What is ‘writing’?

William Outhwaite

We need to distinguish at the beginning between the writing of emails, notes, short reports etc and writing in the serious sense of the production of research with the prospect of publication. It is interesting to reflect how little time most academics probably spend writing in this strict sense. On a Saturday morning, at the end of a fairly busy term-time week, this is the first time I have written anything, and I cannot in fact remember when I last wrote anything. (My computer will of course tell me, when I return to neglected texts in progress, when I last ‘saved’ them.)

There are, I think, three broad classes of exception to a pattern of this kind. There are people, such as PhD students and academics on research leave, who may be able to work uninterruptedly on a specific piece of writing. There are others, such as C. Wright Mills and many creative writers, who make a principle of writing something every day, if only a few paragraphs, rather as a musician would practice every day, regardless of other commitments or the particular shape of their schedule of future performances. The final category, which of course overlaps with the previous two, consists of people who spend a lot of time on the writing process, for whom the long hours of ‘editing’ time recorded by the computer do really mean sitting at the screen writing and re-writing, rather than, as tends to be the case for me, time when the document is open but I am doing something else.

I tend to write fairly fast, though I type slowly, and I revise as little as possible. In the days when many academics wrote in long-hand and had their manuscripts typed up (as a few still do), I was always impressed to see, as I sometimes did, page after page on the secretary’s desk, impeccably written with no crossings-out, yet looking like the first and only version.

We do of course prepare what we write, rather like a painter who spends four days on preparation, rubbing down surfaces and so forth, and only on the fifth day produces and uses the expected paint-brush or roller. Perhaps, then, the time spent in preparation and tidying up, which is massively longer than the time spent actually producing the text, should also be seen as writing. There is a parallel here with ‘thinking’. Again, I suspect I spend rather little time in thinking in a focussed way and uninterruptedly about something, and much more time mulling it over in odd moments spread over days, weeks or months. I admire people who sit down for an hour to think, or to write, without producing a sentence, but for better or worse I’m not one of them, and it does save time. I also tend to write short. (When I tell people I have just published a book on Europe which is less than 200 pages long they tend to react with an incredulity which reflects their no doubt justified suspicions about the seriousness and quality of the result.) Asked to write 500 to 1000 words on this topic, I found myself coming in at 496. Only these last few sentences, added after the word count, take me over the minimum. Editing time (uninterrupted) 46 minutes. Plus some more reading over and tinkering.

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