Edith Cowan University

Andrew Taylor

Memory and Innovation: Creative Writing and the Avant-garde

Abstract

This paper is not concerned with identifying a contemporary avant-garde as such, but with factors that underlie and nourish an innovative writing that is not ephemeral. It will look at the diverse roles of memory in the creative arts, both in giving them form and in locating them within a socio-historical perspective. Then taking cues from writers and critics such as Eliot, Pound, Bloom and Barthes, it will look at how memory, and the knowledge it makes available, enable innovating writing to draw nourishment and power from its relation to the past. It will do this by looking briefly at how past periods of innovation have related to what Eliot called the Tradition in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and at where innovative writers of today stand. It will defend a wide and catholic knowledge of past writing, not from a conservative point of view, but as a means of creating the genuinely new. It will attempt to identify the various creative uses of the past for today's young or beginner writers, and draw some conclusions regarding the structure and aims of creative writing courses.

The avant-garde

It would seem logical to start this paper with a discussion of the avant-garde: as its name suggests, the avant-garde comes first, it is out in front. The Macquarie dictionary defines it as the vanguard, the leader. But in fact the term seems to me today to be less than useful, being more of a rallying call - if it is used at all - than an accurate description of any group of people or movement. We live in such an eclectic age, where the experiments of the past and the innovations made available by new technologies are so readily available, that serious artists find it hard to compete with the extreme assemblages of some video clips, the montage so easily achieved by computers and now the cliché of much magazine layout, and the almost numbingly pervasive linguistic play that characterises advertisements and newspaper headlines.

Of course, this was not always the case. There were avant-gardes in the past, some of which are still remembered. But who today would spend a lot of time reading Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), a leader of the Vorticists and, in 1914 and 1915, editor of the shortlived but significantly named

Blast? (Lewis1914 & 1915) Lewis was as avant-garde as anyone could be, but he is now completely overshadowed by those immensely innovative, yet also immensely conservative, figures, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Why should this be so? Literary quality, however you define it, may have something to do with it, yet while much of Pound is unreadable today his reputation still stands. I would suggest that what is relevant here is something that goes into producing literary quality or, more precisely, it is a literary quality, a quality of literature, that a certain attitude to the past helps to generate, and which Pound and Eliot had in abundance, and Lewis lacked.

One point about the avant-garde to bear always in mind is that the avant-garde is always belated. It is belated or, if you will, behind the times, in that it is always preceded by something else that has developed something wrong with it, and that should have been renovated or rejuvenated or replaced earlier. In this way the avant-garde always comes *after*, as well as *before*. It is this relation to what it comes after that I want to look at in this paper, because in this relation we can see the difference between an avant-garde of the *Blast*/Vorticist type, and an innovative artistic practice that endures. The louder publicists of change may have shaken the edifice and toppled the walls of the old order - and in doing so they have their value - but those who are remembered are those who built anew, who built new. They had new needs, due to the changes occurring in society, and their art made new demands on them, and they set themselves new challenges. Yet often, like the medieval Romans who pillaged the Forum and Colosseum for building material, they used some of the material of the past, and even adopted, and adapted, old plans and models to new purposes. That too was part of their innovativeness. And one tool, or one faculty, that enabled them so innovatively to remake the past to their new purposes, was memory.

I will turn to memory in a few moments. A key text here is T.S. Eliot's extraordinary essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', originally published in several parts in 1917. In the first part, Eliot claims that it is not 'preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (15). This alteration of the past by the innovations of the present is achieved by 'the historical sense [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' (14). Eliot is writing here of the creative writer. But his insistence that the past is 'altered' by the present - i.e. redefined, reconfigured, constructed differently as a result of the actions of the genuinely innovative artist - is compatible with Roland Barthes' liberation of the text, in his essays 'The Death of the Author' (Barthes 1968) and 'From Work to Text' (Barthes 1971), from authorial intent in the interests of the reader's free-ranging creativity. For Barthes, the works of the past respond to the exigencies of the present, thus becoming texts to be reconfigured as the changing times demand. Despite Eliot's reference to 'the existing monuments [of literature that] form an ideal order among themselves' (15), for both Eliot and Barthes the past is fluid, responsive to the interpretative demands of changing social realities, and - and this is my point - constituent of the innovations of the present.

If one looks at some of the great innovators of the past, and I must confine myself here to literature in English, one is struck by the fact that they are also some of our best critics and literary theorists. Eliot, of course, is one; but so is Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), John Dryden (1631-1700), Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Wordsworth (1770-1850), Coleridge (1772-1834) and Shelley (1792-1822). They were all theorists, all innovators,

and none of them turned their back on the past. Any more than Pound, whose essays deal, amongst others, with the troubadours, Guido Cavalcanti, the Renaissance, the Elizabethan Classicists, and George Crabbe. Or Eliot, who wrote on the Metaphysicals, Marvell, Dryden, Blake, Wordsworth, Baudelaire and, of course, Dante, as well as many other writers. For all of them, the presence of the past, to use Eliot's term, was a powerful constituent of their creativity and their innovativeness. It is with this in mind that I want now to consider memory, and its function in the arts.

Memory

For the past to be present within 'the historical sense', as Eliot uses that term, it must be alive in memory, and not simply retrievable in libraries or from a web archive. But memory has a complex of functions within the arts, not all of them contextual. For example, it is as crucial to any sense of form as, in our personal life, it is to a sense of a coherent personality (Rita Carter 2003). This is most clearly illustrated by music. Unless we can recall what has come before in a piece of music, we cannot relate what we are now hearing to it. Variations on a theme are the most obvious illustration of this, for example Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and, more recently, Robin Holloway's (b. 1943) *Gilded Bach*, which is a massive set of variations on Bach's (original/unoriginal) 31 variations on Goldberg's theme. Or again, Gavin Bryars' (b. 1943) *Jesus' Blood*, a seventy-minute series of repetitions of part of a hymn sung, out of tune, by a street preacher. But sonata form and the symphony depend even more on this ability to remember previously stated themes, as do the vast complex structures of Wagner's Ring Cycle, and more recent works by composers such as Phillip Glass, John Adams, Aavo Pärt, Ross Edwards and Carl Vine. [Because I lack the expertise to remember the musical material of the twelve tone compositions of the Viennese School, I cannot grasp the form of much music by Schönberg and Webern, short though some of it is, nor that of many of their followers. But when a motif, whether rhythmical, tonal, textual or melodic, sticks in my mind, then further allusions to it, or variations on it, give me a sense of structure against which the passage of time can be correlated, and hence of musical form.]

The equivalent in poetry would be most obviously rhyme and metricality, or poetic forms that have repetition built into their progression, such as the sonnet and the villanelle. Thematic or linguistic repetition, or a coherence of imagery (such as the extended Metaphysical conceit) serve the same function. In fiction, I would suggest that characterisation is a prime location of the memory function. We expect characters, within limits, to act in accord with how we remember them as having acted - or potentially acted - before. If they did not, the action and, most likely, the fiction itself would be chaotic and formless. Purposive action, in other words, is dependent on a certain stability or consistency of characterisation, on the characters having a past which the ongoing action both leaves behind yet, simultaneously, builds on. To be purposive, progression in fiction need not be teleological; on the contrary, it needs to come *from somewhere*, and we need to be able to remember where that is.

If an awareness of the past, i.e. memory, is central to the internal structure of writing, this is also the case with regard to the larger structures of what one might want to call literature. (And by this, I am not restricting myself to what used to be considered 'the canon', although the writers I refer to

here mostly have a respectable place in it.) Literature, culture generally, moves on, re-vitalises itself, by a series of rejections and recuperations. In retrospect, the Renaissance contained many aspects of Medieval thought and belief - for example, alchemy played a central role, even in the thinking of Isaac Newton. The Enlightenment's embrace of order and the image of God as a celestial clockmaker grows from late Medieval and Renaissance developments of scientific rationality and method. The Romantics' rejection of Enlightenment Reason and their embrace of the irrational looks forward to Freud and the Modernists, yet Wordsworth's celebration of order within apparent chaos in *The Prelude* (Wordsworth Book 6) is not worlds away from the Enlightenment's image of a coherently structured, orderly, if somewhat excessively mechanical, universe.

The Modernists took a knowledge of the past for granted, even if, as Eliot wrote, 'the more tardy must sweat for it' (1951: 17). Yet they were at the same time deeply worried by their relation to it, and the awareness that its certainties and coherence were slipping from their grasp. The Modernists' trauma of that 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' (1975: Eliot's review of *Ulysses*) is fuelled by the loss of that very vision of wholeness and harmony that Wordsworth celebrated. It gave Modernism its urgency and dynamism, forcing its artists into new forms and new appraisals because the old ones were felt on the nerve as having failed. Nonetheless, although Ezra Pound's catchcry might have been *Make It New* (Pound 1934), he also wrote a *Guide to Kulchur* (Pound 1938) and an *ABC of Reading* (Pound 1934), which was a kind of reading course for those who wished truly to 'make it new'.

Postmodern artists on the other hand were not born or raised in the era of late Victorian certainties (or pseudo-certainties) whose collapse so traumatised the Modernists. Their response to their situation has been to play with the fragments that Eliot's speaker, in 'The Waste Land', 'shored against [his] ruins' (l. 430). This Postmodern embrace of play, including the ironic and ludic citations of the past, springs from a liberation from, or deflection of, the Modernist trauma, in a move that recuperates the past in the act of rejecting it. As Catherine Belsey wrote recently in an essay entitled 'Reading and Critical Practice' (Belsey 2003), 'Modernism and postmodernism break and reinvent the rules with varying degrees of anxiety or celebration, but their defiance of convention can usually count on a familiarity with the norms they repudiate.'

In today's post-Postmodern period, we seem to be in a space cleared of the past by the depredations, or the playful demolition - depending on how you view it - of the Postmoderns. The Modernist trauma is long dead, the resultant debris has been tossed around and, now that its origins have been lost and the game has become predictable and boring, packed away or shoved aside. We live in the most eclectic age humanity has ever experienced. The music of any age, and of any culture, is on CD; any visual image can be found on the Web, and although most books are not, unfortunately, in print, we can access almost anything we want if we try. The past is now instantly available to us. But does it, as Eliot wrote, provide us with 'a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together' (14)? In other words, does the past have a *use* for us, which is another way of asking, do we have a *use* for the past?

The Anxiety of Influence

Harold Bloom's thesis, put forward in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, is too well-known to need extensive discussion here. But his neo-Freudian picture of a dynamic of literary change, in which a writer must tackle, Oedipus-like, the 'strong' writer of the past and wrest control of the text from him in order, through an act of what he calls 'misprision', to re-write it askew and anew, is a powerful and stimulating reminder of one use of the past. The strong poet must tackle and destroy his predecessor, like the aspirant to the priesthood at Lake Nemi near Aricia (which was the starting point for Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*). Bloom would instance Wallace Stevens' rewriting of Milton or, for that matter, of Wordsworth. But even if we descend a little from the heights of Parnassus to our everyday situation, Bloom's thesis is still apposite. Put simply, today's new writers need to recognise the best of what has come before them, and scale their aspirations and ambition accordingly. The relevance of this to our students should be obvious. If they wish to be really good writers, they need to know what really good writing has been in the past, and set themselves the goal of challenging and surpassing it. Despite or, more particularly, precisely because of, historical and social changes, they must look not simply at their immediate predecessors and contemporaries, many of whom would be writing in the same or similar idiom, but further into the past and, of course, also into other languages and cultures. For this to be profitable to them, and not simply discouraging, they need to know not only that these writers from the past are superlatively good, but also *how* and *why* they are. It is our job to teach them this.

At this point I want simply to list what I consider to be some of the main uses of the past for the aspiring writer, in order to bring this paper back to the context of our writing programs. But before doing that, I hope it should be clear that, by ranging as widely as I have through the big names of literary history, I would expect our programs to have their sights set as high as possible. I don't think this is unrealistic, although of course we know, realistically, that few of our students will ever become major writers. But it would be a betrayal of all our students if we failed to show them just how good writing can be and, consequently, set our aim, and their aim, low. So here is my list of ways in which a knowledge of past writing, alive in memory, can be a stimulus to innovation in the present:

- First, it provides an awareness of the possibilities of form and its uses. And I am not thinking only of traditional forms, but also of unconventional or alien forms, and of traditional forms that have been, or can be, re-configured and re-cast.
- Second, it provides awareness of what has been written about in the past: of the breadth and the scope of thematic and representational material.
- It can teach them to avoid the mistakes of the past, and also to understand why past successes are not necessarily what are needed in the contemporary social and cultural situation.
- It avoids the necessity of re-inventing the wheel: what has been done well in the past need not be repeated, but must be done, if done again, *differently*.
- It takes students out of their comfort zone by showing them just how far good writing can go in stretching the limits of the possible.
- It can stimulate them, invigorate them, and challenge them.
- For the best students, it can provoke a Bloom-like ambition to tackle the very best and do - not better, but the very best in today's context.

- It can provide them with creative re-readings of the past within which their own innovations as writers are located and nourished.

I would ask you to note, as I finish, that although I have a great love of the literature of the past, in this paper I am not invoking it in any Arnoldian way as a 'touchstone' of achievement or quality. And I have deliberately refrained from endorsing some kind of canon, even if, for the sake of convenience, I have referred frequently to writers who once were considered undoubtedly canonical. I simply do not believe in the validity of the concept of a canon, and for that reason I consider the important writers of the past not as models, but as challenges. It is worth remembering Fredrick Jameson's statement in his book *The Political Unconscious* that 'a given style [is] a projected solution, on the aesthetic or imaginary level, to a genuinely contradictory situation in the concrete world of everyday social life' (225). A writer aware of contemporary contradictions will not imitate the achievements of the past, but use a knowledge of past 'solutions' as stepping stones to creating innovative new ones. One of our roles, as teachers of writing, and as designers of writing courses, is to provide our students with the knowledge, alive in their memory, that they need in order to be genuinely and energetically innovative. That, I think, is a sizeable challenge.

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Professor Andrew Taylor teaches in the School of International and Community Studies at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.
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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@griffith.edu.au