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The Romantic Ego in the Creative Writing Workshop

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.
Nothing besides remains.
Percy Bysshe Shelley - 'Ozymandias' (1817)

I begin here because we are living through one of those strange moments in history - an interregnum (indeed a time of war) between the death throes of optimistic post-modernity and the cold realization that we might be responsible for our late romantic urges.

Before venturing on I need to define my terminology. I use 'romantic' here as having to do with love or romance, of showing or constructing life in an idealized fashion. I have invoked Shelley as an epigraph because he identified the dangers of hubris and vanity when desire is exhausted and over-idealized. Romanticism as a movement emphasised creative inspiration and individual feeling; what I will attempt to argue is that the privileging of the individual / 'romantic' ego in this instance (what I call 'late romantic') is an exhaustion of idealism and feeling, in effect, a fearful and potentially barbaric desire for order, masking itself as 'romantic' and democratic.

I have been teaching for quite a while and I have begun to notice a trend in some creative writing programs: that is, the rise of the overly self-absorbed student obsessed with instant fame. The return, if you like, of the romantic artist who displays a relative inability to appreciate and relate to the work of other students. This type of student is still very much a minority - nevertheless, s/he may represent a trend that shouldn't be ignored because we are working within a framework of accelerating co-modification in which students are increasingly under intense pressure to succeed and to do so very quickly. I would like to see this article as being in some way in the spirit of honesty created by Jen Webb in her 'Depression and Creative Writing Students' (Webb 2003) where she explored the individualised pressures on students and a context in which they could be helpfully understood. Another useful intervention into the ways in which we could place student experience into our theorization of creative writing practice is Brian Dibble's "'An Idiot of the Present or a Genius of the Future?": Some Problems, Some Promise' which is, in my view, a playful salvo across our own 'romantic' desires as teachers (Dibble 2002) (note 1).

I need to say at this juncture that I am becoming firmer in my belief that a CW course that only privileges technique without context is particularly problematic at undergraduate levels. Even so, reading and writing should go hand in hand in all CW courses irrespective of the levels, whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate.

And also I need to say that I want to invoke a 'playfulness with representation' (Borges 1970: 282) and a seriousness, as described by Borges in 'the fact that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future' (Borges 1970: 282). I am of course an unreliable narrator, and this is my story.

During my own experience in coursework creative writing courses at two Australian universities, I have observed manifestations of the romantic ego that could be said to form a composite that shares characteristics. For example, early in the course, a student announces that the contents of the course reader (which, like most course readers, is inevitably imperfect) containing Dessaix, Simic, O'Connor, Malouf, White, Barnard, Cheever and Carver, among many others, has nothing to offer the CW student. The student makes copious notes of anything anyone says about anything, and delights in editing the work of other students by making voluminous marks all over their scripts, so much so that it is difficult to distinguish the original typescript underneath the weighty scribbling. The student starts to own someone else's story. The student also resists reading other authors, suggesting that such an activity is intrusive, but says they want technical tips on how to make their work better.

The romantic ego then, in this instance, has little notion of, or the democratic spirit to imagine, the CW class as a dialogical experience; an environment of social heteroglossia that could be caring *and* rigorous.

Now, I have little doubt that you have met the romantic ego in one or another of its incarnations (indeed collaborations) in your classroom, but the question persists about the extent to which we, as CW teachers, could be perpetuating this phenomenon in our courses and the degree to which we should tolerate it.

In broad terms, I think that we could, if we are not careful, be fostering 'toddlers who still insist that they need their comforters, and need to be dragged kicking and screaming to the recognition that they do not' (Eagleton 2003: 58). But such a psychological intervention requires broader framing and unpacking. For example, Michael Wilding has recently noted that

The cult of the writer as celebrity was very much a Romantic phenomenon...the hero as man of letters. But the writers and composers have gradually been displaced by the players, the musicians and the actors. Consequently celebrities are generally performers...in contemporary society, the celebrity is celebrated for unauthenticity, for faking it. (Wilding 2004: 2)

There are here obvious allusions, and particular references, to so-called reality TV and Paris Hilton, etc, but it is the performative aspect that I am most interested in, in the context of the CW class.

The romantic ego is, then, on one level, a performer or faker, a legend in its own lunchtime, without any of the centred self-consciousness of great actors or good writers who have something to say. We also know, that CW classes have become, in a sense, a site of the post-modern confessional, a search for community in an instantaneous, yet disconnected world (which explains some of its current popularity), but little has prepared us for the perverse role of the performance poet and prose writer, masquerading as transgressive, lubricated by the ideological ascendancy of the idealised sovereign (albeit at times fractured) individualised subject.

For some students therefore, invoking a relationship between reading and writing is (as with a belief in history) traumatic, in that inscribed within their

nihilism lies a disenchanted absolutist, the rebellious
Oedipal child of the metaphysical father...(and) like the
father, he or she believes that if values are not absolute,
there are no values at all. If father was wrong, then nobody
else can be right. (Eagleton 2003: 214)

Furthermore, this type of 'romance' has been kidnapped and absorbed into 'the ideology of an ascendant class', as Frye has suggested. My further point is that the idealized individual ego is the dominant ideology, or 'non-ideology' in this case (Frye 1982: 57). Based on my experiences in the CW workshop I suggest that this kind of 'romance' legitimates dominant hegemonic groups and acts as a narrative veil that hides 'a language of ideology' (Macherey 1985: 60 uses the term), rather than having a liberating function.

So, in such a frustrated search for everyone's wisdom, the student is terribly critical of other people's writing (regarding them as competitors for high marks and publication opportunities) thereby implying that his or her work is superior. Unable to accept responsibility for their own work, they feel the need to pull others down in order to raise themselves up.

Taking a literalist, controlling stance then, the romantic ego insists on the high moral ground which is a kind of militant sensitivity to itself alongside a disregard for other people's feelings, coupled with a litany of statements about how there are now no moral positions, and that it is too stressful to speak of any. Does then the romantic ego manically gesture the high moral ground because it has given up on moral positions in the world outside the class?

Discussion with other teachers indicates a pattern wherein students attend workshops and then move on when not satisfied with the level of praise received. Instinctively, I have felt this, but *my* ego has led me to believe that I can manage the group dynamic and marginalize the attention-seeking behaviour. If I were a primary school teacher, I would not have been that stupid, but because I am a caring CW professional I feel a sense of responsibility for all of my students. Many of you could, I am sure, relate similar situations from your own experiences. My suggestion here is simple: we don't have to accept emotional responsibility for our students' romantic egos.

I, of course, have romanticised my ego over my responsibility to the work, which also raises another question: the extent to which we may revise too much of some student's work, and thereby naturalize many of the symptoms of what could be an impending crisis if left unchecked. Could

some of us be looking for love in the workshop? Allowing for all of the obvious variables, when should a student take responsibility for his or her own work in the CW workshop? Could we be in danger of constructing ourselves as seers rather than catalysts in this new industry we have created?

Returning to the romantic ego's resistance to the reading of other authors, or indeed intolerance towards what could be construed as 'theory', I would like to reframe that as a resistance to literature as an on-going tradition. But to infer that that neurosis (in this instance) is overtly individual could be fatal, for I'm inclined to think that this helpless aggression comes from an anxiety that is relatively systemic in the broader culture. That is, there is a trauma within social formations such as education, which recognises that the past is too big, and the present is too quick to comprehend; particularly when much of post-structuralism (which many of our students are schooled in) refuses generalisation as an act of faith and inscribes its own evangelical moment in the closure of non-closure (note 2).

Furthermore, this romantic masking of its own ego could be, as Eagleton suggests, 'a kind of evil which fears for its own fullness of being' in such a way that it 'involves a megalomaniac overvaluing of the self' (Eagleton 2003: 218). The popular culture references to reality TV are self-evident. To venture further, is this then an unsatisfied self without a history to ever return to? The romantic ego believes (we are led to believe) that it is on the cutting edge of culture, on the next wave of the poetic tide; whereas I suspect the value of poetry is that it is often oceans back from the shore. Are there then (in terms of the broader picture) the traces of 'a deadly combination of voluntarism and nihilism which could be characterising our modern era' (Eagleton 2003: 218)?

As well as resistance to reading other texts, another common manifestation of the romantic ego is the opposition to any outside intrusion into the CW haven / refuge. For example, the presence of invited writers (who, in my classes, have included Geoff Goodfellow and Tom Shapcott) was criticised, ostensibly because it took attention away from the isolated and individualized ego at work.

The case of Geoff Goodfellow might be best explained by this: Geoff would have irritated because his poetry is polemical and egotistical; indeed an overt manifestation rather than idealized covertness, as is the case with the romantic ego. He and it are never easy (and to some probably chauvinistic) but his work always speaks of history being bigger than any individual neurosis; that is, we try to construct our worlds, and are constructed in turn, by a social system built often on our romantic delusions as to where power resides. His work, usefully, generates both approval and disapproval. He positions himself in a place in real time as a member of a social class, and he would have seemed uncool and foolish, his passion embarrassing, to a romantic ego that could not make up its mind whether it were frightened of authority or playing with it.

The threat, in this instance, to the romantic ego lies in that Geoff was a feral Bakhtian intrusion into a desire to control the idealized space of the workshop. There is here the contemporary dilemma of a redundant avant-garde, because Geoff's work is messy, imperfect, often unstylized - like life. This unnerved the romantic ego - and from an educational point of view that may be a good result - but from the aspect of the group dynamic (where the romantic ego is looking for love) it presents a difficulty. On the other hand, Tom Shapcott is typically modest, which on reflection I can

see, was disturbing in different ways. He speaks of his story so far and of his dedication to his work. His patience is quietly subversive to the romanticised ego.

I have observed a similar resistance to other visitors in the workshop. There is no time there, for example, to legislate against the stranger's response to the work presented where s/he is an anonymous reader whose democratic impulses are seemingly unpolluted by the romantic ego's love / hate relationship with hierarchy. The romantic ego exhibits a clear disdain for what could be constructed as the average reader, having the notion that the CW workshop is a privileged, inviolate space to be policed from intruders.

You can see that I am trying not to be too reductive here, but I am hoping that I haven't lost the courage to come to a conclusion...

There is now considerable evidence that taking CW classes is a sign of cultural cred, even an inverted symptom of post-modern status seeking.

There is also evidence that many CW classes provide a longing for a sense of community for people involved in a lonely calling, but going by the evidence of conversations I have had with prospective students at my university, it could also be becoming an official form of creative sanctification. If so, there are other dangers in terms of the romantic image of the artist in that kind of workshop, because people could be doing courses for the wrong reasons. The worst-case scenario of all in this could be that of a fee-paying student in a postgraduate course who sues a university because it has not made her or him brilliantly successful in a short time.

Is then the romantic ego overcome by a generalised anxiety, and is this symptomatic of broader problems? Like most teachers confronted with a difficult student, I feel both anger and compassion, but I am concerned that if we bend to these trends (and individuals) we could be in turn offering up our institutions to a weakness that calls itself relevance, even compassion, but which is only short-hand for conformity.

In any case, do we inadvertently intervene in the romantic ego's traumatic withdrawal from itself, and in, if you like, post-modernism's surface openness exposed as a romantic withdrawal, back into an unpolluted past which cannot be named for fear of naming itself as redundant?

I am still partially seduced by Habermas' suggestion that what we call post-modernism is modernity's incomplete project (a state of melancholy) and by implication, a delayed adolescence inscribing itself in most social formations, including education. A pertinent metaphor might be that of a stationary car with an over-revving engine. As Diane Elam suggests in response to Lyotard's notion that post-modernity is a contemporary cultural mood, 'Pm is not a "now" but a haunting, excessive return of past events' (Elam 1992: 50). And, as I have argued elsewhere, 'pm' is perhaps a repression of creative inspiration and individual feeling masked beneath a democratic veneer (Edmonds 1997). Such haunting 'romantic' re-runs are endemic to the structures surrounding us.

Ingrid Wassenaar, in an interesting recent comment on Brian Castro's *The Garden Book*, delineates the dialogue between modernity and post-modernity undertaken by that author, and so doing, makes out that:

'postmodern suffering...is infinitely dispersed, atomised, reiterated endlessly, and belongs to everyone and no one. Your suffering is already a cliché, your story has already been told' (Wassenaar 2005: 18). Even so, I am optimistic that the best and the most courageous will come through even if the landscape we have been working in has too often been characterised by romanticised fragments rather than glimpses into new worlds.

As in the broader picture, where many are hoping for fifteen minutes of fame, it could be fatal for all concerned to take emotional responsibility for the anxieties of the 'romantic' ego manifested in some students. But, in writing this paper, I hope I have shown that by being clear about what we are doing we can in turn be truly responsible for all our students, and hopefully, we can interrogate the brutal fearfulness of the contemporary romantic ego.

Notes

1) In his article Dibble suggests that the CW workshop should veer away from becoming a controlled dialogical space with naturalizing assumptions. He openly discusses students *x*, *y* and *z* and in turn pleads that we don't romanticize students and in this way encourage their contradictions in a realistic / democratic space. Return to text

2) See the argument in my PhD thesis about narrative withdrawal and the trauma inscribed therein (Edmonds 1997). Return to text

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