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Those who teach: creative writing and failure

Abstract:

This paper addresses the topic of creative writing and failure in terms of the historically embedded vocational rationales of creative writing pedagogy. It proposes that failure is fundamental to creative writing as an educational method and teaching formation, but not for the reasons suggested by its historians or detractors. Creative writing is not a failed form of vocational training for professional literary careers; rather, it is a form of general literary education in which the figure of ‘failure’ has, at times, played a key pedagogic role in forming personalities. It reviews the emergence of a distinctly modern conception of the literary artist in Romantic aesthetics as an ‘ethical exemplar’, and traces the annexation of this idea by the first generation of university creative writing educators.

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I want to regard him as he often chose to regard himself, as a representative example of education: but education pushed to the point of failure as contrasted with ordinary education which stops at the formula of success.

R.P. Blackmur, 'The Expense of Greatness' (1936).

[W]e make it easy in our presence to speak out sincerely and disinterestedly. Out-spoken sincerity we must have, for that is where the new education begins.

Hughes Mearns, *Creative Youth: How a School Environment Set Free the Creative Spirit* (1925)

Introduction

The topic of 'creative writing and failure' is intuitively appealing for many reasons, but a chief reason would be that in the context of a creative writing conference it is confessional in tone. Such a topic holds out the promise of truth-telling and catharsis. Considered as rhetoric, the public confessional mode is sincere. It is notable for its courage in both senses of this word; for both taking risks in addressing the issue of failure, and taking heart, in that, the presumption in opening this discussion is that we can talk our way through this. The speaker, who has risked a collective dignity in this process of truth-telling, will redress a source of collective unease.

To talk of failure is of course to talk of schemas of evaluation. The evaluation of failure or success in the context of the creative writing program is a vexed issue, reflecting not only radically different conceptions of their educational missions, but also the different values at work in the literary field itself. We might say competing discourses that evaluate success in the literary field according to regionally specific criteria that are *not* universally shared (such as whether commercial viability or a particular state-funded award are legitimate indicators of literary value), are overlaid in the university context by both the traditional status games of peer recognition of academic faculty, emergent games of essentially *post-disciplinary* modalities of academic work, as well as a set of recent management games centred around professional accountability. The net effect of this convergence of professional fields, as Jen Webb would describe it, is that we who teach creative writing work within a complex, shifting and discontinuous set of discourses of evaluation in which it can be always be said

that we have all failed, one way or another (Webb 2012). This is possibly why the topic seems so intuitively appealing – the problem isn't so much what to say about failure and creative writing, as where to begin.

It is perhaps for this reason that the spectre of 'failure' haunts the history of creative writing. The founder of creative writing, Hughes Mearns, was after all depicted as a failed writer in the first history of the field. In *The Elephant's Teach*, D. J. Myers described Mearns as a 'dramatist manqué and self-styled "writing man" who 'published unsuccessful novels' and disappeared 'into oblivion'' (Myers 1996: 102). Mearns was the US progressive educator and teacher trainer who in the early 1920s developed what he called 'Creative Writing' as a sub-discipline of English literary studies at the Lincoln School of Columbia University and then later as a Professor of Creative Education at New York University. Given these humble origins of university level creative writing in teacher training, and the rise to dominance in the postwar period of a properly 'vocationalist' conception of creative writing as a form of professional training for a literary career, it is not surprising that Mearns would be remembered this way; not as a wildly successful educational reformer who pioneered a new national curriculum for the US education system, but as a failed writer. This deeply pedagogic vocational mission of creative writing has been disavowed ever since. Myers regarded the professionalisation of creative writing courses in the post-war period as a failure in so far as this had led to the production not of literary authors, but of teachers of creative writing. In other words, creative writing had failed its true 'vocation' of contributing to a living literary culture. Such an account of creative writing has in more recent years formed the basis of a significant critique of creative writing programs as failing their students who, it is assumed, seek careers as literary authors (Brook 2012).

This paper proposes that failure is fundamental to creative writing as an educational method and teaching formation, but not for the reasons suggested by its historians or detractors. That is, creative writing is not a failed form of vocational training for professional literary careers; rather, it is a form of general literary education in which the figure of 'failure' has, at times, played a key pedagogic role in forming personalities. As my opening quotation from R.P. Blackmur suggests, for the founding generation of creative writing educators in the US, failure could operate as a benchmark of true education. Creative writing – or 'imaginative writing' as it was also originally known (Schramm 1941) – was crucial to this model, as it was the method by which the formal education system might reach into and transform the extramural life of the student, so that the student's capacity for experience and reflection

become themselves the technical means for a lifelong educative relation to the self. To put it bluntly, the *practice* of creative writing was a tool and barometer of ongoing moral development, one which exposed the student not only to the teacher and their peers, but also to themselves (cf. Mearns 1925). It was the technical efficacy of literary genres for achieving this that explains why creative writing courses would historically privilege literary genres, such as poetry, the short story and the personal essay, and neglect those popular genres and writing occupations, such as Romance novels and writing for film and television, whose commercial opportunities were always stronger. It is because of this progressive educational emphasis on the students' capacity for experience and reflection that the modern, post-Romantic conception of the artist would become so important. The figure of the modern artist would enter the education system as a model of full human development, or what Ian Hunter has described in his histories of the emergence of literary education as an 'aesthetico-ethical exemplar' (Hunter 1991a: 73). The fact that the modern literary artist might also routinely appear as a social failure, figuratively if not in actuality, did not detract from their capacity to embody the ideal of a higher mode of ethical being; indeed, professional and even *moral* failure could always be recuperated as a commitment to this higher vocation.

Romantic Aesthetics

It is during the nineteenth century that failure within the professional arts field became a symbolically viable vocation. For Pierre Bourdieu, the emergence of an aesthetically autonomous pole of 'peer oriented production' within the literary field, in which avant-garde literary producers competed for peer recognition rather than publishing markets (i.e. to be a "a writer's writer"), was an effect of the struggles over symbolic status pursuant to the expansion of commercial publishing in the mid-nineteenth century (Bourdieu 1996). Indeed, it was this struggle that inaugurated the aesthetic autonomy of the literary field from the market, and recuperated dignity in the face of commercial failure. However, in focusing on the educational value of Romantic aesthetics, I want to draw on the neo-Foucauldian work of Ian Hunter on the emergence of literary education, as it is this history of the educational project of Romantic aesthetics that shows us how such a new social type was progressively incorporated into the education system; at first as a 'form of the person' extolled in the discourse of English teachers, and later as a source of personnel in the ranks of the teaching profession. It is in Romantic aesthetics that we find a distinctly heroic and secular account of

the Artist as moral educator. It was this move that enabled the practices and personae of Romantic aesthetic culture to be articulated to a fledgling universal school system in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

A key text here is Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry', written in 1821 and published posthumously in 1840 (Shelley 1986). Shelley's canonical essay was crucial for popularising German Romantic aesthetic theory (eg. Friedrich Von Schiller's *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* of 1794) for an English readership. It lays out why the practice of creative imagination is important to moral self-improvement, and hence why we might regard artists as barometers of the moral development of society. It is a key text for the present discussion as it not only clearly demonstrates this caste-specific project of promoting the ethically exemplary status of the artist by a new literary avant-garde, but is accompanied by a gesture towards (and recuperation of) the decidedly Modern notion of the artist as moral reprobate.

For Shelley, aesthetic culture was necessary as it would counter modern tendencies to radical individualism and economic accumulation, which were eroding the moral bonds of society. It would do this not by stating what is wisest or best in morals, but by *inspiring* moral action:

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination[.] (785)

Furthermore, contemplating the imaginative works of great artists would inspire imitation. The reputation of the classical poets rests on what Shelley describes as 'auditors' who lived in later ages:

The sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected, that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they can by no means be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. (784)

Although they provide ‘edifying patterns for general imitation’, Shelley then moves on to discuss why poets often have reputations for having a poor moral compass. His remarks on this topic were written in full awareness of the public scandal that surrounded his departure from England. It was well known at the time that Shelley had abandoned his first wife, Harriet Shelley, aged 19 and pregnant with his first child, and eloped with Mary Godwin to Switzerland.

For Shelley, poets don’t dictate what is right or wrong by their actions; rather, they embody a capacity for feeling and perception, and inspire others to develop these capacities in themselves. I think we have here the beginnings of a modern theory of how the artist is exemplary even when they are social failures. We have this terrific passage at the end which seeks to explain the well noted poor ethics of artists:

But in the intervals of inspiration, and they may be frequent without being durable, a poet becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden influx of the influences under which others habitually live. But he is more delicately organised than other men, and sensible to pain and pleasure, both his own and that of others, in a degree unknown to them, he will avoid one and pursue the other with an ardour proportioned to this difference. And he renders himself obnoxious to calumny [ie. ‘exposed to slander’], when he neglects to observe the circumstances under which these objects of universal pursuit and flight have disguised themselves in one another’s garments (791)

So the artist is more sensitive than others and isn’t used to the influences others normally live under. They therefore become *confused*; they can mistake pain for pleasure, and pursue it with an ardour that reflects their enhanced capacity for experience. Note how the artist’s capacity for exemplary human development is in fact *systemically* related to moral failure. The explanation doesn’t concern any rhetorical or theatrical account of the utility of the artist-as-failure: is not the case that the failed artist is exemplary as a fit object of contemplation for others. Rather, the explanation concerns the special physiology of the artist, which is a by-product of their higher level of development. In a proto Nietzschean move, moral failure is an occupational hazard of those involved in striving for a higher level of human development.

Here we have the rudiments of a distinctly modern idea of the literary writer as a special type of person who goes beyond the bounds of everyday moral norms, and is all the more ethically exemplary for doing so; the literary writer as pioneer of our ethical being, if you like.

Progressive Pedagogy

That this figure survived into the twentieth century and was present at the emergence of the first generation of tertiary creative writing programs is clear from the work of R. P. Blackmur (1941). Blackmur was an American poet and perhaps the most well-known of the New Critics in the interwar period: he was also a conspicuous member of the first generation of university creative writing instructors. He was a well-known autodidact, having been expelled from high school at age fourteen, after which he worked in bookshop and later attended lectures at Harvard without ever enrolling. More known for his formalist criticism than his poetry, he became an influential figure in American literary Modernism during the 1930s. In 1940, aged 36 and after a decade of living as a 'near starving freelancer' (Fraser 1981: 541), Blackmur became a lecturer in creative writing in the newly established Creative Arts Program at Princeton University. And it is in this capacity that Blackmur left one of the earliest source texts of tertiary creative writing instruction; 'The undergraduate writer as writer', based on his address to Princeton creative writing students and published in the first journal for creative writing research, *College English* (Blackmur 1941).

'The Undergraduate Writer as Writer' is of particular interest to the history of creative writing pedagogy as it represents an apologia for the young literary aspirant on campus. It is therefore a transitional text between a model of creative writing that was explicitly focused on teacher training, initiated by Hughes Mearns, and a model that would effectively deny this vocational function and focus instead on the status ideal of the professional literary author. In 1941, the same year as Blackmur's address, Mearns would publish the third of three major studies on creative writing pedagogy, which described the role of creative writing in teacher education (1941). This default rationale was clear also from contemporary accounts of the Iowa creative writing workshop (Schramm 1941: 197-98, 200; Wilburs 1980: 44). Nevertheless, within a generation such modest vocational rationales would be subsumed by the notion that the creative writing program does have a default vocational rationale of training literary authors.

Blackmur's text begins with an attempt to posit his subject who is also his addressee: 'the writer who tries to be creative under the peculiar but pressing distractions of undergraduate life'. It is not the student of a prestigious liberal arts college who has taken an elective in creative writing whom Blackmur addresses, but rather the writer *who has become a student*. Blackmur notes that the truly creative writer is one who aspires to write not in a style that comes easily or is popular, but in a manner that is difficult and time-consuming:

It is the plane of long-term judgment. It is the plane on which the writers of the past survive, if they do survive. Thus it is the plane on which, whether they are conscious of it or not, contemporary writers try to write and which they naturally for the most part fail to reach. [...] There is a radical imperfection in even the greatest art, which you cannot get around except by great effort and which you cannot overcome for sure at all, no matter how long and hard you try. (Blackmur 1941: 252)

In other words, it is the plane of the great Modernist author. Blackmur suggests as much through his references to the prolonged struggle with failure that characterised the careers of William Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Henry James (257). Blackmur then proposes that the situation of the undergraduate student is ideally suited to this form of literary vocation as the student is *permitted* to fail and is provided with a peer group which is sympathetic to the nature of the struggle (252). It is this dynamic and progressive milieu, Blackmur states, that makes the university an ideal context for the contemporary literary author.

That we are dealing with a program whose default vocational rationale is *not* organised around professional preparation for a career in publishing, but rather around the inculcation of the *persona* of the literary artist, is abundantly clear from how Blackmur represents the problem of finding a theme. Blackmur's poses the question of how the young writer might find their 'theme' in the sense that 'Hemingway writes about doomed men, Thomas Mann writes about the delicate man, [...] Dostoevski dealt with the injured, the insulted, the humiliated' (252-53). 'It is perhaps the definition of a great writer that he has such a theme'. Blackmur contends that it is harder for contemporary writers to find their theme than for artists in previous historical periods, as the contemporary artist is 'more than ever the random creature of every idea that blows' (255). For this reason students are advised to look away from established themes they

might find in the archive, and turn to their own personal thoughts and experience as the basis of their authority:

[W]hen you write, and especially when you come to write with the beginnings of authority and are on the edge maybe of discovering a genuine theme, you should stick to what you actually know and feel, even to what you *actually* think [...] (254. Original emphasis)

While Blackmur's article contains clear traces of the personalist pedagogy developed by Mearns, in which sincerity becomes the highest marker of literary achievement (1925), we can also see how this pedagogy is in the process of being reformulated as a vocation. The exemplary persona of the literary writer is not simply presented to the student as a heroic model of self-education and authentic experience: the student is now hailed as one who has already selected this persona as a calling. It is the writer *beneath* the student ('under the peculiar but pressing distractions of undergraduate life') whom Blackmur addresses and consoles with the idea that their current situation is *already* a vocation. Furthermore, the rationalities for sincerity and personal experience that were elsewhere articulated in terms of personal development are formulated by Blackmur in terms of a general fatality of the Modern era: that one must write from personal experience is presented not as a pedagogic strategy, but as a caste-specific *knowledge* the aspiring literary artist shoulders as the burden of Modernism.

Given that creative writing might prepare students for the calling of the Modernist literary project, it is not surprising that Blackmur would make failure such a significant value. This is suggested by the exemplary list of themes noted above ('the doomed man' 'the injured' et cetera) but is abundantly clear from the volume of literary criticism, 'The Expense of Greatness', which takes its title from Blackmur's homage to the US novelist and historian Henry Adams. In this essay Blackmur develops a heroic account of failure as a measure of true education:

Success is not the propitious term for education unless the lesson wanted is futile. [...] Surely the dominant emotion of an education, when its inherent possibilities are

compared with those it achieved, must strike the honest heart as the emotion of failure. The failure is not of knowledge or of feeling. It is the failure of the ability to react correctly or even intelligently to more than an abbreviated version of knowledge and feeling: failure in the radical sense that we cannot consciously react to more than a minor fraction of the life *we yet deeply know* and endure and die. It is the failure the mind comes to ultimately and all along when it is compelled to measure its knowledge in terms of its ignorance. [...] A genuine failure comes hard and slow, and, as in a tragedy, is only fully realised at the end. A man's success is in society, precarious and fatal; his failure is both in spite and because of society—as he witnesses its radical imperfection and is himself produced by it, its ultimate expression. (Blackmur 1936, my emphasis)

So, the experience of failure is testimony to an *enlarged awareness* of the inevitable gap between our limited capacity to act and the full potentiality of life. Our sense of failure – in life as in education – is our awareness of this gap, of this tragedy of our mortal limitations. The Modernist literary author embodies this awareness of failure, and they become ethical exemplars of a higher plane of self-awareness; what literary critic I.E Richards would describe in 1925 as ‘The normality of the artist’.

Conclusion

It is only with the professionalisation of creative writing as what is now routinely described as a ‘discipline’, that the notion that creative writing has a specific vocational mission – namely the preparation of students for professional careers as authors – has risen to dominance. Of course, as with many accounts of occupation-specific vocational training, and *especially* those pertaining to the creative industries, such a model has ‘failure’ written all over it (See Comunian *et al* 2010). We know from post-Bourdieuian cultural sociology, such as recent studies by Bernard Lahire, that the literary field is a secondary vocational field, one that exists on top of a primary field of employment routinely conducted elsewhere (Lahire 2010).

The job of creative writing programs, if they are to address their abiding sense of failure in a positive manner, is to avoid confusing the two domains; that is, not to read-off the employability of their students in terms of the vocational status ideal that informs creative writing pedagogy. There may be a writer ‘within’ the student that can flourish into a

vocation, as Blackmur shows and countless apologist histories for the professional mission of creative writing have espoused, but there is also a *graduate* whose employment prospects are informed by, but not identical to, this vocation. At the same time, I have suggested that the techniques of literary culture are a defining and therefore non-negotiable element of creative writing considered as a distinct teaching method. Just how the personal attributes formed by these practices articulate with employability skills in the current climate is a question we have yet to address. As I've argued elsewhere, however implausible their combination appears, a commitment to both literary value and vocational training are not projects we can opt out of (2009): our job is to understand their historically contingent relation – how it was that literary education could emerge as a technique for forming persons with vocationally redeemable attributes (Hunter 1991b) – even if this means significantly *revising* our conception of graduate outcomes, including employment outcomes, of creative writing courses.

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