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Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy

We exist today in what has been called a post-Theory academy. This means that the conditions for intellectual work in the contemporary humanities are constituted by two interrelated elements: a desire to move beyond the methodological restrictions of Theory and engage more practically with the public sphere; and the need to adapt to the institutional pressures of an increasingly corporatised university. (note 1) The discipline of Creative Writing is well placed to contribute to this intellectual work, having emerged in Australian universities alongside the New Humanities as part of a challenge to traditional forms of literary education. The challenge for writing programmes is how to accommodate the insights of critical theory, identity politics and cultural studies, and the critiques of literature which these offer, while still retaining the central pedagogical aim of Creative Writing, which is to teach students how to develop their writing skills in order to produce literary works.

Negotiations with critical theory have been taking place for the past two decades. These negotiations have taken a range of forms, including: integrated courses which ask students to produce their own writing as a way of understanding and critiquing the literature they are studying (Reid, MacCabe, Miles); encouraging an aesthetic engagement with contemporary theory through formal experimentation with avant-garde writing practices (Bernstein, Brewster); and introducing a cultural studies/identity politics framework to reform the workshop as a site of political contestation (Green, Amato and Fleisher, Webb).

I am interested in developing a poetics which can be applied to all student work, from confessional poems to discontinuous narratives, without establishing a hierarchy in which 'experimental' modes of writing are more radical or politically efficacious than 'mainstream' genres. A poetics which engages with questions of literary quality and aesthetic power while still remaining committed to the oppositional criticism of the New Humanities. And a poetics which encourages the view of literature as a public intellectual practice, rather than a means for the empowerment of individual identities and subjectivities.

The difficulty in developing such a poetics is that the 'practical' nature of writing workshops, focussing as they do on improving the draft material brought in by students, causes the critical principles which underpin and allow discussion (reading) to remain invisible and under-theorised. Is the pedagogical process merely guided by the idiosyncrasies of each teacher, the practising writer able to pass on knowledge by virtue of his or her innate talent and secret knowledge of the craft? Or is there a more systematic approach to the study of exemplary texts and student manuscripts, one based not so much on the first-hand knowledge of writers, but on a certain type of criticism? My argument is that what enables the writing workshop to function is not so much a theory of writing, but a theory of

reading. How a work is *composed* by the student is not as important as how it can be *read* in terms of the critical approach of Creative Writing.

In this essay I want to trace the origins of some of the common principles and assumptions which underpin the writing workshop. These can be grouped under three phrases which circulate in pedagogical discussion about Creative Writing: *reading as a writer*; *show don't tell*; and *discovering a voice*. I do not mean to suggest that these three phrases cover the whole range of teaching which is conducted in universities today. Their influence is persistent, however, and by demonstrating how they are underpinned by a certain type of criticism, I aim to show that the traditional poetics of Creative Writing can be reconfigured not by encouraging new modes of writing based on an aesthetic engagement with contemporary theory, but by developing a different critical reading practice in the workshop.

Reading as a writer

The best way to learn how to write, according to most teachers of Creative Writing, is to read. Students are encouraged to read not merely for literary appreciation, but with the aim of discovering ways to improve their own writing. This is what we understand by the term *reading as a writer*. The method of this practice of reading seems to have its origins in advice delivered to literary aspirants by that nineteenth century doyen of professional authors, Walter Besant. In his 1884 essay, "The Art of Fiction", Besant advises that an aspirant "should with the greatest care and attention analyze and examine the construction of certain works, which are acknowledged to be of the first rank in fiction" (Besant 1884: 29). The aim is not only to come to an appreciation of these works, but to determine how they were made. In *The Pen and the Book* (1899) Besant outlines a process for this analysis. First, the "student" should "read it through uncritically" for pleasure. Then read it through again, "critically". Then "take pen and paper" and "pull the story to pieces and then reconstruct it himself" (Besant 1899: 100).

Besant does not suggest that a battery of techniques can be extracted from this analysis and then applied by writers, which is the rhetorical model. His advice is vague because at this stage in history formal critical methods for studying fiction (yet to be fully acknowledged as a legitimate art form alongside poetry) were still in their nascent stages of development. Hence, when he advises young writers to read "critically", he simply distinguishes this as work from mere enjoyment of a book. Criticism is defined as a professional approach, where the writer is an apprentice craftsman.

The phrase, *reading as a writer*, was first used in 1934 by Dorothea Brande, and her description of its method bears striking similarities to Besant's advice. In her handbook, *Becoming a Writer*, Brande advises that "to read effectively it is necessary to learn to consider a book in the light of what it can teach you about the improvement of your own work" (Brande 99). The steps she outlines are the same as Besant's, except she says that when "critical attention" becomes habit, one can read "for enjoyment and for criticism simultaneously" (Brande 104). What Brande means by "reading as a writer", then, is obviously the utilisation of criticism; but again criticism is not defined beyond analytical scrutiny as opposed to idle enjoyment, although elsewhere in the book she uses criticism to denote the secondary act of revision of a first draft which has been worked up from the unconscious.

It is another best-selling fiction handbook, *Writing Fiction*, published in 1962 by R.V. Cassill, which gives the phrase *reading as a writer* its distinctiveness. "A writer reading," Cassill asserts, "must be forever aware that the story exists as it does because the author chose his form from among other possibilities" (Cassill 9). An author attempts to convince those who read for pleasure that his or her work could not be written with any other arrangement of language; a writer reading must analyse how this seemingly natural match arose out of a number of choices, and hence derive an understanding of the process of craft.

Cassill is at pains, however, to distinguish this analytical scrutiny of literary works from the practice of criticism in a way which Brande never did. "The critic's way of reading fiction," he claims, which involves placing the literary work in some sort of theoretical or social context, "is a good way too, and a very valuable approach for a writer" (Cassill 7). It is obviously not essential, however, for Cassill suggests that if a young writer has "time and opportunity" he could "supplement his writing program with classes in the analysis of contemporary fiction" (Cassill 7). We can only assume that the sort of reading which writers must undertake is not one covered by the term criticism. Cassill thus establishes a deliberate dichotomy between the reading practices of the writing workshop and the reading practices of the class in literary studies, one which consolidates the institutional split between writers and critics. This could be because Creative Writing had, by the sixties, become "professionalised" as D.G. Myers puts it, and therefore required a disciplinary identity. It is Cassill, in fact, who founded the Associated Writing Programs in 1967, thus establishing a legitimate professional organisation for teachers of Creative Writing.

Because the motto of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, that writing cannot be taught but talent can be nurtured, is still largely prevalent, and because writing teachers stress that constant reading is the most important thing students can do, alongside constant writing, the notion of reading as a writer is important for Creative Writing to retain its disciplinary distinction. (note 2) By 1993, in Nancy Walker's essay, "The Student Writer as Reader", this distinction seems to have become almost naturalised, rather than one which is taught. Walker claims that "students who are also writers and students who are not writers read literature differently" (Walker 35). Walker does not state that students who have taken Creative Writing classes have been taught to read as writers, she suggests that the practice of writing has provided them with some sort of intuitive inside understanding of the mechanics of literature. The understanding that a work "could have been better or worse than it is had the author made different choices," Walker claims, "may, in turn, empower the student to move from being a reader to being a critic" (Walker 36). The inference is that Creative Writing does not involve criticism, but that it could lead to it.

What we can see here is an attempt to distinguish Creative Writing from literary studies not by virtue of the work students produce, but the manner in which they read literature. It is a difficult distinction, however, based on a difference of motivation (to learn how to write rather than how to appreciate literature), and presumably of expertise (the writer drawing upon his or her first-hand experience of the craft rather than a training in literary study). It is obvious that the terminology employed in the writing workshop, such as plot, structure, point of view, dialogue, and character, is formalist in orientation. And it is also obvious that this sort of reading of literature wishes to concentrate on the craft of writing; how a work of literature is made, rather than extra-literary concerns. The claim, however, that "reading as a writer" is somehow not criticism, based on a writer's point of view rather than a critic's, cannot be validated. The origins of the sort of criticism known as "reading as a writer" is in the Anglo-American tradition of narratology which takes its cue from the New York prefaces of Henry James (writing as a critic of his own work) and finds articulation in the

pioneer work of Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), long before the phrase comes into use. It is in fact no different from what Lubbock terms "creative reading".

Lubbock's enterprise in this book is to establish a new methodology for the criticism of fiction. How a novelist finds his subject is beyond us, Lubbock claims, but how this subject is treated is the beginning of an understanding of the book. For Lubbock, the point at which we begin to study an author's craft is where "the critical question, strictly so called, begins. Is this proceeding of the author the right one, the best for the subject? Is it possible to conceive and to name a better? The hours of the author's labour are lived again by the reader, the pleasure of creation is renewed" (Lubbock 24). Here is where we see the crucial similarities between his work and, not only the concept of *reading as a writer*, but also the workshop process itself. Lubbock is demonstrating that a writer chose one method of presentation over another. Furthermore, asking whether it is possible "to conceive and name" a better proceeding in method is precisely the sort of critical scrutiny that a student manuscript is subjected to.

In discussing what he sees as various flaws in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Lubbock asks: "How would he have treated the story, supposing that he had kept hold of his original reason throughout? Are we prepared to improve upon his method, to re-write his book as we think it ought to have been written?" (Lubbock 57). The qualms that Lubbock experiences in the face of a canonised text are not felt when his method is transferred to the student manuscript. For workshopping does not just ask how a finished work might have been improved, but how a work in progress might be coaxed towards a finished piece.

Lubbock's final comments make it clear that the formalist approach to the study of fiction is the same approach taken up as a pedagogical tool in Creative Writing classes and "naturalised" as a writer's perspective in opposition to a critic's: "The author of the book was a craftsman, the critic must overtake him at his work and see how the book was made" (Lubbock 274). What distinguishes the writing workshop from this type of 'creative reading' is that it also applies this critical method to student manuscripts.

The industry of writing handbooks continues to burgeon today, but in the last decade or so these have been supplemented by an increasing number of academic articles on Creative Writing, most recently in journals such as *College English*, *Electronic Book Review* and *Iowa Review*, and especially in *TEXT*. Rather than maintaining a division between writers and critics, this new industry strives to provide academic legitimacy to the discipline by theorising the teaching of writing in relation to contemporary critical practices. What remains constant in the demarcation of Creative Writing as a discipline is the emphasis on praxis which empowers students to be producers rather than receivers of knowledge, and to develop critical reading skills focussing on process rather than product. Traditional boundaries between reading and writing, the creative and the critical, have been challenged, but the argument remains that Creative Writing offers students more personal freedom and practical skills than an essay-based literary studies class.

Show, Don't Tell

The most common piece of advice in Creative Writing classes, and hence the critical statement most often applied in workshop readings of student manuscripts, is *show, don't tell*. This phrase was already common when Cassill wrote his 1962 handbook. "An experienced writer, criticizing the work of any

apprentice," Cassill writes, "is apt to say repeatedly, 'Don't tell us what your character or scene is like. Show us'" (Cassill 5). This is generally an exhortation for more concrete description which will allow a reader to 'see' a scene, to be convinced of its verisimilitude rather than having to rely upon a sketchy report. For instance, if a sentence read: "She could barely restrain her anger at this comment," a teacher (and experienced students) might ask to be shown the anger, rather than to be simply told that there was anger. The sentence might then be rewritten as: "She smiled tightly in response while underneath the table her knuckles creaked as her fingers twisted the cloth serviette into tight little knots". (This might then be further pared to read: "She smiled in response and her knuckles creaked under the table as she twisted the serviette into tight, little knots.") Or if a room is described as "cluttered", a teacher might suggest that the scene be 'fleshed out' by more description of what is actually in the room.

In "An Apologia for Creative Writing" Ron McFarland claims that: "The advice to 'show' rather than 'tell' qualifies as universal. This comes down to the use of concrete detail in writing, especially imagery" (McFarland 34). McFarland's account of how he worked with a student to improve her poems demonstrates how this advice applies equally to poetry as to fiction. Such advice can be said to derive from Imagist manifestos of poetry. Ezra Pound's 1913 "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" suggests that an imagist poet must "[u]se no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something" (Pound 131). An imagist will also eschew abstract expression of ideas in favour of the concrete image, the symbolism of the natural object. It is better, Pound suggests, to present an image - "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Pound 130) - than to describe a scene in the way a painter would depict it. It is not so much imagist poetry which survives in the workshop, however, as it is a watered down version of Pound's statements in the form of pedagogical advice. "Unfortunately," a 1918 review of an Imagist anthology in *Poetry* claimed, "imaging has now come to mean almost any kind of poetry written in unrhymed irregular verse, and 'the image' - referred solely to the visual sense - is taken to mean some sort of pictorial impression" (quoted in Jones 23). This is a handy description of the sort of poetry which will arise when "show, don't tell" is taken literally.

In *The Writing Book*, Kate Grenville sets an exercise in description for aspiring writers and then suggests that they rewrite the piece without adjectives or adverbs. "This will force you," Grenville writes, "to be very specific, and to 'show' rather than 'tell'" (Grenville 138). So the advice to show rather than tell encourages students to make their events and descriptions more 'concrete', appealing to as many of the senses as possible to more fully realise the events and characters they are describing. In essence, students are being encouraged to make a scene more 'dramatic', paring back adjectives and adverbs in order to let the action present itself. In noting the ubiquity of this piece of advice, Deborah Westbury describes the practice of 'showing' as almost an act of courtesy, an endeavour to share an experience with readers:

The best writing is generous. To show the readers what you saw, felt, touched, tasted, smelled is to enable them to enter into your original experience. To simply 'tell' them leaves the reader on the outside of your experience. It is not generous or interesting.
(Westbury 150)

Is this the advice of writers who have an indepth understanding of their craft, or is it the prescription of a certain type of critical opinion regarding the function of narrative? The distinction between showing and telling is as old as the classical distinction between dramatic and narrative poetry. While Plato argues in *The Republic* that "the poet should conceal himself nowhere" (Plato 638),

Aristotle's *Poetics* praises Homer for speaking as little in his own person as possible; that is, for effacing himself as the narrator in favour of providing as much action and dialogue as possible and imitating characters. This inaugurates a tradition in all forms of narrative art to aspire to an effacement of the condition of narrative, that is, to mask the narrator.

From Flaubert onwards the trajectory of the novel is often regarded as the development of techniques to impersonalise the narrator in order to efface the presence of the implied author, and dramatise as much of the action as possible. According to Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: "the complex issues involved in this shift have been reduced to a convenient distinction between 'showing,' which is artistic, and 'telling,' which is inartistic" (Booth 8).

Henry James was probably most responsible for the dissemination of the idea of 'showing' or 'rendering' as a criterion of evaluation, for his crucial work on point of view was systematised by Percy Lubbock. For Lubbock the historical 'progression' of novelistic craft was one towards its dramatisation, and James signalled the high point of this achievement, locating the 'centre' of action in a character's point of view so that narration itself was enacted in a dramatisation of his or her consciousness. In discussing *Madame Bovary*, Lubbock asserts: "the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (Lubbock 62).

According to Booth, it is Lubbock who "taught us" to believe that the art of fiction does not begin until a novelist shows rather than tells (Booth 8). This observation, Booth argues, this championing of the aesthetic achievements of modern fiction, soon solidified into a rule for both composition and evaluation as it was taken up by both commercial handbooks on fiction writing and scholarly and critical work (Booth 26-7). Booth demonstrates how this is a flawed and restrictive principle for evaluation, but it is nonetheless the principle on which a major critical tool of the writing workshop is based. R.V. Cassill claimed that Flaubert "taught most of the good writers of the past century - all those who 'read as writers' when they looked into *Madame Bovary*" (Cassill 6). Studying Flaubert's writing, according to Cassill, is a way of learning how to show a story, to make it concrete.

The appeal to convincing and authentic depiction of sensory experience which this advice relies upon can work to perpetuate Lubbock's implicit favouring of the genre of realism and the mimetic philosophy behind it. And indeed American writing workshops have been criticised for their contribution to the prominence of minimalism or dirty realism (Morton and Zavarzadeh, Aldridge). In Australia as recently as 1998 Dean Kiley wrote (in a story which provides an account of the Melbourne writers festival, but employs email transcripts and an anecdotal narrator rather than scenic description): "At least three generations of Creative Writing students have grown up with the legacy, passed down from interview to interview, of the official Garner naturalistic narrative realism method" (Kiley 802).

The critical tradition I have sketched out favours an historical view of the novel as an artistic form progressing towards an invisible narrator who will simply present events (or experience) without commentary or evaluation. By focalising a narrative entirely through a character's perspective, there is no apparent mediating presence between story and narration. In order for characters to be fully realised, according to this aesthetic perspective, their sensory and psychological experience must be rendered or recreated (not simply related by a narrator), thus creating a sense of verisimilitude, engaging the reader's imagination and drawing them into the narrative.

When transformed into a teaching device in the writing workshop, *show, don't tell* may be exemplified by this mode of narration, but it ultimately refers to craft, making the aesthetic choices an author has made seem like the only possible ones, rather than to mimesis, disguising the fact that an author has constructed rather than reflected reality. "Perhaps the last thing you need to find out, reading as a writer," R.V. Cassill writes, "is how an author has managed to disguise his own presence, how he has kept the curtain always between himself and the reader" (Cassill 11). Cassill certainly favours realist fiction, but this advice to disguise the presence of the author's craft can easily apply to any genre, even to an anti-realist mode of writing such as metafiction. A work such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exposes the conventions of realism in order to draw attention to its own fictional status, but it does not necessarily draw attention to how the work itself was actually put together. The 'intrusions' upon the narrative draw attention to the role of the *narrator* and *implied author*, rather than that of the author. It is precisely because the advice to show rather than tell is operationalised at the syntactic level rather than the structural, especially in relation to description, that it is so pervasive. One can imagine a writing tutor encouraging Fowles to *show* us this intrusive narrator sitting at his desk, toying with his characters as he contemplates the writing of fiction in the age of Barthes and Robbe-Grillet. For Antoni Jach, *show, don't tell* is limiting and prescriptive because it encourages "scene-setting followed by dialogue" (Jach 62).

Show, don't tell also arises from romantic anti-didacticism, an evaluative ethos which asserts that overt morality in literature is to be equated with aesthetic failure. The pedagogical injunction to show rather than tell, then, is not only practical advice about craft based on the guild knowledge of writers, but the dissemination in the workshop of a long-standing critical opinion on the aesthetic development of both poetry and the novel towards a dramatisation or 'showing' of the material. This opinion is realised in the microscopic attention paid to sentence construction, where the advice to show rather than tell is a convenient pedagogical tool for commenting on student manuscripts, encouraging the pruning of excess language or the fleshing out of a scene with more description. Because this practical advice has evolved from critical debates about narrative technique it bears a relationship to the murky concept of voice.

Discovering a Voice

In their critique of "orthodox creative writing classrooms", Joe Amato and Kassia Fleisher argue that the teaching of craft has "the aim of capturing highly individuated experience", employing the term "voice" as its "intellectually fuzzy co-conspirator" (Amate & Kassia 9). The origins of the concept of a writer's voice can be traced to the classical distinction between dramatic and lyric poetry. Either a poet speaks in the voice of a character, or in his or her own voice. Hence voice originally referred to a poet's choice of genre. It is important here to understand the development of the relationship between voice and style. Style is descended from rhetorical 'elocution' and the rhetorical treatment of poetry was prominent throughout the Renaissance, with the idea of style as an ornament to the poet's material. For instance, George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), outlines a number of figures of speech designed to create a particular 'style' - high, mean, or low.

With the increasing influence of organic theories of poetry in the late eighteenth century, however, style came to designate an intrinsic quality of a work and the sign of an author's individual genius. In his long refutation of Wordsworth's 1800 preface, Coleridge claimed that a person of any taste who had studied

Shakespeare's principal plays would be able to recognise an unattributed quote from any of his other plays as undeniably Shakespearean. "A similar peculiarity, though in a less degree," Coleridge continues, "attends Mr. Wordsworth's style whenever he speaks in his own person; or whenever, though under a feigned name, it is clear that he himself is still speaking" (Coleridge 229). So when a poet 'speaks' from natural passion rather than adopting mechanical devices (and Coleridge condemned the "language of men" as a flawed and artificial device) it is manifested in an *individual* style. This is what leads to the concept of a poet's voice.

Romantic theories of creativity are democratised in Creative Writing pedagogy, where students are encouraged to develop this individual style by the process of finding a voice. This is a result of the influence of Progressive Education on the Creative Writing movement in American schools in the 1920s, and English and Australian schools in the 1960s. In her handbook Dorothea Brande warns against the danger of a contagious style, of writing after the fashion of admired authors. "The important matter," she asserts, "is to find your own style, your own subjects, your own rhythm, so that every element in your nature can contribute to the work of making a writer of you" (Brande 139). And Brande's advice for achieving this was to tap into one's own unique and individual unconscious via a series of writing exercises, thus drawing out original material.

One reason why students are encouraged to write about what they have experienced, or about what they know, is that this will supposedly ensure that they write in their own 'voice', and the work they produce will be 'authentic'. Voice becomes linked to the discovery of a pre-linguistic self and its expression in a unique writing style. This idea has caused writing workshops to be criticised for operating with a logocentric concept of writing (Morton and Zavarzadeh, Koethe). However, while this discovery takes place through the process of writing, its goal isn't the development of the self, but of an individual style, that is, a particular mode of selecting and arranging words. It is here, in the interrelationship of voice and style, that the concept of 'voice' and its relation to authorship becomes complicated. For as well as a term relevant to expressive theories of poetry, voice is a narratological concept. In this sense voice does not indicate the inner self of the writer, it indicates the speaking position of the text itself. According to Gerard Genette, most formalist and narratological studies "suffer from a regrettable confusion" between point of view and voice "or, more simply, the question *Who sees?* and the question *Who speaks?*" (Genette 186). Voice, in this formulation, has nothing to do with an authorial selfhood, but is the narrating instance which structures a literary work. The voice of a work is not that of the author, but of the narrator, and this is separate from the point of view.

The expressivist and the narratological concepts of voice do not necessarily operate independently, however. Kate Grenville's *The Writing Book* demonstrates their conflation in Creative Writing pedagogy. "Every story has its own voice," Grenville argues, "just as every person does" (Grenville 80). She suggests that a story's originality lies in its style, or arrangement of words, and as these are chosen by the author, it is the author's voice which provides the originality. Following Genette, however, Grenville argues that voice is the complement of point of view. She then distinguishes between the writer's natural voice, presumably what they might write a letter in, and voices the writer borrows to fit the point of view, to match the story at hand: "So the challenge for a writer is to find a way of keeping the energy and authenticity of your own voice, while adapting it to meet the needs of different points of view" (Grenville 81). We have, then, an oscillation between the expressivist notion of voice as the authorial guarantee of a work, evident in its style, and the narratological notion

of voice as a structural element of narrative, translated in the workshop as a technical choice made by writers.

The framework for all this is the pedagogical inculcation of a specifically modernist view of the compositional process. The institutionalisation of the ideal of the modernist craftsman in Creative Writing pedagogy is a byproduct of the development of the discipline alongside the institutionalisation of the New Criticism in American universities. The key figure here is the most influential poet and critic of the modernist era, T.S. Eliot.

In "The Function of Criticism" Eliot reworks the relationship between the creative and the critical which Matthew Arnold had established. For Eliot, criticism is an essential part of the creative process because it constitutes the labour and the choices involved in literary composition. Criticism in this sense operates as an ongoing revision of the work in progress. Eliot's emphasis on the role of criticism in the creative process bears a relationship to the neo-classical duo of imagination and judgement. However, criticism is not a vague censor, as it was in this earlier conception, but an interactive mode of reading, a progressive critical revision.

Students of Creative Writing have subsequently been taught to internalise critical reading as part of the creative process. The origins for this process can be found, once again, in Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*. Brande includes a chapter entitled "The Critic at Work on Himself", where she encourages aspirants to read over the material which they have generated from their unconscious. In order to benefit from this "corrective reading", Brande advises, it is necessary to "learn to read as a writer" (Brande 99). The institutional implementation of this process in the seminal Iowa Writers' Workshop can be seen in this 1941 comment by Wilbur Schramm, the Workshop's first director:

The writer must therefore be a critic before he can be a good writer, even as the critic must be an artist before he can be a good critic . . . He must read other men's work with the intelligent understanding of a fellow craftsman . . . He teaches himself to write by a process of constant self-criticism.

(Schramm 195)

In an article published in 2001 Marcelle Freiman asserts that Creative Writing is positioned as 'other' to English studies in Australia, and uses this as a starting point for articulating a postcolonial approach to the teaching of writing. While suggesting many ways in which this approach can interrogate and disrupt conservative notions of genre, canonicity, culture and identity, Freiman's essay demonstrates the persistence of the foundational modernist approach to craft in Creative Writing pedagogy. Freiman defends the intellectual rigour of Creative Writing by arguing that "criticism is an acknowledged part of the creative process itself", and as proof she quotes approvingly from Eliot's "Function of Criticism". While acknowledging Eliot's complicity with the Arnoldian tradition that a postcolonial approach to English studies explicitly criticises, Freiman argues that his

statement about the critical labour involved in creativity remains both pragmatic and pertinent to the process and its craft.
Creative writing involves re-reading and rewriting which develops critical ability in an acutely practical, and experiential, context. Developing this critical-reading faculty is a vital part of the teaching of writing. Criticism can be further incorporated into the subject as self-reflexive analysis and commentary.

(Freiman)

The poetics of Creative Writing, then, consists of a critical study of exemplary texts which is no different from the formalist criticism I have traced from Percy Lubbock through to elements of structuralist narratology. The end of this study is not so much a critical evaluation of these texts but the development of a method of 'reading as a writer'. This same method of criticism is then deployed in the analysis of student manuscripts, of works in progress, with the intention not of passing final evaluative judgement, but of aiding their progress to a completed form, and with the secondary intention of encouraging the aspiring writer to internalise this form of criticism as a method of revision and editing and an integral part of the 'creative' process.

Towards a Sociological Poetics

If we accept that what underpins Creative Writing pedagogy is a critical reading practice, I want to argue that reconfiguring this practice will enable the discipline more productively to engage with the concerns of the New Humanities. The problem requires shifting the pedagogical focus of the workshop from narrowly formalist conceptions of craft to the social context of literature, but without diminishing the importance of craft as an intellectual skill, and without detracting from the purpose of improving students' writing. This means paying attention to the content of a literary work, as this is what connects it to the outside world, but without isolating content from form. What is required, then, is to demonstrate how content is realised in the formal construction of a text, and this means shifting from a formalist poetics to a sociological poetics.

In order to suggest how this transition might be achieved I will draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's essay, "Discourse in the Novel". Bakhtin argues that

the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract 'formal' approach and an equally abstract 'ideological' approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon. (Bakhtin 259)

The recognition that writers do not simply employ a neutral language to express their unified vision of the world, but instead represent within the literary work a range of extra-literary languages which organise social relations, means that an attention to form also requires an attention to the prior utterances, dialogised words, and world views of the heteroglot, and ideologically conflicting, social languages being artistically orchestrated within the text.

This is the key to a reconceptualisation of the concept of voice. In Bakhtin's formulation voice is neither the author's pre-linguistic creative self realised in an individual style, nor the speaking position adopted by a narrator in relation to the story. In fact, the question 'Who speaks?' can never be answered in the singular for it is a question of which social languages, and the belief systems they embody, are being torn from the actual world of discourse and represented within the literary text.

Literary works are polyphonic because the dialogue of characters, the written genres and professional languages which are included, the speech of the narrator, and even the direct speech of the author, are points at which *heteroglossia*, or the "diversity of social speech types", enter the work and are embodied as concrete utterances. While all these voices are orchestrated by the author, they are still literally the voices through which social languages find articulation in the novel. Language in the novel is thus double-voiced or

hybridised because every word contains simultaneously both the author's (literary) language and the language of social groups.

Adapting this insight to the critical practice of the workshop would mean considering how these 'voices' are transformed by their inclusion and manipulation within a text. It would mean tracing the dialogic connections being made between the text and the extra-literary discourses it mobilises, and thus studying how authorial voice is positioned in relation to other social voices. The practice of *reading as a writer* involves a formalist analysis of how a literary work is constructed by paying attention to the conscious decisions an author has made regarding plot, structure, point of view, narrative voice, character, dialogue, etc. In Bakhtin's formulation, however, these elements are merely compositional devices which incorporate and organise heteroglossia. A sociological poetics would thus require a recognition that *aesthetic* or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or *political* choice: the choice to employ social languages and the ideologies they embody in certain ways, and hence the choice to position a literary work in relation to these languages, as an active intervention in the ideological work they perform.

Craft must therefore be conceived as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse as well as a series of aesthetic decisions regarding the artistic quality of a work. The advice to show rather than tell, then, would be governed not by purely aesthetic considerations (which typically reject authorial commentary or narratorial intrusion in favour of 'objective' and concrete rendering of experience) but by the political implications of this advice. What is being gained or lost, what ideological function is performed, by an author's adoption or disregard of this technical practice of 'showing'?

As a concrete example I will briefly discuss the work of Australian poet, Coral Hull. Hull is an excellent example of a graduate of a writing program who might be seen as a public intellectual in terms of her 'creative' writing. Hull completed a Doctorate in Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong, and part of her thesis was published as *Broken Land: 5 Days in Bre, 1995* by Five Islands Press. Hull is an animal rights activist, and in this work, which won the Victorian Premier's Award, she employs an autobiographical narrative sequence of poems in which the narrator travels to an outback town, Brewarrina, in order to spend time with her father and to visit various abattoirs and slaughterhouses. The narrator in this book is referred to as Coral, forcing us to identify her with the author and to read the poems as a direct representation of experience.

These elements may seem to align the work with what is called 'workshop poetry', leaving it open to be dismissed as theoretically unsophisticated by 'avant-garde' writers. However, despite being a personal and expressive description of nature and the world, the book is more practically engaged in forging a connection between poetics and politics. After visiting the slaughterhouses, Coral says in response to her father's attempts to soothe her,

I do not want to pick the paper daisies, dad.
 I want the slaughterhouses to shut down.
 I want to write poetry & then be gone.
 (Hull 62)

This is both poetry as therapy and poetry as politics. It is the political made personal.

I do not mean to suggest that Hull's work is an exemplar for Creative Writing because it deals with a 'worthy' issue, or that to be politically engaged one must

write in a social realist mode. I choose this collection as an example because it highlights the political issues surrounding the 'aesthetic' question of showing and telling, and to demonstrate how Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse can also be applied to contemporary poetry.

Let me consider a poem from *Broken Land* as a brief example. "Inside the Boning Factory" consists of what at first appears to be a fairly neutral description of the "Roo Works":

Carcasses are brought in from
kangaroo shooting boxes
throughout country sites.
(Hull 31)

This description is at times punctuated by italicised interpolations registering emotional responses to the process being witnessed:

Skin is temporarily preserved
by freezing.
Storage of skins in metal cages.
It's so cold. (31)

It could easily be argued that Hull is telling rather than showing here. Do we need to be told it is cold? Does not the description show us this? If one were to examine the political reasons for this telling, however, such advice may be counterproductive. For a start, these italicised lines place the narrator within the scene she is describing. But why doesn't the narrator 'show' the goosebumps riddling her flesh, for instance? Later she writes

Freezer.
Chiller.
I can't get warm. (33)

Why have another internal level of speech?

The italicised interpolations, however, begin to dictate a shift from description to commentary, a conflation of the two levels of narration:

Where does the life go?
Is it processed into heat?
Is it brought into the factory? (32)

Finally, they become verbalised as part of a dialogue the narrator is having with her guide:

Any kangaroos out there?
Hey, don't take any photos of that. (33)

Once we realise that the narrator is being taken through the Roo Works by the "manager's son" we realise that the description of the place is actually a hybrid of his language and the author's poetic language. We begin to wonder, then, can these questions and interpolated thoughts be assigned wholly to the narrator, especially considering her guide is the "Most nervous manager's son I've ever met" (33)? The last stanza begins

G'day
Welcome to
Australia's Kangaroo
Harvesting Program...

and finishes with

Southern Game Meat Pty Ltd. You'd have to be game to eat it.
(33)

Is this a case of showing the language of the manager's son and then telling us what we should think? Or is this final comment a representation of the self-ironising Australian vernacular, linking it with the 'ocker' greeting, "G'day"?

The question of showing and telling in this case cannot be offered as a merely technical consideration of the categories of description and narrative voice being mobilised by the author. The italicised interpolations are designed to open an ethical space for the reader to inhabit, and by being invited to ask whether they tell rather than show we cannot avoid addressing the ideological connection between the didactic heresy and political quietude. What must be considered is how Hull is positioning extra-literary discourses (the semi-official language of the manager's son) within the poem in such a way as to insert her own poetical discourse back into the ideological realm these discourses inhabit.

In a later poem, "As I Kept Walking", the narrator deliberates over her own implication in the slaughtering of animals; she is not intervening, but politely participating in the tour so she can gather material to write poetry:

I could even laugh lightly on the way out
& make small talk with the manager,
as he lit up a smoke.
(Hull 54)

We are thus forced to consider what role Hull's poetry actually plays in the verbal-ideological life of the discourses it is representing, and to what extent the act of *reading as a writer* is implicated in this role.

A series of questions arises from this consideration. Can we avoid discussing animal rights when reading Hull's poetry? Does sticking stringently to questions of craft devalue or fail to adequately comprehend the work? Is it possible to isolate authorial decisions about craft from decisions about political efficacy? Does Hull's work fail if we are not convinced to become vegetarians or animal rights activists? If it can be appreciated simply as poetry, are the powerful descriptions of animal slaughter responsible for its aesthetic quality? In which case, why can we be moved 'aesthetically' yet remain politically unconvincing? These are all questions derived from an expanded understanding of what a writer's craft entails: they are not concerned with reading the poetry mimetically or with inviting students to offer personal responses.

I do not wish to rest my entire argument on this isolated example. It is intended only as a brief description of the considerations which must accompany any advice offered on purely aesthetic grounds. Studying plot, dialogue, structure, point of view, etc., can be more than a means of abstracting formal properties from an exemplary text as examples of craft, or a method of determining whether a student's 'voice' has been adequately expressed. It can be a critical exploration of how these compositional devices introduce heteroglossia into the work. A sociological workshop poetics will not abstract the language of the author, but rather free its socially dialogic associations by tracing their resonances outside the text. When this critical practice is applied by individual students to the act of revision and redrafting, and is hence eventually internalised as part of the creative process, student writers may come to see themselves as inescapable participants in a social dialogue through the practice of writing.

If, in the formalist poetics of the traditional workshop, craft is a neutral linguistic technique for translating an author's voice from self to text, in a sociological poetics it would be a device for populating a text with multiple speaking positions, concrete textual utterances that embody the verbal-ideological life of living discourse, and hence dialogise the text as a literary participant in 'public' discourse. The author is always engaged in a dialogue with the belief systems or ideologemes which stratify a national language and give meaning to words by employing them in concrete social utterances. As a result, the work of literature is itself a concrete utterance within those discourses, existing on the same discursive plane as a contribution to their verbal-ideological life. An oppositional criticism within the workshop would draw attention to the ways in which the privileged cultural status afforded to literature regulates the nature of this dialogic exchange. Here, the literary work can be conceptualised as a zone of social contestation by exploring how the compositional process is a mode of social intervention at the level of discourse.

Notes

1 The phrase 'posttheory generation' was coined by Jeffrey Williams in a 1995 essay. This essay is reprinted in the anthology *Day Late, Dollar Short: The Next Generation and the New Academy* (2000). [Return to article](#)

2 In fact, Cassill's emphasis on reading with "close concentration", and his stress on the unity of fiction, demonstrates his indebtedness to the 'close reading' practised by the American New Critics. Alan Tate, who taught Creative Writing at Princeton, wrote an article in 1940 entitled "We Read as Writers" which argues the same things that Cassill does, but the point of this article is to demonstrate the benefit of *criticism*. [Return to article](#)

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TEXT

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