

**Abstract:** Philosophy concerns asking fundamental questions about practices: their meaning, how they function, what they presuppose and what makes them distinctive. Within CW, we often ask about the effectiveness of the workshop, classroom activities or we inquire about our subject's past and present distinctiveness. But the question of a philosophy or philosophies of CW has gone largely unasked. This paper considers a number of questions about how CW articulates itself in terms of its view of teaching, autonomy and the scope of CW research. The paper argues that if CW is to be an autonomous discipline, then various problems need to be addressed. It concludes by identifying two current schools, or philosophies, of CW: Integrationism and monarchism. Whereas the latter seeks to rationalise CW as an autonomous discipline, the former seeks to see it as part of a broader education in the humanities. Ultimately, the paper seeks to create a framework for a new area of investigation in CW scholarship.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, pedagogy, research, autonomy, teaching, workshops.

### **The philosophy of creative writing**

Creative Writing has a problem. This is certainly not a problem of popularity, for as Moxley notes, '[w]hile 40 years ago there were only about 40 programs in creative writing registered with the Association of Writing Programs, now there are over 400 to choose from' (Moxley in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 235). Neither is it a problem that is widely acknowledged by teachers of CW: 'many creative writing teachers *still* do not avail themselves of the growing body of scholarship on the teaching of creative writing (Vanderslice in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 33). And finally, it is not a problem that those who study CW may be aware of. This problem seems invisible. Is it then a problem?

Sometimes, when problem becomes a norm it goes unnoticed. What might problematic from the outside might be another day at the office for someone else. Therefore, when I claim that CW has a problem, I mean that its objectives, pedagogies, the expectations of students and the view of CW within circles of academic management contain tensions, cross-purposes and lacks of clarity. One only needs to consider the recent Kurishei-inspired debates (and in some cases, rants) about creative writing to note that while there are questions in any discipline, there are certainly pressing and unresolved issues about the very existence of CW.

That this is the case is not to deny that CW has an intellectual history. Indeed Myers in *The Elephants Teach* (2008) does an excellent job of showing that it has a history and Paul Dawson in his *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (2005) does an even better job of showing that it has an intellectual history. The crisis is not simply one of scholarly background. The crisis, I argue, is of a philosophical nature and this paper is an attempt to gain some clarity of a number of issues which concern CW as a discipline and an activity.

Creative writers though are not in general philosophers and even philosophers will be (often painfully) aware that what philosophy is, is itself a site of debate. Let me be as clear as I can then. By 'philosophy' I mean the asking and answering of questions fundamental, or very important to the nature of something. Philosophy asks things such as, 'what is X?', 'how is X, X?' and 'what role does Px have to play in X being X?' So, putative philosophical questions about CW would be, 'What is Creative Writing?' and 'How is Creative Writing Creative Writing?', and about how ideas of text, author and teaching contribute to what CW is.

To give an answer to all these is of course beyond the scope of this paper, but I do intend to outline how the asking and answering of such questions is useful and indeed necessary if we are to better communicate our ideas about our subject. My paper will move in three stages. I begin by discussing an underformulated issue within CW, but one central to the philosophy of education: the function of teaching. I distinguish between the concepts of 'training' and 'education' to show that CW pedagogy has generally not marked an important distinction which might help it answer more fundamental questions about its existence and purpose.

Next, I move on to consider the important issue of the autonomy of CW. A variety of works such as Donnelly's *Establishing Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline* and Dawson (2005) have dealt in some ways with this issue and I consider it to show how attempts to frame the autonomy of CW need to consider certain questions if they are to avoid philosophical problems.

To contextualise and exemplify this discussion, I then move to the idea of research and scholarship. Here I argue that conceptions and aspirations for research in CW are notably self-referential and concerned with pedagogy and history<sup>1</sup>. This, I link

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, at the Great Writing conference 2014 where a draft of this paper was first delivered, I found a notice about NAWE's new journal, *Writing in Practice*, among whose principal aims are 'critical examination of the history and pedagogy of Creative Writing' (NAWE, online).

back to the issue of the push for the autonomy of CW and discuss how research to date in CW compares to scholarship within the wider humanities.

In my conclusion, I draw together my arguments on autonomy, research and teaching to give an outline of the present philosophical landscape of CW. This picture will be an attempt to define ‘schools’ within CW, a tentative but necessary step in exploring the philosophy and theory of creative writing.

### *Teaching, training and education*

We can use words such as ‘teach’ and ‘learn’ in haphazard ways, as we might say that ‘Mr Corruption earns £4.1 million a year’ when we really mean that he does not *earn* that amount at all, rather merely gets or receives that amount. In such cases our imprecision in usage can occlude a conceptual distinction. Such, I argue is the case with the concept of ‘teaching’ in CW, where the perennial question, ‘Can it be taught?’ betrays such a lack of conceptual specificity.

I wish to split ‘teaching’ into two categories; that of ‘training’ and ‘education’. Training is the teaching of someone to do certain highly specifiable tasks. For example, we are trained to replace spark plugs in an engine or to perform CPR on a non-respiring individual. Training is not only highly specifiable, but it also possesses a means/ends distinction: what I do during CPR (the means) is distinct from saving someone’s life as a result of CPR (the end).

Contrast training with what I am calling ‘education’. Education in the sense that I am using it means the cultivation of someone’s ability to understand, retain, associate, and reflect on ideas. Education teaches the learner to learn. Unlike training, education is not directed towards a highly specifiable goal. Education also does not possess the kind of means/ends distinction characteristic of training. This means that being educated is part of the ends of education.

If this sounds all too woolly, consider the following. We might draw an analogy between education and sex with respect to a means/ends distinction. One can have sex to produce a child, say, or to earn one’s living, and here there is a means/end distinction. Contrariwise, one can have sex for pleasure, for the strengthening of bonds or for the exploration of one’s sexuality. Here, the means are at least partly constitutive of the ends. The alcoholic knows a means/ends distinction when it comes to the sauce, but the boozy celebrant has the end within the means. This also gives us a clue as to why education

does not have a highly specifiable goal, unless we mean ‘well-roundedness’, ‘curiosity’, ‘autonomy’ and other non-specific qualities. Because in education the means are partly constitutive of the ends, the ends must be open-ended, subject to expansion, revision and questioning.

Such a distinction between training and education is familiar within the philosophy of education. R.S. Peters has claimed that, ‘the trained artist, or scientist, or historian is not necessarily an educated man; for he may have a deep but circumscribed understanding in these spheres’ (Peters in Peters (ed.) 1973, 19) and he sees ‘the impossibility of conceiving of educational processes in accordance with a means-end model’ (Peters in Peters (ed.) 1973, 24). Here, education is a bifurcation of depth and breadth of knowledge and passions. It is also an inculcation into a worthwhile form of life, part of which is itself constituted by enabling students to inquire about what might or might not be worthwhile. For a trainee on the other hand, considerations and explorations of worthwhileness may be disruptive. For example, the consideration of the worthwhileness of car mechanics might well get in the way of changing spark plugs philosophical reflection during the performance of CPR might well be fatal.

Such a distinction is recognised, though often implicitly, in discussions of CW. For example, Haake has claimed that CW graduates ‘may write very well in a particular mode- they may even be said to have found ‘a voice’. But they have not been well served because they lack the skills to frame the next problem or take either their writing or, as importantly, their reading into and beyond what they don’t know how to do yet’ (Haake in Donnelly 2010, 187). Here, Haake describes students that may well have been trained, but have not been well educated. Also when Fenza talks about CW, ‘inspiring, exercising, and strengthening the efficacy of the human will to do good, to make a meaningful difference in art and in society’ (Fenza 2000, Online 1), he is certainly not talking about training.

The importance of marking such a conceptual distinction in the case of CW is firstly to recognise that a philosophical approach can help us get clearer about what CW is and our pedagogical aims. Secondly, once the distinction is made it can also show us that may we have been looking at this issue for some time, but by flagging up the issue, we can bring it into sharper focus and consider if creative writing is training or education and if it should be training or education.

At the end of this paper I will return to the question of teaching. I now move on to the question of disciplinary autonomy, as I argue the two are intertwined.

### *The craving for autonomy*

In her book *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* (2012), Donnelly seeks to investigate CW pedagogies with a view to creating a new subject: creative writing studies. Such a move is a response to the fact that CW has been kept ‘from achieving any central core in the academy’ (Donnelly 2012, 2). She stresses (following Ritter (2001)) that the subject should, ‘establish markers of professional difference... [t]he academic goal of *creative writing studies* is to stand alongside composition studies and literary studies and any other university field of study as a separate-but-equal discipline’ (Donnelly 2012, 2).

This desire to achieve ‘markers of professional difference’ and give ‘academic legitimacy to the discipline’ (Donnelly 2012, 148) is a common aspiration and while arguably achieved, is still a question that concerns many CW scholars. As Dawson notes, ‘Creative Writing now seems to be situated as a separate stream alongside English and Cultural Studies rather than being integrated with them’ (Dawson 2005, 155) and Bizzaro asserts CW, ‘is more than a hybrid of literary and composition studies; it is an autonomous field with a right to its own history, epistemology, and classroom activities’ (Bizzaro in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 37). Interestingly, such an assertion is similar to Saussure’s wish for his proposed science of semiotics. In his introduction to the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure claimed that while his science did not yet exist, ‘it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance’ (Saussure 2006 [1922], 15-16). This is interesting because such assertions within nascent academic disciplines are often just that: *assertions*. They constitute an academic will-to-power. That such a will-to-power is in use is evident when Bizzaro goes on to admit that it is not yet clear how creative writing is autonomous, but ‘if creative writing is an autonomous field of study, it will differ in some fundamental ways from literary and composition studies’ (Bizzaro in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 38). The answer to the ways in which it does differ are not made clear.

It is true then that there is a concern that CW be autonomous and that through autonomy, obtain an equality with other subjects. This is a strategy other subjects have attempted and it can be problematic. The problem is that the putative subject can have an unhealthy reliance, in association or disassociation, with other subject areas. Let me illustrate by returning to linguistics. Linguistics in the mid-nineteenth century sought to be a ‘proper’ science and thus obtain autonomy, which required a reliance on physics as a

paradigm science. This led to a fairly fruitless struggle to formulate exceptionless universal laws governing sound change and other linguistic phenomena<sup>2</sup>. The point is that in seeking autonomy, one can inherit philosophical commitments that can be unhelpful and even conflict with one's overt intentions and aspirations.

Is this the case with creative writing? To give an initial answer, one should look at the way in which creative writing's *raison d'être* is articulated. For example, William Dick has claimed that CW, 'should be autonomous and not part of the English department. It should be run by writers for writers' (quoted in Dawson 2005, 131) and Fenza claims that CW is there for, 'the education of artists and the making of art. Failure is an undeniable part of the process' (Fenza 2000, Online). Here we have a very common conception that CW is there to make writers, a conception that sometimes relies on analogies with the conservatoire or fine art course.

Now, Fenza is correct about the failure of CW courses to make writers and he is also correct to go on to note that such failure is shared with acting schools, dance schools and the like. However, it is worth considering if the other humanities are equally failures, at least if the purpose of English is to produce English scholars and Philosophy, philosophers. It matters little about the actual numbers; the point is that most humanities students do not become professionals within their subject area and we don't judge the humanities as failures because of this.

This though is perfectly natural. That philosophy graduates rarely become philosophers is no scandal because philosophy does not have the express purpose of making professional philosophers. It does though have the express purpose of getting students to think critically, reflectively, logically and immanently about problems, themselves and the world around them. In contrast, because CW very often sets itself up as writer training, being 'by writers for writers', it also sets itself up for failure and moreover failure on its own self-selected ground. This being the case, we might then consider why it is that CW sometimes can't or won't align itself with other subjects, why it seems orientated toward a means-end distinction in being training for writers.

This leads us back to the question of autonomy. CW is peculiar within the academy and its peculiarity is often related to its claims for autonomy. This is evident in discussion of the workshop. For example it has been claimed that, 'the Workshop is us' (Beck 2006, 213) and that '[w]orkshops are the beating heart of creative writing' (Roe in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 194). It is unsurprising then that Wandor refers to the workshop as

---

<sup>2</sup> For example see Jordan-Baker (2013), Robins (1997) and Seuren (1997).

something which constitutes ‘the institutional distinctiveness of CW as an academic discipline’ (Wandor 2008, 120).

The workshop model as both stamp of professional difference and the pervasive pedagogical staple on CW courses<sup>3</sup> is a corollary of the fact that CW courses are seen as being there to train writers. Indeed if this were not so, CW’s claims for institutional distinctiveness might be put in jeopardy. This is made quite clear when Dawson argues that ‘[i]mproved literary appreciation is a valid by-product of a workshop-based writing course, but it not a sustainable justification for the existence of Creative Writing as a discipline’ (Dawson 2005, 163). Of course, if CW were not there to train writers, but, say, to cultivate a passion for literature and an appreciation of the human condition, one might respond that this was the job of literature academics, which would leave CW in direct competition with another subject. In such a case, we would have failed to provide what Donnelly sees as the much needed ‘academic legitimacy to the discipline’ (Donnelly 2012, 148).

I now wish to expand into the question of research in to show that here too, the desire for autonomy arguably influences how research and scholarship are perceived.

### **Research in creative writing**

In both discussions and practice of research in CW, there is a consistent self-referentiality. Again Donnelly gives a useful account of the current state of affairs when she claims, ‘research leads to creative writing as knowledge and, as teachers, we should want at the least, to be informed about our pedagogy’ (Donnelly 2012, 124) and she advises ‘more training of graduate creative writing students in the history and practice of the field’ (Donnelly, 2012, p.125). As well as this, a series of publications (Beck 2012; Donnelly (ed.) 2010; Bishop and Ostrom (eds.) 1994; Moxley 1989) attest to the fact that the academic field of CW has a marked pedagogical and historical emphasis.

What this situation suggests is that the object for CW research is very often *itself*; its pedagogy and history. Of course, this is part of the scholarship in any field, be it Eagleton’s *The Function of Criticism* (2000 [1984]) or Bertrand Russel’s *A History of Western Philosophy* (2004 [1945]). However, research in English and Philosophy is typically directed to understanding its objects of knowledge through analysis, argument,

---

<sup>3</sup> This claim is based on research carried out by Donnelly (2012). For example, her survey found that, ‘[t]he [workshop model] serves as a primary focus or a major component in 80% of creative writing classes’ (75) and she quotes sources that claim overall, CW courses consist of 50% workshop (78).

scholarship and the proposal of new theories. Such aspirations in CW however are not salient.

Arguably, this is because CW's research aspirations are articulated in such a way as to cause no conflict with its claims distinctiveness its desire for secure autonomy. This self-consciousness can be seen when Donnelly discusses creative writing research: 'What we need to know about creative writing and research is how to facilitate a better understanding of creative writing's particular modes of research' (Donnelly 2012, 126). Here we see that a desire to make CW autonomous is coupled with uncertainty about what makes CW autonomous and there is an advocating of research on the kind of research CW should do in order to distinguish itself. Such a claim is repeated by Bizzaro when he states, 'one of the many tasks awaiting new scholars in creative writing studies is the determination of what is uniquely the province of creative writing' (Bizzaro in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 45). While academic will-to-power is being enacted within CW, it is accompanied by confusion about the philosophical basis for that action.

It might be objected though that such a situation is rather benign and necessary. Necessary in the sense that all disciplines need to engage with questions about what makes them *them*. Such attempts though risk putting the desire for autonomy before other concerns, even to the extent that one might sculpt research and course design on the basis of it being different, as opposed to true, intelligent, well organised and philosophically cogent. This will-to-power might be understandable, it can make difficult an investigation of the presuppositions that constitute the philosophy of that subject.

Our discussion of autonomy is not only confined to how it is reflected in conceptions of scholarship and research, but also to the question of teaching. That is, should CW be training or education? Royster mentions being 'trained as a writer' (Royster in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, 105) though Myers reminds us, '[o]riginally the teaching of creative writing...was an experiment in education...it was not a scheme for turning out official writers' (Myers 2006, 4). This is an open question, but it makes sense that if CW is training for writers, rather than education for students of the humanities, CW has a marker of professional difference from literature, composition and media. To emphasise this link between the issue of teaching and autonomy, I repeat my quote from Dawson: '[i]mproved literary appreciation is a valid by-product of a workshop-based writing course, but it not a sustainable justification for the existence of Creative Writing as a discipline' (Dawson 2005, 163).

### *Conclusion: Integrationists and monarchists*

So far, I have attempted to show that by asking philosophical questions about CW, we can clarify some issues and show the conceptual links between ideas; in this case, the links between disciplinary autonomy, teaching, research and some of the ways in which the desire for autonomy might influence the aforementioned. In my closing remarks, I wish express the practical result of these links by outlining what I see as an important dividing line in CW, an outline that might help structure future questions and debates.

I want to suggest that there are currently two schools of thought on the direction of CW. One camp, which I will name the ‘integrationists’, stress the need for CW to be linked with other subjects such as literature, composition or media. This is due to the sharing or reliance on their objects of knowledge, technical vocabulary and intellectual skills as opposed, *pace* Dawson, to the idea there is a ‘fundamental conflict between writers and critics over the nature of literature (Dawson 2005, 161). Here, CW can be seen as what Wandor terms, ‘extrinsically incomplete’ (Wandor 2008, 216-217) and there is no necessary requirement that CW be or become an autonomous discipline. Such people, at least to my mind, include Norman Foerster<sup>4</sup>, Michelene Wandor and Katherine Haake<sup>5</sup>. I also include myself among their number.

The other camp I call ‘monarchists’ because of their stress on the need for creative writing to be an autonomous discipline with a series of markers of professional difference spanning pedagogy, training, and research. That is, they wish creative writing to be sovereign, and though this sovereign might take advice from its subjects Literature, Composition and Media, and this hierarchy secures the autonomy of CW *within* its own disciplinary boundaries. I consider Diane Donnelly, Patrick Bizzaro and Kelly Ritter<sup>6</sup> to be among the creative writing monarchists.

Within my two camps there will doubtless be differences and disagreements: about the role of the workshop, the nature of creativity, the status of research and so on. But my arguments suggest there *are* such camps and this is so because there are different

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘As a humanist Foerster believed that writers required a humanistic education that would give them a permanent sense of literary tradition...[t]he larger purpose...behind Foerster’s whole plan of literary education was to rediscover critical standards’ (Myers 2008, 135).

<sup>5</sup> ‘It is not such a stretch, after all, to construe Creative Writing as ideally situated to integrate all the strands of English studies as a nexus of both reading and writing’ (Haake in Beck (ed.) 2012, 134).

<sup>6</sup> ‘My argument here is limited to Ph.D. programs in creative writing only, as I would argue that in order to exist, Ph.D. programs must account for their identity by building markers of professional difference in their candidates’ (Ritter 2001, 208).

philosophical positions about the nature of literature, the human subject, and creative writing. I've only been able to sketch some of the differences in this paper, but I hope I have shown how a philosophical consideration of CW can yield some clarity and further questions for the development of the field, in whatever direction(s). As Gross has rightly suggested of CW, '[w]hatever it *is*, it has to be aware of *what* that is, and why' [author's emphasis] (Gross in Donnelly (ed.) 2010, p.57). This is why a philosophy of creative writing is desirable.

## **References**

- Beck, H. ed. 2012. *Teaching Creative Writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Beck, S. 2006. Learning from tools. *New Criterion* 25 (1), 114-218.
- Bishop, W. and Ostrom, H. eds. 1994. *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Practice*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Dawson, P. 2005. *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*. London: Routledge.
- Donnelly, D. ed. 2010. *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* Multilingual Matters: Bristol.
2012. *Establishing Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline*. Multilingual Matters: Bristol.
- Eagleton, T. 2000 [1984]. *The Function of Criticism*. London: Verso.
- Fenza, D. 2000. 'Creative Writing & its Discontents'. *Writer's Chronicle* (March/April) <[https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine\\_media/writers\\_news\\_view/2871/creative\\_writing\\_its\\_discontents](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_news_view/2871/creative_writing_its_discontents)>. Accessed 1/4/2014.
- Jordan-Baker, C. 2013. *Agency, Structure and Realism in Language and Linguistics*. Doctoral Thesis.
- Moxley, J. 1989. *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

Myers, D.G. 2006. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. London: University of Chicago Press.

National Association of Writers in Education, 'Writing in Practice':  
<http://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/nawe-news/writing-in-practice.html>. Accessed:  
3/6/14:13.00.

Peters, R.S. ed. 1973. *The Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ritter, K. .2001. Professional writers/writing professionals: Revamping teacher training in creative writing Ph.D. programs. *College English* 64 (2) (Nov.), 205-227.

Robins, R.H. 1997. *A Short History of Linguistics, (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*. London: Longman.

Russel, B. 2004 [1945]. *A History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Saussure, F. 2006 [1922]. *The Course in General Linguistics*. Harris, R. (trans.) Chicago: Open Court.

Seuren, P. 1998. *Western Linguistics: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wandor, M. 2008. *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived*. London: Routledge.

**Wordcount: 4309**