Edu-Biz: The Worlds of Learning and Writing – A Writer's Perspective

As a writer-teacher I am aware that by equipping those who want to write we are changing – perhaps with glacial slowness – our literary culture. We are reducing the 'beginners tax' new writers pay…

Carl Tighe

Knowledge of the literature of the past is essential to any writer. However, while writers are aware of texts other than their own, and are particularly aware of the writing out of which their own has grown, they are not concerned with the 'place' in the canon or the critical interpretation of finished texts which have already achieved publication. Creative Writing is concerned with making what the Italian poet Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558) called 'imaginative interventions' in the present. (Scaliger 1561) Creative Writing is concerned with what will be written, what is being written, how a creative idea will be shaped and expressed, how it will get out into the world. Creative Writing – in addition to pondering the nature of humanity and interrogating the peculiar activity we call writing as an essential part of its daily business - is the midwife of new texts: it is concerned with planning and drafting of creative work, the process of bringing new work into existence, with the act of making, with solving particular creative problems, the difficult business of bringing feelings, states of mind, ideas and ways of seeing into the world and with finding effective forms. Inevitably there is a link between the popularity of Creative Writing courses, the nature of popular fiction, the function of the market and the dream of writing.

Creative Writing clearly has its own historical, philosophical and theoretical elements to discover, recover and burnish: but in addition it attempts to affect awareness of feelings, the way people organise their thought and view their life. It attempts to bring into being new products of the mind, new ways of seeing and understanding, to say things never thought or said before – or if not, then to say things again but better fitted for contemporary readers.

One of the major questions the traditional study of literature often misses out, but which Creative Writing can address, is the issue of the social role and social function of the writer as a creative and interpretive intellectual. And from this recognition other questions grow. What is writing? What do writers do? What does writing do? How do they represent the world in words? Why do writers write? Who is their audience? What might their audience expect of them? And once asked these questions open up debates of considerable complexity which for some unravel the dream of writing, if not in the dawning realisation that their talent is limited, then in the patience-frazzling realities of the cultural climate - publishing, marketing and second guessing what the public will want to read.

In the UK Creative Writing first made an appearance in 1970 at the University of East Anglia, and since then it has assumed almost mythic status due to the critical and popular success of alumni such as Rose Tremain, Anne Enright, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan. Over the next two decades Creative Writing established a modest presence in undergraduate studies (usually as part of an English degree) at several British universities: after Derby University pioneered a stand-alone undergraduate degree in 2000 six other UK universities also developed degrees in the subject, and by 2008 it was offered as a degree component at twenty British Universities. The National Association of Writers in Education website lists 421 Higher Education Creative Writing courses. (see: www.nawe.co.uk) Creative Writing is The Open University's most popular module. PhDs in the subject have started to appear. At British universities there are now over 5,000 students studying Creative Writing at undergraduate level – that is more than the number studying English Language.

(*Student Record 2003-08* 2009) The subject is well established in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and it has begun to establish itself in universities in India, Poland, Italy, Romania and elsewhere. These are confirmations that the subject is popular, is re-creating a distinct place for itself within the academy and in the public imagination, and is developing its own presence and agenda of study.

There are several current ideas about what Creative Writing at university might be. One popular view is that Creative Writing is simply Life Writing, something that allows people to write out their experience and which encourages *catharsis* (the purging of emotion). The most extreme form of this view sees Creative Writing as a kind of Art Therapy, an academic variety of care in the community. While most tutors acknowledge a therapeutic element to the subject, this is not the main thrust of Creative Writing within universities. Indeed, tutors usually try to persuade students to move beyond the safety of autobiography, however therapeutic, to put their revelations into fictional or poetic form, to develop narratives that are more than 'the way it actually happened', to think themselves into someone else's life and feelings, to take an imaginative leap out of their own skin and develop a cloak for their experience.

It is often assumed that Creative Writing is something anyone can do, that 'we all have one novel in us'. Usually this is accompanied by the explanation that Creative Writing is merely 'free' or 'personal' expression, that we only have to emote on paper, write 'what we feel', and that a student can never 'get it wrong'. This view is not something that tutors easily accommodate: those who come to the subject with this idea usually come to grief very quickly. It is often something of a shock to discover that Creative Writing is a subject which sets standards – and not only in terms of literacy, academic performance, satire or witty observation of social *mores*. Because, in practical educational terms, the subject insists on moving students towards professional standards of presentation, writing, spelling, organisation, planning, reading, engagement and expression, Creative Writing can do things, including combating plagiarism, that now give traditional academic subjects real difficulties. (McCrory 2001)

Creative Writing within the university plays a broad role, not as Arts Therapy, a service unit for Dyslexia, Remedial Academic Support, nor even as a part of Adult Literacy, but simply in its own right. Perhaps the most important and the easiest to understand of the various erroneous views of Creative Writing is the one that sees it simply as 'part of English'. This, for people who remember 'doing' poetry at school, makes a kind of sense. But while there is clearly a great deal of common ground and productive cross-over between the two subjects, the work, agenda and practices of English teachers are very different from those of Creative Writing teachers. Both subjects are concerned with general cultural values, the interpretation of experience, and with words and language: but after this they part company. The difference in aims and methodology of the two subjects is almost total and it is important to distinguish between the *work* of English and the *work* of Creative Writing.

English emerged as a literature in the 14th century and as a university subject it was accepted in Cambridge with some reluctance in the 1860s. (Potter 1937; Tillyard 1955; Mulherne 1979) For many years the subject struggled to gain acceptance from the more established disciplines, who considered it to be the equivalent of

‘geography or forestry’, a subject for those who were not intellectually equipped to study the more serious subjects. (Alvarez 2005, 81) The study of English as a degree was planned at Cambridge University in 1917, and started at around the time of the 1918 Armistice. The Cambridge English syllabus stopped at around 1830 and English staff, mainly part-time ‘freelance’ lecturers, at first allied themselves with the Classics and with Philology, setting about Anglo Saxon and Medieval texts in the hope that this would give the subject some academic credibility. They also dabbled with philosophy, history and religion in developing an interpretative methodology and then, in the developing intellectual foment that followed the First World War, took up from Matthew Arnold the battle for culture. They claimed to be ‘central’ to national cultural life and the moral health of English society and started ranking texts and authors in order of ‘moral seriousness’. In the years 1926-7 English was ratified as a degree course and a centralised Faculty structure was established to administer and teach it. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s as more UK English departments opened up, the subject fought a desperate battle to establish the idea that it was something more than ‘a charming parasite’ or a training ground for book reviewers (Leavis 1948). By the mid-1970s the avenues of exploration opened up by F. R. Leavis, Q. D. Leavis, L. C. Knights and those gathered around the journal *Scrutiny,* were largely exhausted or simply by-passed by new ideas from the European mainland, and the 1990s saw English enter what is now referred to as the ‘the Culture Wars’ in which the canon was contested, the literary application of Political Correctness was investigated, and increasingly English devoted itself to literary theory, which seemed somehow more grown-up, more serious, more tangible, more academic than any previous version of the subject.

Creative Writing confronts literary theory in general with the awkwardness of its existence and its relentless practicality; but of the canon it has particular questions to ask: where does the canon leave the contemporary would-be popular writer? Does the ‘accepted literary canon’ actually represent us? Do we have a responsibility to tradition or to the identity that goes with certain traditions? Should writers be concerned with tradition? Does tradition affect them at all? Can writers ignore tradition? Are we part of a tradition of writing just because of the language that history handed us? Who among our predecessors do we look to, have time for, reread, admire and argue with? Who do we dismiss? In what areas do we share things? In what ways are our aims common? What binds us to the writers of the past? Are we doing something that develops an idea they started? Or are we doing something entirely new? In an age dominated by Hollywood, TV soaps and a commercial, rather than a literary, market for writing, is it possible to do something new? And if we do something new, will we find a publisher or a market for it?

To put it bluntly, when looking at the orthodox literary canon – at how we are represented in terms of our identity and culture – the contemporary writer asks whether what they are asked to study and respect is not still merely a list of books mainly by dead, white, upper-middle class, English males, but also what the canon has to do with what they want to write and read now. And this in turn raises questions about identity, privacy and choice, about the fragmentation of society, the privatisation of experience and the nature of community, about the ‘core values’ of education, and raises questions about the nature of education itself. Rick Gekoski opened up some of these issues when he wrote:

> I lived through a time when it was great to read. There were so many books that you *had* to read, which would have been read by everyone you knew. Not merely read, through, but digested and discussed. We formed not merely our opinions but ourselves on them. It was a common culture – or more accurately, a common counter-culture – which included music, art and film. Within our middle-class, educated world there was a canon, which wasn't limited to Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Scott Fitzgerald. You could assume people around you had read a lot of contemporary books: if they hadn't, it occasioned not merely puzzlement, but disapproval. So: if we asked a bunch of literate university students today what they had read, what they had *all* read – what would be the answer? I suspect the answer would be: nothing. Not that young people don't read, but they don't read together. They haven't got, as we had, a common culture. (Gekoski 2010)

It is possible to see now that Creative Writing, by restoring and reasserting itself within the academy, is fulfilling some part of the inner reflection on, and training for, citizenship that the ancients so valued and which is reflected in so many classical texts. For classics scholars the study and practice of Rhetoric and Poetics (from which in part the idea of teaching Creative Writing descends) was what was once termed 'a liberal education'. (Glover 1953) By helping to create the 'classics of tomorrow' within the modern academy Creative Writing quietly, in its own way, and by a completely different route, has begun to find, revive and extend the idea of 'the classics', to challenge, revitalise, review, renew and develop the idea of national (and international) literature and the canon, and to re-assert a standard-setting civic role for literature such as the ancients believed in and which distinguished literary critics, writers, thinkers, scholars and teachers as diverse as Matthew Arnold, Cardinal Newman, Antonio Gramsci, Leon Trotsky and F. R. Leavis once sought for the study of Literature.

I am often asked what is the relationship of Creative writing to the canon, and how exactly does the subject prepare young writers for particular markets, and how many writers do you actually produce? These are interesting questions, but they seem to suppose one standard answer, when in fact every university course and teacher is different. But also it is unfair to look at the subject in these terms – would we ask how many Renaissance Dramatists an English department produces, how many Native Americans American Studies produces, or how many MPs result from Politics degrees? Creative Writing recruits some students who have read a lot, who are serious about writing and who want to write professionally, but like most subjects it also has many more students who simply want a degree and have no intention of taking their studies further.

Creative Writing certainly urges student-writers to consider the market for their writing, but the main struggle is to hone the student's critical/creative skills and to accommodate them to working in workshops, critiquing each other's work in creative and supportive ways. Discussion of the market in this environment is mainly to point out the literary standards and styles that apply, to give students something to aim at, and to warn that the market is in a constant state of flux and totally unpredictable in terms of what kinds of writing will succeed. The idea that luck, contacts, good looks and persistence do not play a part, or that a particular genre or good writing alone will be sufficient, would be seriously misleading.

Another question I am asked is whether we have special assignments where students learn how to write in specific genres. The answer to this is a clear 'No' - and for good practical reasons. While we do address questions of genre, writing for a particular genre (cowboy, romance, sci-fi, horror, fantasy, teen-fiction and their various cross-over hybrid forms) demands massive preparation and in-depth reading: teaching such a course would involve similar labour. In writing a historical novel, for example, the writer might be involved in reading equivalent to a PhD over several years. This is clearly something that cannot be accommodated on a one semester course. Also, on most degrees within any given cohort there is unlikely to be sufficient number of students interested in any one genre to run a module. It is a simple, financial problem. If a team were to offer a course on, say, writing Romantic Fiction, it would not recruit enough students to pay the tutor's fees. Of course if the team were to offer a course on Twilight / Werewolf / Un-dead / Vampire writing, the response might be different. Or at least, this year and possibly next year it might recruit, but then the fashion would change, the demand would shift. Even at Masters Level writing workshops are general, catering for as many possibilities and personal tastes as is practicable, and students are encouraged to develop the type of genre and writing that interests them.

Are students taught about the publishing world and its many demands? Yes, but the publishing world is itself constantly responding to reader demands, sales, marketing, economic predictions, and in the UK for the last twenty years, has been in the throes of rationalisation: where publishers are not being bought up, they have been trans-atlanticised, globalised and e-booked, so second guessing the publishing world is not something that could easily be taught by tutors whose skill lies in writing. In the face of rapid global change, personal experience of a writer is often more useful to students than a trend analysis. That said, however, writers – as part of 'popular culture' - are more recognised and accommodated by universities than was once the case: many universities now try to recognise the most successful local writers with honorary degrees; almost all universities run a careers and employability day to which Creative Writing teams contribute: they also invite local writers, agents, publishers and successful ex-students employed in the creative industries and literature development to return and talk about their experiences. Writers and publishers are now less shy of holding literary events - readings, talks, book launches - in universities.

Do writers take publishing trends into account? Yes, particularly those engaged in writing for a particular genre. Literary writers, however, seem to take much less note of these things and are driven by their own inner demons, tastes and observations. But student-writers, in my experience, are hardly aware of trends at all. And if they are, the process of writing a novel or producing a collection of poems or stories is so long (minimum two years) that by the time they have produced something in response to a particular trend, the trend has moved on, mutated, changed into something else. At the same time it has to be said that literary trends are more often the accident of coincidental publication – publishers thinking alike – and copying the success of others, than they are the product of writers setting the lead.

Of course, all writers respond to the market. But it is a free market. There can be no promise of success even for those who write superbly and get straight 'A' grades. To

all these questions tutors of writing would say their primary task is to concentrate on getting the student to write well, to write better, to aim at standards where publication might be possible. While it is good to have an eye on the target market, the business of agents, publication and markets are not something that can easily be addressed on a *writing* course. And to offer more than this, to direct students precisely towards a particular market with the promise of publication, to offer even a hint of success in such an unpredictable area, would be to open up a whole range of discontent.

An undergraduate writing course (as with any other degree course) is only an introduction to the subject. It can do little more than acquaint students with the basics, making them more aware of what they need to do if they are to succeed, making them more aware of what it takes to write well; it will introduce them to the tools they need to develop and explore for themselves when they leave university. And to reiterate an earlier point, even if graduates from Creative Writing do not go on to literary success, they are nevertheless more aware of writing and its difficulties, more aware of the literary world, more aware of the canon and contemporary writing and more aware of the possibilities for further reading. As in every other subject, how students engage with the skills on offer, how they apply their talent after the course has finished, how they sift the trends of popular fiction is entirely up to them. As teachers, at the back of our mind there is always the creeping suspicion that we assume a hunger for education that might not exist, that we assume writing is an ambition with a shaping social role when really students have a very different agenda.

A student who arrives at university with a well-stocked mind and a bookshelf full of well-thumbed novels stands a far better chance of identifying and breaking into their chosen market than the average undergraduate who arrives having read only a few selected literary passages in an 'A' level anthology. And whatever the well prepared student learns at university, they will be much better placed to take advantage of it in turning themselves into a professional writer than the student who simply wants to know what they need to do to pass the module. In the current educational and economic climate, teaching writing feels like pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will, as Antonio Gramsci used to say. But perhaps it was never any different.

With these things in mind what a writer-teacher brings to the subject in terms of personal experience is vitally important. For me the prime ingredient of any writing course is not a grasp of genre or a sense of style, or even an ambition to write popular novels – though all these things help. What I seek to develop in student-writers – whatever the module or the genre - is an awareness of words, the stock of words, what is in words, our precise choice of words, what we can do with words. Every year as a writer and teacher, I ask Creative Writing students: What do writers do when they write? Usually, as soon as the question is asked, a chasm of uncertainties opens up. What do we mean by *writer*? We all write, so in what way is what a writer writes different from what a non-writer writes? Why? Who says? And so on. To a certain extent the question has faced writers down the ages and it is exactly the kind of open ended conundrum you might expect in a university. But it is not an idle question, and over the last few years the question has been increasingly focused for me, not by disinterested academic speculation, but by current events.

One of the most important things writers of all political persuasions do is direct us to think about how words are used and what is *in* words. Dictionaries tell us the meaning of words in the past, at particular moments in time, but writers tell us about the inner life of our language, about what is happening to words now. Because language and words are tied to issues of identity, perception, ambition and ideas of community, writing is much more likely than other art forms to be judged, not only in artistic terms but also in moral and political terms. The Nobel Prize winning Bulgarian writer, Elias Canetti was very aware that the content of words shifted through time and daily usage: he was aware that just because a word once had a particular content or meaning it did not mean that it would always have that same meaning or content. He said that to notice changes in meaning and to make use of these changes was to be an 'earwitness', and this, he said, was a writer's duty. (Canetti 1987)

Lewis Carroll was another writer who studied language very carefully: he loved to play with words and was aware of the arbitrary nature of meaning. In *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice that although we get birthday presents once a year we could get un-birthday presents on the other 364 days of the year. He ends his explanation ends with: 'There's glory for you!'

> 'I don't know what you mean by "glory"', Alice said.
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'
> 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.
> 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.'
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'Whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all.'
> Alice was too much puzzled to say anything; so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again: 'They've a temper, some of them - particularly verbs: they're the proudest - adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs - however, I can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what I say!'
> 'Would you tell me, please,' said Alice, 'what that means?'
> 'Now you talk like a reasonable child,' said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. 'I meant by "impenetrability" that we've had enough of this subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life.'
> 'That's a great deal to make one word mean,' Alice said in a thoughtful tone. (Carrol 1970, 267-9)

Generally, unlike Humpty Dumpty, writers work with a language which, while it is constantly changing and responding to social pressures, is given. For example, although we now avoid using it, at one time the word 'nigger' was in common use. Neither Agatha Christie nor Joseph Conrad saw anything wrong in using the word in their book titles - *Ten Little Niggers* (1939) and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus* (1897). The word also appears in the works of Charles Dickens, G. B. Shaw, D. L. Sayers, Mark Twain, Rider Haggard, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, Carson McCullers and even US President Woodrow Wilson. Enid Blyton's story 'The Three Golliwogs'

has characters named Golly, Woggie and Nigger. It would be very difficult to wipe this from the language or delete these books from the literature. It would also be a falsification of the past and the language of the past.

Now, although the British National Party and National Front, KKK, White Supremacists in the southern states of the USA and white separatists in South Africa still use the word, and Quentin Tarrantino and Spike Lee often have black characters in their films use the word, it has not been socially permissible to use this word for some years and in the US there has been pressure to remove all books containing the word from schools and libraries. Now it is often referred to simply as 'the n-word'. From being *the* word to describe black people, the taboo on its use is now so strong that even an informed discussion about its origins, history, spelling and changing function can hardly take place. An actor is reported as saying:

> The N-word. I don't use it… ever… I don't want *anybody* to use it. If somebody uses that word towards me, I'm going to take issue with it because it's not a definition of me. I don't think it gives anybody any power over me to use that word; in fact, I think if you use that word towards me, you've lost all power. Once you've used that word towards me, I know exactly who you are and I'll crush you. No question, no ifs, buts or maybes… (Hattenstone 2003, 17)

And when the actor Michael Richards was recorded abusing a black heckler in the audience with the words: 'you fucking nigger' the furore which followed was as much about the racist epithet as about the problem of trying to report and discuss the incident without repeating what had been said. (Mayes 2006, 33) But if we cannot air-brush this word entirely from the present, we certainly cannot make it vanish from the past either. In fact that word is important if we want to chart race relations in USA, the history of the anti-slavery movement, the issues of the American Civil War, the history of jazz, blues and rock and roll, the musical achievement of Elvis Presley, population shifts and urban and industrial development in the USA, the history of the KKK, or even slavery and the histories of Bristol and Liverpool.

This example, contentious as it might be, shows that it is important for writers to follow the shifts in the language since these represent changes in understanding and social relations. Conrad, Christie, Blyton, McCullers and the others did not avoid the word - indeed, there was no reason for them to think they should - and there were few alternative words available to them. None of them could have predicted a shift in sensibility that would make that word unacceptable within a few decades. And when, in the 1970s, John Lennon said 'Woman is the nigger of the world' he was making use of this change to highlight a different shift in perception. And this is not disinterested academic speculation limited to some ivory tower: all the writers mentioned in the preceding five paragraphs were the popular writers and leading cultural figures of their day, and most are included in the canon.

Writers often see their work as a struggle to understand what is happening to words, to reveal some of the hidden possibilities. My way of thinking about words is the mantra:

> Writing tells us what is happening to words

Words tell us what is happening to feelings
Feelings tell us what is happening to people

For all writers the conscious creation of new work entails the choice of words, and that means dealing with two contradictory impulses. The first is the temptation to use words as they are given, to set down only words which are current, which do not cause problems, which can be easily absorbed, which do not challenge. This is, I think, to see the writer merely as part of the entertainment industry and to accept the idea that the writer can make no meaningful intervention in the world. The second, opposite impulse, is to seek out and make use of words to probe meaning, to make it obvious how words change, are changed, are compromised in daily use, to reveal what is often hidden in words. A writer must always choose between these two possibilities, must always choose between 'servility and insolence'. (Sontag 1982, 190) For a writer to say what they hear, to record what is happening to words, to be an *earwitness,* will always be characterised as an act of treachery, sedition, opposition or aggression by those who do not want these things observed, recorded, represented in words, or dragged to light.

For a young poet, novelist or short story writer perhaps working on their first volume, this kind of discussion can be helpful. To know that this is what other writers have been thinking about is reassuring, creative and generative. To engage in discussion of these topics with others is an act supportive of professional solidarity. But the relationship between this discussion, popular literature and the would-be popular writer can be quite strained. I am aware, for example, that for the student who 'just wants to write' or who just wants know what they need to do to pass the module, this kind of exchange can be baffling. And this is not helped by the context, where university attention is fixed on recruitment, retention and results, since this discussion and this level of discussion are hardly on the 'event horizon'.

Creative Writing is relentlessly contemporary, that is its nature, and so inevitably tends towards the popular. Even so, while a writer like Kazuo Ishiguro is often touted as the successful product of such a course, the number of graduates and postgraduates emerging from university writing courses in the UK is still tiny, and their impact is still limited. But as a writer-teacher I am also aware that by equipping those who want to write we are changing – perhaps with glacial slowness – our literary culture. We are reducing the 'beginners tax' new writers pay by being unaware of the 'world of words', the way the writing business operates and the way writing – with its emphasis on what is in words - can work in the wider community.

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