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**Reading literature and writerly self-consciousness: personal reflections on reading and teaching creative writing**

Abstract:

The importance of reading to writing has often been asserted and it is generally agreed that providing Creative Writing students with opportunities to read literature, including ‘classic’ texts, plays an important role in teaching Creative Writing. Self-consciously ‘literary’ texts can be particularly useful in highlighting how such texts have been made. Yet the amount of reading that can be offered during Creative Writing courses is limited and many Creative Writing students have not read widely. As a result, many students have a limited range of models for their creative work, which is often relatively unambitious. Combining Literary Studies and Creative Writing courses and course practices and, in doing so, encouraging students to *write as readers* and *read as writers* is one way to improve the teaching of Creative Writing and Literary Studies in Australian universities.

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1.

One of the most richly ironic moments in nineteenth-century literature occurs in Emily Dickinson's playful poem 'I would not paint a picture' (Franklin 1999: 157, poem 348):

I would not paint - a picture -  
 I'd rather be the One  
 Its bright impossibility  
 To dwell - delicious - on -  
 And wonder how the fingers feel  
 Whose rare - celestial - stir -  
 Evokes so sweet a Torment -  
 Such sumptuous - Despair -

I would not talk, like Cornets -  
 I'd rather be the One  
 Raised softly to the Ceilings -  
 And out, and easy on -  
 Through Villages of Ether -  
 Myself endued Balloon  
 By but a lip of Metal -  
 The pier to my Pontoon -

Nor would I be a Poet -  
 It's finer - own the Ear -  
 Enamored - impotent - content -  
 The License to revere,  
 A privilege so awful  
 What would the Dower be,  
 Had I the Art to stun myself  
 With Bolts - of Melody!

In this poem Dickinson not only appears to disavow her interest in writing poetry through the vehicle of an extraordinarily accomplished poem, but also appears to disavow any interest in being a painter or musician. Yet, Judith Farr has observed that 'it was painting and the related art, drawing, that seem most significantly to have affected [Dickinson's] choice of [poetic] subject and language while shaping her aesthetic' (1998: 62) and Carolyn Linley Cooley has persuasively explored Dickinson's considerable debt to music, along with her musical expertise, arguing that recognising 'the importance of music to Dickinson's verse can intensify a reader's awareness of the aesthetic richness of the Dickinson canon' (2003: 1).

'I would not paint a picture' is startling and engaging partly because it captures that familiar sense of being simultaneously transported, disabled and entranced by art; of being 'Enamored - impotent - content -'. It is also superbly written. In the first stanza, for example, the juxtaposed alliterative effects of 'bright impossibility' and 'dwell - delicious' are handled with delectable skill, the off-rhyme of 'stir' and 'Despair' is

impeccably judged and the persistent sibilance of the stanza as a whole contributes strongly to the sense of ‘delicious’ enjoyment it conveys.

If this poem is a paradox, playing at disowning its own making and, by implication, contradicting its author—Erkkilä’s interpretation is that Dickinson ‘proceeds paradoxically both to use and to refuse her creative powers’ (1992: 155)—one of the poem’s striking features is how strongly it demonstrates Dickinson’s self-conscious artistry and self-confidence. It is only the poem’s success as a work of art that enables her to activate the paradox at the poem’s heart.

As she succeeds in writing a highly suggestive and rhetorically sophisticated poem, she asserts indirectly that she is not, after all, satisfied with impotence; that the poem’s expressed views are in opposition to her art; that the poem is a mask and its speaker a persona standing in for the author. But where is Dickinson herself in this poem? I would suggest that if she resides anywhere in it, she inhabits its powerful language.

## 2.

Almost everyone agrees with the assertion that writers must read. Recently, for example, Aileen La Tourette wrote that ‘We all know reading and writing are utterly inextricable, in teaching and in writing. The only absolute rule for writing is that you must read’ (2008: 132). Stephen King has phrased it more pithily: ‘If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.’ (2000: 164). Difficulties with such assertions only arise once one tries to specify what should be written and what the associated reading should be—especially when trying to teach creative writing to classes of first year university students who have not read widely.

There is a further difficulty: reading takes place in a variety of ways. It is all very well for a teacher to recommend particular novels, short stories or poems to students, but students’ readings of such works may not yield the results that a teacher imagines. How, for example, does one read a poem such as ‘I would not paint a picture’ if one knows nothing about Dickinson, is unfamiliar with her oeuvre and is not aware of the traditions of English-language poetry, nineteenth-century American Puritanism, Dickinson’s use of the hymn form or her abiding interests in music and art? One may enjoy the poem without knowing any of these things but is likely to miss significant aspects of the poem’s intricate technique and meaning.

Yet, in teaching Creative Writing, recommending Dickinson’s multifaceted poems to students is one way of showing how complex, idiosyncratic and clearly voiced poetry may be. In my experience, even students who are not particularly interested in poetry will sometimes respond excitedly to such verbally and intellectually inventive works.

## 3.

The best way of forming a reasonably clear idea of Creative Writing students’ responses to their reading—excited or otherwise—is to discuss this reading in class. Allen Ginsberg was once asked whether his classes were literature or writing classes.

He replied: ‘I don’t make a distinction ... the best teachings I got from Kerouac and Burroughs was hearing them pointing out gems of language and rhythm and perception in world literature as well as my own ...’ (Bunge, 1985: 41). Richard Wilbur endorsed this approach to teaching when he stated that

Certain of my literature courses presented me excitingly with writing which made me want to ‘do something like that’. The same is true of courses I’ve taught. The courses most useful to me have been the ones which excited me by putting me into the presence of things which I wanted not so much to copy as to equal in art and vitality (Bunge, 1985: 179).

The use of literary texts to teach creative writing is part of common teaching practice—and usually for the reason that Ginsberg mentions. When teaching I often favour texts that are self-consciously literary and which, if they employ a colloquial or ‘natural’ voice, do so in a sophisticated way; texts that don’t try to disguise their main techniques or present a seamless ‘naturalised’ face to the reader. These texts include Dickinson’s poems because, despite her reclusiveness, she was a self-conscious literary performer. When exploring examples from her work I can say ‘Look at the techniques she uses; look at how her work exemplifies a thoughtful and sophisticated creative practice’.

Texts such as ‘I would not paint a picture’ show students some of the ways writers go about making art. Students are able to practice their own writing in response to such texts, through emulation or even parody. When Burkhardt (2006: 99) writes that ‘Creating a parody of a classic poem is great fun’ he is pointing out that this is a relaxed method for students to explore the mechanics of particular poems, or particular poetic forms.

Further, acts of reading are at least in some respects analogous to creative practice. One never reads a complex novel or poem exactly the same way twice or exactly the same way as anybody else. This means that works of creative writing are constantly being newly imagined or re-imagined through reading, re-reading and criticism. Lubbock (1957:17) has expressed this idea eloquently:

The reader of a novel—by which I mean the critical reader—is himself a novelist; he is the maker of a book which may or may not please his taste when he is finished, but for which he must take his own share of the responsibility. The author does his part, but cannot transfer his book like a bubble into the brain of the critic; he cannot make sure that the critic will possess his work.

Creative Writing students will often interpret particular literary works in ways that suit their individual purposes. Their reading can stimulate them to create new, and sometimes startlingly original works of their own through adopting, or subverting, existing models. This process allows students to increase their confidence in, and capacity to develop, their own voices as writers while simultaneously allowing them—if necessary—to de-authorise set readings by critiquing, departing from, disliking or disowning them (for some students, authorised texts can be a little like parental figures, inciting an urge for separation).

But how does one conceptualise the role of reading in teaching Creative Writing beyond such anecdotal and practice-led issues? Paul Dawson (2005: 49) summarised the combination of creative practice and reading that ‘eventually coalesced in the writing workshop’—defined as ‘a pedagogical arena for the group discussion of student manuscripts’—as following ‘four institutional trajectories’:

*Creative self-expression* is a technology of the self whereby language (especially through the medium of poetry) is a device for discovering and developing the expressive potential of one’s own human character. The *literacy* model situates ‘creative’ writing within a general writing instruction which trains students for competency in a variety of compositional modes for the purposes of accurate expression and professional communication. The *craft* model involves the conjunction of formalist criticism with the concept of artistic training associated with the fine arts. *Reading from the inside* is founded on the belief that practical experience in writing literature leads to a greater knowledge and appreciation of it.

Cosgrove (2008: 1) has written about ‘the workshop method [of teaching creative writing]—where students bring in creative work and fellow students critically engage with it’ as ‘a striking example of Paulo Freire’s education-theory concept of praxis—the point where reflection meets action’. She argues that such a method ‘provides a cornerstone for creative writing pedagogy’ and adds (8) that the ‘use of supplementary readings is critical to this endeavour’, aiding ‘the reflective process’, ‘contextualis[ing] the workshop in a larger literary framework’ and helping ‘students re-think the world as a malleable one’.

Such ‘supplementary’ readings also emphasise the variety of voices to be found in literature. They help to communicate (sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely) that literature is made; that writers use language carefully and with knowledge acquired from reading and repeated creative practice; that all writers’ literary personas are constructed rather than directly representing ‘real’ authors; and that serious writers are self-conscious practitioners.

But do Dawson’s and Cosgrove’s comments mean that Creative Writing courses employ the same kind of reading strategies as Literary Studies courses? Dawson’s answer is that ‘Students of Creative Writing are encouraged to read not merely for literary appreciation, but in order to aid their writing. This is what we understand by the term *reading as a writer*; reading with the aim of discovering ways to improve one’s own writing’ (2005: 91). Moxley states that ‘we need to teach students to read like writers ... the students writer’s focus should not be on theme or principles of literary criticism, but on the choices authors considered when composing’ (1989: 259). However, Dawson concludes that the claim ‘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 ... It is in fact no different from what Lubbock terms “creative reading”’ (2005: 96).

## 4.

When Tim Mayers (2005: xv) argued for ‘invert[ing] the traditional hierarchy of English studies, which privileges interpretation over production’ and of ‘crafting a discipline in which textual production and interpretation may be treated equally’, he was commenting on the continuing, if sometimes blurred, divide between literary studies and the teaching of Creative Writing in America where ‘the activity of *interpretation* still reigns supreme in the vast majority of English departments’. In the Australian context, Dawson (2005:14) has written that ‘The fact that English is constructed as the professional domain of the critic contributes to the idea that the academy is an anomalous location for writers’. Claire Woods (2006: 132) cited Mayer in the course of arguing for

a coherently theorized curriculum and pedagogy across the broad area of Writing [which] should make for a rich and dynamic disciplinary area, an area in which scholars working in diverse but related fields have an interest, whether in literary study, language studies, art history, history of the book, creative or professional writing.

In theory, this sounds like an attractive enterprise. The divide between Literary Studies and Creative Writing is perhaps something of a false dichotomy because students of writing and students of literature share an interest in thinking about how good writing is made and what it means.

In the case of first year Creative Writing classes at the University of Canberra it is possible to teach Literary Studies units as part of a Creative Writing course, and to teach poems—such as ‘I would not paint a picture’—within Creative Writing workshops. However, it is impossible to provide Creative Writing students with a thorough literary studies background, ensuring that they have read reasonably widely and understand how to critique and contextualise their reading, because the focus of Creative Writing courses inevitably remains on the students’ own writing. There is only so much time in any class to talk about ‘classic’ works or to set exercises relating to such works.

When students enrol in a first year Introduction to Creative Writing course, one cannot be sure that they will have read many (or any) of the ‘classic’ texts—unless one defines such texts as the Harry Potter series and various fantasy and genre fiction titles. This situation is true to a greater or lesser extent across the world. As long ago as 1965 Daiches observed that ‘American students seem to feel that literature is something you get up in a course and that unless you read it in a course you never read it’ (372).

Certainly many Australian students will have read little poetry. I conducted an informal experiment with first-year Creative Writing students in the first semester of 2010 by distributing poems by Philip Larkin and Judith Wright and asking each of four first-year Creative Writing classes (about 70 students in all) whether they knew of the authors and/or knew the poems. These were Philip Larkin’s ‘This Be The Verse’ and ‘Dublinesque’, and Judith Wright’s ‘Black Cockatoos’ and ‘Woman to Man’. Most students had not heard of either poet and, of those students who had some knowledge of one or both poets, less than a handful said that they were familiar with any of the works.

This is not surprising. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, typically, students in Australian secondary schools are not exposed to a great deal of poetry—and, in any case, the language of ‘This Be The Verse’ is likely to be considered by many secondary school teachers as inappropriate for their classes. Further, while many students are aware of the names of high-profile writers, such as Shakespeare, Milton, Woolf or Toni Morrison, the majority are unlikely to have read many works by such authors.

In such circumstances, how does one approach the task of teaching students to write? If university Creative Writing classes are broadly modelled along the lines of Dawson’s ‘writing workshop’ and students are asked to produce pieces of creative writing, both in class and out of class for discussion within the workshop, the risk is that students will write, and subsequently critique, works that demonstrate a limited cognisance of the world of literature. Many contemporary first year creative writing exercises are fantastical, for which one can’t entirely blame J.K. Rowling given the proliferation of fantasy and escapist literature in the print and electronic media, and some students produce passages of what might be described as gritty realism.

Because many students do not read widely, the creative works they produce tend to be relatively unsophisticated and unselfconsciously poor—as opposed to ambitious and self-consciously literary works that aspire to be more than what the student can make them. When Stephen King stated that would-be writers needed to ‘read a lot and write a lot’ he meant that they need to do both at once. Writing a lot without reading can be akin to being trapped in a series of ever-diminishing circles. It can also cause students to struggle with the idea that one of the hallmarks of literary works is that they are uniquely voiced and expressed; that their meanings are, to significant extent, irreducible.

## 5.

Richard Wilbur commented that in reading poetry he ‘looks for the unparaphraseable’. (Bunge, 1985: 175). Kevin Brophy has observed that

Denial of the naturalness of art or literature begins and justifies the process of the workshop; and the writing workshop in these times signals to students that they are part of a Creative Writing class. The workshop, by its nature as a deliberate and conscious training-ground for apprentices or a place of learning-through-experiment, denies the spontaneity of art ... (2008: 77)

Chapman (1973: 60) stated that ‘literary writers have a habit of going beyond the conventions of common speech in questions of what is “correct”, which choices are “appropriate”, even what is to be regarded as “comprehensible”, and in other matters’.

This brings me back to the Dickinson poem ‘I would not paint a picture’. One can no more paraphrase this poem than one can paraphrase a fine painting. Pointing out to students the self-consciously literary language of the poem, and its unparaphraseable nature, is one way of denying ‘the naturalness of art’ and a way of exhibiting some of the many creative possibilities inherent in language. This is especially valuable for first-year students, some of whom have not been taught to make a significant

distinction between the language of creative writing and the language they use every day—and, if they do make a distinction, they are often hard pressed to say what this distinction is. Further, Dickinson’s language is an antidote to the surprisingly prevalent idea that creativity needs no tutoring.

Teaching such a poem to Creative Writing students would ideally be buttressed by good Literary Studies courses. By itself, Creative Writing can teach many useful professional and pragmatic writing skills, and they can occasionally help students to resolve personal issues as they learn to express themselves better. However, it is only through reading literature, as well as writing, that students begin to become accomplished in their craft.

It may be time to put aside the divide between the disciplines of Literary Studies and Creative Writing (recognising that both *are* disciplines), and to create course structures that combine Creative Writing and Literary Studies in equal partnership, including creative writers and literary studies academics as teachers on an equal footing. Such a model would offer better opportunities for students to understand literature and to write from the inside; to be taught to *write as readers* and to *read as writers*. Such a model might introduce students to practice-led reading as part of their ongoing writing practice—reading, that is, which focuses on how a text has been made and why it might be considered ‘literary’. This reading could also be a way for students to learn to elucidate the linguistic and aesthetic strategies that inform such texts.

Students might then write *out of their reading*, using their writing practice to reflect on what they have read and finding points of departure in doing so. Creative-led reading and the writing it connects to offer a way of exploring literary works as self-conscious artefacts. They are also a way of reminding students that what Lubbock (1957:1) refers to as ‘the shadowy and fantasmal form[s]’ of literary works are always being imaginatively reconstituted through the creative act of reading. Recognising that reading, creative writing and the creative processes attending to both are not so very far apart is one way to begin to construct curricula that do justice to both reading *and* writing.

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