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Brian Dibble and Julienne van Loon

Writing Theory and/or Literary Theory

True ease in writing comes with art, not chance;
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
- Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*

Brian Dibble commences:

The theory/practice schism is a relatively new development which has been most heavily underlined in the latter half of the twentieth century. Originally the two activities were conjoined: in addition to being a wide-ranging philosopher, Plato was a literary critic who also wrote dialogues, and Aristotle was the same (although none of his dialogues has survived). Importantly, they were quite different literary critics, Plato an idealist and Aristotle a materialist, who publicly disagreed - Aristotle is often directly critical of Plato's assumptions and critiques. As an addendum, it should be noted that Aristophanes was comparably a philosopher/critic as is made clear in Plato's *Symposium* (189B, ff) where he gives a theory of psychology which defines homosexual and heterosexual love, and it was the conservative Aristophanes' charge which led to the liberal Socrates being sentenced to death. Compared to that, Gore Vidal describing Truman Capote's death as a "good career move" seems positively tame.

If the originary theory/practice situation in the western tradition illustrates differences of opinion, at least it also illustrates the fact that the people doing the work at the time did not distinguish between the two activities, or at least did not subordinate one to the other. The explanation for this perhaps relates to the fact (as Auden noted in "The Poet in the City") that the Greeks we know had a more leisurely life, for it was based upon slavery, which meant that free people were more easily able to follow their interests without so much regard to remuneration. Indeed, many other things were different then too, including the fact that in Sophocles' day people were paid to attend the theater, a point I shall indirectly recur to later.

An instructive quiz would be to ask people to define the following as literary critics or creative writers: Horace, Dante, Boccaccio, Ronsard, Sidney, Jonson, Dryden, Campion, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Poe, Sainte-Beuve, Arnold, Hugo, Flaubert, Zola, James, Tolstoi, Conrad, Eliot, Pound, Ransom - these are names that appear in a standard anthology of literary criticism which unproblematically had three editions between 1932 and 1951 (Smith and Winfield Parks). No one should fail the quiz, because all of those people were both writers and critics. And some of them had the same kind of animosities shown by Aristophanes: the Marlowe-Shakespeare rivalry has recently been portrayed in film, but there are also many more, like Dr. Johnson's complaints against Thomas Chatterton. Significantly too, there is the critic's claim to the higher moral ground, as when Ben Johnson said that Shakespeare had little Latin and less Greek.

Between the 19th and the 20th centuries, there was a split of the critic/writer's position from that of leisured, middle- or upper-class intellectual to that of the critic in university and the writer outside of it, enabling Leavis to deride the *Times Literary Supplement* (19 May 1966) when it said, "[n]ame a great novelist who was a don; apart from Housman, most poets, I think, have been outside the University net" (quoted in Polletta 572). Leavis no more saw the need for writers to be in the university than did the Professor of English at Cornell University, who when told of the proposal to hire the novelist Vladimir Nabokov, said that to do so would be like the Department of Zoology hiring an elephant.

This splitting of the writer/critic related to the institutionalising of the subject "English literature," a subject which had previously been regarded as a demotic one. For the first half of this century, people with a BA and sometimes an MA, often in classics but certainly in humanities, were regarded as adequately qualified to teach English. Increasingly, however, the metaphorical base of the poem as an organic thing (for example, a well-wrought urn) and of the literary tradition as likewise organic (a series of well-wrought urns) was eroded, with the poem coming to be regarded more as a linguistic artifact. Kenneth Burke and I.A. Richards perhaps represent the end of one - the British - tradition, which is replaced by another - the Continental tradition - led by Saussure and those structuralists influenced by him.

Thus it is instructive to consider the names of a standard anthology of critics from the early 1970s: Northrop Frye, Georges Poulet, Roland Barthes, J. Hillis Miller, Ihab Hassan, Maurice Blanchot, Gaston Bachelard, Jorge Luis Borges and George Lukács (Polletta). In this case, the diagnostic quiz might ask for the correct spelling of the names! The first anthology, of course, was produced by editors from American universities and this second one by an editor from the University of Geneva: that is, the subject has been redescribed by the critics, and national literatures are now sub-genres of literature itself, a topic to be interrogated from a variety of new points of view.

In Australia, the Whitlam years effected the change on a wholesale basis, with expanding student numbers accompanied by an increase in tertiary institutions and an upgrading of what were previously called Colleges of Advanced Education: mass hiring meant that the BA/MA combination was replaced by the MA/PhD combination, the degrees preferably coming from overseas (and very often brought home by Australians) rather than from one of the city/state Australian universities. Almost overnight, the existing members of the traditional English department in Australia became the old guard on the defensive against the young Turks with their new theoretical perspectives, perspectives which also broadened the concept of "English" to include Australian literature and even "media" - I still remember hearing a prominent Professor of English Literature at the University of Queensland in the early 1970s say that he would not excise one play of Shakespeare from the syllabus of his department for the whole of Australian literature... Given the fact that writers had lost their status as independent agents fifty years before, when magazines like *Look* and *Life* and *Harper's* went from deriving ninety percent of their income from subscriptions and news-stand sales to ninety percent of it from advertising, the writer was down and out like never before, in London and Paris or wherever. It is sobering for us as writers and/or teachers of writing to consider that in 1919, when he was 23, Fitzgerald received $300 for a short story in *Scribner's Magazine*, then $1000 for one in the *Saturday Evening Post* - ultimately going on to command $10 000 for a semi-fictionalised article (Cross, pp.15-16). Today *The Australian* pays $300 per story and a publisher 10% of a book's recommended retail price, if you are lucky.

In the twentieth century the subject of literature has been institutionalised as the domain of the theorists and critics, and the position of the thereby-marginalised writer has been redefined as more of a production-line worker than an independent producer.

Julienne van Loon responds:

So…the academy positions the critic above the writer. Certainly within the institution where we both work, the critic as researcher/writer is better paid in research funds and also more likely to be promoted than the writer who publishes creative work. The recent White Paper on Research in fact has worked to foreground this as a national issue in higher education and particularly an issue for the Humanities. It was interesting to read Kevin Brophy's account of the same dilemma in a recent edition of *Westerly* (pp.101-110).

It is significant that in the same institutional rhetoric, product is valorised over process. I argued in a recent paper on tertiary teachers of literacy that this issue of valuing product above process is related to issues of power and gender in the institution (van Loon, pp.15-17). It prevents women from getting promoted. It also positions those who reflect on teaching beneath those who produce research more easily measurable as product, and those who work in the creative endeavours of the arts below those who work in the industry-linked creative endeavours of science and engineering.

There are some clear advantages, however, to teachers of creative writing being asked to define more specifically what they "do". Staff in creative writing need to be accountable to students regarding assessment procedures, for example, particularly if the "voucher" (student-as-client) system is on the horizon. And in the current climate of the White Paper on research, the lively discussion that the Australian Association of Writing Programs has been developing over the last three to four years has worked to define and map out a number of territories and rubrics which in the current political climate can only be healthy for the survival of creative writing amidst the collapse of support for the Humanities more broadly.

In this current higher education climate in Australia, creative writing does actually have some advantages over literary theory and other critical arms of the humanities in that the novelist and poet, although underpaid, can be highly visible. In book form, too, creative writing is after all, highly commodifiable (even if it is the publisher, the distributor and the bookseller rather than the writer who make the money). My point here is that despite low income levels for authors or the perceived threat to the book which new electronic mediums have created, and in the face of higher education reform, creative writing's capacity for being highly visible in the cultural imaginings of a nation, may still be its key strength.

"Writing theory" then, is partly about creating a distinguishable marker for creative writing in the academy. So what are the distinguishable markers of "writing theory"? "Writing theory", for me, tends to refer to discourses about writing praxis. Thus "writing theory" is about approaches to teaching, discussing, documenting, creating and interpreting writing itself. It isn't then a field set up in opposition to literary theory at all, but a realm of theory, perhaps an offshoot of literary theory, that's orientated toward writing in all its manifestations. These needn't always be public, published works or works in need of critical acclaim. I see it as a realm for which the term "literary theory" doesn't fully suit.

Brian Dibble:

I understand literary theory to be of two kinds. One sort is a focus on theory itself, trying to improve the system, making it more coherent and coextensive with the field, making it more explanatory and productive. The other kind of literary theory is writing about writing which, when it becomes the continuing application of the same theory to one text after another, is what we call criticism. There may be an *idiot savant* somewhere who can churn out flawless poetry or prose, but I will not hold my breath until I meet that person: in the meantime I will encourage my students to learn theory in the first sense that I defined, so that they can have the habit of mind characterized by the second definition. The Greeks would call the first kind of theory *episteme* and the second *techne*: loosely, *episteme* is knowledge of the system and its elements, and *techne* is knowledge of how to apply them in

some practical way - thus *techne* or technique is the process of reducing the possibility of failure of an idea.

Regarding the creative writing course itself, I believe it is important that it offer students the widest possible study opportunities, meaning an introduction to the various genres and access to a variety of types and practitioners, from the more sober and/or scholarly to the more exuberant and/or intuitive - the more of each, the better. However, since resources are finite and becoming ever less these days, we have to learn to work in fairly limited circumstances. In fact that is why I tend to incline more toward teaching via theory than otherwise, because that is an analogue to becoming a better writer through becoming a better reader. In saying that, I realise that I am opposing myself to a position held by an ex-colleague who insisted that "Analysis induces paralysis."

Before I elaborate on why I teach through theory, I want to address myself to the beliefs of my hypothetical opponent. Probably the most "minimal" approach to theory in Creative Writing programs is the workshopping of what the students have written, something I believe to be a very valuable exercise. However, just as you cannot cross the street without theory - that the world that I perceive is real and not a dream, that my eyes clearly see cars and trucks, whose speed I can roughly calculate relative to, that I am not invincible, and so on - so you cannot run the workshop without depending upon theory, whether or not you foreground the theory. You cannot say (for example) that dialogue is "stilted" unless you can define what is "natural," and can also argue that for some reason "natural dialogue" is appropriate to the kind of writing under discussion - and defining the "kind of writing under discussion" can only be done in reference to some kind of theory.

One step up from pure workshop is a reading-writing workshop where the teacher guides the students through various examples of traditional writing, such as that found in anthologies, identifying and defining various writing strategies and techniques. It is likely that to the extent such a unit does not foreground theory is the same extent to which that unit is relying on theory firmly, almost certainly the New Criticism of the 1960s and 1970s. This, to my mind, is the source of the complaints of many writers in their forties and fifties and sixties who wonder why we want to concern ourselves with Irigary and Cixous and Kristeva and Barthes and Foucault and Derrida and/or whomever: I believe that, whether or not they know it, they are wishing that we would instead concern ourselves with F.R. or Queenie Leavis, or Wimsatt and Beardsley, or some such. Terry Eagleton put it very nicely when he quoted J.M. Keynes to the effect "that those economists who disliked theory, or claimed to get along better without it, were simply in the grip of an older theory. This is also true of literary students and critics" (xiii).

Julienne van Loon:

I wholeheartedly agree that one needs theory to cross the street and that one needs to read and to write quite extensively in order to write well. My own approach to the teaching of creative writing tends to incorporate both the models you have mentioned above: the practical workshop process as well as the guidance through various examples of writing through which useful strategies and techniques are highlighted. I also try to encourage writing practice, within tutorial time. But I don't think this process necessarily fails to foreground theory. Perhaps it does depend upon the curriculum and on the teacher. My own second-year narrative class, for example, works over a three-hour period around three elements: (1) starting out with some discussion as readers in response to a certain piece or pieces (during which concepts of literary theory are made use of), (2) next trying to spend some time actually writing in response to that discussion, and (3) then moving on to the peer critiquing of one another's major or minor submissions. The literary theory is sometimes the framework upon which the whole seminar is built. One week's topic for consideration is the sense of an ending, for example, another is Margaret Rose's concept of parody.

One of the things which has intrigued me about your response to the question "What is writing theory and how is it different to literary theory?" is that you don't seem to see a need to articulate a term such as "writing theory" at all - that it is perhaps an integral component of the broad arm of literary theory that is writing about writing. And yet, when we look at writing in a creative writing class we tend to move from analysis and work toward strategies and techniques (i.e. a bent toward praxis), rather than being wholly occupied with notions of critical literary theory and writing as analysts.

Brian Dibble:

If one kind of theory is writing about writing, it should be emphasised that both theory and criticism are activities conducted in reference to one or more goals. That goal might be to explicate the text to a reader, to construct a psychological profile of the author, to investigate reader preferences, and so on. The goal might also be to construct "writing theory" - more likely "writing theories" - something much needed today, as testified to by the perceived need in 1996 for regular conferences under the auspices of the AAWP [Australian Association of University Writing Programs].

A good example demonstrating the need for theory is the current interest in life-writing and the use of auto/biography as a starting point for creative writers. But surely, life-writing is theoretically one of the most complicated of areas: where is it that one encourages the students to start, how does one suggest how to proceed, and how does one advise about subjectivity/objectivity distinctions? Not to concentrate on relevant theory at some point in the process - whether at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end - would seem very remiss to me.

Julienne van Loon:

I think you could say the same for teaching students to write fictocriticism or teaching gendered reading and writing. These are complex junctions of theory and practice, and one might want a semester-long unit dedicated solely to these areas in order to do justice to both the theory and the practice. I wonder if the university's tendency to call a semester-long creative writing unit by a traditional generic term like "fiction" or "poetry" or "scriptwriting" condemns us as teachers to these very broad, generic forms and thus prevents us from concentrating as specifically on a specialist genre or specific reading/writing methodology as we might like to, or need to, in order to fully delve into the theories and practices of reading, writing, researching in such fields. When a teacher chooses some special emphasis, s/he is then open to being accused of doing so at the expense of other important elements of the broad generic term "fiction" or "poetry" or "scriptwriting." The current economic challenges to Schools within the Humanities compound the tension around practice versus theory: there is sometimes a tension about providing enough theoretical content in the curriculum (any curriculum, not just creative writing) to justifiably expect informed practice from students when student contact hours and the number of specialised units able to be offered in a degree are under threat. The term "unstuffing the curriculum," which is bandied about campus at the moment, illustrates this trend.

Brian Dibble:

It might be useful to remember the anecdote about Clark Kerr, President of University of California (Berkeley) when he said "[if] we do not train our plumbers as well as our philosophers, then neither our pipes nor our theories will hold water." But I want to qualify the import of it by saying that we do not need to train our creative writers in the same way

as our we train our literary theorists: rather, we want to train them in the way comparable to that of would-be doctors who learn from chemists, anatomists, pharmacists, biologists, and so on, but not as much as chemistry students and anatomy students, respectively learn about those subjects: medical students learn what they need in order to be practitioners, and then they continually update that knowledge or else they become out of date and/or incompetent practitioners.

Julienne van Loon:

It's important to remember too, that our creative writing students are not always literature students. We can't guarantee that a geology student who has picked up Creative Writing 111 as an elective is really going to have the background knowledge of literature theory which a literature student might automatically apply to a given text. Again, one of creative writing's bonuses in the current political climate is its attractiveness to students from a broad range of backgrounds. This is significant when you consider that our own School of Communication and Cultural Studies in the writing of a new BA, now has a major in professional writing and that it is this major that is seen to be a great marketing ploy. Now, creative writing, clearly, is a form of professional writing. But professional writing is a very broad field. The notion of writing as praxis reminds me of Derrida's 1976 comments that:

> we tend to say 'writing': ...to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible…And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'… All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected to these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves. (165)

I wonder if the teaching of creative writing in the academy does need to fly from the coop of literature studies to some extent - simply in order to interact further with broader notions of writing to which Derrida refers. In his new book *Why We Write: Writing as Creative Design* Mike Sharples reminds us of some key connections between creative writing and psychology and the work which was carried out in the 1970s to explain creativity in writing as a mental process that forms an integral part of the cognitive development of literate children (Ch 1). Sharples' book is interesting in the way it highlights the relationship between theory and writing praxis without necessarily relying on literary theory. Also, I have recently read with great interest two papers that have appeared in *Text* written by Claire Woods of the University of South Australia (one of which was co-written with Paul Skrebels). Woods talks about her Faculty's experiences of developing a program in professional writing and communication, in which students are engaged in writing as ethnographers, where students are seen as "writers/readers/researchers who are engaged in techne - the productive arts - specifically in rhetoric or the 'arts of discourse'." I like the way Woods' discussion focuses on the way in which writing operates across so many contexts, freeing up notions of genre and moving towards definitions that "reinvest genres with a dynamism and evolutionary quality that are all too easily overlooked in traditional literary studies, where genre is often merely a template for producing the 'well wrought urn'."

There seems to be no shortage of comments on the new crossroads that teachers of writing are meeting. Kevin Brophy, in the article mentioned earlier, sees the university rhetoric of "new knowledge" as being highly problematic (pp.107-108). Yet Tess Brady and Nigel Krauth in a recent *Text* editorial, comment that:

> It is clear that as a discipline, we can now stand alone from English and Communication Departments around Australia in representing pedagogy

> and practice - a useful theoretical 'do-it' discourse - relating to the significance of writing industries in the new millennium.

This sense of the new stems not just from the burgeoning popularity of the writing course, but also from new possibilities for the individual, any individual, to be able to produce and consume texts. Year Twelve students are now taught rather complex notions of literary theory that involve them seeing themselves as positioned as readers and as active in constructing meaning from a text. This generation's understanding of themselves as readers and audiences is dynamic, and this is a significant factor in the development of an idea called "writing theory" and a push toward "doing".

Perhaps the undergraduate's production and understanding of meaning is better "sold" to them as active participants, as "do-ers" and *that* is in part what attracts me to this notion of "writing theory" as a pedagogy and practice about writing that stands on its own.

I believe new developments in the professional writing area at a tertiary level might have some exciting repercussions for the further development of creative writing as a discipline at university. Perhaps my own tendency to sit with narrative rather than poetry leads me in this direction. For me, the teaching of creative writing at university needs to be positioned in a zone which is strengthened by some of the new notions of professional writing and communication at the same time as drawing student attention to the peculiarly creative and imaginative, the poetic, and the wealth of old and new literature (including literary theory) which forms creative writing's base. So "writing theory" as a legitimate field, whilst slightly embryonic, is showing some great potential - not so much as literary theory's runaway carriage, but as an idea that seeks to develop the notion of reader/writer/researcher as informed practitioner with a creative endeavour and that simultaneously permits a broad interpretation of the notion of "text".

Despite some differences of approach, there are some key points regarding theories of teaching creative writing upon which Brian and I can agree to conclude our discussion. The first is that writing praxis, the "doing", is integral, and that to develop our students' skills we must emphasise that we all become better writers by writing.

Brian Dibble:

The second is Aristotle's observation that you cannot teach anyone anything, but can only offer a person a chance to learn - a sentiment warmly echoed by Galileo, each of them interchangeably a pre-eminent theorist and practitioner.

Julienne van Loon:

The third point is that it is often the case that there are multiple satisfactory solutions to the same problem or, to put it another way around, it is not unusual for students to respond differently to various learning environments.

Brian Dibble:

And last, an observation by Elizabeth Jolley that I strongly believe in: "To become a better writer, you must become a better reader."

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Letters and Debate

Jeri Kroll, *Honouring Students: What can a successful creative writing honours program offer? TEXT vol 4 No 2 October 2000*
Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo "Exit Jesus": Relaying the Exegesis and the Creative/Production Components of a research Degree

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