The young men come,  
 the apple-pickers and sieve-makers.  
 When I am gone, will they divide my body  
 up or place me on anyone's tongue?

We were, and remain, amateurs in the fields of scholarship which Christina's story impelled us to encounter; oddly, I felt entirely comfortable, as a poet, about starting from ignorance and being driven by curiosity to read all sorts of texts and follow up wayward references; as a researcher writing this, I feel methodologically and stylistically exposed.

So at this point I want to pick up the hint I dropped earlier that doing educational research—ostensibly the process and product of rational analysis—is not always or solely what it appears, either. I suppose one way of going a bit further with this might be to play at trying to answer the question, is educational research a science or an art? Flyvbjerg's (2001) case for constructing an alternative model of social science (within which discipline we might wish to place educational research) rests on the importance of intuition and other arational forms of knowing. Eisner (1981, cited in Knapp, 1999; Eisner, 1999) argues for aesthetic modes of knowing, and for the arts as resources with which to think about and conduct educational research. Burton (2001) has conducted a fascinating inquiry into the role of intuition, aesthetics and emotion in mathematics as practised by research mathematicians. She found that in describing their own practice of the subject, i.e. as learners, mathematicians are inclined to use highly personal and subjective terms—they talk about embarking on a journey, they feel excited, moved, by what they call the beauty or elegance of mathematics, they rely to at least some extent on revelation, intuition and visualisation to tackle complex abstractions. Burton concludes that these accounts give the lie to a view of mathematics in the classroom as an objective discipline *par excellence* and undermine its sociocultural role as the supreme example of the triumph of reason over emotion. (See also the novel *Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture* by Apostolos Doxiadis [p. 97], and the dream-solution attributed to the mathematician Henri Poincaré.)

However, in the context of this article, I am even more struck by writings which themselves *exemplify* these processes. For example, some months after writing the first draft of this article, I was sent a journal article, 'Notes from a marine biologist's daughter' (Sullivan, 2000). The author uses her own poems as a species of research report, to show us her sensory and emotional as well as intellectual and cognitive processes in close-up. She wants to know, 'What is the nature of the researcher's attention? How do we learn to attend with keen eyes and fine sensibilities? How do we teach others to do it?' (Sullivan, 2000, pp. 211–212). She goes on to quote Stenhouse, '“It is by virtue of being an artist that the teacher is a researcher ...”' (Stenhouse, 1988, p. 48, quoted in Sullivan, 2000, p. 226), and argues that 'researchers with aesthetic vision perceive the dynamics of a situation and know how to “read” it. They look at details within their contexts, perceive relations among the parts and between the parts and the whole. They look for pattern within disorder, for unity beneath superficial

disruption, and for disruption beneath superficial unity. They construct forms and suggest meanings' (p. 221).

But it is the use of her poetry in the text which compels as well as surprises.

In the researcher's search for pattern and unity/disruption, how many times have I (and you also?) experienced the *frisson* of something very like inspiration, when the data suddenly appear to yield a quite unexpected revelation that yet feels exactly right. It is like a gift, it feels as if this understanding has not come through a rational sifting and re-sifting of the data but rather as a bolt from the blue, a dream-like intuition. The poet Les Murray (quoted in Alvarez, 2001, p. 79) says writing poetry entails that:

You think with a double mind. It's like thinking with both sides of your brain at once. And if you can't do that, you can't write poetry. You can write expository prose, but poetry is as much dreamed as it is thought and it's as much danced in the body as it is written. It's done in your lungs. It's done in every part of your muscles—you can feel it in your muscles.

Well, perhaps it *is* also true of expository prose, at least under some circumstances? Certainly, I think that such a gift, if it is to be trusted, is hard-won, coming after—not before or instead of—the ratiocination. I have a sense that learning to wait in some kind of mental stillness for that connection to happen may be as important in research as in poetry. The risk of spoiling the work by 'premature closure', the easy ending, is as real in both. The researcher's and poet's responsibility, and talent, is not just to 'tell it like it is' but to add a deeper sounding. One or two of my research writings have tried to manifest this process, despite the risks of subjectivity, prolixity and inconclusiveness (Saunders, 1999b, 2002).

So an appropriate question in this context is, why did we not write *Christina* as a research project, in prose? Or, put another way, what would it take to turn *Christina* into a doctoral thesis? In one important sense, the answer is that we did not wish to do it that way: poetry is what we always intended to write, with its capacity to be both demandingly rigorous and liberatingly creative; we are each committed to practising a form of expression, a craft, whose meaning (as I said earlier) resides *in* its language rather than being conveyed through it. Another less personal answer is that *Christina's* story, being so metaphorical to a twentieth-century mind's eye, lent itself to being told in fold upon fold of metaphor and simile in a process which allowed us to explore without arriving at what we might have felt to be false conclusions and without having to privilege one way of knowing (evidence-based, discursive, scholarly) over another (allusive, symbolic, intertextual). Indeed, I sense that for us the poetry functions as a way precisely of not coming to conclusions—the question implicitly posed by the juxtaposition of two opening epigraphs has no single or even reachable answer; in fact, it's a trick question which the whole book then tries to sidestep. The last poem in the book was one way of ending the story but is also pointing a way out to something else: addressed to the three young daughters we have between us, it is called 'And will our daughters fly?' So poetry was a way of not having to conclude that there were no conclusions; the form, as well as the intent, is agnostic. It allowed us to be reticent in response to *Christina's* (unwitting, unwilling?) reticence—to try to respect the integrity of the unknowable without being impelled to remain wordless.

Because this article is meant to stimulate, not foreclose, discussion, I should like to end with some questions, which might go like this:

I have been made aware that other researchers are working with poetry as a way of exploring meaning in educational research: what is other colleagues' experience of the

opportunities for truth-telling, self-expression and ‘coming at things aslant’ which the writing of a poem offers to the writer that the composition of a research report does not—and *vice versa*?

how true or relevant is it to say, as Phillips (2000) does, ‘The privileging of poetry and poets is a counter-force to the fear that language and meaning don’t work. Or don’t work in quite the ways we might want them to’?

and, what tensions for the researcher *qua* writer—in terms of partiality/impartiality, location within tradition, sobriety/playfulness, functionality/elegance—might be explored by further comparing research with poetry?

I look forward to hearing from you.

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