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Creativity and contemporary value

Abstract:

This paper is part of a larger project that investigates the cultural construction of creativity in the context of the history of ideas. It understands creativity not as a given human attribute or ability, but as an idea that emerges out of specific historical moments, shaped by the discourses of politics, science, commerce, and nation. It shifts the ground of analysis away from the naturalised models that have traditionally dominated the field of creative practice research, in order to highlight the historicity of a concept that is more commonly deemed to be without history. In this sense, it addresses a key theme of the conference—by asking what literary historical studies can say about one of creative writing’s most deeply cherished beliefs.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creativity—Genealogy—Literary Studies—History

One of the most suggestive properties of the word creativity is the late date of its emergence—making its first appearance as an abstract English noun in 1875, before entering into common usage a half century later (Kristellar 1983: 105-6). Raymond Williams (1961; 1976) has argued that the antecedents of the discourse are to be discerned in European culture since the Renaissance—for example, Williams cites Shakespeare as one of the first English writers to apply the word creation to human imagination, but this was, to quote Macbeth, in the largely negative sense of ‘A Dagger of the Mind, a false Creation, Proceeding from the heat-oppressed Brain’. The concept of imagination as productive and positive that is entangled in the modern meaning of the word is difficult to sustain in any popular sense before the nineteenth century—and imagination as a passive, inferior, or as Samuel Johnson ([1751] 1825) put it, ‘vagrant faculty,’ was very much the hegemonic discourse until the arrival of romantic discourse in the closing decades of the eighteenth century (Abrams 1971; Lund 2004).

This paper argues that the discourse of creativity is more recent and complex than Williams’ hugely influential argument allows. Moreover, there is a strong sense in which Williams’ text needs to be read historically, as a product of the rapid expansion of the discourse of creativity through the decades of the 1950s and 1960s—as a work that seeks to celebrate the arrival of a concept that ‘we should be glad of,’ as Williams puts it (1961: 3), rather than to cast a critical eye over its uses and origins. Creativity, in Williams’ account, is something that is fundamentally a-historical; something that is seen to pre-exist both the naming and, indeed, the thinking or understanding of the concept. Hence, his historical narrative is one in which certain exemplary writers come successively ‘very near to’ recognizing creativity for what it really is (1961: 21), and ‘what it really is’ is defined by scientific theories of psychology current in the 1960s. The problem here is not simply one of teleology, but also one of elision in that this historical narrative or ‘myth of origin’ has the effect of eliding alternate paradigms and ideas of process that could more productively inform the contemporary debate.

The burgeoning interest in the creative industries phenomenon has thrown up some wildly different dates for the origin of the discourse. For example, Negus and Pickering (2004) gesture back to the Judeo-Christian creation myth, while Toby Miller (2009) recently argued that the discourse has its origins several thousand years later, specifically in the early speeches of former US President Ronald Reagan. Creative writing studies have tended to follow Williams in favouring a Renaissance origin for the term, with the early eighteenth century being claimed as pivotal in its formation (for example, Dawson 2005; Pope 2005). However, the evidence Williams presents for these claims are slight. For example, Williams points to the fact that in 1728 the minor Scottish poet David Mallet was the first to apply the modern concept of creativity to the powers of the poet (1976: 73). The sole source for the claim is a quotation from Mallet’s *The Excursion*, in particular Mallet’s opening line ‘Muse, Creative Power, IMAGINATION!’ However, it ought to be noted that Mallet makes use of the word creative in the context of invoking the poetic muse, a literary device traditionally used by poets to signal that they were working within a given tradition, according to fixed rules. There are in fact several earlier examples of the word

‘creative’ used in the context of the hymnic tradition (as Paul Dawson (2005: 27) points out, the poet John Hopkins invokes his Muse’s gifts: ‘You, like creative Heav’n your Labours frame;/You spoke the Word and at your Breath they came’), and this makes it difficult to determine whether Mallet intended—or that his readers understood—the word ‘creative’ to signify a human rather than divine or muse-like attribute.

Moreover, the version of the poem quoted in all the above-mentioned works is taken from the radically revised 1743 edition of *The Excursion*, and not the original 1728 edition (as cited), which actually read:

FANCY, creative Power, at whose Command
 Arise unnumber'd Images of Things,
 Thy hourly Offspring; Thou whose mighty Will
 Peoples with airy Shapes the Pathless Vale
 Where pensive *Meditation* loves to stray
Fancy, with me range *Earth's* extended *Space*
 Surveying Nature's Works. (Mallet [1728] 2007)

The 1728 work falls more naturally within the tradition of the invocation, with the poet asking his muse ‘Fancy’ to be his companion on a journey. In the more commonly cited 1743 version, the balance shifts and imagination becomes a more impressive player in the poem. Thus,

Companion of the muse, creative power,
 IMAGINATION! at whose great command,
 Arise unnumber'd images of things,
 Thy hourly offspring: *thou*, who canst at will
 People with air-born shapes the silent wood,
 And solitary veil, thy own domain,
 Where *Contemplation* haunts; O come invok'd,
 To waft me on thy many-tinctur'd wing
 O'er EARTH's extended space: (Mallet [1743] 1810)

The changes would seem to suggest that Mallet welcomed a more radical interpretation of his work, given the emphasis he gives to the word ‘IMAGINATION,’ for example. However, Mallet’s description of the poem as it is laid out in the poem’s ‘Argument’ continues to make it clear that the invocation is ‘addressed to Fancy’—that it is Fancy and not the poet who is creative, using her heavenly power to waft the poet on her ‘many-tinctur’d wing’.

Other than Mallet’s use of the adjective ‘creative’ there is little in *The Excursion* to differentiate it from the work of his contemporaries, and less to suggest that the use of the adjective signals a new epistemic relationship to imagination. Indeed *The Excursion* belongs, together with James Thomson’s better known *To the Memory of Sir Issac Newton*, to a sizable genre of eighteenth century poetry devoted to Newton’s *Principia* and *Opticks*, which, in the words of literary critic M.H. Abrams (1971: 304), it ‘joyously pillag[es]’. Far from being innovative, M.H. Abrams characterizes the genre as the product of an illustrative process, via which the ‘truth’ of Newton’s *Opticks* is turned into poetry through a process of ornamentation—an illustrating of its

statements—rather than creating things afresh. In other respects, *The Excursion* retains the Classical period's concern with the external world (as opposed to, for example, the idea of creative self expression). It is heavily influenced by the Gothic and Picturesque (elements that are also far more marked in the 1743 edition), but these elements are strongly framed in the context of an ordered Classical universe, in which the rainbow, for example, is deemed more poetic for having been demystified by Newton's 'pure intelligence' and 'mind's clear vision' into a vision of 'ideal harmony' (Mallet [1743] 1810: 61). In short, an equally tenable interpretation of the poem would place it as yet another example of imagination enlisted in the service of reason.

In attempting to create a narrative that reaches as far back into history as possible, the studies of creativity examined in this project often miss the fundamental fracture in the discourse of the mind that occurs at the end of the eighteenth century—what M.H. Abrams (1971: 58) once called the 'Copernican revolution in epistemology' that was the Romantic era. As Foucault (1970) has argued, the shift between the classical episteme and the modern is one in which the structure of knowledge undergoes a fundamental reversal. In the course of this reversal, imagination, once regarded as a poor cousin to reason—at best, passive, and at worst, a dangerous faculty that led to madness or delusion—becomes the primary faculty of the human mind. To overlook this shift is to miss the tension between the Enlightenment ideal of the rationally bounded individual and the Romantic myth of the unbounded autonomy of the infinite self. It is also to elide the possibility that the arrangement of knowledge that gave rise to creativity may well have been that which created the modern and anthropological subject—a new arrangement of knowledge that created man as the central subject and object of reality.

Kant would seem to be an obvious figure in this transition. It was Kant who increased the scope of the imagination in the theory of knowledge to a revolutionary degree. Just as Copernicus reversed the way people thought about the relationship of the earth to the sun, Kant reversed the way people thought about the relationship between the mind and the world of objects and experience. In a dramatic reversal of both empiricism and rationality he argued that some of the properties observed in objects might be due to the nature and constitution of the human spectator. Or, as Kant indelibly put it:

Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved around the spectator, [Copernicus] tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. (Kant [1787] 2003)

Kant accepts that knowledge begins with sense experience, but argues that the mind applies preexisting categories of perception—including logic, causality, substance, space and time—to the object. In this sense, the perceiving mind might be said to discover only that which it itself has partly made. With Kant, imagination ceases to be an empty storehouse for images generated by the senses, a blank sheet of paper on which the imprint of experience is placed, and begins to be understood as active and productive. Interestingly enough, it is not long after Kant that scientists and

phrenologists such as F.J. Gall, Charles Bell and Erasmus Darwin begin to elucidate the active mind in neurological terms—for the first time locating the mind in the brain, and not in the heart, the spinal column, the pineal gland, or the body as a whole.

In English, Kant's influence manifested itself in poetry before entering into philosophy. Famously, it is in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge that imagination is seen to take the leap beyond the subject through the act of artistic creation. With Coleridge, the imagination ceases to be 'a lazy Looker-on on an external world' and is endowed with a synthetic or 'magical' power (qtd. in Shawcross 1907). He describes this new apprehension of imagination as a power of knowledge that is a repetition in the subject's mind of the auto-poetic power of God's creation. Or, in Coleridge's own words, the imagination is 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception' and 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (Coleridge [1817] 1907). This statement of the artist's auto-poetic power is qualitatively different from, and therefore historically discontinuous with, the tradition of the divine analogy—that is, the many statements likening the poet to a 'second Maker' that form the subject matter of Williams history of creativity, such as, for example, the quotation from Tasso that he argues is the 'decisive source of the modern meaning' of the term (Williams 1976: 72), and that the literary historian E.N. Tigerstedt (1968) has extended back to the Florentine poet Christoforo Landino in the fifteenth century. The essential difference is that for Coleridge the perceiving mind is seen to be active in giving shape and meaning to what is outside it, so that our knowledge of what is outside us is also the knowledge of ourselves. Hence, Coleridge calls this new creative power both a self-manifestation and self-discovery because we see ourselves through the structure of our own minds.

Coleridge is an alluring progenitor for the concept of creativity. However, there are many intractable problems in his styling of the concept, which Williams' ignores. The most obvious, perhaps, is the way in which Coleridge constructs the problem as primarily theological, and the strange distortions, digressions and confusions in his philosophical works are more easily understood as the result of his attempt to make both science and philosophy compatible with traditional Christian doctrine. That is not to say that Coleridge has not been influential in the contemporary construction of creativity. Rather, it is to argue that the version of Coleridge that has been so influential—that Williams argues comes so 'very close to' the concept of creativity in its modern sense—is the secularized, modernized version that is largely the product of university departments of English literature in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, it is in the period following Kant and the Romantics that creative imagination comes to be seen as the 'true source of genius' and the 'basis of originality', words which themselves gain a new meaning. Genius is distinguished from mere talent, and redefined as a quality of mind that makes rules instead of following them, and the art object comes to be understood as the embodiment of original aesthetic ideals that are the product of the artist's creative imagination, not mere reflections, imitations, or perfections of truths found elsewhere. The emergent discourse also needs to be understood as a product of the new system of the arts arising in the eighteenth century, with its now familiar dualities of art/craft, aesthetic/purpose, genius/talent, creative/mechanical, which can be usefully mapped

through the shifting definitions provided in the French *Encyclopédie* between 1751 and 1780 (Kristellar 1952). The consequence of this reorganisation is that art is effectively created as a separate realm of human endeavour standing above and outside the rest of social and economic life. For this reason, Marx ([1845] 1976: 151) argued that ‘The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labour’, attributing an economic origin to the process through which the older idea of art as construction is replaced by a system that devalues the work of the artisan as a manual worker, and revalues the work of the artist via a cult of mystification. Also relevant is the way in which the new discourse intersects with the artist’s bid for respectability, driven by the artist’s new reliance on the vagaries of the market as traditional patronage systems collapse. There is an emerging sense in which artists ‘add value’ to their work by placing art beyond value.

Hence, ‘Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance,’ wrote Shelley ([1821] 2007: 151) in a sentence that reverses many centuries of European thought. For Wordsworth ([1850] 1994: 426), the mind is ‘creator and receiver both’ and human imagination ‘Is but another name for absolute power/And clearest insight, amplitude of mind./And reason in her most exalted mood’. John Ruskin (1865: 123) addressed himself to objects that bore the impress of ‘highest creative life that is to say the mind of man’, William Hazlitt (1854: 83) located ‘this creative impulse, this plastic power’ in works of art from Chaucer to Shakespeare. Thomas Carlyle ([1833] 1987: 149) extended the term to other professions, finding an ‘active power’, ‘creative instinct’ or dynamic force in all kinds of human production, and popular newspapers of the period were as likely to invoke the ‘creative power’ of industry, as they were to invoke the creative powers of the poet. It is also during this period that statements of a qualitatively different order seem to be found, including Benjamin Disraeli’s (1832: 170) assertion that ‘man is made to create,’ Marx’s ([c.1858] 1993: 614) argument that human happiness lies in a ‘positive, creative activity,’ Matthew Arnold’s (1865: 4) claim that ‘a free creative activity is the true function of man,’ and Frederic Nietzsche’s ([1886] 2003) argument that it is ‘creative plenipotence’ that separates the *Übermensch* from the rest of humanity. The work of such writers exemplify the shift away from the eighteenth century idea of a fixed and immutable universe (as exemplified in the mathematical physics of Newton), towards a universe that is understood as a continuous process of organic invention—a universe unfolding within a metaphysical structure that is malleable enough to impart a new sense of freedom to human endeavour. The concept of creativity can be understood as a product of the flux and upheaval of the industrial revolution—the period of the mid-nineteenth century when the term ‘creative power’ entered into popular usage. This paradigmatic shift gains its most characteristic expression in Darwin’s theory of evolution—and, no less famously, in *The Descent of Man*, the work in which Darwin aligns human imagination with a narrative of continuous novelty or invention, formation and transformation, arguing, ‘The imagination is one of the highest prerogatives of man. By this faculty he unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results’ (Darwin [1871] 2004: 95). In this sense, it might even be possible that the discourse of creativity does not originate in art, or the discourse of imagination, as

is commonly believed, but represents new forms of thought migrating into the arts from philosophy, political economy, or what is more likely, from the emerging biological and life sciences. These new forms of thought may be seen to reach full expression in twentieth century works such as those of the philosopher-mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, who defined creativity as the process, ‘whereby the actual world has its character of temporal passage to novelty’ ([1926] 1996: 174). Or, more forcefully, ‘The creativity of the world is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact’ ([1933] 1967: 227).

Despite its emphasis on the new, what seems crucial to the functioning of the discourse as it flourishes is that ‘creativity’ appear old, that it offer us a mythical history stretching back to the first time man applied paint to a cave wall. This illusion is aided by the emergence of a new critical vocabulary with which to survey the entire history of European art, together with means and opportunity, as art and literature programs flourish in the university cloister. In reality, the discourse of creativity is not even two hundred years old. It is more likely less—for it is only once creativity is reified and named that it makes itself available as an object for scientific study. Once named, it can be measured and dissected by psychologists and brain surgeons, and political and educational institutions can create policies for its cultivation. In this sense, the important period for the formation of the discourse might even be the twentieth century—the period in which the discourse becomes codified.

In this respect, my own preliminary research indicates that the abstract noun creativity entered into common usage in the US between 1926 and 1953, where it far outstripped its then minimal usage in the United Kingdom. The growing popularity of the term was accompanied by a dramatic shift in the contents of the discourse, so that creativity ceases to be understood as the preserve of genius, but is located in all kinds of people and human endeavours. The American ideal is exemplified in the work of the advertising impresario Alex Osborn ([1953] 1963) and his wildly successful bestseller, *Applied Imagination*—a work that is inflected with a particular American character, combining ideas of ‘uplift’ with ideas of accessibility and the concept of the ‘common man’. In this sense, Osborn’s work draws implicitly and explicitly on the ideas of the pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, whose work influenced the cultural activities of the Federal Arts Program under Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Progressive Education Movement (of which the creative writing movement is an enduring legacy), and the work of others including the creative writing educationalist Hughes Mearns at the Lincoln School. The significance of Osborn is that he radically transfigures these ideas in order to make them compatible with a specifically nationalist enunciation of entrepreneurial capital.

The decades of the 1950s and 1960s saw an unprecedented proliferation of institutes and foundations devoted to the fostering of creativity in the US, a phenomena that J.P. Guilford, dubbed the ‘father’ of creativity studies in psychology, allegedly attributed to the massive redirection of funds from the US defense budget in the wake of the ‘Sputnik Shock’—the US, it was feared, was losing the Space Race because its scientists were not ‘creative’ enough. Shortly afterwards, Paul Torrance invented the Torrance Test (the ‘creative’ equivalent of the IQ test) to measure creativity in American children, an estimated one trillion dollars flooded into tertiary education

institutions through the National Defense Education Act, Osborn's Creative Education Foundation received contracts from the US Air Force, and Guilford's research at the University of Southern California was funded by the US Navy. These government-sponsored initiatives shifted the focus of the discourse once again—this time onto the identification and study of individuals and individual traits as a means to combat Soviet totalitarianism, but mobilizing those traits within a framework that placed emphasis on organizational and structural optimization, which is the most likely antecedent of creativity theories in organization and business studies today. Significantly, it is only in the decade of the 1950s that the Anglo-American word 'creativity' is imported into European languages, such as French and German (Imbs 1971-74; Ritter 1971-98).

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