

**But Is It Art? Creative Writing
Workshops in the U.S.***
(それにしても、文学と言えるのですか？
アメリカにおけるクリエイティブ・
ライティングワークショップ)

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It's an odd fact of English departments across the United States that so many professors who study literature for a living don't particularly want authors as their colleagues. This divide is known as the literature-creative writing rift in academia. The literary critics see the writers as having it easy: producing some stories or poems every once in a while and teaching courses that don't seem to require much preparation. The writers, of course, view the critics as uncreative parasites, living off others' work.

This mutual non-comprehension was best epitomized some decades ago at Harvard, when the literature department was considering whether to offer Vladimir Nabokov a position. "What's next?" thundered the linguist Roman Jakobson, "Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?" Though Nabokov eventually went on to teach at Cornell, and his remarks on the field have been collected in the magisterial *Lectures on Literature*, the sore point remains: Should actual writers rather than critics teach literature? Furthermore, should writers teach writing, or is that a non-rigorous subject best left to some non-university sector? Can creative writing even be taught, anyway?

These are old issues, admittedly. They've been around since the first creative writing program at the University of Iowa, which followed the model of the trade school, where doctors teach apprentice doctors, and so on. Though many institutions were slow to accept creative writing as a discipline, English itself was once a tough sell in the academy. In the mid-1800's, literature study consisted mainly of classics, works considered *aere perennius*, Horace's term for "more enduring than bronze." Taking a hard, critical look at stuff like novels and Romantic poetry was considered silly.

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Yet, as William Riley Parker notes in his essay “Where Do English Departments Come From?,” literature in English began to emerge as a legitimate field of study in the 1870’s, with a focus on elocution and literature beyond the classics. Harvard inaugurated a composition class in 1872, and figures like the now-forgotten Barrett Wendell taught what became known as the daily theme, a short piece of writing about whatever the students chose to focus on, no matter how trivial, but enlivened by the students’ perceptions and mode of expression. Driving this expressivist movement was the conviction that, to understand literature, a sound knowledge of its interior workings was crucial, and who had a better command of such knowledge than a working writer?

Literature classes, on the other hand, were still devoted to a weary procession of dates and other facts, and in many courses the students never read so much as a sonnet. The professors lectured *on* literature without bringing much of it *into* the classroom. These were the philologists, a Latin term that means “love of words,” and a piece of irony for those students who suffered under a drone of facts and historical details. On the other hand, by the early 1900’s, many composition classes focused on sheer mechanics, grammar and syntax building to clarity of expression. Creative writing workshops were a middle ground, encouraging writing but with a literary grounding. “Teach by doing” was the credo. The teacher William Hughes Mearns was influential in bringing creative exercises to elementary school pupils with marked success, and many educators were eager to follow his example. At the same time, popular how-to books began to tackle fiction-writing, with a heavy emphasis on the making of short stories. One of the more enduring volumes, *So You Want to Write!*, by Esther L. Schwartz, became a bestseller. It also spawned later imitations like *So You Want to Write?* and *So You Want to Write a Book*.

But so-called creative writing in the academy started at Iowa in 1922 with the acceptance of creative work for advanced degrees and was formally inaugurated as a program in 1936 as a workshop for poets and fiction writers (*Writers’ Workshop* 1). And the set-up spread to other universities, notably Denver, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins. Because someone had to teach these seminars devoted to producing literature, now known as the workshop method, professional writers were tapped for the job. As the system grew, a national network of creative writing instructors emerged, supporting squads of otherwise unemployable poets and feckless fiction writers.

The whole contentious history, with plenty of arguments between the schol-

ars or philologists and the lay critics or writers, is best summed up by D. G. Myers in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Since the book was published in 1996, it omits the latest decade of creative writing growth. Around 1945, only a handful of institutions taught creative writing. Today, over 300 programs in creative writing span the United States.

The whole system began to pick up speed in the 1960's, when so much else in American culture began to mushroom. As James Berlin remarks in *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*, "The influence of expressionism in art and of Freudian psychology also encouraged the rise of creative writing courses in high schools and colleges" (79). The AWP, or Association of Writing Programs, was founded in 1967, in tune with the exhibitionist 1960's movement and the 1970's Me Decade coming to slow fruition in the inevitable time-lag that exists within the academy. During this stretch, creative writing began to rise like a hot-pick stock. To cite a few numbers: in 1975, the entire country had only 15 M.F.A. degree-granting institutions. By 2004, the number had climbed to 109. On the undergraduate level, the number of B.A. programs in creative writing jumped from 3 to 86. Schools offering a Ph.D. in creative writing (usually a creative dissertation or some hybrid of scholarship and personal essay), once considered a great rarity, moved from 1 to 42.

Based on a raft of writing workshops, literature courses, language and translation classes, and pedagogy, creative writing programs now have their own core curricula and degree requirements—for the A.A. and B.F.A. at the undergraduate level, the M.A., D.A., and M.F.A. at the graduate level, and the Ph.D. Recent offshoots of the basics include playwriting, screenplay-writing, creative nonfiction, and even advertising copywriting. As in other academic fields, the degree of specialization gets ever more refined. For example, some twenty years ago Vermont College was the first in the nation to develop an entire M.F.A. program around writing for children, and Goucher College in Maryland in the 1990's spearheaded a low-residency M.F.A. in creative nonfiction. Today, creative nonfiction, which is to say factual accounts enlivened by dialogue, characterization, and scenes, is the new kid on the block.

During the businesslike 1980's and beyond, the appeal of creative outlets grew in an era when more and more jobs seem programmed or systematized; or these days, the quixotic lure of originality in a society whose current generation cannot top the economic accomplishments of the baby boomers. Yet, despite distinguished creative writing program graduates as far back as Flannery O'Connor

and as recent as Jonathan Safran Foer, for decades creative writing suffered the same ghettoization as composition, as a poor cousin of the English department, often staffed by adjunct faculty. If the study of English literature originally suffered by comparison to the classics, at least it was analytic and could boast a tradition. The creative writing workshop, in which students produced original poetry or fiction and subjected it to a circle of peers, seemed unacademic to many: non-rigorous, unscientific, and cultivating a skill that was either unteachable or which smacked of arts and crafts. That English departments looked down on the in-house production of the very material they purported to study was an irony that did not go unnoticed but also did not get corrected. To this day, a tacit war exists between literary theorists and writers, though both usually publish and teach within the same department.

Why the animus on the part of other faculty members? One could posit that many literary theorists wanted their literature safely dead. During the rise of Big Theory, whose reign was approximately from the mid-1970's to the mid-1990's, the author *was* dead. In fact, Roland Barthes famously wrote an essay with exactly that title, "The Death of the Author," in the mid-1970's. On another theoretic front, Derrida's deconstruction showcased language as a dazzling, endless chain of signifiers, without—as Norman Holland noted in *The Critical I*—ever crediting a mind, or a working writer, as the fabricator. To avoid the embarrassment of talking about how one author influences another, literary theorists even came up with intertextuality, how one text influences another, seemingly without human intervention.

Yet, as the theory movement continued, other critical perspectives started to rescue the author from oblivion. Feminist literary criticism cared a great deal about the sex of the author, or his or her constructed gender. On another front, African-American theorists wanted to know where the writer was coming from, as did those who examined class issues. Thus was born the unholy trinity of race, gender, class—though in many places, including the American South, creed is just as important. The academy also tried to theorize humble composition, but with limited success.

During an era that hasn't been too friendly to English departments—or to the humanities in general, with people questioning the usefulness of a liberal arts education—attendance in workshops has swelled. Yet, if English as a major is questionable as a career move, surely focusing on writing poetry is doubly suspect, at least for managing in the larger world that smacks one in the face after

graduation. So what accounts for this rise in popularity?

Well, what accounts for the allure of creative writing, in general? Robert Wincour, a lawyer devoted to copyright law, puts it best: “As writing is one of the desperate professions, it has universal appeal, especially for those who are not engaged in it” (7). As W. H. Auden once observed, somewhat more harshly: “How often one hears a young man with no talent say when asked what he intends to do, ‘I want to write.’ What he really means is, ‘I don’t want to work’” (7). Perhaps the idea of something for nothing, of creation seemingly *ex nihilo*, is leading droves of students to sign up for creative writing workshops.

The system spawns itself. Schools yearly graduate a whole crop of apprentice writers who can’t support themselves by writing and generally end up, if they’re lucky, publishing some work and teaching their craft at a college somewhere. But can you teach creative writing?

I dislike this question and its waspish assumptions, but I’ve grown used to it. True, apprentice writers must provide their own inspiration and experience, two aspects vital to the writing process, but a good writer and teacher can serve as a sounding board, an editor, a nurturer of fledgling writers. Such a figure can also help with connections to other writers, editors, agents, and publishers. And what these apprentice writers learn in class often seems a lot more purely literary than the sociology that, sadly, much literary criticism has become. Maybe this is where the profession should be headed. It was once called rhetoric.

Rhetoric, or the art of persuasion through verbal means, might best be termed performance in words, as Robert Frost once described what he did. To study rhetoric is to focus not specifically on *what* something means, a textual analysis stemming from Biblical hermeneutics, when important doctrinal distinctions rested on deep or fine meanings. Rhetoric, based in the classical era and thus predating Christianity, focuses rather on *how* something means, with an intense interest in technique and style and an urge to recreate those tricks in one’s own writing.

For example, near the start of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, when Prospero explains to his daughter Miranda just how they happen to be on an island, far from their native Milan, he begins by telling her that it is time she knew about her origins. He then disgorges a huge chunk of information concerning political betrayal, the embarkation for the island, and so forth—all the while continually asking Miranda whether she’s listening, to which she replies, “Sir, most heedfully,” “O, good sir, I do,” and finally, as the old man continues to rant, and loudly: “Your tale, sir, would cure deafness.” She also acts as the prompter, asking naive

questions along the way.

A traditional literary critic might note how a dual character portrait emerges from this Q & A, the sad old man and his wide-eyed daughter. A theorist might focus on political exile and the hegemony of power relations in Shakespeare's time. A creative writing class would more likely notice how the speech is a species of forced exposition really meant for the audience: How could Miranda, already a young woman, not know these matters? And since Prospero's speech is overlong, she interrupts him many times to break it up.

Whether other professors like it or not, students enjoy taking apart literature like this, rather than dealing with it as either a sacred icon or a site for political contestation. But what about the second, crucial part of creative writing: Can just anyone write a poem or write a really fine short story? Maybe not, but no one who's tried to rig up a plausible dialogue or attempted a lyric poem emerges from that class without a deeper, broader understanding of the difficulty, complexity, and richness of art, and *that's* genuinely useful, even if the student concludes that perhaps a career as a banker makes more sense.

But not everyone can do creative writing! cry some critics, charging intellectual elitism. Maybe so, but not everyone can do math, either, yet it continues to be offered at many levels. More telling, not everyone can make the football team, but no one thinks to call college athletics a bastion of elitism. Then again, since the founding of the nation, the American educational system has been dogged by worries over intellectual elitism: see Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, published back in the 1960's.

Creative writing may antagonize certain parties who don't like that not everyone can write well, but also satisfies others who see it (somewhat falsely) as an alternative to hard analysis. Thus, some have turned to creative writing workshop techniques as a means of pursuing old-style literary criticism in the classroom. Back in the 1990's, during the heyday of Big Theory, the Modernist scholar A. Walton Litz at Princeton became head of the school's creative writing program. He said that he appreciated the emphasis on primary texts there, and he likened the work they were doing to monks preserving manuscripts during the dark ages. Robert Scholes, a literary scholar who taught for years at Brown University, seeing the same crisis in the field of literature, came out with a book called *The Rise and Fall of English*, in which he advocated a return to the trivium, the medieval three-legged educational program consisting of grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

Creative writing has, for the most part, remained inimical to the larger machinations of literary criticism, and even today the bulk of criticism regarding creative writing has concentrated mainly on exercises and anthologies. See, for example, such classics in the field as John Gardner's *The Art of Writing* and Robert Pack and Jay Parini's *Writers on Writing*, or more recent efforts like Madison Smartt Bell's *Narrative Design: A Writer's Guide to Structure*. Nowadays you can't open the pages of a publisher's catalogue without encountering at least one or two guides to creative writing. All these books hope desperately for course adoption, an expedient that's become necessary for sales.

Meanwhile, creative writing remains a growth industry. What has this expansion brought? Over the last couple of decades, a recognizable workshop product has emerged, both in fiction and poetry. What do the artistic spirit and the ivory tower have to do with each other? As Christopher Beach asks rhetorically in "Careers in Creativity: The Poetry Academy in the 1990s": "Does the entrenched network of academic poetry constitute an elitist and reactionary front, a wall of vested power and institutional status that marginalizes alternative poetic cultures and discourages the participation of groups from outside the mainstream?" (5). Many others have inveighed against the burgeoning of M.F.A. programs, some famously—see John W. Aldridge's *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*, for example, M. S. Bell's "Less is Less: The Diminishing American Short Story," Joseph Epstein's "Who Killed Poetry?," or Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?"

Most pungently, Gore Vidal once observed, "Teaching has ruined more writers than drink." Nonetheless, the numbers in workshops continue to rise. Flannery O'Connor was once asked whether she thought creative writing programs discouraged writers, and her answer was brief: "Not enough."

The expansion is in part economically driven: creative writing is a cash cow, a popular offering with a low overhead and a big return. It's even self-generating. As one professor with a foot in both literary criticism and creative writing cynically commented: "All you need to start is a copy machine and an instructor with a few poetry publications under his belt." Meanwhile, the need for creative writers to publish has spawned hundreds of little magazines, journals, and reviews, with the result that the market share of each is minimal. The more there are, the less each matters individually—or as Yogi Berra once said of a popular restaurant: "That place is so crowded that no one goes there anymore." The same situation happened to cable television when it expanded to umpteen channels,

just as the same scenario is replaying itself as the World Wide Web beckons to every face in front of a computer screen. In all these cases, the embarrassment of riches is embarrassing only to those whose offerings are more or less ignored. What seems like a surfeit resembles a vast banquet at which the majority eats from only a few dishes. Some of the food has a distinctly institutional flavor, but few go truly hungry in this land of plenty, where blandness is always safe. The urge to scribble now almost seems like an American right: life, liberty, and the pursuit of self-expression.

The latest in creative writing is the current craze for memoirs, themselves a subset of creative nonfiction, in which the writer pens a true account of something but relies on the fiction writer's props of dialogue, characters, scenes, and so forth. The writer and teacher Lee Gutkind has become a crusader, traveling around with his journal, *Creative Nonfiction*, as well as his annual conferences, the latest having just taken place in Oxford, Mississippi.

There's even been a seep of creative writing into more traditional sectors of literary scholarship. Frank Lentricchia, once the "bad boy" of literary criticism, has written a memoir and two novels, and repudiated his previous role "as an historian and literary polemicist of literary theory, who could speak with passion, and without noticeable impediment, about literature as a political instrument" ("Last Will" 59). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, so influential in gay and lesbian studies, long ago migrated to a self-involved brand of poetry. To some extent, a focus on oneself is a focus on the force of personal style. As Adam Begley noted in a *Lingua Franca* essay called "The I's Have It" (55), narcissism and self-expression are often linked. Since narcissism knows no age limits, rhetorical excess can be any generation's property. In response to this growing trend, the October 1996 *PMLA* Forum dwelt entirely on the use of the personal in literary scholarship.

One irony remains: Though creative writing once offered a refuge from the wars of political correctness, many creative writing workshops are now afflicted with the same problems that disciplines like postcolonialism have pointed out. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has been translated to the creative writing instructor's dilemma, "Is It Okay to Write Like an African-American If You Aren't One?" The stakes may be somewhat higher than in the politically charged sociology *cum* literary criticism classroom, because in there, at least, students are encouraged to question received values and label cultural products as an essential process of critical reading, whereas such strategies have rarely

been thought crucial to writing fiction. The policing of creative writing presents another reason for the popularity of the memoir, with the self as the source of authority, as well as the focus on minorities and working class concerns to show one's social merit badge. As the author and creative-writing teacher (and my former colleague) Barry Hannah has remarked, "If you want to get taken seriously these days, you've got to write about trailer parks."

At my old institution, the University of Mississippi, Doug Robinson, the new head of the writing program, by which I mean expository writing, the kind that's supposed to be useful for everyone, is advocating a textbook that teaches students how to write by imitation: Follow the work of a particular writer. Practice the craft. Understand by doing. Write to read better and vice versa. This path seems remarkably similar to the way in which the 19th century taught its students classics: Write an ode in the style of Pindar. So maybe the wheel has come full circle. For better or worse, it's bound to turn again.

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