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Investigating the means of production: a fresh approach to contextualising elements in creative writing degree programmes

Abstract:

Most creative writing courses, certainly at Masters level and beyond, contain elements of professional development and some consideration of the processes of publication and the nature of the creative industries. However, these elements tend to sit uncomfortably in the academic context.

It is the purpose of this paper to propose an alternative approach, one that takes full rigorous account of the complexities of the ways writers have in the past and do now get their work to readers; an approach that demands reflection on the conscious and unconscious influences that shape a writer's work; that offers a rich, barely-explored field for Creative Writing students and teachers to colonise; and finally that will help all involved to understand themselves better as writers and students of writing.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Professional development—Creative industries—Publishing—Genre—Contextualisation—Research

Most Creative Writing programmes (certainly at Masters level or beyond) advertise some elements of 'professional development', some consideration of the processes of publication and the nature of the creative industries. Jen Webb's conclusion (Webb 2009, 70) is probably representative:

> it is reasonable to build into our programmes some specific training in the industry of writing: to prepare students to be more professional, to treat themselves as small businesses, and operate more effectively in the market.

Note the use of the word 'training'. This suggests a set of skills or information that can be simply acquired or transferred. Note also the emphasis on instrumentality. A typical prospectus offering in the UK might be:

> You will have the opportunity to develop your creative writing skills in general, or specialise in a chosen genre. You will also study literary criticism and theory and will look at the professional elements of writing, such as copy-editing and how to get your work published.[1]

The 'professional elements' sit alongside the more conventional academic elements ('literary criticism and theory'), but are specifically separated from them. While the student 'studies' the academic elements, they only 'look at' the professional. Even at the cutting edge of industry involvement, there is little or no sense of critical awareness, analysis or reflection:

> The Novel in Society: Internship Programme
> As far as we know, this course is unique to Brunel and highly popular with our students. You will study the publishing industry and the strategies adopted by successful authors within it, and will also learn how to build your profile as a writer and prepare a submission to a literary agent. After the taught course, we will place you as an intern within a company in this field to learn at first hand how and why a novel is published. [Brunel University, UK]

Clearly a wonderful opportunity for the students concerned, and promising something more than a set of easily grasped skills or information, but the 'learning' seems to take a narrow, contemporary and instrumental form, seeking not so much to broaden students' knowledge and understanding per se, but simply to equip them better to get published. Again, there is little hint of critical investigation.

My own research[2] among colleagues reveals two, somewhat contradictory, grounds for this reluctance to subject the creative industries to the same kind of scrutiny that a respectable academic discipline might afford other social or cultural manifestations: first, some academics regard knowledge of the creative industries as straightforward and easy to obtain, and probably best conveyed by visiting speakers or self-directed perusal by students of such publications as *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*:

> Given how straightforward most publishing is when boiled down to the basics - it really does not need to be made quite so complex - and there are not very many differing opinions over say, how to write a synopsis. [Senior Lecturer, Creative Writing and Publishing]

> Our main aim must be to enable students to write the best books they can in the light of a knowledge of how the industry works, but the latter shouldn't take up too much space in the

curriculum - it could be dealt with comprehensively in a couple of sessions with industry professionals. [Professor of Fiction and novelist]

On the other hand, there are those who find the operations of those industries so bewilderingly complex and unpredictable that they can't see the point of trying to formalise knowledge of them:

> There's real danger of wasting time trying to teach in the abstract a know-how which comes primarily through a mixture of nous and happenstance. As teachers, we are very clever/experienced at the complex editorial interaction, getting the book right. I suspect we would not be so clever at understanding how the industry works: even if we brought in industry professionals to teach it. The one is an evolved and intensely focussed teaching skill; the other risks being too much guesswork, too generalising, always slightly after the event.[Lecturer, academic and novelist]

Both above factions share a reductionist view of the place and influence of the creative industries, and the corresponding professional development of students. They cannot envisage the 'market' elements of the course being assimilated into the academic fabric, but rather they are banished to a kind of footnote status. This sordid, unpleasant and possibly contagious area is not a suitable province for creative writing academics - *even if they are published writers.* Whether it is so complex as to be incomprehensible, or so simple as to be beneath formal study, creative writing academics are pleased to delegate this area to 'industry professionals', whose pronouncements (even if contradictory or partial) are accepted uncritically.[3]

On the contrary, many Creative Writing tutors contend that one of the main functions of their course is to preserve an unsullied and unpressured creative 'space', where students are free to experiment and find their own unique voices without sordid commercial interference:

> [The course's] main purpose is not to discover ways of achieving worldly success - welcome as that might be. The real value of the MA lies in its presenting students with a chance to concentrate on their work in an atmosphere that is at once intense and supportive: to develop their skills, to search more deeply into their selves and their imaginations, to experiment and to diversify. [Motion (2001) p.x, re the UEA MA]

Not only individual teachers espouse this view: many course brochures and descriptions emphasise the same features:

> The programme offers fertile ground for experimentation and the possibility to break from old forms and traditional restrictions. There is a focus on new writing, allowing you to expand personal frontiers and create hybrid form. [University of East London]

> We don't believe that creativity, as such, can be taught, or that it is only fulfilled in 'the marketplace'...At least as important as teaching are the space and stimulus to write within a community of people with similar aspirations, facing similar practical, imaginative and intellectual problems.[Warwick University]

There is no doubt that this position is very popular with these present and past students studying on one of the Bath Spa Creative Writing MAs:

I loved being in an environment where the writing was 'protected' from the harsh light of unrealistic deadlines or the requirements of an editor's list.

I believe one of the main functions of a creative writing masters should be to allow writers to experiment and find their own voices.

Personally I attended the course in order to improve my writing, and to discover and strengthen my own 'voice' or 'calling' as a writer. I wanted the intense focus on the work and I wanted to be able to become more self-critical of what I was producing. I did not come expecting to learn a formula or be given 'commercial' information. There are many genre and writing organisations out there which are friendly and welcoming and which will help writers understand the commercial expectations of many types of genre and fiction writing. You can easily gain this information and these contacts without attending an expensive university programme.

I think bringing commercial pressures into the content of what students are writing is destined to fail because a) commercial imperatives come and go, and what is popular now may well not be so when a student's work makes it through the labyrinth of agents and publishers, and b) it could easily bring a temptation to copy an approach which has already proved successful (which would almost certainly be destined to fail) rather than develop something unique and fresh.

The vision is clear: the world of publishing is in essence crude, stupid, and intrusive. The function of the MA is to provide a monklike retreat where the student can nourish their personal flame, and find their own unique voice.

However, can this vision survive any kind of scrutiny? Isn't it intrinsically simplistic? Can such 'protected' space be a reality, or is it rather a retreat into ignorance of those forces that shape any writer's work? As Raymond Chandler [quoted in Estleman, (2004), 10] said:

No writer in any age got a blank check … He has always had to accept some conditions imposed from without, respect certain taboos, try to please certain people. It might have been the Church, or a rich patron, or a generally accepted standard of elegance, or the commercial wisdom of a publisher or editor, or perhaps even a set of political theories. If he did not accept them, he revolted against them. In either case they conditioned his writing.

In the 'protected' space of the Creative Writing course, are there really no 'conditions imposed from without'? Isn't it naïve in the extreme to imagine that whoever we are, and whatever we write, that it is or could ever be somehow unique and born of nothing but our own immediate native genius? Don't we all have our own personal cultural environment that provides stimulus and obstacle? For one thing, there is the potentially normative influence of the Creative Writing course and workshops: Don Bogen (1988) has argued that workshops tend

by nature to encourage the slick but shallow work we deplore...this type of class produces not only "workshop" pieces but "workshop" *writers*. It gives students a false idea of what writers do and why they do it.[4]

We may not agree with this rather jaundiced and negative point of view (I certainly don't), but it is hardly possible to argue that the very ethos (probably in part or even largely

unspoken) of a given course, and the local culture of a particular workshop group don't have some effect on the writing of those taking part. The very sacred space which the course provides must also have some influence on how the student writer approaches their writing, and what they 'publish' to their peers.

Further, doesn't every book we read influence the way we ourselves write? What the student reads in the sacred space will also have an effect on what they produce. And whether we like it or not, everything we read has had to get the approval of some kind of gatekeeper, whether it be the publishing house that distributes our most influential author, or the university which admitted the student colleague whose work we critique week by week. As John Frow (2005, p.12) asserts in his study of genre:

> ...classification [of literature] is an industrial matter. It is enacted in publishers' catalogues and booksellers' classifications, in the allocation of time-slots for television shows and in television guides, in the guidelines and deliberations of arts organisations, and in the discourses of marketing and publicity, together with the whole apparatus of reviewing and listing and recommending...

Even if we aren't consciously aware of the influence of the creative industries though the actions and decisions of publishers, we are surely conditioned by those decisions, and ignoring 'industry conditions' doesn't make them go away. Ignoring them only renders us less capable of reflecting on and analysing the choices we make as writers. As Philip Gross (2010) writes:

> If Creative Writing as a subject has a theory—as opposed to a canon of how-to techniques—then some of that thinking must provide us with tools to consider and question choices...down to the level of the self...how, as writers and writing educators in the university, do we talk about ourselves… or ask our student writers to talk about themselves, crucially? We are committed to something more complex, and somehow more rigorous, than 'it's all subjective.'

Gross is here advocating a more sophisticated approach to Creative Writing as an academic discipline, one that goes beyond craft, one that acknowledges the complexity of the choices we make as writers. I would add that this sophistication surely also ought to inform our consideration of the creative industries and their influence on what writing is written and read.

My contention is not that the 'protected space' approach is wrong, or to be avoided, but that we as academics and students of writing should at least be aware that we all write in a complex context of influence, genre, aspiration, and assumption. Whether we are engaging with the enclosed space of the workshop, or the bewildering world of the means of publication, we (and our students) should actively interrogate those conditions and influences, and this interrogation should be an integral part of our discipline. We should take full rigorous account of the complexities of the ways writers have in the past and do now get their work to readers. As Creative Writing academics, we shouldn't shy away from the sordid complexities of publishing and the creative industries, we should throw up our hands with

joy, and then set about scholarly analysis of the same. Aren't we fortunate to have such a rich, barely-explored field to colonise? [5]

Endnotes

1. Kingston University. I must stress that I'm not trying to single out any institution for blame or praise; I have selected on the basis of best representation of current trends.

2. In January 2010 I invited colleagues and present and past students of our Creative Writing MAs to give there responses to the following proposition: *Should the B[ath]S[pa] U[niversity] MACW include a module that encourages students to explore the complex relationship of the creative individual to the world in which they try to publish their work, to understand the complexities of negotiation involved in getting work published, and to be critically aware of the pressures (both open and hidden) that shape their writing?* More than 50 responses were received, and the general consensus was 'No'.

3. Creative Writing academics are not alone in this: Gabriel Zaid (2003, p.54) notes how in general the academic consideration of literature is underpinned by a *contemptus mundi* dismissal of the economic framework in which it is produced. I am indebted to the work of my PhD research student Richard Hudson for pointing me in this direction.

4. See also for example Angela France 'Teaching Creative Writing: The Role of the Tutor,' *Writing in Education* Summer 2008 58-64, where several similar views are summarised.

5. Andrew Cowan, 'Questions, Questions,' *Writing in Education* Spring 2007, 57 would not agree. He argues that if we asked students 'to examine themselves as cultural producers...or as instruments of ideologically loaded discourses, and that [they] apply to their writing the same levels of historical and contextual awareness and socio-political scrutiny' as other academic disciplines might recommend, none would wish to study Creative Writing, nor indeed to teach it.

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