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Fractured Writing: Creativity, the University and the Australian Culture Wars

In 1988 an academic conference was held at the University of New South Wales entitled 'Writers and Academics - an Australian Divide?'. Whereas in America the traditional rivalry - between writers and academics, literature and criticism - had by this time galvanised around what Marjorie Perloff called the A team of the creative writing workshop and the B team of the graduate seminar in theory (Perloff 1986: 45), in Australia the two groups were still squaring off over the dividing wall of the academy. Creative writing had not yet come into its own as an Australian university discipline. The first undergraduate major had been established for three years at the University of Wollongong, creative writing had a strong presence in the CAEs (many of which were soon to become universities via the Dawkins reforms), and isolated subjects were appearing at newer and more experimental institutions such as Macquarie and Deakin (Dawson 2005: 151); but the discipline had no professional body, no cohesion, no mission statement. Fifteen years on, as a discipline with a professional body and an almost comprehensive representation in humanities departments throughout the country, how has university creative writing entered and affected the hostile dialectic between writer and critic? This paper will aim to address this question, while touching on a wider terrain of debates about creativity, the academy and Australian cultural politics.

Because of its longer institutional history and more extensive critical commentary, American creative writing is a useful place to start. In 1996 D.G. Myers published the first comprehensive account of creative writing's emergence as a discipline in America. Myers explores creative writing's development in tandem with upheavals in the related discipline of literary studies. His purpose, although often only inferred, is to resurrect the spirit of creative writing's formative steps, which were taken alongside New Criticism in opposition to the then-prevalent scholarship model of teaching literature. He writes:

> The rise of creative writing belongs to the conflict between positivism and idealism that raged in many fields of endeavour in America after the Civil War. Creative writing enlisted on the side of idealism; its origins lie in the complaint that an austere and uninspiring literary scholarship, obsessed with the ideal of scientific knowledge, had treated literature as mere material for

> analysis, instead of what it was - the most spiritual of subjects (Myers 1996: 16).

Myers' study effectively cuts off in the 1970s, after the establishment of the Associated Writing Programs, which is a telling end-point. The absence of inquiry about creative writing's contemporary status allows a progressive, even vaguely revolutionary aftertaste to linger, unalloyed by current critiques of creative writing.

The reality is that, while creative writers are perhaps by definition an embattled breed, the discipline of creative writing in America is no longer struggling to find its niche, at least in the university marketplace. There are now more than a hundred universities in America offering Masters of Fine Arts programs, which the AWP supports as the terminal degree for writer/teachers. 'At first glance,' says Susan Hayes, 'this amazing network of creative writing programs and the opportunities they provide for new writers to work at their craft seems enviable to a country where we are still struggling to establish doctoral programs in this discipline' (Hayes 1998). The very entrenchment that creative writing has achieved in the US can also be seen as a threat to its legitimacy as a discipline amongst other disciplines in the modern university. Criticism of the creative writing 'industry' in America takes one of two lines: it focuses on academic credentials - the way creative writing is taught and positioned in the university - or it addresses creative writing's perceived effect on a wider literary culture. Both modes of criticism pivot on accusations of disciplinary insularity.

To take the latter mode of attack first - that creative writing is having a negative impact on the American literary scene - we could start with Flannery O'Connor and the charge of homogenisation:

> In the last twenty years the colleges have been emphasizing creative writing to such an extent that you almost feel that any idiot with a nickel's worth of talent can emerge from a writing class able to write a competent story. In fact, so many people can now write competent stories that the short story as a medium is in danger of dying of competence. (O'Connor quoted in Neubauer 1996: 42)

Thomas Aldridge, attacking contemporary minimalism, claims that the writing workshop has taught a generation of writers 'to avoid taking risks or indulging in the kind of technical experimentation that might provoke an accusation of originality' (Aldridge 1992: 30). Susan Hayes reports that literary agents in America claim to be able to recognise an 'Iowa short story' without having seen an author bio (Hayes 1998).

Leading the charge on the other line of attack are proponents of what is commonly taken to be creative writing's institutional nemesis: theory. The rift between writers and critical theorists in American college education has been well documented over the past twenty years. In 1989 Eve Shelnutt described the insularity of the MFA programs, which made a virtue of their departmental segregation from literature, theory and composition courses, isolating students from 'the broader intellectual life of the university' (Shelnutt 1989: 9). Numerous commentators have since characterised the pedagogical environment of these programs as intellectually impoverished ghettoism. Amato and Fleisher write that the Iowa workshop model translates into 'old soldiers' and old souls' retreats...where each writing guru is the sole proprietor of his or her

localized tribe' (Amato and Fleisher 2001: 16-17). Kelly Ritter calls creative writers

> the most invisible group within the academy and certainly the most invisible in English studies, as they suffer from a collective anti-academic identity, one that carries with it frequent exclusion from...theoretical, pedagogical training. (Ritter 2001: 210)

Other commentators, among them Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, have described creative writing students in more threatening terms, as a reactionary horde poised to undermine the theoretical advances of the last twenty years:

> The main cultural purpose of the dominant fiction workshop in the present pedagogical regime is in fact to teach the student how to discover the "self", and the cultural politics of this self-discovery ... is to construct a subject who perceives herself as self-constituted and free so that she can then "freely" collaborate with the existing social system, a collaboration that assures the continuation of patriarchal capitalism (Morton and Zavarzadeh 1988 - 1989: 161).

It seems clear then that, in America, as writers have been absorbed almost whole-sale into the academy, the writing workshop has taken on the symbolic role previously associated with the public author in debates between writer and academic.

Turning to Australia, and to the sentiment behind the 1988 conference, 'Writers and Academics: An Australian Divide': in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, a study of the development of creative writing published in 2005, Paul Dawson traces the history of this divide and challenges its central premises, disputing the loftiness of the garret and the fragility of the ivory tower. Dawson's objective is to assist in the ongoing project of formulating a space within the university where writers can do meaningful work in the context of the academic imperative to make a contribution to knowledge. His reconceptualisation of the university writer and the academic as 'public intellectuals' opens up useful common ground, allowing new ways to consider the writer's place in the academy. While I don't dispute Dawson's premises and to a large extent will accept his findings, I argue that, by anchoring his pedagogical discussion in the workshop, Dawson fails to take stock of creative writing's potential for engagement with a wider public sphere. For the purposes of this paper my aim is to examine the split - between academic and writer, egghead and aesthete, garret and ivory tower - against a broad territory of cultural anxiety that has found expression in the series of public battles and controversies often identified as the 'culture wars', referring to nationally specific phenomena with common ideological underpinnings in Australia and the United States.

The polemic surrounding both sides of the culture wars concerns the nature of public intellectual life and the role of public institutions in sustaining it. Debates have coalesced around a number of cultural flash-points - the canon, multiculturalism, anti-elitism. While these debates have taken on distinct cultural and political significance in different national contexts - specifically Australian and North American - they share a common ground in anxiety about the meanings attached to modern art -

aesthetic, intellectual and moral (though the existence of this last standard for judgment is itself at stake in the wars). Writing about the debates in America, Richard Bolton says that 'conservatives and liberals both seem to agree that contemporary art has much potential as an agent for social change' (Bolton 1992: 24) (note 1). Debates about if and how this potential should be fostered revolve around claims that modern (often visual) art has turned its back on universal humanist virtues of beauty and imagination, resorting to shock tactics and high intellectualism and pandering to minority interest groups. Attacks against the state of modern art employ the rhetoric of economic conservatism - protecting the public purse - and of anti-intellectualism, dressed as anti-elitism, e.g. in this press release about the NEA from the American Family Association, 25 July 1989:

> The response by the National Endowment for the Arts to the public outcry against these "works of art" has been that "artists"...are an elite group of people, superior in talent to the working masses, who deserve to be supported by the NEA with $171 million tax dollars imposed on the working people of America... Carpenters are artists also, but the government doesn't give them $171 million to support their art. (quoted in Bolton 1992: 71)

In these issues of public support for the arts - especially arts of dubious popularity - and in the widespread transatlantic suspicion of intellectualism in art, creative writing as it exists in the Australian academy becomes a nexus of anxiety and potentially of negotiation. As a way in to the issues concerning creative writing in Australia I will focus briefly on the polemic surrounding Christopher Koch's acceptance speech for the 1996 Miles Franklin award. My aim is to chart how ideas about creativity, the university and the subject are co-opted by various competing ideologies, and where creative writing has been positioned in the fray.

Koch's speech champions a particular notion of art and takes aim at a general notion of academic endeavour. In its published form in the *Age*, the speech bears the headline and by-line 'Beware bullies who sap the beauty from young writing: Miles Franklin award winner Christopher Koch on why critics and teachers should be ignored' (Koch 1996: 17). The by-line is at once deceptively generalised and overly specific. Koch is referring not to all critics and teachers, and not only to critics and teachers, but to a spectrum of intellectual and ideological positions that differ from his own: positions here embodied in 'the deconstructionist, the post-structuralist - whatever depressing terms they've lately thought up for themselves, always ending with "ism"'. The 'ismists' are grandiose in their destructive power: a 'cancer', a 'plague', a 'spectre' representing the evolution of totalitarianism. They teach the young

> that there is no such thing as real worth in art, and no common values for art to reflect and draw on. Such teachers are asking young writers to believe that structure and the portrayal of character and feeling in a novel are "traditional" - their word, not mine - and that this is therefore bad. What is good in their eyes is "experimental" - again their word, not mine, and one they love to death. Never has a word been so inflated; and the paradox is that its cult has produced only minor and trivial work. Very little that's original has ever been written to please these scholar-masters - and a writer who writes to please them is doomed.

> His words die on the page, since they are masters only of the sterile, the trivial, and the second-hand, and they are abolishing the notion of beauty. (Koch 1996: 17)

The supporters and detractors of Koch, and of his aesthetic and ideological line, define themselves against these loaded terms: tradition, experimentation, beauty. Koch's defence of humanistic values is taken up in various academic and media contexts. Keith Windschuttle adopts it in defence of history, warning of the 'theoretical abyss' approached through 'a relativist view of the concepts of truth and knowledge' (Windschuttle 1994: 36). Beatrice Faust makes the plea on moral grounds: that the denial of 'fixed bodies of knowledge or canons of excellence' will lead to 'moral nihilism' (Faust 1995: 39). Les Murray says, 'Any *true poem* is greater than the whole Enlightenment, more important and more sustaining of human life' (Murray 1997: 187).

In his rejoinder to Koch's speech, published in the *Australian*, McKenzie Wark points to the contradictions through which Koch identifies his social evil, diagnosing 'an irrational expression of fear and resentment', a fantasy.

> These puritan ideologues are also self-interested careerists, specialising in "professional anger". They are masters only of the sterile, yet are "multiplying like mice". They are too uncreative and yet also too experimental. "Lobby groups" are destroying "the harmony that nurtures creativity". Yet "we're producing talent and achievement in every field". (Wark 1996: 13)

Koch's speech doesn't stand up well to this level of scrutiny. And yet there is too much going on in it, and in the virulence of response it elicited, to dismiss its concerns as fantasy. For the purpose of exploring creative writing's place in this field of debate I briefly consider Koch's attitudes to, on the one hand, the 'critics and teachers' undermining society, and on the other the 'Australians who care about this country' - in particular Australians who write.

The critics and teachers, as we have seen, are slippery in character, and often identified by extremes. They are defined circuitously; first by their motivations: 'I'm referring to people of a kind who have no real love of literature, who are probably dead to it, and who use it as an instrument for power grabbing'. Then by their location: they are 'the white-coated scientists of the English departments'. When Koch comes to their creed, they are identified variously as 'deconstructionists', 'post-structuralists' and 'postmodernists' (Koch 1996: 17). Their activities are a shadowy welter of contradictions and, like McCarthy's Communists in the White House, Wark points out that none is ever named.

By contrast, the group to whom Koch addresses his appeal - 'to my fellow writers - especially to young writers' - is imbued with coherence, and can largely be defined in opposition to the postmodernists. Koch says:

> [A] writer, I believe, has only one duty: to recognise these would-be controllers of thought and creativity whenever they appear. Above all, a writer should counter their negative effects by loving what he does, and loving literature itself. (Koch 1996: 17)

Koch doesn't use qualifiers like a writer *of traditional narrative realism*. And by this sleight of hand the only real writers become his kind of writers

- those devoted to 'common values for art to reflect and draw on', to 'structure and the portrayal of character and feeling'; and most of all, to beauty.

The idea of an intellectual embodying the dual positions of real writer and real postmodernist is a contradiction in Koch's terms, since postmodernism is 'the final revenge of the uncreative', and anyone who embraces it is doomed to sterility: 'His words die on the page, since they are masters only of the sterile, the trivial and the second-hand.' This begs the question of why Koch is so concerned about the fate of Australian writing. If the theory boffins are so barren and marooned in the English Departments, outside of which 'we're producing talent and achievement in every field', what threat do they pose to the culture at large?

One justification for concern is that the field of contention is much broader than that peopled by contemporary Australian writers. The next voice in Koch's public stoush belongs to Jonathan Bowden, writing in the *Australian*. Bowden at once broadens the attack and makes explicit its academic target:

> Something has happened especially in the arts faculties of the universities, which, over the past 20 years has turned them from being defenders of liberal and humane values into the attackers of the traditions which have sustained the arts for millennia. (Bowden 1996: 13)

Whereas Koch is primarily concerned for the effect these 'attackers of the traditions' are having on young writers, Bowden's anxiety is for the visual arts:

> Over the past 20-odd years I have watched the arts schools become absorbed into the universities and the teaching of painting and drawing skills relegated to a tricksy and meretricious sub-craft. Meantime the students have been required to provide elaborate verbal self justification for themselves, all in the name of conceptual rectitude. (Bowden 1996: 13)

This is a relevant detour in considering creative writing's place in the conflict, since visual art schools are at the coalface of debates about theory, creativity and the universities. In 2004 Peter Timms published an emperor's-new-clothes exposé of contemporary art, posed as a question, *What's Wrong With Contemporary Art?*, which he answers with sweeping conviction: everything. Contemporary art, for Timms, is by definition aligned with contemporary theory:

> What...do we mean by contemporary art?... The most common answer to this question...is that contemporary art is that which "engages with contemporary theory": that is, the sort of basically French cultural theory taught in university humanities departments under the broad rubric of postmodernism. (Timms 2004: 15)

Contemporary theory, in turn, is aligned with a state-sponsored educational and financial monopoly:

> In the modern West, governments are usually willing and able to support the production of installation, performance and video, and to pay for the exhibition spaces that show it,

> *the tertiary educational institutions that teach the theory in the first place*, and the public museums of contemporary art that represent virtually its only buyers. (Timms 2004: 24, my italics)

This institutional patronage is only a bad thing if, like Timms, you are unimpressed with the kind of art that emerges from it: 'the university's rewards system, while it might suit the bureaucracy, encourages a narrowly didactic approach to art making ... it demands that art be constructed from a blueprint, discouraging whatever springs from the unconscious' (Timms 2004: 31). The thrust of Timms' argument is analogous to Koch's, as well as Bowden's, Beatrice Faust's and Les Murray's: that art does not and should not operate on an intellectual paradigm. It should only, in the words of the master potter Bernard Leach, have *heart* (quoted in Timms: 131).

Timms' hostility towards what he calls 'the primaeval ooze of our art school theory departments' (Timms 2004: 103) is the more strident arm of a general distrust of 'ideas-based art'. His explanation for the recent prevalence of this 'thinky' art is that universities privilege exegesis over diegesis, intellectual articulation over abstract expression:

> Discourse rules. And that tends to rule out the ineffable. Art...which invites an aesthetic and emotional response, doesn't stand much chance in the urbane academic milieu of thesis and exegesis, a world in which aesthetics is regarded with distrust and emotion is confused with sentimentality. (Timms 2004: 107)

A similar suspicion of intellectualism in art is what leads Koch to deride the 'white-coated scientists of the English departments', and Bowden to accuse Wark of being 'an arts buff plagiarising the language of pure science'. Thus, when Koch attacks the 'life-hating ideology' of the postmodernists, he is entering a well established polemic. Only the alignment of discipline and ideology is particular to the context of Australian creative writing. The main reason that Koch can't dismiss the life-hating ideologues, trusting that they're removed enough from what he calls the 'broad mass of intelligent human beings who read,' is that the space between Australian writers and the white-coated scientists of the English departments is not as clearly established as Koch and others would like it to be.

In 1994, two years before Koch won the Miles Franklin, McKenzie Wark published a piece in the *Australian* titled 'The Courses of True Fiction', which celebrates a spate of first novelists emerging from tertiary writing courses. In the article Wark focuses on the novelists' theoretical sophistication, which he links to their common academic background. Of Jane Messer's *Night by Night*, for instance, Wark writes:

> Now wait a minute! I might be nodding off here but isn't it unusual for an Australian novelist to have this breadth of literary sense, this commitment to the pleasure of the text made artfully out of other texts, as much as out of observation, narrative, character? I mean, as literary theorists go, Blanchot is about as cool as it gets.
>
> Maybe it's significant that Messer studied creative writing - at the University of Technology of Sydney with Glenda

> Adams, then in Baltimore - and maybe not. Some critics seem to think that the connection with universities will be the death of good writing. Others think it's the cure. (Wark 1994: 34)

Wark draws this line to what other critics think about universities and good writing as though all debate on the subject lined up along the same ideological and aesthetic axes as his. In fact, as discussed earlier, creative writing courses in America - far from fostering a symbiotic relationship with literary theorists - are widely viewed as theory's nemesis. To go back to Morton and Zavarzadeh:

> The dominant form of the fiction workshop in creative writing programs of contemporary American literature departments is founded upon a set of assumptions that have all been put in question by postmodern critical theory' (Morton and Zavarzadeh 1988 - 1989: 155).

In 1989 Eve Shelnutt wrote that American MFA programs were dominated by an 'almost aggressive anti-intellectualism' (Shelnutt 1989: 7). In 2004 Patrick Bizarro writes of the same educational milieu that 'the mere mention of theory or praxis sets off alarms in the brains of most creative writers' (Bizarro 2004: 295).

Compare this to Justine Ettler, quoted in Wark's article:

> "The really liberating thing about post-structuralist theory for a writer is that the author is not the origin of the text. I wrote my MA about parody which came straight from that idea. In the novels I borrow characters and put them in new contexts, rework them. Theory gets you out of the very adolescent writing down of 'feeling'. It breaks the circuit between the self and the writer and the writing." (Ettler quoted in Wark 1994: 34)

Obviously some writers are more engaged with critical theory than others, and Wark's article is skewed in that it only references graduates from the Communications program at UTS. Nevertheless, the fact of Koch's and others' hostility to the 'life-hating ideologues', and their defensive huddle around 'their' kind of writing, suggests a more divided literary/academic culture than that prevailing in America, where creative writing stands accused of insularity, traditionalism and commercialism. Indications of something different going on in Australian creative writing courses emerge from the contents of *TEXT*, where an interrogation of creative writing's academic praxis and its position vis a vis literary and cultural studies ranges over research equivalence (Dawson 1999), post-colonial approaches to the teaching of writing (Freiman 2001), the integration of multi-media into workshop pedagogy (Woods 2002). As an example, Claire Woods and Paul Skrebels write of the undergraduate program in Professional Writing and Communication at the University of South Australia:

> The award is grounded in a broad-ranging dialogic and rhetorical approach; an interdisciplinary approach drawing on anthropology, communication and discourse theory, linguistics, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, feminist criticism and the theory and practice of the ethnography of communication. (Woods & Skrebels 1997).

The pedagogical culture of creative writing courses taps and feeds back in to a stream of debates in the public sphere, and particularly in the cultural media. A scan of the contents pages of Australian literary journals and extracts reveals some of the cultural anxieties channelled through Oz Lit: 'The State of Australian Fiction: Is There Too Much Mediocre Fiction Being Published?' (*ABR* Forum 2000), 'Death of the Novel' (Modjeska 2002a), 'Has Australian Writing Lost the Plot' (Preston 2004). One common theme in discussion of Australian literature is *waiting* - for the next big thing, the book that will define a decade, a generation, a national outlook. Andrew Reimer, writing as part of the *Australian Book Review*'s 2000 symposium on 'The State of Australian Fiction,' asks,

> Where have bold, innovative young writers gone? It is at the top that the mediocrity of contemporary Australian fiction becomes most evident. When did the Vogel, for instance, last come up with a Kate Grenville, a Tim Winton or a Brian Castro? (Reimer in *ABR* Forum 2000: 30)

Various literary trends have been blamed for the absence of the *big* Australian books and authors. Grunge became an easy target, with its formal minimalism and quotidian subject matter (and, by extension, young first-time authors were held accountable for the dearth of 'good' literature - see for instance Cork [1995], Reimer [1996]). Malcolm Knox, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, blamed the novel of 'obscure or historical or allegorical places' (Knox 2001: 8). Similarly, Drusilla Modjeska diagnosed a modern cultural cringe, scaring authors away from content of contemporary Australian significance: 'The fiction we were producing was too postmodern, too self-referential...leached of feeling, or pitched to an international audience' (Modjeska 2002b: 8). Critical frustrations with novels perceived as impermanent and *small* echo the terms in which Koch condemns critical theory: the 'cult' that 'has produced only minor and trivial work'. Delia Falconer claims that postmodernity has become the ubiquitous subtextual slur, 'the demon that lurks in terms like "tricksy" and "insubstantial"; that is used to invoke a vast array of sins including alienation, a lack of heart, amorality, incoherence, even Demidenko' (Falconer 2003: 34). Anything tarred with 'the taint of postmodernism' fails by definition to communicate as literature should - on suitable subjects to a suitable breadth of readership.

In a very material sense the idea of impermanence *is* built in to the way new writing is disseminated and received. According to David Myers there are more novels being published than ever before and the review space and shelf life they can expect is limited (Myers 2004: 66). It is possible, however, to interpret this trend as something other than a terminal decline. Instead of a culture of literary celebrity relying on the author function - waiting for the next Kate Grenville, Tim Winton or Brian Castro (or better still Jonathan Franzen) - Falconer makes a case for diversity and for literary specificity rather than universalism:

> we need to acknowledge that history itself has moved along with our literature; that the very concept of a novel that can sum up 'our' present might be dated.
>
> It may be that the novels that tell us who we are are already here, or need rescuing from the queer, koori, grunge, po-mo, historical, or multicult baskets. It may be that we need to stop scanning the horizon for the old-fashioned 'political novel' and learn to read novels that trace the byways of

> globalisation in private lives as 'political' too; we might need to foster novels with experimental - perhaps even 'postmodern' forms - as they try to fit themselves to a new reality...
>
> Our best sense of ourselves will come out of the broadest ecology of novels (Falconer 2003: 34).

While it is difficult to generalise about the culture of Australian creative writing courses without more empirical research, it seems fair to suggest that - located within departments of Cultural Studies, English, Media Studies, Communications - they might tend to foster experimentation and a broad ecology of novels. Certainly the degree structure of postgraduate work in Australian creative writing courses encourages a more experimental and theoretically engaged ethic than what Ritter calls the 'M.F.A. position' currently dominating American creative writing pedagogy (Ritter 2001: 216). While American creative writing students may be encouraged or required to take coursework in Comparative Literature, the standard assessment at the end of two years is 'a creative thesis (book-length collection of creative work)' (*AWP Director's Handbook*), with no equivalent to the critical exegesis that represents anything from twenty to seventy percent of creative writing PhD programs in Australia.

These different institutional paradigms raise questions beyond the scope of this paper: questions about how, why and for whom art is made, and about the role of education in producing and sustaining culture. And the more fundamental question (to end at the beginning of another discussion): what is going on in Australian creative writing courses?

Notes

1) Bolton's book, *Culture Wars* (1992), is a collection of source material from the American culture wars. For analysis of the American culture wars see Williams, *PC Wars* (1995); Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams* (1995); Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992); Berube, *Public Access* (1994). For discussion of cultural conflict in Australia see Wark, *The Virtual Republic* (1994); Windschuttle, *The Killing of History* (1994). Return to text

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 2 October 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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