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Story as Refuge

George Ewert Evans Centre for Storytelling Symposium
University of South Wales, Cardiff

Section 1:

I think when Bambo invited me to co-present this provocation the expectation was that, as a criminologist, I'll take up the theme of the trickster by looking at the trickster function of the offender, the criminal, the prisoner. That I'd talk to you about criminal narratives, the ducking and diving and weaving of threads of subterranean stories. The legends (the Krays, the Rippers, the Great Train Robbers), or perhaps the lesser known autobiographies written by the small time crooks, the nick lit, because there's a lot of it, Neal Shover says 'Offender autobiographies are a dime a dozen'

But I'm not going to do that and I'm not going to do it because before I began working in a university I spent over ten years in jail working as a creative writing facilitator and a librarian. So I know for a fact that the most successful tricksters, the master transgressors of the moral order, the renegades who push the boundaries and cross the lines are not the offenders. If you think about it, the criminals are the least successful trickers, they're actually not very good at it - that's how come they got caught. They are the usual suspects and the usual suspects tend to repeat the same old tropes. The same old suspects are a cliché stuck in the rut of the same old language. They are part of the narrative order, entirely unable to reorder the plot. Indeed, if you believe the classic sociologist Emile Durkheim, these guys (and they are mostly guys, which is another of those tropes), are a necessary part of the social order. Durkheim, who was working in the latter half of the 19th century says an incredible thing - he says that a certain amount of crime or deviance is completely normal. Go tell that to Cressida Dick. Not only is it normal, it's necessary for a healthy society - Durkheim says crime 'is a factor in public health'. Crime performs a number of important social functions, not least that of 'boundary maintenance', thereby reinforcing social values and norms - it does this by stimulating a collective action against

the deviance which then helps to reaffirm the moral order, the difference between right and wrong. So I'm definitely not going to talk to you about the trickster function of the criminal, that really is a myth, a story we take refuge in in order to know where the dividing lines are between right and wrong, good and bad, the innocent and guilty, a story that allows us to stand firmly on the side of the innocent. But as Solzhenitsyn says so memorably:

'If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?'

Well. This is a good question, and I reckon there are a very small group of people in prisons who are willing to blur that boundary, consciously challenge the binary between good and evil, who, sometimes end up destroying a piece of their own hearts as a result. These are the creative practitioners, the artists, the musicians and most pertinently for us, the writers who spend time and energy and words working with prisoners. There has always been some amount of creative activity in prisons, most of it smuggled in as contraband by the prisoners themselves - as early as the 1800s prisoners in Dartmoor were making intricate carvings out of beef and mutton bones. However, officially sanctioned creative activity really came into its own as a result of the rise of the participatory and community arts movements during the 1960s/70s, and the first official prison writer in residence was Tom Haddaway at HMP Durham in 1985. This was the beginning of a whole thriving network of creative writing practitioners working in prisons in England and Wales and in a 15 year period spanning 1998 to 2013 over 200 writers took up residencies in prison. This was the work of the Writers in Prisons Network, brilliantly coordinated by Clive Hopwood and Pauline Bennett. Times have got harder since then though, the austerity budget of 2011, the government's Transforming Rehabilitation agenda, the loss of Writers in Prison Network following funding cuts. Writers, however, continue to find ways to smuggle themselves inside the jail walls in all kinds of disguises - as teachers, as therapists, as unpaid volunteers and in my case, as a criminologist.

Even when times were good, there has always been something of a resistance to creative arts in prisons. Cox and Gelsthorpe in their research, for example, note several occasions when the creative practitioners they were observing faced resistance or obstruction from uniform prison staff. And Tobi Jacobi, an extremely experienced writing facilitator in the US corrections system recently told about having a particular type of paper deemed a security risk. So what is it that's so threatening about a poet in a prison?

There is perhaps something about the subversive image associated with professional writers and storytellers. The idea that all artists are at some level an anarchic or deviant force. However, most experienced practitioners who work in the prison system will tell you, there is little to be gained from overt non-conformity. Indeed, writers work hard to fit in, find ways to appear useful to the prison regime and generally avoid the outlandish personae of the 'arty-farty' writer type.

So perhaps it's the art itself. Another experienced practitioner in prison arts, James Thompson, suggests that the humanising process of the arts will always exist in contradiction to the administrative task of the institution. 'Prison' he says, 'is in the business of containment, observation, punishment, categorisation, restriction and separation' and he suggest that art in prison is a 'living, breathing, noisy, chaotic, confusing and compelling paradox'.

My research, however suggests that there is a much quieter dimension to the threat perceived by prison staff, administrators and, at times, the public. And it is much more concerned with that humanising process that James Thompson speaks about. In the process of gathering data for my PhD research I had twenty experienced creative writing practitioners tell me their life stories up to the point where they went to work in prison, and what I found was that a good deal of what they told me was not very different from the narratives of prisoners.

'When I was at school I can imagine more than one teacher thought I would end up in prison', wrote one of the creative writers in my study. While another told about how his mate on the council estate where they grew up ended up in Borstal. And there's drink and drugs and rock n roll. There's stories about shit jobs, and little hope and mental health crisis.

There's punk and protest, homelessness. There's poor maternal attachment issues, trauma and lives begun in the kinds of marginalised subcultures frequently associated with criminalisation. But then all of these narrative dead ends take unexpected plot turns. Twists in the tale, or just unanticipated changes of direction, so that every one of those 20 participants end up in jail with keys on their belt. Now that, for my money, is proper subversive. These are the tricksters who escaped their own narrative fate. They challenged the boundaries, found ways of telling the story differently, they reordered the myth. This reminds me of the Rumi quote:

'Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth'. And in the process of doing so, these writers have affected a total redistribution of power - how else do you end up in jail with a bunch of keys and an identity pass? And what's really dangerous, is that these practitioners aren't very different from the prisoners they work with. If I can escape my narrative fate then perhaps the prisoners can too. But it isn't the kind of enforced rehabilitation promoted by the prison regime, the one where the convict is set on the straight and narrow path by a combination of coercion and compliance. It isn't that same old narrative trope, it's not following a plot set out by someone else, but exploring it, digging into it, seeing what's buried, seeing what we want to grow, which is what creative writing facilitators allow us to do. And that exploration allows us to access a wilder landscape with far more possibilities and an expansion of horizon which lets us see further, dream bigger, exchange compliance to rules with defiance of expectation. And that, for the system, is a scary prospect indeed. And not just for the prison system, for the whole system. As Durkheim said, prisoners serve to affirm the moral order, we know what we are by measuring ourselves against what they are not, and if it transpires that prisoners are, in fact, the same as us, then the myth is truly broken - everything is transformed.

Section 2: Two kinds of author

This is where Bambo and I start to disagree. At this point we may begin to provoke each other. So for Bambo, if I've understood correctly, the

story cannot be relied upon. It's equivocal, there is a search for meaning, but there is no ultimate meaning, it's random. And for me and for my research, that's problematic because I'm trying to treat story as a reliable variable in rigorous social scientific study. What I'm trying to do is understand exactly how creative writing might play a part in making positive changes in prisoners' actual lives. How the stories we write in workshops might escape the page and come to have a tangible impact on people's future selves. This isn't a new idea, the psychologist Jerome Bruner claims that:

'In the end we become the autobiographical stories we tell about ourselves'

But how might that work in the context of prison? So I think that Bambo's two types of authorship can give us some clues to the two possible types of impact. The first pertains to the notion of the professional writer, the writer who has particular skills and competencies, who has a writing routine, who writes, redrafts, redrafts, submits, edits, publishes etc. And for some prisoners this is the dream. And in a small number of notable cases the dream comes true. Ewin James, John McVicar, Noel Smith and in fact, if you don't know the autobiographies of Noel Razor Smith, I'd highly recommend them, in particular 'A Few Kind Words and a Loaded Gun', is probably the best title ever for a book on the subject of armed robbery. But these writers are few and far between and it's a dangerous game we play as facilitators if we encourage every prisoner we work with to think that they too can become the next best-selling author. The truth is it's setting people up to fail. As one prison governor once said to me, if anyone with a bit of writing talent could make their living out of it then you wouldn't be messing around in a prison library. In my case I'm not sure that's entirely true, but the point's a valid one. So this first type of authorship is a rather literal way of thinking about how telling stories might allow prisoners to change their lives for the better, but it's a somewhat surface understanding of what writing might achieve, not to mention somewhat unlikely.

The second type of authorship in Bambo's toolkit allows for a much more nuanced approach and I think reaches far deeper into the processes that are at work when prisoners begin to explore the possibilities of story. I

want to focus here on the idea of agency in this process. This is one of the stages in a writers' development according to Bambo's model and is also coming to be recognised as a powerful force in a person's ability to desist from crime, it stems from a seminal piece of research conducted by a criminologist called Shadd Maruna in the early 2000s.

So Shadd spent a good amount of time hanging out with ex-prisoners in bail hostels in Liverpool. He did long, life history interviews with about 200 people who'd previously served prison sentences - half of them said they hadn't committed a crime in the last couple of years, half of them were still actively breaking the law. And what Shadd found when he began to trawl through the interview data was that those people who were no longer committing crime had a particular narrative, or rather there were particular features in their narratives that came up time and time again. These were as follows:

There was the idea of a real me. That the person committing those crimes was different to who I really am. It was out of character. I wasn't myself. But now, now I've stopped committing crime, this is who I really am - and who I really was all along.

Secondly, there was a commitment to generativity running through the desisters' narratives. Helping to make things better, often for the next generation. It was bad for me but I want to make it better for my kids, for the kids on the estate, for other people.

And finally, and this is the element I want to focus on is the idea of agency, or in fact, in the case of Maruna's research, super agency. The people who were desisting from crime seemed to believe they had control over their own fate, that they could achieve amazing things and that, to some extent, impossible was nothing. But these beliefs don't match up with the reality of their lives at all. They were often still poor, living in deprived circumstances, often without paid employment, but they believed that they could change things. Now viewed from a psychological perspective this would be worthy of a diagnosis, it's a kind of cognitive dissonance, as Maruna describes it 'a wilful, cognitive distortion' - or as I might describe it, just a bit bonkers. But it was this

very distortion of the facts that seemed to allow people to desist from offending, that was key to positive change in their lives.

Maruna, who is a far better social scientist than I'll ever be, was studying the function of these narratives retrospectively. The ways in which people rationalized their previous experiences. But as a creative writer I'm interested in looking at how we might use stories as catalysts for future action rather than just rationalisations of past events.

Now clearly we can't just tell any story that comes into our heads and make it our living breathing reality. If that were the case we'd eradicate prison overcrowding overnight. A story has to have what J.L. Austin calls 'narrative felicity'. Enough of us have to believe that a story is true for it to have purchase in the outside world.

But when it comes to developing agency, I wonder if the very process of telling the story, however ludicrous or far removed from reality it might be, may not give us a feel for agency. For prisoners especially, this may be a rare chance to feel in control of the situation, even if that situation is a fictional one. The opportunity to author a narrative, to decide who stands where, says what, to whom. To control the flow of time, dictate the pace of plot, withhold information or reveal it. All of these are functions of authorship and I wonder if the practice of them makes people more hungry for agency and more able to handle it and direct it. And who better to support that process than writers who have changed the telling, but not the content of their own stories and as a result escaped their own narrative fates?

Section 3: Two forms of refuge

In this final section I want to turn more fully to the notion of story as refuge in the context of prison. In the prison environment, I think, refuge can be seen as a kind of escape. Not the big, dramatic, bar bending, wall scaling, file-in-cake escape of the movies but a more personal, internal process of escape. A taking refuge into the self. Clive Hopwood of Writers in Prisons Network often talks about the idea that creative writing

in prison 'is the only legal form of escape', and Erwin James who spent twenty years in jail for a double murder before going on to be a full-time writer and Guardian columnist describes how writing for him was 'a means of liberation'. But, what do we actually mean by escape in this sense? It is perhaps most often seen as a passive state, a retreat into fantasy, a flight into a fictional world. And for some prisoners perhaps, that is why they begin to write, but to be honest I think writing is a more demanding art than that and if you just want to escape difficult thoughts or escape thought entirely, you'd be far better advised to get hold of a bag of skag and drift through your bird on the zephyrs of the illegal drug trade. Writing, if you're doing it right, will always be a challenge, it is after all a discipline and disciplines require, well, discipline.

This kind of escape is what Csikszentmihalyi defines as 'Flow':
'A state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter'.

It's a state where the level of challenge matches the level of skill and drives us into a deep state of concentration. Hours pass by like minutes, goals are clear and you feel you have control over the task - you feel, as I said earlier, like you have agency.

Now that, to me sounds like a fairly accurate description of a good writing session, and it also sounds like a pretty good way to get yourself through a stretch in prison. And, there's little that's passive about this kind of escape, so this is where the equivocal nature of the notion of escape, and by implication, refuge might come in. And I want to frame this in terms of a distinction between taking refuge, which is a form of passive escape and making refuge, a far more active process where we can begin to use our agency to affect change.

Prisoners escaping into fiction, into the stories of make believe is clearly an example of a passive form of escape, a **taking** refuge into a place of safety. However if, as I argue, writing is a more demanding art than that, if the challenge of the discipline enables us to enter a state of flow then there is also a far more active process at work, we develop agency. It's a kind of empowerment that allows us not only to take refuge in ourselves

but to begin to make a refuge of ourselves. And I believe that, if we dare, we can take that active refuge-making one step further. To do so we need to take Shadd Maruna's idea of agency and combine it with his idea of generativity. This is the second key feature that Maruna found in the narratives of desisters, and it refers to that process whereby people actively try to make things better for others. Through parenthood, by becoming peer mentors, or drug counsellors, boxing coaches or creative practitioners. And this is where the story really begins to peel away from the page.

If we gather together some of the key properties of storymaking in prisons that I've raised so far; so the blurring of the lines between good and evil; the quieter, humanising function of the arts; the examples of escape from narrative fate modelled by creative practitioners, the access to wilder landscapes with wider horizons and bigger dreams, the empowerment of agency, of super-agency, perhaps. If we gather all of this together along with that desire for generativity, a passion to change things for the better for others, well I just don't think a story can contain all of that. I think it must by force of its own volition burst out into the real world and transgress the boundaries between fact and fiction.

And this breach, this rupture, this redistribution of the power of story is affected by none other than the prisoner. And here, I stand corrected. Right at the beginning of this provocation I claimed that prisoners make awful tricksters, however, that's not the whole story. In the journey from taking refuge in stories to making a refuge for others, prisoners navigate the very same maps that the creative writing facilitators in my research did. They challenge the boundaries, find ways of telling the story differently, and whether they expand our understanding of what a prisoner is, or cross the line into the role of practitioner, in one way or another they reorder the myth and begin unfold their own. And in that process they find the 'real me' - that third feature of Maruna's desistance narratives - and they find, perhaps, that they are after all the ultimate trickster.