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A live event, a life event: The workshop that works

Abstract: In certain recent critiques, the term 'workshop' has been used to describe almost every aspect of our discipline's pedagogy. The various models might be arranged along a horizontal axis that has as one pole the wholly taught, exercise-based class for beginners and at the other the wholly discursive workshop for advanced students, with a vertical axis that begins with recreational or high-school classes and ascends through the BA to the MA and MFA, and then on to the elite MA and MFA programmes exemplified by the likes of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Alternative axes might calibrate the extent to which a programme is publication- or research-oriented, or to which the pedagogy is premised on a formalist or a 'sociological' poetics. This paper attempts a defence of the peer-review workshop by first distinguishing it from other forms of Creative Writing pedagogy, and concludes by offering an understanding of the workshop as an advanced and necessarily formalist pedagogy whose encounter with the work-in-progress requires an openness to its 'singularity' and a resistance both to instrumental readings and to prescriptive instruction.
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1. The undergraduate workshop: 'hands-on' vs 'peer-review'

Perhaps the most striking feature of *Does The Writing Workshop Still Work?*, the recent collection of essays edited by Dianne Donnelly, is not the general consensus, give or take a few dissenting voices and many caveats, that the workshop does indeed still work – summed up by Philip Gross in the Latin: '*Eppur si muove.* And yet it moves' (Donnelly 2010a: 52) – but the sheer range of understandings of the nature of this thing that still works. The multiplicity of models, whether descriptive or prescriptive, is reflected in several other recent publications, including Michelene Wandor's *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else,* which takes as its dissenting refrain 'The workshop must go' (2008: 219) yet offers as the culmination of its critique an alternative set of procedures that many teachers of undergraduate Creative Writing might recognise as orthodox practice and which some might even term, precisely, a 'workshop'.

The 'signature pedagogy' of our discipline thus appears to lend its name to almost every aspect of our discipline's pedagogy – including the individual tutorial (Donnelly 2010b: 19) – and in part my difficulty as a would-be defender of the conventional peer-review model is exacerbated by the need to orientate myself in relation to an American context in which Creative Writing is situated as one of three competing disciplines – alongside Composition and

Literature – that Patrick Bizarro sees as collectively constituting English Studies (Bizzaro 2010: 37). In this context the workshop is alternately commended as lending Creative Writing distinctiveness 'as an autonomous field with a right to its own history, epistemology, and classroom activities' (Bizzaro 2010: 37) and criticised – even demonised – as a vehicle for the transmission of a pernicious 'lore' that secures the continual reproduction of those same classroom activities while working to the detriment of pedagogical standards.

Tim Mayers's response to the persistence of such 'lore' is to propose an alliance between Composition and Creative Writing that will 'provide energy and institutional power for both fields' (Mayers 2007: 9). But while this may be appropriate to the US academy it serves to diminish the authority of his critique in relation to Creative Writing as it operates in other Anglophone countries, where Composition doesn't present itself as a rival or potential ally for Creative Writing, and where conventional workshop practice tends not to be applied quite so ubiquitously – an issue that may be crucial in determining what are the limits of the workshop's efficacy.

Donnelly for instance cites 'open admission policies, and a long well-documented history ... of poor reading skills and comprehension at the college-level coupled with fewer opportunities for the reading of literature' (Donnelly 2010b: 13) as significant influences on the ability of some students to benefit from the conventional workshop. In similar vein, Colin Irvine (2010) describes the experience of 'teaching a typical composition course at a typical college – one that is tuition-driven and access-oriented' and likely to contain 'a relatively high-percentage of non-readers' and 'a relatively high percentage of students with learning disabilities' (Irvine 2010: 142) many of whom come to further education belatedly from educational backgrounds unlikely to have equipped them for the requirements of 'peer-review activity in particular' (143). David Starkey (2010) elaborates on this mis-match in relation to the two-year community college course, where 'after many disappointments' he has come to accept that work may not be 'efficiently distributed to other students', who may not 'read the work before the workshop', or may not 'show up to critique the work' at all, and whose author may not 'be present during class' anyway (Starkey 2010: 155). 'When those are the terms of the workshop,' he asks, 'can it even be called a workshop anymore?' (155). And of course the answer is 'no', though the more pertinent question might be whether the workshop is an appropriate pedagogy at that level, in those circumstances.

The solution offered by Donnelly is to propose 'two possible workshop trajectories' (2010b: 18), the first being generalist, even remedial, and taking as its goal 'the advancement of writing (and reading) for its own sake' (18), the second being more advanced and requiring admission by portfolio (22). But while the first of these is consistent with Mayers's call for the incorporation into Creative Writing of the greater pedagogical rigour of Composition, to describe both tracks as *workshop* trajectories is to conflate the discipline (Creative Writing) with just one element of its pedagogy (the workshop). Some such bifurcation of practice occurs repeatedly in the literature, however, and at undergraduate level this generally takes the form of a division between an approach based on generative classroom exercises and one based on critical discussion of student works-in-progress. This is summarised by Gaylene Perry as the distinction between 'the *hands-on writing workshop*' and 'the *peer-review workshop*' (Perry 2010:119). The former she describes as 'a type of incubator meant only to facilitate particular formative moments in the creative process' (2010: 122). The latter is described elsewhere by Katherine Haake as those 'craft-based, text-centred, publication-oriented creative writing pedagogies modeled after the Iowa Writers' workshop' (Haake 2007: 24).

Stephanie Vanderslice similarly identifies the peer-review model as having derived from the one 'conceived and implemented at the University of Iowa' (Vanderslice 2010: 31) and similarly proposes that the undergraduate 'workshop for beginning writers' should be 'refocused to include content that enhances skill building and craft' (33). It should, in other words, be more generative, more 'hands-on', and this is an argument pursued consistently in her pedagogical writings, whose polemical purpose is served by the identification of a clear distinction between an unhealthy US system and its much healthier UK counterpart (she doesn't address the Australasian context). In the UK, she notes, far greater emphasis is placed on curriculum design and the identification of appropriate learning outcomes, resulting in 'a more formal division of undergraduate and graduate writing program pedagogy' and an undergraduate workshop that is 'more *taught*' (33 – to which I would only object that it isn't therefore a 'workshop').

To cite the example of my own institution – which is relatively orthodox in the context of UK higher education – the BA programme is indeed formally constituted in relation to a 'programme specification' that identifies skills and outcomes in some detail. Moreover, Creative Writing is only offered as a subsidiary subject, taken in conjunction with the study of English Literature; it is one element in a joint honours degree whose premise is consistent with Norman Foerster's original conception for the Iowa School of Letters: 'Creative writers would do scholarship; scholars would creatively write' (Myers 1996: 136). The stated aim of the programme is 'to complement the critical study of English literature with insights gained from the practice of writing and to complement the practice of writing with insights gained from the critical study of English literature' (UEA 2011), and within this arrangement the degree is organised so that workshopping is only gradually introduced, building on a foundation of generative, exercise-based learning that is designed, as Vanderslice advocates, to enhance 'skill building and craft'.

The implication of the curriculum, therefore, is that the peer-review workshop should succeed rather than preclude a more 'hands-on' mode of teaching. It is assumed to be an advanced pedagogy for students who have progressed to a certain level of formal and contextual understanding that will allow them to contribute insightfully and constructively to the discussion of their peers' works-in-progress. To recycle a line from my guidebook, *The Art of Writing Fiction,* the workshop is where 'the curriculum gives way to conversation, where discussion replaces instruction' (Cowan 2011a: 203). And in this sense the workshop I wish to defend is less, not more, 'taught'.

2. The graduate workshop: 'knowledge' vs 'skills'

If the critique of the undergraduate workshop is sometimes premised on its misapplication, and sometimes on its misappellation, the critique of the graduate workshop tends either to take issue with its conduct or with its content. The critique of conduct generally derives from unhappy personal experience of workshops governed by the shibboleths of Creative Writing 'lore', and again stems primarily from the United States; the critique of content appears often to be an internalisation of the academy's scepticism about the legitimacy of Creative Writing as a discipline and has as its focus the identification and correction of the workshop's pedagogical and theoretical deficiencies. Paul Dawson's *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (2005) may be the most prominent example.

Predicated on the need for a shift in workshop pedagogy from 'a formalist poetics to a sociological poetics' (208), Dawson's critique relegates the role of the Creative Writing programme as a form of literary apprenticeship while elevating an approach to the student manuscript that would illuminate 'the extra-literary discourses it mobilizes' (210), with the eventual aim of recrafting the work to make a more fully 'conscious and deliberate intervention' (211) in those discourses. As I have suggested elsewhere (Cowan 2011b), this is to neglect the extent to which writing may be a speculative activity premised on the necessity of 'non-knowing' and the impossibility of anticipating the nature of its future participation in the discourses that will condition its reception. To adopt a term from Derek Attridge (2004: 7), Dawson describes an 'instrumental' pedagogy that would scrutinise the student text for what it might reveal – or confirm – about the larger cultural texts that produced it, and would thereby neglect its specificity or 'singularity'. But while this approach may have validity if offered in the form of a supporting or contextualising seminar, it is difficult to see how it might improve either the student manuscript, the student writer, or the efficacy of the writing workshop.

In a subsequent essay, 'Historicising "Craft" in the Teaching of Fiction' (2008), Dawson goes on to offer a template for a revised pedagogy that would historicise rather than take as universal and immutable the formalist understandings of craft that guide the critical examination of student works-in-progress and which inform most Creative Writing handbooks. The elements identified by formalist criticism and subsequently given technical application in the Creative Writing classroom – 'point of view' etc – are historically contingent, he points out, and thus open to challenge and mutation. His argument is illustrated with a critical taxonomy of certain contemporary novels that collectively constitute a 'revival' of the omniscient narrator, each of them offering a challenge to the 'limitations of the effaced and focalised narrator of modernist fiction' (Dawson 2008: 200). As is customary with Dawson, the case is cogent and persuasive, though as is also customary the strategies he advances are primarily strategies for reading, and while an engagement with omniscience in the contemporary novel might again provide for an exemplary contextualising module, and might even offer some valuable additions to the repertoire of examplars already available to the teacher of the generative Creative Writing class, the shortcoming of such an approach is that it would again sideline the student manuscript as a mere adjunct to the greater goal of critical understanding.

What appears to be missing from such a proposal is, in fact, the workshop, while missing from his assertion of the emergence of a new aesthetic in Creative Writing – advanced in an earlier essay, 'The Future of Creative Writing' (2007) – is any clear association of writing with a distinctly *literary* aesthetic. Here Dawson purports to have identified a decisive break with the traditional conception of the workshop as 'a place for writers to pass on practical knowledge about their craft' (Dawson 2007: 85). There has been, he asserts, 'a marked shift away from a conception of Creative Writing as formal training for new writers, and towards a conception of it as practice-oriented research' (88). This shift is impelled not by any belated engagement with the challenges represented by the formerly 'incommensurable discourse' of Theory. Rather it is an emergent post-Theory reconceptualisation of Creative Writing teachers as both writers and critics who are already schooled in Theory and whose natural institutional home is not English Studies but the more 'interdisciplinary enterprise of Cultural Studies' (82). On the one hand, claims Dawson, this results in an oppositional orientation that takes from Cultural Studies an emphasis on 'activism and critical consciousness' (86) and is premised on an 'avant-garde aesthetic' that 'encourages and rewards formal experimentation' (84). On the other hand – and perhaps contradictorily – it

results in a greater emphasis on 'employability' and the inculcation of transferable skills appropriate to the creative industries.

Ultimately, perhaps inevitably, this presentation of current trends, which is offered also as a prediction for the future of the discipline, shifts the locus of attention and value away from the intellectually narrow Masters programme with the workshop at its core – 'a practical studio training for aspiring artists' (87) – towards the more theoretically engaged PhD programme that represents 'a research oriented education for future intellectuals and teachers' and which contains an element of teacher training (87), and in this manoeuvre Dawson is emblematic of what may be the main bifurcation informing the disciplinary discourse of graduate-level Creative Writing: the distinction between those pedagogies oriented towards 'skills' and those oriented towards 'knowledge'.

The bifurcation is one recognised in the UK by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which offers two types of support for Master's students: the 'Professional Preparation' scheme that fosters the development of 'high level skills and competencies for professional practice', and the 'Research Preparation' scheme that fosters 'advanced study and research training explicitly intended to provide a foundation for further research at doctoral level' (AHRC 2011). This division is elaborated by Harper and Kroll in their essay 'Creative Writing in the University' (2008) in which they identify two understandings of what may count as a successful outcome in Creative Writing, the first informed by the widespread acceptance of 'publication or performance' as the main criterion of achievement in the field, resulting in a pedagogy and practice oriented towards an '"industry" or "consumption" ideal connected with "making a living"' (Harper & Kroll 2008: 5), and the second promoting a pedagogy that fully exploits the research potential of the academic context and 'actively encourages knowledge acquisition and the application of that knowledge' liberated from any commercial considerations (6).

Complicating their argument is the proposal of a third outcome, the application of such knowledge to 'the communication industries' (8) – that is, the conscription of research knowledge to the institutional imperative to inculcate transferable skills for employment – but broadly speaking the opposition they identify is not so much between varieties of MA practice as between what Joseph Moxley, in another context, calls 'the traditional MFA Model (which can continue to ignore praxis and theory and focus on the studio approach) and the Creative Writing Studies PhD Model (which can be more interdisciplinary and academically rigorous)' (Moxley 2010: 236).

For Willy Maley, writing in the same volume as Moxley, the opposition is indeed between two versions of MA practice, one of which operates as a 'finishing school' with publication and 'professional status' as its aim, the other as a forum cognate with 'studios, improvisatory spaces, places of experimentation and invention, angst and exertion, where serious writers try things out free from any immediate pressure to publish, perform or produce' (Maley 2010: 87). Maley decisively favours the former. Chad Davidson and Gregory Fraser, discussing the teaching of poetry, favour a version of the latter, which they term the 'autotelic' workshop and which is primarily generative, privileging the practice of writing for its own sake over the achievement of 'some final goal or product' (Davidson & Gregory 2006: 22).

This notion of the workshop as an experimental space untainted by commercial imperatives aligns interestingly with the PhD model of research through practice, but locates that practice in a classroom setting and again emphasises the process of generating new material. As such it offers itself less as a corrective to the traditional workshop than as an alternative, and thereby takes

its place among the promiscuity of models that might, in summary, be arranged along a horizontal axis that has as one pole the wholly taught, exercise-based class for beginners and at the other pole the wholly discursive workshop for advanced (perhaps already published) writers, with a vertical axis that begins with recreational or high-school-level classes and ascends through the BA to the MA and MFA, and then on to the elite MA and MFA programmes exemplified by the likes of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. A third axis, were such a thing imaginable, might calibrate the extent to which a programme is vocationally oriented, though this raises the question of whether the non-vocational course is premised on a recreational ideal of 'writing for pleasure' or an academic ideal of 'writing as research', and whether the vocational course has mainstream publication as its goal or entry-level occupations in the 'creative industries'. An impossible fourth axis might register the extent to which the pedagogy is premised on a formalist or a sociological poetics.

The nature of the programme will determine the nature of the 'workshop'. And the workshop I wish to defend – and to take as definitive of the term – is the wholly discursive, advanced-level, publication-oriented version inaugurated at the University of Iowa.

3. The peer-review workshop: 'writers who teach' vs 'teachers who write'

As described by DG Myers in *The Elephants Teach* (1996), and summarised by Vanderslice in *Does The Writing Workshop Still Work?* (2010), the Iowa workshop took as its mission the postgraduate incubation of young-ish writers selected for ability, who would through the critical rigours of the workshop be tempered to withstand the harsh critical landscape of publication – the explicit end to which the programme was oriented. Following Mary Swander (2005), Vanderslice describes this as 'the Bobby Knight School of writing pedagogy, so named for the famously abusive, chair-throwing college basketball coach' (Vanderslice 2010: 31), a style that would have found a ready response, she surmises, among the Iowa intake of war veterans then entering college on the GI Bill, 'for whom the humiliations of boot camp and the paint of the basketball court were easily internalized metaphors' and who subsequently 'fanned out to become writing teachers themselves and modeled their own workshops on the only method of teaching they had known' (31), thus perpetuating a pedagogy wholly unsuited for undergraduates in particular, for whom a more guided and gradual approach is required (33).

Elsewhere Vanderslice identifies as key to the Iowa legacy 'a firmly entrenched star system' whose consequence is 'a pedagogy characterized by an anti-intellectual cult of personality' that 'privileges the testimony of the writer/teacher in the workshop over other more varied teaching techniques that might be more closely aligned with learning objectives' (Vanderslice 2008: 70). The slight note of grievance that animates this and her other reflections on the shortcomings of the US academy is given its fullest expression (and explanation) in her most recent publication, *Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education: Programs and Practices that Work* (2011), where she contrasts the 'incredibly nurturing' experience of completing a PhD under the mentorship of 'literature and composition professors' with an MFA experience in which she was offered little mentoring that wasn't incidental to the programme, and in which her tutorials were repeatedly 'scheduled and canceled, scheduled and canceled' (Vanderslice 2011: 48-9).

In the person of Wendy Bishop, Vanderslice eventually discovered a role model, and in Bishop's *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories* (1997) a set of

corroborating narratives that allowed her to accept that neither she nor her teachers were responsible for shortcomings of her MFA, which was the outcome of a system 'that honored the product and its star creators in an economy of scarcity, rather than creating an empowering economy of process and, subsequently, wealth' (2011: 52). Whatever an 'economy of process' might be, her pedagogical mission has since been premised on the correction of the manifold hurts and disappointments of the apparently failed Iowa model, particularly in relation to undergraduate provision, and in this it is consistent with Tim Mayers's critique of the 'devaluation of pedagogy in creative writing' that follows from the privileging of 'writers who teach' over 'teachers who write'. This devaluation, argues Mayers, is endorsed – and even enabled – by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs:

> In the "Values and Beliefs" section of its *Strategic Plan 2000-2010*, the AWP specifically defines itself as the province of "writers who teach," thereby elevating the former identity over the latter. More specifically: "AWP believes that those accomplished in making literature are the most effective teachers of writing and literature." (2007: 4-8)

For Patrick Bizzaro, another prominent critic of such pedagogical complacency, the hiring of published writers can be 'a wonderful thing' since it provides an 'opportunity for students to talk with writers actively engaged in finding solutions to the same kinds of problems in writing the students must solve for themselves' (Bizzaro & McClanahan 2007: 86). 'But,' he counsels, 'there is a down side':

> this kind of teaching fosters master-apprentice relationships, the teacher having near dictatorial control over the students' texts. The logic is pretty simple. If students don't make the kinds of changes their teachers, who have appropriated their texts, recommend, they will receive poor grades. I heard one teacher, a well-known writer, say that her students could decide to not make the revisions she suggested; students, she argued, have a right to fail. Sometimes this kind of enforcement is more subtle... [and] in my opinion, such teaching has produced a generation of clones – students who sound amazingly like their teachers. (2007: 86)

Setting aside the obvious remedies to such a situation – the blind double-marking and external examining arrangements that are standard practice in the UK, for example – it is instructive to compare Bizzaro's largely negative conception of the writer-led workshop with Anna Leahy's more nuanced consideration of the role of self-esteem in Creative Writing pedagogy, which attends to the implications of a less dictatorial style of teaching. Similarly concerned to refute those aspects of 'lore' that 'position professionalism as antithetical to being a writer' (Leahy 2007: 61), Leahy aligns with Bizzaro and others in stressing the need for greater rigour in the Creative Writing classroom. Her impulse, however, is not to repudiate the peer-review workshop, or the authority of the 'writer who teaches', but to offer a fuller appreciation of the workshop method as a mode of teaching that is both conducive to writing and perhaps even analogous to it – which is itself a 'creative act'. This begins with a recognition of the need to shift the pedagogical focus from the student to the work, and from the work to its revision.

Leahy notes the temptation among teachers to foster a 'feel good' classroom atmosphere in order to secure favourable course evaluations, and the

identification among students of kindness and encouragement with effective teaching. 'Again and again,' she finds in the research, 'friendliness and caring are cited as characteristics that students deem most important in teachers' (2007: 57). The danger of such a pedagogy, however, is that the 'hidden guiding principle' (56) of nurturing self-esteem may produce students who are unreceptive to criticism and thereby less teachable; in affirming students' over-estimation of their own abilities, it may curtail the acquisition of the critical self-awareness that will enable them to develop independently of the classroom.

Leahy's solution is to attempt to guide classroom conversation 'away from concepts such as intentionality that are more directly related to self-esteem and toward the words on the page and writerly techniques and choices' (62). Strongly implied in such a strategy is an insistence on the importance of revision, which 'allows students to avoid looking only at themselves for inspiration or creativity; instead, they look to what's already on the page, to something that has become somehow separate and worth listening to' (63).

Though primarily concerned with undergraduate teaching, this emphasis is crucial in fostering among students a relationship to their own writing and to the success of their learning that is self-critical and responsible. In addition, it offers a counter to naive conceptions of writing as unmediated self-expression and, in counselling against an overly solicitous mode of teaching, reasserts the authority of the teacher as a corrective to student complacency. Ultimately it opens to a fuller consideration of the role of actively engaged students in mitigating the authority of the potentially 'dictatorial' tutor.

This latter point is pursued in detail in a later essay, 'Teaching as a Creative Act: Why the Workshop Works in Creative Writing' (2010), in which Leahy suggests that beneath the surface structure of the workshop there is a deeper structure of tacit understandings, both practical and ethical, not just about writing but about the conduct of the collaborative enterprise that constitutes the workshop method. Quoting Lee S Schulman on signature pedagogies, she stresses firstly that 'the emphasis on students' active participation reduces the most significant impediments to learning in higher education: passivity, invisibility, anonymity, and lack of accountability', and secondly that such pedagogies 'create atmospheres of risk taking and foreboding, as well as occasions for exhilaration and excitement' (Schulman 2005: 57). That the workshop method becomes 'deeply internalized', she suggests, 'likely allows us – both as individual teachers and as an academic field – to think very effectively *with* it (Leahy 2010: 65-66):

> [In] discussing each other's work with revision in mind, collective wisdom emerges. Individual members of the workshop contribute to the collective wisdom and also benefit from it, ultimately distinguishing their individual written pieces in relation to the common conversation. Far from homogeneity, the workshop environment teaches students to think of themselves as writers in relation to the literary tradition, readers, and other writers and to develop skills that allow them to create distinctive work in those contexts. (2010: 66)

Leahy's recognition of what may be termed the 'writerliness' of the student participants is coupled with an insistence on the writerly credentials of the teacher, who 'models the writer as practitioner' (71), which helps foster a shared awareness of the primacy of the work over the individual and enables a flexibility and inventiveness of approach to its discussion that is analagous to

the conditions of its production. To borrow again from Derek Attridge (2004: 101-3), the precondition for an engagement with the literary work is an acknowledgement of both its authoredness and its separateness from its author. Intentionality is assumed; the workshop attends to the words on the page and what they, not their author, may reveal of their meaning and potential for future reworking.

4. The workshop must go: 'Romantic muse' vs 'coercive self-expression'

The egalitarianism implied by Leahy's argument is one that Michelene Wandor would describe as merely 'terminological' (Wandor 2008: 158), belying a 'structured dependence' (125) that renders the workshop incommensurate with a 'peer-friendship' (126) model in which authority is dispersed or shared. The hierarchical reality, Wandor insists, is that knowledge passes 'from expert to novice' and this 'inevitably creates an inbuilt tension' which reveals as bogus the 'theoretically egalitarian responses' of the students (126). 'The teacher,' she points out, 'is a professional, whose job in the classroom is to teach, and the student is there to learn what s/he does not yet know' (158), and while such an assertion is consistent with Leahy's admonitions against an overly-personalised pedagogy, it also represents a manoeuvre characteristic of *The Author Is Not Dead* in proposing as a remedy for the apparent contradictions of the graduate workshop an axiom more appropriate to the undergraduate classroom.

In many ways productive of the contradictions it purports to identify, Wandor's critique is animated by an impatience with what she terms 'the impossible ideology of CW as caught in the double bind of the Romantic/therapy axis' (174). This ideology is premised, she asserts, on a disavowal of any ability to teach talent, since talent is the product of 'the grand triumverate Muse/Genius/Inspiration' (Wandor 2004: 116), which cannot be taught, even as the pedagogy organises itself around a set of conventions whose purpose is to produce 'great writers' (2008: 129). This contradiction is compounded by the discipline's attachment to an equally erroneous insistence that 'all' writing must come from the self (109). Thus, no writing can happen without an appeal to the self; but in the absence of talent, no appeal to the self will produce it. Nevertheless, such an appeal is encouraged, for while genius is claimed by the pedagogy to be inexplicable and unteachable, it may nonetheless 'be lurking within' (109). Only a concerted excavation of personal (preferably traumatic) experience will reveal it, an approach that 'over-privileges the personal and fetishes [*sic*] the autobiographical' (110).

Wandor's understanding of the solipsism of Creative Writing pedagogy finds its justification in a reading of the conventionalised 'how-to' literature exemplified by R.V. Cassill's fifty-year-old publication *Writing Fiction* (1962), which confirms the familiar precepts of the discipline ('show, don't tell' etc) and evinces in addition 'a resistance to knowledge acquired outside the "self", a questionable attitude to reading, and continuous stress on self-expression' (2008: 104). This conception of writing as a form of 'proto-therapy' (117) divorced from any consideration of 'literary history, criticism, theory, aesthetics' (114) is, she claims, inscribed in the university curriculum too, for just as the consumers of such guidebooks are routinely invited to 'trawl their emotions, in order to uncover and work on... the most vulnerable' (110), so in the 'writing-as-therapy' classroom Wandor finds a 'stress on memory, difficult emotional experiences, dreams, personal relationships' that teachers 'coerce into public display' in a way that is 'frankly unethical' (153).

There is doubtless some truth in Wandor's depiction of a genre of guidebook targeted at beginners and 'self-learners', but there is much that is questionable in relation to the contemporary undergraduate curriculum, where the goal – as at my own institution – often remains as it was at the discipline's foundation: 'to integrate literary knowledge with literary practice' (Myers 1996: 13). Here the initial emphasis may fall on generative exercises and the conversion of personal experience, but this is coupled with a sustained engagement with literary history and theory and an interrogation rather than simple acceptance of the concept of 'self-expression'. The aim is draw upon the self in order to write beyond the self, which would only become 'coercive' if all memories were assumed to be traumatic, all emotional experiences difficult. Writing as therapy may well be practiced in therapeutic contexts, but in the university classroom the emphasis is elsewhere: on the generation of material to be worked upon and – at a more advanced level – the constructive criticism of the already worked-upon material. Axiomatic in either context is that the focus should fall on the work, not the self.

For Wandor, however, any such 'criticism' (the scare quotes are hers) is compromised by the accepted protocols of workshop practice, which operate to conceal the 'value judgments' that underpin the process of peer review. These cannot be 'taught or shared', just as the literature cannot 'theorise or discuss its critical values' (2008: 127), because to do so would be to expose the 'the irreconcileable [*sic*] Romantic/therapy axis' (131) on which the pedagogy is based. The result is an impoverished lexicon of 'likes' and 'dislikes':

> 'Feedback' can mean favourable or adverse opinion (this is 'good' or 'bad'). 'Criticism' or 'critiquing' can be (often is) used in the colloquial sense of put-down, disapproval. The solution of 'constructive' or 'positive' criticism means saying nice things first, pointing out what you 'like', what you think is 'good'. This contrasts with its opposite, 'negative' criticism, which involves pointing out what is 'wrong' or what doesn't 'work'. The mooted ideal is to find some form of 'constructive criticism', which is meant to 'help' the student re-write their work, if they want to. (127-8)

Whether this constitutes the 'brutal and patronising exchanges' that Wandor claims are characteristic of workshop practice (131), she nonetheless insists that such a 'peculiarly perverse methodology' could only have become ubiquitous by virtue of a 'background assumption that the training is determined by an aesthetic Darwinism: the survival of the fittest student through the hard-cop/soft-cop scourges of the workshop'. This she describes as 'fundamentally a punitive approach to pedagogy' which creates 'insecurity, fear, intimidation, uncertainty' and results, ultimately, in a 'terror of the blank page' (219).

Unlike Vanderslice and other critics of 'the Bobby Knight School of writing pedagogy', Wandor has not herself been the victim of such intimidation or uncertainty. Her critique depends heavily on two published accounts of Iowa's workshops – Tom Grimes's *Seven Decades of the Iowa Workshop* (1999) and a report by Robert Graham on the NAWE website of having observed an Iowa class in 2001 (128-9 – and, as if to demonstrate that Iowa is everywhere, Rebecca O'Rourke's 1992 report into community writing groups, which similarly evidences examples of 'frankly brutal' feedback – 'rip it to pieces', 'pull it part' [*sic*], 'pull no punches' (130). These examples lead her to conclude that:

> The patronising of individual vulnerability alongside a method which cannot fail but be discouraging and educationally disempowering is not a context in which genuine teaching and learning can take place. Such workshops are sado-masochistic Houses of Correction on a Victorian scale. (129)

Wandor's tendency to hyperbole – evidenced here and throughout her critique – is consistent with the scale of her many misapprehensions about the discipline – which includes the assertion all students at all levels are 'seduced' into believing that they are being prepared for publication (218) – but regardless of whether one accepts the accuracy of her overview, or the validity of the dichotomies that structure her argument, it is reasonable to expect that she might go on to describe an alternative pedagogy that will bring about the transformation of classroom practice that she insists is required if the subject is, belatedly, to be taught 'effectively' (174). And indeed her polemic concludes with the revelation of 'a set of principles' that is, she claims, 'very different from received ways of teaching CW' (211). These seven principles are offered in the register of the programme specification, and the extent to which they correspond with current practice may be indicated by comparing them with a selection of the 'skills' and 'outcomes' itemised in the programme specification for the BA programme at my own institution (interleaved below):

> Wandor – 'to develop verbal acuity in imaginative uses of language in relation to each of the conventions of the imaginative modes of thought realised in the three core genres – prose fiction, drama and poetry;' (Wandor 2008: 212)
> UEA – 'Ability to write creatively across a range of forms and genres' (UEA 2006: 4); 'specific skills required for writing in a variety of genres.' (6)

> Wandor – 'to develop a practical understanding (i.e. through writing and analysis) of the conventions of the above;' (212)
> UEA – 'Understanding of the constituent elements of the principal genres from a practitioner's point of view.' (2)

> Wandor – 'to become aware of, and understand, what distinguishes each genre from the others, both in the imagining and in the writing;' (212)
> UEA – 'Knowledge of the distinctive character of texts within the principal genres.' (5)

> Wandor – 'to become aware... of the difference between *writing* and *knowing and thinking about writing*;*'* (212)
> UEA – 'Appreciation of the power of imagination in literary creation' (5); 'ability to reflect critically on one's own creative and critical practice.' (8)

> Wandor – 'to *think* about writing, and to think about *how to think* about writing, through analysing the stylistic features of student writing in the classroom;' (212)
> UEA – 'Understanding and use of critical terminology' (5); 'reading skills and discrimination and judgement in relation to complex materials.' (8)

> Wandor – 'for each student to develop a greater understanding of how their mind/imagination works; to gain understanding of their own linguistic and cultural resources, and of the necessity of expanding these;' (212)

> UEA – 'An understanding of how literature and language produce and reflect cultural change and difference' (5); 'understanding of and engagement with contemporary writing, as something living and as something to be contributed to and interacted with' (6); 'the learning of the confidence to take on a writing voice – informed, analytical, politicised and engaged – when writing in any form' (6);
>
> Wandor – 'to pursue class-based studies which focus on imaginative *writing,* not *rewriting.'* (212)
> UEA – 'Practical skills in effective writing, notetaking and listening' (6); 'observation, invention, imagination, discipline' (7); 'ability to manage an ambitious project from the drafting process to completion' (8)

Far from representing a 'profoundly radical change' (218), then, Wandor's 'set of principles' largely conforms to the practices of the generative and cumulative undergraduate curriculum. Students are set writing tasks in class; they read out the results; the tasks build towards the completion of a finished work; the tutor comments on 'relevant stylistic/linguistic features', guiding the students appreciation of genre conventions; further writing is added and, gradually, 'the possibilities already immanently there within each segment of written text are raised as possible ways in which the writing might develop' (213). But if this last phrase sounds like a description of the peer-review workshop, it isn't, because the students' voices are silenced, rewriting is forbidden, and the emphasis on 'structural potential' and what is 'immanently there' is entirely non-evaluative.

In this abolition of 'value judgements' and any 'second-guessing' of intentions, Wandor's method aspires to a 'materiality' that will elevate it above the solipsism and subjectivism of 'the Romantic/therapy axis' and so avoid 'the ethical problems resulting from the workshop's putative linking of writing with therapy' (216). Setting aside the extent to which that 'linking' is produced by her own argument, it is worth noting that Wandor does nonetheless make some allowance for the 'self':

> The central conundrum of the 'invisibility' of the sources of imaginative writing – what is in the mind, the imagination – gives the exhortation to 'write about what you know/from your own experience' a very crude, baseline accuracy. However, as soon as the first word is written in class, it has already become something different. It is now marks on the page, and an 'object', with all the weight of its historical, cultural and intertextual determinations.... Something has been made manifest: whether and what relationship it bears to what was/is in the mind is another issue entirely. (Wandor 2008: 215)

This brings Wandor's argument very close to an accord with Anna Leahy's more positive presentation of the workshop and suggests a solution to the contradictions into which her critique has bound her, for if the workshop is premised on a recognition of the separateness and materiality of the writing, it need not consider questions of intentionality, or engage with the vulnerable self, but seek instead to address the material 'object' and the cultural determinations it encodes – which include the generic conventions it operates within – much as the writer, in the act of writing, attends to the page as 'something that has become somehow separate and worth listening to' (Leahy 2007: 63). That listening may be collective, and guided, and while it remains

an objective of the workshop to improve the student manuscript, it may be that its principal purpose is to improve the students as 'listeners'.

5. The workshop that works

I have offered elsewhere a series of statements by well-known novelists on the importance (or unavoidability) of maintaining a state of 'non-knowing' in the creative process (Cowan 2011a). Here is an addition to that series:

> It is naive to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. (JM Coetzee, quoted in Attridge 2004: 23)

Coetzee's presentation of the task of writing implies a particular level of attentiveness to what the words on the page may reveal to their author. Leahy describes that attentiveness as a form of 'listening'. And the workshop, I would suggest, provides a context in which the 'writer who teaches' may effect a performance of that listening, a practical demonstration of the intensity of his or her 'imaginative and technical engagement with the way that sentences operate' (Cowan 2011b: 209):

> The tutor may well be the most insightful reader in the room. She will almost certainly have spent more years in the language than her students. Possibly she will carry the authority of several publications and prizes. Her role, however, is not to issue instructions, but to point to possibilities. It is not to lay down the law, but to attempt to engage with each student's work on its own terms, and to guide the rest of the group in adopting a similar approach. Ultimately her role is to exemplify a way of reading that is tactful and insightful, meticulous and honest, but which is only ever offered as one reading among numerous others. (210)

This may be to overstate the egalitarianism of the process, which is nonetheless far from being 'spurious' or 'terminological', as Wandor might allege (2008: 158). At graduate level, and especially on a programme whose participants have been selected by interview and portfolio, a degree of provisionality may be required in proposing suggestions for a manuscript's amendment. In part this will be a response to the integrity of the work, its degree of accomplishment, inventiveness, complexity. In part it will reflect a shared understanding of writing as a form of self-reading and self-correction, a recursive process in which re-writing leads to re-reading and then on to further re-writing; it will reflect an appreciation of the extent to which writing may be tentative, exploratory, always proximate to failure, and arduous. The steps are not straightforward; we cannot teach to a template. In the unpredictability of its encounter with the already-written, the workshop brings the work into being – as an event in the present, *as* writing – and produces the possibility of its future re-writing.

As may be implicit, this conception of the relationship of reading to writing is indebted to Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, with which it shares a resistance to those 'instrumental' approaches that would shift the centre of attention from the text to its context, or view the work as an example of

something other than itself, or seek to interrogate the work for what it might disclose of the operations of other discourses, whether 'political, moral, historical, biographical, psychological, cognitive, or linguistic' (Attridge 2004: 7).

This is not to deny the role of contextualising modules as part of a broader curriculum; nor is it to concede to Dawson's suggestion that the workshop is 'founded on a concept of the literary as a site of withdrawal from politics and society' (2005: 184). Rather it is to elevate the importance of formal considerations in attending to the literary work, for whatever else the work may achieve 'as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement' (Attridge 2004: 129), other modes of writing are equipped to achieve such outcomes equally as effectively. What distinguishes the literary work as literary is the 'otherness and singularity' that may arise 'from the encounter with the words themselves, their sequence, their suggestiveness, their patterning, their interrelations, their sounds and rhythms' (107).

Although Attridge does not directly address the discipline of Creative Writing, it may be extrapolated from this that the workshop – a pedagogy dedicated to the production of literary works – is necessarily 'formalist'. Its primary concern is with the selection and arrangement of words, though this does not entail any 'withdrawal from politics and society' since these will have entered the workshop in the person of the participants and in the shape of the words. Linguistic and generic conventions are culturally constituted, for instance, and almost any word will be a nexus 'of meaning and feeling, and hence deeply rooted in culture, history, and the varieties of human experience' (109). It is a matter of emphasis, which in the workshop will fall on the deployment of a work's formal resources rather than any concerted scrutiny of what the work may reveal about politics or society. And the more inventive the work, the more those generic conventions and cultural assumptions will be challenged, altered, renewed.

The workshop provides the occasion, then, for a disparate group of writers at different stages of their development and having distinct life histories, personalities, areas of expertise and knowledge, to collaborate in a sustained engagement with works-in-progress that will become through their revision more effectively situated in relation to the wider cultural context that is revealed and constituted by the various contributions of the participants. Every reading in the workshop will be unique, but will turn primarily on the question of whether a work 'works', by which I mean the question of whether the apparent intentions of the work – as they are encoded in its manipulation of form, its invocation of a reader, its engagement with generic conventions – are realised in the responses of the readers gathered in the room, out of which will emerge a series of suggestions for the better realisation of those intentions (and of course it should go without saying that the 'actual' intentions of the author will be irrelevant to this encounter with the work).

This is not to suggest, however, that the individuals who make up the collective will always or inevitably coincide in their views, and in this regard Jen Webb's account of teaching collaborative practice is instructive, since any group, like the wider society, will be 'an aggregation of individuals and small collectives predicated on antagonisms, competitive practices, fragmented identity and disparate interests' (Webb 2008: 127). With the objective of engaging her students in the production of collaborative works as a counter to received notions of art as 'the charismatic representation of a personal vision' (119), Webb's project represents an implicit rejection of those 'publication-oriented... pedagogies modeled after the Iowa Writers' workshop' (Haake 2007: 24).

Nevertheless, her summation of the project's success might equally apply to the operation of a successful workshop:

> how can a small group of self-willed practitioners, motivated by training and predilection to commit fully to their own vision, put aside self-interest and competition to make a collaborative work? We know they (we) can, because it happens – and I suspect it happens in the same way that society works, despite its 'impossibility'. In limited, contingent moments when disharmony and dissimilarity are put aside; in temporary acts of suturing that allow us to achieve a localized and temporary shared goal. So we might lack a guarantee of final truth or perfected community, but we do have practice.... The better students are often the driven students, and hence perhaps more competitive than their peers; but at least for the length of the semester, they seem capable of finding ways to be collaborators, complicit in the idea of community, of team, and able to put their energy into the shared vision of their project. (Webb 2008: 127-8)

In this light, the 'shared vision' of the peer-review workshop might be understood as its commitment to providing a supportive and challenging context for the reception of individual works-in-progress, which Kevin Brophy, writing in the same volume as Webb, characterises as 'a live event, dominated by spontaneous responses, group dynamics, all the naturalness and excitement of live reactions to a piece of writing – alternately sentimental, political, personal, inspirational or dampening' (Brophy 2008: 77). For Brophy, too, the task of establishing a successful collaborative practice is predicated on an awareness of its 'impossibility', expressed in this instance as a tension between 'the spontaneity of art' and 'the application of critical intelligence and theoretical frameworks' (77). Managing this tension, he writes, 'makes the workshop almost an unworkable occasion', and yet its almost-unworkability – its 'strangeness and difficulty' – is in some ways 'the point' (79). Like art, like writing, the workshop derives its energy and potential from working at the limits of what may be possible.

In transcribing these and other phrases from Brophy's essay I inadvertently typed 'a live event' as 'a life event'. And in doing so I hardly committed an error, for the workshop is and should also be a life event, an experience that requires its participants to be fully alert, fully alive to the moment, prepared to think and say the unexpected, to surprise themselves, but also to form alliances and emnities and relationships, and not only to form them but to be formed by them. Such receptiveness to experience finds its corollary in a receptiveness to the work under discussion, and corresponds to what Attridge identifies as an ethical imperative to remain open to 'alterity' or 'otherness', whether in a work of art or another person. Such 'otherness' is constituted in the moment of the encounter, and is that which currently lies 'outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving' (Attridge 2004: 19).

Otherness, in other words, is unpredictable, unforseeable, and necessarily brings about a shift in the horizons of the person to whom the other is other, while the capacity to write creatively depends as much on a particular 'alertness to hints of as yet unexplored possibilities' – including the possibility of otherness – as it does on a 'skillful handling of known materials' (25).

The graduate workshop will attend – inevitably and often – to the consideration and development of craft skills, but it will depart most decisively from the

necessary constraints of the undergraduate curriculum in gathering together a group of individuals who are sufficiently immersed in the language and sufficiently experienced in the requirements of their form to appreciate both its limitations and its possibilities, and who will themselves possess the potential, at least, to go on to produce unanticipated new iterations. And this, I would suggest, accounts for the excitement and value of the workshop for the 'writer as teacher', in that it represents – in all its contingency and difficulty, its spontaneity and intensity – the point at which the pedagogy comes closest to the experience of writing, and closest to exceeding the institutionalisation of what the writer knows.

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