**The rhetoric of prose fiction workshop – an analysis of teaching methods at the University of East Anglia[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Abstract

This article, originally given as an oral presentation at a colloquium on creative writing teaching methods held at Rhodes University from August 31st – September 2nd 2014, examines the distinction between the rhetoric of literary criticism and that of critique of creative prose fiction work in progress, as taught at the University of East Anglia (UEA) on its Masters in Creative Writing. It examines the methods and values applied in teaching and peer evaluation of work on the core course on the Masters, Prose Fiction Workshop. Distinctions between analytical processes of evaluating literature are too rarely examined, the author argues, and yet govern the process of the so-called production of creative writing in prose fiction, not only at UEA but in many institutions.

What is the relationship between literary knowledge and literary practice? In this paper I will examine how conscious and unconscious processes are acknowledged in teaching creative writing at the MA level in a workshop class format. This will involve, necessarily, an outlining of the relationship between knowledge and unawareness as the distinction between conscious and unconscious processes in the production of literature. Ultimately, a distinction will emerge between the rhetoric of literary criticism and the rhetoric of creative writing teaching process, one which exemplarises the pedagogical uniqueness and value of creative writing teaching processes.

To do so I invoke a principle of *unknowing* – what my colleague Andrew Cowan, novelist and Director of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, has posited in two recently published papers in the Australian scholarly journal *TEXT* as what creative writing ‘doesn’t know’ (Cowan, Andrew. 2011. ‘What Creative Writing Doesn’t Know’, *TEXT:* 15 (1))*.* In these two wide-ranging papers, Cowan demonstrates how knowing and unknowing, or, awareness and mystification, are both central to the process of creating literature, and how they are accommodated within a seminar we teach at UEA called prose fiction workshop.

It is important to examine the distinction between these analytical processes evaluating literature, because in the context of academic creative writing programmes what is being evaluated – implicitly and explicitly – are the formal and aesthetic values of a text in progress. To do this we employ an approach and a lexicon which have their origins in literary criticism, whose rhetorical cosmology has evolved for the distinct purpose of evaluating literature in history. Creative work is not yet in history, I posit, and is still in the process of acquiring its own language and rhetoric to reflect its emergent nature.

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What is the relationship between creative writing critique, as practiced within a pedagogical seminar, and literary criticism? This is a little-discussed area of academic inquiry into creative writing teaching methods.

As lecturers, teachers, tutors or workshop leaders (terminology varies according to the institution), particularly a university level, we are charged with being arbiters of literary sensibility and quality, invoking the lexicon of literary criticism to evaluate the creative potential of work in progress. But there are clear distinctions between the purview of literary criticism and the process of critique in creative writing workshop.

Creative writing looks at the text in as the product of a particular sensibility or vision, whereas literary criticism approaches at the text as a product of larger forces: cultural, historical, economic, sociological, psychological, philosophical. As Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor note, quoting Terry Eagleton, literary criticism is a mode of analysis which selects, processes and “corrects and rewrites texts in accordance with certain ‘literary’- norms which are at any given time arguable, and always historically variable.” (Fahnestock, Jeanne and Secor, Marie. 1991. “*The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism*, *Textual Dynamics of the Professions” in* Bazerman, Charles and Paradis, James (eds) *Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*. University of Wisconsin Press: 74).

The context of our analysis is the so-called workshop model of creative writing class. For the purposes of this paper, the workshop is a peer-evaluation seminar where students, presided over by a lecturer/teacher, read and evaluate student work in progress. The ethos of the workshop is that each workshop member offers a response to the work in progress of their peer being “workshopped”, a response which can be analytical, subjective, thematic, technical or an amalgam of all the above in nature. What such a response in the context of creative writing workshop and in the practice of literary criticism have in common is that both are an exercise in the interpretation of a text.

But we swiftly encounter a conundrum. In the creative writing workshop, the text does not yet entirely exist. It is a series of suppositions, experiments, gestures and explorations, no matter to what degree its author might believe it is finished work. In reality, in prose fiction workshop we are tasked with assessing the potentialities and intent of the text: what is this piece of fiction *trying* to be? What is its optimal expression of itself? We are parsing the purpose of seen and unseen dimensions; furthermore we are assessing this within the lacunae of the historical present, an ahistorical reef poised between the shore of creative intent and the horizon of inevitability. The text in progress is a conversation between those two points: one of departure, the other of arrival.

As well as its emergent nature, we are presented in this pedagogical model with intellectual uncertainty: there is an unknowable quality to what the text could be, or, to give it the agency and psychic autonomy from the author’s consciousness that is a hallmark of sophisticated writing, what it *wants* to be. To an extent, as Andrew Cowan has argued, only the text knows.

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As I have suggested above, the teaching of creative writing presents us with a series of conundrums and little-understood antitheses vis-à-vis the process of the evaluation of literature. One of these elusive contretemps is that between the theory of writing versus the theory of reading. Ultimately reading and writing may be intimately linked, but are separate processes.

In *Creative Writing and the New Humanities,* his seminal survey of the evolution of creative writing programmes in the United States, Paul Dawson posits that the creative writing workshop functions as much as a theory of reading as much as a theory of writing (Dawson, Paul. 2004. *Creative Writing and the New Humanities.* London/New York: Routledge.) How a work will be read is already present in the classroom as an aesthetic yardstick. In contrast, in her book *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: creative writing reconceived*, UK writer and educator Michelene Wandor argues that the workshop should not be a space for ‘critical reading’ and that this notion acts as a conceptually dubious justification for creative writing methodology:

Reading and writing entail different actions and processes, applied to different ‘objects’ at quite different moments, with quite different outcomes. Even where they may take place within the same procedure, they are analytically distinct. (Wandor, Michelene. 2008. *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (British Studies Series). London: Palgrave MacMillan: 147)

To this tension between the processes of reading and writing, we add to the mix the nature of the evaluation of creative work within an academic institution. This brings certain pressures – specifically the institutional requirement to apply a set of academic criteria to creative work. These criteria promise to give the student a benchmark of aesthetic achievement, but through the use of a critical lexicon. This can reinforce an already latent assumption that prose fiction should adopt or communicate theory, context, critical concerns, that it should promote understanding offer what philosophers call an *heuristic*, or a strategy using information to help [problem solving](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_solving).

As Paul Williams from the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia has argued, there is an explicit assumption that ‘in the context of a Creative Writing Department [sic] in a tertiary academic learning environment, narrative fiction in some way should perform the function of interrogating important academic issues and problems.’ (Williams, Paul. 2013. “Creative Praxis as a Form of Academic Discourse”, *New Writing*, *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing.* Online publication). In other words, it should have a societal purpose, achieved through the application of rhetoric.

Rhetoric, we recall, is indelibly linked to purpose. In a technical sense rhetoric is a tool not only of language but of consciousness, a slant of thought powered by syntax and psyche, as persuasive and manipulative as the ideology that fuels its purpose. But is it conducive to the creative process that the writer interpret the value and meaning of their fiction as it is emerging? Is it a writer’s business to know where their literature in progress sits within history, to evaluate its contribution to knowledge?

At the University of East Anglia we resist the utilitarian trend outlined by Williams, instead proffering an experimental space which resists the intrusion of *Realpolitik* values, either of a commercial or institutional nature, instead teaching it with a fine art studio practice ethos, in ways I will now outline.

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The Masters in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia is the longest-established graduate degree in Creative Writing in the United Kingdom. Founded in 1970 by two literature scholars who were also novelists, Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson, it adopted from the beginning the workshop seminar structure from courses in the United States, in particular the Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa.

In its present incarnation, our MA is one-year course. Each year around thirty students are enrolled; for these 30 places we receive around 300 applications annually – a ratio which we take as evidence of our course’s reputation and popularity. The course is sought after in part for its track record in enabling professional success. Around 30 per cent of our graduates go on to be published writers, as opposed to about 5 per cent of graduates of other Masters programmes in the UK.

The three-hour long seminar Prose Fiction Workshop is the core course on the MA. In the autumn and spring semesters we run three groups with 9-12 students in the workshop, taught by three different lecturers. In December, after the end of the first semester, the groups are shuffled up and assigned a new lecturer.

The course is run on the principle of fine art studio practice, as it is encountered in visual arts degrees. In each seminar, three (sometimes four) pieces of student fiction in progress are discussed for around 50 minutes. The discussions are intense, questioning, open-ended, and variable. No writing exercises are set. Students’ work is annotated by the group, but not corrected. Generally, only students’ work in progress is discussed. It is what Cowan calls ‘[An] improvisatory space’ (Cowan, Andrew. 2012. “A Live Event, a Life Event”, *TEXT*, 16 (1)).

From the very beginning, directors of the MA and lecturers at UEA questioned the nature of the relationship between unconscious and conscious processes in discussing and analysing creative work in progress.

Malcolm Bradbury is widely regarded as the progenitor of our MA. In her paper *Rethinking the Unconscious in Creative Writing Pedagogy*, Abi Curtis of University of Sussex suggests that Bradbury espoused a Freudian view of the process of writing. According to Curtis, for Bradbury writing was exclusively “a psychological mater” in which the unconscious and the conscious must be “reconciled” (Curtis, Abi. 2009. “Rethinking the Unconscious in Creative Writing,” *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*. 6: (9)). The implication for Bradbury, she argues, is that writing could not be “consciously” taught. It had to be “discovered from within”. The teacher’s role “is to help the student to access something that is already there, but hidden from them in some way.”

Toby Litt, a commercially successful literary novelist and UEA graduate, has reflected on the benefits of the workshop as follows:

a small audience who weren’t (unlike my friends and family) emotionally committed to me as a person. I could hand in a piece of work to the class in the knowledge that they would respond without thinking they had to spend the rest of their week, or maybe even the rest of their lives, dealing with the consequences of being negative. It’s a completely different feeling, knowing that you are writing for a small group of committed readers, rather than for the judges of open competitions, for skim-reading agents or work-experience people in publisher’s offices. This, I used to say – the provision of an audience of peers – was how creative writing was learnt. (Litt, Toby. 2011. “Sensibility” in Foden, Giles (ed), *Body of Work: 40 years of creative writing at UEA*. Norwich: Full Circle Editions: 241) .

Litt goes on to problematise his learning process in the workshop by making an illuminating distinction which is ultimately about psychological ownership of literature in progress. For Litt it involved a shift in awareness, one he describes as a transition from: *I want to write this* to *this is being written.* The critical distance in perspective on his own work which he gained in Prose Fiction workshop represents a cognitive, philosophical and aesthetic shift. The agency has migrated from the writer to the text. The work has become depersonalised in a way which is experienced as aesthetically freeing. For Lit, bad literature (as he describes it, narcissistic or ungiving or derivative, or apprentice literature) he associates with: *I want to write this* writing. *This is being written* writing is more self-possessed, with an innate sense of purpose and destiny, which must be discovered by the writer as much as his or her readers.

We could now add to this analysis the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious as synonymous with the link between the creative and critical imagination. Literary criticism, and its more expansive parent, literary theory, requires a conscious analysis of an existing text. This gives us the most obvious difference between the rhetoric of creative writing and that of literary criticism: literary theory and critique is applied after the fact. Creative writing presupposes its own definition. It deals with work that is emergent, in progress. It doesn’t yet know what it is. But also, and as importantly, it does not yet know *where* and *when* it is. Fiction is consecrated by being published, at which point it exists in history, but work in progress is as yet unaware of its own relationship with history.

As lecturers at UEA, we expect our students to be relatively sophisticated readers of literature before they arrive. They need to be well versed in literature’s conversation with history. Our workshops are less about writing as a process of the discovery of the authentic self, or about becoming a more competent writer, than about discovering one’s aesthetic purpose and stylistic abilities. Students make a shift during the course of the Masters programme from reading fiction as readers to reading fiction as writers. They may well become much more aware of the technical aspects and effects of fiction – point of view, tense, narrative arc, character trajectory, tropes, motifs, symbolic structure, metaphor, and the world views encoded in categories of literature – naturalism versus fabulism for example, but this is not the exact goal of our teaching methods.

What we espouse, in our individual and differing ways of teaching the workshop class, is a theory of teaching writing that acknowledges the slipperiness of language and the diversity of the individual imagination. We are interested in seeing students develop – as Michelene Wandor has written, “an understanding of how their imagination works and the cultural context for that imagination.” (Wandor, 2008: 214). By paying close attention to the text itself, we reveal what clues are already within it, in its language, ideas, formal poetics, and structure.

My colleague at UEA Giles Foden has described the rubric underpinning Prose Fiction workshop as a process of idealisation. Its efforts are directed towards *ideal* texts - not a single ideal text to which all teaching aspires, but the ideal form of each text to which a particular student is aspiring. As Foden writes, “this question of intention is very important. But trying to help students discover and realise their aims does not mean ignoring the real liability (and theoretical certainty) that those aims will be misinterpreted once on the page.” (Foden, Giles. 2011. Introduction, in Foden, Giles (ed) *Body of Work: 40 years of Creative Writing at UEA*. Norwich: Full Circle Editions: 19). Foden’s suggestion introduces two presences in the process of literary production: the reader and history; or, to put it another way, the future. What happens between writer and reader is not so much a text as an experience – moreover, a shared experience; shared because we are both in history. Not at the same temporal point and place, but we are located both in a larger, if “ghostly” (Foden’s term) contest.

As Foden notes, the reader is present in the workshop. This is a radical notion. Students in Prose Fiction Workshop encounter readers far in advance of publication. The reader in the workshop class is both an envoy from the future and a representative of history. But even if the reader is in the room, the literary work will continue to know more than any single reader knows.  There will always be other readings, other meanings. No one interpretation will enact the truth. As Cowan has commented, quoting literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, “Unknowing may not be a personal process but *about the clash of living discourses in society.”* [my italics] (Cowan, 2011.)

Literary criticism critiques map the relationship between the writer and the reader, but also take a measure of the historical distance. Where is the writer in history? Where is the reader? What is being diffused through the text? In literary criticism there is a sense of fixity. Of evaluating the text with posterity in mind, with how the text expresses or refutes dominant trends of the philosophy, politics, mores, obsessions and what you could call cognitive errors on a civilisational scale of an era. Literary criticism flenses fiction into its constituent layers – complex novels have many layers of interpretation, the metaphorical, political, metaphysical, among them. Novels have a skeleton or structure of ideas. Some of these are buried, opaque, not available even to the consciousness that created it. Only time will lay them bare.

Literary criticism, then, is a kind of archaeological excavation. When applied to work in progress, this brand of theoretical analysis can be problematic in its reductionist impulse. Literary critique doesn’t allow for the work to be rewritten in response to that reception. The whole idea of the workshop is, as I have said, that work is emergent. It might change. It might not. But it seeks to take a measure of itself at a specific temporal point in its creation. Unlike history, it does not know what came next.

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*‘I think the truest thing I can say about my own experience of writing is that I don’t know what I am doing.’* (Malouf, David, quoted in Cowan, 2011).

As Fahnstock and Secor note in *The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism*, reality is always more complex than appearance, and surfaces by definition have underlying depths. “One obvious residence for complexity is the author’s psyche where impulses of various kinds, conscious or unconscious, can be said to exert pressure on a text.” (Fahnstock and Secor, 1991: 90).

The Australian writer David Malouf suggests that the unknown impulses driving fiction are the source of its aesthetic power:

the only thing that’s going to be interesting in the book is what you don’t yet know. Fixed ways of reacting are useless. Although you have to be highly conscious on one level – technique and so on – you also have to be in some ‘non-knowing’ mode for the book to shape itself. (Cowan, op cit.)

The interplay between conscious and unconscious processes in writing are well described by Freud[[2]](#footnote-2) and others. This duet of knowledge and mysterious impulse mirrors the nature of our consciousness. We are, as humans as much as writers, tasked with being aware and unaware at once. In creative writing class, what we are aware of, generally, is the application of technique. But this does not explain ‘what we are doing’. Foden writes:

in helping students become more detached and judicious about their writing, the good Creative Writing course allows the novel to become the self-organising entity which, at its best, it is. The ideal that was sought in the first place becomes scaffolding that can be kicked away, to allow the unpredictable trajectory of the self-organisation to deliver something new. (Foden, 2011: 20)

As both Foden and Litt avow in different ways, literature is a mysterious totality. It is not a sum of its parts but the product of a quantum evolving creative experience, in which each constituent element may never be fully inventoried. But in which, every word carries a story forward with ever-accelerating accretion. This is conveyed to the reader in a kind of personal code that is different from individual to individual, so that the language of the author can live again in the reader’s head.

The author’s intentions are built from an ideal which the author may or may not have been aware they espoused. But the belief communicates itself to the reader, and in an uncanny way it presages the reader’s individual experience of the text. This is akin to the literary critic FR Leavis’s conception of literature as a collaborative act of reconstitution between human minds.

Not everything can be known in this collaborative, emergent act. There are too many unknowns because creative work is not a logical or even traceable process. Prose Fiction workshop gives the time and space for writers to encounter their unawareness, and to learn from it. There is an element of alchemy in which we as writers have to be adept mixers of constituent elements, yet unaware of the exact formulae of the transformation we seek. Because in writing fiction we seek not only to “tell a story” (as publishers are so enamoured of proclaiming) but to change a reader’s state.

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In this paper I’ve put forth the notion of critique as an interpretation not of what is “wrong” with a piece of work, but a taking the measure of its best instincts and intents. Rather than engaging in a process of deconstruction, the rhetoric of creative writing workshop involves a subjective perception of what the text wants to be, its ideal form, and to calculate the distance between that and its present incarnation.

It’s worth noting that this requires experience to elicit and to teach well– specifically the experience, in my opinion, of being a writer with a significant publications record, who has gone through the process of drafting, rewriting, publishing and having your work reviewed, not only once but several times.

As Andrew Cowan has written, in Prose Fiction workshop class as it is taught at UEA “discussion replaces instruction” (Cowan, 2012) while conversation might be said to replace criticism. We teach less and consider more. We challenge and offer a mirror to the student, in which they can see a prism of reflections of their work in progress. While we sometimes rely on the language of literary criticism, this lexicon tends to lay inert in the face of creative work which is situated in – but not yet determined by – history.

ENDS

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1. The University of East Anglia, (UEA), is located in Norwich, Norfolk, United Kingdom. It is home to the longest-running Masters in Creative Writing (established in 1970) in the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example Freud, Sigmund, *Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)