

Murdoch University

Wendy Marrion Glassby

Looking behind the book: creative writing as pre-literature

Abstract:

‘Oh! It is only a novel!’ replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame. This researcher understands the response of Jane Austen’s character in *Northanger Abbey*. She feels a similar emotion when asked about her choice of study discipline, aware that if she could answer ‘literature’, she would not have to endure the sighs that follow when she answers: ‘creative writing’. This unexplored phenomenon is confusing, particularly when at least some study of literature is incorporated in her discipline. Why? Is it because literature has been around longer than creative writing? Or is it because literature is the study of something that already exists, something that already has value (the completed works of acknowledged writers, the products of writing)? As the creative process is in many ways a search—for ideas, for clarity of thought, for better use of language, and for an understanding of the social restraints and limitations within which the work must fit—its value is incalculable until a product emerges. This paper argues that within contemporary consumer society ‘product’ is valued over ‘process’. This is demonstrated through a brief examination of the purposes and practices of writers’ festivals, which, arguably, are concerned less with writers/writing than with products (books) and performance. Literature shows us who we are and its insights are exemplary for creative writers. But, as creative writing precedes literature, might we ask: what insights into literature can the study of creative writing bring? Will it only be when creative writing is recognized as the precursor, the beginning, and a necessary ‘process’ towards the achievement of the ‘product’ of literature, that there will be less need for this researcher to defend her discipline?

Biographical note:

Wendy Glassby is a postgraduate student enrolled in a doctorate in creative writing at Murdoch University, Perth Western Australia. Her publications include short fiction in *Westerly* and Regional ABC radio and a refereed paper for the 14th AAWP Conference 2009, *Margins and Mainstream*.

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There has been much discussion about creative writing in universities, about its development, growth and worth. An example is Nigel Krauth's summary of the field's early development in Australia until 2000, the year his paper was written, when Krauth could say (2000: 13):

creative writing courses have now achieved a critical mass, a recognition and respect, perhaps even some envy, from academia in terms of economic viability in teaching and learning, and our significant relationship with employment applicability and cultural and technological change, at the turn of the millennium.

A year later, Paul Dawson declares that 'Creative Writing has developed within universities as an institutional site at which writers can contribute to knowledge in the New Humanities' (2001: 11). From many others on this topic have come numerous papers, reports and statistics that confirm growth (if not always smooth) and good standing of this discipline.

Why is it, then, as a student of creative writing, that I have become like the young lady of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, who when asked what she is reading, replies, 'Oh! It is only a novel!'...while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame (Austen 1995). And more particularly, why is it that I have come to realize if I could answer 'literature' to enquiries about my discipline, I might detect more respect and inquisitiveness than I do when I answer 'creative writing'?

In this paper I explore possible influences for what I see as commonly held misconceptions: a view about creative writing's contribution to society that is perhaps not completely negative but certainly cautious and reserved. This is a discussion rooted in the every day. First I examine how the words 'literature' and 'creative writing' are used and understood within contemporary society, particularly when literature as a work of art can also be understood as a commodity. From this it is a very short step to seeing literature as product and creative writing as process. How does this way of seeing influence perceptions in a society that values product over process? I extend this notion to offer an alternative view: as process creates product and product defines process, so too are literature and creative writing inherently interdependent. As we eagerly declare literature's contribution to understanding humanity, we forget there is a name for the process that precedes and creates literature. Time, I believe, for creative writing to claim recognition as pre-literature (my term).

What do we mean?

The history of western literature stretches back to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and literary theory/criticism to Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is not unreasonable that we tend to see the study of literature as classical and a tried-and-tested enduring traditional form of education and research. Looking at literature in this way, we might imagine shelves packed to the brim with leather bound volumes and parchments gathering dust and (according to Dawson, with our lingering nostalgia for a British past) we might imagine those books located in some revered location like Cambridge or Oxford (Dawson 2001: 2). What we are thinking about, here, is literature as a body of works whose content we

study. On the surface this is straightforward but the image of aged texts and their distant origins become tangled with other ways we use the word. Raymond Williams gives us insight into how difficult the word ‘literature’ has become in contemporary usage. The problem, Williams says, is that though usage has changed, past meanings linger and complicate. Williams explains (1989: 183):

Literature is a difficult word, in part because its conventional contemporary meaning appears, at first, so simple. There is no apparent difficulty in phrases like **English literature** or **contemporary literature**, until we find occasion to ask whether all books and writing are **literature** (and if they are not, which kinds are excluded by what criteria) or until, to take a significant example, we come across a distinction between **literature** and *drama* on the grounds, apparently, that *drama* is a form primarily written for spoken performance (though often also to be read).

Williams notes that Shakespeare, whose work was written for speaking, is not excluded, exemplifying the difficulties of defining literature. From early usage to present day, literature has denoted not only exclusivity but also specialization. Literature’s first usage was to describe ‘the sense of polite learning through reading’ (1989: 184), a description that later defined a standard of printing where blurred letters measured exclusion from literature. As the word attached firmly to the idea of printed books, it developed from the ability to read as well as the condition of being well read (not dissimilar to the modern meanings of literacy) as it moved towards meaning a high-skill in reading and quality of books. From the eighteenth century, as it was used to mean the practice and profession of writing (1989: 185), literature referred to the whole body of books and writing, but by the nineteenth century it came to mean only certain kinds of writing: a distinction was drawn by the arbiters of taste between imaginative writing (poems, plays and novels, previously called poetry) and other kinds of ‘serious writing’, described as ‘general’ or ‘discursive’. Finally in its current usage it means a body of writing displaying ‘high-skills of writing’ with imaginative and creative subject-matter. The teaching of English in universities was also known as literature, ‘meaning mainly plays, poems and novels’ (1989: 186). As the meaning of literature moved from skill and knowledge (literacy) to only the highly educated; from a high-skill of writing, to writing already completed, and then only certain works of art; its extreme specialization has been frequently challenged. And while this specialization to certain kinds of writing is often successful it is also incomplete, says Williams, because the term literary is often used (such as literary editor or literary supplement) to refer to books in general (1989: 185). Literature, then, is understood to mean a finished work of a standard of ‘authorship’ that measures to the body of exclusive works.

As I use the word ‘authorship’ I am aware of the ways in which ‘the author’ complicates our understanding of both literature (as the completed work of an ‘author’) and creative writing (as the creative process in which an ‘author’ engages—undoubtedly influenced by other works of literature—and an outcome which in some future may or may not be measured as literature). Andrew Bennett in his book *The Author* (2005) makes the subject of authorship accessible. Bennett uses the movie *Shakespeare in Love* to illustrate the distances in time and imagination between first, Will Shakespeare himself, the working author that William may have seen himself as

being; and second, the ‘late twentieth-century sense of Shakespeare’, a person interested in his own identity as we are; and third, ‘a Shakespearean one’, a view of Shakespeare as an exemplary author (2005: 2). Time and imagination also come into play when we use the word literature to talk about the works of Shakespeare or, earlier still, the written version of the Homeric epics. We imagine literature stretching back through history being understood as we do now. Confusion comes when we fail to remember that though we name those ancient texts as literature, there is a distinction between our contemporary understandings and how a work of art and its creation may have been perceived in the past. An example: now we study the process of creating; in earlier periods a creator’s insight was a ‘gift’ from God beyond question. Conversely, against the imagined longevity of literature, creative writing ‘feels’ modern, perhaps explained (if Dawson is correct) by its relatively recent first entry (1960’s) into Australian conversations as part of the teaching of English (Dawson 2001: 2). Williams charts contemporary usage of both. And surprisingly they begin roughly at the same time, in the nineteenth century.

Similarly, past understandings and present conventional usage of the word creative when coupled with the word writing is problematic. Williams explains that, until the seventeenth century when the words create and creation ‘acquired a conscious association with art’, these two words were mainly used ‘in the precise context of the original divine creation of the world’ (1989: 82-83). Connected to this was the belief that because the terms creation and creature have the same etymological root, ‘the creature that has been created cannot itself create’, and before creative could denote a human faculty it ‘had to wait on general acceptance of **create** and **creation** as human actions’. This significant origin is almost lost in contemporary use even though it continues to stress originality and innovation. Williams explains the difficulty comes (1989: 83):

when a word once intended, and often still intended, to embody a high and serious claim, becomes so conventional, as a description for certain general kinds of activity, that it is applied to practices for which, in the absence of the convention, nobody would think of making such claims. Thus any imitative or stereotyped literary work can be called, by convention, **creative writing**.

Williams is describing stand-alone pieces of literary work, not the imaginative and creative writing that measures to societal notions of what might be called literature, and certainly not the knowledge and focus that is encompassed by a discipline of study that carries the same name. Yet undoubtedly negativity attached to the creative writing to which Williams refers must, to some degree, be reflected in negative connotations connected to the other. It is time to change perceptions.

Graeme Harper, creative writing scholar, speaks for his discipline. In his speech to launch this year’s Great Writing Conference in Bangor, Wales—a conference dedicated to creative writing—Harper said that ‘creative writing is a subject that has existed in universities since universities were first established.’ If that is so, it might be well worth noting, here, that universities, or their earlier forms, came into existence as early (or as late) as the twelfth century. In his speech, Harper passionately declared (Harper 2010):

we all know that universities were never created to institutionalise higher learning...we all know that universities were never intended to place knowledge in compartments of learning...that the basis of the foundation of ancient universities was liberty of thought, liberty of enquiry and liberty of action...[that] creative education because it fundamentally supports liberty of the individual, because it fundamentally supports journey of discovery, is at the core of the university ideal [and] creative writing as a range of human practices has always been at the core of that university ideal. Always. It is historically inaccurate to say otherwise. Universities that are without creative writing are by this definition lesser universities.

Harper is talking, not only about a branch of study entitled 'Creative Writing', but about educational ideals and philosophies. Harper certainly emphasizes the 'university ideal'. To demonstrate creative writing's place within that ideal, Harper makes the point that creative writing does not say 'you cannot go here'; creative writing does not say 'this is not my realm of knowledge'; creative writing does not say 'I must present these findings only in one way'; and creative writing does not say 'only *some* people can do this activity'. Perhaps Harper's point is that we are all well qualified and have the required prerequisites to undertake the study of creative writing because its subject is the human condition. This is precisely the moment to note the study of literature has the same subject.

Because literature today is described as works of art, a brief return to Williams and his history of the use of the word art is useful. Art has always meant skill, but from the nineteenth century it was used to provide a 'modern distinctions between various kinds of human skills and between varying basic purposes in the use of such skills', relating to the 'changes inherent in capitalistic commodity production' where 'the arts' were not determined by 'exchange values' (Williams 1989, 42). Ironically, works of art are understood as commodities and artists (who Williams says 'can justly claim quite other intentions') as a category of independent craftsperson who produce certain kinds of 'marginal' commodities (Williams 1989, 42). The way in which Williams uses the word 'marginal' succinctly contains a bundle of conflicting ways, within a capitalistic society, that artists and their work sit on the edge of acceptance and rejection. Both are simultaneously revered as symbols of imaginative and creative contributions to our understandings of ourselves and marginalized for standing outside the norm of industrial value exchange. The question might be: is there, somewhere within this conundrum, a clue to differences in societal perceptions between literature and creative writing?

I have come full circle, from a word that began as describing 'a sense of polite learning through reading' to a written (and printed) work of art for reading that is a commodity. I can see now that there is no unequivocal view of how the word literature or creative writing means, and that one person's usage of the term literature might be understood by another quite differently.

Books as product, writing as process

Let us simplify. Literature means books (though not all books are literature). At writers' festivals everyone with a vested interest in books gathers: creators and their agents, publishers, and book sellers; buyers and readers of books; and those who harbour a desire to create them. Festivals are an open mass in the church of a literary world. Though named for writers, what unites attendees is a passion for reading. (A good reason, I say, to re-name festivals.) That which divides readers at festivals are reasons for attending but, I suggest, the real purpose of festivals might hide beneath a façade of benevolent and self-congratulatory (if harmless) propaganda: a view of ourselves immersed in 'culture' ('the arts'), and proving ourselves literate (through choice of titles and understanding of content). Even as we convince ourselves of this, we do in truth join industry members and contribute to festivals' *raison d'être*: buying and selling of books and other negotiations that enable these practices. Writers write to have their products sold and publisher, agents and booksellers facilitate this. (Realistically, too, no industry may mean no sponsorships and consequently no festivals.)

Readers who attend to be inspired may be the only ones disappointed. The purpose of writers on the dais is to speak to potential buyers of their books. While discussion of the vast range of topics explored in such authors' books is often (mostly) enlightening, indeed also intriguing and mesmerising, it is delivered by way of humorous anecdotal recollection of the writing experience. A journey completed, this is the polar opposite of what would-be writers want to hear. Would-be writers need reassurance. They want to hear about a struggle not dissimilar to their own—the warts-and-all version of the writing journey—in order to know there is a purpose and perhaps a promise of success as reward for all the pain and confusion of searching for the right word, expanding an idea, writing and editing, and starting all over in an effort to first understand and then find a creative way to articulate. What these writers want to know is that what they are enduring is all part of a meaningful and productive process.

I have used both words—'product' and 'process'—and have articulated writers' festivals through an understanding that comes from my previous life and a career in manufacturing. In the factory, product and process were terms that represented our working life. Daily we engaged in process to make product necessary for income. In turn, process was driven by product: that is, we only knew what the process would be by knowing what it was we needed to make.

Product, in our contemporary lives, plays a major role. We are bedazzled by marketing and advertising. For many this means that whether or not objects are needed, they are desired and so must be owned. Possessions are one way we measure success. We love our products. The entire marketing strategy around the Apple range of products—iPods, iPhones and last, but certainly not least, iPads—is based on a notion whereby the value of an object is assessed by its desirability. In the literary world, we love seeing (or reading) the finished article (product=book), particularly when everyone around us is declaring its worth—if others possess such a fine article, then so must we—and what makes our article particularly valuable its acquisition within a socially acceptable venue (festivals) and possibly with value added by its author's signature,

evidence of acquisition of yet another product: a momentary connection with celebrity authorship (Hawryluk 2009). Acquisition of product is a pleasurable experience, and that is what we enjoy about writers' festivals.

And why might we value product over process? I am certain there is a whole library on the psychology of why this is so but without plumbing those depths, one very obvious reason: product is solid and tangible proof of its existence from which we can make judgment of worth. As product, literature, by definition, already has value, a worth granted by (often) decades of criticism, that is reaffirmed through subsequent readings. That certainty unfairly compares to the creative process that is both difficult to articulate and impossible to measure. A search—for ideas, for clarity of thought, for better use of language, and for an understanding of the social restraints and limitations within which the work must fit—its value is incalculable *until* a product emerges.

If we accept ourselves as members of a society that values possessions, then of course the solid form of books is certainly more reassuring than the amorphousness of writing. Despite what appears to be an imbalance in value, I argue that, like product and process, literature and creative writing are symbiotic and the value of each reciprocal.

Pre-literature

I began by asking why, when I announce my choice of discipline, I am compelled to feel the same 'momentary shame' experienced by Austen's character. Why creative writing is (too often) measured as less than literature has partly been explained by how we understand and use these terms. Behind contemporary usage linger past meanings that influence reception. Furthermore, within a society that values product over process, seeing literature as product and creative writing as process might also influence how we measure their respective value. This same notion, of literature as product and creative writing as process, leads me to reconsider the relationship between literature and creative writing and this, I believe, points to a new but very important change in how value is assessed.

Williams' examination of the word 'literature' in *Keywords* (1989) traces a tendency over centuries of usage of this word towards increasingly higher levels of specificity about what it represents. I suggest this elevation of literature's position within language may be paralleled by society's increasing focus on how literature contributes to knowledge of humanity. Without doubt, literature enables the articulation of that which is hardest for us to explain about ourselves: our beliefs, our self-perception, our philosophies, our assumptions and our interaction with the world at large. We read literature to go beyond our own imaginings, to venture into the imaginings of others, to visit worlds unknown to us and to consider possibilities (about ourselves and about others) of which we may never have dreamed. In so doing, we may discover what it is we truly wish to become. Literature not only reveals to us all that which shapes and defines us but also takes us beyond ourselves. If we place such high value on the knowledge literature reveals to us, then there can be no doubt that examination of its creation is equally valuable, for this is not only the place where the extrusion of

knowledge begins but through which comes an opportunity to examine the human faculty of creativity that lifts insight from the everyday into the ‘magnitude and complexity of interpretation of the human activity’ (Williams 1989: 83). However, I suspect, sometimes, when we think about literature, we put aside logic and permit ourselves to imagine an almost instantaneous creation that arrives before us complete. If we can, in hindsight, compel ourselves to look back to its origins, and the remarkable human need to ‘understand’ that drives creativity, then perhaps we can begin to consider, in our contemporary usage of these terms, creative writing practice as ‘pre-literature’ (my own term), and literature and creative writing as inseparable. While not everything created will achieve the status of literature, without engaging in the process and without those failures, literature of the future cannot be created.

As in the factory, where process creates product and, in turn, process is driven by product, literature and creative writing are intrinsically linked, one no less valuable than the other, and together both contribute to our understanding of humanity and the human capacity to imagine and create. I wonder whether, the next time I am faced with a less than satisfactory response, will I have the courage to reply in this way. Or will I shrug my shoulders and think to myself: your loss, friend.

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