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Creative writing and postmodern interdisciplinarity

Abstract
This essay intervenes in current debates about the operation of creative writing as an academic discipline, and provides a polemical critique of practice-led research as a basis for disciplinary identity. It argues that the emergence of creative writing studies as a field of academic research is the product of an ongoing tension created by the pull of centrifugal intellectual forces that are interdisciplinary in focus and centripetal institutional forces that are driving towards disciplinary independence.

Since the turn of the millennium, debate over whether creative writing can be said to constitute an independent academic discipline has gained increasing international prominence and urgency. This is not an abstract scholarly enterprise, for its pursuit presents a vital means of developing and positioning creative writing programs within the modern university. The foundations for this enterprise were laid over a decade ago. In 1996 DG Myers published *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, which bequeathed the subject its first institutional history. This book deserves the typically overused label of 'groundbreaking', for it provides an invaluable account of the origins of creative writing as an 'experiment in education' (2006: 4) designed, according to Myers, to integrate literary knowledge with literary practice in American universities. Also in 1996, the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) was formed, indicating a desire in this country for a national dialogue on this burgeoning subject of study across a number of disciplines, and initiating a sustained scholarly engagement with creative writing as a field of academic research. As a result of the range and scope of work published in the AAWP's journal, *TEXT*, since 1997, Australia can rightly claim to be a leader in this field.

The momentum provided by these two events enabled me to write *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, published in 2005. My intention in this book was 'to approach Creative Writing not as a practice (creativity), or as a synonym for literature, but as a discipline: a body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting this knowledge' (2). This was a methodological decision, necessary to bypass existing questions about whether writing can or should be taught and focus more clearly on the actual operation of creative writing programs in the university system. Such a decision demonstrates the extent to which a 'research question' and a methodology can work actively to construct an object of study. In this article I wish to pursue further the question of whether we can conceive of creative writing as an academic discipline. Furthermore, I wish to consider the effects such a pursuit might have on the future direction of teaching and research in creative writing programs.

The traditional concept of a discipline involves a distinct and discrete object of study, specific methods for studying this object, and a body of knowledge emerging from this research that can be passed on through teaching. The institutional framework for a discipline includes peer-reviewed mechanisms for the dissemination of research; professional associations of researchers in the field; the training and accreditation of future researchers; and administrative authority within a university. When we think about creative writing in this context, we can certainly say that, in institutional terms, it functions as an academic discipline, although the ongoing lack of recognition from research funding bodies indicates that creative writing hasn't quite achieved parity with established disciplines within the university. In intellectual terms, I remain sceptical that we can productively demarcate the discipline as an independent branch of knowledge. Nonetheless, the growing body of scholarly research in the field of creative writing has revealed an impetus to do exactly this. The result is an underlying tension between the intellectual desire to question the boundaries of knowledge within creative writing, and an institutional imperative to define creative writing as a university subject. In what follows I will consider some of the arguments for disciplinary independence in America and Australia, placing these arguments in the context of some recent postmodern theories of interdisciplinarity.

The moment of self-awareness

> It is fundamental to the epistemologies of the more sophisticated of the natural sciences that a discipline's object of study is a constructed theoretical object. Within the literary disciplines such an awareness has come only as the result of a process of political contestation. (Frow 1992: 24)

What is the object of study in creative writing? Is it literature? Is it the creative process? The craft of writing? Or the teaching of writing itself? Does one teach within the discipline, or does the discipline arise from the teaching? For much of its history throughout the twentieth century, formal reflection on creative writing as a university subject has been largely restricted to the publication of writing handbooks and dilettantish essays musing on the creative process and the question of whether writing can be taught. Some critical commentary on the subject emerged in America in the 1980s, but this tended to be hostile rather than investigative, bemoaning the absorption of mainstream literary culture into the academy, and blaming writing programs for the mediocre state of contemporary American literature.

By the end of the 1980s it is noticeable that discussions about creative writing in America had shifted from concerns about the effects of writing programs on literary culture to concerns about the division between creative writing and critical theory within the academy. In the 1989 anthology *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy*, Eve Shelnutt articulated a frustration with the culture of anti-intellectualism within writing programs, and issued an early and well-known call for a productive dialogue with poststructuralist theory. Throughout the 1990s, and particularly since the turn of the century, creative writing has emerged as an international field of academic research, especially in Australia and the UK, where creative writing developed an institutional presence at the same time that theory and cultural studies were reconfiguring the traditional humanities.

So my simple point is that disciplinary identity emerges from a moment of self-awareness, the desire for an intellectual enterprise to critically scrutinise its

own origins and assumptions, rather than simply defend its existence, and that this desire was formed in the late 1980s and through the 1990s when teachers of creative writing adopted the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' associated with critical theory. This has occurred because a new generation of teachers who perceive themselves as writers *and* critics has productively engaged with theory to investigate their practices and transform their knowledge base. 'In recent years,' according to Tim Mayers in *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, 'a type of writing I call 'craft criticism' has emerged in the discourses surrounding academic creative writing' (2005: xiv). Mayers defines craft criticism as 'a kind of critical prose written by (institutionally defined) creative writers that seeks mostly to subvert - or at least account for - some of the persistent problems in what I call "the institutional-conventional wisdom" of creative writing' (2005: xiv). Mayers' book itself is a contribution to this ongoing impulse for scholarly interrogation in creative writing.

Indeed, creative writing can be seen as an exemplary discipline of the post-theory academy (what Vincent Leitch calls the postmodern 'disorganization' of knowledge and departmental structures in literary and cultural studies since the 1990s) because it has cherry-picked from an eclectic range of theories to assert the cultural capital of creative writing as intellectual work in the contemporary university. Furthermore, much of the research into creative writing as an academic discipline has been undertaken by members of what Jeffrey Williams calls the post-theory generation, that is, 'the generation of intellectual workers who have entered the literary field and attained professional positions in the late 1980s and through the 1990s', and for whom the embedded presence of Theory is taken for granted (1995: 25). The crucial institutional site for the formation of this post-theory generation is the PhD, because it is precisely through accredited research training that a discipline perpetuates itself. In an article about the emerging PhD program in America, Kelly Ritter points out that 'there is most certainly a generational divide between the pre-1980s hires in creative writing, most of whom hold the M.A. or M.F.A., and the current crop of new hires, many of whom will hold the M.A. or M.F.A. and Ph.D' (2001: 216). In other words, creative writing students who have been exposed to what John Guillory calls 'the canon of Theory' in the graduate school curriculum are now theorising their own discipline.

Throughout the 1980s, when critical histories of English studies flourished and the politics of criticism became an important subject of debate, scholars such as Frank Lentricchia, Paul Bove, Jim Merod and Evan Watkins argued that the role of academics as literary critics cannot be considered in isolation from the institutional realities of their function as teachers. These authors often invoked Foucault's figure of the 'specific intellectual' as a model for the work of 'oppositional criticism' in the academy. In similar fashion, recent scholars of creative writing argue that in order to resist the orthodoxies of the traditional writing workshop, the prevailing assumption that creative writing academics are writers primarily, and teachers incidentally, needs to be challenged (see Mayers; Green; Amato and Fleisher). In this way, teachers of writing have participated in the politics of oppositional criticism characteristic of contemporary literary and cultural studies by critiquing and redefining standard workshop practices.

The recent emergence of the PhD in creative writing also exemplifies the institutional exigencies that have facilitated the development of disciplinary identity in this field. In her article Ritter points out the declining value of the MFA, suggesting the degree is no longer considered a sufficient qualification for a university teaching position unless the candidate has several books published. Hence the PhD has become an important additional degree for MFA

graduates who hope to teach in the academy. However, for this doctoral degree to justify its existence, Ritter argues, it needs to be marked as professionally distinct from the MFA. Her suggestion is that the PhD in creative writing be reconfigured towards teacher training, specifically 'the ability to teach undergraduates in the field' (2001: 208). In neglecting to discuss the creative dissertation itself, Ritter demonstrates a belief that what defines creative writing as an *academic* discipline (rather than the master-apprentice system offered by the MFA) is its ability to be taught in a scholarly self-reflexive fashion, as opposed to its ability to produce new works of literature. This focus on teaching suggests that the creative doctoral dissertation is still to be conceived along the same lines as the MFA dissertation: as a literary work to be circulated outside the academy instead of a contribution to disciplinary knowledge.

In America there is a privileged historical relationship between creative writing and English studies, the links with composition notwithstanding. The title of Mayers' book itself is indicative of this relationship. The development of creative writing in Australian tertiary institutions since the 1970s was more piecemeal, with programs emerging in departments of English and literary studies; in new degrees in communications and professional writing; and in the creative arts. I have traced this historical emergence in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, arguing that:

> Creative Writing only developed in this disparate and interdisciplinary fashion, however, when the discipline of English had its academic hegemony over literature challenged by the advent of Theory, the nationalist push for Australian literary studies, and the expansion of tertiary education. These challenges opened up the possibility for Creative Writing to emerge as an alternative means of literary education. (Dawson 2005: 127)

While Australian writing programs inherited the structure and pedagogical assumptions of the traditional writing workshop, the comparative newness of creative writing in Australian universities, compared to those in America, has facilitated a more positive engagement with the intellectual changes wrought by what Ian Donaldson dubbed the 'new humanities' in 1990. In 2005 Jeri Kroll and Steve Evans wrote:

> anyone engaged in criticism nowadays, in fact anyone contemplating a higher degree in creative writing, has to be aware of theory, even if they are not converts to a particular tribe such as the poststructuralists or the new historicists. In Australia our discipline has been theorising its practice and its brand of research for more than ten years. (Kroll and Evans 2005: 16)

In Australia, the institutional exigencies prompting the development of the discipline are far more directly concerned with the issue of research. Here, the proliferation of research degrees in creative writing occurred as post-Dawkins universities attempted to develop research profiles, and all universities sought to attract the government funding which accompanies research student enrolments and completions. The PhD is now an entrenched part of creative writing programs, and is an essential qualification for those seeking academic careers in the university. Unlike doctoral programs in America, PhDs in Australia do not include coursework or exams. Instead we have a thesis that combines the creative dissertation with a critical 'exegesis'. The relationship between these two components, and the problems and possibilities they present,

has been one of the most prominent topics of disciplinary research in creative writing.

The other institutional pressure bearing upon the construction of disciplinary identity in Australia has been the need to attract competitive research funding for publications. We have spent the last decade battling to get 'creative' work recognised as research by university and government funding bodies, and this has been for one reason: to get money. As Malcolm Gillies said in a 1998 symposium on research in the performing arts: 'When is a pot or a painting research, and what is the size of the research element in these items? If it were not for our ever-deepening funding crisis I suggest that we would not be much concerned with these, often ridiculous, questions' (1998: 27). The intellectual work gone into defining creative writing as research, into proving its academic merit, has been one of the driving forces of disciplinary research in Australia. As the editors of *TEXT* wrote in their editorial for the inaugural issue in April 1997:

> the status of creative writing in tertiary institutions in Australia still requires full recognition from the rest of the tertiary education and research communities. Few research grants have been awarded to the area, and the Research Quantum (the means by which Australian universities are ranked and funded according to research activity) is biased against creative writing ... Being the first refereed journal in the creative writing area in Australia, TEXT represents a further step towards claiming full recognition. (Krauth and Brady 1997: 1)

It can be noted here that funding is the most important marker of institutional status within the modern university, operating as both the generator and the reward for research. So far we haven't had much luck getting research funding for our creative writing, but at least we're getting research funding for writing refereed articles about why we *should* get funding for our creative writing.

Disciplinary identity

My central argument in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* was that the historical development of the subject can be understood as a series of ongoing educational responses to the perennial 'crisis in English Studies', from debates between scholarship and criticism in the early part of the twentieth century to the fundamental shifts in disciplinary knowledge presented by the New Humanities. The widespread academic critique of traditional categories such as 'literature', 'creativity' and 'aesthetics' in the late twentieth century has provided an intellectual environment in which teachers of creative writing have been able to interrogate their practice and expand the possibilities of the subject. This has led to the development of new pedagogical practices drawing from a range of fields: from poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, identity politics and postcolonialism, to linguistics and cognitive science.[1] These pedagogical practices have resulted from a growing body of research which we can legitimately refer to as 'creative writing studies'.[2] However, the institutional need to turn intellectual disciplinary identity into departmental autonomy and professional recognition has led to attempts to demarcate creative writing as an independent discipline. This is an inevitable and perhaps necessary outcome of 'creative writing studies', but I think it could ultimately work against the possibilities offered by the original impulse for self-interrogation: which was not to make explicit what was already there, but to reconceptualise teaching by fostering links with existing fields of scholarly knowledge.

In America, attempts to define creative writing as a discipline revolve around distinguishing its practices from those of the English departments in which writing programs are typically housed. In a 2003 article, 'The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query', Shirley Lim asks:

> How does the modern research university incorporate or contain creative writing? Does creative writing possess a disciplinary base from which certain methodological notions and practices can be drawn, and if so, how should we begin to talk about such a discipline? (Lim 2003: 151)

I think the first question here is vitally important, but that the second question betrays a limiting approach: of trying to determine what might already exist but has yet to be articulated. As it turns out, Lim never answers this question, instead concluding that if creative writing 'is to be realized as a complementary discipline', it must overcome its 'inherent resistance' and perform a necessary integration into the intellectual and academic work of English' (Lim 2003: 165).

In a 2004 article, Patrick Bizarro argues that creative writing lacks disciplinary status in English departments because of the dominance of literary studies, and that '[a]cademic independence for creative writing requires an assertion of its epistemological differences from other subjects in English studies' (Bizarro 2004: 296). According to Bizarro, a new generation of scholars has been investigating how creative writing is taught, and contextualising it in relation to other subjects in English studies, particularly composition. And now that a PhD has been established, the epistemological difference of creative writing from other subjects has to be asserted by 'teaching skills unique to the research creative writers do' (Bizarro 2004: 297). This will allow 'teachers of creative writing' to 'function independently in the English departments that house them', rather than having to rely on courses taught by literary critics (Bizarro 2004: 297). Bizarro's catalogue of these unique skills is not inspiring: we read as writers; we observe and interview people; we conduct historical research; we believe in the discovery of meaning through the process of writing; we understand the demands of different audiences; and we are 'adept at employing various genres' (Bizarro 2004: 303). Furthermore, he asserts rather than explains how these skills differ 'at an epistemological level' when used by writers. What is most important to gain from this is that, like Ritter and Lim, Bizarro's claim for disciplinary independence relies on training PhD graduates to *teach* creative writing, and that none of them can comprehend creative writing outside an English department.[3]

In Australia, and in the UK, there seems to be a strong desire to define the discipline not in terms of the skills and teacher training that can be provided at the graduate level, but in terms of the creative work produced by staff and research students. The reasons for this difference are institutional. In discussing American creative writing programs, DG Myers writes: 'Today writers are hired and promoted in academe on the basis of their writing - it has become their equivalent of original research - and yet they have been less successful than academics in other fields at establishing institutional peer-review mechanisms for legitimising their own work and excluding that of others' (2006: 6). The dilemma Myers points to is how to distinguish, in academic terms, between writers who teach and writers who don't. It can be easily understood, then, why, for scholars such as Ritter, the capacity for critically-informed teaching in the contemporary academy has assumed importance as a marker of professional distinction. In Australia, creative writing academics do not have the luxury of their creative work being the basis for hiring and promotion, or at least the sole basis, for writing has not been considered the

'equivalent of original research'. The crucial importance of research productivity for a successful academic career has made it necessary for teachers of writing to think strategically about how their creative work can be recognised as research.

In 2006, Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien pointed out that over a ten-year period since *TEXT* was established, 'it is possible to trace a shift … away from pedagogical issues and towards research-oriented questions' related to creative writing as an academic discipline (2006: 1). A search through *TEXT* will reveal that in the 1990s the most common term for framing creative work in an academic context was 'research equivalence'. The accepted terminology is now 'research through practice', where the creative work is the 'outcome' of 'practice-led research'.

The phrase 'research equivalence' was used by Dennis Strand in his 1998 report, *Research in Creative Arts*, to propose a research funding model for academics in the visual and performing arts. Strand argued that it was necessary to recognise the creative work of academics as equal in value to, but different in nature from, traditional scholarly research. The key concept underlying the argument for research equivalence is the idea that creative work involves research *in* rather than *about* the arts: 'Their research methodologies are in the arts, their investigations are in their practice' (Strand 1998: xvi). According to Nigel Krauth, creative writing was not included in the Strand report, nor involved in the government-funded project out of which this report was produced, because no peak body for creative writing existed before the formation of the Australian Association of Writing Programs in 1996. In fact, Krauth argues, '[t]he *Research in the Creative Arts Project* was undoubtedly one of the catalysts which brought together the creative writing programs in Australian universities' at the inaugural conference for the Association (2000: 2). The Strand report does acknowledge that creative writing is a notable omission from its coverage of the creative arts, but points out that the 'newly formed Australian Association of Writing Programs, a national body for creative writers, has indicated it is likely to develop indicators for that discipline in the future based on the material in this report' (Strand 1998: 127).

The Strand report acknowledges the bureaucratic function of its genesis: to study research outputs in the creative arts and develop performance indicators that can be adopted by the federal government as an instrument of measurement. 'The question of what is research in the creative arts,' Strand points out, 'is one that has special significance in Australian universities today but little significance elsewhere. Its importance lies in the fact that there are scarce dollars attached to the definitions of research' (1998: xv). In the ensuing years, however, academics in the creative arts have taken on with genuine scholarly relish the challenge of defining creative work as research, and the term 'research equivalence' has, accordingly, fallen out of favour.

The phrase 'practice-led research' was used by Brad Haseman in his keynote address to the eleventh AAWP conference in 2006. In this address Haseman generously told assembled academics in creative writing that '[y]ou have been among the leaders in problematising and clarifying the relationship between your creative practice and research' (2007: 1). He argued that creative practice as a mode of research can be said to constitute a 'fresh, distinctive and new research paradigm - Performative Research' (2007: 2), one which has grown out of the limitations of traditional quantitative and qualitative modes of research.

In some ways, the concept of practice-led research is a more sophisticated attempt to define the 'epistemological difference' of creative writing, arguing

that the process of writing is an investigative method in itself, so that researchers in the field arrive at disciplinary knowledge through the practice of writing rather than the study of writing. This assumes, however, that we know what that disciplinary knowledge is: is it simply knowledge of how to write, or is it something more difficult to define and transdisciplinary in its origins and effects, something related to the 'content' itself of the creative work? If this is the case, then the 'knowledge' creative research can deliver is as limitless and nebulous as the subjects with which writers deal. If the 'outcome' of practice-led research is the creative work itself, what, in any academically definable fashion, could this work contribute to knowledge of these subjects? Nor do I think it is clear how this sort of research *in* creative writing relates to scholarly (quantitative and qualitative) research *about* creative writing. This question is important if practice-led research is to form the basis of disciplinary identity, for it is this scholarly work, not creative work, which is really responsible for establishing creative writing as a field of study.

More importantly, I'm not sure how the concept of research through practice helps us understand the process of writing in such a way that it would benefit our teaching, which I think is at the core of creative writing. Furthermore, because this concept is borrowed from the visual and performing arts, I don't think it really addresses the textual specificity of creative writing. For instance, the strong presence of fictocritical writing within Australian creative writing programs demonstrates the generic permeability of creative and scholarly work - or, performative research and quantitative/qualitative research - in a way that the relation between, say, dance or painting and an academic dissertation does not.

For me, the concept of research through practice is a purely bureaucratic enterprise, brought about by the institutional exigencies of the research university. I fully understand the political necessity for making the argument that creative writing is a form of research, but I don't see much intellectual merit in defining the discipline in terms of 'praxis'. I think research in all disciplines involves praxis: these are called methodologies.

The emphasis on praxis is especially designed to distinguish creative writing from English studies, since both fields of study deal with literary texts. This makes some sense at the level of coursework teaching, where manuscripts are edited via the workshop process, while in literary studies students simply submit an essay for marking. At the level of research production, though, all theses go through multiple drafts and I think it is hard to justify the difference without relying on unproductive distinctions between first-order (creative) and second-order (critical) texts. Yes, writing a novel is different from writing an academic dissertation, but I think it's difficult to say that the process of one is a practice while the other is not.

The real disciplinary function of 'practice-led research' is not to distinguish creative work from traditional academic research in the academy, but to distinguish it from other types of creative work *outside* the academy. The investigative rigour of the writing process separates it from the formulaic work of popular culture; and the reflexive nature of the investigation separates it from the literary work it would otherwise be if it were not written in the academy. Ultimately, the efficacy of this language of praxis is less in its epistemological account of disciplinary specificity, than its rhetorical power as a marketing exercise. In an article taking stock of creative writing at the turn of the millennium, Nigel Krauth described a power shift within the university system creative writing is poised to benefit from:

> English and Humanities Departments, that once held sway in terms of offering studies for generic and analytical interpretative language skills, are now facing notions of 'productivity-value' not previously encountered. Reading and criticising texts, as opposed to producing them, doesn't cut so much ice with the clientele anymore. In the 1990s, the 'real world' focus of university training has added a practical 'can do' aspect to the receptive 'will do' orientation of English departments and traditional arts degrees. (Krauth 2000: 5)

While in America much is written about how outmoded assumptions about teaching creative writing need to be reformed (or about how these reforms should be resisted for the sake of literature), creative writing in Australia and the UK claims the post-theoretical dynamism of the new, drawing on the rhetoric of praxis to distinguish it from traditional English studies and position it within the new economy of the creative industries, which reconfigures the notion of creativity from a traditional aesthetic category to a form of cultural capital in the new knowledge economy. This move indicates that creative writing need not remain aligned with the fine arts in its search for an appropriate model of disciplinary research, for it opens up a relationship with the exemplary interdisciplinary enterprise of the post-theory academy: cultural studies.

Postmodern interdisciplinarity

Recent approaches to understanding a discipline accept that an object of study is always constructed, must be constantly defined, and that it is more productive to conceive of a discipline not as a body of knowledge, but as a flexible set of methodologies organised around a series of recurring questions. We know that for much of its history the question that informed debate and guided the acquisition of knowledge in creative writing was: can writing be taught? In other words, creative writing began as a pedagogy, enshrined in the writers' workshop. Those who taught 'writing' assumed its independent existence, as self-evident a term as 'literature' - something which students could be taught to *do*, in order to produce literature. And if students could not be given talent (for that, too, obviously must already exist as a genetic quotient), they could be taught the process and craft of writing in order to develop their talent.

When we began to ask different questions, when we accepted the contingency and porousness of our assumptions about writing, we opened up the possibilities for thinking about writing programs as involving more than the teaching of writing, more than the training of future writers, and becoming centres for the production of knowledge. This scholarly investigation of the theoretical underpinnings of creative writing pedagogy was, necessarily, interdisciplinary in focus, for there were no 'internal' methodological tools for conducting this sort of investigation. If our guiding question is now, 'what makes creative writing an independent discipline?', I think we will be unduly limiting ourselves. It seems paradoxical to suggest that branching out our disciplinary focus should in fact lead to a coalescence of knowledge around a definable object of study. If writing programs and postgraduate degrees are to conceive of themselves as being based in the discipline of creative writing, it cannot be a discipline in the traditional sense. First, because I don't think this is conceptually possible, and secondly because the idea of establishing, or recognising the prior existence, of a 'new' discipline seems at odds with contemporary theories of disciplinarity.

In his 2004 book, *Theory Matters*, Vincent Leitch argues that postmodern culture is characterised by disorganisation or disaggregation, and that this is manifested in the university in the post-theory proliferation of disciplinary subfields. This proliferation, Leitch says, 'contributes to the postmodern disorganization of the modern bureaucratic departmentalized university ... The new postmodern interdisciplines challenge the autonomous discipline, or, more precisely, each discipline per se contains, it turns out, ineradicable elements of other disciplines' (2004: ix). Leitch lists over a dozen of these subfields, including women's and gender studies, film and media studies, whiteness studies and cultural studies, arguing that 'these are all postmodern (inter)disciplines, formed in the late twentieth century, and in certain specific ways also counterdisciplines, that is, constructed self-consciously against the oversights, blindspots, or ingrained prejudices of the modern disciplines' (2004: 169).

It could be argued that creative writing is one of these postmodern interdisciplines, emerging out of the blindspots of English studies (and other disciplines), and occupying a space in established departments, but seeking to develop its own independence. This drive for independence is inevitable, for, as Leitch says, the 'origin and end of all interdisciplines is the discipline' (2004: 167). Nonetheless, as I've said, I think this is neither possible nor desirable in the case of creative writing.

It is worth considering Leitch's postmodern interdisciplines within the polemical framework of Bill Readings' earlier well-known book, *The University in Ruins* (1996). In this book Readings proposes a radical dissolution of traditional disciplines in favour of 'short-term collaborative projects of both teaching and research (to speak in familiar terms) which would be disbanded after a certain period, whatever their success' (1996: 176). The reason for this, Readings argues, is that, despite their intellectual energy, 'such collaborations have a certain half-life, after which they sink back into becoming quasi-departments with budgets to protect and little empires to build' (1996: 176). To put it another way, the end of all interdisciplines is bureaucratic institutionalisation.

For Readings, the university is in ruins because as an institution it no longer has a defined cultural mission, one which historically has been linked to the ideology of nationhood. 'In a general economy of excellence, the practice of research is of value only as an exchange-value within the market; it no longer has intrinsic use-value for the nation-state' (1996: 175). To protect the integrity of intellectual thought in this context, he argues, the humanities can no longer rely on traditional concepts of disciplinarity. Instead, the relations between knowledge and disciplinary form must be constantly questioned. His intention is to avoid the deadening institutional and bureaucratic effects of disciplines, and to make use of the curricular elective system without succumbing to the concept of the student as consumer. And, rather than exchanging the 'rigid and outmoded disciplines for a simply amorphous interdisciplinary space in the humanities,' Readings argues that 'the loosening of disciplinary structures has to be made the opportunity for the installation of disciplinarity as a *permanent question*' (1996: 177). He goes on to claim that the 'short-term projects I suggest are designed to keep open the question of what it means to group knowledges in certain ways, and what it has meant that they have been so grouped in the past' (1996: 177). By way of example, he points to constellations such as 'Modern Art History' and 'African-American Literature', suggesting that unless disciplinarity remains an open question, such constellations will not remain attentive to their own conditions of production and reproduction.

Without endorsing Readings' 'structural diagnosis' (1996: 2) of the university, or advocating his overall argument for the dissolution of disciplines in favour of shortterm projects, I think it is worth trying to avoid the fate of newer interdisciplinary constellations, those which Readings argues 'become modes of unthinking participation in institutional-bureaucratic life' when they establish themselves as independent disciplines (1996: 176).

In a 1997 article entitled, 'At the Forefront: Postmodern Interdisciplinarity', Roger P Mourad considers the challenge to traditional disciplinary structures presented by the increasing quantity and diversity of knowledge. He argues that it is becoming more difficult to see disciplines as 'absolute structures' (1997: 130) that can apprehend discrete elements of pre-existing reality through the progressive refinement of methods and accumulation of knowledge. In a postmodern environment of proliferating knowledges, disciplines can be seen as robust structures able to accommodate the ongoing expansion of knowledge, or they can be seen as increasingly incoherent. For Mourad, '[t]he most significant evidence of this incoherence is the blurring of disciplinary boundaries as a result of the intellectual activity that pursues knowledge by combining, or seeking to combine, theories or modes of inquiry from more than one discipline' (1997: 130).

Mourad argues that the blurring of disciplinary boundaries as the result of increasing quantities of diverse knowledges that cannot be contained in traditional disciplinary structures is a demonstration of the increasing fragmentation of disciplines in the contemporary world, and thus can form a basis for a postmodern higher education. 'The 'blurring of boundaries' suggests that even though the disciplines as structures are absolute in effect, some intellectual activity within the disciplines does not follow this principle but is trying in part to move out of these boundaries' (1997: 130-31). However, Mourad distinguishes between modern concepts of interdisciplinarity, which essentially seek to shore up the absolute status of disciplines, and postmodern interdisciplinarity, which seek to move beyond them. Modern interdisciplinarity seeks to fill in the gaps between disciplines by combining disciplinary approaches to a larger problem:

> In effect, modern interdisciplinarity tries to repair the modern fragmentation of knowledge by bringing disciplines together. It implies an ultimate ideal, namely, the unification of disciplinary knowledge as a totality. For these reasons, modern interdisciplinarity is largely an uncritical extension of the disciplines rather than a critical alternative. (1997: 136)

In contrast, Mourad claims, 'the postmodern idea of the disciplines advocated here does not view the fragmentation of knowledge as an abnormality that needs to be repaired so that the normality of unity can be restored or realized' (1997: 136). Instead, disciplines would lose their essentialised status as repositories of permanent and unified knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge would be more open-ended and contingent. As Mourad states:

> First, a postmodern inquiry would be self-organizing in that its particular foundations would emerge in the course of the inquiry rather than be predetermined in the form of discipline-bound theories, methods, and schools of thought ... Such an idea of a theoretical ground is 'local', in that inquiry is explicitly dependent on a context that is essentially defined by a knower or group of knowers engaged in a particular inquiry, rather than the context's being 'already there' in a discipline (197: 132).

To facilitate such a move towards a more contingent understanding of disciplinary structures, Mourad proposes the idea of research programs, similar to Reading's shortterm projects. In these research programs, 'interested individuals from a diverse group of disciplines' (1997: 133) would gather together and use their various intellectual groundings as points of departure 'to produce compelling ideas that are not limited by the disciplines', in order to 'change what is normal' (1997: 136). It is not clear what form these 'compelling ideas' might eventually take, and where that would leave the traditional disciplines, but then, that is because Mourad is projecting an ideal.

Interdisciplinarity in creative writing

Interdisciplinarity has been a feature of the development of creative writing studies, bringing to bear new ways of thinking about the teaching of writing which are not purely centred on illuminating the consciousness and creative processes of the writer, thus opening up the possibility of thinking about creative writing as a more rigorously defined scholarly pursuit. Nonetheless, there is no reason to suggest that this interdisciplinary approach should eventually cohere in an understanding of creative writing as an 'absolute structure' defined by its knowledge of a pre-existing aspect of reality, ie. 'writing'.

The difficulties inherent in discussing creative writing as a discipline are apparent in Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady's introduction to *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice* (2006). This book recounts the various approaches teachers of writing have taken towards developing a unique creative writing theory over the last decade, contributing to a body of knowledge which would enable writing to 'exist in the sector as more than an elective, to be able to reach the dizzy heights of a discipline' (2006: 14). They point to the variety of work carried out in the name of this enterprise, and acknowledge the 'eclectic nature' of the scholarly essays in this anthology, designed to advance the possibility of a creative writing theory:

> Scholars use many and varied doors to enter the discipline of writing; some are even climbing in the windows. Approaches are based in psychology, biology, philosophy, ecology, architecture, ethnicity studies, psychoanalysis, sculpture, writing technique, and so on. These source areas work as portals or provide metaphorical structures, but each of them brings to the discipline a richness, a complexity. This is one of the great gifts that writing conveys to the academy; and rather than suggest that the focus should be narrowed, this collection celebrates the breadth and elaborate color range offered by writing research. (2006: 16)

There are admirable sentiments being expressed here, but the metaphor for the discipline is instructive; in fact, it resonates with Henry James' famous 'house of fiction', operating as a kind of scholarly mirror image of this metaphor. For James, the house of fiction offers a million possible angles to the world as perceived by the artist, or the fictional world created by the artist. The house has a myriad range of windows which serve as vantage points from which to perceive characters in this world, but the windows are only tools, the literary form which enables authors their distinct approach to their subject.[4] For Krauth and Brady, scholars are standing outside the 'discipline of writing', with various scholarly approaches offering a variety of complex portals into this discipline.

The interpretive possibilities offered by this metaphor present us with a choice for how we are to understand interdisciplinarity in relation to creative writing. Is the 'discipline of writing' a pre-existing object of study or body of knowledge which can be entered (which I take to mean, 'known') by a range of interdisciplinary approaches, or 'external' methodologies? If so, what is at the core of this interdisciplinary inquiry, what is in the 'house' of writing? Is it the act of writing, the products of writing, the teaching of writing? It may be all of them, but regardless, the metaphor is inward-looking rather than outward-looking. Or is the 'discipline of writing' itself only a metaphor, a constructed theoretical object, a 'compelling idea' (to use Mourad's phrase) which can act as a nexus point for interdisciplinary 'writing research?' What is the 'gift' that writing conveys to the academy? That it may help fill one of the gaps between separate disciplinary inquiries on the way to a totality of knowledge? Or that it provides the basis for a rich and complex understanding of interdisciplinarity because of its very haziness as an object of study, and the range of scholarly approaches this necessitates?

For me, Krauth and Brady's introduction demonstrates that the emergence of creative writing studies is the product of an ongoing tension created by the pull of centrifugal intellectual forces which are interdisciplinary in focus and centripetal institutional forces which are driving towards disciplinary independence. Rather than resolving this question, I suggest the most productive approach is, to use Readings' phrase, to install disciplinarity as a permanent question.

In some ways the debate about disciplinarity is one of semantics, but writers more than most know the importance of words. Some programs prefer the more inclusive term 'writing' to the traditional one of 'creative writing', with its emphasis on the literary and the fictional; although our 'discipline' finds its identity and its institutional niche in the idea of 'creative' research. I think creative writing is most productively conceived as a distinct, theoretically informed, *pedagogy* that occupies a space within multiple (and themselves permeable) disciplines such as English, cultural studies, media and communication, film and theatre studies, and the creative arts.

Creative writing, therefore, is best understood as an interdisciplinary pedagogy, rather than a discrete discipline that can be illuminated by drawing upon other modes of knowledge. By this I mean that 'writing' is not an independent object of study (even the 'craft' of writing which academics employ as 'practitioners' is taught according to the principles of formalist criticism). And I mean that asking broad theoretical, cultural, institutional and political questions about how and what we teach does not simply stem from an eclectic theoretical approach to the practice of writing; this sort of critically-engaged pedagogical enquiry depends on the ineradicable *structural* presence of other 'disciplines', especially literary and cultural studies. It engages by nature with questions - what is literature, what is creativity, what is writing - that keep the question of disciplinarity perpetually open.

This does not mean we should not offer research higher degrees, what Krauth and Brady call 'the jewels in the university crown' (2006: 14), or that we should no longer lobby for institutional parity and funding equality, but that the study and profession of creative writing in universities must avoid becoming what Readings calls a mode of 'unthinking participation in institutional-bureaucratic life.' For me this becomes a possibility when a concept motivated by the desire to attract funding for the creative publications of teachers of writing is taken seriously as a new paradigm of research around which our disciplinary identity should cohere.

Notes

1 *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice* (2006), edited by Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady, provides a good example of this range. The standard genre of writing handbooks is also developing, as evidenced by two recent publications: Hazel Smith's *The Writing Experiment: Strategies for Innovative Creative Writing* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005) which aims 'to theorise the process of writing by relating it to the literary and cultural concepts which students encounter on other university courses' (vii); and Amanda Boulter's *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) which 'attempts to unpick the oppositional logic that has developed around creative writing, a logic that sets "creativity" against "criticism" as if they are utterly distinct elements of writing' (1). In 'The Future of Creative Writing' (2007) I argue that the cumulative effect of ongoing critiques of creative writing pedagogy has been the emergence of a new aesthetic in the poetics of creative writing: a shift from the 'sublime' to the 'avant-garde'. return to text

2 This is in fact the title of a new scholarly anthology edited by Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll: *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy* (Multilingual Matters, 2007). The field of creative writing 'studies' might also include this shortlist of books: Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writer's Workshop: Origins, Emergence and Growth* (Iowa UP, 1980); Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (eds), *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1994); DG Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Prentice Hall, 1996; Chicago UP, 2006); Katherine Haake, *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies* (National Council of Teachers of English, 2000); Paul Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (Routledge, 2005); Tim Mayers, (Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing and the Future of English Studies (Pittsburgh UP, 2005); Anna Leahy (ed), *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project* (Multilingual Matters, 2005); Wendy Bishop and David Starkey, *Keywords in Creative Writing* (Utah State UP, 2006); Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice (eds), *Can it Really be Taught?: Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy* (Boynton/Cook, 2007); David Morley, *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* (Cambridge UP, 2007); and Michelene Wandor, *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing After Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). return to text

3 It is worth noting that a PhD in Creative Writing was first offered as early as 1931, in the School of Letters at the University of Iowa. Here 'imaginative writing', as it was then called, was conceived as one element of graduate specialisation alongside language, literary history and literary criticism. DG Myers argues that creative writing first found identity as a discipline in this context: 'in the first stage creative writing settled into a *discipline* while only in the second stage did the teachers of this discipline make themselves bodily into a *profession*' (147). This is manifested in the shift from the School of Letters to the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1939, and the eventual establishment of the Associated Writing Programs in 1967, which facilitated what Myers calls an 'elephant machine' of teacher training. According to Myers: 'In the first stage creative writing was the perfection of one tendency in the history of criticism. It was an effort to handle a single order of human discourse in a way that would yield a unified body of theory. It was the movement of criticism toward constructive knowledge - knowledge *how* conceived as both the only means of access to and somehow the equivalent of knowledge *that*' (147). One can see connections between Myer's account of disciplinary knowledge and the argument for practice-led research. Nonetheless, if one reads *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods* (1941), the manifesto for the School of Letters edited by Norman Foerster, it can be seen that the word 'discipline' relates more to a particular type of graduate training rather than to a body of knowledge. It seems most appropriate to say that, in the School of Letters, creative writing was conceived as one methodological approach to knowledge in literary studies alongside criticism, history and language. return to text

4 The metaphor of the house of fiction can be found in James' preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. See Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, ed RP Blackmur, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934, p46. return to text

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