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How critical is Creative Writing? Malcolm Bradbury and the 'serious' writer

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ABSTRACT

Recent reappraisals of the origins of the MA in Creative Writing at UEA by Kathryn Holeywell (2009) and Lise Jaillant (2016) have brought Malcolm Bradbury's contribution into question. This article identifies that contribution as a greater emphasis on literary criticism and theory, which Bradbury maintained from the beginning of the MA until his retirement from teaching. Despite the arch treatment of poststructuralism in his fictional works – most overtly in *The History Man* (1975) and the academic parody *Mensonge* (1987) – Bradbury's definition of the 'serious' writer emphasised an awareness of, and engagement with, the developments of literary and cultural theory. Looking at archived teaching notes from the 1989 module 'Fiction and the Creative Process', we see how Bradbury sought in his teaching to bring criticism and creation into closer proximity.

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This article began as a paper at the 'Futures for Creative Writing' conference, held at the University of East Anglia in May 2021 to mark the 50th anniversary of the university's celebrated Creative Writing programme. The call for papers began: 'Fifty years ago, in September 1970, Ian McEwan became the sole inaugural student on the UK's first MA in Creative Writing, established at UEA by the novelist-critics, Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson'. There is, however, one problem: Ian McEwan did not take an MA in Creative Writing, but rather UEA's MA in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Novel. This was a critical MA – today's equivalent being the MA in Modern and Contemporary Writing – with two modules in the Autumn and two in the Spring, followed by an MA thesis to be written in the summer term. McEwan took four critical modules: The Theory of Fiction, Symbolism and American Literature, The English and American Novel 1945 – present, and A Comparative Study of Some English & European Novelists – but he was the first student to submit a collection of short stories instead of a conventional MA thesis.[1]

The story that a formal MA in Creative Writing course began with Ian McEwan in 1970 is a familiar one, but two articles published in *New Writing* have complicated this version of events. Kathryn Holeywell has shown that the origin of Bradbury and Wilson's formal MA programme began with 'certain decisions made during the initial organisation and

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development of UEA in the early 1960s', ranging from a more general 'ethos of nonconformity and broadmindedness at the institutional level' to specific actions taken by Ian Watt, the Dean of English Studies for 1963–1964, the University's inaugural year (Holeywell 2009, 16–17). It was Watt, author of the influential *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), who emphasised the importance of seminar group teaching and made the 'landmark proposal' to hire Angus Wilson, which Holeywell suggests was 'the first time in the history of UK higher education that a creative writer was offered a university post' (Holeywell 2009, 17). A 1964 letter sent to Wilson by the second Dean of English Studies, Nicholas Brooke, refers to Wilson 'advising students on their own writing', but Holeywell rightly points out that this remark does not refer to creative writing specifically, and may refer instead to students' academic writing.[2] There exist no archival records of Wilson's formal or informal creative writing tuition, although Holeywell does interview Peter Humm, a student at UEA from 1963 to 1966, who 'recalls "story writing as one form of assessment in the (Wilson's) courses on Dickens and the novel"' (Holeywell 2009, 21).

Lise Jaillant has then questioned the significance of Bradbury's contribution altogether, concluding that the more concise origin story – that creative writing at UEA began with Bradbury and Wilson's MA in 1970 rather than Wilson's informal undergraduate teaching as early as 1963 – is a 'myth' which had been actively 'chosen' by Bradbury for his own self-interest, because 'the aging Bradbury increasingly saw the MA programme as one of his most important achievements' (Jaillant 2016, 364). Jaillant writes that McEwan 'had no more than a few informal meetings with Bradbury – nothing that resembled a structured writing programme', and refers to interviews and magazine articles where Bradbury gave the concise version of events: '"McEwan was in my creative writing class", he declared in a *typical* 1992 interview' (Jaillant 2016, 351, emphasis mine). This gives the impression that Bradbury consistently denied or downplayed the more complex series of events identified by Holeywell, but Jaillant does not refer to those many instances when Bradbury did indeed acknowledge both the programme's longer history and the lack of formality in his supervisions with McEwan. In an introduction to the collection *Class Work* (1995), an anthology of short fiction by UEA graduates, Bradbury recounts that he and Wilson had been 'working informally' with 'a new generation of vigorous and creative undergraduates' including 'Rose Tremain, Clive Sinclair, the playwright Snoo Wilson, and Jonathan Powell', and that the two began proposing a formal MA course in 1967. 'By the end of the Sixties', Bradbury writes, 'the course had struggled its way onto our postgraduate programme – as a possible small supplement to an academic MA degree' (Bradbury 1995, pp. viii–ix). It was this 'possible small supplement' that attracted McEwan to UEA; in his own introduction to the collection, printed alongside Bradbury's, McEwan writes:

> I was struck by the offer of a full immersion, in Norwich, in postwar American and British fiction, with a little literary theory on the side, a dose of comparative European nineteenth-century literature, and the option of handing in at the end of the year twenty-five thousand words of fiction in place of an academic mini-thesis. (McEwan 1995, p. xvi)

Both introductions acknowledge the lack of formal supervision or creative writing workshop that year: Bradbury writes candidly that 'Angus and I met him [McEwan] in pubs and teashops' and McEwan mentions the Maids Head Hotel in Tombland as the location of their first supervision (Bradbury 1995, p. ix; McEwan 1995, p. xvii).

These reconsiderations of the origins of creative writing at UEA lead to an important question: what was Bradbury's contribution to the shape and style of the MA in Creative Writing at UEA? This article argues that Bradbury's contribution to the MA was its emphasis on literary criticism and theory, an emphasis which Bradbury maintained from the beginning of the MA right through to his retirement from teaching in 1995, but which is now in abeyance. While acknowledging Bradbury's resistance to certain elements of poststructuralist theory, namely the hermeneutics of suspicion and the death of the Author, as well as his comic treatment of those concepts in *The History Man* (1975) and *Mensonge* (1987), this article draws attention to Bradbury's definition of the 'serious' writer as one who is aware of, and engages with, the intellectual developments of literary and cultural theory. This article then turns to archived teaching notes from the innovative 'Fiction and the Creative Process' module to consider how Bradbury sought in his teaching to bring criticism and creation into closer proximity.

The origin of the MA in Creative Writing at UEA as 'a possible small supplement' to the critical MA in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Novel can be attributed, to an extent, to institutional necessity and academic *realpolitik*. It also resembles the beginnings of the first creative writing programme, the Iowa Writers Workshop, which, according to D. G. Myers, began in 1936 as 'merely one track of a more extensive graduate program in English organized around the study and practice of criticism' (Myers [1996] 2006, 124). But the critical orientation of the UEA MA remained as it expanded and became more formalised over subsequent years. This was deliberate: as Bradbury would go on to write in a 1992 review-essay in the *Times Literary Supplement*, he and Wilson 'saw a fundamental aim of our programme as being one of new relations between the "creative" and the "critical", both in individuals and in university culture too' (Bradbury 1992, 7). In particular:

> a course of this kind, conducted from the distance of an academic environment, distinct from the commercial marketplace, could have some impact on the state of serious fiction in Britain at the time, by which both of us were dismayed. And […] the presence among our own literature students of serious, articulate writers might have some impact on the bee-swarms of new theory that regularly surge through literature departments, and by which we were also concerned. (Bradbury 1992, 7)

Because of this aim, the content of the MA in Creative Writing under Bradbury's direction was closely aligned to that of the MA in the Novel, to the point that the creative writers took the same critical modules. As Andrew Cowan, who took the MA in Creative Writing in the year 1984–1985, recounts:

> we were obliged to enrol in one critical module each term, alongside students from the more academic MA programs, and I chose contemporary literary theory with Lorna Sage in term one, the postmodern novel with Bradbury in term two, and was required to write a substantial critical essay for assessment in each. (Cowan 2011, 18–20)

Most, if not all, MAs in creative writing today – including the current courses at UEA and Iowa – require enrolment onto one other module each semester, alongside the workshop. At UEA, however, many of these classes are now supplementary creative modules designed specifically for the MA Creative Writing cohorts, such as 'The Art of Short Fiction' or 'Theory and Practice of Fiction'. Creative writing students can still enrol onto the critical modules offered for the MA in Modern and Contemporary Writing, including

'Living Modernism' and 'Contemporary Fiction', as well as either of the innovative creative-critical modules, 'Creative-Critical Writing' and 'Ludic Literature'. In the same way, the critical students can enrol onto the supplementary creative modules. But the emphasis has certainly shifted: in contrast to the earlier rubric, a student on the MA Creative Writing Prose Fiction in the year 2022–2023 could conceivably complete the degree and graduate without having written a single critical essay – or without having met a single student from the critical MA.

In his own critical writing, Bradbury returned frequently to this idea of 'new relations between the "creative" and the "critical"', and identified the professionalisation of literary criticism in British and American universities at the turn of the twentieth century as the catalyst for their divergence. In the same *TLS* article, Bradbury argues:

> most of the serious exploration – the reinterpretation of the literature and canon of the past, the construction of the significant literary aesthetics of the present, the concept of the authority of writing and the exploration of the task of "poetry" in culture – has historically occurred in the work of the major literary practitioners. (Bradbury 1992, 7)

This 'serious exploration' occurs not only in critical essays or lectures, but in the writing itself; as Bradbury writes in the essay 'Writer and Critic' (1987): 'every writer *is* a critic, and amends, qualifies and rewrites the work of others' (Bradbury 1987, 12). Bradbury saw this critical intelligence as central to the novel in particular, and during his speech as Chair of Judges for the 1981 Booker Prize he defined 'the serious novel' as

> the work of a writer who is pressing at the edge of the genre, taking it as a form of enquiry, into the grammars and orders, the means and structures, by which we build up sufficient fictions of the world. The novel is a major mode of enquiry, as serious as science, as thoughtful as philosophy, but always conscious of its fictionality. (Bradbury 1987, 372–373)

Bradbury here describes an awareness of literary form – a writer would have to know the novel and its boundaries before 'pressing at the edge of the genre' – and this knowledge is of obvious benefit to students of creative writing. But Bradbury also refers here to an awareness of structuralist and poststructuralist theory: the 'serious' writer should be conscious of the ways in which meaning is constructed, or, as Bradbury puts it, 'the grammars and orders, the means and structures' of 'the world' outside the novel. Bradbury therefore conceived of the writer as theoretically aware, and it was for this reason that the MA in Creative Writing students were offered modules in contemporary literary theory.

The idea that creative writing students should be conversant in literary theory would seem to contradict the opposition, made by Bradbury in the *TLS* article, between 'the serious, articulate writer' and 'the bee-swarms of new theory that regularly surge through literature departments'. Indeed, Bradbury took aim at those 'bee-swarms' in his fiction. While *The History Man*'s protagonist Howard Kirk is a lecturer in sociology, his ability to 'explain anything' with 'a little Marx, a little Freud, and a little social history' is clearly a parody of Paul Ricœur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Bradbury [1975] 2017, 25). Rita Felski describes this as 'a mode of interpretation that adopts a distrustful attitude toward texts in order to draw out meanings or implications that are not intended and that remain inaccessible to their authors as well as to ordinary readers' (Felski 2011, 216). This 'distrustful attitude' is embodied by Kirk in his seminars,

'where an apparently casual remark about one's schoolboy stamp collection, or a literary reference to the metaphoric significance of colour' leads to 'a sudden psychic foray from a teacher who will dive down into your unconscious with three shrewd enquiries and come up clutching something in you called "bourgeois materialism" or "racism"' (Bradbury [1975] 2017, 137).

A hermeneutic which resists the author's 'intended' meaning to such a degree is made possible by the developments of literary theory, at first the New Criticism's 'intentional fallacy' and then the later developments of poststructuralism, particularly Roland Barthes's essay 'The Death of the Author', first published in English in 1967. Barthes's argument was that the interested student of literature should not seek to uncover the intended meaning of a text inscribed by its author, because no such meaning exists: 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (Barthes 1977, 146). We should pay attention instead to the reader rather than the author, because it is the reader who 'is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination'. As such, Barthes concluded: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes 1977, 148).

Alongside the hermeneutics of suspicion, the death of the Author was the major theoretical concept which Bradbury saw fit for comic treatment. In the introduction to *Class Work*, Bradbury quipped that because he and Wilson 'were both novelists as well as teachers of literature, and took our profession seriously, it seemed somewhat strange for us to be announcing the Death of the Author in the classroom, then going straight back home to be one' (Bradbury 1995, viii). In 1987, by which time the MA in Creative Writing had become an established success, Bradbury published *Mensonge*, a comic novella presented as a work of scholarship in the manner of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), with a mock bibliography and index as well as an afterword written by David Lodge but attributed to Professor Michel Tardieu, a character from Lodge's *Small World* (1984). Writing in an ironic academic style, Bradbury claims to be searching for Henri Mensonge, a French deconstructive theorist and author of *La Fornication comme acte culturel* – or 'Fornication as a cultural act' – who is so committed to the death of the Author that he has himself disappeared. At first Mensonge – whose surname in French means 'lie' or 'falsehood' – merely 'insisted that his name should not appear anywhere in print, on the spines or title pages of books, whether they are by him or not, which we shall never know anyway' (Bradbury [1987] 1993, 26). Eventually, however, he became aware of a profound 'illogicality': 'if the author was dead, it was still necessary to have a Deconstructionist author who could explain this to us' (Bradbury [1987] 1993, 24). Hence Mensonge made himself totally absent, leaving only 'a lost credit-card here, an unanswered letter asking for the return of a favourite sweater there' (Bradbury [1987] 1993, 30–31).

Both in *The History Man* and *Mensonge*, Bradbury sends up those elements of poststructuralist theory which reduce the significance of the author: the hermeneutic of suspicion involves reading the text 'against the grain' to identify meanings which are unintended or unconscious, and the death of the Author enables such a method of interpretation by affording hermeneutic primacy to the reader rather than the author. Bradbury did so not to argue in favour of a naïve intentionalism, but rather because such concepts

failed to account for the complexity of the creative process and were, as he put it in the *TLS* article, 'resistant to imaginative subjectivity' (Bradbury 1992, 9). Novels, Bradbury wrote:

> involve complex matters of craft, of choice, of existential decision-making, which have to do with how we shape, develop, discover, contradict, divert and subvert the flow of those imaginary and those rhetorical materials out of which we make fictive things from the elements of life and consciousness that challenge our own individual imaginations[.] (Bradbury 1992, 8)

The writer 'amends, qualifies and rewrites' not only 'the work of others', but also their own thoughts, words, and ideas in the act of composition. This work, with its 'complex matters of craft, of choice, of existential decision-making' is an act of criticism, involving as it does the use of critical judgment upon differing literary effects. As T. S. Eliot writes in 'The Function of Criticism': 'the larger part of the labour of the author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative' (Eliot [1923] 1975, 73).

For Bradbury, writing was active intellectual work, akin to criticism – as mentioned above, he described the 'serious' writer as somebody who is 'pressing at the edge of the genre, taking it as a form of enquiry' – and he therefore advocated turning scholarly attention towards 'those aesthetic introspections and insights that come from the writers themselves' (Bradbury 1992, 8). But Bradbury did also mock the kinds of anti-intellectual discussion had by contemporary writers outside of the academy, which he portrayed elsewhere as being limited to such mundane questions as 'is it best to write lying down, or standing up, like Hemingway, or naked, like Victor Hugo, or late at night, or in a swimming pool' (Bradbury 1987, 10). Such discussion, which romanticises the writer and their daily habits, is both naïve to the developments of literary theory and incapable of offering any alternative ideas about the complex intellectual and imaginative work that creative writing involves. 'The absence', Bradbury writes, 'lies in works of serious, and contemporary, reflection by high practitioners, exploring the nature of writing's art, and craft, and historicity' (Bradbury 1987, 8).

In the late 1980s, Bradbury developed the 'Fiction and the Creative Process' module at UEA in an attempt to address this 'absence'. This was a module on the critical MA Novel course, but – as detailed above – it was equally available to the MA creative writers. The earliest dated record held in the UEA archive is a reading list from the 1989 Autumn Term, in which Bradbury's description of the course reads:

> Concentrating on some major works of fiction where there are useful records, in the form of notebooks, diaries, and memoirs, where writers have self-consciously analysed their own creative process, this course will move between a "creative" and a "critical" perspective on these works.[3]

The 'major works of fiction' discussed that semester were Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866); Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (1924); James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922); Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925); William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); Italo Calvino, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* (1979); Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962); Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1925); and, in the final week, selected short stories by Eudora Welty, Donald Barthelme, and Raymond Carver. Other potential texts on offer to the cohort were Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1903); the first three volumes of

Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1921); John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969); and selected short stories by Samuel Beckett. Apart from Welty and Carver in the final week, each of the writers discussed is a recognised figure in the canon of Western modernism and postmodernism, and each of them is quite clearly 'pressing at the edge of the genre' in the listed novels. Bradbury's definition of the 'serious' writer involves, then, not only a certain awareness of critical or theoretical developments, but also a commitment in practice to innovation and inventiveness, a commitment which Ezra Pound memorably summarised in the slogan 'Make it new'. This avant-garde emphasis inherent in Bradbury's poetics of the novel provides an interesting counterpoint to the tradition of 'show, don't tell' minimalist realism exemplified by Carver in particular, and which is still emphasised by creative writing tutors throughout the world today. While Carver is of course featured on the module, it remains unclear whether Bradbury thought the realist writer was as 'serious' or 'major' in quite the same way as the modern or postmodern novelist. Indeed, it is worth noting the trajectory of Bradbury's own fiction, from the comic realism of his first novel, *Eating People is Wrong* (1959), to the postmodern satire of *To the Hermitage* (2000).

Looking more closely at Bradbury's teaching notes, we can see how exactly the module 'move[d] between a "creative" and a "critical" perspective'. A handwritten sheet from the seminar on *Crime and Punishment* reads:

> C&P. Began in 1864 – married in Siberia; magazine collapsed. Bankrupt; brother died; threatened with jail. He [fails?] on relation with publisher which threatened his independence. Problem of fulfilling contract. Writes two novels: The Gamblers and Crime & Punishment. Hired a stenographer – the pressure. Heavy drinker and gambler. Drunkards [?] became a sub-plot to C&P. Sonja loses her role (social protests aspect.?) The Marmeladov plot.: the drunkards.
>
> C&P. beginning of new narrative cycle. Prepared in Notes from Underground. The Russian Messenger letter. This letter goes with 1st person version: a criminal's confession. He replaced [?]; burned all previous versions. First person not suited to the book – why?
>
> Final version a) The Drunkards into C&P.
>
> b) 1st person into 3rd person … [4]

To a poststructuralist theorist such as Barthes, this biographical material would have been deemed entirely irrelevant to an interpretation or appraisal of the novel and its effects. To Bradbury, however, this was all relevant information: these are the 'elements of life and consciousness' out of which 'fictive things' are made. The discussion of Dostoevsky's initial use of first-person narration – which Bradbury describes as 'a criminal's confession' – is also significant. At once this is a scholarly analysis of textual variants, but it also involves a critical judgment: Bradbury asks, 'First person not suited to the book – why?' This is precisely the kind of critical and creative work described by Eliot, the work of 'sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing'. A further handwritten note reads:

> In preface to Penguin edition, D's letter, which elaborates the plot. References to variant versions and possibilities: what was his first sense of the plot, and what gives him grounds for changing it? How does the changed version become better, more necessary? And what do we learn of the relation between intentions and produced text?[5]

Again, Bradbury encourages the class to make critical judgments – 'How does the changed version become better, more necessary?' – and we also see here how Bradbury takes into account the apparent intention of the author alongside the 'produced text' that the reader actually experiences. In doing so, the novel is experienced in the class as something authored, the final version of many 'variant versions and possibilities', with an emphasis on the changing decisions of the author and the changing effect upon the reader created by those decisions. In this way, a canonical text of Western modernism published 120 years earlier becomes, in the classroom, the subject of a creative writing workshop.

Bradbury's contribution to the MA in Creative Writing at UEA was his emphasis on a much closer proximity between the creative and the critical. The arch treatment of poststructuralist ideas such as the hermeneutics of suspicion and the death of the Author in Bradbury's creative work belies the theoretical interest of his own teaching, and the Fiction and the Creative Process module in particular involved a sophisticated enquiry into the creative process and the kinds of critical judgements every writer has to make. In British and American universities, the trend in recent years has been towards greater specialisation, to the point where Creative Writing is now seen to be a discipline in its own right. Bradbury instead saw the creative and the critical as two 'perspectives' – not two separate subjects but rather two complementary aspects within one subject, which was then 'English' but which we might now call 'Literary Studies'. This had always been the case previously: until the early twentieth century when criticism became professionalised in university English departments, the creative writer and the literary critic were the same person. Establishing 'new relations between the "creative" and the "critical", both in individuals and in university culture' was one of the key motivations for Bradbury and Wilson when they began the UEA MA more than 50 years ago, and it is still important now.

Notes

1. 'MA Courses' [handwritten sheet]; 'M.A. Courses in Literature 1970-1' [typescript], UEA/BRAD/11, UEA Collection: Malcolm Bradbury, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
2. Holeywell (2009, 21). I quote from the same page Holeywell's transcription of Nicholas Brooke to Angus Wilson (1964), University of Iowa Special Collections, MsC 199: Papers of Angus Wilson.
3. 'Fiction and the Creative Process' [annotated reading list], UEA/BRAD/22, UEA Collection: Malcolm Bradbury, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
4. Untitled [handwritten sheet on *Crime and Punishment*], UEA/BRAD/22, UEA Collection: Malcolm Bradbury, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
5. 'Dost., *Crime and Punishment*' [handwritten sheet], UEA/BRAD/22, UEA Collection: Malcolm Bradbury, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

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Notes on contributor

Joseph Williams is a CHASE-funded postgraduate researcher at the University of East Anglia. His research examines the creative, critical, and educational work of Malcolm Bradbury, Lorna Sage, David Lodge, and the literary journal *Critical Quarterly*, founded by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson in 1958. The project will consider how these figures shaped the direction of literary studies in the United Kingdom, most notably by establishing creative writing within the discipline.

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