

## *Social Science as a Kind of Writing*

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*The purpose of this paper is twofold: to argue for the value of (1) social science as part of the intellectual activity of writing (rather than righting) and (2) the practice of fiction to that intellectual activity. Writing is a mode of representation that eludes our complete and objective knowledge and always remains partial and temporary. While righting, in contrast, is concerned with the absolute truth and the revelation of the right answer. This paper argues that writing is a more productive, creative, and necessary way of engaging with reality than righting, and that it can offer insights and perspectives for both theory and praxis. Drawing on Stephen King's view on writing fiction, this paper will also argue that fiction constitutes a kind of writing and employs a particular form of truth that is conceived as a relation between representation and reality. The paper will conclude by suggesting the need for criminologists—and social scientists more generally—to adopt the perspective of writing to gain a better understanding of the phenomena with which they are concerned.*

**Keywords:** Writing; philosophy; fiction; truth; criminology.

### 1. *Introduction*

In this paper, we explore the value of “writing” and “righting” as two different ways of communicating through discourse that have implications for how we understand and engage with reality. Writing and righting can be seen as opposing intellectual activities that reflect different assumptions about the nature of knowledge of reality. Writing views knowledge as contingent, interpretive, and temporally situated that can engage in an infinite forms of understandings. Righting, on the other hand, views knowledge as objective, universal, and certain. Righting claims to reveal an absolute Truth and operates within a fi-

nite paradigm of comprehension. Righting, as we shall demonstrate in more detail throughout the paper, limits and distorts reality by imposing a false certainty and authority. Where writing requires humility and openness to different perspectives, righting requires pretentiousness and avoidance to criticism or challenges. We focus on the role of fiction as a form of writing that offers valuable insights for criminology and the broader social sciences. Criminology, as we discuss, consists of several ontological and epistemological frameworks with the recent development of “critical criminology” that is concerned with harm, injustices, and the role of dominant truths and knowledges in reproducing such harm. We argue that fiction is a form of writing that reflects a particular version of reality (“real” or otherwise) and establishes a relation between fiction and truth. Fiction engages in the infinite process of understanding by exploring a multitude of different and changing aspects of harm and experience. Fiction represents reality, regardless of the accuracy of the representation. The recipients of fiction enter a quasi-experience of a specific version of reality that belongs to an intersubjective truth (Summa 2017). This subjective experience modifies their understanding of the non-fictional world and makes them aware of the possibility of different imagined realities. We will identify the connection between fiction and truth by distinguishing two types of truth: accuracy and authenticity. We further argue that fiction provides criminology with theoretical and practical value by engaging in a fluidity of truth-making in productive and creative ways.

The foundation of the paper builds on the theoretical framework of Richard Rorty (1978). Rorty was one of the most famous public intellectuals in the US at the time of his death in 2007. His career is notable for his development of neopragmatism and for his crossing of the philosophical Rubicon. Rorty was trained as an analytic philosopher, completing his PhD at Yale in 1956 and being awarded a professorship at Princeton in 1970 (Gross 2008). He became increasingly disillusioned with the tradition during the 1970s and turned his back on it with the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1979), which rejected truth as the criterion for philosophy. Rorty was sympathetic to James (1907: 42), for whom truth is simply “the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons.” If truth is to be retained by the natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities, it must be truth as usefulness rather than truth as providing direct access to reality. Rorty concluded his academic career at Stanford, where he was Professor of Comparative Literature from 1998 until his retirement in 2005. He was not, however, embraced by the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition, being regarded as too conservative to be placed in the same category as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault in virtue of his commitment to liberalism. Rorty’s (1982) second book, a collection of essays entitled *Consequences of Pragmatism*, demonstrated his affinity for Dewey and the originality of his own contribution to the pragmatist tradition.

Both Rorty and Dewey were concerned with destroying the distinctions among philosophy, science, art, and religion, but Rorty's pragmatism was distinguished by his overriding desire to place philosophical inquiry entirely at the service of democratic politics (Voparil 2021). For Rorty, philosophical or other inquiry is only "true"—or valuable—to the extent that it facilitates and enables democracy. Our particular interest in Rorty (1978) is in an essay he published in the literary studies journal *New Literary History*, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," which was a response to and continuation of one of James' (1907) lectures, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy."

The remainder of this paper will be structured as follows. First, we shall introduce the theoretical framework of Rorty (1978) which distinguishes between the conceptions of "writing" and "righting" and shows their implications for understanding the notion of "truth" or rather, a hegemony based on truth claims. Secondly, we will explore how the difference between writing and righting relates to the views of Kantian and poststructuralist philosophers on our ability (or inability) to access reality. Third, we draw on the insights of Stephen King (2000) to show how fiction is a kind of writing that aligns with phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy and fosters creative and critical thinking. Next, we will examine whether representation always fails to capture reality, and why this idea goes against the expectations of those who make representations, along with the relevance to the social sciences. Then, we will frame this within the context of criminology by associating righting with positivism and writing with constructionism, however, our preferred approach is critical realism. We will also suggest that righting—asserting that one has discovered the Truth—can be equivalent to causing harm. Lastly, the paper will conclude by suggesting the need for criminologists, and social scientists more generally, to adopt the perspective of writing to gain a better understanding of the phenomena (both in theory and praxis) with which they are concerned.

## 2. *Philosophy as a kind of writing*

Rorty (1978: 141) begins by presenting two different and conflicting ways of understanding the field of physics, "right and wrong" (i.e., normative ethics or ethical theory), and philosophy. He uses these contrasts to show the two traditions of philosophy. Rorty (1978: 143) subsequently introduces Derrida and characterises his project as addressing the question of why analytic philosophers oppose the notion of philosophy being regarded as a "kind of writing," i.e., a literary genre whose limits are determined by convention rather than by form or content. Writing as a mode of representation, according to Rorty, is a hindrance to be negotiated for Kantian philosophers and positivist scientist: they want to *show* us their findings, to *point* the truth to us rather than represent it in writing. Truth, however, can be substituted *for the trace*: Writing is one of the representatives of the trace in general, it is not the

trace itself. *The trace itself does not exist.* Rorty's summaries the two intellectual traditions as two forms of activity: "writing" and "showing." Showing, which shall henceforth be referred to as "righting" for reasons that will become obvious, is not restricted to the institutions of analytic philosophy and positivist science, but is also the preferred activity of religious institutions. Scientists and priests alike want to show us the Truth (truth-with-a-capital-t) or God (god-with-a-capital-g) without the interference of representation.

As already mentioned, the essay begins with two contrasting descriptions of physics, selected by Rorty because it is the model of inquiry that analytic philosophers attempt to emulate. The positivist description of physics is that "there are some invisible things which are parts of everything else and whose behavior determines the way everything else works" (Rorty 1978: 141). For the pragmatist, "physicists are men [*sic*] looking for a new interpretation of the Book of Nature" (Rorty 1978: 141). In the former, physics proceeds in a linear fashion, building on previous progress and aiming for the point when it will, quite literally, be able to reveal the Truth about everything. The latter draws on Thomas Kuhn's (2012: ch. 8 and 5) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which was first published in 1962 and distinguished between "normal science" and "revolutionary" science. Periods of normal science are interrupted by scientific revolutions that involve a shift to a new paradigm, initiating a new version of normal science which is incommensurable with the previous one. As such, scientific progress from Ptolemy to Copernicus to Newton to Einstein is non-linear and there is no indication that physics will reach an end point that is not itself subject to a paradigm shift. In his next two examples, Rorty examines ethical theory and philosophy in the same way, decoupling both of them from the concept of truth. Referring to all three of physics, ethical theory, and philosophy, he (Rorty 1978: 143) concludes that there are two separate activities under discussion and that writing "takes science as one (not especially privileged nor interesting) sector of culture, a sector which, like all the other sectors, only makes sense when viewed historically." Rorty proceeds to a discussion of Derrida in which he frames deconstruction as providing a sketch of how the intellectual landscape might look in the absence of a Kantian, truth-based hegemony, in a similar manner to that in which Derrida's predecessors detached morality from religion. As might be expected, Rorty focuses on Derrida's prioritisation of writing over speech as a form of representation that provides a reminder of language's inability to make reality present. This is because of the arbitrary and unstable relationship between words and concepts.

With its publication shortly before the release of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, there is a strong sense in which Rorty's essay is a declaration of and rationale for his disenchantment with analytic philosophy. It is also noteworthy that this declaration was made in a literary studies journal rather than either an analytic or phenomeno-

logical-hermeneutic philosophy journal—literary studies is a discipline dedicated exclusively to writing and it is inconceivable that there could be literary theory or literary criticism without writing. Rorty, however, can be situated in the context of the pragmatic tradition of philosophy, which is neither analytic nor phenomenological-hermeneutic, as inaugurating neopragmatism and very likely saving the “third way” in philosophy from extinction at the end of the 20th century. Rorty’s focus in the essay is, for the most part, on Derrida and pragmatism is not even mentioned. James is mentioned, but only once and not cited. Peirce, Dewey, Addams, and Locke are not mentioned at all. It seems that this is thus a declaration of Rorty’s support for phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy (specifically, for Derrida’s deconstruction within that tradition) rather than pragmatism. That would be an accurate summary of the essay, but a more enlightening summary would be that it is a declaration of and dedication to writing rather than righting. Writing is an activity undertaken by philosophers in both the phenomenological-hermeneutic and pragmatic traditions, distinguishing them from philosophers in the analytic tradition, who undertake the activity of righting.

### 3. *Writing vs. righting*

Rorty does not actually define either writing or righting in the manner of the necessary and sufficient conditions favoured by analytic philosophy (which would be inconsistent with the aim of the paper), but describes writing in more detail and makes the explicit link with Derrida, providing further elucidation. What we are referring to as *righting* and what Rorty describes as showing is most clearly set out in the fourth and final part of his essay. For Rorty, analytic philosophy eschews writing as an impediment to its revelatory power—its capacity to reveal the Truth—because revelation involves direct access to reality. Rorty (1978: 166, emphasis in original) values Derrida for (among other things) demonstrating how to conduct inquiries without aiming at truth:

Kantian philosophy, on Derrida’s view, is a kind of writing which would like not to be a kind of writing. It is a genre which would like to be a gesture, a clap of thunder, an epiphany. *That* is where God and [hu]man, thought and its object, words and the world meet, we want speechlessly to say; let no further words come between the happy pair. Kantian philosophers would like not to write, but just to *show*.

Kantian philosophers, like their religious counterparts, desire revelation and revelation does not come via the written or spoken word but by the perception of the thing itself. If we do not already perceive the Truth, then we may need someone to show us where it is, to point us in the right direction, to give us a push along the path. None of the showing, pointing, or pushing require writing—or, indeed, words—at all and to represent the Truth (by language or pictures) is precisely to

not reveal it: if I am reading about Truth, I am not looking at it; I am looking at a description (representation) of it. What physicists, philosophers, and priests want is therefore *righting*—revelation of *the* right answer—which is distinct from writing. Rorty (1978: 156) elaborates on this distinction by using Kuhn's (2012) distinction between normal (positivist) and revolutionary (realist) science:

In normal physics, normal philosophy, normal moralizing or preaching, one hopes for the normal thrill of just the right piece fitting into just the right slot, with a shuddering resonance which makes verbal commentary superfluous and inappropriate. Writing, as Derrida says in commenting on Rousseau, is to this kind of simple 'getting it right' as masturbation is to standard, solid, reassuring sex. This is why writers are thought effete in comparison with scientists—the 'men [*sic*] of action' of our latter days.

Revolutionary, realist, or critical scientists and philosophers are writers rather than righters. *Writing* is an activity in which disciplinary claims of providing direct access to Truth are rejected in favour of interdisciplinary approximations of a truth to which access will always be partial and temporary. For Kantians and positivists, writing is a necessary evil, a flawed but unavoidable means to the end of communicating their Truth(s). The key point for Rorty (1978: 156–157, emphasis in original) is that Kantians and poststructuralists are engaged in two different activities, not inquiring into different subjects:

The important thing to notice is that the difference between the two forms of activity is not subject matter—not, for instance, a matter of the difference between the flinty particles of the hard sciences and the flexible behavior of the soft ones—but *rather is determined by normality or abnormality*. Normality, in this sense, is accepting without question the stage-setting in the language which gives demonstration (scientific or ostensive) its legitimacy. Revolutionary scientists need to write, as normal scientists do not. Revolutionary politicians need to write, as parliamentary politicians do not. Dialectical philosophers like Derrida need to write, as Kantian philosophers do not.

Writing is thus an activity that is a means to an end for Kantians and the end itself for poststructuralists. Poststructuralists and pragmatists know that there is no final or absolute truth—no Truth—that will be reached, only ideas, concepts, and theories that are better or worse for the ends to which we wish to use them. Harcourt's (2020: 46) reconstruction of critical theory, which aims to transform rather than interpret the world, is very relevant here:

a reconstructed critical theory precisely represents an endless unveiling of illusions to demonstrate how our beliefs distribute resources and material conditions. It traces the effects of reality of our beliefs and material practices, recognizing that, as it unveils illusions, it creates new ones that will need to be unpacked later. It is relentless in this way. It engages in a form of recursive unmasking—an infinite regress—that endlessly exposes the distributional effects of belief systems and material conditions.

For writers—as opposed to righters—knowledge is always only partial. A writer aims to improve on what has gone before by providing ideas, concepts, or theories that are more useful or that unveil more of

the illusions of the righters, but expects—indeed *hopes*—that her own writing will be criticised, unveiled, and replaced. Part of what it means to be a writer rather than a righter, one of the features of Derrida’s project that Rorty develops, is a lack of respect for the divisions between disciplines. Once one differentiates between righting and writing and makes a commitment to the latter, then no sphere of culture (science, philosophy, religion, or art) is any more privileged than any other. They are all simply tools that are better or worse at achieving certain ends. Writing itself—the activity of pragmatic philosophy, deconstructive critique, and critical theory—is not (and has never been) the preserve of pragmatists, literary critics, or critical theorists, but of anyone who undertakes the activity of writing. The activity of writing is undertaken in this paper with a commitment to Derrida, Rorty, and Harcourt. A significant part of that writing, which will be the topic of the next section, will involve the analysis and evaluation of a different kind of writing—fiction, communicated in the linguistic and hybrid modes of representation.

#### 4. *Fiction as a kind of writing*

If pragmatic philosophy is a kind of writing, then it has more in common with other kinds of writing—like phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy, art, and fiction—than with analytic philosophy, positivist science, and religion. As such, insight into writing can be found from sources beyond academia and one of the most useful is Stephen King’s (2000) *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, which combines autobiography with an exploration of writing as an activity. King is one of a handful of authors who has sold hundreds of millions of books.<sup>1</sup> He is best known as a writer of horror fiction, specifically as the author of: *The Shining*, *Carrie*, *Salem’s Lot*, *Misery*, *Pet Sematary*, and his apocalyptic masterpiece, *The Stand*. In an interview in 2022, King listed his favourite five stories, which includes only one of his bestsellers (Russell 2022): “Survivor Type,” *Misery*, *Lisey’s Story*, “The Body,” and *Billy Summers*. What is particularly interesting about this list is that only one of his favourites has a supernatural element (*Lisey’s Story*), much of which is represented with great subtlety. *On Writing* is divided into five uneven sections: “C.V.,” “What Writing Is,” “Toolbox,” “On Writing,” and “On Living: A Postscript.” The first and last of these are autobiographical and our interest is in the middle three. The answer to what writing is, is straightforward (King 2000: 77): “Telepathy, of course.” King uses “telepathy” literally rather than metaphorically, introducing writing as an activity with the capacity to transcend both time and space. Telepathy requires clarity of communication, for which King (2000: 85) recommends that the writer assemble a *toolbox*:

<sup>1</sup> Karen Heller (2016) claims that King has sold 350 million books, but this claim appears to be based on a 2006 estimate so the figure is no doubt substantially larger now, seven years after the publication of Heller’s article.

I want to suggest that to write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle so you can carry it with you. Then, instead of looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work.

King's toolbox consists of four levels, with the most common tools, vocabulary and grammar, on top. The second level is style and the third the paragraph, which is where the activity starts for King (2000: 103): "I would argue that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing—the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words." The fourth and final level is structure, the development of paragraphs into sections or chapters and sections or chapters into a manuscript draft. Social scientists who have marked student assessments; peer-reviewed journal articles, book proposals, and grant applications; and edited journals and books will immediately recognise the value of the toolbox beyond the kind of writing we call fiction. Vocabulary, grammar, style, and structure are indeed essential to clarity of communication and they are also so often undeveloped. Many social science texts suffer from jargon, ambiguity, and inconsistency, which prevents them from conveying their ideas effectively and persuasively. By using the four levels of the toolbox, social scientists can enhance their communication skills and make their words more meaningful and impactful.

Having assembled his toolbox, King explores writing as an activity by discussing three of its core features: practice, environment, and routine. The writer must practice her craft often and regularly and practice includes both reading and writing. "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut" (King 2000: 112). If social scientists want to write well, we need to write a lot and read a lot. Second, King links his professional success to a stable and ordered environment for practicing the craft, which in his own case involved good health and a happy marriage. "The biggest aid to regular [...] production is working in a serene atmosphere. It's difficult for even the most naturally productive writer to work in an environment where alarms and excursions are the rule rather than the exception" (King 2000: 120). Finally, King prefers a routine, which he justifies by comparing the activity of writing to the (in)activity of sleeping. This comparison and his conception of *creative sleep* is worth quoting in full (King 2000: 122):

I think we're actually talking about creative sleep. Like your bedroom, your writing room should be private, a place where you go to dream. Your schedule—in at about the same time every day, out when your thousand words are on paper or disk—exists in order to habituate yourself, to make yourself ready to dream just as you make yourself ready to sleep by going to bed at roughly the same time each night and following the same ritual as you go. In both writing and sleeping, we learn to be physically still at the same time we are encouraging our minds to unlock from the humdrum rational



thinking of our daytime lives. And as your mind and body grow accustomed to a certain amount of sleep each night—six hours, seven, maybe the recommended eight—so can you train your waking mind to sleep creatively and work out the vividly imagined waking dreams which are successful works of fiction.

King's conception of creative sleep suggests that writing is not only a rational and conscious activity, but also a creative and subconscious activity. He implies that writers need to access their imagination and intuition, which are often suppressed or ignored in the daytime. By establishing a routine and a private space, writers can create the conditions for their minds to produce original and vivid stories. Creative sleep can also be applied to social science writing, which often requires more than logical and analytical thinking. Social scientists can benefit from tapping into their imagination and intuition, which can help them generate new insights, perspectives, and hypotheses.

### 5. *Truth-Telling?*

King's exploration of the activity of writing provides exemplary insight into the activity as a whole rather than just fiction as a kind of writing. If we, however, are looking to King as a guide to the activity of writing, then it seems we are no longer interested in truth, in which case one might well ask what is left for pragmatic philosophy. The distinction between Rorty and King is broken down and while we might hold the two of them in equal regard, one seems to be writing about reality (even if he admits that he can never reveal it) and the other about fantasy (impossible, improbable, and unlikely versions of reality). The same could be (and is) said of *The Shining*, *Carrie*, *Salem's Lot*, *Misery*, and *Pet Sematary*—they are science fictions and fantasies, representations with only a tenuous and fragile link to reality.

This is a concern expressed in many different ways and is one of the reasons that the criminologies have been reluctant to engage with fiction. The two criminologies one might expect to have made the most use of fiction—narrative and cultural—either fail to recognise the link between fictional representation and actual reality (the former) or understand the link in terms of a mirror that always distorts the reality (the latter). Even in the very niche area of what can be called pulp criminology (i.e., the criminological engagement with fictions outside of the cultural criminological framework and ultra-realist theory), the character of the link is highly disputed. As writers rather righters, we are not interested in Truth; rather, we are interested in truth, conceived as a relation between representation and reality.

The first point to note is that if there is a relation between representation and reality, it would be curious if that relation always, i.e. necessarily, distorted the reality. If a link is admitted, then there is always the possibility of accurate representation, even if that is rarely achieved in practice. Once one admits a link, it seems likely that representations

can either represent reality, misrepresent reality, or combine representation with misrepresentation. If representations *always* represent or *always* misrepresent, then the burden of proof lies with those making this counter-intuitive claim and there yet remains to be a convincing argument for the latter from cultural criminologists (McGregor 2018, 2021, 2023). Mirrors do distort reality (by swapping left and right), but once one understands that distortion, they provide a pretty accurate representation of the object they reflect. But what about *fictional* representations, what could the relationship between protagonist Andy Dufresne and the world in which one reads “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption” possibly be? The relation between fiction and truth (but not Truth) is neither paradoxical nor puzzling—or was at least not regarded as such until the birth of modernism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The relation between fictional characters, settings, and actions and contemporary or historical people, places, and events is one of reference to universals rather than reference to particulars. The notion is from Aristotle’s (Murray 2004) famous observation on the superiority of poetry over history: history refers to what has happened (particulars) and poetry to the kinds of thing that can happen (universals). In other words, nonfiction (history) is about particular contemporary or historical people, places, or events and fiction (poetry) is about types of people, places, or events. “Andy Dufresne” refers to a fictional character and the relation between “Andy-Dufresne-in-Rita-Hayworth-and-Shawshank-Redemption” and the world in which one reads King’s ([1982] 2000) novella is the relation between the fictional particular and an actual universal, which might be “a banker who is wrongly convicted of murder” or, less prosaically, “a man of great patience and resilience.” People like Dufresne—apparently unremarkable, but possessing an almost superhuman resilience and apparently limitless patience—have and do exist. The relation between fictional particulars and actual universals applies not just to characters, settings, and actions, but to works of fiction as a whole. “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption” might thus be considered to instantiate the universal of “the redemptive power of hope” or, of more interest to the criminologist, “the dehumanising quality of incarceration.” If the reference of “Andy-Dufresne-in-Rita-Hayworth-and-Shawshank-Redemption” to “a man of great patience and resilience” seems too distinct from the reference of “Rita-Hayworth-in-Rita-Hayworth-and-Shawshank-Redemption” to (the historical) “Rita Hayworth,” then there is—again—a simple way to differentiate what we might call two types of truth: accuracy and authenticity. “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption” is accurate if, for example, King’s description of (Dufresne’s poster of) Hayworth corresponds with her actual appearance. The novella is *authentic* if, for example, Dufresne is a credible instantiation of “a man of great patience and resilience.” Truth in fiction is usually (but not always) concerned with the authenticity of themes, characters, settings, and

actions. One of the many merits of *On Writing* is the extent to which King is concerned with truth, which can be understood in terms of authenticity. The first explicit mention is at a crucial stage of the activity, once the writer's toolbox is assembled and she is about to put fingertip to key (King 2000: 123, emphasis in original):

So okay—there you are in your room with the shade down and the door shut and the plug pulled out of the base of the telephone. You've blown up your TV and committed yourself to a thousand words a day, come hell or high water. Now comes the big question: What are you going to write about? And the equally big answer: Anything you damn well want. Anything at all... *as long as you tell the truth.*

Shortly after, King (2000: 124) comments on the specific relationship between representation and reality or authenticity and accuracy that characterises writing: "the job of fiction is to find the truth inside the story's web of lies." He explains this relationship in more detail in a discussion of John Grisham's novel, *The Firm* (King 2000: 126–127, emphasis in original):

Although I don't know for sure, I'd bet my dog and lot that John Grisham never worked for the mob. All of that is total fabrication (and total fabrication is the fiction writer's purest delight). He was once a young lawyer, though, and he has clearly forgotten none of the struggle. Nor has he forgotten the location of the various financial pitfalls and honeytraps that make the field of corporate law so difficult. Using plainspun humor as a brilliant counterpoint and never substituting cant for story, he sketches a world of Darwinian struggle where all the savages wear threepiece suits. And—here's the good part—*this is a world impossible not to believe.* Grisham has been there, spied out the land and the enemy positions, and brought back a full report. He told the truth of what he knew, and for that if nothing else, he deserves every buck *The Firm* made.

The first clause of the last sentence is equally important for social scientists: we must tell the truth of what we know and our knowledge must be acquired by methods that are both valid and reliable. Similarly, social science at its best—whether an article or a monograph—presents *a world impossible not to believe* (often, a world of cause and effect). King ([2006] 2011: 609) makes a similar point in *Lisey's Story*, through author surrogate Scott Landon, "Some things just have to be true, Scott said, because they have no other choice." King is also concerned with the joy of the activity of writing, taking pleasure in the process as well as the product, which he describes with an example from writing *The Stand*:

At one moment I had none of this; at the next I had all of it. If there is any one thing I love about writing more than the rest, it's that sudden flash of insight when you see how everything connects. I have heard it called 'thinking above the curve', and it's that; I've heard it called 'the over-logic', and it's that, too. (2000: 162–163)

The *sudden flash of insight when you see how everything connects* will be familiar to social scientists. It might come after weeks, months, or even years of hard work on a particular project or it might not come

at all. King (2000: 200) returns to pleasure when identifying his motivation for becoming and remaining a writer: “I did it for the pure joy of the thing. And if you can do it for joy, you can do it forever.” When King says he writes for the joy of it, one is surely inclined to believe him. Social scientists must also find joy in their work, especially when they discover something new or meaningful which requires creative approaches. Joy, however, is not always easy to achieve or maintain in the social sciences because of methodological limitations, political and financial pressures, and institutional expectations. Social scientists, therefore, need to cultivate a passion and a curiosity for their topics, and to value both the process and outcome of their ideas in a creative and engaging way.

### 6. *Criminology as a kind of writing*

Like philosophy, criminology is divided into two traditions: mainstream and critical. Broadly construed, mainstream criminology is concerned with criminal justice and aims to reduce or prevent crime while critical criminology is concerned with social justice and aims to reduce or prevent harm, regardless of whether that harm has been criminalised. The difference is significant because the latter recognises that the criminal justice system can itself be harmful and perpetuate or even exaggerate socioeconomic inequality. This critique is usually focused on the power relations underpinning the criminal justice, legal, and political systems within a particular state or region (Ugwudike 2015). In practice, critical criminologists lean towards the theoretical and qualitative, and mainstream criminologists towards the empirical and quantitative. The disciplinary division is more recent than in philosophy—since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—but nonetheless substantial, with the same consequences: the two traditions are almost unrecognisable as belonging to the same discipline and it is extremely rare to find a criminologist who finds value in both (Van Swaaningen 1999). From a philosophical point of view, one may be tempted to align mainstream criminology with analytic philosophy and critical criminology with phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy. In the terms set out by Rorty in his essay, one might further bracket analytic philosophy, normal physics, and conventional criminology as righting and phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy, pragmatic philosophy, revolutionary physics, and critical criminology as writing. This would, however, be a gross oversimplification. For starters, it would not do justice to the substantial amount of rigorous, sophisticated, and pragmatic research being undertaken in the tradition that is, somewhat dismissively, referred to as “conventional” criminology (or, with outright contempt, as “administrative” criminology).

Rorty’s distinction between writing and righting is more relevant to broad approaches to the social sciences than to either criminological frameworks or criminological theories. An *approach* is a set of onto-

logical and epistemological assumptions about social science research. There are three broad categories of approach, although they are identified by several different (and at times confusing) terms: positivism, constructionism, and realism. These approaches can, again broadly, be distinguished by their relationship to truth (or, more accurately, to truth value). *Positivism* is an approach to social science that assumes the social world is an external reality, that social facts have a truth value, and that researchers can access the reality and discover the truth values. *Constructionism* assumes that the social world is experienced as an external reality, but that researchers can only observe and describe the experience, in consequence of which social facts do not have a truth value. *Realism* assumes the social world is an external reality and that social facts have a truth value, but that researchers have only partial access to reality, in consequence of which criminological knowledge is approximate to rather than correspondent with reality (McGregor 2021).

The last of these, which is our preferred approach, can be described as “critical realism” (McGregor 2021: 56) in order to draw attention to its relation to Roy Bhaskar’s (1975, 1987, 1989) approach to natural science and Jon Frauley’s (2010: 2) “perspectival realism”. There seems to be a straightforward (if, perhaps, superficial) set of relations among analytic philosophy and positivism, phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy and constructionism, and pragmatic philosophy and realism. As the discussion in this paper suggests, righting can be described in terms of positivism and writing in terms of either constructionism or realism. Criminologists can thus either undertake the activity of righting or writing; they are righters if they adopt a positivist approach and writers if they adopt a constructionist or realist approach.

The kind of writing we call fiction has significant pragmatic value for criminology, both for the reasons explained in this paper and because the distinction—and usefulness—between fictional and nonfictional narratives is questioned, especially when those narratives are complex rather than basic (McGregor 2018). The argument is that even criminologists who do not recognise the value of fiction or who (as in the case of the aforementioned cultural criminologists) misrecognise its valence as negative, should recognise that the activity they are undertaking is writing. One does not have to write about writing, but unless one recognises that what one is doing is writing, one is likely to perpetrate harm by asserting that one has discovered the Truth. Rorty (1978) insists first on the fallibility of writing and then on the desirability of that fallibility. When we write, we understand that the next writer may rewrite our social scientific significance (by developing or criticising us), write us out of the disciplinary canon (by pointing out flaws we failed to perceive), or indeed write us off (by ignoring us). When we right, we gesture towards a Truth that society fails to recognise at its peril and act with the conviction such revelation brings. Harcourt (2020) refers to critical theory (and the praxis with which it is

intertwined) in similar terms, as an infinite—but not vicious—regress in which we as social scientists work towards a better understanding of phenomena, an understanding that will never be complete because we will never be able to access reality directly. Harcourt's goal is, like Rorty's, to be rewritten, to have his critical theory developed by others and transformed into more nuanced and useful critical theories in the future. Writing as an activity thus involves a degree of humility that righting does not and the thought that we might be wrong—or that someone else might have a better way of doing things—is essential when it comes to putting our writing into practice, whether the praxis that accompanies our critique is teaching, activism, or something else.

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout the previous sections, we have identified several primary arguments to support the claim that writing is a more productive, creative, and necessary way of engaging with reality than righting and that fiction constitutes a kind of writing that employs a particular form of truth. We have shown that writing is practiced by philosophers in the phenomenological-hermeneutic and pragmatic traditions, fictional writers, and criminologists who adopt a constructionist or realist approach. Righting, on the other hand, is practiced by analytical philosophers, positivist scientists, religious institutions, and criminologists who adopt a positivist approach and are limited by their own assumptions and methods. Writing allows for multiple perspectives and forms of truth, while righting operates within a finite paradigm of comprehension. Our argument is that, regardless of the methods used, engaging with Truth involves engaging with a representation, because we cannot access reality directly. Fiction has a great value for the practice of writing because it can create imaginative representations that challenge and transcend the boundaries of righting. This paper argues that criminologists can gain a deeper and more critical understanding of harm and injustice by self-consciously pursuing the practice of writing and utilising fiction as an insight to that practice. Fiction can help criminologists explore alternative scenarios and solutions, as well as empathize with diverse experiences and perspectives. Engaging with fictional realities provides alternate forms of understanding that makes us aware of the intellectual inadequacies when we face perennial problems. Writing, therefore, is a method of creating new possibilities and realities to which fiction acts as powerful tool for that method. Righting, however, is a method of imposing and enforcing a single vision of reality that may be harmful and oppressive.

We have also argued that writing can offer insights and perspectives for both theory and praxis. Our reasons for this, as discussed, are: (1) writing accepts that knowledge is always partial and aims to improve on its ideas, concepts, or theories; (2) writing weakens the superiority of disciplinary claims to truth and allows for more open-

mindful and creative interdisciplinary work; (3) fiction as an activity of writing reveals the complexity, ambiguity, and diversity of reality that engage us in creative thinking that is necessary to overcome the many adversities with which we face; and (4) fiction provides a reflection and experience of diverse realities and can serve as reconceptualisations in practice, such as social scientific practice. There are, of course, many research areas to which this subject can be applied: language and phenomenology, existential anthropology, media studies, cultural criminology, and narrative criminology. In summary, we have shown the value of writing that engages with reality in creative and critical ways, and the value of fiction as a practice that enhances and enriches this writing. Fiction, as a kind of writing, ignites an experience of different truths and imagination, an experience which, we argue, can challenge and enrich the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

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