Learning from Fiction – Using Metawriting to Overcome Writing Problems[1]

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Abstract

In this article, I recommend using literary texts as a starting point for working with students in higher education on writing problems, because these texts can touch on topics usually taboo in academia. I demonstrate a specific reading of literary texts which include reflections on writing (metafiction). This makes visible processes, which are usually hidden. My focus is on how writers resolve problems – or even writing blocks – connected with beginning a text when they use various types of metawriting. Not only do the analysed literary texts serve as illustrations of findings from writing didactics, but they are also used to develop writing techniques and exercises for use in general writing workshops and during consultations with blocked writers. Text examples are taken from Russian (émigré) literature and Academic Writing scholarship.

Why turn to fictional literature?

The writing process is something elusive, something invisible and therefore neither easy to study – nor to teach. What happens in the head of someone who is writing? And even more difficult to understand: what happens in the head of somebody who is not writing, who fails to write, who is blocked? Academic writers and students tend not to speak about writing problems (cf. e. g. Ruhmann 1995, 93, Kruse 1997, 28, Furchner/ Ruhmann/Tente 1999, 62, Hjortshoj 2001, 3); these issues are still taboo in many academic cultures and disciplines.[2] In fictional literature, however, quite a few records of writing blocks and ways of coping with this problem can be found. Sometimes, the characters who are not writing are academic writers.[3] More often they are novelists or poets.

Authors of fiction usually do not undertake research on the writing process in an academic sense, but they habitually write and reflect on their writing.[4] Part of their job is to show the «black box» of human

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1 Thanks to Katrin Girgensohn, Imke Lange, Friederike Neumann and Jana Zegenhagen for their feedback and to Jana Kaiser for her help with the English. Any remaining mistakes are my responsibility.
2 In my workshops for graduate students in Germany, participants very often express their relief that they are not the only ones, who experience writing problems, which they had thought before. For a similar observation cf. Ruhmann 1996, 109. Obviously, this does not hold

true only for Germany; Boice 2000 writes of a «kind of Social Darwinism» (3) that prevents new faculty members in the US from talking about their writing and teaching problems and from seeking support.
3 A good genre to look for academic writers is the campus novel, e. g. *Perlmanns Schweigen* [Perlmann's Silence] by Pascal Mercier, in which a linguist almost commits murder to conceal his writing block. Campus novels reveal the social context that can lead to a writing block.
4 Ortner 2000, in his study on general writing strategies, starting with similar considerations, moves on to analyse how writers of fiction describe their writing processes and gives some more reasons to do so.

behaviour as the «transparent minds»[5] of their fictional characters, thus describing exactly those experiences people hesitate to talk about. Therefore, scholars and teachers of academic writing can use fictional material to learn, and even more, to teach something about one taboo topic in academia: writing problems and how to solve them. A positive side effect is that, due to the different genres, literary texts often reach their readers in a more personal and emotional way than academic descriptions of the same subject. Because they address imagination and identification, literary texts can be a good starting point for talking about writing problems. In my contribution, I will focus on problems at the beginning of the writing process. After a short introduction to literary genres revealing the writing process and methodical constraints in working with fictional literature, I will analyse three examples from Russian literature and one scholarly example. My aim is to interpret the texts from the perspective of writing pedagogy and to show didactic applications of the literary devices used.

Methodical constrains and suitable literary genres

When working with fictional literature, one has to bear in mind that literary depictions of the writing process are not objective representations of reality. There are always elements of fictionalisation and stylisation; the way of writing about writing is strongly influenced by literary and cultural conventions, and writing can even be used as a metaphor for something else. But these descriptions in some ways reflect their author's writing experience and conception of the writing process and therefore can be used for exploring the writing process, if treated with philological care and if the literary context is taken into account. The constructivist view maintains that all representations of reality – and not only literary ones – are influenced by the observer and the medium of representation.[6] In this respect, there is only a gradual difference between various text genres concerned with the writing process.[7]

There is a great variety of literary genres which reveal parts of the writing process:[8] autobiographies, novels about the life of a writer (*Künstlerroman* or *artist's novel*) or independent books on writing a novel as e. g. *Doktor Faustus. The Genesis of a Novel* by Thomas Mann. Most interesting in this context, however, is so-called metafiction or «fiction about fiction» (Hutcheon 1991, 1). It is a type of literature which includes a commentary on itself and quite often a description of its own genesis.[9] In many cases, metafictional texts can be understood as a representation of the usually invisible writing process within the literary text.[10] Reading metafictional texts of this kind from the perspective of writing didactics reveals that the literary devices in many cases resemble writing techniques recommended for overcoming or preventing writing problems; namely, reflective practice as writing about writing (cf. e. g. Elbow 1998, vom Scheidt 1998, 29, Bräuer 2000). Thus, literary devices and writing techniques can be summed up under the broader term *metawriting*. In the following, examples of two different forms of metawriting will be analysed: staging the writing process and reflection upon the writing process.

Sasha Sokolov: Staging the dialogue with the inner critic

As quite often noted in the literature on writing, the beginning, the first sentence, is a crucial point in the writing process (cf. e. g. Elbow 1998, 26, Keseling 2004, 236 ff). For various reasons, fear of starting can lead to a longer postponement of the writing project or even to a lasting blockade. The importance of the first sentence is overestimated by writers who confuse the first sentence in their writing with the first sentence of the revised or final draft. The difficulties of getting started are quite often reflected in fictional literature at the places where they occur: at the beginning of the text (cf. Waugh 1984, 29).

Sasha Sokolov's novel *A School for Fools* (Sokolov 1988), one of the most experimental Russian novels, stages the problem of beginning. The staging of the writing process in a fictional text involves incorporating

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5 Cohn 1978 calls her study on the narrative presentation of consciousness in fiction «Transparent Minds».
6 Even the traditional tools of writing process research as e. g. speaking aloud protocols and stimulated recall are thought to influence the writing process they observe (cf. e. g. Harris 1985, 167 f.).
7 The categorical difference between fictional and non-fictional texts can be neglected for this article's didactic purpose.

8 Cf. Beetz/Antos 1984, 101 ff for an extended list and discussion of this metaliterature
9 The theoretical implications of this kind of literature are beyond the scope of this article, which concentrates on the practical values for writing didactics. For a good theoretical overview cf. Hutcheon 1991, Waugh 1984.
10 For this reading of metafiction in texts where processes of writing and recollection occur, cf. Lange 2003, 35 ff.

versions and parts into the final text which would usually be eliminated during revision.[11] The novel starts with the first question many writers ask themselves when they are about to write the first sentence:

> «All right, but how do you begin, what words do you use?» (11)

By posing this question, the first sentence of the novel is already written and now one sentence can lead to another. The question is answered by the second voice in the text:

> «It makes no difference, use the words: there at the station pond.» (11)

In this answer, two points are of interest: it emphasises that the beginning of the (fictional) text is arbitrary, that there is not one single right first sentence but that the writer has to make a deliberate decision about how to start the text. This can lead to different reactions: either hesitating or even blocking, because the writer can not choose between too many possibilities, or realizing, as in the example of Sokolov, that the beginning is not so important – «It makes no difference», a realization that can liberate the flow of writing and makes the second voice suggest one possible beginning: «there at the station pond».

But then the first voice re-enters:

> «At the *station* pond? But that's incorrect, a stylistic mistake. Vodokachka [the protagonist's literature teacher] would certainly correct it, one can say «station» snack bar or «station» news stand, but not «station» pond, a pond can only be *near* the station.» (11)

After hesitating to begin at all, here is the first interruption from the self-critical writer. The proposed first sentence is not good enough, it contains a stylistic mistake. But the second voice again makes it possible to continue by accepting the proposed correction of the first voice without arguing. It again stresses that the first sentence is not as important as expected by the first voice:

> «Well, say it's near the station, that's not the point.»(11)

Finally, the first voice accepts the first sentence:

> «Good, then I'll begin that way: there, at the pond near the station.» (11)

Only after some more interruptions of this kind is a continuous flow of the narration established. For a novel, this is quite a disturbing beginning, even more so as it is

not typeset as a dialogue but as a continuous text. The reader has to discover – as one possible interpretation – that it is the dialogue of the two personalities of the schizophrenic first person narrator. Inner dialogues of this kind may be part of the writing process (even with non-schizophrenic authors), but in most cases they will not be part of the fictional – and even more – the academic text, since they will be eliminated from the final draft.[12]

For teachers and researchers of writing, this beginning sounds much more familiar than to the general reader, because it resembles a research tool of the discipline: the thinking-aloud protocol. In thinking-aloud protocols, the mental and emotional processes while writing are verbalized. This fictional «protocol» shows the difficulty of formulating the first sentence, the inner critic interrupting the flow of writing, and the critical teacher of literature as a source of this critical voice.

For students in writing workshops, it might be helpful to read and analyse a text like this in order to become more aware of their own inner dialogues while writing. The beginning of *A School for Fools* can be used to demonstrate two pieces of advice for overcoming the difficulties of beginning and for preventing a momentary blockade from becoming a lasting one by finding out what the writing problem is:

- Do not dramatize the beginning! Just start with any word, knowing that this word can be changed later. Write your way into the text, using the principles of *freewriting*.
- Get in touch with your inner critic, start a dialogue with the nagging voice in your head and write it down, make it part of your first draft – but do not let it stop your writing. [13] Of course, eliminate these parts before you hand in the paper.

Peter Elbow – Theory and Practice of Metawriting

In the case of the beginning of *A School for Fools* – and certainly not only in this case – metafiction can be analysed as a means for overcoming a writing block by writing about the obstacles in the way. This method

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11 Thus the writing process is not narrated/told but staged/shown.

12 Instead of creating the illusion of a fictional reality, this beginning creates the illusion of the writing process *in actu*.

13 A similar but still different approach is the interview with the inner critic (cf. e.g. von Werder 1995, 36 ff, Fröchling 2003, 108, Wolfsberger 2007, 176 ff.). Here students are advised to personify their inner critic and to write a dialogue with her/him, not while producing a specific section of the text but to clarify the overall situation and to reduce anxiety.

very much resembles «writing about writing», as recommended and practised by Peter Elbow in his classic book *Writing without Teachers* (Elbow 1998). Elbow describes how he himself discovered this technique to solve and later to analyze his writing problems (XV). He cites several examples of this metawriting to illustrate his point. Unlike the literary device in *A School for Fools*, these notes are not about the book in which they are published, but nevertheless, *Writing without Teachers* can be read not only as theory and advice on writing, but also as a document about non-fictional metawriting. Thus it can be used here simultaneously as an example of and a source for explaining the effects of metawriting.

Even though Elbow is not staging the dialogue with the inner critic, as Sokolov does, but rather uses the mode of reflection in his metawriting, his explanation of why the technique works to get unstuck applies to both modes: becoming aware of the problem, naming it, analyzing it and looking for a solution, reduces the frustration and makes it possible to move on in the text. The advice Elbow gives in his conclusion applies exactly to Sokolov's dialogue-method: «Talk to yourself in your writing. If you stop involuntarily in the middle of a sentence when you suddenly see it's turning out stupid or wrong, force yourself to keep writing and write to yourself whatever you have to say about that sentence: why it is stupid or wrong, how you noticed it, whatever.» (74)

Sasha Sokolov probably had never heard of Peter Elbow – he emigrated to the West only in 1975 and *A School for Fools* was still written in Russia. Nevertheless, the beginning of his novel can serve as an introduction to the technique of metawriting – exactly because it stages the inner dialogue so typical of all reflective writing in a fictional manner. Sokolov's narrator really talks to himself – to his second personality – and by doing so he does not lecture on a writing technique but shows it.

Jurii Gal'perin – Accepting the fear of starting as a necessary part of the creative process

The second way of representing the writing process in metafiction that this article will address is reflection. Here, the narrative voice reflects on writing in general or on writing the text in which the reflection occurs. In doing so, processes that usually hidden are most clearly verbalised within the literary text. Jurii Gal'perin uses this mode at the beginning of his novel *Play Blues* (Gal'perin 1983) and, like Sokolov, he emphasises the problem of beginning.[14]

> «You only have to start, to dare, blow the first note, drag the brittle, uncertain first sound from your lips, hold it, stretch it and weave it into a series with different, lighter and more supple ones, – utter a word, a second one, peel out a sentence and set the paragraph free, – and already you can't stop any more.» (3, my translation, U.L.)

This first sentence sounds like self-encouragement. It is about the fear and the magic of beginning and getting into the flow, and, at the same time, a highly poetic description of freewriting. The first person narrator compares writing to jazz music because he compares himself to his father, a jazz musician. And his father assures him that there will always be the fear of starting, that it is part of the process, and that a main point of the creative process is to overcome this fear (130). Later in his life, the narrator experiences that this fear can be mixed with joy and, when he is working on a novel, he makes a break to write a short story, only to re-experience this ambivalent state of mind when he is confronted with beginning.

Analysing an example like this in a writing workshop can illuminate two aspects:

- Being nervous about or afraid of starting is part of the business and not necessarily a writing problem.
- The point is to be courageous, to start in spite of this fear and trust in the flow to carry us along.

Boris Khazanov – A novel about not writing a novel

Not all writing problems and writing blocks are overcome, neither in reality nor in fiction. There is at least one Russian novel that is almost entirely the record of a major writing block. In his novel *The Distant Mirage of the Woods* (Khazanov 2001), Boris Khazanov describes a writer who is trying to write his autobiography but fails to do so. The story is presented as a first person narrative: although the writer is not able to write his autobiography, he is able to describe his fruitless attempts to do so. The mode in this case is more narrative than reflective. The writer describes what he is doing to overcome his writing block, but does not include text fragments of these endeavours.

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14 For a detailed literary analysis of *Play Blues* cf. Lange 2003.

Again, the main problem of the narrator is getting started. He always stops after a few paragraphs and obsessively crosses out what he has written. To overcome his writing block, he uses several techniques often recommended in this situation. He starts to write a diary about his writing process (reflective writing) and comments quite sarcastically: «the most important thing is to pile up written pages, isn't it?» (362) He uses automatic writing in order to free himself from the tight control he – or language itself, as he puts it – is exercising over his writing and to capture the flow of his thoughts (308). Although he is delighted by the quantitative outcome – in half an hour he writes more than he usually does in one week – he is depressed about the poor quality of his writing. He feels as if he had vomited the mess of words directly in the waste paper basket (309). Disgusted, he throws away the pages and decides never again to use this writing technique.

Khazanov's novel can serve as a warning that writing about writing cannot always solve a writing block. Too much of it, obviously, can distract a writer from writing the real text[15] and it does not work for every individual. In the case of *The Distant Mirage of the Woods*, there are deeper problems, closely related to the psychological and theoretical challenges of writing an autobiography, that prevent the narrator from writing his planned book.[16]

While writing about his failing attempts, the narrator decides to use his problems as a new plot and to write an «anti-novel», i. e. a novel about not being able to write a novel. He solves his writing block by moving on to a new project – a freedom academic writers do not always have. This way of coping with the writing block can remind teachers of academic writing and their students that being blocked does not necessarily imply not being able to write at all. There can be specific topics and projects that trigger the writing block because they touch certain psychological problems or surpass the writer's abilities in other ways. While this situation can be a decisive stimulus for writing fiction, it can be devastating for academic writing projects (cf. Frank/Haacke/Lahm 2007, 17). To be aware of this can be crucial when counselling students about deciding on a topic for a major assignment or thesis. Sometimes, the only way to get back to writing may be to abandon or change an ill-chosen or insufficiently-defined project.

Conclusion

Using four examples (three literary and one scholarly), I have demonstrated how fiction can be used for understanding and teaching something about coping with the writing block. I analysed metafictional literature because it reveals the actual writing process in a literary text. Texts of this kind can make students – and other writers as well – aware of the invisible but crucial processes in writing and can be used in general writing workshops and during individual consultation as a model or a starting point for talking about writing.[17] Even though students might be more familiar with films on writing blocks – e. g. *Deconstructing Harry* or *Stranger than Fiction* – the use of literary examples has the advantage that the reflection on writing is presented in the written form and can more easily be transformed to writing exercises and writing techniques. In this contribution, I have focused on the problem of beginning to write and the use of metawriting. Literary texts and devices dealing with other writing problems can also be found and integrated into writing pedagogy. Text samples and reading recommendations can be taken from any national literature; the Russian novels in this article serve only as an example.

I want to conclude this article with three more examples of academic metawriting. Hjortshoj 2001 uses the device when he talks about audience and the writing process and thus shows that the early drafts are not identical with the published book: «I am sitting here in my office at a particular time, working on page 24 of this manuscript. […] While I am writing, however, you are not yet reading, and the specific text you read does not yet exist in the form you have. […] [A]lthough you might assume that I wrote this passage before the sections and chapters that follow, I did not. I'm inserting these paragraphs into a full draft of the book» (22). Girgensohn 2007 includes a fictional dialogue with her inner critic to clarify her research position (97 ff). The voice of the inner critic represents the traditional view on teaching academic writing at German universities,

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15 It can lead to «grafomanija» [graphomania] – an established concept in Russian culture. Graphomania is an addiction to writing. This is writing for the sake of writing, without caring about the quality of the written product. The term can be applied to second-rate writers as well. For further information cf. Boym 1995.
16 For a detailed literary analysis of *The Distant Mirage of the Woods* cf. Lange 2003, Lange 2005.

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17 Metafictional literature and other genres, in which describing or reflecting on writing processes occurs, can be a suitable topic for a writing intensive seminar in literary studies which covers an introduction to writing techniques as well.

which the author challenges with her didactical concept and her research on autonomous writing groups in higher education. Thus, she reveals part of her doubts during the working process and demonstrates a creative way of coping. Lillis (2001) inserts, in her book on non-traditional student writing, notes on her own «experiences […] of being and writing in academia» (2), some of them referring to writing the book they are part of (e.g. 97, 125 on earlier drafts and reasons for revision). One of her aims is «to emphasise that the reasons why we engage in academic endeavour are often (always?) connected to our own experiences and desires» (2).

Publishing parts of metawriting makes visible not only the writing process but reveals something about the author. This very personal approach is atypical of academic writing.[18] Instances of scholarly metawriting can therefore show students how authors who have successfully published meet the challenges of the writing process and encourage them to talk about writing problems in academic settings.

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18 The studies by Girgensohn (2007) and Lillis (2001) both use methods of ethnographic research, always connected with reflecting upon and writing about their own research process (cf. Bishop 1999); thus, including personal writing in an academic text is less unusual than it would be for other disciplines and methods.

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