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“Roots in the Air”

THE TEACHING OF CREATIVE WRITING
IN UK UNIVERSITIES

*Keynote talk to Creative Writing: Pedagogy and
Well-Being conference, Jyväskylä, 22.10.2014*

In many other settings, especially at home in the UK, I would be using this talk to justify the still-young discipline of Creative Writing as bona fide part of the academic landscape. Fifteen years ago, I might have felt the need to defend its scholarly respectability, responding to concern or even disparagement from colleagues in long-established subjects. With an increasing infrastructure of peer-reviewed journals, conferences and study to Doctoral level, that battle at least has been won. Today, the more likely challenge is to account for our methods and aims in the increasingly standardised and bureaucratic language in which higher education teachers have to justify themselves to their own management and to the sources of funding beyond.

That is not my subject here, though we may converge with it obliquely later on. No, I am going to trust this audience, the conference participants and the readers after the event: we know that we have something important to con-

tribute to the university in terms both of knowledge and of pedagogy. Starting from that conviction, I want to encourage us to be bold – to use our own distinctive language, that comes from the experience of our creative work, and to insist we make our contribution best by celebrating what is distinctive at our subject’s heart.

In the process, I will sketch a picture of the almost accidental birth and growth of Creative Writing in UK universities. This is not a guilty admission; I am inclined to value the tensions, even conflicts, in that history - for example, between the academic and the commercial principles, between the critical and the creative mind-set, or between the urge to write for self-expression and the craft of writing for professional ends. We writers learn to value frictions, because we know from our experience that this holding such apparent contradictions in balance is the root of creativity.

I am not here to talk about myself, but I will use a writer’s technique of taking a character as focaliser for this story. A good choice is always a character who happens to be there when the story begins to unfold... as indeed I was at the time when Creative Writing started to expand in British universities. That character, myself, was already a working writer, publishing poems in magazines and in my own collections, earning not enough to live on, supplementing that income from teaching adult classes, leading writing workshops, visiting schools and sharing the craft in other ways, when a climate change in UK higher education opened a demand for these same skills inside the expanding world of universities.

In such a story, the character should have a voice, and that is why this talk will weave itself around some of my

poems. A novelist might do the same in an extended narrative, a playwright in a dialogue on stage, but poems are the way I think most clearly, by which I mean I register most clearly the many internal and external voices of which writers are aware. Maybe this is the plainest way to make the point about speaking from the heart of our creative practice. Poetry is the most self-reflexive and self-questioning of writing forms. For me, it always hopes to be experimental space where logical thinking, emotion, sensual experience and intuition come together. I would like Creative Writing as a subject to have the confidence to think poetically.

THE -ING IN WRITING

But the history... Creative Writing in UK grew from a practitioner-taught ethos, which had more in common with historic art school practice than with that of universities. Art students expected to be exposed to the advice of working painters, sculptors, etc. Usually these practitioners would teach part time because (and this was seen as a proof of their value) their first priority was their own creative career. Gradually, sometimes uneasily, a dialogue grew up between such working writers, often with no formal training as teachers, and those lecturers in Literary Studies or Education who at least had a respect for the creative work, and maybe a secret writing life of their own. Over time, a surprising number of the practitioners turned out to be quite gifted teachers, while the academics slipped their novels-in-progress out of their back pockets... and a community of practitioner-teachers was born. It is only recent-

ly, with the logic of the growth of postgraduate research in the subject, that most new entrants have been qualified in Creative Writing as such.

There was of course a family relationship, for Creative Writers in the UK, writing in the English language, with the disciplines of English / English Literature. Should they in fact be seen as separate? That was the question at one stage. Articulating why the answer was No led to expressing the difference between the way a literary critic on the one hand and a working writer on the other might read the same text.

Creative Writing is precisely what it says: a practice centered on the writing, not the written. Reading the written, yes, but where Literary Studies reads in order to develop a theory of that literature, Creative Writing reads to help the writing process on. The concept that emerged was that of ‘reading like a writer’ – a practical rigour geared to discerning techniques, strategies and understandings that would stimulate, refine and feed the practice of our own creative work.

The phrase ‘creative writing’ expresses the process of creativity as well as the specific craft of writing, so it is logical to extend the concept of ‘reading like...’ to ‘thinking like a writer’. I say that with no assumption that any two writers think alike. Getting a sight of the individuality of practices, as well as common factors, is vital. So, in a way that need have nothing to do with solipsism or self-promotion, one part of our study is bound to be ourselves, the way we work. Analysing the literary factors, influences and poetics only told part of the story, without developing an awareness of how we manage our own processes – even, how we

manage manage our own working / thinking / feeling lives.

I sense a raising of eyebrows when I say these words. Indeed, it might be my own eyebrows I sense raising. Given the well-known personalities of many writers - famously rivalrous and petty, factional together and chaotic in their private lives - who would wish to school anybody else in that? Let me put it another way: the goal is not so much to think like a writer as to think like the writing itself.

As to what we might mean by that... Well, why not ask the writing?

House of Paper

A low table. Two cushions. Two
cups set. And no-one here but me
in a room with no walls,
only thin paper screens,
paper screens beyond screens
hung from ceiling to floor. Light
moves in and is moved among them
from I don't know where.
If I'm the guest
I'm unannounced or uninvited.
Say I'm the host...?
As if a door opened somewhere
a rustling spreads. Almost
a whisper. I can almost hear.

When I wrote this poem, maybe twenty years ago, without the current title, I did not imagine this was writing

about writing. Nor is any living poem likely to be only about one thing. Slowly over the years I realised how close it had come to the apprehension I seemed to have about the process I was practising and helping to foster in others: the creative work as an emergent thing, to which our first responsibility was to attend, as much as making it.

EMERGENCE, TENSION, PARADOX

Maybe it comes as no surprise, then, to see the growth of Creative Writing in UK universities as an emergence, a phenomenon to be discerned and worked-with, rather than intended in advance. This is not to say it came about by random chance. Most working writers and artists will recognise the principle of serendipity – the readiness to spot and use emerging opportunity and lucky accident.

One seed of that emergence, quite specific to the UK, was the Arvon Foundation, founded in 1968 by poets John Moat and John Fairfax, and soon involving Ted Hughes, who would become the Poet Laureate. The distinctive residential courses offered by Arvon in its secluded centres, with groups of up to 16 students living and working for five days alongside two experienced writers, responding to writing exercises and giving feedback in workshops, entered the bloodstream of Creative Writing in the UK. For many of the practitioners who came into universities during the 1980s and 1990s, this blend of apprenticeship and peer critique, was the benchmark for the best transmission of their craft and art.

Another seed lay in the history of Creative Writing in

the USA. This dated back to Iowa Writers Workshop in the 1930s, and again the central and creative tension was between charismatic leadership of groups by well-known writers and the principle of peer critique. (Both the forcefulness of that leadership and the ferocity of peer critique has tended to be more marked in the US writing culture than that of the UK.) At a certain point writers and writer-academics from the UK who had attended American MFA programmes began to import that US experience and use it as a precedent for courses that they started in their own universities.

This marriage between the craft-work of writing and the academy brought its own tensions. Even at the beginning of the process in the UK, there was a suspicion that in the US, Creative Writing courses has become an institution, creating its own orthodoxy – the perfectly worked bland ‘workshop poem’. My point here is not to judge whether that suspicion was, on average, justified. The fact that the tension existed was good. By a neat double-bind, the only orthodoxy I would propose for the creative arts is that scepticism should come as standard. Any time we start feeling sure about ourselves, suspect a cliché taking shape.

That was the fear on the practitioner side of the equation. On the other, and maybe more fundamental, was the working writer’s suspicion of the critical and theoretical tools that their academic colleagues used.

In the late 1980s, I found myself exchanging letter, then exchanging poems, with the poet Sylvia Kantaris. All we know was that we were exploring an imaginary land, somewhere in the clouds of the high Andes. What emerged from the mists was a surreal, teasing culture prone to Zen

non sequiturs and sly satirical asides about our world... and a collaborative book titled *The Air Mines of Mistila*. Into this world, a visiting professor strayed.

Dr Crampfold's Complaint

Dear Sirs, While sensible of the trust your august institution has reposed in me I have to report that my contribution to the World Digest of Critical Socio-philology will be delayed. My expenses here are nil, as are my findings. This - can one strictly call it a community? - has nothing one might properly term a custom. I have explained to them that all known cultures have such things. They express surprise, or interest (or are simply polite) and say 'You are a great professor of this. Teach us. May we do a custom this very night?'

Their dialect appears a hybrid of the common tongue and an uncommon desire to confound. 'Our roots are in the air,' they say. 'The leaves reach to the earth and brush it with a speaking sound.'

The deep structure of their grammar resembles the labyrinth of shafts, mostly disused, that litter these slopes. 'The wind,' they say, 'strays into them and cries aloud, confused, like a hundred whales.' They have never seen a whale. They have forty words for a certain bean they never eat. 'Forty beans make only wind,' they say. 'Please tell us what we mean.'

This was slightly before I myself had had a deep enough immersion in the world of universities to be aware of the ascendancy of Deconstruction, or even of Barthes with the author is dead. Whether a Derridean or Deleuzian have

made himself more at home among the people of Mistila, I don't know. For now, I am content with the irony that I would one day wake up to find myself a Professor myself.

But Creative Writing emerged in UK universities. Like many creative works, it grew by paradox. Though the very first postgraduate students, in very small numbers, had been enrolled at the University of East Anglia in the early 1970s, the surge in demand came later. When it did, the leading edge was in the new universities – UEA itself, Lancaster, Warwick... When an important Act of Parliament in 1992 allowed a wave of former polytechnics to gain university status, institutions like my own (Glamorgan then, now South Wales) became significant players. In the highest-status and historic universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Creative Writing still has only a marginal presence, in extramural courses mainly, while one of the leading programmes is at Bath Spa University, a small institution also awarded the power to award their own degrees in 1992. Creative Writing grew fastest in those institutions with least anxiety about damaging a historic reputation by embracing the new discipline.

A second creative anomaly was that Creative Writing took root (these are the 'roots in the air' of my title) at the level of the Masters, not the standard undergraduate, degree. The one or two years of a Masters programme offered itself as a period of focused and intensive work in which ambitious and developing writers could aspire to complete their novel or their collection of stories or poems. The impetus was often practical, personal, professional – rather than primarily academic.

But finding a place in the structure of academic awards

had a logic of its own. In due course, undergraduate BA programmes grew to 'feed' the Masters level study, and graduates from those MAs, especially those who hope to become university Creative Writing educators in their turn, looked logically to progression to a PhD. Now, a complete through-path exists through all the levels of study... almost as if it had been planned that way from the beginning.

A third anomaly might be presenting itself now. In the bleak financial times now shared by most of Europe, university funding in the UK now depends on higher student fees, and Creative Writing can be seen as one of those the not-simply-vocational subjects which is called on to justify itself in terms of students' futures. Very few undergraduates will go on to be best-selling writers. Even for good post-graduate students, who may justifiably expect to see their book in print not long after the end of their course, the most likely future is that writing and publication will be one strand in a 'portfolio' working life. The most hostile critics accuse the discipline of enticing students with promises of fame and fortune that will almost certainly prove false.

This is to miss the point. I know no Creative Writing teacher who promises fame and fortune; for most of us, the evidence of our own lives says otherwise. What we do offer is a practical and intellectual schooling in creative process... and what employer does not at least pay lip-service to wanting their employees to be good creative thinkers? Some students will always come to us motivated by the pleasure and self-expression of the act of writing, and these things are likely to be there, incidentally, for anyone who writes, but for students who ask 'What use is this going

to be?’ we have an answer, if we care to give it. The harsh economic agenda may seem like a threat, but as writers we understand the creative act of blinking and looking again. By another productive paradox, this challenge might help us to see the great resource that lies in what we already, and naturally, do.

WORKSHOPPING THE WORKSHOP

Creative Writing educators who are writers teach from the practice that comes naturally to us. One of those practices, and one of the roots of our subject, is the workshop.

‘Workshop’: some people see the word as affectation, writers pretending to be horny-handed craftsmen at their trade. As writers, we know that words are fluid, often metaphorical, and always to be understood in terms of their use. Historically, writers have formed groups and circles, in schools cohering round an influential individual or in one-to-one reciprocities such as that which gave a powerful dynamic to the English poets Wordsworth and Coleridge at a crucial stage of their lives. The Romantic image of the solitary ‘writer in the garret’ rarely applied even to the Romantics themselves. Rather, writers have felt the need for each other as readers, sharing work in progress, noting each other’s response, testing techniques and judgments in that semi-collaborative space. The Iowa practice simply made a method of it. The word ‘workshop’ may rouse feelings and associations for and against, but it has persisted, and seems needed – if only to distinguish from seminar, lecture, and other academic terms.

Still, the workshop as a teaching tool might seem like

orthodoxy in our subject, and the scepticism I mention above should still apply. The title of a recent compilation of scholarly articles, ‘Does The Workshop Model Still Work?’ (Donnelly, D. (ed) London: Multilingual Matters, 2011) hints at ongoing question and a scope for reconsideration. In the spirit of ‘workshop’, the term itself and the practice it refers to both invite response, experiment and future development.

In fact, the ‘pure’ workshop scarcely exists. It is rare for any workshop group in education to sit down untutored, un-led, un-framed, simply to throw raw work to the wolves of response. In practice, almost all Creative Writing educators think about the learning needs, skills, experience, readiness, of students in our care. And it is the principles that this alertness reveals to be good workshop practice that I propose as valuable, essential knowledge not only within but way beyond the discipline. Like most good subject knowledge, at least in literary studies and creative arts, what we know and practice points to wider applications. Attending to language, in exacting ways, we are working with the basic human business of expression and communication, after all.

So, what is so special about the workshop, that brings me all this way to talk about it?

For a start, the workshop asserts that the work we bring to it is always work-in-progress. The workshop is not summative assessment. It is formative, dynamic, done while choices are still open, options not yet realised. The allegiance of the workshop is, or should be, to those possibilities – to their emergence – what the work in progress might become.

How to address them, that seethe
of loose connections—half ink, half itch in the neurones?
For every halfway-to-whole

thing that gathers its membrane
in the evolution gloop, to slouch up the shores of the page,
hundreds stay fluid, indistinguishable

from what they breathe, eat and excrete,
mulching into each other. Or perhaps they slope off, deeper
in their element, to be... what

I can't name. You know I mean you,
you untouchables, children of God, you secret sharers who
keep the house warm, swept

and to everyday acquaintance
empty... Keep a light on, though, please, on the off-chance
tonight's when I find my way home.

Far from being counterposed to the individual, interior creative process, it can create a space between us in which that process becomes visible.

As a peer-response group, the workshop has an ethos of equality. Or rather, equality is one factor in another good productive paradox. Historically, workshop groups might often cluster round a dominant individual; the principle of apprenticeship is frequently in play as well. In the university setting, Creative Writing educators are paid to be, in some sense, experts. People come clearly unequal in experience, craft, ambition, confidence and reading.

But as writers we also know the principle that T. S. Eliot names when he says that each poem is a new ‘raid on the inarticulate’. Each new work starts equal, even if their writers do not. We also know that if you know how to do it in advance, the work in hand is very likely not worth doing; it will be a duplication of what have you already achieved.

So the Creative Writing teacher has something to teach – in terms of craft, yes, clearly. But maybe more important is the meta-knowledge of our discipline: Creative Writing teachers, speaking from experience of writing, are expert at knowing the questions we share, not the answers individual students need to find to fit individual needs.

Meanwhile it is easy to anatomise the malfunctions of the workshop, where the balance between opposites that make best practice is lost. At one end of the spectrum is what we might call the Boot Camp approach. This favours sentiments like ‘if it ain’t hurting, it ain’t working’ and ‘if you don’t like the heat stay out of the kitchen’ and rates its own virility in terms of the harshness of its criticism. At the other end lies the Flotation Tank – that alternative therapy where the subject is suspended weightless in a bath of blood-heat water... or in this case a bath of undifferentiated reassurance, where the person or the poem have no way of sensing the point at which they touch or have relationship with anything beyond themselves. At one extreme, the emergent process can be stung into submission; at the other, disempowered and left to feel vaguely patronised.

Somewhere nearby, to one side of this spectrum, there are other dead ends. The academic environment can easily promote the workshop as a Deferential Guessing Game; the lecturer asks apparently open-ended questions, and the

real challenge for the student is to guess which answer the authority figure wants to hear.

Meanwhile, in the virtual world, the Internet Forum is a common mode – ‘interactive’, yes, but in a way that privileges unsubstantiated opinion, in which we hear critical voices in a vacuum, without real relationship. At worst, this becomes (if I can use that word in Finland) a happy hunting ground for troll.

As against all of these, I would like to propose a quietly radical model of the workshop, seen in relational terms. What applies in the process of the group is similar to what operates in an emergent piece of writing as it finds its coherence, its ‘voice’ – a matter not so much of individual elements as of the (dynamic and creative) *Space Between*.

Syntax is the least of it: what holds together,
 for its moment,
 when the air
 is a pliant and see-through cartilage
 between the words,
 between them and what’s
 not said, what’s known somewhere else but here,
 hardly known that it’s known.

 (My father
 at the end spoke himself into fragments in five languages;
 we worked by inference, like constellations drawn from stars
 as far from each other as any from us. Where
 was he then?)

SOME PRACTICAL BENCHMARKS

This and the previous poem come from an unpublished notebook sequence called Benchmarks, and incidentally some of the ideas in this talk have clarified while serving on a working group for the Quality Assurance Agency, a body whose remit is to oversee the terms in which the quality of universities' provision can be assessed. This includes producing Benchmark Statements for each subject. Currently, Creative Writing, as a still-new discipline, does not have a Benchmark Statement of its own, and our working group is tasked with producing one.

The list below aims to lay out the range of practical variations on the workshop, as a step to showing just what a flexible and distinctive tool our pedagogy has at its disposal, and to indicate what its wider implications might be.

Response to named or anonymous pieces

The workshop as an experiment with our perception of what we actually respond to in writing, our expectations and preconceptions as opposed to what is on the page.

Written or spoken feedback

Experiments with modes of response encourages self-observation of the ways one's own thoughts form into words, as well as of group process, eg how who speaks first sets an agenda that moulds the succeeding responses.

Online or virtual work shopping

An extension of this experiment with feedback in the con-

text of new media and platforms; this also gives a ground for reflection on those media themselves, and how the medium moulds the response.

Response in groups of different sizes

...including self-selected or randomly chosen pairs.

Response involving pre-arranged roles

Different participants are temporarily assigned the roles of punctuation fiend, character counsellor, language lover, formalist, as well as the classic 'hard cop / soft cop' dyad (created in a way that makes clear it is not to be taken personally). In the 'goldfish bowl' technique an outer circle of participants observe the smaller inner workshop process, and may offer advice... then participants may be asked to change places. All these variant of group roles serve to defocus the group process from ourselves as individuals to the work in hand, and help participants conceive of themselves as collaborators in the workshop process, for the sake of that work.

Role play of specific industry-based situations

e.g. editorial or scripting meeting

This list relates to the peer-response aspect of the workshop, rather than an equally rich set of variants dealing with writing practice led by a tutor-set task. The latter fosters related skills relating to creative embrace of the given, the unasked-for, as material – in other words, a practical

self knowledge of working with an element of not-knowing and uncertainty. Collaborative writing exercises are a specific case of this, illustrating the creative value of letting one's 'ownership' of the work in progress go, at least for a while. This is a long way from the common distrust of collaboration as 'writing by committee'. Rather, the metaphor is of releasing one's work into the wild; the valuable knowledge our discipline has is that, in a collaboration rightly understood, that work comes back to you, as if of its own accord, and comes back enriched.

All these experiments are also, almost incidentally, about learning the skills of establishing trust between individuals and in group situations. The workshop leads us to be (awarely) a member of a culture... as a writer, however solitary their personality and practice, always is. For the individual writer, equally, they have the long-term goal of each person internalising the workshop. By finding that you can play all the different roles in workshop, the participant leaves the group at the end of the course with a sense of the continuing workshop in their head.

This goal of gradually emancipating the learning writer into creative autonomy produces the principle that this pedagogy is to do with process as much as with product – learning the skill of questioning, rather than being taught the answers. Far from the worry, mentioned earlier, about writing workshops creating conformity, it stresses that different readers have, and must have, different responses. This difference is what enables the method to work, by creating that dynamic 'space between'.

Out of this space, the skill the writer learns is that of choice. Any honest reaction from their readers – even mis-

taken reactions, based on mis-reading – is evidence the writer can potentially use. The skill is to weigh up the range of possible responses they hear, test it against their own judgment, and see if on that evidence the work is achieving the effects the author wants. Then they choose.

As for each participant in their roles of reader and respondent, the discipline of creative reading and creative listening is very practically based. On a human, social, interactive level, they are practising a discipline of empathy, instanced by the writerly questions of discerning what another writer's goals, stage of development and abilities are, what their agenda is as writers, and what kind of feedback they can use. It is off the point to talk about whether a response is 'kind' or 'savage'; the criterion we learn to orient towards, together, is what works: what is fruitful in practice. What works will relate to the understanding, and self-understanding, of individual participants. No writer can really take advice they do not come to recognise in their own responses. Even if they can act out of obedience, once, they will not incorporate the learning in their later work.

THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE WRITING

It may seem I have lost track of my early plan to build a narrative around the viewpoint of a character, who happens to be myself. If that self and his life story has dissolved a little into the work, both of the teaching and the poems, that might be an accurate reflection of the way it feels to me. I know that I have come to conceive of my own writing process, and other central features of my life including person-

al relationships and worship in a Quaker meeting, through the process I have observed in writing groups. The model is that of creative individuals standing together around that shifting and palpable ‘space between’, a space that is anything but emptiness. As in the well-known optical figure of the two faces and the candlestick, we blink and see the space between the faces as a figure in itself. In groups and in the writing, we blink and shift the focus from ourselves. By taking and sharing the responsibility for the holding and the care of that space between us, attentive to what is emergent form it, we can learn to let the process, and the work become itself.

This perspective offers a fresh way of figuring collaboration, as creating a shared space into which individuals can release exclusive ownership and – here’s the beauty of it – find the work in progress coming back to them, willing and changed.

Having been invited to speak on the subject of Creative Writing pedagogy talk, I cannot avoid a glance towards the other theme of this conference, that of writing for health and wellbeing. Many students are drawn to Creative Writing by the wish to work with their own life experiences, frequently traumatic ones, and sometimes a conflict can be proposed between writing for literary purposes and the overlapping subject area of writing for personal growth or therapy. The arguments above suggest, in passing, one last good creative paradox: that making the best art we can, which we do by seeing the work itself as other, as a living and evolving organism, with dynamics of its own, may be the best therapy too. The part of us that writes may know implicitly, or potentially, what our everyday self and

conscious self-reflection might not. Most Creative Writing teachers have witnessed that moment when a student's understanding - maybe in the form of memory or insight - is suddenly released by what had seemed an arbitrary writing game. A serious part of the discipline that writers know is play.

If the practice of the writing workshop can reflect the principle that the space we hold between us is a model of the space inside us too, so the workshop art of questioning our imagination - 'what if...?' and 'what then...?' - can be internalised, enabling different perceptions inside us to speak.

All I have been saying here might sound ambitious, idealistic, utopian. On the contrary, I am arguing that it is simple: we do not have to devise a radically new technique. We simply have to see, and say, that all I have laid out here is what we can already do. We do it not out of extraordinary wisdom, but simply because we are human... language users... and we write. At its heart is a kind of love, partly for language, for the human business that is done in language, and partly for that moment when we know that we are in the presence of something that simultaneously we recognise... and, in the same breath, know to be new.

This stands apart

from me. Or will
when it has become...

Is that ellipsis? No,
I mean simply

'become'. Intransitive,
nothing in apposition.

To say 'itself'
would be tautology. (Thus

the old grammarian
stares at a snippet of text, amazed,

as if at his wife
robed suddenly in moonlight

after all these years.)

The poems here are currently unpublished in book form, apart from Dr Crampfold's Complaint, in The Air Mines of Mistila (Bloodaxe Books, 1988) and House of Paper, in Changes of Address: Poems 1980-98 (Bloodaxe Books, 2001).

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He was one of the working writers involved in first wave of Creative Writing courses in British universities. Reflecting on three decades since then, he will in his own words "explore the subtly shifting balances and tensions in this growing discipline between a robust practicality, a commitment to knowledge and the serious play and indeterminacy vital to creative process".