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Sleeping with the enemy: creative writing and theory in the academy

Abstract:

This paper will contend that as literary studies elevates creative writing to the highest level, by studying and analysing creative texts; creative writing is similarly enhanced when it is underpinned by theory. This flies in the face of the view that theory has no relevance to the needs of contemporary writers. This paper will examine the way in which theoretical insights and their applications are essential to the creative writing process and propose that without theory, creative writing classes might be at risk of constantly going over the same ground, with no way of being elevated to the next level. Without the study of literary theory in creative writing, writers are in danger of producing imitations of acclaimed literature. Similarly, without studying creativity in literary studies, writers are at risk of imitating the language of French theorists in translation and failing to harness imaginative ways to create new ideas and theories. This paper encourages new ways of thinking about the union of literary studies and creative writing by focusing on theories and poetry of the sublime. This can assist creative and analytical writers with the anxiety of the blank page and the problem of the ineffable, through an examination of the role of imagination and reason in this process. Creative writing and theory should be studied simultaneously; they invigorate one another and this paper focuses on this important reciprocal relationship.

Biographical note:

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As long as Literary Studies and Creative Writing are defined as ‘very distinct activities...the former concerned with interpretation, the latter with creation’ (Harris 2009), then the ‘precarious, festering tension’ between the two disciplines, that Nat Hardy (2008) has detected in the United States, can only become a similarly gangrenous fate for the dialectic of creativity and theory in Australia. Paul Dawson (2008), Christine Owen (2006), Brian Castro (2010) and Catherine Cole (2010) have reiterated this argument, using this same word, ‘tension’, to describe ‘creative writing as a university subject’. (Owen 2006) Owen argues that, ‘While the teaching of creative writing is now well established in most Western universities...its wide acceptance belies the fact that many tensions remain.’ This is not a new argument, and Bunty Avieson (2008) has posited that it is unlikely ‘to be resolved, and so the argument will continue, pointing out differences and similarities as well as locating areas where they overlap or complement one another.’ However, it is this kind of ongoing exchange of views that is essential to any kind of progression. Scholarly articles on ‘the relationship between academic and creative writing’ (Kroll 1999) in the last decade or so, have contributed to exposing what Jeri Kroll (1999) has famously argued is a relationship of ‘uneasy bedfellows’.

Theoretical insights and their applications are as essential to the creative writing process, as creativity is to analysis and interpretation. If, as Marcelle Freiman (2001) has argued, there is ‘the perception (by students and academics) that creative writing is a ‘soft option’ in the English discipline and that it lacks critical rigour’, then equally, ‘there is...a tendency to see academic work as less exciting...than creative work.’ (Owen, 2006) Without theory, creative writing classes run the risk of encouraging ‘flashes of inspiration’, as Dawson (2005) argues, with no critical basis. It is not about studying theory because it is ‘good for you, like greens’, as Harris (2009) argues, it’s about theory introducing new ways of thinking about creative writing. Literary Studies and Creative Writing should have a reciprocal relationship in the academy as they have much to learn from one another. Literary Studies elevates creative writing to the highest level by studying and analysing creative texts; creative writing is similarly enhanced when it is underpinned by literary theory.

The defensive and often offensive arguments that are mounted in order to justify and continue this segregation between disciplines are a further indication of the sensitive and inflammatory nature of the debate. Discussions of theory in the Creative Writing classroom are often discussed in emotive terms. This is most obvious, for example, in Harris’ introduction: ‘are...our students expected to absorb [theory] en masse, like whales sucking in plankton? Or are we being called upon to select, from some Marks and Spencer of the Mind, the pre-cooked theory that most appeals?’ (Harris 2009). Similarly, Andrew Taylor (2006) continues to publicly argue against the writing act being ‘theoretically informed’, although he does add that his views may be ‘hopelessly old fashioned’.

Paul Dawson (2007), responding to Robert Miles’ discussion of ‘an irreducible tension between the manoeuvres of contemporary theory and the practise of teaching writing’, identifies that,

some commentators have provided staunch resistance to the intellectual challenges and aggrandising critiques of literature offered by the ‘fashions’ of Theory, even positing Creative Writing as an antidote to the disciplinary malaise wrought by Theory... (80).

This animosity extends to many Creative Writing students and teachers. Lauri Ramey (2007) argues that in her classes:

A common reaction to the idea of introducing critical theory in creative writing is ‘It will take away my creativity’ or ‘If I know too much, I won’t be able to write ‘naturally’’. I have not encountered any other academic discipline where students view the acquisition of new knowledge as anything other than precisely the point, or as potentially detrimental. Far from disempowering writers through rules, the opposite often takes place. (47)

Nessa O’Mahony (2008) PhD student in Creative and Critical Writing at The University of Wales, Bangor, is a good example of this mindset. She purposefully, ‘steered away from theory’ in completing her thesis. It is disappointing that in her discussion of the writing process she separated the writing of her verse novel and exegesis. She gave two years to the composition of this section and only, presumably, a year to the critical section. However, it was when she was undertaking research for her exegesis that she realised:

To my surprise I found that my writing and my concerns has a great deal in common with Elizabeth Barrett Browning... It had not occurred to me before beginning my critical survey that in taking on the verse novel, I might be following in the footsteps of generations of other women writers... Thus through my wider reading, I began to see how I could place my own work in a wider context. (46)

As O’Mahony’s verse novel was already completed when she made these discoveries, it is unlikely that this knowledge, gained through writing and researching the critical component of her thesis, ever found its way into her creative text. This is in direct contrast to Avieson (2008), a PhD student at Macquarie University, who states that, ‘working on the two [creative and critical] together, as part of a unified whole, I developed a new appreciation of their similitude: that is, the similar dynamics that drive both.’ This supports the argument that for Literary Studies and Creative Writing to be reciprocal disciplines, then the critical and creative components of the PhD in Creative Writing should be undertaken simultaneously, so that they can inform one another. Similarly, Barbara H. Milech and Ann Schilo (2004) argue that universities need to find a way to ‘diminish the sense that the exegesis is just an ‘academic’ exercise/requirement’ and demonstrate the ways in which the exegesis ‘enable[s] students to fully articulate and explore their projects.’ Perhaps Paul Skrebels (2007) best moves toward a solution to this when he articulates that, ‘the strategic application of theory, particularly in its explication of the notions and creativity and praxis, can turn the exegesis from the sort of navel-gazing exercise... into a considered reflection by students.’

A case in point, O’Mahony was initially unaware that her verse novel was in fact not original in its scope and theme. Understanding that she was part of a tradition of

female writers, coupled with a feminist study of some of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work, would most likely have enhanced her verse novel. This initial ignorance is similarly evident in Harris' diatribe about the way in which critics like Sean Burke are not interested in 'you, i.e. *the actual living writer who makes things up for audiences and readers.*' (Harris 2009) Not only is this emphasis extremely egocentric, but it calls, perhaps, for outdated biographical responses to texts that are often based on gossip.

Vahri McKenzie (2007) aligns herself with Nike Bourke and Philip Nielsen when she states, 'the root of the anxiety' about writing an exegesis as part of the PhD, 'lies [in] the value judgement intrinsic to this structure, which suggests the creative work is insufficiently worthy on its own.' (25) Bourke and Nielsen (2004) argue, 'Are not creative writing RHD projects legitimate research output in their own right?' And there is some truth in this. As far as I am aware, a person with a Literary Studies PhD can be offered a Creative Writing position in a tertiary institution and teach into the Creative Writing programme if they have a strong record of publications and some teaching experience, but a person with a PhD in Creative Writing is unlikely to gain an ongoing position in the Literary Studies discipline of a University, even if they have some strong critical publications.

If, as Julienne Van Loon (2000) proposes, Literary Studies has a privileged position in the academy, to the point where it is synonymous with the study of English, then some of the animosity and tension in Creative Writing departments is justified. Van Loon argues:

The academy positions the critic above the writer. Certainly within the institution where [I] 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.

Freiman (2001) acknowledges this when she expresses the paradox that, 'creative writing is marginalised within the English department; the perception is that it is 'less important' than the teaching of literature...yet paradoxically, creativity is something we value in our culture and in the university.'" She makes the important point that Creative Writing in English departments is often only viewed as positive for 'its capacity for increasing enrolments.'

These tensions are felt by students and staff alike and can have a negative affect upon both disciplines. Hite (2002) uses her own experience to argue:

Occasionally,...I crossover into creative writing: creative as opposed to critical and theoretical, writing as opposed to reading and analysing. The line is well marked, and crossing it makes me into a somewhat different sort of writer and teacher. (150)

And, postgraduates equally feel this anxiety. O'Mahony states:

There will probably always be some degree of tension between the academic and creative writing wings of those departments that attempt to splice English and Creative Writing. And yet, depending on the balance of power between those two wings, there is a danger that the tension created will not always be healthy for the students, who may feel they have to develop dual personalities in order to satisfy the conflicting demands of creativity and criticism. (41)

One solution is to stop ‘separating students into streams’. Bourke and Neilsen (2004) posit that this only ‘limits...opportunities.’ Another is to encourage reciprocity between these two disciplines by changing the structure of a degree to require students completing a Literary Studies major to undertake a minor in Creative Writing. Similarly, Creative Writing students would be required to undertake a minor in Literary Studies. Both disciplines have much to learn from each other and in this way, students may gain respect for, and integrate, the skills they have acquired, into a more homogenous approach to reading and writing. Similarly, subjects that use both creative and critical approaches and even build this into the criteria for assessment, encourage students to understand the reciprocal relationship between the two disciplines.

Dawson’s (2007) contention that the practice of Creative Writing cannot be ‘conceptualised as a body of knowledge outside literary theory because it is one that is fashioned within literary theory’ (70) is important as it encourages Creative Writing to be seen as ‘an intellectual work characterised by a dialogic engagement with literature and literary theory.’ (71) Far from a “feckless sister” (Hite 2002: 150), Dawson draws Creative Writing into Literary Studies as an equal partner; the two disciplines are bound together in ‘dialogic engagement’. (71)

Studying theory is an important way of bringing together Literary Studies and Creative Writing. Theory enriches both creative and critical investigations and while the use of theory is considered *de rigueur* in Literary Studies, in Creative Writing, the value of theory has been hotly contested. Hazel Smith and Amanda Boulter see the advantages of using theory in creative writing. They argue that ‘by tackling the legacy of literary theory we may ... learn from its interrogation of texts and contexts.’ This is important given that, as Harris (2009) asserts:

The text writers read most of all is their own text. We read it over and over again as we revise, constantly changing it in order to make it better. And when we read other fictional works, as writers, we read them as *de facto* instruction manuals for technique, style, structure and thematic possibility.

Creative writers need to look to the possibility of theory improving their writing. There is certain narrowness in reading one’s own text ‘over and over again’ with only ‘other fiction works’ for inspiration. Furthermore, a creative writer should not be bound by a code that only allows for a reading of texts as ‘instruction manuals’. The study of Creative Writing should allow for a diversity of reading and include theoretical articles and books.

Ramey (2007) articulates the value of this, when she states:

For many creative writers who are open to such possibilities, the philosophical, social, historical, cultural and psychological apparatus of critical theory has helped them discover their central literary purposes and goals, whilst also enabling them to recognize antecedents, connections and methods that can powerfully generate new ideas and practices for the benefit of their writing. (46)

Creative writing students are no different from Literary Studies students in the way in which they should be appealing to, and entering, a critical heritage associated with

their writing projects and contentions. It is important to recognize antecedents and demonstrate an understanding and awareness of how a particular area of investigation has developed over time. Without this, a student is at risk of producing writing that is unoriginal and goes over the same ground as a previous publication, without being aware of this repetition. O'Mahony certainly discovered this when she began researching, only to find that she was both 'following in the footsteps of generations of other women writers' and began to understand 'how I could place my own work in a wider context. (46) It is this initial ignorance of a wider context which, if unchecked, can be potentially embarrassing for a writer making claims about the newness or uniqueness of his/her work. Therefore, when Harris (2009) states, 'The primary task of a writing student is not reading but writing', he is seriously misguided. A far more balanced approach between the acts of reading and writing is essential for writers of creative and critical texts.

Without reading theory in Creative Writing classes, students are in danger of producing good imitations of great fiction; mimicking rather than creating something new. And similarly, although the Literary Studies discipline prioritises creative texts by analysing them, without the study of creativity, students may impersonate (often French) theorists' dry and poorly constructed English as a second language. Harold Bloom (2008), Camille Paglia (2010) and Noam Chomsky (2009) have all expressed their dissatisfaction with Literary Studies students aping the language of theorists like Barthes and Foucault. Chomsky states that some theory, with its 'very inflated rhetoric with codicils and pomposity and so on' is taken too seriously. He adds that it can sound as if theorists 'are parodying themselves.' Paglia is even more vitriolic:

The traditional arts are suffering and being marginalised out of the folly, the utter folly, of academe in the seventies, post-fifties revolution suddenly gearing towards post-modernism with its repercussions of language, that slippery, self-reflective language, the contortions where native English speakers are imitating bad English translations of French intellectuals, that's what they're doing OK. If you are French you can get away with that, the French need to interrogate themselves, they have a very rationalist culture. But what Lacan is doing in French can't be replicated in English, we don't need it in English.

Without an understanding of creativity and how to harness imaginative ways to express new ideas and theories, students may imitate rather than create theoretical texts and commentary. Critically, Hite (2002) suggests that studying creativity in Literary Studies, 'might well help construct more intelligible theories about motivation, intention and the individual and political unconscious in the making of cultural objects.' (150) Boulter (2007) claims that 'a study of Bakhtin's theory of the 'dialogic' and 'heteroglossic' nature of fiction can help novelists...'find their own voice'...[and] Vladimir Propp's 31 'functions of narrative' may help us come up with better storylines.' Just as these examples have been used to demonstrate the usefulness of theory in the Creative Writing classroom, this paper will explore the ways in which a study of the Burkean and Kantian sublime can assist not only Creative Writing students, but also Literary Studies students, with the anxiety of the blank page and questions of how to express the seemingly ineffable.

An exploration of the sublime is not new to Creative Writing classes and is certainly studied in Literary Studies. Ramey (2007) discusses the ways in which she has used Longinus' sublime and his commentary on the 'sublimity of Sappho's poetry' to instruct students in the creation of their own sublime fragment. (48) And the sublime has been used by Chris Green to discuss 'the sublime reader' and posit that 'before asking how students can better write 'good' poems, I propose we look beyond the gaze of the sublime reader and ask how students can write useful poems.' (159) This paper suggests that a study of the sublime and the structure of the sublime, can assist writers in the process of creation, through an understanding of the power of imagination and reason.

Kevin Brophy (2008) refers to Yeats' poem 'The Balloon of the Mind' to discuss the poet's 'call to himself, as he sits at his desk in front of the difficult blank page. What to do with the wild and shapeless current driven thoughts of the mind as it flies past the poet at his desk.' (82) This 'wild, shapelessness' reads as a sublime moment for the writer. The blank page, which is now most often the blank Word document on the computer screen, can be a terrifying experience. Many students sitting down to write, often describe being blocked and frozen in the face of this amorphous space; a whiteness that has no end. It can be read as a kind of 'infinity...filling the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime.' (81) Without knowledge of the structure of the sublime and the movement from one stage to the next; this confronting moment may not be harnessed and the student may remain blocked.

Ian McCalman and Jon Mee (2001) define the structure of the sublime as beginning with:

the interposition of an overwhelming force which shatters our equanimity and produces a feeling of blockage. As this power takes hold of our mind and emotions, inertia becomes transport: we are hurried on as if 'by an irresistible force.' As the experience recedes it leaves behind a newly invigorated sense of identity and, frequently, admiration for the blocking power. It is as if the mind has appropriated itself 'some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates.' (723)

This inflation can be likened to the feeling of completing a piece of writing and therefore filling this blank space. If the student understands that by taking one word, one sentence and one page at a time, they can begin to rationalise the infinite, they may then successfully move to the transportation phase of the sublime and begin writing. The sense of completion, at the end of this process, signals the movement from terror, to a Kantian (1982) 'delight'; a sensation of 'negative pleasure'. The transcendence of this moment underlines the seriousness of the writing process. Students in both Creative Writing and Literary Studies may be less inclined to reel off a piece of writing with little thought, if they understand how the process of writing can be linked to theories of the sublime; they are potentially cheating themselves out of a sublime experience.

In addition to this, the sublime is centred around a moment of chaos which helps to create an autonomous self; it is a moment of self-fashioning and when applied to the writer, it centres on the importance and creation of identity through writing.

The Romantic sublime has its source in, and is revelatory of, the individual's own powers. When the student understands, as Kant argues, 'the sublime is...in our own ideas', they have a structure for the movement from blockage to transportation and finally inflation. (71)

A more robust and reciprocal relationship should exist between Creative Writing and Literary Studies in the academy. Studying theory is imperative in both disciplines as it allows for the enrichment and layering of creative and analytical writing. Jeri Kroll and Steve Evans (2005) are keen to point out that:

anyone engaged in criticism nowadays, in fact, anyone contemplating a higher degree in creative writing, has to be aware of theory, even if they are not converts to a particular tribe such as the poststructuralists or the new historicists. In Australia our discipline has been theorising its practise and its brand of research for more than 10 years. (77)

Currently, many staff and students who teach or study across both disciplines will attest to an unpleasant tension existing between Creative Writing and Literary Studies. This often stems from the alignment of theory with Literary Studies and a reluctance to see the relevance of, or use of, theory in Creative Writing. Perhaps, as Dawson (2007) suggests, it is only a matter of time before this changes: 'More and more teachers of Creative Writing across the world will...be comfortable shifting between academic and literary modes of writing and with combining the two.' (83) This breed of academic who can teach in both disciplines may help bridge the gap. In this way, teachers and students might one day feel that they can participate across these disciplines without feeling as if they are sleeping with the enemy.

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