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Blind spots: what creative writing doesn't know

Abstract

The Creative Writing program at the University of East Anglia – the longest established in the UK and the first of its kind outside the USA – was founded in part as a reaction against a Theory-driven conception of Literary Studies that was felt to be indifferent to questions of aesthetic value and the authority of authorship. In this article I trace the history of Creative Writing at UEA and outline my understanding of the nature of the relationship between creative and critical practice in order to examine questions of knowledge that hinge on the following three questions: What does Literary Studies know? What does Creative Writing know that's different? What might Literary Studies know that Creative Writing doesn't need to know? The answers these questions, I suggest, may offer an argument against the incursion into the Creative Writing workshop of pedagogical approaches that derive from Literary Studies and are blind to the importance of 'non-knowing' in creative practice.

Keywords: creative writing pedagogy, creative writing theory, creative writing history, literary studies, knowledge

1. Smudgy squares

I would like to explore what it is I think I know about the relationship of Creative Writing to Literary Studies (whether 'strange bedfellows' or 'perfect partners'), and I suspect this will hinge on the question of literary knowledge and what each of these forms of enquiry may be said to know or, perhaps, what each of them may be said not to need to know. And because I graduated from and now teach on the Creative Writing program at the University of East Anglia (UEA) – the longest established in the UK and the first of its kind outside the USA – it might help me to approach this question by way of what I know about the relationship of Creative Writing to Literary Studies at UEA, currently and historically, though this understanding will inevitably be conditioned by what I know of developments in the Australian academy, since so much of my thinking about my own discipline has been formed in relation to – and sometimes in reaction against – the arguments of Australian academics, particularly those published in *TEXT*.

But first I would like to describe a scene in episode seven of the second season of the American TV series *Mad Men* (2008), a particularly 'knowing' drama about a Madison Avenue advertising agency called Sterling Cooper in the early years of the 1960s that is famously precise in its observation of period detail and famously like a novel in its multi-layeredness. It wins nominations and awards for everything from make-up to hairstyling, casting to cinematography, lead acting to ensemble acting, and the scene I have in mind involves several of the ensemble players, including a character called Harry Crane, the fretful,

bespectacled head of TV advertising (this is 1962 and Harry is head of a department of one).

Harry is particularly fretful in this instance because he's been summoned to a meeting the following day with Bert Cooper, the gnomish Senior Partner of the agency, and as he speculates on what this summons might mean, one of his colleagues mentions that Cooper has recently acquired a 'picture', rumoured to have cost \$10,000, and teasingly hints that the meeting will be a test: what does Harry think of the picture? Typically, Harry is worried about the consequences of thinking wrongly, and appeals for help, but it's no help at all to be told that the picture is 'abstract expressionist'. 'What the hell does that mean?' he asks, which prompts the agency's new secretary – Jane Siegel – to suggest they all go upstairs to look at it. And because they are (mostly) all smitten by Jane, they follow her.

It's after-hours, the coast is clear, but they're conspicuously jittery because Bert Cooper has a god-like authority in their world. He knows things, but no one really knows him; to his underlings, Bert Cooper is unreadable, and his office, which is huge, is forbidden to them: it's where knowledge resides. They take off their shoes before entering.

Initially we see Jane and her admirers tentatively approaching the wall on which the painting is hung. The camera looks at them looking. It shows them orientating themselves in relation to whatever it is, this 'picture', preparing themselves for whatever it has to reveal. Then Sal, the art director – who ought to know a thing or two – identifies it as a Rothko, at which point the camera observes them all from behind, looking at the painting, which is taller than it is wide: three bands of orangey-red (or reddish orange: a Rothko).

What then follows is a kind of 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Fretful Harry says: 'Two possibilities. Either Cooper loves it, and you *have* to love it, like in an 'Emperor's New Clothes' situation, or he thinks it's a joke and you'll look like a fool if you pretend to dig it.' But most of them don't dig it. Their responses are largely philistine. Jane sums it up as 'smudgy squares' and says 'that's interesting' in such a way as to express her complete lack of interest; Harry can't get over the price-tag, and casts about for a brochure that will explain it; and Sal, the art director – who *ought* to know a thing or two – is sure it must mean *something* (because he's a commercial artist, for whom images are always instrumental, always *meant*, always the medium for a message), but the message of the Rothko escapes him.

Only one of the group is appreciative: Ken Cosgrove, a would-be novelist – he's had a short story published in *The Atlantic Monthly* – who suggests that it's not supposed to be explained; it's simply meant to be experienced. 'It's like looking into something very deep,' he says. 'You could fall in.' Which gives Sal, the art director – who is secretly gay – a reason to look appreciatively at Ken, on whom he has a crush.

And that is all. The scene is short; not a lot else happens. Harry hurries them away. But the painting has been the occasion for an interpretative community to gather and attempt to arrive at a shared understanding of an art work's significance, and although they don't arrive at a consensus, this at least offers an illustration of meaning's multiplicity, of there being as many interpretations, perhaps, as there are interpreters. The scene might also be read as a commentary on the question of art's value – intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically – the punchline to which comes in a later scene, when Bert Cooper slyly admits to Harry Crane that the painting is merely an investment: he expects it to '*double* in value by next Christmas'. Meanwhile the painting

has allowed the characters to reveal a little more of themselves to each other, and to the viewer.

What I have left out of this account are the three occasions when the camera lingers on the Rothko. There is nothing else in shot but the painting, which appears to be observing its observers. It looks back at them looking; it gazes back at their gaze, which is also our gaze. It fills the television screen. And of course it's entirely mute, yet it appears somehow enigmatic, somehow knowing in its muteness. It cannot signify verbally, or linguistically, and because it's 'abstract expressionist', it cannot signify representationally, or iconically. And yet it does appear to brim with withheld significance. It appears to know stuff. It appears, almost, to have a secret.

2. What does Literary Studies know?

This scene in *Mad Men* reminded me of a passage in a book called *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* by Mark Currie (2007). Here is that passage:

The idea that fiction might know something, perhaps something more than philosophy, has come back into focus recently in literary studies in a number of ways. An interesting case, particularly in relation to knowledge, is Michael Wood's *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*. Wood's discussion of knowledge begins from Peter de Bolla's 'brilliant brief statement' of the question of knowledge in art:

De Bolla is looking at a Barnett Newman painting [...] He has decided that the usual critical questions – what does this painting mean?, what is it trying to say? – are the wrong ones. He offers one or two not all that appealing alternatives ('how does this painting determine my address to it?, how does it make me feel?, what does it make me feel?) and says that 'beyond these questions lies the insistent murmur of great art, the nagging thought that the work holds something to itself, contains something that, in the final analysis remains untouchable, unknowable'. Then de Bolla arrives at what I find the truly haunting question: 'What does this painting know?' (Currie 2007: 107 (quoting Wood 2005: 8))

Both Mark Currie and Michael Wood want to ask this same question of literature: 'What does literature know?' And I'll come back to this, though briefly, initially, I should acknowledge two problems in the question, the first being the degree of personification involved, which both Currie and (to a lesser extent) Wood recognise and discuss. Neither a novel nor a painting has consciousness, let alone self-consciousness, and so cannot really be said to 'know' anything. Clearly we're talking metaphorically, and idiomatically, as a way of approaching a different question, which concerns the limits of our own knowledge, perhaps – not so much about literature (though that too) but about life.

The second problem concerns what has been called the 'ontological groundlessness' of literature, and indeed art. Defining literature is difficult, defining art notoriously so. They are both the product of discursive practices –

in a sense, they are products of our efforts to define them – and one of the discursive practices that defines literature is Literary Studies, while another, we might want to argue, is Creative Writing, though the object of study – or the subject under discussion – then becomes somewhat different. Expressed in crude though familiar terms: for Literary Studies, literature is what has been written; for Creative Writing, literature is what is being written. Literary Studies attends to the product, Creative Writing to the process. And this raises the possibility of certain other questions: What does Literary Studies know? What does Creative Writing know that's different? Or more interestingly, I think: What might Literary Studies know that Creative Writing doesn't *need* to know?

In posing these questions, however, I wouldn't wish to propose a fundamental conflict between the two discourses. My assumption – always – is complementarity, even reciprocity, and in this regard I ought to add that Mark Currie was, until recently, my Head of School at UEA, and he remains a friend: I have not only read his book, I've sat in a pub and discussed it with him. Which is to say, I haven't experienced the relationship of Creative Writing to Literary Studies at UEA as anything other than a conversation. We talk – literally and metaphorically – and this conversation reflects the foundational premise of the Creative Writing program at UEA: that there should be a dialogue between the creative and the critical – or, to put that a different way, that these bedfellows should not be strange to each other.

3. The American model

In order to situate and explain the emergence of Creative Writing at UEA, and the nature of this relationship between the creative and the critical, it might help me to follow the narrative of Creative Writing's development in the USA, as described by DG Myers in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (2006), since the UEA program owes so much to the American model, both in its inception and its current incarnation.

Myers locates the beginnings of Creative Writing in the USA at the end of the nineteenth century in a reaction against a pedantic, philological approach to literature that treated it as a corpus of historical and linguistic knowledge but failed to allow for the possibility of that corpus being actively supplemented or supplanted by living writers. In this, Creative Writing was both an experiment in education and a creative-critical enterprise whose goal was critical understanding 'conducted from within the conditions of literary practice' (Myers 2006: 133). It was 'learning by doing', 'practice' rather than 'theory', and initially – in the 1870s and 1880s at Harvard – this experiment assumed the guise of a re-formation of the teaching of rhetoric under the new rubric of 'English composition'. But whereas traditional rhetoric had emphasised a rule-bound correctness, a subordination of the self to 'grammatical exercises, spelling drills, and the memorization of rhetorical precepts' (Myers 2006: 37), English composition (for now, at least) emphasised individuality, self-expression, the imagination.

The subsequent development of the discipline, as Myers reveals, is more complicated than might be expressed in terms of a simple dichotomy between the practical and the scholarly, or the creative and the critical. On the scholarly side – at least until the advent of the New Criticism – individual literary texts continued to be scrutinised for what they might reveal about larger cultural texts – whether that larger text be linguistic, historical, philosophical, sociological – while on the practical side there was the teaching of instrumental

language – technical English, business English – which achieved ascendancy as ‘English composition’ reverted to a rather mechanical regime of precepts and drills. ‘Historically,’ says Myers (8), Creative Writing ‘beckoned a third way’, but it wasn’t yet called Creative Writing, and in the first two decades of the twentieth century it beckoned with diminishing force until given fresh impetus by the confluence of three things: the appointment of Robert Frost as the first ever writer-in-residence at an educational establishment, at Amherst in 1917; the invention of the artists’ colony and the writers’ conference – Carmel, Bread Loaf, MacDowell, Yaddo – which advanced the role of writers as teachers; and, crucially, the emergence of the ‘progressive education’ movement in high schools in the twenties, which placed particular emphasis on self-expression and the nurturing of the child’s innate or natural abilities (thus storing up for the future the pedagogical conundrum of whether writing can or should be *taught*).

The foundational text of this child-centred movement was *Creative Youth* by Hughes Mearns, who was the first to use the term ‘creative writing’ to refer to a course of study. But still, at university level, there wasn’t yet a discipline of Creative Writing, and this, for Myers, came about with the appointment of a critic, Norman Foerster, to the School of Letters at the University of Iowa in 1930. Importantly, Foerster was not only scornful of the blindness of philological scholars to contemporary writing; he was equally scornful of the historical ignorance of many contemporary writers, who were too interested in ‘problems of technique’ and – in their reliance on the expressive self – overly inclined towards ‘solipsism’ (Myers 2006: 134-5). And so the Creative Writers at Iowa were required to do scholarship as a structured part of their course, just as scholars were required to do Creative Writing, and the kind of scholarship required was New Critical scholarship, which respected the autonomy and sufficiency of the individual literary work, which didn’t treat it as symptomatic of any larger cultural text.

At undergraduate level, classes in Creative Writing soon became commonplace – and popular – while remaining faithful to the founding pedagogical goal of achieving critical understanding through creative practice, but despite the success of the Iowa program, and despite the impetus of the 1944 ‘GI Bill’ which guaranteed free college or vocational education to returning servicemen, by the mid-Sixties there were still only five graduate programs in the USA – at Iowa, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Denver and Cornell – and when the expansion of Masters courses finally occurred, partly in response to changes in university funding arrangements, it was in the direction of training would-be authors for publication and would-be writing teachers for teaching. At Masters level, that is, Creative Writing became a form of professional apprenticeship once again removed from critical scholarship, so what had begun ‘as an alternative to the schismatizing of literary study had ended as merely another schism’, a schism that was exacerbated by the advent in the academy of Theory – capital T – as symbolised by the appointment in 1976 of the structuralist Northrop Frye as President of the Modern Languages Association. Frye’s election, says Myers (169/70), represented ‘the revolt of literary study against literary value’ and ‘the view that meaning and value are not *in* literary texts – that novels, stories, and poems have neither meaning nor value in themselves.’

In effect, this replicated the conditions for the foundational moment of Creative Writing almost a century earlier. As Myers says of nineteenth century philology (29), ‘Any treatment of a literary text as something created rather than determined, a transcript of individual choices and not a specimen of larger forces, was left out of the account.’ Which might well be a description of Theory, and the subsequent expansion of Creative Writing – not only in the USA, but in the anglophone academy outside the USA – might then be

understood against this backdrop, as a reaction against the dominance of a Theory-driven approach that was indifferent not only to questions of aesthetic value, but to the authority of authorship.

This, certainly, was how Malcolm Bradbury came to describe the context in which Creative Writing emerged at UEA.

4. A possible small supplement

Kathryn Holeywell (2009) has identified eight published accounts of the founding of UEA's Creative Writing program – four of them by Bradbury – and has revealed how each contributes to a myth of origin that depends upon 'a curtailed view of the course's history'. As she explains, the conditions for what would become the first degree course in Creative Writing in the UK were established at the inauguration of UEA in 1962, a new university founded on 'an ethos of nonconformity and broadmindedness at the institutional level' that was reflected in the university's motto 'Do Different' and given practical expression in its commitment to interdisciplinarity and small group, discussion-based learning (which would lay the ground for the appointment of novelists to teach literature and the eventual adoption of the workshop method for teaching Creative Writing). An early Vice-Chancellor, Frank Thistlethwaite, had experience of working in the US that made him particularly receptive to notions of 'scholarly experiment, creativity, and exchange', and the brief tenure of Ian Watt as Dean of English Studies led to the employment in 1963 of the UK's first novelist-academic, Angus Wilson, an appointment so unorthodox that it was reported as national news in *The Guardian*.

Like Bradbury, who joined UEA in 1965, both Wilson and Watt had experience of and were sympathetic to the idea of the English composition classes that were commonplace in the American academy, and Holeywell provides evidence that Watt may have envisioned a role for Angus Wilson that included the teaching of Creative Writing classes on the American model. Certainly her findings suggest that Wilson was offering informal Creative Writing instruction to undergraduates from the beginning of his employment, as well as the possibility of submitting Creative Writing for formal assessment. As Holeywell says (2009: 15), 'the classic retrospective narrative that circulates in British literary culture' tends to overlook this pre-history, but it was crucial in laying the institutional ground for the subsequent inauguration of Creative Writing at UEA.

The eventual impetus for this inauguration appears to have been Wilson and Bradbury's shared sense of a developing schism between creative and critical practice, as described by Bradbury in the introduction to *Class Work*, an anthology of UEA alumni published to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the MA (and his own retirement from teaching):

One odd fact struck us. Though everyone was announcing the Death of the Novel, no one was announcing the Death of Literary Criticism. In fact (as was clear from the climate in our own university) criticism, stimulated by the new thoughts of France, was undergoing a vivid resurrection, emerging in the new guise of Literary Theory... Since Angus and I were both novelists as well as teachers of literature, and took our profession seriously, it seemed somewhat strange for us to be announcing the Death of the Author in the classroom, then going straight back home to be one. What seemed even more

grievous was that the practice of criticism and the practice of writing were splitting ever further apart. Where once writers and critics had been much the same people, now the practice of writing and the theory of its study seemed ever more to divide. (Bradbury 1995a: vii/viii)

In addition to this splitting apart, Bradbury was conscious that British literature and British publishing appeared to be in the doldrums. ‘Serious publishers,’ he wrote elsewhere (Bradbury 1995b), ‘seriously talked about dropping the serious or literary novel – so it clearly needed a context of reinforcement and support, an intellectual environment.’ On this account, he and Wilson first proposed such a context of reinforcement and support in 1967, and while their proposal did initially meet with some scepticism, by 1970 they had secured a concession to offer Creative Writing ‘as a possible small supplement to an academic MA degree’. And that might have been as far as it went, were it not that their sole inaugural student was Ian McEwan (or so goes the conventional narrative, though in fact the development of the course remained somewhat halting until Kazuo Ishiguro, another alumnus, won the Booker Prize in 1989, after which applications for the MA increased exponentially).

Whatever the precise chronology, and whatever the institutional intricacies, a number of continuities do emerge between the inception of Creative Writing at UEA and the earlier establishment of the discipline in the USA. As in the States, UEA Creative Writing began as something of an experiment in education – in a new university committed to educational experimentalism – and just as English composition and then Norman Foerster’s School of Letters at Iowa had ‘established the institutional validity of submitting creative work for academic credit’ (Dawson 2005: 60), UEA Creative Writing proceeded from the identification of this same possibility. The American academy, meanwhile, had a long tradition of employing practising, publishing authors to teach literature, and UEA followed suit, firstly in the appointment of Angus Wilson and then, to a lesser extent (he was already an academic), Malcolm Bradbury. Before long, UEA would begin to employ writers exclusively to teach writing and would adopt another institution already well-established in the States, the creation of a position of a writer-in-residence that would continue for the next 40 years. Creative Writing at Masters level in the USA had evolved into a form of literary apprenticeship, and UEA Creative Writing was mindful of the professional context from the outset while also insisting on a conjunction of the creative and the critical that was the structuring premise of Creative Writing at Iowa. And it was this conjunction that most accurately characterises the MA program I joined as a student in 1984.

5. An improvisational space

In several respects, not a great deal has changed. Then, as now, the Creative Writing MA at UEA was organised over one year and structured around the workshop, which met once weekly during the first two terms to discuss student works-in-progress under the guidance of an established writer – in our case, Malcolm Bradbury. Then, as now, the discussion in the workshop was contingent, exploratory, largely unstructured. In the words of Shady Cosgrove at the AAWP conference in 2008, the workshop was ‘an improvisational space’ (Cosgrove, 2008). There were no set exercises, and no formal discussion of exemplary texts. It was assumed that our first degrees, and our extracurricular reading, and the supporting academic component of the course, would furnish us with an appropriate critical vocabulary, which we could then adapt to the demands of the workshop. Nor was there a requirement for any exegesis or

critical self-commentary in support of our writing: the workshop was considered sufficient occasion for the demonstration of our awareness of the relationship of literary knowledge to literary practice, and sufficient context for the articulation of our self-understanding in relation to our craft.

However, in addition to the workshop – which was the exclusive preserve of Creative Writing students – we were obliged to enrol in one critical module each term, alongside students from the more academic MA programs, and I chose contemporary literary theory with Lorna Sage in term one, the postmodern novel with Bradbury in term two, and was required to write a substantial critical essay for assessment in each. In the third and final term the workshop gave way to individual weekly tutorials with Angela Carter, while the corresponding critical element of the course was a three-hour academic exam. The summer vacation was then spent writing our dissertations: 15,000 words of original prose fiction, which accounted for half our final mark.

But while the structure of the course remains much the same – other than that we no longer require our students to sit an exam – there have been a number of other developments. The MA has grown, for instance, to accommodate separate strands in Lifewriting, Scriptwriting, and Poetry, each of which has a target intake of twelve students and a slightly different assessment regime. The original MA is now the Prose Fiction strand, which accepts two workshop groups of twelve students, for which we receive around 300 applications annually. Meanwhile, we awarded our first PhD in Creative and Critical Writing in 1990 and currently have a PhD population of around four dozen, and we have offered a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing since the mid-90s, for which most modules are open to enrolments from students on other programs.

A somewhat different discussion would need to address the very different ways in which these latter two programs, the BA and PhD, seek to integrate literary knowledge with literary practice, and the extent to which they are predicated upon the academic context, but I want to concentrate on the MA program at UEA, partly because it is so central to what we do, and partly because the workshop is so central to the MA.

And the workshop is key, since it is where our pedagogy comes closest to the condition of writing, by which I mean the activity that defines writers outside the academy and which leads to the production not of works for academic assessment, but the stories and novels and poems and plays that circulate in society and inhabit the imaginations of individual readers and which may, eventually, return as the objects of study for Literary Studies. And because, like writing, the workshop method is improvisational – contingent, exploratory, largely unstructured – it is where the question of knowledge is most intricately poised and where we might, perhaps, come closest to answering the question: What might Literary Studies know that Creative Writing doesn't *need* to know?

6. Fictional knowledge

My starting point here was a painting by Rothko. For Mark Currie and Michael Wood it was a painting by Barnett Newman, and the initial question was Peter de Bolla's: 'What does this painting know?' Which gave rise to the question: 'What does literature know?' And of course these two questions are not identical, because a novel – or any other form of literary art – can convey knowledge in a literal, non-metaphorical way that is beyond the powers of a painting. The medium of literature is language, after all, which is the medium

of philosophical understanding and factual communication, so for instance, in Mark Currie's words: 'When a narrator or a character reflects upon a topic, or provides information, or most obviously, philosophises openly, the idea of a novel as a receptacle of knowledge looks far from implausible' (Currie 2007: 108).

But the quarry, for both Currie and Wood, is not this kind of explicit knowledge, and they both invoke Roland Barthes to aid them in the pursuit of literature's unspoken, implicit, non-philosophical mode of knowing. Or rather, Currie invokes Wood invoking Barthes, who said: 'Organized or systematic knowledge is crude, life is subtle, and it is for the correction of this disparity that literature matters to us' (Currie 2007: 110). In other words, literature is 'a stepping stone by way of which philosophy can reach out towards a comprehension of life's subtleties' – an observation that Currie wryly acknowledges may come as 'music to the ears of creative writing students everywhere' (111).

So there are ways in which literature 'reports on what happens and on what may happen', but there are also ways in which literature is itself 'a form of lived experience' (Wood 2005: 9). And Currie – as a philosopher of time as well as a literary theorist – is interested specifically in what the novel knows about the experience of time (or 'internal time-consciousness'), which he pursues through a close reading of several contemporary novels, including Ali Smith's *The Accidental*, which prompts him to ask:

Can we then speak of the novel's knowledge of time without assigning this knowledge to the author...? Is this knowledge of time meant, and if not, does it qualify as knowledge? (Wood 2005: 123)

To which his eventual answer, intricately argued, is that:

the mode of knowledge that we might expect from a novel about time [is] that it might fall somewhere between the intentional conduct of an enquiry and the generation of accidental insights.... what *The Accidental* knows about time has to be understood as the sum of the two. This is the only way that de Bolla's attribution of knowledge to the painting rather than the painter can be observed in relation to the novel (Currie 2007: 123).

He goes on to gloss this further (and I'll come back to this passage):

Fictional knowledge in this light becomes a combination of blindness and insight, in de Man's terminology, so that sometimes what a novel knows might be inherent in what it doesn't know, or generated in the interaction between its conscious projects and its accidental effects. Nor will a novel's efforts to know what it knows, or to be in possession of its own blind spots, alter this model in any fundamental way, since its efforts will only ever specify the distance between its self-knowledge and the knowledge of a given reader (Currie 2007: 123-4)

So although Currie allows for authorial intention, he allows also for authorial 'un-intention' – for the accidental. He allows, too, for readerly insights that are unavailable to the author, and he maintains – because every reader is a given reader – that the literary work will continue to know more than any single reader can know it knows. There will always be other readings, other meanings. Michael Wood makes a similar point about language use generally :

... all utterances, all pieces of language have a potential life of their own, in the sense that they can, in addition to what their speakers or writers mean and their listeners or readers take them to mean, mean something else entirely (Wood 2005: 110).

And of course literary works are particularly complex utterances, with a greatly amplified potential for generating new meanings, which are often understood – metaphorically – to lie somewhere beneath the surface, though in truth the literary work is all surface, all externality. You can't go behind it. 'It's like looking into something very deep,' says Ken Cosgrove of the Rothko in *Mad Men*. 'You could fall in.' But Ken is no more able to fall into that painting than Mark Currie is able to step into the pages of *The Accidental*. It is only *like* looking into something very deep. There is merely pigment on canvas, just as there are merely words on the page. And yet paradoxically, for that surface to mean anything, it must suggest depth, and we must concede to the possibility of depth, even as we confront the absence of actual depth.

This problem of fictional knowledge, as Currie terms it, brings him to what he calls:

a rather busy intersection of contemporary thinking: it is Derrida's call of the Other, Badiou's unnameable, de Man's blindness, Lyotard's inexpressible, Beckett's ineffable, Freud's uncanny, Lacan's real, Conrad's secret and, for Wittgenstein, what lies beyond the limits of language. (Currie 2007: 124)

And put like that, it does begin to look like a problem. But it's an interesting problem, and one that Currie pursues interestingly for several pages more. He pursues it, in fact, as far as an understanding that derives from Derrida's concept of the secret as 'the essential characteristic of literature':

On one hand, there is a claim that, because we can never enquire behind the surfaces of fictional characters, the secret of literature, which literature tells us about, is that it is pointless to try. On the other hand, the absolute inviolability of the secret results from this superficiality. The first claim offers a model of pure surface, pure externality, beyond which it is pointless to enquire, but the persistence of the secret, the very existence of a secret depends on the notion that there is something to enquire into, or something which lies behind the surface (Currie 2007: 134-5).

But this, I suspect, is to bring me far too far in the wrong direction, because the problem of fictional knowledge I am describing here is a problem for philosophy and for Literary Studies, since it is a problem that may only be encountered in relation to a finished work in the context of its consumption or reception in a discourse that doesn't allow for the work to be rewritten in response to that reception.

From the perspective of Creative Writing, the problem comes earlier, and is somewhat different, though it's a problem that might be approached in terms used by Mark Currie when he speaks of 'a combination of blindness and insight' and 'the interaction between ... conscious projects and ... accidental effects'. He doesn't mean this pejoratively. And, from a writer's perspective, it needn't be problematic since our attempts to write about what we know are so often undertaken in the hope that we might know more than we know we know, and that this knowledge will only become evident after the work has left us. The problem, always, is how to live with the uncertainty that this engenders,

and how to resist reaching after the formulations and consolations of other discourses.

7. Non-knowing

I think the truest thing I can say about my own experience of writing is that I don't know what I am doing. Writing is the activity where I feel most adrift, least competent, most uncertain, least aware. I stumble along. And of course I'm not the only one. Here are some others:

David Malouf:

Writers have to be – naive is the wrong word – but in a state of innocence when writing. Everything you think you know you have to let fall out of your head, because the only thing that's going to be interesting in the book is what you don't yet know. Fixed ways of reacting are useless. Although you have to be highly conscious on one level – technique and so on – you also have to be in some 'non-knowing' mode for the book to shape itself. (Malouf 1996)

William Trevor:

I believe in not quite knowing. A writer needs to be doubtful, questioning. I write out of curiosity and bewilderment. (Trevor 1990)

EL Doctorow:

You write best when you write to find out what you're writing. It's a writer's dirty little secret that language precedes the intentions ... Passion and instinct got buried by my education. I knew everything about writing – I could discuss theories and give critiques. Now I don't know any of that. I just do it ... I wrote [*Welcome to Hard Times*] crucially because I knew nothing about it. That's how writers write: by trying to find what it is they are writing. (Doctorow 1994)

Joan Didion:

Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. (Didion 1976)

WG Sebald:

I don't even know what thinking is. There is something that goes on in one's head but I always have this notion that it is pretty much like these tentacles which some creatures have, organisms halfway between plants and animals that exist in the sea. They just float these tentacles out in the hope that something will drift by that they can catch and ingest. Certainly in my case, I think that is how thinking seems to work. It is a completely random process. I cannot imagine anything like systematic thought. (Sebald 2000: 148)

EM Forster:

People will not realize how little conscious one is of these things; how one flounders about. They want us to be so much better informed than we are. If critics could only have a course on writers' *not* thinking things out... (Forster 1962: 32)

Elizabeth Hardwick:

As for writing fiction, well, you don't have any primary text, of course. You have to create that, and yet the struggle seems to be to uncover things by language, to find out what you mean and feel by the sheer effort of writing it down. By expression you discover what you wish to express or what can be expressed, by you. Things that are vague in the beginning have to be made concrete. Often, what you thought was the creative idea ahead of you vanishes or becomes something else. (Hardwick 1989: 206)

Paul Auster:

I sometimes feel that I am wondering in a haze of things that cannot be articulated and the struggle to put things down clearly is so enormous that I think at times my brain is damaged. I do not think as clearly as other people. The words don't come when I want them. I can spend fifteen or twenty minutes trying to decide between prepositions and then I have no idea which is right any more; absolutely stupid basic stuff, basic grammatical questions. It is just a tremendous puzzle for me all the time. (Auster 2001: 20-21)

8. Creativity and uncertainty

All of which means, perhaps, that this article is a belated contribution to the 2008 conference of the AAWP, whose theme was 'creativity and uncertainty'. And being a very uncertain person – uncertain even in my convictions – I am already anticipating the objections. In particular I am anticipating them from Paul Dawson, or the figure of Paul Dawson who stalks my imagination, who appears to be all conviction, all certainty, and whom I take to be emblematic of a certain critique of the workshop that comes from within our discipline and which tends to find the workshop insufficiently attuned to the wider cultural, social, political or theoretical context in which writing is disseminated and consumed, and consequently deems the 'creative' to be insufficiently 'critical'.

As formulated by Dawson, it is a powerful critique, and while there are other critiques (some of which may not find their emblem in Dawson), it is his that I wish to concentrate on because it strikes me as both a 'perfect partner' to my thinking about my discipline *and* a 'strange bedfellow', in part because it is so very seductive. Mike Harris may well be right in suggesting that there's 'a tendency, in Dawson's scholarly arguments, for the great world to shrink to the size of a campus' (Harris 2009), but within the narrow compass of the campus Dawson's arguments are often exact, and almost always persuasive. *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* is an exceptional work of scholarship, and a brilliant polemic, extraordinary in its awareness of every issue, and in its ability not only to articulate those issues but to trace their intellectual, institutional and sociological provenance. In most respects – descriptive and argumentative –

Dawson is right, but his conclusions disturb me; I believe his conclusions are wrong.

Clearly he is right to say, in a later essay, that ‘Writing programs now exist in an intellectual environment of interdisciplinarity, critical self-reflection and oppositional politics on the one hand, and in an institutional environment of learning outcomes, transferable skills and competitive research funding on the other’ (Dawson 2007: 78). And he is possibly right to view the traditional workshop as something of a defensive formation in this environment, a kind of refuge in which ‘amateurism’ and ‘evaluation’ and the ‘literary authority’ of writers can be protected from the incursions of institutionalisation, professionalism and what he calls ‘the onslaught of post-modern critical theory’ (Dawson 2005: 108).

Dawson is doubtless right, too, in his characterisation of the traditional workshop as a privileged space in which a community of writers may gather under the patronage of the university for the purpose of enabling ‘established practitioners’ to ‘pass on practical [largely formalist] knowledge about their craft’ (2007: 85) to literary aspirants with a view to improving the student manuscript and, ultimately, hastening the possibility of the students’ graduation to publication and ‘accreditation’ as fully fledged practitioners themselves. He is right to view the workshop as both a ‘vocational traineeship for the publishing industry and an artistic haven from the pressures of commercialism’ (2005: 214). And he may even be right – if one concedes to the pejorative terms of the register – in characterising the workshop as the last bastion of traditional humanist literary criticism, a forum that ‘facilitates the therapeutic discovery of a neo-Romantic expressive voice’ (2005: 177) and ‘construes the literary in terms of aesthetic autonomy’ predicated on a ‘withdrawal from politics and society’ (2005: 187).

But I believe he is wrong – mostly wrong – to lament this.

I believe he is wrong to lament that the writer’s ‘literary authority’ in the academy is directed principally towards what he calls ‘the narrow goal of training other writers’ rather the (presumably) much broader goal of contributing to ‘the academic study of literature’ (Dawson 2005: 85) and I think he is wrong to conclude that the discipline ought therefore to be reconstituted, and its signature pedagogy – the workshop – reformulated as ‘a site of contestation over various theories of literature, and a site for the exchange of pedagogical links with other disciplines’ (Dawson 2007: 85). He is wrong in particular, I believe, to propose a negotiation with critical theory – a ‘programmatic provision’, in fact – that would involve the introduction into the workshop of an ‘oppositional criticism’ that will ‘interrogate the assumptions about literature underpinning [conventional workshop] responses’ (2005: 206).

The hypothetical example that Dawson offers here is the work that displays an ‘obviously unreconstructed sexism’ and which may be examined in terms of how ‘it differs from and interrelates with a range of non-literary (scholarly, political, journalistic, legal) discourses of gendered power relations’. By obvious extension, this same operation may then be performed upon the assumptions of any discourse, and particularly those found to be rebarbative to an oppositional criticism (a criticism that is itself historically constituted, of course, the product of discursive practices that might themselves be interrogated, *ad infinitum*).

Dawson describes this as a shift from ‘a formalist poetics to a sociological poetics’, a shift premised on an understanding – derived from Mikhail Bakhtin

– of literature as ‘a conscious artistic dramatisation of [the] dialogic clashing of living discourses in society’ (Dawson 2005: 208-9). A sociological poetics, he informs us, would operate as a ‘device for populating a text with multiple speaking positions, concrete textual utterances that embody the verbal-ideological life of living discourse, and hence dialogise the text as a literary participant in “public” discourse’ (214).

My misgivings about this are threefold. Firstly, as a novelist whose literary authority in the academy derives from my grasp of formalist poetics as embodied in my novels, I’m not sure how I would teach this sociological poetics, particularly as Dawson envisages a role for my ‘critical expertise’ that would effectively constitute me as someone other than a practising novelist, someone more like a Cultural Studies academic, who wouldn’t so much enable the workshop’s ‘remedial technical overhauling’ of the student manuscript as place it (rather more didactically, rather less collaboratively) ‘within a broader cultural or political context’ in order to improve my students as scholars or cultural critics but not necessarily – if at all – as writers (Dawson 2005: 208).

Secondly, as DG Myers suggests in his own critique of Dawson, ‘A work of literary art seeks only to express itself – not the clash of living discourses in society’ (Myers 2006: 172) – which is, in essence, the point made by my various novelists in their ruminations on the importance (or unavailability) of ‘non-knowing’. This isn’t, of course, to deny or preclude the polyphonic possibilities of the literary work, merely to doubt the viability of purposely incorporating that polyphony into the work. Inescapably, even axiomatically, the literary work will express the clash of living discourses in society, regardless of an author’s conscious intentions, and to privilege or advocate the conscious ‘orchestration’ of that clash in accordance with the values of an ‘oppositional politics’ may be to miss the extent to which a literary work’s unconscious disclosure of ideological assumptions is precisely what will make that work valuable or significant to subsequent readers.

And thirdly – following on from this, and perhaps crucially – Dawson appears to want the literary work to be, in Mark Currie’s words, ‘in possession of its own blind spots’.

Currie’s remarks on fictional knowledge apply equally as well to the concept of ‘the clash of living discourses in society’ as to the nature of ‘internal time consciousness’, and so here – taking some licence – is Currie critiquing Dawson on my behalf:

Fictional knowledge *about the clash of living discourses in society* becomes a combination of blindness and insight, in de Man’s terminology, so that sometimes what a novel knows *about the clash of living discourses in society* might be inherent in what it doesn’t know, or generated in the interaction between its conscious projects and its accidental effects. Nor will a novel’s efforts to know what it knows *about the clash of living discourses in society*, or to be in possession of its own blind spots, alter this model in any fundamental way, since its efforts will only ever specify the distance between its self-knowledge and the knowledge of a given reader (Currie 2007: 123-4; italicised phrases added)

In other words, Dawson’s confidence in the writer’s ability to populate his or her text with ‘concrete textual utterances that embody the verbal-ideological life of living discourse’ would appear to depend on a fully knowing anticipation of the terms of that text’s participation in the discourse that will

condition its reception. That reception cannot be known, of course – not even by a workshop tutor fully skilled in the application of a sociological poetics – and the range, for instance, of ‘non-literary (scholarly, political, journalistic, legal) discourses of gendered power relations’ with which a text attempts to engage at the moment of its production may not appear to be so urgent, coherent or relevant at the point of its consumption.

The impulse informing Dawson’s proposal is pre-emptive, even prescriptive, and in its rejection of a formalist, craft-based poetics it purposely overlooks the extent to which the activity of writing is already inherently and sufficiently critical, a practice-based mode of heuristic enquiry into the nature and limits of literary language and form in which the authority of the workshop tutor derives from his or her having successfully negotiated the formal and imaginative challenges of such creative-critical work, as evidenced by his or her publications. This creative-critical work is speculative, recalcitrant, often ungovernable, an exploratory activity in which method and conscious intention will always be vulnerable to the promptings of the moment and of the material. And so one answer to the question ‘What might Literary Studies know that Creative Writing doesn’t *need* to know?’ is this: Creative Writing doesn’t need to know what Paul Dawson’s sociological poetics would insist it should know. Or rather, the Creative Writing *workshop* doesn’t need to know what Paul Dawson’s sociological poetics would insist it should know.

This is not, of course, to suggest that a Creative Writing *program* should ignore the wider cultural, social, political and theoretical context in which writing is disseminated and consumed. As will be evident from my account of the Creative Writing program at UEA, our commitment – historically and currently – is to a relationship of complementarity between the creative and the critical, which is expressed in the structure of our courses. It is however to insist that the relevance of creative works to these other contexts is for the operations of academic criticism to continue to propose or extrapolate in the form of a separate, *subsequent* discourse, constituting a separate, subsequent order of ‘knowing’. One site for that discourse is in the supporting modules that accompany the workshop as part of a structured program in Creative Writing, and which attend not to student works-in-progress but to published works. Another is in the realms of posterity, however immediate or distant.

I remarked at the start that the Rothko in *Mad Men* appears full of withheld significance. It appears to know stuff. It appears, almost, to have a secret. And I would suggest that the secret is the secret of its reception, the secret of posterity’s understanding of it. That reception isn’t predictable, and neither is it final, for there will be many moments of reception, many posterities. These can’t be anticipated by the artist or writer. They cannot be known, and any attempt to teach critical contexts in the writing workshop, or to interrogate the workshop’s underlying ideological assumptions – when the writer is still struggling, in Elizabeth Hardwick’s words, to uncover things by language, to find out what he or she means and feels by the sheer effort of writing it down – runs the risk of stifling or subjugating that writing before the effort has even begun.

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