

TEXT Volume 18 No 2 October 2014**Editorial****Nobel Prize criticism of creative writing courses**

On 8 October 2014, the British *Guardian* reported criticisms of creative writing courses made by Horace Engdahl, a member of the Nobel Prize committee for literature. Among other comments, he said the following:

“I think it [the university] cuts writers off from society, and creates an unhealthy link with institutions,” he told *La Croix*. “Previously, writers would work as taxi drivers, clerks, secretaries and waiters to make a living. Samuel Beckett and many others lived like this. It was hard – but they fed themselves, from a literary perspective.” (Engdahl quoted in Flood 2014)

This is not an unusual criticism. It is criticism that has been directed at creative writing in the academy for many years. I wonder if it was such a bad idea for Michelangelo Merisi from Caravaggio to seek out a protected place in the training studio of Guiseppe Cesari, the favourite painter of Pope Clement VIII in 1593 when Caravaggio, as he was later known, was wanting to professionalise his skills, set himself the highest benchmarks possible, understand the artistic movements of his day, find patrons, and make his name where it counted. Artists have always found ways to exploit, adopt, profit from, invade or live off those institutions that would welcome or suffer them. If the modern academy helps kickstart writers’ careers, and if it produces at the same time readers who appreciate the work and skill required to write a book, and if sometimes it even produces academics who devote their lives to researching questions of art and creativity, then the modern academy is doing no more than what many institutions have done for centuries: it is fostering creativity in a world where the survival of that quality is as fragile as it has always been.

Besides, nearly every student I teach at university these days also works as a taxi driver, clerk, secretary or waiter in order to fund their study. And Samuel Beckett no doubt would have been safely ensconced in the best creative writing program he could find, if such opportunities had been there for him. Such criticisms have more than a whiff of anti-intellectual fervor, and are based upon inaccurate assumptions about universities, writers, literature, and the relation of creativity to work. It is disturbing and newsworthy that this time the criticism comes from such an eminent source.

Another related point to note about creative writing is that it remains something of an interloper or an outsider in the academy. Its relation to the academy is not as cosy as Horace Engdahl implies, because it does keep creating deep connections into the commercial worlds of bookselling, games writing, film making, television, theatre, community arts. It has its attention on the swirling world outside any university curriculum, outside the sanctity of research, and outside the safety of respectful intellectual debate. And this is okay. The new university, starved of government patronage, wanting to take its place in the neo-liberal marketplace, finds itself now needing to foster these kinds of connections, this kind of ‘engaged’ attitude. *The Philosophers’ Mail* (<http://www.philosophersmail.com/index.php>) is a new website that takes up

the news that the British tabloid *The Daily Mail* publishes, and offers reflections and analysis by philosophers.

The site is modeled on the site of the *Mail Online* (<http://www.philosophersmail.com/index.php>) and is staffed by philosophers from London, New York and Melbourne. This is in part a response to the fact that in Britain an average book of philosophy sells about 300 copies, while *The Daily Mail* has about 4.5 million readers and 100 million visitors to its website per month. This is the kind of creative, lateral, challenging and digitally-savvy writing project that can come from the academy when it begins to value communication beyond the campus out into the chaotic world. When writers from the academy go to writers' festivals, a world symposium on education and climate change, bookshops, neighbourhood houses, schools, country towns, it is the edgy, interloping creative writers who are there doing this new work of giving the academy its public face as a creative and not merely corporate entity. Far from retreating into the academy, writers are more often dragging the academy into the world.

A final point: if you Google 'Literary Journal' you will have 34.5 million hits to choose from. With that kind of activity, that kind of energy going round out there, it is important that as many university graduates as possible have a sophisticated understanding of what might be found there, how they might contribute, how they might help shape this world. Where better to think about, investigate, critique, experiment with this now-upon-us cyberworld than the university?

– Kevin Brophy

Research is about seeing chinks, opening new avenues, taking leaps. The articles in this issue of *TEXT* look at the coal-face of research and identify niches for further probing; they view the territory of research and recognize new ways to blaze trails through it; they watch the performance of other researchers and are compelled to reach further. The metaphors for research we live by indicate it is industry, journey and perhaps circus. *TEXT* continues as a workplace quarry, region and map, performance stage...

In the opening article, 'Reflections on the applicability of case study methodology to performance-as-research', Julian Meyrick notices potential exegetical benefits in identifying the artwork as a 'case' in accordance with case study methodology. This means considering it 'not (only) as a unique experience, but as representative of a certain kind of problem'. Thus the subjective work of writing (or performing or directing) is placed in a comparative vista thus capable of illuminating and validating general claims. By this means, Meyrick draws creative writing research into a focus shared by other soft science inquiry.

Kevin Brophy probes another chink in his consideration of 'The poet and the criminal: Dreams, neuroscience and a peculiar way of thinking'. In Brophy's ongoing quest to describe creativity he contrasts Freud's ideas about the mind with recent research into lateralisation of the brain: the contest between the mind's poet and scientist, between language and body. In the context where research undervalues 'the kind of knowledge important to the arts, knowledge based in the subtleties of intuition, learned skills and proliferating complexity', Brophy mounts an argument for the centrality of poetry to thinking.

On a path related to that Brophy has taken, Maria Takolander in 'After Romanticism, psychoanalysis and postmodernism: New paradigms for

theorising creativity’ also seeks to understand creativity with poetry as a strategic focus. Turning to the work of sociobiologist Ellen Dissanayake and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, Takolander explores recognition of ‘the embodied condition from which all poetry fundamentally arises’ and celebrates the role of ‘the feeling body, femininity and mutuality in creative practice ... against the “supra-rational”, masculinist and solipsistic visions of creativity that have prevailed’.

Returning to the possibilities for the exegetical, in ‘Strange loops: Creative practice and philosophies of selfhood’ Catherine Noske leaps beyond Nicola Boyd’s 2009 ideas about Douglas Hofstadter’s Strange Loop as a model for creative research. Noske shows how Hofstadter’s thought ‘potentially opens up multifaceted notions of selfhood as implicated in the writing act’. Hofstadter’s framework illustrates ‘the manner in which writing can be taken as an inherently reflexive act, giving insight into the involvement of the author in his or her own practice’. Noske opens a chink and invites others to follow in exploring ‘the drive to write and the effects of writing on the writer’.

Kathryn Owler also finds a new path to follow developed from the work of an exceptional thinker. In ‘Meditating on Maurice Blanchot and the ‘leap’ of inspiration that happens in PhD thesis writing’, Owler focuses on ‘the difficult and arid times of thesis writing’, a territory also described by Boyd, Noske and others. She finds in Blanchot a series of positives: ‘In the process of learning to manage inspiration, students might come to view inspiration as a precious, yet abundant resource... [I]n order to achieve the mastery of a finished ‘work’, a writer must firstly make a leap into the unknown... If the writer persists with their writing, they will find a way out of their confusion’.

The demands of the exegesis also provide the subject of Eugen Bacon’s ‘Journaling – a path to exegesis in creative research’. Bacon’s piece is a re-blazing of an old path which may have become overgrown in recent years. In seeking to renew awareness of the creative process as a personal journey she advocates the journal as a vital link between creative product and exegesis: ‘When practice-led research outputs comprise a creative artefact and an exegesis, it is crucial for the practitioner to adopt journaling to capture evidence of a self that evolves with practice and the research’.

Rounding out this collection of articles about new research pathways and performance of research, Kath Dooley finds inspiration in an exceptional filmmaker and thinker, Claire Denis, and maps the process of writing and making a film for a PhD – *The Sister* (2014) – based in Denis’s ideas. ‘Oppositions and lines of desire: Exploring the screenwriting approach of Claire Denis in a practice-based study’ analyses praxical concerns which, Dooley says, ‘allowed for a reinvigoration and evaluation of my previous practice as screenwriter’.

And may we draw your attention to an exceptional creative works section. Outstanding poems by John Watson and Peter Kirkpatrick astutely and amusingly deal with writing and the academy, while sensitive prose explorations by Winnie Ha and Pawel Chalewa allow us intimate access to the writing process.

Finally, it is worth noting that 10 of the 12 monographs reviewed in this issue were written or edited by *TEXT*-published authors. That’s impressive!

– Nigel Krauth

Works cited

Flood, A 2014 'Creative writing courses are killing western literature, claims Nobel judge', *The Guardian* (8 October): <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/07/creative-writing-killing-western-literature-nobel-judge-horace-engdahl> return to text

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