



CREATIVE WRITING AND THE NEW HUMANITIES

Paul Dawson

Creative Writing and the New Humanities

‘It is rare to have a text that not only meets a very real need academically, but one that is written with heartening persuasion and clarity. This is clearly excellent scholarship.’

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‘The approach to the subject is lively and impeccably researched as well as highly engaging . . . I think this book is essential and timely reading.’

Julia Bell, Birkbeck, University of London

Discussions about Creative Writing have tended to revolve around the perennial questions ‘can writing be taught?’ and ‘should it be taught?’

In this ambitious new book, Paul Dawson carries the debate far beyond the usual arguments and demonstrates that the discipline of Creative Writing developed as a series of pedagogic responses to the long-standing ‘crisis’ in Literary Studies. He traces the emergence of Creative Writing alongside the New Criticism in American universities; examines the writing workshop in relation to theories of creativity and literary criticism; and analyses the evolution of Creative Writing pedagogy alongside and in response to the rise of ‘Theory’ in America, England and Australia.

Paul Dawson’s thoroughly researched and engaging book provides a fresh perspective on the importance of Creative Writing to the ‘New Humanities’ and makes a major contribution to current debates about the role of the writer as public intellectual.

Paul Dawson is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of New South Wales.

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For Vanessa

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Introduction

Building a garret in the ivory tower

Once seen as a peculiarly American phenomenon, Creative Writing has developed an increasingly international presence in the last decade. Writing programmes are now entrenched and growing in Australian and British universities, have a strong presence in countries such as Canada and New Zealand, and are also developing in Asia-Pacific countries. Owing to its immense popularity with students, and a growing sense of professional awareness amongst teachers, Creative Writing has increasingly and inevitably become the subject of research interest, as academics draw upon current literary and cultural theory to develop new pedagogical methods, and to examine the role of Creative Writing in the contemporary humanities. Despite this popularity and interest, perceptions of Creative Writing both within and outside the academy continue to be framed by an outmoded scepticism. Since the inception of writing programmes the most prominent discussions about Creative Writing have been concerned with its legitimacy as an academic discipline. These discussions have tended to revolve around a simplistic polemic, manifested in the perennial question, *can writing be taught?* and its corollary, *should it be taught?* As a result much that has been written about writing workshops assumes the form of either a denunciation or an apologia.

The question of whether writing can be taught not only manifests a concern about the limits of education, but continues the debate about the relative merits of native talent and acquired skill which has occupied commentators on literature since antiquity. Today's version of this ancient debate is played out entirely in regard to writing workshops, acquiring a hitherto unheard of institutional context. This raises the question of whether writing *should* be taught, a question which betrays an anxiety about the location of attempts to teach writing: the university. The debates which revolve around these questions rest upon a conception of Creative Writing as a formal institutionalised

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apprenticeship for literary aspirants and as a sort of surrogate patronage system for established authors. Such an understanding is founded on the assumption that the social practice of writing, the ostensibly placeless activity of literary production, has been somehow absorbed or colonised by the academy, typically after the Second World War. This narrative of absorption has led to an institutionalisation of the traditional rivalry or animosity between writers and critics, a professional division which, in America, Christopher Beach characterises thus: '*PMLA* and *Critical Inquiry* versus *Poets and Writers* and *AWP Chronicle*, PhD versus MFA, literature faculties versus creative writing faculties' (1999: 31). This perpetuates an intellectual and theoretical division between the creative practice of writing and the scholarly or critical study of literature. 'To this day,' David Galef claimed in 2000, 'a tacit war exists between literary critics and writers, though both usually publish and teach within the same department' (169).

In order to overcome this divide and circumnavigate unproductive debates about whether writing can or should be taught, it is necessary to reconceptualise Creative Writing, in terms of both its historical origins and its current state as an academic discipline. Creative Writing functions as a discursive site for continuing debate over some of the foundational questions of literary studies: what is literature, what is the nature of the creative process, and what is the relationship between the creative and the critical? It is possible, then, to see the pedagogical strategies which underpin writing workshops themselves as responses to these foundational questions. As a result I intend to approach Creative Writing not as a practice (creativity), or as a synonym for literature, but as a discipline: a body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting this knowledge. If the historical examinations of the discipline of English which accompanied the 'crisis' in English Studies throughout the 1980s came to any conclusion, it was that English has never been a stable discipline, and has always been riven by internal conflict. The history of Creative Writing needs to be seen as a series of educational responses to this perennial 'crisis' in English Studies, rather than an apprenticeship which developed alongside and largely untouched by Literary Studies.

There are three crucial turning points in the history of English Studies which I shall demonstrate have borne upon the development of Creative Writing. The first is the debate between scholarship and criticism in American universities in the early part of the twentieth century. This was a result of attempts to replace historical and philological research in departments of English with a literary criticism that

evaluated literature in terms of its aesthetic qualities, and enabled the academic study of contemporary (Modernist) literature. It saw the professionalisation of criticism by divorcing it from the public act of reviewing, and the institutional entrenchment of the New Criticism as a pedagogical practice by the middle of the century. The second is the rise of 'Theory' as an international *lingua franca* in the humanities: that collocation of anti-humanist discourses, imported from largely Continental extra-literary disciplines, which was deployed to challenge the authority of 'practical criticism' in English Studies and its construction of literature as a privileged aesthetic category.

'The lurid rhetoric of crisis', Jonathan Culler wrote in 1988, 'seeks to transform our situation from a hapless, even ridiculous diffusion to a decisive, focused condition of choice' (43). This rhetoric of crisis, so prevalent from the 1970s to the 1990s, where Literary Studies was continually described as a discipline in chaotic flux, became an enabling device, charting the path towards a disciplinary refiguration of English Studies. If a crisis is a turning point, then the anxiety generated by Theory can be said to have passed to the extent that we now exist in a post-Theory academy, evidenced by books such as *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (1999), *What's Left of Theory?* (2000) and *After Theory* (2003). This does not mean that we are comfortably posterior to this crisis, but that its effects are now being worked through.

For instance, the 'canon debate', which was a product of the curricular revisions effected by the crisis in English Studies, lies at the heart of the so-called 'culture wars' that raged throughout the 1990s. In his book *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992), Gerald Graff saw a resolution to the canon debate in 'teaching the conflicts'. This emphasis on *teaching* rather than on criticism demonstrates the shifting nature of crisis, from disciplinary challenge to institutional revision. The result of the culture wars has been that a sense of crisis is now generated not only by internal intellectual debate (the need to move beyond Theory, embodied in the interdisciplinary enterprise of Cultural Studies), but also by external challenges. These challenges have taken the form of anti-political correctness media campaigns which flared in the early to mid-1990s, but still simmer in the division between academia and the public sphere, as well as institutional pressures which have affected the university as a whole.

Since the 1980s, dwindling public funds have forced university administrations to develop executive models based on the private business sector. Marginson and Considine have called this new model the Enterprise University, an institution which 'joins a mixed

public-private economy to a quasi-business culture and to academic traditions partly reconstituted, partly republican, and partly broken' (2000: 236). The 'corporatisation' of universities has generated a schism between their academic and administrative sections, such that research and teaching are now compelled to adapt to a growing culture of managerialism and economic accountability, as well as responding to the demand for vocational outcomes for students and a declining job market for academics. The effects on the humanities of these institutional changes can be seen in books such as *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (1995), *The University in Ruins* (1996) and *Day Late, Dollar Short: The Next Generation and the New Academy* (2000). The crisis resulting from these internal and external challenges tends to revolve around the notion of a public intellectual, a figure which must be seen less as the product of nostalgic yearning for a mythical public sphere than as a discursive site around which debates about the role of the humanities in a public institution circulate.

My aim is to locate the disciplinary development of Creative Writing within this history of crisis. Creative Writing first developed disciplinary identity in American universities alongside the New Criticism, in mutual opposition to scholarship in English Studies. Writing programmes expanded at the same time as the rise of Theory, but became entrenched in opposition to it as a means of retaining this disciplinary identity. This is because Theory called into question the privileged category of literature, the *raison d'être* of Creative Writing. D.G. Myers has produced the only substantial account of this history, with his book *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880* (1996), and to a large extent I shall not question his research. Myers's history, however, ends with the *discipline* of Creative Writing turning into a collection of *programmes*; with its 'professionalisation' in the 1970s as an 'elephant machine', a production line which produces not writers, but more teachers of writing and more writing programmes. This narrative serves ultimately to align Myers with standard critiques of writing workshops. Apart from displaying a sympathy for Creative Writing's 'original' intention of combining the study of literature (criticism) with its practice (creativity) for a humanistic understanding of literature 'for its own sake', Myers's nostalgia is apparent in his discontent with an academy 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of "theory"' (1996: xiii). In other words he does not provide an up-to-date account of Creative Writing. Nor does he suggest possibilities for its future, except that Creative Writing can somehow help repair a three-way schism in the academy between

writing programmes, composition and critical theory if it recovers its original integrative function.

In order to show how Creative Writing might be able to negotiate the upheavals in disciplinary knowledge and curricular structure since the advent of Theory and Cultural Studies, I will turn to the development of the discipline in Australia. This did not begin until the end of the 1960s, occurring *alongside* the introduction of Theory to Australian universities as part of an interdisciplinary challenge to existing literary education, and developing in a far more haphazard fashion than in America. This history provides a useful case study of the international emergence of Creative Writing in the decades since the rise of Theory. My aim is to examine how the relationship of Creative Writing to English Studies suggested by this history might point to ways in which the discipline can adapt more successfully as a site of intellectual work in the 'post-Theory' academy, known in Australia as the 'New Humanities'.

In order to situate Creative Writing within a discipline that has shifted from 'practical' criticism to 'oppositional' criticism, and an institution which now speaks of producing public intellectuals rather than disinterested scholars, and in order to promote the importance of literary works to disciplinary knowledge and to public debate, I feel that writers need to be conceived as intellectuals alongside others in the academy. What form a literary intellectual might take in the age of postmodernity and in an era of blurred generic boundaries and hybridised genres, and what role Creative Writing can play in the formation of literary intellectuals is, ultimately, what this book hopes to explore.

I do not wish to assert that Creative Writing has not had a genuine impact on the profession of authorship (by offering employment and training to writers) or on the production of literature (through its impact on publishing). I am suggesting, however, that this understanding does not adequately describe its operation as an academic discipline or its relationship to literary studies. Instead of resting on an assumption that writers were absorbed by the academy, the account of the historical origins of Creative Writing which I shall provide is a means of enquiring into *how* it came to serve the needs of writers in terms of apprenticeship and patronage, into what institutional and theoretical negotiations were required for its establishment. This historical investigation is also a methodological device for reconceptualising Creative Writing as an academic discipline in order to explore more comprehensively its relationship to English Studies.

If Creative Writing is not to be seen as the institutional absorption of literary production into the academy, but as an academic discipline which developed as a series of pedagogical responses to the perennial crisis in English Studies, then we must ask different questions from the ones we are asking: (1) instead of asking whether writers need formal training or whether teaching the craft is helpful for writers, and instead of producing more handbooks on the craft of writing, we must ask what are the theoretical underpinnings of the practical writing workshop, what are the assumptions about literature which allow writing instruction to take place; (2) instead of questioning the academic rigour of the writing workshop, we must ask what constitutes knowledge in Creative Writing, and how does work produced by teachers and students in Creative Writing (i.e. their 'research') contribute to knowledge in Literary Studies – and this also means asking what is the function of literature in modern Literary Studies; (3) instead of bemoaning a split between writers and critics we must ask what position of literary authority can the writer assume in the academy, not as an artistic practitioner, but as an intellectual? In order to clear a conceptual path for these questions, however, we must explore the assumptions about Creative Writing which organise our current understanding of the discipline.

Can writing be taught?

The question, *can writing be taught?*², tends to be posed as a challenge rather than as a genuine enquiry; a challenge which threatens to damn the foundational premise of Creative Writing by daring the addressee to answer in the affirmative. This display of pedagogical anxiety about a university subject has overshadowed an earlier one, expressed in the question *can literature be taught?*² In his inaugural lecture in 1913 as the first Professor of English at Cambridge University, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch reminded his audience that 'some doubt does lurk in the public mind if, after all, English literature can, in any ordinary sense, be taught' (1946: 13–14). He pointed out that 'by consent of all, Literature is a nurse of noble natures, and right reading makes a full man', and that the study of literature found a place in universities due to the conviction that 'Literature is a good thing if only we can bring it to operate on young minds' (12). The rise of English Studies was dogged by the pedagogical challenge of how to bring literature to operate on the minds of students. The study of literature was first conducted as historical and linguistic scholarship precisely because of anxiety about whether it could be

taught in any rigorous academic fashion. The catchcry of criticism in its struggle to replace scholarship as the dominant mode of teaching literature was that it promoted the study of literature *as* literature, that is, as an art. For John Crowe Ransom, 'the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature' ([1937] 1984: 95). The institutionalisation of criticism in the university gave English departments an independent disciplinary existence because it provided a successful means of teaching literature. The answer to the question of whether literature could be taught, however, was that students were taught how to write *criticism* of literature rather than to absorb scholarly knowledge about it. If this is the case, Creative Writing might thus be seen as the teaching of literature *as writing*.

But the question *can writing be taught?* has an older and non-institutional heritage: it is the twentieth-century version of the ancient aphorism, *poeta nascitur non fit*, or, 'poets are born, not made', recast as a sceptical question. In his *Art of Poetry*, Horace writes that

The question has been asked whether a fine poem is the product of nature or of art. I myself cannot see the value of application without a strong natural aptitude, or, on the other hand, of native genius unless it is cultivated – so true is it that each requires the help of the other, and that they enter into a friendly compact with each other.

(1965: 93)

What Horace is suggesting here is that a poet must possess natural talent, although this talent needs to be cultivated. While he emphasises the importance of labour and study, he does not argue that 'art' can lead to the development of talent. According to William Ringler, a commentary on this work around the year 200 by the Latin grammarian Pseudo-Acro provides the origin of the phrase *poeta nascitur non fit*. It enters the English language in the Elizabethan period through the influence of Continental writings; although, as Ringler points out, it does not appear in this 'precise order of words' (1941: 497) until the time of Coleridge, who uses it in his *Biographia Literaria* to explain the qualities of the imagination. For Ringler, the 'appearance or non-appearance' of this phrase 'in the critical works of any period serves as a barometer indicating the presence or absence of ideas concerning inborn talent or genius' (503). While the phrase is familiar to readers today, it is more common to see its variation, 'you can't teach writing' or, in its interrogative form, 'can writing

be taught?' The simple reason for this is that the latter is always brought up in reference to Creative Writing programmes, which did not exist before the twentieth century.

What is the relationship between *poeta nascitur non fit* and 'can writing be taught?', and what is the reason for this change in phraseology? Immanuel Kant shifts the ancient debate about the role of art and learning in the production of poetry by suggesting, not only that poetry is a product of genius, but that it is defined by the fact that it cannot be taught. In his *Critique of Judgement* Kant argues that genius 'cannot indicate scientifically how it brings about its product, but rather gives the rule as *nature*' ([1790] 1952: 169). The prime characteristic of genius, then, is originality, and its opposite is imitation. By describing learning as a form of imitation Kant is able to distinguish between fine art and science. Science, as a form of learning, differs by degree from imitation, but differs in kind from the original genius which guarantees fine art. Whereas the work of even a brilliant scientist such as Newton can be learned, 'we cannot learn to write in a true poetic vein, no matter how complete all the precepts of the poetic art may be, or however excellent its models' (170). Newton could make 'intuitively evident and plain to follow' all the steps which led to his great discoveries. No poet, however, 'can show how his ideas, so rich at once in fancy and in thought, enter and assemble themselves in his brain, for the good reason that he does not himself know, and so cannot teach others' (170). Here Kant is inverting Plato's criticism of poets by celebrating their lack of knowledge, making this a guarantee of genius. The difference between science and art, then, is manifested in terms of pedagogy. And this is why science can continue to make advances in knowledge, while works of art do not become progressively greater.

What must be noted here, however, is that while someone may learn how a scientific theory was produced, this does not mean they will be capable of producing one themselves. We cannot make a Newton any more than we can make a Shakespeare. The question of whether writing can be taught, then, is really a question of what can writers, *as writers*, tell us about literature? To assert that writers cannot explain their creative process is to assert that writers cannot tell us anything about literature, they can only write it.

While the phrase 'poets are born, not made' refers to the industry of the poet, the debate over whether writing can be taught places emphasis on the pedagogy of the instructor; it is the same argument, but with a different emphasis. This debate, and phrase, takes shape in a form familiar to us with the exchange between Sir Walter Besant

and Henry James at the end of the nineteenth century. Walter Besant was a minor British novelist and man of letters who founded the Royal Society of Authors and did much to champion the profession of authorship. In 1884 Besant delivered a lecture at the Royal Institution entitled 'The Art of Fiction'. His first point was that fiction, like painting, sculpture, music and poetry, should be considered an art form. Like these arts, he said, fiction 'is governed and directed by general laws; and . . . these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion' (1884: 3). Of course, like all art, 'no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts' (4). Besant was not a literary critic, however. He wanted to improve the position of the author in society. He claimed that novelists enjoy no national distinctions or honours as in every other profession or art. They have no associations, no 'letters after their name' (5). Even those who appreciate the novel could not bring themselves to afford it the distinction of an art form. He says:

How can that be an Art, they might ask, which has no lectures or teachers, no school or college or Academy, no recognised rules, no text-books, and is not taught in any University? Even the German Universities, which teach everything else, do not have Professors of Fiction, and not one single novelist, so far as I know, has ever pretended to teach his mystery, or spoken of it as a thing which may be taught.

(7)

Besant decried the idea of the time that anyone could sit down and write a novel, their skills being 'acquired unconsciously, or by imitation' (7). His earnest exhortation was that for those who are 'attracted to this branch of literature . . . it is their first business to learn' the 'laws, methods and rules' which govern the genre (7). According to David Lodge, 'if anyone deserves the title "Father of Creative Writing Courses" it is he' (1996: 173). Besant was not, of course, advocating a Creative Writing degree. His point was that if the novelist's craft was taught in a university, by writers, then, as with other arts, fiction would have greater credibility in the public sphere. The presence of a university in the realm of literature would influence public perception of authors and hence increase their professional and social standing. Nonetheless, he hoped that 'one effect of the establishment of the newly founded Society of Authors will be

to keep young writers of fiction from rushing too hastily into print, to help them to the right understanding of their Art and its principles, and to guide them into true practice of their principles while they are still young' (1884: 27). What makes Besant's lecture different from an *ars poetica* of previous centuries is that it is backed up by an institution devoted to the professional status of authors.

This lecture inspired Henry James's famous riposte of the same name, in which he claimed that while fiction is indeed an art form, its laws cannot be laid down; the novel is an organic form incapable of dissection and the only rule to be observed by the novelist is that it be interesting. James employs a Kantian line when he claims that the novelist's 'manner is his secret, not necessarily a jealous one. He cannot disclose it as a general thing if he would; he would be at a loss to teach it to others' ([1884] 1972: 33). In 1899 Besant published *The Pen and the Book*, 'written for the instruction and the guidance of those young persons, of whom there are now many thousands, who are thinking of the Literary Life' (v). Everything from a writer's lifestyle to the editing and publishing procedures are covered in this book. 'In treating of Imaginative Literature,' Besant writes, 'one thing is most certain that, without the gift, it cannot be taught' (73).

In his 1902 book, *A Study of Prose Fiction*, Bliss Perry mused over 'the question first brought before the public by Sir Walter Besant's lecture upon "The Art of Fiction," namely, whether that art can be taught' (296). The debate over whether writing can be taught takes shape out of practical rather than philosophical concerns (such as those which occupied Kant). It develops when formal attempts to teach writing begin at the end of the nineteenth century; either by laying down guidelines for technique in handbooks, or criticising manuscripts in workshops. It is a self-conscious debate, an attempt by teachers of writing to pre-empt scepticism about their pedagogical enterprise, a scepticism encapsulated in the phrase 'poets are born, not made'. At the same time that Besant was writing, handbooks on play-writing and especially short-story writing were beginning to emerge in America. These were anticipated by an English text, *Playwriting: A Handbook for Would-Be Dramatic Authors*, in which the anonymous 'Dramatist' set the tone for following handbooks when he claimed that 'I could roll off fifty or a hundred neatly-turned instructions for you here, but they would no more teach you to write a play than a treatise on navigation would help a landsman to handle a yacht. Beyond a few rudimentary hints and technical rules, which we will discuss hereafter, nothing can be taught, no help can be given' (1888: 12). In 1929 Stewart Beach prefaced his book, *Short*

Story Technique, with this defensive claim: 'It is often asserted that short-story writing cannot be taught, and I am so thoroughly in agreement with the statement that I feel this book requires some word of explanation' (iii). By 1960 Archibald Macleish could write with a certain degree of playfulness, '[e]verybody knows that "creative writing" – which means the use of words as material of art – can't be taught' (88).

The irony of the debate over whether writing can be taught, which was triggered by the rise of Creative Writing, is that most writing courses themselves tend to operate with the notion of innate talent, claiming only that talent can be nurtured in a sympathetic environment: a community of writers where the practical skills of literary craft can be taught, and where students can become better readers of literature and better critics of their own work. In fact, it is common for classes in Creative Writing to regulate enrolment numbers by requiring the submission of a folio which displays creative potential. The first Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, held at a summer school in 1939, was 'open only to students who can present evidence of their ability to participate' (Iowa University 1939: 1). The official position of the Workshop is still characterised in these terms: 'Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and limitations as a school in that light.'¹ If writing cannot be taught, however, of what worth is Creative Writing to aspiring writers and to the study of literature? This leads to our second question.

Should writing be taught?

There are two sides to the debate about whether Creative Writing should be taught in universities: the first is a concern about the external influence of writing programmes on literary culture; the second about its internal relationship to academic research and teaching. Workshops are often considered to have a homogenising effect on students' work, thus inhibiting genuine creativity (in other words, original and individual expression). This is because critical decisions about a manuscript are arrived at by class consensus, supposedly influencing students to write in order to please their tutor and peers. The other reason is that 'workshopping' operates negatively, by warning students to avoid certain practices, such as adjectival floridity, and hence promotes an easily teachable style of writing. 'We teach how not to write', Richard Hugo claims (1979: 64).²

The first side to the question 'should writing be taught?' concerns both the usefulness of writing programmes for aspiring writers and their influence on the publishing industry and the general state of literature. Creative Writing is blamed on the one hand for giving false hope to aspiring writers, since most graduates do not go on to become successful authors. On the other hand Creative Writing is blamed for producing too many authors, to the extent that graduates of writing programmes dominate mainstream literary culture in America. In a sense, the doubt generated by the question of whether writing can be taught is ironically answered in the affirmative by this concern. What enters here are questions of *value*; work is being successfully produced and published, but it lacks literary quality. This is evidenced by the prominence of Creative Writing as a scapegoat in contemporary debates about the 'death of poetry' in America.³

The most common complaint arising from these debates is that the 'workshop' poem which dominates contemporary poetry is a bland and unambitious free-verse lyric focused on an epiphanous moment of quotidian experience, with an autobiographical association encouraged between the speaker and the poet. It is also argued that despite the fact that more poetry is being published than ever before, it does not address the general reader, but rather is confined to an audience within the professional industry of writing programmes and their attendant readings, prizes, publishing houses and tenure-track jobs.

The workshop poem has also been the target of avant-garde movements, with both Language poets and the New Formalists defining themselves in opposition to the mainstream American poetry produced and perpetuated by Creative Writing. Spokespersons for these movements argue not only that writing workshops produce outmoded free-verse confessional lyrics, but that they are at the hub of an exclusionary network of publishing and grant-funding departments. Two recent books on the state of contemporary American poetry, Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry* (1993) and Christopher Beach's *Poetic Culture* (1999) accept this characterisation, seeing the future of poetry in a move away from the deleterious effects of writing programmes.

The same complaints are made in regard to fiction. In 1983 *Granta* devoted an issue to what it called 'dirty realism'. This phrase was used in the editorial by Bill Buford to describe the 'fiction of a new generation of American authors' who wrote about 'the belly-side of contemporary life' (5). This generation, Buford claims, were influenced by writers such as Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme who dealt with the minutiae of life in 'a flat, "unsurprised" language, pared down to the plainest of plain styles' (5). By the 1990s complaints

were being levelled at writing workshops for producing a new generation of writers influenced by Carver and writing technically competent but bland and soulless minimalist prose, with largely objective realist observations about the minutiae of everyday existence. John W. Aldridge's 1992 book, *Talents and Technicians*, is perhaps the best known of these critiques. What lies behind all these criticisms is the assumption that writing cannot really be taught, and hence should not be.

The second side to the question, 'should writing be taught', involves an anxiety about the effects of writing workshops on university education, manifested in concerns about academic rigour. Where once English was criticised for its vague *belle lettrism* and dismissed as mere chatter about Shelley, a poor man's classics, or a woman's subject, Creative Writing now operates as the soft alternative to an increasingly rigorous Literary Studies. Recalling his early teaching career, Theodore Weiss claimed that one occurrence which was considered 'barbaric and outrageous – after all, what studious length of years, what scholarship, research, rigors, had hallowed it? – was the intrusion into the university of the creative writing workshop' (1989: 150). Wilbur Schramm, first director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, was compelled to defend the discipline as 'comparable both in quality and in severity with the discipline of any other advanced literary study. The graduate student would not find a good play, or novel, or book of verse an easy substitute for the usual thesis or dissertation' (1941: 190).

As writing programmes expanded throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, opposition came not from scholarship or criticism but from Theory. In 'English departments all across the United States at the present moment,' Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh claimed in 1988, 'a political rapprochement is being negotiated between traditional humanist scholar-critics and creative writers' (160). Writing workshops, they argue, 'are founded upon a set of assumptions that have all been put in question by postmodern critical theory' (155). This set of assumptions is said to ensure the workshop's complicity in the maintenance of the capitalist state. However, there is not so much a demonstration of political commitment as there is of professional castigation at work in their claim that ideas such as 'voice' or 'originality' are academically outmoded, and in their provision of a long list of theorists which students ought to read. Eve Shelnutt, a teacher of Creative Writing herself, claimed that writing workshops shelter students from 'the broader intellectual life of the university' (1989: 9), discouraging them from seeing themselves as thinkers, and

refusing to come to terms with exciting changes in literature departments, specifically those wrought by poststructuralist theory. Concerns in Australia about the academic rigour of Creative Writing are currently manifested in debates about the incommensurability of 'creative' work with standard definitions of research as they relate to university funding and postgraduate study.

What is at stake here is not only the nature of creative work, but ideas of its proper place. Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' is instructive here because it opposed nature to the academy as the best teacher of the poet. In the third book, 'Residence at Cambridge', Wordsworth writes of 'A feeling that I was not for that hour, / nor for that place' ([1850] 1950: 509). Instead, he called on the earth and sky to 'teach me what they might; / Or, turning the mind in upon herself, / Pored, watched, expected, listened, spread my thoughts' (509). In other words, while the university is a place of learning, the imagination which Wordsworth seeks to develop through nature cannot be taught. One could argue that this is Wordsworth's own peculiar experience, but he of course is a crucial part of the canon, a representative writer the study of whom perpetuates Romantic concepts of creativity in the academy.

The fact that English is constructed as the professional domain of the critic contributes to the idea that the academy is an anomalous location for writers. If the writer cannot contribute to disciplinary knowledge, a critic might ask, what is the point of Creative Writing? It is little wonder, then, that the *presence* of writers and of a professionalised discipline for their reproduction within the academy is a major source of consternation in discussions about Creative Writing. Not only are writing programmes seen as anomalous, but the work they produce, literature, has traditionally been perceived as *placeless*.⁴ Regardless of writers' occupations, their 'creative' work, supposedly, is not tied to their specific location (even though experiences of this may form the basis of their writing) because it is generated by their creative impulse and addresses an abstract general audience. Hence when writers become physically located within the university and their 'creative' work (as the equivalent of academic research) is produced to *maintain* this position, literature itself is seen to be tied to an institution. What requires challenging here, if we are to examine ways in which Creative Writing can contribute to intellectual work in the contemporary humanities, is the pervading influence of the two metaphors which encapsulate popular understandings of the location of both writers and academics: the garret and the ivory tower.

The garret and the ivory tower

A garret is the clichéd writer's retreat. It conjures up images of a solitary author eking out a bohemian existence in order to gain the distance necessary to comment upon his or her surroundings or simply to indulge a creative impulse. The metaphor of the garret assumes that writing takes place outside society before it is released into the public sphere for critical scrutiny, via the machinations of the publishing industry. The word came to be associated with poets in the mid-seventeenth century, around the time that Grub Street acquired its reputation as a place for literary hacks in England. As a result it has always been associated with hardship and penury. Thomas Brown (1663–1704) self-parodies his profession in 'The Preface' by drawing attention to the harshness of the poet's life, forced to scribble 'Dogg'rel and News' for a living:

I am closely block'd up in a Garret,
Where I scribble and smoak,
And sadly invoke
The powerful assistance of CLARET,
Four Children and a Wife,
Tis hard on my Life,
Beside my self and a Muse,
To be all cloath'd and fed.

(Literature Online)

Despite its operation as a cliché (see 'The Poetaster' by John Byrom), there has always been a certain romanticism attached to the garret. This is made explicit in Mark Akenside's 'The Poet . . . A Rhapsody' (1737). In this poem Akenside draws attention to the fate 'of the Muse's son, / Curs'd with dire poverty! poor hungry wretch!', before going on to suggest that manual labour is impossible for the poet: 'Oh! he scorns / Th' ignoble thought; with generous disdain, / More eligible deeming it to starve, / Like his fam'd ancestors renown'd in verse' (1996: 395). In the eighteenth century the word 'garreteer' developed, to mean 'an impecunious author or literary hack' (*Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*), but Akenside's poem demonstrates that the inhabitation of a garret can be seen as a mark of poetic authenticity: 'These are his firm resolves, which fate nor time, / Nor poverty can shake. Exalted high / In garret vile he lives' (395).

Perhaps the most extreme and romantic account of the self-sufficiency of the writer is a poem by Emily Dickinson written circa 1863:

Publication – is the Auction
 Of the Mind of Man –
 Poverty – be justifying
 For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather
 From Our Garret go
 White – Unto the White Creator –
 Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –
 Then – to Him Who bear
 Its Corporeal Illustration – Sell
 The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
 Of the Heavenly Grace –
 But reduce no Human Spirit
 To Disgrace of Price –

(1970: 348–9)

In this poem the garret is linked to creativity (it is where the writer composes), and to poverty (the writer is isolated and unrewarded by society). This isolation, however, is the guarantee of poetic creativity. The garret is opposed to publication (which is equated not with dissemination, but with commercialisation), ‘the Auction of the Mind of Man’. Poetry is a private circular communion with God, and hence is its own reward. We can see here from its origin as a physical space in which the writer composed (a space which provided cheap rent on Grub Street and a haven above the din of industrialised cities) the garret has come to denote a metaphorical space for the creativity of the isolated author.

How does this idea of the garret relate to the clichéd domain of the academic? ‘One of the most enduring popular myths of humanities research’, according to Meaghan Morris and Iain McCalman, ‘involves an egghead in an “ivory tower”’ (1988: 1). The ivory tower denotes a physical space or state of mind which is removed from the practicalities and harsh realities of everyday life. As a cliché, claims Masao Miyoshi, it ‘is as taken for granted as the university itself’ (2000: 50). Its connection to the academy brings up associations with both the idea of pure or basic research, where universities operate as a haven for the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and the