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CRITICAL-CREATIVE LITERACY AND CREATIVE WRITING PEDAGOGY

Glenn Clifton

Abstract

This article builds on psychological research that claims critical thinking is a key component of the creative process to argue that critical-creative literacy is a cognitive goal of creative writing education. The article also explores the types of assignments and prompts that might contribute to this goal and simultaneously build bridges between creative writing education and other Humanities disciplines.

Keywords

Creative Writing Studies; Pedagogy; Creativity; Critical Thinking; Psychology of Creativity.

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Glenn Clifton

Creative Writing has a long history of refusing to theorize what it is doing. As Tim Mayers notes, creative writers in post-secondary institutions have historically enjoyed a “privileged marginality” that keeps them separate from the debates and battles of the rest of the university departments they are housed ((Re)Writing Craft 21). While this historical position may have helped creative writing instructors to distance themselves from abstruse theoretical debates, it also ran the risk of encouraging a resistance to pedagogical reflection; the romance of the earthy, “real” kernel of activity—the production of creative work—allowed the discipline of creative writing to set itself in opposition to theory of any kind. Fortunately, in the last few years, this attitude has shifted, resulting in an increased commitment to pedagogical reflection and conscientious teaching practice among creative writing instructors. There has been an explosion of work in what is sometimes now called Creative Writing Studies (CWS), represented by the launching of the journal *New Writing: An International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* in 2004 and Channel View’s *Multilingual Matters* book series in 2005. More recently, Bloomsbury’s *Critical Creative Writing* (2018) edited by Janelle Adsit, has gathered contemporary writers’ reflections on issues such as identity, privilege, and appropriation in creative writing pedagogy. These new studies have broadened the conception of the field, addressing the crucial social context of creative writing education and so also emphasizing the multifarious skills students might learn from studying the subject.

In what follows, I argue for “critical-creative literacy” as a cognitive goal for creative writing pedagogy. This claim builds on Steve Healey’s description of “creative literacy,” which he defines as “a broad range of skills used not only in literary works or genres but in many other creative practices as well” (“Creative Literacy” 170). In shifting this vocabulary to consider “critical-creative” literacy, my claim is that creative literacy is primarily successful when it is understood as being largely comprised of critical thinking skills; the creative powers we seek to cultivate in creative writing students are dependent on a critically developed conception of the process of writing and the role of writing in our society. As such, criticizing the myths and romance that circulate about writing in our culture should be a central goal of creative writing pedagogy, as it helps our students internalize a sophisticated understanding of audience, purpose, and technique. The claim that students must cultivate a self-understanding of their writing process is of course not new; this form of personal development is encouraged by writing teachers everywhere. But advocating for such development in the vocabulary of critical-creative literacy offers several benefits. It allows us to connect the

goals for our students as literary writers with those that might help become prepared for other fields as well. It also offers a clear shape for delineating how creative writing instruction is connected to the social history of writing. Lastly, because it helps us see how sophisticated approaches to reading literature can benefit creative writing students, it offers inroads for how creative writing might utilize some forms of literary theory without becoming mired in their intimidating terminologies.

Creative Writing Studies and Creative Literacy

In the 1990s, beginning with Wendy Bishop's *Released into Language* (1990), Patrick Bizzarro's *Responding to Student Poems: Applications of Critical Theory* (1993), and Katherine Haake's *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies* (2000), scholars made inroads into developing an academic vocabulary for the pedagogy of creative writing. Tim Mayers and Diane Donnelly proposed terms such as "Craft Criticism" and "Creative Writing Studies" for the sub-discipline of creative writing reflection, and the latter term seems to be taking over. This field is modelled partially on the discipline of Composition, guided by a "pedagogical imperative" to centre scholarship on the practice of teaching (Mayers (*Re*)*Writing Craft* 10).¹ As such, the first task for the nascent discipline was to critically interrogate what Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice call the "lore" of the discipline—the inherited body of assumptions about the creative writing classroom (Ritter and Vanderslice xv). Central to this lore was the longstanding scepticism about whether creative writing could be taught. What Mayers calls the "institutional-conventional wisdom" of creative writing held that talent was innate; all that could be taught was technique or "craft" (Mayers (*Re*)*Writing Craft* 13). Even today, the website of the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop includes in its philosophy statement: "Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed" ("About"). While it is undeniable that some components of a writer's talent are inherent rather than learned in a classroom, this is also true for any discipline (and it rarely leads to the insistence that math cannot be taught.) There was also, in many traditional classrooms, a risk that the emphasis on creative writing's unteachability might lead to coasting or playing favourites. Creative writing teachers were often accused of allowing their personal biases to pass as law, and a resistance to critical reflection regarding the methods of teaching the discipline could easily encourage such an attitude.

To date, CWS has accomplished two complementary aims, both of which involve broadening our conception of the discipline. The first aim has been the questioning of the "workshop model." Developed at the Iowa program, the in-class workshopping of student work (usually while the author is required to remain silent), has been described as the "signature pedagogy" of creative writing, as the research proposal, lab report, or term

paper might be in other disciplines (Donnelly 89). But CWS interrogates the dominance of this model; many scholars have advocated for a broader set of classroom practices, beginning with Wendy Bishop's description of the "transactional" creative writing class that gets students writing rather than simply critiquing the work they've already done (14). Some critics have even claimed that the workshop simply must go (See Wandor), while others have defended the workshop as a flexible format but sought to expand our sense of its possibilities (Donnelly 75-89). As several scholars have noted, when the workshop model was initially invented at the Iowa workshop by Paul Engle, it was intended for experienced students at the graduate level, not for undergraduates (Swander 168). The workshop relies on widely read and confident peers amongst the participating students and may not always be appropriate for less advanced students.

The second achievement of CWS has been the wellspring of new ideas regarding how creative writing can broaden not only its classroom practices, but also its pedagogical goals. If the "lore" of the discipline asserted that only techniques, craft, and "tricks of the trade" could be taught while the fundamentals of the practice could not, there was a risk of imagining a "thin" discipline. Such a discipline might help students solve specific problems in the creation of a story but would have trouble speaking to the foundations of what good writing tries to do, nor could it question the political and historical context within which writing occurs. An instructor can help students refine their point-of-view in a story to help them focus the reader's empathy, but it is much harder to raise the question of when or how often or why we should write stories that inspire empathy if craft and technique constitute the entire field. And accordingly, some of the best works in CWS have addressed the need to connect creative writing instruction with history, conceiving of student writers as potential public intellectuals engaged with the powerful linguistic discourses which comprise the rest of our culture outside conventional literary genres (Dawson 194-96).²

Steve Healey articulates for one such model of the public intellectual by advocating the goal of Creative Literacy. Healy defines the goals of his creative writing classroom as the promotion of creative literacy skills that prepare students for a range of critical activities beyond those of a literary writer:

Given that so few creative writing students actually go on to become published or professional writers, I want to offer students learning experiences that are more relevant, practical, and engaging. I also want to encourage the creative writing field to open up its boundaries and not cling so tightly to narrow definitions of the literary. ("Creative Literacy" 170)

Other scholars have also noted the necessity of a shift in goals: since only 10% of MFA graduates—that's *graduate* students, not undergraduates—go on to publish books, the discipline is a failure if it understands itself solely in the careerist terms of the production of professional literary writers (Leahy 61). The goal of creative literacy responds simultaneously to the broader goals of the

humanities in creating public intellectuals and to the realities of student job-seeking. As Healey notes, widespread claims about the rise of the “creative class” and the creative ethos of business in new Millennium have allowed a generalized understanding of creativity to absorb much of the cultural capital that used to belong to “literary” literacy, and students want access to that capital more than they want particularly literary skills (“Beyond” 63-68). Just as most history or English undergraduates do not go on to become historians or literary critics, but instead to become historically-conscious critical citizens with advanced communication skills, creative writers can and do achieve the same.

Healey argues that creative and critical literacy work in tandem, so that creative literacy joins “a range of other literacies, most notably ‘critical literacy,’ which is often promoted as the primary skill-set that students gain from liberal arts courses” (“Creative Literacy” 176). This is a prudent way to introduce creative literacy, comparing it with more familiar skills to which it serves as an addendum. I propose, however, that we understand the literacy particular to creative writing not as an addendum to critical thinking, but as a form of critical thinking in and of itself, comprised of not only of the capacity for spontaneous creative production but at least as much from critical and rational capacities. While this might not be the conventional way creativity is positioned, there is considerable evidence supporting the claim that successful creative endeavors, particularly in the field of writing, are marked by the internalization of a critical consciousness, and furthermore that this critical consciousness is not only an element of good writing and editing but essential to the writer’s developing self-conception.

Critical-Creative Thinking

The most conventional way to situate creativity is as a separate from of cognition from critical, rational thinking. Books like Weston and Stoyles’s *Creativity for Critical Thinkers* claims to proffer a helpful additive to critical thinking, emphasizing that both are useful and setting up the dichotomy of “inside the box” and “outside the box” thinking (Weston and Stoyles x-xii). But this binary is problematic. We might want to note that instructors teaching critical thinking or logic never claim that they are promoting “inside” the box thinking, because the entire cliché of “inside” and “outside the box” thinking is designed to make non-creative cognition sound small and rote. The idea that creativity will deliver us from rote solutions is not an empty promise, and other vocabularies, such as divergent and convergent thinking (both of which are usually situated as a part of the process of creative problem solving) lead to more complex versions of this binary. But we might want to think critically about why the desire for novelty appears in the guise of the same cliché over and over, as if the impulse to solve problems creatively were butting its head forever against the inside of the same box.

Psychologists studying the nature of creativity provide the following

definition: “Creativity is the interaction among *aptitude, process, and environment* by which an individual or group produces a *perceptible product* that is both *novel and useful* as defined within a *social context*” (Plucker et al. 87).” This definition aligns with our everyday experience of problem solving: anything from inventing the iPhone to installing an appliance in an oddly-shaped space requires some degree of creative adaptation, uncovering a new method or concept appropriate to the situation. Yet this model of creativity has also been widely criticized for subsuming every form of creative engagement into a capitalist model of the marketable product, whose novelty and usefulness to others can be measured in sales. Thomas Frank argues that it appropriates creativity from the arts, reassigning it as the marker of the managerial class (see Frank).³ Indeed, one of the most widespread concerns about aligning creative writing with the general fervor for “creativity” in the business world is that writing will lose its critical potential as a humanities subject and become more closely aligned with market forces.⁴ As Alexander Hollenberg has recently argued, “the language of value claims the creative moment as an inherently marketable and always already marketed product” (Hollenberg 50). The issue, as Hollenberg argues, is that divorcing creativity from critical thinking tends to transform creativity into this marketable ghost of itself, encouraging the romance of individual creative laborers who spontaneously invent the devices the market needs.⁵ Hollenberg claims instead that “creativity is always constituted through criticality” (63).

The realignment of critical and creative thinking is not only a possible avenue of resistance—it also appears to be an accurate reflection of cognitive reality. Recent psychological research on creativity supports the claim that the people discovering creative solutions are doing so by pursuing an activity cognitively divorced from reason and critical evaluation. It is true that most guides to brainstorming and creative thinking will advise readers to defer evaluation and judgment while trying to come up with creative solutions, but only as a stage of the process. Recent psychological work on creativity suggests that even the initial process of uncovering surprising or counter-intuitive possibilities does not arise from simply setting aside rational linear judgment. Barr et al. point to a growing body of research that demonstrates that conscious, executive processing is crucial for creative thinking, and suggest that at least complex forms of creativity could be understood a “dual-process” theory, that uses both conscious processing and unconscious processing at once. (Barr et al. 70-71). Crucially, their study also points to the central importance of both a person’s ability and her *willingness* to think critically and to test her ideas (Barr et al. 71). While we might have the image of a successful creative brainstorming session as something that sets aside rational and critical thought, critical thinking is often involved in setting aside and skipping over the obvious, trite, or absurd solutions. The relevance of this to the world of creative writing is clear, for creative writing is a field where freshness and originality are valued and cliché is treated almost universally

as a weakness (Schultz 79).⁶ To return to my earlier complaint about the overused metaphor of “outside the box” thinking, it is critical creativity, rather than a mere impulse to celebrate all things creative, that allows people to recognize when they are repeating a cliché that might be leading to the ossification of the very way they conceive of creativity.

Understanding the role of critical thinking in creativity is essential if we are to apply creativity theory to creative writing, a field wherein creativity is fairly obviously paired with conscious, critical thought. In 1920, addressing the question of a method for writing poetry, T. S. Eliot famously remarked, “there is no method except to be very intelligent” (Eliot 55). While his arch sentiment may sound elitist today (and disregards the theory of multiple intelligences), the fact is that a writer’s ability to articulate and explore the world in words marks a kind of intelligence which is often conventionally noticeable as such because it trucks in conscious and critical deliberation. Writers may describe the need to put aside their inner editor in order to begin writing, but most successful writers are also keen and critical editors of their own work. To see creative and critical thinking as distinct cognitive strategies is to misunderstand how writers think and what kind of consciousness that studying and practicing writing is likely to develop. A writer working on a story, for example, needs to be able to apprehend and define a core conflict, cut passages and sections that don’t contribute, critically analyze the characters to make sure they are well-defined by their actions, and needs to stand outside of themselves enough to imagine how a reader might apprehend a detail or a situation. There is a significant degree of intuition in the process of imagining a story or poem, but crafting one is often a conscious and self-critical process. It is this latter process of editing and re-conceiving of a piece of creative writing which is in fact both the more teachable and arguably the more precious skill in a creative writing classroom. As the very title of Janelle Adsit’s *Critical Creative Writing* reminds us, important issues such as appropriation and privilege cannot be addressed without a willingness on the part of students to critically evaluate where they are situated in social history, power relationships, and potentially problematic literary traditions.

Research examining what students actually take away from creative writing courses supports the claim that the complex movement away from mere instinct and towards self-critical thinking is a key marker in their development. Gregory Light, in a study that uses student interviews as qualitative data to chart student development in undergraduate creative writing degrees, uncovers four stages that move the writer from 1) direct personal expression towards 2) documenting, 3) narrating, and finally 4) criticizing the world around them. The progression through these stages is ultimately guided by an increasingly sophisticated internalization of the awareness of the reader, resulting in increasing objectivity towards their own work (Light 268-72). (And as Vanderslice points out, Light’s work is perhaps the best evidence that creative writing can, in fact, be taught (Vanderslice 30-

31)). As students develop, they cease to feel that a piece of writing is motivated simply by the fact that it expresses their own feelings or beliefs (Light 266). So while the intuitive and spontaneous side of creativity will remain an important element of writing throughout a writer's life, writers demonstrably develop towards the desire to make conscious and critical statements about the world, challenging the perceptions of their readers.

Light's study suggests that increasing critical consciousness changes the goals of a student's creative process, moving the student past the desire for simple self-expression. The kind of critical-creative thinking that writers learn, therefore, includes both an evolving conception of their own writerly activity and a critical disposition towards the world, a desire to make statements about reality. This latter aspect of the writer's life is difficult to discuss, because it is boundless: writers can and do critically engage with any subject matter, and anecdotal accounts attest to the endless "checking" writers must do to make sure details, situations, and conflicts are evoked in a way that represents their full complexity. The reason beginners are so often advised to "write what they know" is that even everyday life events such as working retail or going to the dentist are almost impossible to imagine accurately without some personal experience of them. But critical consciousness can be discussed as a disposition, an attitude, and that attitude is cultivated in part through focusing on cultivating a writer's self-conception.

As Light points out, much pedagogical research supports the claim that of students' understanding of their own activities and goals as students is massively important for their learning (272). That this holds especially true when it comes to creative writing is attested by the large number of studies that bemoan the danger of the circulating cultural myths about writers (see Rodriguez, 169; Kuhl 4; Royster). The fount for myths about writers, as for many creative professions and creativity itself, is the Romantic movements of the late 18th and early 19th century. The image of Coleridge composing "Kubla Kahn" in a fever dream and awaking to discover it done is one of our most famous icons of brilliant creative production – and later evidence has also demonstrated that it was a myth propagated deliberately by Coleridge, who concealed the fact that there had been earlier drafts (Royster 27). But the problem is that romantic myths about writers have been accused of disincentivizing editing, and also of discouraging those who don't immediately land on brilliant first drafts. A student who feels that writing must come from heightened moments of inspiration and that those moments must be awaited patiently (rather than manufactured through work ethic) is going to struggle to produce well-crafted writing. But research demonstrates that even "Aha!" moments are often the result of long processes of work (Sawyer 176).

Adding to the testimony of writing teachers, psychological research also demonstrates that myths about writers are counter-productive, distorting student understanding of the work that goes into composing a successful

story and intimidating writers with a false picture of a rare and spontaneous genius. Waitman and Plucker note that:

Even effective creative writers often fall victim to the belief that the 'magic' to create may leave them. They might believe that they can only be struck by lightning once and that, despite their success, they might actually be a creative imposter. In this kind of evaluation of their own abilities, such writers initially fail to acknowledge the role played by their own critical abilities in their revising process. (303)

Educating students in the real nature of creativity is so important simply because aspiring authors need to realize how deeply they must internalize the field, and how much rational thinking goes into their processes: "an undeniable linkage exists between a person's self-perceptions and the creative process he enacts. Thus, the way that an aspiring creative individual views himself plays a crucial role in his development as a creative writer and also in his written products" (Waitman and Plucker 294). In addition to the myths that originate with Romanticism, other cultural depictions of the writer from television and film have been criticized for leading students to misunderstand the profession: Kuhl notes that the popular representations of writers tend towards a softer expressivist model of writing as therapy, which equally fails to encourage students to work hard (Kuhl 3).

In addition to the celebration of unconscious spontaneity and irrationalism, the Romantic model of creativity has also been criticized for its hyper-individualism. This latter critique is posed by theories that stress the profoundly collaborative and historically-situated nature of creative thinking. Psychologists such as Keith R. Sawyer and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have argued that what makes something creative depends largely on its social context, and not on the sole inner brilliance of its maker. Csikszentmihalyi describes creativity as dependent on the Domain (the traditions that define the endeavour), and the Field (the range of experts who evaluate which new ideas are "of value"), in addition to the individual's contribution (314-16). According to this account, the social context of creativity is just as important as the individual's actions. This perspective has been criticized for going too far in its devaluation of individual creativity, claiming that works only *become* creative when they are recognized by the experts (by which time the author might already be dead).⁷ But the social context of creativity is paramount: there are many more authors spinning their wheels producing works full of clichés, prejudices, and insensitivities than there are lone creative geniuses who fail to be discovered. Importantly, these social theories of creativity parallel Light's argument about the internalization of the reader, suggesting that a critical faculty for estimating how others will respond is actually central not only to writing but to all forms of creative thought.

One of the first outcomes of critical-creative thinking for writers must therefore be the challenging of myths about writing and writers and the cultivation of a critical perspective on how the writer imagines his or her own

activity. It might be objected that this goal does not need to be deliberately or separately pursued; creative writing programs will achieve some of this cultivation almost automatically, as instructors speak to students about their process and experiences. But in fact creative writing is simultaneously a discipline where debunking the myths about the field are especially valuable (because moving beyond romantic expressivism is central to a writer's development) and yet also where the professional world—at least in most university programs—does little to intrude on the classroom. Stephanie Vanderslice notes that in an age where media savvy is expected of everyone, many writing programs still graduate students as they do who leave with no real understanding of the publishing market (35-38). Indeed, very few students leave an undergraduate degree in creative writing understanding even how to approach a publisher or where they might submit work—in its university setting, the discipline often resists such practicalities. Vanderslice calls for more practically-oriented courses that would orient writers towards publishing primarily to prepare writers for the work they might do, but I would add that such courses introduce an entirely other discourse of the author and so aid a writer's critical self-reflection. Indeed, assignments requiring self-reflection on students' identities and processes as writers are a key ingredient to the cultivation of a critical-creative literacy. Carl Vandermeulen's *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing* demonstrates that student self-reflection, including narration of the process of developing a piece and seeking revision, can be a crucial element of creative writing pedagogy.

Some scholars do see a positive dimension to the romantic image of the author; Diane Donnelly notes that the Romanticism is one of the few discourses that asserts that writing and the arts are of central human importance (50). It is also hard to avoid the suggestion that a certain romantic celebration of the power of the arts may keep the discipline going (Sparrow 89). But Donnelly also positions the romantic image of the writer alongside three other possibilities, and suggests that if we have inherited a contradictory set of discourses about the aims and origins of writing then we should be teaching this debate to our students (22). Cultivating a critical attitude to Romanticism's myths of creativity and writing may be an important element in student training, but there is no particular reason why this needs to be experienced as a harsh disillusionment. The idea need not be that student ambitions are devalued. It is precisely the teaching the debates about creativity, the marketplace, and the history of writing (and designing specific assignments that require students to do so actively) that empowers students to position themselves in the reality of the world in which writers live. Is it a problem that writing is so often represented on television as a form of therapy? Or do such discourses allow non-writers to imagine a sympathetic connection to writing through a familiar form of self-development? Perhaps we should ask our students.⁸

Craft History and the Issue of Content-Neutrality

To criticize romantic myths of the author in our teaching is also to open ourselves up to the history of the craft. If students arrive without knowing how to think critically about images of the writer, it is at least in part because they do not arrive on the first day of an undergraduate degree knowing that there was such a thing as Romanticism, that it flourished in a specific time and in response to specific historical pressures, and so forth.⁹ And so a recurrent claim in CWS has been that students need to be engaging with history. As Tim Mayers notes, the writer of today is not simply the same as writer of the past (*(Re)Writing Craft* 63).¹⁰ Paul Dawson argues that the conventional approach to craft in the creative writing classroom needs to be historicized, so that examples of successful stories and writing advice are not taken as simply and trans-historically true, but seen as arising from a specific time and place: “if we adopt a diachronic rationale when selecting exemplary texts, we might develop a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between narrative device and fictive example.” (“Historicizing” 216). Dawson gives as an example the modernist rejection of the omniscient narrator, which is taken today to be simply a piece of good advice but is actually a specific attitude that was current in the early twentieth century and that some twenty-first century authors have begun to reject (“Historicizing” 216).¹¹

The value of introducing students to a historicized sense of craft is that they can internalize debates about the purposes of the arts as they are developing a sense of readership, encouraging them to think critically about their own aesthetic goals. As Dawson argues, such a shift is central to the project of recasting creative writing as a humanities discipline like others. It is just this intrusion of history that allows us to problematize the present, further activating the critical side of critical-creativity by inviting our students to interrogate and perhaps imagine alternative versions of the society and economy within which they find themselves. But the suggestion that we begin teaching the “history” of craft raises the question of how such an effort distinguishes itself from the study of literature, and how it might engage with or keep distance from literary theory.

We can address this question from another angle by asking: What is the content of creative writing as a discipline? If we move past teaching only “technique” and craft, what other content do we add to the field? Other humanities disciplines, such as literature, philosophy, or history, never risk facing a lack of content: indeed they have more than an undergraduate degree can ever cover, because their disciplines are essentially historical, beholden to a particular kind of writing for the duration of recorded history. But what Mayers calls the “institutional-conventional wisdom” of creative writing—that only technique can be taught—arises only partially from a false belief in the Romantic genius; there is also a certain practicality to it. Instructors certainly assign readings as models and examples, but no one wants to tell students what they have to write about. It is true that some

teachers are more willing to provide students with prompts that push their imagination in specific directions (for examples, see Webb “Myth” 186; Manolis 145). And some have argued that students are in fact more willing to edit, and less threatened and less attached to their drafts, when they are responding to eccentric prompts because they don’t feel the story originated romantically with themselves (Leahy 63; Mayers “Process” 45). But no one prescribes content in a strict sense; no instructor tells students: “write a story about a middle-aged entrepreneur’s struggle to reconnect with her family.” The reasons why instructors can’t prescribe precise content are fairly obvious, and they return us to the element of truth in the hackneyed maxim to “write what you know”: our students are in the best position to judge what subjects they may or may not have insight into. And yet, the formal techniques one uses to solve a problem in creative writing are always what Graeme Harper calls “strongly situational”: “If a creative writer is pursuing the completion of a task, whatever knowledge they explore, employ or produce will be defined by that aim of completion” (Harper 107). One can learn the structure of a good story but every piece of content requires new insights and new problems. Mostly, writers can only learn to solve these problems with experience, coming to understand their own habits of work, which means that again, the transferability of their learning arises from self-reflection. But as a result, the conventional attitude of the discipline is that it is teaching form without content—that we are keeping content-neutral. This content neutrality is understandable, but it ultimately goes hand in hand with the assumption that we are mainly teaching craft and technique, rather than insight.

As Dawson points out, while you can’t prescribe content in student creative writing, you can make room for its reception, introducing into the class a number of critical and social concerns that make the urgency and politics of writing a part of the discussion (*Creative Writing* 206). The political importance of making such a context is well addressed by Lynn Domina, who argues that instructors can’t simply assume that content takes care of itself in a workshop, because this easily becomes a blindness to the work of writers from marginalized groups under the cover of content-neutrality (28). What happens if we begin to think of both specific techniques and the history of those techniques as central to the content of creative writing?

Creative writing teachers, of course, are usually very well versed in the history of literature, but they are understandably suspicious of literary theory. The early history of the discipline of creative writing generally saw creative writers operating out of the same attitude as literary critics, because both were dominated by New Criticism’s intense close reading and attention to craft. The divide came later, as literary studies embraced a new and more theoretical vocabulary. Some have pointed out that creative writers were obviously less keen to jump on the bandwagon that proclaimed the death of the author, and as a result creative writing is often cast as the last bastion of a more straightforward formalism that celebrates authorial achievement (Ramey 44-45).¹² But we might respond that those who object to literary theory

because they don't believe in the "death of the author" are operating from an outdated understanding of literary theory, since Barthes's claim about the "death of the author" hasn't been central to literary criticism since the end of the 1980s. Some of the more recent driving forces in literary studies, such as New Historicism, the cognitive turn, the return to ethics, and eco-criticism are not nearly so hostile to authorial intention.

There are considerably more possibilities for cross-fertilization between literary studies and creative writing if we look to these more recent theories and so start to apply the logic of "teaching the debate" to questions of why authors write, how they engage with nature or class, or how to write politically without being overly didactic. While beginning writers could easily be burdened by too much abstruse theory about such things, exposure to several kinds of writing about nature, or several kinds of writing about class, is certainly a good thing if it isn't accompanied by an enervating theoretical vocabulary.

I want to focus on one small body of theory that arguably avoids mandating any specific content for writers: the "turn to ethics" that was current in literary studies 10-15 years ago. The approach of the new ethical critics is best summed up by Lawrence Buell, who writes that:

Key to many such accounts of reading ethics is a conception of literature as the reader's other, a view of the reading relation sharply different from that of traditional reader-response criticism, which tended to celebrate (as did Barthes) readerly appropriation or reinvention. The newer ethical criticism generally envisages reinvention not as free play or an assertion of power but as arising out of conscientious listening. (12)

J. Hillis Miller, another theorist in this terrain, advocates for the idea that the reader is hailed by the text, put on trial by its ethical demands that they set their own preconceptions aside to pay attention to the other (Miller 14). Adam Zachary Newton argues that texts make claims like persons do, demanding responsibility of the reader (Newton 19-20). If books are said to demand close, ethical attention as a representation of the experience of others that curtails the demands of the reader's ego, then not only must the writer of the text have agency, she must also be representing some experience that deserves to make such a demand of its readers.

Is it possible to imagine the kinds of courses, assignments, or prompts that would respond to such a theory from the side of the writer? What if, for example, we posed an assignment or prompt asking writers to represent an experience of struggle on the part of someone they seriously disagree with? Such a prompt arguably retains the necessary degree of content neutrality to allow students to find individual ways to approach it, and yet it also requires them to engage with ethical questions of representation. Such an assignment not only primes students to produce the types of text that ethical criticism seeks to read—it also positions them as *readers* of their own experience, critically engaging with the limits of their empathy.

Critical-creative literacy is only one potential vocabulary for the goals of creative writing education, but it has the advantage of emphasizing the crucial role of critical thinking in student self-development without making that critical thinking seem external to the creative impulses that motivate writing. The improvement of student writing and the critical consideration of social and political issues are ultimately united by the necessary student realization that the best and most thoughtful work does not come from a romantic and momentary burst of inspiration, but requires a sophisticated internalization of the reader and the historical forces shaping reader response. When students write statements of purpose, manifestos, or reflective memos about what they are trying to do, this is only the beginning of their development of a critical-creative sense of what they write, for whom and why. To steep creative writing pedagogy in critical thinking is not to stop students from choosing what to write about nor to drown them in abstruse theory—it is to make contact with the critical debates about the purpose of the arts which have always mattered to writers.

Notes

1 Mayers goes so far as to suggest that Creative Writing and Composition can cross-pollinate and ally in such a way as to make writing central and literary studies marginal to university English departments.

2 There is substantial evidence that creative writing may actually be one of the best disciplines for training people to do research and critical thinking. Patrick Bizzarro lists a set of six transferable skills that writers have (“Research”). Alexandria Peary notes that creative writing assignments across the curriculum have demonstrated a powerful ability to raise the critical capacities in students in other disciplines (Peary).

3 Conversely, Richard Florida, best known for his influential claim that the ability to attract the “creative class” is a driving power of economic growth, has emphasized that everyone is creative and that we should not see only one class of people as the arbiters of creative power. Florida makes this clarification in the preface to later versions of *The Creative Class*.

4 This is the motivating concern of Dominique Hecq’s collection *The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century*. See also Sparrow, Webb (“How to Avoid”).

5 This argument is also made by Sarah Brouillete’s *Literature and the Creative Economy*.

6 Schultz makes a further intriguing argument for engaging with cliché not as a mere matter of craft, but as a matter of social responsibility and political engagement, arguing that it is clichés that keep students from experiencing political awareness (80).

7 This critique is made by Harris (171-82).

8 Earnshaw (74) and Ramey (54) pose some great suggestions for the kinds of questions that arise from considering what writers say about themselves and how they are represented.

9 There are many histories available that detail the complex connection between literary Modernism and creative writing courses, but the best brief history of all the influences on how creative writing is taught is Thebo’s article (30-47).

10 Mayers and Dawson, who are the leading proponents of the idea that creative writing should be thought of as a humanities subject like others, are accordingly also advocates for an openness to history in writing classes. But

there are many other reasons to think that immersion in the history of writing, literature, and craft are important that go beyond the more obvious advice that writers need to read. David Rain points out, for example, that teaching genre fiction inculcates a special kind of openness to history because genres like horror or fantasy live by responding to their own pasts. Genre writers, accordingly, know that “Belatedness is our fate” (Rain 62). See also Koehler (27); Haake (“Against” 24).

11 Such an approach also responds to one of the recurrent criticisms of the academic life of creative writing made by authors themselves: that it homogenizes writing. The most notorious such attacks on the workshop are those made by Donald Hall and Elif Batuman. Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* is largely a defense of the overall effect of creative writing classes on the quality of American writing.

12 Earnshaw, for example, objects that theory is not useful because he has living authors before him (71); see also Fenza and Wandor for older versions of this critique.

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